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The Conquest of Language and the Language of Conquest

David B. Paxman

The phrase, "the conquest of language," has two contrary meanings, one, the displacement, and two, the learning of, new-world languages during the conquest of the Americas. The other half of my title, "the language of the conquest," bears both on language as vehicle of the conquest and as the means by which the conquest was represented and assimilated into European culture. It bears secondarily on the way in which language study is represented in the complex terrain of today's scholarship. I will begin with brief remarks on the last issue before examining linguistic aspects of the conquest in more detail.

I teach literature. My linguist colleagues remind me that the literature teacher's version of language study is often characterized by pet theories, aesthetic sentiment, the selective clamor and silence of political correctness, and the misapplication of ear-tickling formulas coined by legitimate linguists. Phrases like "signifier and signified," "Whorfian hypothesis," and "the prison house of language" play through the village of literary discourse like Pied Pipers drawing literary scholars after them. One colleague insists — and I think rightly so — that literary scholars refuse to see the merits of empirical study, especially when the results challenge the conclusions we draw from studying aspects of culture past and present which remain inaccessible by empirical methods.

I differ from most of my linguist colleagues in that my interests lie mostly in the historical and cultural contexts of language study. While I want to know how my colleagues go about empirical study, I'm equally interested to know when the distinction between "empirical" and "non-empirical" first emerged clearly into view, what those terms meant at that time, what immediate problems of knowledge and deeper problems of culture the distinction helped solve, and what problems the distinction left the future to wrestle with. And while I am keenly and genuinely interested in the work of a colleague specializing in sociolinguistics, I am also interested in the social function of the linguist and linguistics at various times and places. In light of these interests, I agree with Thomas Sebeok that linguistics is, after all, "too important to be left to linguists." My paper is an attempt to elicit a mutual respect for different kinds of endeavor — both language study and, if you will, the study of language study.

Ours is by no means the first age to witness opposing attitudes about kinds of language study. Sir Francis Bacon, often called the father of empirical science, promoted a comparative kind that would lead to a philosophical grammar and help to avoid the intellectually warping "idols" that language perpetuated. But he warned that language study could also retard the advancement of knowledge: "Here therefore is the first distemper of learning, when men study words and not matter." Bacon illustrates the spread of this distemper with the story of Martin Luther, who, finding little aid "by the opinions of his own time, was enforced to awake all antiquity, and to call former times to his succors to make a party against the present time." Luther's resort to the ancients required "a more exquisite travail in the languages original for the better advantage of pressing and applying their words." In their recourse to ancient languages, however, Luther's contemporaries became enraptured by the ancients' "manner of style and phrase" and sought the "sweet falling of clauses" above all else in their own writing, losing sight of the "matter" of their discourse.

However Bacon errs factually in attributing the rise of classical studies to Luther, he suggests two points relative to the study of language in its historical contexts. First, we should attend to the motives for which people have undertaken language study. People have often studied languages "to make a party" and for the "pressing and applying of

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words." Second, Bacon points to the results of language study, especially its broad and unpredictable effects. We ought to register on the one hand the way language study affected the course of problems it was undertaken to resolve and, on the other, the way language study distracted or—if you will—elevated discourse by being a constant source of delight. My interest in this paper will be to examine the study of language during the conquest in terms of motives and results. My thesis will be that new-world venturers often studied language as a tacit admission of failure. Because they could not achieve their objectives otherwise, they had to learn the languages of the native inhabitants. However, language study in turn prompted many conquerors and missionaries to modify their objectives as they acquired closer understanding of native peoples and specific languages. And, to complete the cycle, closer understanding prompted new speculation on the nature of language itself and created new possibilities for cultural tolerance.

This pattern—failure leading to more careful language study which then modified the relations between conqueror and conquered—was not necessarily linear, nor did it occur in the same way in each time and place. Successive phases of discovery and conquest posed different sets of problems. Initially, Europeans required only enough language to find gold and conquer if necessary. Later, they had to explain their presence to new peoples, govern, convert, and trade. As long as venturers held language learning in strict subordination to their goals, they accomplished them all the more efficiently. But each kind of efficiency raised its own kind of failure: military, economic, managerial, moral, and so on. As language understanding grew, it tended to spur deeper investigations into the native idioms, customs, and thinking. Europeans in the new world eventually wanted to know whom they had conquered, what their past was, why they followed certain customs, and how they thought. As we shall see, a select group of missionaries soon realized that true communication of Christian doctrines could not even take place until missionaries understood these points. As native languages provided information, they constituted a cultural and religious "other" prompting Europeans newly to perceive, define, clarify, defend, and eventually modify their own truths.

The effect of the encounter with new languages on European language thought has not received the attention it merits, although most histories of linguistics acknowledge that linguistic thought developed partly in response to such contact. I suggest that the impact starts with an event that we pass over in a search for direct linguistic commentary. This event played itself over in many first encounters and lies deceptively out of sight in numerous histories of the conquest. It was the decision adventurers and chroniclers made, not often consciously, about what status to grant the sounds and gestures made by newly discovered peoples. Should they be considered language, or only an inferior form of barely articulate communication? Did the putatively superior European knowledge and languages grant ready insight into the ideas of the natives? Should new languages be conveniently circumvented through the use of informants, or supplanted, or learned? If learned, would they be recordable using European characters? Would their structures lend themselves to description in Latin-based grammatical terms? Of crucial importance, did native lexicons lend themselves to the expression of Christian concepts? If used, would these terms perpetually contaminate the natives' understanding?

Discoverers, soldiers, and missionaries found that regardless of which assumptions they took, they kept having to come to grips with the languages themselves. Throughout the long history of the discovery and conquest from Columbus on, no more important development occurred than the recognition that communication could not be assumed to take place simply because Europeans knew what they wanted from native peoples, believed themselves divinely sponsored, or had confidence in the artfulness of their languages. Initially, material failure triggered this recognition.

We see this recognition emerge in Columbus himself. Although Columbus records events in language and recognizes that his own language fails to express the wonder of the Indies, native languages barely register in his first encounters. He treats them as transparent media, a set of signs he already knows how to interpret. The natives seem to say what he wants them to. He shows little uncertainty at first: "I made signs to them asking what they [wounds] were; and they showed me how people from other islands nearby came there and tried to take them, and how they defended themselves." Or: "We understood that they were asking us if we had come from the heavens. And one man ... called to all the men and women: Come see the men who came from the heavens" (67, 75). He listens for sounds that already have special meaning. Cybao must be Cipango or Japan (285). Cami must mean Kahn (125). In other matters where he has no expectations, he views the natives as empty linguistic vessels the Spanish can fill: "They should be good and intelligent servants, for I see that they say very quickly everything that is said to them" (69). Some will object that these words may not actually be Columbus's, but those of Bartolomé de las Casas, who abstracted them from the original diary. Either way, the problem is emblematic.

Only after repeated disappointments in his quest for gold does Columbus acknowledge ignorance and seek for remedies. Initially, he transforms even his ignorance into a deficiency in the natives: "... I do not give much credit to what they say, from not understanding them well and also from recognizing that they are so poor in gold" (103). To "not to give much credit" to an utterance
implies that one already understands it. That part which Columbus doesn't understand heightens his suspicions, and the natives' lack of gold confirms them. Ignorant and suspicious and needing results desperately, Columbus wishes for priests who can learn the language. This is imperative: “nothing is lacking except to know the language and to give them orders” (259).

Columbus wants to capture natives and convey them to Spain, “so that they might learn our language and in order to know what there is in that land, and so that, returning, they might be interpreters for the Christians, and so that they would take on our customs and faith” (143). This tumbling passage prefigures much of the linguistic activity of the conquest: circumvent the language barrier by training informants and supplant native languages by teaching Spanish, all to the ends of “finding out” and converting. The need to learn native languages is hinted at in the recognition that someone who knows the speech of the inhabitants will be required to teach them.

Crown policy took shape from the response of early explorers to the profound implications of linguistic difference. I am thinking here of the Requerimiento, the document soldiers were required to read to newly encountered peoples after 1513 in order to give prior notice and therefore legal weight to the thin fiction of Spanish jurisdiction. As with the protocols for claiming territory, the Requerimiento had as its real audience the states of Europe. Vanguards read it in Spanish to baffled native listeners, who were to understand at the peril of their lives the authority of the Spanish crown and its viceroy to occupy their territories and spread the Christian faith. The fact that the native inhabitants didn't understand its claims, its justification, and its threat of enforcement didn't bother many of those who pronounced it, as long as the steps were properly followed and recorded by notaries. Bartolomé de Las Casas, informed and sympathetic witness of conquest depravities, stated that he didn't know whether “to laugh or cry” at the Requerimiento. Stephen Greenblatt says, “A strange blend of ritual, cynicism, legal fiction, and perverse idealism, the Requerimiento contains at its core the conviction that there is no serious language barrier between the Indians and the Europeans.”

Aldrete's Origin and Principle of the Spanish Language, the first history of a European vernacular and the first to treat the conquest as an important dimension of linguistic history, reveals that, insofar as the Spanish had linguistic agenda, one of them was to supplant indigenous languages. Aldrete sees in Castilian's power to displace other tongues the evidence of its superiority and deserved prestige. “The conquered receive the language of the conquerors, delivering theirs up with their arms and persons.” Aldrete obscures the fact that Castilian's power to supplant native tongues derived from the rapid control the Spaniards gained by force of arms. If anything, Aldrete views coercive force as justified: the Spanish honor the humanity of the native populations by giving them the Spanish tongue, Christian religion, and participation in an unrivalled world empire.

In one notable passage, Aldrete observes:

> It is certain that when our people first arrived on the island Hispaniola there were a million and a half Indians, of whom not one remains today; in Cuba there remain only a few; and the same holds true on the other islands. On all these everyone speaks Castilian, and the remaining Indians have so totally lost their own former tongue that today it is not known what it was. This is very surprising, since these are such large islands.

Aldrete calls for increased diligence to spread the language among those who resist it out of stubbornness or shame. But observe the analogy: the linguistic conquest accompanies an appalling drop in native population. The supremacy of Castilian is achieved at the expense of hundreds of thousands of lives. Aldrete doesn't seem to think the cost too high.

Aldrete's work was followed within a year by Gregorio García's lengthy speculations on the origins of the Indians, in which García attributes the multitude and heterogeneity of Indian languages to a clever devil who spread languages like so many fortifications in the path of the missionary army. His and Aldrete's views are not those of early arrivals to the new world. They come after a century of Spanish presence, and long after missionaries had been struggling to win approval to study and record native tongues and customs. The debate had not been resolved, but one wonders that neither Aldrete nor García had absorbed much from the more sympathetic voices. Both wrote in distant Spain where suspicion and official opposition to studying and writing of Indian customs was strongest. Their intolerance reveals the persistent fear of cultural contamination from new-world natives. Spanish rulers had not become secure enough to allow them to view native cultures as objects deserving impartial study.

Missionaries, of course, were among the first to see that learning native languages was imperative; otherwise they would need to wait until the natives learned Spanish to teach them Christian doctrine. Even among these, the fear of contamination impinged on the effort to learn native tongues. The difficulty was to overcome one kind of failure—the inability to proselytize—while not inviting another—the corruption of pure doctrine by native superstition interwoven, as García suspected, in native words and phrases. Diego de Landa (1524-1579) arrived in the Yucatán in 1549 and became bishop of the area. He learned Maya quickly (he reportedly preached his first sermon after a few days study) and became an authority on the languages and customs of the area. His Relación de Los Cosas de Yucatán is one of the most thorough ethnographic
works of the mid-sixteenth century. Landa produced
a grammar of Maya and recorded dialects and
language boundaries, phonetics, and forms of
indigenous writing. These facets of language natu-
rally had an instrumental appeal to Landa: by cre-
atring grammars, attending to dialect variations in
the area, and deciphering the native writing, priests
could more easily communicate, using native cus-
toms and beliefs to persuade of the truth and super-
iority of Christianity. Coming to understand the
native language, writing, and customs created many
puzzles which absorbed Landa’s attention. In
Landa’s case, however, language mastery never
advanced to become deep cultural sympathy. The
conflict is there, but his implicit admiration fuels his
sympathy.”9 My point is
not to exhume and accuse men like Landa. We must
remember that their fears were as real to them as
are ours of living downwind from Chernobyl. My
point is rather that such fears interacted with their
aims and aspirations to motivate their responses to
native languages. Success and failure were con-
tantly being reconfigured in this process, and in
turn the act of learning a new language colored,
and was colored by, their motives.

In some notable cases, the lack of religious
motive seemed to create a space in which a passion
and curiosity for host languages could flourish un-
constrained by thoughts of use and appropriation.
Such curiosity could begin as mere listening with-
out comprehension, taking delight in the sounds.
Explorers and settlers sometimes remarked on the
silences, cadences, tones, gestures, protocols, mov-
ing sighs, and groans of the native inhabitants.
Those who took from this additional motivation
to study their hosts’ language were more quickly
prone to see their human faces. The French Cal-
vinist Jean de Léry spent over a year among the
Tupinamba of Brazil in 1557–1558. His History of
a Voyage to the Land of Brazil is a milestone in the
textual creation of sympathy using language as a
shared attribute. First, he adds to the word lists and
rudimentary grammars, already standard features in
voyage accounts, a colloquy with a Tupi informant
which not only records Tupi phrases but shows
interest in Tupi life and customs. Second, Léry’s
response to Tupi ceremonies is the linguistic equiva-
lent of European wonder at the visual splendor of
the New World. One morning he hears a ceremony
when caciques or sorcerers visit the village:

While we were having our breakfast . . . we began
to hear in the men’s house (not thirty feet from
where we stood) a very low murmur, like the muto-
tering of someone reciting his hours. Upon hear-
ing this the women all stood up; and clustered
together, listening intently. The men little by

little raised their voices and were distinctly heard
singing all together and repeating this syllable of
exhortation, He, he, he; the women, to our
amazement, answered them from their side, and
with a trembling voice; reiterating that same
interjection He, he, he, he, let out such cries, for
more than a quarter of an hour, that as we watched
them we were utterly disconcerted. (141)

Compelled by his curiosity, Léry sneaked into the
men’s hut and watched as the ceremony continued:

. . . when I was in the women’s house, I had been
somewhat afraid; now I received in recompense
such joy, hearing the measured harmonies of such
a multitude, and especially in the cadence and
refrain of the song, when at every verse all of them
would let their voices trail, saying Heu, heuare,
hera, heuarae, hera, hera, ouhe—I stood there
transported with delight. Whenever I remember
it, my heart trembles, and it seems their voices
are still in my ears. (144)

Léry’s unusual interest and response may be
attributed to his situation in Brazil and to his reli-
gious attitudes. He came to Brazil not to conquer
and not immediately to convert the inhabitants,
but to find a place where fellow French Huguenots
could settle. This fact alone may have made him
more attentive to the native people and given him
the mental leisure to respond to their ways more
sympathetically than did most conquerors and mis-
sionaries. Léry also hints at possible differences in
the Protestant and Catholic responses to language.
Léry’s desire for the language of his hosts may
reflect protestant interest in the inner state, in con-
test to the Catholic concern for ritual and priest-
hood hierarchy.

As Victor Hanzeli has written of the French in
North America, missionary linguists saw knowledge
of native languages as “machine de guerre” in their
proselytizing work. “Their first and most important
duty was to acquire an oral command of these lan-
guages and sometimes to study and codify them for
the express purpose of teaching their companions.
Yet it often happened that a missionary would be
fascinated by the structure of a language as such.
His admiration for it might even reach theological
heights.” In their efforts to grasp the structure of
Huron or Iroquois, missionaries were often
“haunted by the peculiar ‘economy’ and ‘genius’ of
these languages.”10

Disinterested admiration did not, however,
make a strong argument to those who suspected
native languages of being demonic snares. For these,
one needed a stronger argument—that intimate
knowledge of Indian languages and mores was
needed to avoid a critical failure, the inability to
read the essence of Christian doctrines and to
learn in turn from the natives. In the eyes of many
missionaries, Christian principles required this ap-
proach. Acosta wrote Natural and Moral History of
the Incas (1590) in this frame of mind. In contrast
to Landa who burned Mayan books, Acosta grieved that the decision to burn books was often made by the most ignorant. He said, “The like hath happened in other things, for our men thinking that all was but superstition have lost many memorials of ancient and holy things which might have profited much. For such as would be curiously informed of them have found many things worthy of consideration.” The phrase “curiously informed” seems to carry weight here.

Acosta also observed: “We enter by the sword, without hearing or understanding; persuading ourselves that the Indians’ affairs deserve no other respect, but as of venison that is taken in the forest, and brought for our use and delight.” Acosta devotes chapters to “confuse the false opinion many do hold of them, that they are a gross and brutish people.” He and many others recognized that lack of understanding inhibited clear and effective teaching of Christian doctrine. They discovered that one cannot effectively explain one’s thought to another without knowing something of the other’s thought as well. Acosta said, “having knowledge of the Indians’ customs, we may help them more easily to follow and persevere in the high vocation of the gospel.” And further on: “The ignorance of laws and customs hath bred many errors of great importance, ... And besides the wrong which is done unto them against reason, it is prejudicial and hurtful unto ourselves, for thereby they take occasion to abhor us, as men both in good and evil always contrary to them.” This is a pointed appeal which implies a spiritual and moral failure: ignorance creates enemies of those who should see us as friends.

The kind of understanding Acosta encouraged required not only a grasp of words and syntactical structures, but of how language was conditioned by context. The best appeals for this kind of understanding came from native inhabitants schooled by Europeans, who then reflected on the European perceptions of their people.

Born 1528 to a native Peruvian mother and Spanish soldier father, the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega wrote his Royal Commentaries to amplify and correct the history and customs he found in the books being published in Spain. In one passage de la Vega explains that the Incas differentiated familial terms not only by relationship (brother, sister, etc.) but by gender of the speaker, so that a boy used a different word for “sister” than did a girl. In another, he details the many meanings possible for Inca words depending on pronunciation and context and explains the distortions in Spanish versions. He cites Spanish teachers of the Inca language who mistook words because they could not differentiate sounds not in their own language. He relates how an early interpreter translated the concept of the trinity—a key Christian doctrine—into Inca language not as three in one, but as “God three and one make four.” The Spanish missed many opportunities to communicate their own beliefs effectively. They beat down what they supposed to be devil-inspired Inca beliefs that paralleled Christian truths but which were not in fact valid Inca beliefs. And they failed to comprehend the many features of Inca language and customs they could have exploited to convert Peruvians to Christianity. Finally, he gives eloquent but practical justification for maintaining the general language and not supplanting it with Spanish. So, the better use of language as an instrument—in this case, to communicate Christianity effectively—required true comprehension of contexts that influenced meaning.

For every de la Vega or Acosta, however, there were many who feared intimate understanding of Indian ideas and customs. For these, knowledge of customs and languages posed a grave threat. So subtly had the devil confounded the languages and societies of the new world, they believed, that to study them was to ask to be seduced. The contest here was not simply between ignorance and knowledge, but between one kind of knowledge and another. Many friars, especially those who lived among the Indians, favored a knowledge that approximated the way in which Indians saw themselves. Only by attaining such a knowledge, the friars implied, could the Europeans truly teach the native populations. On the other side, the Spanish crown and church hierarchy viewed Indian customs with deep suspicion and preferred to filter their knowledge of Indians through the truths they already knew. To them, few things mattered less than what the native inhabitants thought, since their thought overran with error. What mattered was what the missionaries could teach. Earlier I said that language study could alter the motives and means of conquest and conversion. A perverse form of this threat led the Spanish crown in the 1570s to prohibit the writing and publishing of materials on Indian beliefs and customs. As a result of this proscription, many of our most important sources on Indian manners were suppressed in their day, even though they were written to teach priests to recognize the heathen nature of many Indian customs.

In The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico Robert Ricard acknowledges that while the Spanish crown did not oppose the simple study of indigenous languages, “it believed that none of them was sufficiently rich and supplie to allow it to be used for explaining the mysteries of the Christian faith.” By contrast, the missionaries “were not seeking to Hispanicise the Indians” and believed that “the task of civilizing them was to be done completely and solely in the native languages.” But the crown “never ceased to insist at the same time that all Indians be taught Spanish,” although—as Ricard observes—“without result.” Many friars simply ignored the church directives and taught the people in their own languages. In all, there was a long struggle among the religious orders, secular clergy, and crown over the policy of translating Christian teachings into native languages, with vigorous forays on each side.
The disputes over the wisdom of studying native languages revolved around several issues. One was the issue of the status of the languages in relation to the learning and languages of Europe, with different sides splitting over whether Christians could really learn anything from heathens. Another issue involved different kinds of failure, with various disputants conceiving of failure and success in different modes and drawing up lines of battle accordingly. For some, the greatest failure would be to convert the Indians to a Christianity tainted by paganism. For such, deep study of languages was an invitation to contamination. For others, the greatest failure was to pass on an abstract religious construct learned through an imported vocabulary and therefore untethered in the lived experience of native peoples.

My theme could occupy at least a short volume, and it remains to trace how the budding knowledge of new-world languages would pollinate on-going grammatical and speculative work in Europe to produce Bacon's call for a philosophical grammar, his perception of the "idols" within languages that retard learning, the seventeenth-century projects to discover universal grammar and to invent a universal language, and Locke's epoch-making theory of ideas and language. Following a hint from Bacon, I have examined language study in a context of motive and unpredictable results. I have been able to touch on only a few figures such as Columbus, Aldrete, Landa, Acosta, and de la Vega to illustrate how the recognition of material, spiritual, and moral failure propelled language study forward, and that as language study gradually demolished the barriers of ignorance, the recognition of new types of failure propelled explorers and especially missionaries to rethink the very nature of conquest and conversion.

Notes
7 Aldrete, 146.
8 Origen de los Indios de el Nuevo Mundo e India Occidentales, 2nd ed. (1729), 52-53.
12 Acosta, 390-391.
13 Acosta, xxvi, 392.
15 Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón's Treatise on the Heathen Superstitions (1629) circulated in manuscript but was published only in 1892. Bernardino de Sahagún's General History of the Things of New Spain saw its first publication in Mexico in 1829-1832.