



Nancy Farriss. *Tongues of Fire: Language and Evangelization in Colonial Mexico.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 432 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-088410-9.

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The book *Tongues of Fire: Language and Evangelization in Colonial Mexico* by historian Nancy Farriss is a truly interdisciplinary work by a single author who delves into the archival record armed with language and linguistic understanding most historians can only aspire to have as well as a theologically informed understanding of the evangelization process in early colonial Mexico.[1] The book is at times deeply historical and at times deeply linguistic. Some chapters focus on profoundly historiographical debates by engaging with the likes of the classic history monographs in colonial Mexican historiography, such as Robert Ricard's *La conquista espiritual de México* (1966), while other chapters delve into technical linguistics concepts, such as phonetics, morphology, syntax, and semantics. The book examines the process of evangelization in the period after the conquest of Mexico in 1521 through the lens of language contact. The author provides a detailed exploration of the intertwined histories of language contact and evangelization in central Mexico and Oaxaca. Farriss focuses on the region of colonial Oaxaca where the languages, mostly from the Zapotec language family, have not been studied with as much depth as the Nahuatl-speaking regions in the areas of central Mexico. The majority of the book examines the first two generations of the indigenous populations after the conquest in the six-

teenth century. Consequently, the focus also falls on the first two generations of the regular clergy, mostly of the Franciscan and Dominican orders, who carried out most of the early evangelization. Throughout the book, the author interprets key sixteenth-century Zapotec-language texts used for evangelization, particularly those by Dominicans Juan de Córdova and Pedro de Feria. She compares them with parallel Nahuatl- and Mixtec-language texts that other historians have interpreted. As for methodology, Farriss uses not only traditional historical text analysis and interpretation but also the often technical analytical tools of linguistics, making this a truly interdisciplinary work.

Ethnohistorians have studied most of the processes associated with language learning, evangelization, and indoctrination examined in this book in central Mexico's Nahuatl-speaking regions. The contribution of this work is to examine the history of language contact and evangelization in the lesser-studied Zapotec-speaking region of colonial Oaxaca. This gap is partly explained by the linguistic differences between the Nahuatl and Zapotec language groups. Farriss's contribution begins with her description of the complexity involved in learning to speak and read Zapotec and other related languages spoken in the Oaxacan area. Not only are these languages much more complicated to learn for speakers of Latin-based languages,

in part because they are tonal—meaning that tone carries meaning—but the area of Oaxaca was also relatively peripheral compared to Nahuatl-speaking regions, which were so central to Spanish colonization.

The book is organized chronologically mapping the process of language contact and evangelization in the sixteenth century. It revisits how that process took place in the Nahuatl-speaking region and then explains how it occurred later in Oaxaca. It is divided into four parts with two to three chapters each and a concluding chapter adding up to eleven chapters. Each section explores part of the long and arduous intertwined processes of language contact and evangelization: “Language Contact and Language Policy,” “Evangelization in the Vernacular,” “The Means and the Message,” “Lost and Found in Translation,” and a concluding section titled “Doctrinal Legacies.”

Part 1, “Language Contact and Language Policy,” consists of three chapters in which Farriss describes some of the early attempts at communication and evangelization in the central Nahuatl-speaking areas through rudimentary methods of gestures, words, and pictographs. This section highlights the lack of cross-cultural understanding on the part of early Spanish missionaries including the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians and their early efforts to learn Native languages. It highlights the emergence of indigenous interpreters in the Nahuatl-speaking regions who tended to be part of the indigenous elites and became known as *nahuatlatoles*. These translators became bilingual and bicultural mediators. In this section, the author also introduces Córdova, whose texts become important in the evangelization of Zapotec-speaking areas and the basis for much of the interpretation of the region in this book. Farriss also explains how Nahuatl, since it was one of the earlier and more dominant languages in Mesoamerica, became akin to Latin in the Mediterranean world becoming the native lingua franca. Finally, an important part of the overall

work, in this section Farriss conveys the unusual language diversity of this region. She emphasizes that “the region is home to a large variety of languages ... classified into three totally separate linguistic families.” The region accounts for “well over half the languages listed for all Mesoamerica” (p. 61).

Part 2, “Evangelization in the Vernacular,” explores the process by which Nahuatl became the language that Spaniards relied on within the colonial project, whereas Oaxacan languages (which are from a completely different language family) were more of a challenge for missionaries to learn and use in the evangelization project. Here Farriss’s description of the distinctive linguistic structure of these languages becomes particularly useful in explaining the almost insurmountable challenge the region represented for the regular clergy who carried it out. Zapotec is a tonal language, which for language learning means that “on a par with, or even more elusive than grammar, is the unfamiliar phonetics. First and foremost, unlike Spanish, or any European language—or Nahuatl, for that matter—they are all tonal, with from two to five different tones, which may explain why they sounded like bird calls to the unaccustomed Spanish ear. These differences in pitch are not simply ornamental but are crucial ways of distinguishing meanings between words that have the same consonant and vowel combinations” (p. 87). Although this explanation is clear, perhaps a few illustrative Zapotec-language examples would have made this point even clearer. Chapters 4 and 5 in this section convey the complexity of learning and teaching across languages. These chapters begin to explore how language learning and teaching went hand in hand with communicating the basic theological tenets of Christianity. In Oaxaca the process was complicated by the challenging nature of the tonal languages as well as the perceptions Spanish-language learners developed about Zapotec languages as less sophisticated than Spanish, Latin, or even Nahuatl. Yet such friars as Córdova developed lan-

guage-learning tools in Zapotec, such as his 860-page *Vocabulario* published in 1578.

Part 3, “The Means and the Message,” highlights how Spanish missionaries depended on a literate indigenous elite to convert the majority of the indigenous population. These chapters are also about the specific texts used to convey the basics of the Christian message through two forms of catechism: first, an abbreviated form—*doctrina breve*—and second, a longer more detailed form called the *doctrina larga*. The discussion about the *doctrina breve*, a basic catechism, examines how the institutional Catholic Church has used the same form and format of rote learning through the abbreviated form of the catechism from the eleventh or twelfth centuries up until the 1970 right after Vatican II. Here Farriss emphasizes that the communication of doctrine through these texts was dependent on a relatively educated indigenous elite who would help them to teach it to the majority of the population. In contrast, a more complex theology was presented directly through the clergy’s own preaching using longer expository texts about theology called *doctrina larga*. Here the author consulted preaching manuals that would only be made available to the clergy since the institutional Catholic Church had an entrenched belief and practice that only trained clergy could interpret theological matters without the dangers of falling into heresy. Here we learn how the texts of this genre written by Feria and Córdova addressed questions of doctrine in a way that was more culturally relevant to a Zapotec audience than some of the earlier texts written by Juan de Zumárraga for a Nahua audience in a much more Eurocentric form.

Part 4, “Lost and Found in Translation,” details the challenge of how various theological concepts had to be conveyed both in language and substance from the Judeo-Christian European worldview through to the Mesoamerican worldview. These chapters provide specific examples of language substance and meaning particular to the Za-

potec areas. Here, Farriss’s sophisticated understanding of theology and linguistics shine through the most. Chapters 9 and 10 describe how such basic tenets of Christianity as heaven, hell, the devil, God, and the Trinity were conveyed in Zapotec language and culture and how missionaries had to solve challenging semantic problems in the process of translation, communication, and persuasion. This complex process was not always successful but in and of itself was fascinating.

In the conclusion, Farriss explains how the texts written by Córdova and Feria that she explores throughout the book set the template of Zapotec religious Catholic language not only in the colonial period but also going forward in time. She concludes that in the process of language and cultural exchange the modes of Catholic doctrine in the Zapotec context became a cultural amalgamation that influenced Oaxacan Catholicism to this day.

While the work is truly interdisciplinary, at least for historians, unless one is familiar with linguistics, the technical linguistic terminology may make some of the text difficult to navigate. Even though the author defines technical terms, a glossary of linguistics terms would be helpful. The interaction of language contact and the deciphering and communicating of meaning across both language and culture make for a fascinating narrative about a complicated sociolinguistic process most historians only think about peripherally. Farriss places that process dead center in the historical narrative. Therefore, this work not only expands the historian’s knowledge of a lesser-understood area in colonial Mexico’s historiography but also makes for an intellectually rich reading experience.

While the introduction states that the book concentrates on the Zapotec area, the book also provides a deep discussion of the existing historiography of central Mexico. Since so many of the missionaries sent to Oaxaca came from central Mexico where patterns of language learning and

evangelization were established, this discussion provides contextual background. The book discusses in more depth in the last three chapters how translation of theological concepts into Zapotec meant having to unintentionally change some of the meaning being conveyed and in turn affected the use of the language itself.

Overall, Farriss conveys a painstakingly long process of linguistic and cultural give-and-take between the Dominican missionaries and the indigenous elites who became bilingual and cooperated with missionaries to teach them their language and evangelize the non-elite populations. She effectively proves that in this process “languages and cultures had both to be remade together” (p. 6). The book contains a great synthesis of the historiography of the evangelization of colonial Mexico that could be used in a graduate seminar or an advanced undergraduate course. Many chapters could be assigned in courses touching on a variety of topics, such as early colonial evangelization, language acquisition, cultural contact, social linguistics, church history, and many others.

Note

[1]. I want to acknowledge and thank my partner Kenneth L. Field, PhD. In the writing of this book review, I consulted with him to clarify some terms and related concepts since he has a doctorate in linguistics.

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