

D'Amore, A. M., Murillo Gallegos, V. & Zimányi, K. (2016). Have faith in your vocabulary: The role of the interpreter in the conquest of power, language and ideology in the New Spain. *Linguistica Antverpiensia, New Series: Themes in Translation Studies*, 15, 36 – 50

Have faith in your vocabulary: The role of the interpreter in the conquest of power, language and ideology in the New Spain

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Crucial in the moments of initial contact and military conflict during conquest, translation and interpreting continued to play a fundamental role throughout the 16th and 17th centuries in the New Spain. With evangelization both the means and the end of control and conquest, the ideological conflict required the active participation of both translators and interpreters. This article analyses the role of interpreters and translators in the indoctrination of the local populations through a study of Los Coloquios de 1524, a text that aspired to reconstruct the Spanish Franciscan friars' first contact with and attempts at the evangelization of the indigenous population against a backdrop of conquest. Through the translation and interpretation of conflict between languages, religions and worldviews, changes in ideas, language and culture, and therefore power, took place in the interstices and metaphorical spaces of negotiation.

The colonial difference is, finally, the physical as well as imaginary location where the coloniality of power is at work in the confrontation of two kinds of local histories displayed in different spaces and times across the planet. If Western cosmology is the historically unavoidable reference point, the multiple confrontations of two kinds of local histories defy dichotomies (Mignolo, 2000, p. ix).

1. Introduction

Even with the benefit of hindsight, it is difficult to grasp the ingenuity of the interpreters who emerged from their communities to become linguistic mediators at the height of colonialization. Today, there is growing awareness of not only linguistic, but also dialectal differences when employing interpreters in situations of conflict and specialized courses are developed to prepare interpreters as the need arises. Ideas and resources such as these were not available to the first colonizers, nor, indeed, to the colonized. In the specific case of the New Spain, the particular interest of this article, the colonizers had a double agenda: on the one hand, to conquer and exploit the land; on the other, to subdue its inhabitants, primarily through their conversion to the religious ideologies of the Old World. The latter endeavour required the translation and spreading of the Word, which, in turn, necessitated some of the colonizers' acquiring the indigenous languages or teaching the local population the language of the newcomers, or – ideally – both.

This double agenda was stated explicitly by Hernán Cortés (1994) during his first encounter with the Nahuas in 1519, when he declared the motives for his journey to these faraway lands: “to advise and call [the indigenous population] to come to learn our holy Catholic faith and to become the vassals of our majesties and serve and obey them” (p. 11). This colonizing enterprise was sustained by the conviction that the American indigenous people were mistaken in their beliefs regarding the world and had barbaric customs. This, in turn, implied that these beliefs and customs should be eradicated by both military and political dominance and through evangelization. These efforts were considered a duty that would benefit the indigenous population. However, the mere force of weaponry was insufficient; the services of interpreters and translators were needed. Particularly in the case of evangelization, the use of words was required in an even more problematic situation: the clash between two cultures previously unknown to each other, each with their own language, worldview, and evolving power relations as a consequence of the armed conquest.

Mignolo's (2000) idea of “colonial difference” describes a space, both physical and imaginary, where the restitution of subaltern knowledge takes place and where “border thinking” emerges. In this space, “*local* histories inventing and implementing global designs meet *local* histories, the space in which global designs have to be adapted, adopted, rejected, integrated, or ignored” (Mignolo, 2000, p. ix). This article aims to analyse the role of interpreters and translators in the indoctrination of the local populations in such a context of colonial difference and border thinking through a study of the document known as *Los Coloquios de 1524*, a text compiled more than 40 years after the actual conquest, one that aspired to reconstruct the first contact with the indigenous population and attempts by Spanish Franciscan friars to evangelize them. Apparently under the

supervision of the Franciscans, the role of indigenous Nahuatl-speaking interpreters was paramount in the conceptualization – via Nahuatl – of Christianity in the New Spain, first interpreting indigenous religious and cultural practice and then adapting and reconstructing notions of Christianity for local consumption. Through the interpretation of conflict between languages, religions and worldviews, changes in ideas, language and culture, and therefore power, took place in the interstices and metaphorical spaces of negotiation.

2. Translating, interpreting and ideological conflict

There are a number of aspects to consider regarding translation and interpreting at the time of the Spanish Conquest in the New Spain. Rather than stating the obvious, these issues are mentioned here in order to provide a line of argument that leads us to the essence of this article, namely the vocabulary employed in the translations of religious Catholic works into Nahuatl carried out by a team of scholars and apprentice-interpreters at the *Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco*, the Imperial College of the Holy Cross of Tlatelolco. First, it should be remembered that multilingual encounters at the time of the Conquest were not such an anomaly. Second, conflict and the interpreting of conflict have rarely been restricted to armed or physical struggle. Following on, the interpreting of ideological conflict relies even more on interpreting languages than actual combat. Finally, and in a circular manner, power differentials both between the armed forces and as regards technological progress with firearms literally translates into ideological supremacy, through the manipulation of discourses, whether in a shared or in an interpreted version.

The Aztec capital fell in 1521, and in 1523 three Flemish Franciscan missionaries arrived. A year later, 12 Spanish Franciscan friars, known simply as “the Twelve”, followed. In the subsequent years, other evangelizers were incorporated into their ranks. The missionaries decided to work with indigenous children from whom they learnt the language and who they educated to facilitate the evangelization of the rest of the population. However, it was not until 1536 that the College was established at Tlatelolco to train trilingual children (in Nahuatl, Spanish and Latin) and to educate them in the liberal arts and Christian doctrine, including some theology. These children helped the friars to preach as well as to compile grammar books, glossaries and religious texts in the “Mexican language”.

Motolinía (1971, p. 189), one of “the Twelve”, remarks that barely six months after their arrival in the New Spain, preaching began, using interpreters and texts. Mendieta (1997) goes as far as to confirm that within this short period some friars were able to learn the language and “with the help of their most skilled disciples, who had been advised in the matters of faith, translated the principles of the Christian faith into the Mexican tongue ...” (p. 372).¹ The missionaries did not usually preach, however,

without their “skilled disciples”, who were indigenous children who had been removed from their families.

Motolinía relates the experiences of the first children to be taken from their families and prepared as interpreters in 1523 by the three Flemish friars, and later by the Twelve and the posterior Franciscans. The children were first taught to cross themselves and to imitate the friars during mass. During the first year they were taught to read and write; by the second year, some could copy documents; music was also studied in the third year (Motolinía, 1971, pp. 236–239). By the time the Twelve arrived in 1524, the first generation of child interpreters would have had just one year of instruction and would scarcely have been able to act as competent interpreters in an evangelical context; however, they would have been the only available interpreters at that time.

Cortés continued to order the indigenous elders to hand over their children to the friars, so that they could be used as interpreters and assist in imposing the Christian doctrine on the local population. However, the order was met with resistance and poor children were often handed over instead of the elders’ own. Even though one of the Texcoco elders from the very beginning begged the Franciscans not to go out so as not to stir up the indigenous population (Mendieta, 1997, p. 359), in 1527 the Twelve decided to mission the neighbouring villages, to destroy the pre-Hispanic churches and statues and to evangelize. They were accompanied by the indigenous children who, by this stage, acted as interpreters and enjoyed the missionaries’ trust, so much so that:

Not only did they say what the friars told them to [preach] but they even added more, confuting with lively arguments what they had learnt, reprehending and condemning the erroneous ways, rituals and idolatry of their fathers, declaring their faith in only one God and teaching them how they had been deceived and blinded in their erroneous ways, having as gods the enemy demons of humanity. (Mendieta, 1997, p. 373)

Mendieta claims that the missionaries understood what the children preached and it appears that, at least at the beginning, there was no sign of distrust regarding the children’s preaching or their interpreting.

Translation and interpreting studies offer interesting reflections on the dichotomy between an idealized view of the translator’s work as mediator or as a more rounded and often bothersome character in conflict situations. While much work published throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s focused on mediation and cross-cultural awareness (see, for example, Katan, 1999; Olohan, 2000; Valero-Garcés & Martin, 2008), recent offerings move towards a more complex and less conciliatory aspect of the multilingual paradigm (Baker, 2006; Carr, 2007; Footitt & Kelly, 2012); some make special reference to the current context (Alonso Araguás, Páez Rodríguez, & Samaniengo Sastre, 2015).

The indigenous population and the colonizers were both familiar with a multilingual reality. As Brotherston (2002) remarks, in “native America, translation was as well conceptualized in theory as it was widespread in practice, long before Columbus arrived, notably at the courts of Tenochtitlan and Cuzco” (p. 168). With special reference to the Mexican context, he continues that going “back to the inscriptions of the Classic Maya, we find suggestive statements as the parallel texts, in Maya hieroglyphs and Mexican iconic script, engraved in eighth-century Copan” (Brotherston, 2002, p. 168). Similarly, by the time of the Conquest, Spain had enjoyed a few centuries of multilingual coexistence, especially in a religious and learned context. One of the most significant examples of such contexts is, of course, the Toledo School of Translators, where Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, Latin and Castilian Spanish were the staple working languages.

However, whereas it seems that these two multilingual environments had not only emerged but also functioned successfully and relatively peacefully prior to their encounter due to the bellicose circumstances of that meeting, their relationship was to develop as anything but tolerant. As Mignolo (2000) points out, bilingual exchanges and their recorded versions and “border thinking” in Latin America in the sixteenth century remained under the control of hegemonic colonial discourse, and the Spanish missionaries “judged and ranked human intelligence and civilization by whether the people were in possession of alphabetic writing” (p.3), the writing system that was promoted “as a pinnacle of civility” (Ruiz, 2002, p. 360). Knowledge and narratives were already rewritten, then, as the Amerindian histories transcribed alphabetically in Nahuatl took the place of “native explicit organization of past oral expression and non-alphabetic forms of writing” (Mignolo, 2000, p. 259).

Armed conflict is more often than not accompanied by socio-political and religious struggle. When Cortés arrived in the New Spain, the Rome-seated Catholic Church was losing its grip on the ideological battlefields of Europe. In addition, by the end of the two-year campaign in the New Spain, another front opened in defence of Catholic Europe: the Habsburg-Ottoman war began in 1521 and was to last for almost two centuries. Fighting to save their territories united by their creed in the holy Catholic Church, the Pope and the Church’s allies needed new disciples to strengthen the establishment.

Therefore, given the linguistic differences encountered in the contact and conflict zones of the new territories, translation and interpreting was to play a very significant role in the ideological colonization efforts. The seemingly peaceful activities of evangelization may not have been as bloody as combat, but they were met with considerable resistance. Not only had the parents of the indigenous children resisted handing over their children to the friars, but more violent events followed as some children returned home and sought to indoctrinate their

families. Motolinía recounts the cautionary tales of some of the children later known as the “the child martyrs of Tlaxcala”, who in extreme acts of language brokering provoked acute generational shock among the indigenous population. One such child, Cristóbal, upon failing to evangelize his father with words alone, took it upon himself to destroy statues in his home, and was consequently beaten severely and set on fire by his own father. He died in agony the next day. Other cases were recorded in which several child interpreters were murdered, but also cases in which the children were responsible for violent acts, including the murder of indigenous priests (Motolinía, 1971, pp. 251–258).

The role of translation in ideological conflicts can also be seen in the apparent internal contradiction in the logic of the Catholic Church contemporaneously to the translation activities at the centre of this article. The purpose of the Council of Trent (1545–1563) was to regulate the translation of the Bible. However, while the translation of the Bible into the local vernaculars in Europe was explicitly prohibited in order to counterbalance the spread of Protestantism via these newly emerging renditions, Christian (i.e., Roman Catholic) missionaries in the Americas made a concerted effort to translate not only the Holy Bible, but also other religious writings into the indigenous languages, apparently with the blessing of the Holy See.

None of this is surprising if we construe the endeavours in a narrative framework and follow Baker (2006) towards the last argument in our circular logic. Indeed, the team of translators and interpreters, from Spanish as well as Nahua backgrounds, had the task of interpreting narratives at a micro level (Labov & Waletzky 1967) in order to rewrite the meta-narratives, as in Barthes’s (1972) myths, Bourdieu’s dominant–subjugated discourses (1991) or Foucault’s (1970) discourse. Given that the Spaniards used the “divide and conquer” strategy quite successfully, they had to come into contact with a great number of different ethnic groups who spoke a wide variety of languages. Once they had identified the most widely spoken and, therefore, the most important vernacular, they set about the evangelization process. This, however, required more than a working knowledge of the language in question. In order to succeed in their ideological conquest, the colonizers needed to create a new vocabulary that would adequately describe the main concepts and transfer the monotheistic worldview to a traditionally multi-theistic cosmovision. How they went about convincing at least some of the indigenous population to have faith in this new vocabulary is presented in the following sections.

3. The genesis of the *Coloquios*: The Twelve, the elders and the scholars

Becoming a suitable interpreter for the purposes of evangelization was a slow and difficult process: the apprehension of the indigenous population, overburdened and overcome by military defeat and forced labour, hindered

the missionaries' quest to learn their languages and teach them Spanish and, as a result, the Christian faith. As for the languages involved, the missionaries educated in the Latin grammatical tradition had to work with migrant languages and different, unfamiliar morphological and syntactic structures (Hernández, 2013, p. 27) that did not have an alphabetized form and whose concepts designated an unusual or unfamiliar world and values distinct from their own. As far as the cultural element is concerned, the evangelization efforts consisted of attacking and undermining the ancient authorities, denying their knowledge of the world and discrediting their leaders as well as their deities in order to replace them with the authorities of the victor: the King, the Pope and the Bible. A double challenge therefore emerged: the pre-Hispanic authorities and wisdom would have to be disqualified and Christianity would have to be conceptualized in Nahuatl.

The conversion and indoctrination of adults was more difficult than with the children and tended not get beyond the most basic questions and the suppression of former practices. According to the 1570 reports, now known as the *Códice franciscano* ("The Franciscan Codex"), missionaries such as Fray Bernardino de Sahagún were the most accomplished speakers of the "Mexican language" as "they extracted it from the natural speech of the elders which the boys had already begun to barbarize" (García Icazbalceta, 1889, p. 69). Although the indigenous elders were ignorant of the gospels and thus unreliable interpreters for the missionaries, they provided useful linguistic resources as well as insights into ancient customs which were used for identifying and attacking "idolatry".

In the prologue to the second book of the *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España* ('The General History of the Things in the New Spain'), Sahagún relates the complex work that was the collaboration between the friars, the indigenous elders, and the Tlatelolco scholars. He explains how, together with "four Latins" or "grammarians" of the College, he met with elders in villages to speak of their ancient wisdom and "all that was conferred they gave us in paintings, which was their old way of writing things" (Sahagún, 2000, p. 130). The scholars ordered the elders' oral and painted accounts, the material was organized by Fray Bernadino for his *Historia general*, and:

the Mexicans amended and added many things to the twelve books when they were set down on paper, in such a way that my works were first sifted through the sieve of the Tepepulco; secondly, by those of Tlatilulco, thirdly, by those of Mexico, and in each of these counts were the grammarians of the College. (Sahagún, 2000, p. 130)

These grammarians were the same scholars who had helped Sahagún to write the *Coloquios de 1524*, together with some scribes, also indigenous, who had been educated at Tlatelolco, and possibly since 1523 by the Flemish friars. Following these first rewritings and appropriations, as

Brotherston (2002, p. 168) rightly points out, although Sahagún's *Historia general* was written as a parallel text in Castilian and Nahuatl, later editions and translations were based solely on the Spanish version. Thus began the conscious – and ideologically motivated – subjugation of local narratives, whether they were in oral or written in format.

It is worth mentioning the recent re-evaluations of the circumstances of the composition of this seminal work. Ríos Castaño (2014), for example, argues that, while hitherto hailed as a masterpiece of ethnographic enquiry, Sahagún's *Historia general* was “produced to support the apparatus of colonial power” (p. 32) and was compiled using less than scrupulous methods. Based on a series of comparisons with inquisitorial manuals, Ríos claims that it was far from a collaborative work, and that Sahagún obtained material by breaking the confidentiality of confession as well as questioning a number of witnesses to compare their responses (Ríos Castaño, 2014, pp. 151–197). This, of course, would not have been possible without the assistance of interpreters who were most likely not in a position to comply with the holy trinity of today's interpreting ethics, namely: impartiality, neutrality, and confidentiality. Furthermore, Sahagún's collaboration in inquisitorial cases against the indigenous elite under Zumárraga, the Apostolic Inquisitor from 1535 to 1543, in which several leaders were “brought to justice” and executed, was contemporary with his philological investigations (Ríos Castaño, 2014, pp. 164–165), thus calling into question his methods of data collection and work with the scholars.

4. Translating cosmivision: The *Coloquios*

4.1. Sahagún, the Twelve, and the “True” Gods

According to the chronicles (Mendieta, 1997, pp. 356–358), when the Twelve arrived in 1524, a dialogue took place between them and a group of Aztec chiefs which brought about the conversion to Christianity of the latter. There has been much discussion as to how a dialogue of this nature might have taken place without the intervention of interpreters. The contents of the talks were recorded by Sahagún, who edited them in 1564 under the title of *Coloquios y doctrina cristiana con que los doce frailes de San Francisco enviados por el papa Adriano Sexto y por el emperador Carlos Quinto convirtieron a los indios de la Nueva España. En lengua mexicana y española* (‘Colloquia and Christian Doctrine with which the twelve friars of Saint Francis sent by Pope Adrian the Sixth and by the Emperor Charles the Fifth converted the Indians of the New Spain. In Mexican and Spanish language’), hereinafter referred to as the *Coloquios*.

Sahagún arrived in the New Spain in 1529 and cites the Twelve as the source of all his information about the first days of the evangelization; he himself was witness from that point on. According to Sahagún, this

doctrine used by the Twelve could be found in papers and memoirs dating from 1524 onwards but had not been put into “congruous and polished Mexican language” until 1564, when he put it into writing with the assistance of the Tlatelolco indigenous scholars (Sahagún, 1986, p. 75). It is not at all strange that the first missionaries should have composed short texts as a guide for their preaching to the indigenous population; the question is how the interpreters managed to convey the evangelical message in 1524 and how a Christian vocabulary was formed in Nahuatl for the Aztecs from then on with subsequent contributions from Sahagún’s investigations, as well as the help of the indigenous scholars of Tlatelolco and the testimony of indigenous elders. This vocabulary was then used in all the evangelizing texts composed by Franciscans until at least the seventeenth century.

The *Coloquios* shows both the friars’ discourse surrounding their mission, their authorities and the truth of the Gospel, on the one hand, and the indigenous responses that express *their* conception of divinity, authorities and rules, on the other. It is highly likely that the indigenous elders’ input to the composition of this writing is most palpable in the enumeration of the divinities and the description of pre-Hispanic rituals and customs, which would not have been easily identified by missionaries in 1524. For example, in Chapter IV, the Twelve say:

[...] we truly know, we have seen and we have heard that you have not one, but very many numerous gods, which you honour and serve. The stone and wooden sculptures you have designed and hold as gods are uncountable. You name them: Tezcatlipuca, Hutzilopuchtli, Quezalcóatl, Mixcóatl, Tláloc, Xiuhtecuhtli, Mictlantecuhtli, Cihuacóatl, Piltaintecuhtli, Cintéotl, and the Four hundred of the South, and the Four hundred rabbits, and others which cannot be counted (Sahagún, 1986, p. 123)

A conception of divinity can be perceived here that is very different from the Christian one, one that corresponds to the word *teotl*, generally translated as ‘God’ – although, as the missionaries pointed out, this term was also used to express that something was “imminent in good or in evil” (Sahagún, 2000, p. 983). It also applied to the dead, in which case it would mean “god” or “holy” (Motolinía, 1971, p. 39) and was used for all of those beings venerated by the Nahuas. Various compounds of *teotl* pertaining to the Nahua tradition are to be found in the *Coloquios*, such as *teucalli*, “the house of god”, *teuamoxtli*, “divine book”, and *teotlamatiliztli* “divine wisdom”.

Various nomenclatures for indigenous divinities are registered in the dialogue: *Ipalnemouani*, “giver of life”, *Tloque nahuaque*, “Lord of the near and the nigh”, *Teyocoyani*, “Inventor of people” and *Totecuiyo in ilhuicahua in tlalticpaque*, “Lord of the heavens, of the earth”. These expressions alert us to the Nahua cosmivision that was in all probability known to Fray Bernadino, thanks to the indigenous elders, and which are

initially mentioned with a view to discrediting the authority and the truth of that cosmovision.

4.2 Choosing your words

The disqualification of the pre-Hispanic divinities is congruent with the colonialist discourse and the evangelical intention, but ambiguous situations arise in the translation of the Christian doctrine into Nahuatl. On the one hand, the term *teuamoxtli*, “divine book” is applied to the Bible (Sahagún, 1986, p. 107, p. 111), although the Spanish–Nahuatl hybrid expression *Dios itlatoltzin*, “the word of God” is sometimes used in the same sense (Sahagún, 1986, p. 105). The word *teotl* is used to distinguish the missionaries not as gods but rather “inhabitants of the earth” (Sahagún, 1986, p. 103). The missionaries later use the nomenclatures of the principal indigenous gods for the Christian God: “he who is the true God, who rules, the true inventor of the people, the true giver of life, the true Lord of the near and the nigh, he who we come to show you” (Sahagún, 1986, p. 125); the missionaries change the referent of these words and differentiate by simply adding that their god is the true *teyocoyani*, the true *ipalnemouani* and the true *tlohque nahuaque*, as opposed to the “false” *ipalnemouani* venerated by the indigenous population. The Twelve’s words are endorsed by the authority of the Bible and the Pope, arguing that their god is the true god because he is good and protects them, and enforced by military “protection”.

While it is likely that the indigenous scholars themselves decided that these linguistic formulas were those that best expressed the ideas that the missionaries wished to communicate, the final decision would have required the friars’ approval. Approval appears to have been given, despite the ensuing perplexities: an *ipalnemouani* was the “giver of life” to the indigenous ears, the one with whom they were already familiar, but the intention was to use the same name to designate a supposedly very special and different god, one who, like theirs, also had his *teucalli* or home and his *teotlamatiliztli* or wisdom. It is not clear whether the indigenous population made that distinction. In this instance, catachresis, in which a precolonial element is taken and reinscribed in the process of adoption and adaptation of a colonial concept, cannot be ruled out.

The bewilderment caused by this cross-referencing can be seen in the *Coloquios*, as the indigenous participants affirmed that they, too, had wise men who were responsible for the divine word, the *teotlamatiliztli*:

You said that we did not know the Lord of the near and the nigh [*Tlohque nahuaque*], the Lord of heaven and the earth [*Totecuiyo in ilhuicahua in tlalticpaque*]. You said that ours are not true gods. A new word is this, that you use and we are perturbed by it, it frightens us. Because our forebears, those who came to be, to live on the earth, did not speak in this way. Truly they gave us

their way of life, they held their gods as true and served them, revered them. They taught us all their ways of worship [...] They also give the people bravery, command [...]. (Sahagún, 1986, pp. 149–151)

The use of these same words for designating divinities of two different cosmovisions clearly unsettled the indigenous population. For the missionaries to speak of “another” *ipalnemounani* whom they knew and venerated, together with the affirmation that the indigenous gods were false, could only lead to misunderstandings. The assertion of the Aztec interlocutors interpellated in the *Coloquios* that they already knew these deities shows that they ultimately believed that these words evoked their traditional gods. The missionaries could not achieve an immediate change of referent among the majority of the indigenous population, raised within the pre-Hispanic cosmovision, and therefore we cannot determine to what extent they conserved the Aztec resonances of this vocabulary or whether the Christian sense was in fact assimilated, even in the case of those who had been educated by the friars and had become interpreters, copyists and translators. In spite of their close proximity to the friars, many scholars continued to live with their families and there were cases of pre-Hispanic “relapse”. Indeed, we might wonder if the renunciation of the original aim of the College of Tlalteloco – that of establishing an indigenous clergy – was due to the survival of pre-Hispanic conceptions that the friars gradually discovered in the Mexican language, as noted by Sahagún (2000) and Bautista (Murillo, 2014), even among the most devout indigenous Christians.

4.3. Have Faith in your Vocabulary

In the *Coloquios*, Sahagún seems to take it for granted that the indigenous population was converted to Christianity by these talks, but he also notes the indigenous response that it was the result of military defeat:

We cannot rest assured, and certainly will not continue to do so, we do not hold this as truth, even if we offend you ... It is already sufficient that we have abandoned, that we have lost, that we have had taken away from us, that we are not permitted, the reed mat², the seat of honour [the command]. If we stay in the same place, all we will achieve is that [the lords] are imprisoned. Do with us as you wish. (Sahagún, 1986, p. 155)

After this, the Twelve proceed to demonstrate the ignorance of their interpellated interlocutors, paradoxically using Nahuatl terminology to preach about Christian doctrine: “As you have never heard the venerate word of the Lord [Lord *itlatoltzin*], neither do you have the divine book [*teuamoxtli*], the divine word” (Sahagún, 1986, p. 159), and “because he is God, the lord, he who is called the Giver of Life [*ipalnemoani*]. This name

is befitting of his being ... He invented all things [*Teyocoyani*]" (Sahagún, 1986, p. 163). Furthermore, they argue that the indigenous gods are false:

all those who you had as your gods, none of them is God, none of them is the Giver of Life [*ipalnemoani*] ... everything can be found in the divine book [*teuamoxtli*], all of the divine words of the Giver of Life, of the Lord of the near and nigh [*tlohque nahuaque*], whom we have come to present to you. (Sahagún, 1986, p. 175)

We do not know what words the original interpreter used in 1524. At that time, a Nahuatl would have known very little of the Christian doctrine and a Spanish interpreter, even a member of a religious order, would not have comprehended the original meanings of this Nahuatl vocabulary. The written recording of this dialogue, albeit a re-elaboration of that first encounter, reveals the bafflement of the indigenous population in the face of such discourse and conveys the reservations that must have been caused by the change of referent. Nevertheless, we can confirm that this discourse determined the vocabulary that was widely used in the majority of the evangelical texts composed in the Mexican language both before the Council of Trent and after the decrees came into effect in the New Spain in 1565.

Throughout the 16th century, the Franciscans were considered the authors of these texts, but as attested to by Bautista, they all had indigenous input (Gómez, 1982). Fray Alonso de Molina, a former child interpreter, compiled several religious works, a 'Catechism' (1546) and a 'Confessionary' (1569) in which he employs the word *teotl* to refer to the Christian god and compound forms such as *teotlatol*, 'sacred scripture'. He also used *ipalnemoani* to describe "god the creator", as well as the Spanish–Nahuatl hybrid expression, "Dios *teotl*". Fray Andrés de Olmos used the Spanish word *dios* in the *Tratado de hechicerías y sortilegios* ("Treatise on Witchcraft and Sorcery", 1553), but sometimes appropriated to Nahuatl grammatical forms. He rarely employed *teotl*, but frequently applied the expressions *tlohque nahuaque* and *ipalnemoani* to the Christian god.

Fray Juan Bautista de Viseo compiled and edited the *Huehuetlahtolli* (1600), which was essentially a series of lectures used by the indigenous elders to educate and advise their youth that he had modified for evangelization purposes. Minor changes aimed to further reinforce the Christian essence of the lectures, and new passages composed with the same vocabulary and discursive models were introduced. Bautista scarcely uses the word *teotl* in the *Huehuetlahtolli*, but there is a high incidence of *Tlohque nahuaque* and *ipalnemoani* to describe the Christian god. In *Advertencias para los confesores* ("Advice for Confessors"), in which evangelical phrases are revised, Bautista primarily employs Spanish–Nahuatl hybrid expressions such as *nelli teotl Dios tlahtohani*, "the true

teotl sovereign God”, or in *totecuiyo Dios*, that is, “our Lord God” (Murillo, 2014).

5. Conclusion

All of the authors mentioned repeated the Nahuatl vocabulary as it was presented in the *Coloquios*, reiterating the idea of the ‘true god’, *nelli teotl*, in the hope that the nomenclature would convey the intended meaning and that the indigenous population would differentiate between the pre-Hispanic and the Christian divinities. Whether they achieved this goal remains to be seen hundreds of years later, as pilgrimages are carried out by devout Mexicans to Tepeyac every December in order to honour the Virgin of Guadalupe, still referred to by many as *Tonantzin*, “Our mother”.

Thanks to a “growing acknowledgement of the neglect of religion in the accounts of colonial times” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007, p. 189) and a growing awareness of the role of translators and interpreters throughout history, new information is surfacing that sheds light on their role in old conflicts. While some may consider that Spain “continues still today its efforts to ‘sell’ Spanish culture” (Mignolo, 2000, p. 254), processes of decolonization continue to unfold in postcolonial contexts, and the limits of dominant epistemology mean that cultural forms and concepts are emerging that require “bilinguaging” (Mignolo, 2000) into the new millennium. A brief look at the *Coloquios*, set down at a moment of ideological conflict against a backdrop of conquest nearly five hundred years ago, suggests that translators and interpreters were already indulging in catachresis and perhaps bilanguaged Christian doctrine, unbeknown to their conquerors and self-imposed spiritual guides, who had every faith in their vocabulary.

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1 The quotes from Motolinía and Sahagún in English in this article are our own translations.

2 The reed mat was a symbol of royalty.