

# Multilingualism in New Mexico

Mary Jean Habermann-López uses her state's unique history to illustrate the importance of multilingualism

### New Mexico is perhaps the only state in the nation where

multiple languages and cultures are part of a population mosaic which includes Native American, Hispanic, Anglo and other ethnic groups. It is also the only state where the Spanish language has been used continuously, and up to 1963 officially, since the early Spanish settlements were established after 1598. The seven Native American languages spoken in New Mexico continue to be integral to government, religion and way of life for each tribe, and a command of the Native language is generally expected and valued by the elders. These languages were in use hundreds of years before the Spanish arrived.

In 1848, English became the ninth language added to the list of those spoken in New Mexico. This happened when it became a Territory of the United States, but before English was added, the people of the state spoke only Keres, Tewa, Tiwa, Towa, Zuni, Navajo, Apache, and Spanish. In terms of longevity of use, New Mexico is unlike other states whose inhabitants speak a language other than English. In most cases, the other language disappears within three generations, leaving grandchildren unable to communicate with their grandparents. Remarkably, the Native or heritage languages spoken in New Mexico have been in use for over 400 years.

Historically, New Mexicans have learned how to be flexible with new political, social, linguistic and cultural systems of interaction. Since 1610, the flags of four sovereign nations have flown over the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe, original headquarters of the Spanish Capital of New Spain's Northern Province. These were the flags of Spain, Mexico, the Confederacy and the Uni America. The ethnic groups living in close proximity to one another have shared, adapted and exchanged language and culture in religious, social and political contexts. However, since becoming a state in 1912, New Mexico's longstanding multilingual context has seen an increasingly rapid transition to the English language. Numerous Native American languages are presently in danger of being lost. Yet, in recent years a wide range of ethnic groups, including Anglos have demonstrated growing interest in both preserving and developing New Mexico's languages.

The expansion of two-way dual language immersion programs is building bilingual competence for all students. Language revitalization programs are now thriving in some Pueblo communities. The Navajo nation officially endorses bilingual education for its children.

Languages evolve over centuries. In most cases, speakers rarely notice the change. Languages change slowly when speakers are isolated from other communities. For example, the Spanish language that was brought to New Mexico with the first group of colonizers in 1598 under the command of Don Juan de Oñate was basically that of southern Spain brought to the new world by Columbus, almost one century earlier, but enriched with Nahuatl, the language of the Aztec Empire. Since the Province of New Mexico had remained isolated from the major political, societal, and cultural centers of central Mexico and

Spain, the Spanish in New Mexico evolved quite differently from that of Mexico and Spain. Even today, after 400 years, we notice characteristics of 16th century Spanish in the language spoken by its northern residents.

Languages change most rapidly when speakers interact with new environments. As the Athabaskans, ancestors of the Navajo, migrated south from their homeland in Canada and eastern Alaska, they had to "reinvent" their language as they experienced new flora and fauna — the Athabaskan word for "snowflake" was used for a newly acquired item, "seed."

By the same token, after only 80 years of contact, the Spaniards had incorporated Nahuatl terminology for local flora and fauna not found in their homeland. They also named the round corn patties made by the natives *tortillas* because these new food stuffs closely resembled the egg omelet, called *tortilla*, of their homeland. In 1598, new vocabulary and meanings along with the language of 16th century Spain traveled north to New Mexico with the colonizers accompanying Don Juan de Oñate.

### Pre-Spanish Multilingualism

In 1540, Francisco Vásquez de Coronado conducted an expedition to New Mexico to verify the extravagant stories of wealth. Accompanying him on his long voyage were 400 Spaniards and 800 Tlaxcalteca and Azteca Indians who spoke Nahuatl. Since Nahuatl was spoken across vast areas of Mexico, it was assumed to be the language of the northern frontier as well. However, they were completely unprepared for the languages they encountered.

The languages spoken in the various Pueblos of New Mexico were Keres, Tewa, Tiwa, Towa and Zuni. While the people shared common cultural ancestry with the Anasazi, "the Ancient Ones" of Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde, the languages that had evolved from early times were different from one another.

Although there was no lingua franca among the Pueblo people, they were a people who interacted on a regular basis among themselves and also with other distinct indigenous linguistic groups and held annual trade fairs which were also attended by many Plains Indian groups. In comparison to the Pueblo, the Navajo were recent arrivals to the area, around the time of Columbus. The Apache, still in the process of migrating southward, had partially penetrated the southern mountain and desert country of Arizona and New Mexico when the Spanish arrived. The Navajo and Apache languages, belonging to the Athabaskan language family, were similar, but not at all related to those spoken by the Pueblo groups. However they were interacting with the eastern Pueblos by the time the Spaniards arrived in the area.

### Spanish/Pueblo Settlements

The Spanish established their settlements near the existing Pueblo

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communities along the Rio Grande River valley. They completely Hispanicized what became the Province of New Mexico. The Spanish tactic was not to replace existing functional institutions and cultural traits but to add elements from the Spanish system into the Natives' existing system. Conversion to Catholicism was their primary goal. Once the indigenous inhabitants converted, they became subjects of the Spanish Crown, and were accorded the same rights and privileges of all its citizens. Spanish became the lingua franca of the region.

As a result of association with Spanish-speaking settlers, the Pueblo people developed a practical knowledge of spoken Spanish. By the end of the Spanish colonial period, there was wide diffusion of Spanish into the religious rituals of the Pueblo people due to contact with the missionaries.

The Native American peoples borrowed, adapted and incorporated some Spanish terms associated with new technology and governance into their languages. As each tribe had its own language, these languages had a limited influence on New Mexican Spanish. Some Native indigenous words were incorporated into New Mexican Spanish including *oshá* (wild celery), *chimayó* (obsidian), *chongo* (braid), *estafiate* (medicinal herb). Linguistically, the Spanish and Native American people of New Mexico shared a rather harmonious existence for approximately 225 years under the rule of the Spanish Crown.

## Mexican Governance, 1821-1846

New Mexico became part of Mexico in 1821 when the country won independence from Spain. There were relatively few changes in the legal status and administration because most Spanish laws did not conflict with the new constitution. Under Mexican rule, Native Americans were immediately granted full citizenship, while the Spanish policy of protection of their lands continued.

An important change from Spanish policy that greatly impacted New Mexico commercially, linguistically, and culturally was the opening up of foreign trade with the U.S. through the Santa Fe and California Trails.

Another significant change was the appointment of native New Mexicans as chief executives of the new government. Under Spanish rule, appointments were made directly by the Spanish King. This led to the development of a powerful group of local Hispanic families educated in private schools who came to dominate political affairs. With the arrival of the printing press in 1834, governmental and educational materials as well as civil newspapers were produced and circulated. Literacy in Spanish was needed by a people whose society was in a state of rapid transition.

Spanish continued to be important as a general trade language, the language of external political affairs, local law enforcement and, of course, for daily communication. The Native American languages remained relatively intact during this period.

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It is important to mention the role Padre Antonio Jose Martinez of Taos played in education and development of Spanish literacy. He recognized the power and importance of literacy among the populace of New Mexico, established a seminary in Taos which educated many young boys and girls, and published all types of books, not just those of a religious nature but also those teaching penmanship, grammar, rhetoric, physics, and mathematics.

Martinez disseminated these texts at no cost and he published New Mexico's first newspaper, *El Crepúsculo de la Libertad (The Dawn of Freedom)*, that published informative content about civil matters as well as criticize excesses of certain government officials. He is regarded today as the most influential priest of the period. He is also known as a champion of his people and a leader in education and political affairs during his lifetime.

By the end of Mexican rule, Spanish and Native American languages had borrowed and incorporated terminology from one another but their grammatical structures remained intact.

## The Addition of English

English was added to the multilingual mix of New Mexico officially in 1848 when the state was incorporated as a Territory into the national framework of the U.S. At that time, there were about 60,000 inhabitants, mostly Spanish-speaking. By 1910, the population was 327,301, with 175,000 Spanish speakers. English gained momentum as the state experienced unprecedented growth after the Civil War and with the arrival of the railroad in the late 1800's.

American citizens brought with them a new way of life. Much language borrowing occurred, with many words representing the fact that new phenomena and new technology (*tíquete*-ticket, *billegislative*-bill, *tren*-train) of the new culture were Hispanicized.

English gradually became the language of public domain. However, since the Spanish and Native American population constituted the majority until the turn of the century, their languages remained dominant in the social fabric of the home and local communities of the Territory. This helped preserve New Mexico's multilingual, multicultural mix.

During the latter part of the Territorial period, it became more and more difficult for Hispanics and Native Americans to maintain their cultural identity. The residents of some of the oldest Spanish and Native communities found their very way of life disregarded by the newcomers. The Spanish-speaking public turned to the written word as a means to protect the language as well as to convey their cultural values and political concerns.

Novels, poetry and short stories in Spanish began to be published in the 1880's, and by 1889 there were 65 Spanish language newspapers in the Territory. This marked a linguistic pinnacle for a society which had principally used Spanish to satisfy needs of a daily, rural life style. This literary peak not only helped preserve the Spanish language and culture but also helped inform the populace of important political affairs as New Mexico approached statehood. Numerous articles and columns appeared in the news media on the importance of education for the large Spanish-speaking student population, and emphasized the need for instruction in the children's native Spanish language.

Bilingual education began to flourish in major centers of commerce by the mid 1850's. In order to successfully instruct students it became necessary to use their native tongue. In 1874, after just 26 years as a

U.S. Territory, approximately 22 percent of schools instructed in English and Spanish, and 78 percent in Spanish. By 1889, the percentage of bilingual schools had increased to 28 while Spanish schools decreased to 30 percent, with the remaining schools teaching just in English. As public education took off, English was growing quickly in schools.

In 1891, the Territorial Legislature enacted a law for public education. Because of the large number of students speaking Spanish, Article 13 of that law required teachers to have knowledge of English and Spanish in districts where Spanish was the only language spoken. In 1893, the Superintendent of Public School Instruction reports: "One of the most serious obstacles to carrying out the schools laws in various counties is the lack of knowledge of Spanish by teachers otherwise fully qualified. In many school districts in the Territory, no English is spoken at all, and it is almost impossible for a teacher to make a success in such districts without some knowledge of Spanish." (School Report #7, p. 5)

## Statehood in 1912

New Mexico gained statehood through a long and arduous 60 year process. There are many reasons, too numerous to discuss here, why it took New Mexico so long to become a state. Before the Civil War, some questioned the loyalty of this ethnically different population. The predominantly Hispanic and Native American people seemed foreign to their Anglo counterparts, and spoke different languages. One Senate committee report in 1902 had repeated, negative references to ethnicity and the use of the Spanish language.

Once accepted as a state, New Mexico held its Constitutional Convention declaring that English and Spanish were official languages. The Enabling Act of 1911 required that "all laws passed by the legislature be published in both the English and Spanish languages" for the first 20 years of statehood. This provision was renewed in 1931 and 1943. It also provided for the creation of a "Spanish American School as a normal school to train Spanish-speaking students to become teachers to work with the large number of Spanish-speaking students in this state." This was taken out of the Constitution in 1964. Article XII, Section 8 directed the legislature to train bilingual teachers.

## Language Preservation/Language Loss

Preservation of the Spanish and Native American languages became more and more of a struggle. The rural character of New Mexico and the Hispanic teachers from these rural areas helped preserve the Spanish language. Because of the isolation of the tribes from mainstream English, the Native languages were not impacted as quickly as Spanish.

English gained greater momentum as its institutions were put into place, and new technologies, improved roads, and a competitive, market-based economy became realities for a people living in what had been rural, isolated, community-based settings.

Aurelio Espinosa, a noted linguist, researched the Spanish language in 1909 and some twenty years later, in 1938. He noted how much the language had changed in twenty years and that a large part of the younger population no longer spoke it at all. The Spanish language news media that had gained momentum in the 1880s and continued through to the 1930's served as the medium for disseminating the hispanicized anglicisms to its rural readership.