

Maya Teachers in a Precarious Position

From the newspaper *Por Esto!*

Nov. 5, 2015

by Reporter Roberto López Méndez

Original source: http://www.porestonet.net/ver_nota.php?zona=yucatan&idSeccion=1&idTitulo=439058

Dr. Anne Marie Guerrettaz, professor at Washington State University, claimed that Maya teachers in Mexico are in a precarious position due to the current language situation. Maya writing has many variations and the language is currently undergoing standardization. Currently, Maya teachers are uncertain about how to teach the language.

Dr. Guerrettaz was interviewed during her participation at the conference “El Maya: Variación y reflexión lingüística ante la estandarización” [“Maya: Variation and linguistic reflection vis-à-vis standardization”]. The event took place at the CEPHCIS campus of the UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México). She explained that she has taken and observed Maya courses which were originally offered to teachers from the peninsula. Thousands of teachers have registered to take those courses.

- Reporter: Maybe, adapting Maya to the Spanish alphabet is not that easy, is it?
- Dr. Guerrettaz: It is not easy, and there is a great deal of conflict. A great deal.
- Reporter: For how long has the conflict been present?
- Dr. Guerrettaz: Well, I am not an expert in the history of Maya writing, but there have been attempts to standardize the Maya alphabet since the 1980's. Currently, there is an attempt to standardize the orthography. It is a topic that linguists are currently debating, in particular, but teachers working with children have their own needs.
- Reporter: Is it difficult for children to learn under these circumstances?
- Dr. Guerrettaz: A child can easily learn two languages simultaneously; we just need to provide enough tools to support both the teacher and the children. Ideally, a child should learn how to write in his mother tongue first and then learn how to do it in the second language.
- Reporter: It is said there are different ways to write the Maya language.
- Dr. Guerrettaz: That is what we are analyzing in this colloquium. I do not have an answer as to how it must be done. I think there must be a deep conversation and dialogue to promote

understanding since linguists have different perspectives in this respect. We have to work together in order to reach agreement.

There is a lot of linguistic variation in Maya. Sometimes, in one town something is said one way but in another town it is said a different way. For instance “gracias”- ‘thank you’ can be expressed in different ways in Maya. Therefore, listening is the key.

- Reporter: What would you recommend?

- Dr. Guerrettaz: I would advise to continue working with the communities that speak Maya and consider how they want Maya to be written and taught.

[...]

- Reporter: Is standardization a long process? Is it still going to take some time?

- Dr. Guerrettaz: Well, we are not really sure about the case of Maya, because new standards for writing in Maya were released in 2014. So, we have to see what is going to happen with those standards. I do not know what the reaction of the Maya-speaking communities will be. Oh...I do not know because there are researchers who have worked in this field for years, but we can look at the cases of other languages. The standardization of other languages such as Basque for example took 50 years. But, here [in the Yucatan] they have already been working on this for many years.

- Reporter: Where did you learn Maya?

- Dr. Guerrettaz: Some universities in the United States offer Maya courses. I studied my PhD in Applied Linguistics in Indiana, but I have been learning Maya mostly in [the Yucatecan towns of] Valladolid and Xocén over the last six years.

- Reporter: What is the focus of your research?

- Dr. Guerrettaz: My focus is on bilingual education in Yucatán. Specifically, I study teacher education. I have been learning and doing research in Yucatán since 2009. I have been coming here for almost six years. The most important thing for me, as a researcher, is to earn the trust of the Maya speakers and teachers I work with.

- Reporter: What are some of the findings in your research?

- Dr. Guerrettaz: The primary thing is the important the role that teachers play in the process of the revitalization of Maya. Many linguists, sometimes, do not realize how important teachers are in the processes of language revitalization and planning.

- Reporter: Who do you work with?

- Dr. Guerrettaz: Specifically, I work with teachers from the Secretariat of Public Education who work in the system of Indigenous Education, also called ‘Bilingual Intercultural Education’. Nowadays, we have policies that are being modified and attempting to support the Maya language. I believe that Maya speakers, first and foremost, play the most important role [in language planning in the Yucatan], and in second place teachers.
- Reporter: Are the speakers of Maya valued enough?
- Dr. Guerrettaz concluded: Well, generally, I believe they are, and above all, I think the speakers of Maya and the ways they speak the language in its current form [should be respected]. But, many times, those abroad especially give more value to the ancient past of “the Mayas” and they don’t always even realize that the *pueblo maya* [the Maya people] still exists.

Translated by Nancy Carvajal and Anne Marie Guerrettaz
December 2015