



LINGUISTIC HORIZONS

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Nahuatl

How did you first get into linguistics?

Growing up in rural Denmark, I found languages fascinating. I read Tolkien and loved his constructed languages. I compiled my own wordlist of Old Norse from runic monuments, and read foreign language poetry. In high school, we had a textbook about the religion of the plains Indians. It mentioned how the Lakota language has no verb for 'to have' and suggested that this might indicate that speakers had a different concept of possession. This intrigued me so much that I ordered all the books about Native American languages that I could find through interlibrary loan. The one I remember best was a book by Linda Valentine Philips called *Making it Their Own* about how the Ojibwe of Canada used community radio to create new contexts of use for the language, while still maintaining traditional ways of speaking.

When I graduated from high school, I entered the programme in Native American Languages and Cultures at the University of Copenhagen. The programme director then was the linguist Una Canger, who works on the Nahuatl language of Mexico. She became my first mentor in linguistics. I wrote my MA thesis about social variation in the grammar of Nahuatl, based on 6 months of fieldwork in Mexico (I was able to do this because of the generous student stipend offered to all students in Denmark). I have been working on Nahuatl ever since, with some excursions into other Mesoamerican languages such as Otomi and Huichol. My PhD, which I wrote at Brown University, was about the politics of indigenous languages in Mexico. It focused on Nahuatl, which has a particular role as a kind of symbolic language of Mexican nationalism.



Magnus in the field surveying the landscape around Tequila, Veracruz and its Nahuatl toponyms with research assistant Gabriela Citlahua Zepahua. Photo © Ditte Boeg Thomsen

What do you look at when you look at Nahuatl?

My approach is holistic. This is a perspective that is natural for me because I want to know everything about the topics that I am interested in, and it is also a core part of the anthropological perspective that I have been trained in. I try to look at everything from phonology to syntax, from language history to ongoing changes in grammar, from colonial written sources to current dialectal variation, from the effects of the current influence of Spanish to the deep history of the language in the Uto-Aztecan language family, and from discourse patterns to language politics.

The reason I try to be holistic is that it promotes the deepest kind of understanding, since each aspect is influenced by the others. To understand the language's current state, I must understand the history that produced it; and to understand the history, I have to understand the current diversity of the language as well as how political dynamics in speaker communities can both create diversity and erase it.

What questions are you seeking to answer in your current research?

Currently, I am organizing the Nahuatl Space Project, which I am carrying out with colleagues at the University of Copenhagen. This project draws on my original fascination with the way language and linguistic habits come to play a role in how we understand the world around us. This relation between linguistic and cognitive habits was originally formulated as a field of investigation by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. Some still refer to this basic question as the 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis', although they never really made an actual hypothesis, but rather made some intriguing observations about linguistic and cultural diversity. For a long time, this kind of research was ridiculed, as many linguists thought that language was primarily the key to understanding universal structures of human cognition. But over the past thirty years, there has been increasing evidence that there really is a correlation between linguistic diversity and different cognitive habits – a kind of linguistic

relativity, as Whorf originally called it.

An important series of studies has found that, since different languages give their speakers different grammatical means for speaking about space, speakers of different languages also tend to focus on different things when they describe spatial relations. For example, speakers of some languages, typically the European ones, tend to use the person speaking as the centre for describing spatial relations – one may say that their habitual way of describing space is egocentric. But speakers of other languages tend to place the centre of spatial descriptions outside of the speaker, in the environment, for example by using strategies that are geocentric. Instead of using left and right for describing spatial relations, they may prefer to use elements in the landscape, describing things as being 'uphill', 'downriver' or 'upwind', or using cardinal directions. These possibilities are of course also available to English speakers, but in some languages these strategies are so frequently used that they are even used to describe the relations between small objects on a tabletop (the fork is east of the knife, or the glass is upstream from the plate is not exactly natural usage in English), and they may even be integrated into the grammar of the language.

Nahuatl is a language with many different local dialects, spoken in different types of landscape. In our current project, we want to know whether there is dialectal variation in how Nahuatl speakers describe spatial relations. Do differences in the landscape make the different groups of speakers choose different strategies of describing space? We are asking whether speakers of a language can adapt the language's

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grammar to the particular landscape that they live in.

What is your average day like as a researcher?

I am currently conducting fieldwork in Mexico. I live with a small team of colleagues in a town in the mountains of central Veracruz State. Days in the field vary: some days we meet new research participants and tell them about our project, others we do interviews or conduct different kinds of psycholinguistic experiments (language games that show how different people describe spatial relations). Some days, I use GPS to map the locations of important places; I record toponyms and experience the landscape in order to gain a sense of how the landscape may induce different ways of talking about space (this can be something you have to feel with your own body). We speak a lot of Nahuatl and improve our own language skills every day, since almost everyone here speaks it natively and prefers it to Spanish. It is exciting to feel how one's language skills improve, and to notice new aspects of the language.

When I am home at the university, my days are very different. They involve teaching, writing, meetings, and ordinary family life. Being away from one's family for prolonged periods is the worst part of fieldwork. Other than that, fieldwork is the part of my job that I enjoy the most.

Have you published your research?

Yes, I have published a couple of articles based, starting already with my MA research. I tend to publish several pieces every year, sometimes in big journals. But I also like to publish in smaller venues that often publish research that can be

more descriptive, data-driven, or oriented towards narrower interests, I also publish in Spanish and Danish. I have also published a book aimed specifically at the members of one of the Nahuatl-speaking community I work with. I think we ought to encourage young researchers to explore different kinds of publications like that, and recognize that they are valuable exactly because they let knowledge reach different audiences. I really like when people read what I write, and to be honest articles in academic journals are often not read very much, except by a few people working on closely linked topics. That is why I also maintain a personal blog, where I also publish my research, but targeted to a more general audience. Where a journal article may get a couple of hundred readers, many of my blogposts have several thousand readers.

What is your dream linguistics research project?

Right now, this is it. It is a project I have formulated myself based on my own main interests – the history and evolution of the Nahuatl languages – and the relations between people and the natural environment. We have been very lucky to get generous funding from the Danish Council for Independent Research to carry out this project, with a team working together over several years. I really enjoy interdisciplinary collaborations like this, where expertise from linguistics, cognitive science, anthropology, history and geography really come together to provide a full and detailed picture of an interesting phenomenon.

What advice do you have for young linguists, or those

seeking to get into postgraduate research?

I would advise them to always pursue their own specific interests, but to also seek to avoid defining their interests too narrowly. Sometimes, as young scholars we are led to think that we can only manage to gather enough knowledge if we restrict ourselves to a tiny field of inquiry, and our advisers may suggest that we should not spend much time reading outside of this core focus area, or cultivate research in adjacent areas. I think this is a mistake: the more widely we read, the more different perspectives we can bring to bear on our topic of inquiry, and the more likely we are to be able to see potential inadequacies in our approach, or discover other possible approaches that could be fruitful. The world does not organise itself according to disciplinary boundaries. Linguists who think broadly really have much to offer all the social science disciplines, since they all rely on language as a medium of knowledge, but often aren't attentive to language or adequately trained to analyze it. ¶

Find out more

Articles

Magnus Pharao Hansen (2010) 'Polysynthesis in Hueyapan Nahuatl: The status of noun phrases, basic word order, and other concerns', in *Anthropological Linguistics*.

Magnus Pharao Hansen (2016) 'The difference language makes: The life-history of Nahuatl in two Mexican families', in *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 26(1).

Online

The Nahuatl Scholar Blog – nahuatlstudies.blogspot.com