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**It's a Special Kind of Frog:
Co-creating Teaching Materials for the Q'anjob'al in Diaspora ***

Jill Hallett

Jill Hallett is a PhD candidate in Linguistics at the University of Illinois, and high school teacher in Chicago. For two years, she served as assistant editor of the journal *World Englishes*. Her research interests include sociolinguistics, specifically American and world Englishes, linguistic identity in literature, inner-city pedagogical discourse, language use in the diaspora, and second language acquisition. Her dissertation research analyzes teacher accommodation to student language. She has recently presented her research at the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Annual Convention, the Symposium on Teaching and Learning Indigenous Languages of Latin America (STLILLA), and the New Ways of Analyzing Variation (NWAV) Conference.

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Abstract

This paper details the collaborative efforts between linguists and members of a diasporic Mayan community to create and develop mother-tongue materials for the community's children. Cognizant of the effect outsiders have on the community under study (cf. Hofling 1996), we worked very closely with members of the community to address their specific concerns.

Much of our approach was guided by England (2003) and Hinton and Hale's (2001) *The Green Book*, focusing on the chapters on writing systems and strategies for revitalizing languages. We noted the absence of research on diasporic language preservation in the Americas; as Ladefoged (1992: 809) explains, the principles that guide language preservation initiatives do not and should not apply universally. Through constant contact with many Q'anjob'al over the course of a year, we tailored our work to their needs.

Although other Q'anjob'al diasporic populations have developed in Spanish-speaking areas, the major language in this area is English; thus, members of this community expressed a wish for Q'anjob'al-English literacy materials for the children. Based on Hinton's (2001) language revitalization strategies (6-7), it was decided that documentation and teaching materials should be among our first goals. We felt that an alphabet poster and alphabet book for each child in the community would be the most feasible products of this collaboration; happily, additional materials and goodwill fostered between linguists and the Q'anjob'al community further contributed to the experience.

Naturally, some roadblocks emerged in the creation of these materials, including referencing materials that already existed (mostly dictionaries and bibles), and trying to understand what was being represented in pictures and Spanish translations to accurately capture the meanings. Orthography was also vexing; even members of this tight community disagreed on how certain words were spelled, further exacerbating the difficulties of committing the language to print.

Background

Following a linguistic field methods class on the Q'anjob'al language, Dr. Ryan Shosted, a linguistics professor, and Jill Hallett, a graduate student, began work on developing teaching materials for the Q'anjob'al community in spring of 2009. Our work was informed by Hinton and Hale (2001), who discuss writing systems and strategies for revitalizing languages, and Hinton (2001), whose strategies focus on language documentation and teaching materials.

Several important issues arise in working with minority languages such as Q'anjob'al. England (2003) discusses the politics of working with Mayan languages, including the colonial history of Guatemala and Mexico. Hofling (1996) explains the effect that outsiders have on the community under study, as the researchers are not members of the Q'anjob'al community. Ladefoged (1992:809) reminds the reader that the principles that guide language preservation initiatives do not and should not apply universally. Our work with the Q'anjob'al community raises additional issues, as very little research on language preservation with diasporic populations in the Americas exists.

This paper discusses the production of teaching materials for the Q'anjob'al in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. The Q'anjob'al are a Mayan people from the town of Santa Eulalia (Q'anjob'al *jolom konob'*), state of Huehuetenango, Guatemala, and their American-born children. Champaign-Urbana is home to the University of Illinois, and unlike many urban areas, there is no large Spanish-speaking contingency.

The Q'anjob'al language belongs to the western branch of the Mayan language family, and is closely related to Jakaltek (mutually intelligible with Q'anjob'al), Akatek, Chuj, and Tojob'al. In Guatemala, Spanish is the lingua franca. Q'anjob'al features ejectives and implosives, and has about 100,000 speakers (England 2003). The children in the diasporic families spoke English at school, and their parents often spoke to them in Spanish. According to one community member, some families did not use Spanish because of its violent colonial history, while some preferred it to Q'anjob'al due to the minority language's limited application.

Although the Q'anjob'al language is not in danger, there are no materials available in Q'anjob'al and English for diasporic populations such as the one in Champaign-Urbana. Thus, we set out to make an alphabet poster and an alphabet book for each child in the community (around 20). We were able to produce these, as well as a story book (*Naq' Unin ilom Kalnell* The Boy Who Watches Sheep), a Q'anjob'al/ English glossary, some English as a second

language (ESL) materials targeted to Q'anjob'al speakers, a few gospels in standardized Q'anjob'al orthography, and a history of Santa Eulalia. Examples of our work are available at <https://netfiles.uiuc.edu/rshosted/www/Qanjobal.html>.

In the fall of 2008, we contacted Andres Juan, one of the original members of the diasporic Q'anjob'al in Champaign-Urbana, in the context of a linguistic field methods course at the University of Illinois. We began attending the mass at the local Catholic church that conducts fortnightly *missas* in Q'anjob'al, and joined the community after the service in the gathering hall, where we assessed the needs and desires of the community members through our conversations with them. We continued attending these *missas* through spring of 2009, and also participated in the Festival of Santa Eulalia, another gathering of the Q'anjob'al community outside the church context. Throughout the spring, we increased our contact with members of the community.

Issues

As we were conducting our work with the community, several issues arose that gave us pause. One of these issues was that of Q'anjob'al orthography; the language has no standardized writing system, and of the existing materials in the language, there is no uniformity. The existing materials, such as those offered by the Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala (ALMG), are all in Q'anjob'al and Spanish. The ALMG (2003) dictionary features the ejective q' orthographically, while the ALMG textbooks (Xoy et al 2007a and 2007b) feature both q' and q for the same sound, and are inconsistent with respect to the glottal stop (for example *naq'* and *naq* for 'man' and *ti'* and *ti* 'mouth'). The Q'anjob'al bibles also did not agree orthographically, with disagreement on the sounds represented by c/k/k'/q/q' and b/b'. There was also a lack of agreement across resources of the presence of h in words such as *'heb* 'them'. The chart below shows the orthography of the two main community members, which correspond to the orthography of the bible and the majority of the ALMG materials, respectively.

Speaker 1 (like Bible)	Speaker 2 (like ALMG)
g	k'
c	k
k'	q
q	q'

Table 1. Speaker orthography

We felt the need to be cautious in proceeding with the posters, books, stories, and bible passages, as these materials, effectively produced by outsiders, might have an effect on the standardization of orthography, or even the recognition of the distinction of languages versus dialects. We finished the projects only with serious and long-term consultation with a number of members of the community, as well as the resources available to us.

In addition to issues of orthography, our presence in the community was occasionally questioned. Dr. Shosted did not have access to the female members due to his gender. The community had also had some negative experiences in the past with university researchers, so there was some distrust early on in the partnership. Finally, members of the community requested help with English, but only one person turned up at the Saturday morning class that was offered.

Another issue that arose related to translation. One anecdote involved the creation of the alphabet poster. Hallett was looking for a word that began with the letter j, and found the following entry in the ALMG (2003) dictionary:

- (1) **Jiqtxul.** *Rana.* Tx'oqxa no' jiqtxul b'ay q'axanil tx'otx'. *En tierra cálida existen muchas ranas.*

When she called one of the community members, Andres Juan, to be sure that her example words were appropriate for the poster, she asked if 'frog' was the meaning of the word *jiqtxul*. Juan said, "Well, it's a special kind of frog. It pees when it jumps." Not content that her free

open source frog clip art would capture this distinction, Hallett selected another word for *j*. A similar situation occurred with the word *nam*, which appeared in the same dictionary as shown in (2).

(2) **Nam, txolol.** *Mariposa.* Tx'oqxa no' nam xol an Kaq. Tx'oqxa no' tzolol xol an xumak. *Hay muchas mariposas entre los flores.*

Juan indicated that *nam* is kind of like a butterfly, but that gets attracted to the light. Once it was clear that *nam* was a moth, the image was adjusted accordingly.

It was also important to us to make our illustrations for the alphabet poster and book as clear as possible, as our resources were of little help to us in this regard. One ALMG book (Xoy 2007b) had illustrations to help the reader learn words. The word *xuk*, for example, was written next to a picture of a fruit basket. It was unclear from this context whether *xuk* meant fruit, basket, or a fruit basket. Another word, *t'un'urich*, featured a smiling boy on a swing. Another word showed a tree stump fashioned into a chair. The illustration for the word *kaq'e*, 'wind', showed blowing trees. All of these examples demonstrate the unforeseen difficulty in producing what we thought would be simple materials.

While the alphabet poster featured letters with corresponding words and pictures, the alphabet book featured sentences containing these words in both Q'anjob'al and English. To our knowledge, these are the only teaching materials known to be written in those two languages.

On one of our first meetings with the community after church, one of the members, Luis Esteban, who used to be a teacher in Guatemala, grabbed a sheet of paper and started writing down a story, "*Naq Unin Ilom Kalnel*". The title translates to "The Boy Who Watches Sheep", but is more commonly known in the United States as "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." Another member of the community, Mateo Diego, translated the story sentence-by-sentence and word-by-word to English. We typed up the story so there would be one sentence on every page (in Q'anjob'al with English translation), and distributed the papers to community children after *misa* one day. The children illustrated the story, which we then compiled into a PDF complete with glossary. The final product is available at <https://netfiles.uiuc.edu/rshosted/www/docs/kalnel.pdf>.

We had planned to teach an ESL class for community members, but found that attendance was too low to continue; only one person showed up and it was difficult to find teachers who were consistently available. Nevertheless, we produced materials such as the one shown in Figure 1 below.

Jill: Hello. My name is Jill. How are you? Maria: I'm doing well/ I'm fine/ Good/ Okay/ Great. How are you?	Xuwin: Txajin. Inb'i Xuwin. Watx' mi ha k'ul? Malin: Watx' in k'ul. Watx' mi ha k'ul?
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English	Q'anjob'al
Do you like...?	Txotxej txatx...
Good day	Txajin
Goodbye	Taihila'
How are you?	Watx' mi ha k'ul? /Texi ha k'ul?
I do not like...	K'am txi wotxej...
I like...	Txi wotxej txin...
My name is _____	Inb'i _____

Figure 1. Sample ESL materials

Finally, as a way to familiarize the community with written Q'anjob'al, we coordinated with the priest at the church to find out the gospel at the following *missa*, and borrowed a bible from a community member so we could type up copies for the congregation. We have already mentioned the orthographical concerns with respect to this bible, so some adjustments had to be made to the texts so they would be in line with the other materials we were producing. It is unclear what effect these passages had on the parishioners.

Implications

As alluded to above, there are implications for the type of work involved in materials production for teaching an indigenous minority language in diaspora. First, the commitment to print puts the outsider in a powerful position, that of a standardizer. Second, there is some debate over whether some of these Q'anjob'alan tongues are distinct languages or dialects of the same language, and what effect that distinction has on the status of a language, or possibly the divisiveness of a people. Third, by committing the language to print, are we privileging one

variety or orthography over another? What we have printed may be a “koinéized” form, a mesh of all orthographies or varieties. It is imperative that we consider the implications of producing pedagogical materials, and that we work with the community to best serve the needs of its members.

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