



# MEXICO IN THE SPOTLIGHT OF POLYGLOT STUDIES

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**Abstract.** This paper is a review of the Polyglot Conference 2022 in Cholula and the 3rd International Seminar on Linguistics & Polyglot Studies, both united by the topic of Mexico's linguistic and cultural heritage. Discussed are the social and psychological aspects of polyglottery, language museums, Mexican Spanish, works of Yuri Knorozov, written sources of the Nahua culture, reading acquisition in modern and ancient languages, counting systems of Australian Aboriginals, and broader issues of multilingual and minority language studies.

**Keywords:** Mexico, Aztec script, Nahuatl, indigenous languages, polyglot, polyglottery, multilingualism, language learning, reading

**For citation:** Kazakov, G. A. (2023). Mexico in the spotlight of polyglot studies. *Linguistics & Polyglot Studies*, 9(1), pp. 107–112. <https://doi.org/10.24833/2410-2423-2023-1-34-107-112>

# МЕКСИКА В ЦЕНТРЕ ВНИМАНИЯ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ ПОЛИГЛОТИИ

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**Аннотация.** Данная статья представляет собой обзор Конференции полиглотов 2022 года в Чолуле и III Международного семинара по лингвистике и полиглотии, объединённых темой языкового и культурного наследия Мексики. Обсуждаются социальные и психологические аспекты полиглотии, музеи языков, мексиканский испанский, труды Ю. В. Кнорозова, письменные памятники культуры науа, овладение чтением на современных и древних языках, системы счёта австралийских аборигенов и более широкие вопросы исследований многоязычия и миноритарных языков.

**Ключевые слова:** Мексика, ацтекское письмо, науатль, языки коренных народов, полиглот, полиглоссия, многоязычие, овладение языком, чтение

**Для цитирования:** Казаков Г.А. (2023). Мексика в центре внимания исследований полиглотики. *Филологические науки в МГИМО*. 9(1), С. 107–112. <https://doi.org/10.24833/2410-2423-2023-1-34-107-112>

In late 2022, the focus of polyglot studies shifted to Mexico, where the long-awaited Polyglot Conference finally took place. This, symbolically, coincided with the 100th anniversary of Yuri Knorozov (1922–1999), renowned for his decipherment of the Maya script. Both facts spotlighted Mexico's extensive linguistic heritage and diversity, which rightfully deserves the attention of linguists and polyglots as a source of inspiration and novel research material.

The **Polyglot Conference 2022 in Cholula** was held on October 28–30 (the first one to take place offline since 2019). The event was organized under the auspices of the UN-declared International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032) and was attended by some 200 polyglots and language enthusiasts from across the world (primarily from the Western Hemisphere).

The Polyglot Conferences have been held annually since 2013, each year in a different country (Budapest 2013, Novi Sad 2014, New York 2015, Thessaloniki 2016, Reykjavik 2017, Ljubljana 2018, Fukuoka 2019) [4], [5], [7]. Due to the pandemic, the conference went online in 2020 and 2021. In 2022, the online and offline versions were organized separately, thus becoming two different events.

The 2022 conference took place in Cholula, the oldest continuously inhabited city in the Americas, the site of the biggest pyramid in the world, and one of the historical centres of the Nahuatl language community. The conference was thus surrounded by the immense cultural heritage of Mexico, which includes pre-Columbian civilizations, the colonial period, independent Mexico, and its indigenous languages and cultures.

The conference featured some 35 presentations grouped into three simultaneous tracks. Track 1 was devoted to general issues of polyglottery and language study. Track 2 embraced papers on the languages and cultures of Mexico. Track 3 included practical workshops. The main topics of the conference revolved around social significance of multilingual knowledge, the perception of multicultural identity, psychological self-help in the process of learning and using languages, the languages and cultures of the indigenous peoples of Mexico (especially Nahua), and language activism.

The presentation by Carlos Yebra “Hyperpolyglot activist: learn languages, make a difference” discussed common stereotypes and misconceptions about polyglots and language learning. Among other things, he expressed the view that “flags do not represent languages” (a reference to the practice of making badges with little flags of different countries symbolizing the languages spoken by Polyglot Conference participants), meaning that the identification of languages with specific countries of the world is an oversimplification dating back to the building of nation-states in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Grigory Kazakov's paper “The invisible on display: creating museums of language” addressed the issue of preserving and promoting linguistic diversity as intangible cultural heritage through modern museological forms. Having reviewed some of the few language-related museums that already exist in the world, the speaker stressed the centrality of the social trends behind them, arriving at the conclusion that language museums are not so much about languages as about the societies they make us part of [6, p. 274–275].

In the talk “Descolonizando el español mexicano” Nayeli Mulato spoke about the expressions in Mexican Spanish that reflect cultural and racial stereotypes dating back to the colonial period, e.g. “Es bonita pero está morenita”, “Cásate con un güero para mejorar la raza”, “Tiene el nopal en la frente”, “Hay que trabajar como negro para vivir como blanco”, etc. The speaker highlighted the importance of being more conscious of the way one speaks and of leaving the linguistic traits of colonialism behind, which, however, does not imply reconstructing the pre-conquest past in the present for ideological reasons.

Fred Chen in his presentation “New generation, new language” recounted his family’s linguistic history in the context of the history of Taiwan, which was accompanied by the change of the main language of communication in different generations. The challenges of this type of multilingualism include building cross-generational relations, creating healthy families and making peace with past political struggles. Meanwhile, the opportunities consist in the linguistic and cultural flexibility, “blessing others by blessing their heart language”, learning from source materials in other languages, and professional networking.

Derek Allen’s talk “Reclaiming someone else” raised the problem of linguistic biases that exist in relation to individuals of certain skin colour and social background (for example, a black person being expected to speak Black English in the USA) and presented his own story of coming to self-identify as African-American-Icelandic. He summarized his message by saying that “we do not owe each other certain types of cultural expression”, i.e. one does not have the obligation to meet the stereotypical expectations that others might have.

Benny Lewis in his presentation “Getting your momentum back to be the best you (and best learner) after a very long break” shared his personal experience of recovering both physically and psychologically after heavy stresses one may face in the field of professional language-related activity, given the public interest in and commercial demand for highly productive multilingual experts. Some of his encouraging self-help recommendations were “change your plan not to be behind it” (when failing to meet one’s own expectations) and “focus on content, not analytics” (when measuring success).

Jonathan Huggins in his paper “Why you should practice speaking even though you will make lots of mistakes” compared learning a foreign language to music performance, where musicians distinguish between the practice mode (fixing mistakes is possible) and the performance mode (demonstrating the skill on stage). He pointed out that learners often delay speaking practice because it is associated with stress and anxiety, which are often based on the earlier traumatic experience in school. To get out of this vicious circle, the speaker suggested separating mistakes from one’s sense of self-worth and switching to the mindset of personal growth.

Avishta Seeras in her talk “Less spoken languages matter more: advocating for indigenous and Creole languages and cultures” noted that the status and distribution of languages reflect power relations in society, and indicated that language learning can be a way of contributing to socially significant purposes. She invited the audience to consider these issues by posing the question: “How can you ensure that future generations have the same privileges you have had as a language learner?”

The other conference presentations and workshops dealt with creating online polyglot communities, learning indigenous languages, fostering multilingualism in early childhood, relations across language families, Latin and Ancient Greek translation problems, European vs. American French accent, the language of North Korea, Swiss German, Ladino, and other topics. One more special event was an interview with the American polyglot Vaughn Smith, who came to the foreground following a publication in *The Washington Post* [1].

Particular prominence was given to the Nahuatl language and the culture of its speakers, which were addressed in several papers (language variation, the writing system, grammatical incorporation, loanwords in Spanish, etc.). Besides, an introductory immersion course of Nahuatl was held the week before the conference. In practical terms, the use of Nahuatl for communication was encouraged among the participants, who all received in their welcome bags cards with basic Nahuatl phrases and their Spanish equivalents (Fig. 1).

On December 16, 2022, the 3<sup>rd</sup> **International Seminar on Linguistics & Polyglot Studies** was held online. The seminar was dedicated to the 100th anniversary of Yuri Knorozov, the decipherer of the Maya script. The program of the event focused on the Polyglot Conference 2022 in Mexico, the Aztec writing system and the topic of reading in different languages. The meeting was attended by researchers from Russia, Mexico, USA, Nepal, Japan, Turkey and France.

The seminar was inaugurated by the greeting address from Natalia Fortuny, Counsellor for Culture and Education at the Embassy of Mexico in the Russian Federation, who noted that there are more than 6 million speakers of 68 indigenous languages in Mexico and that the Mexican government aims to pre-

serve each one of them. In this context, the diplomat emphasized the importance of Yuri Knorozov's works and his contribution not only to scholarly research, but also to the strengthening of friendly ties between Mexico and Russia.



Figure 1. Cards with basic phrases in Nahuatl and Spanish (courtesy of Zaloa Languages)

Further, in the paper “Insights from the Polyglot Conference 2022 in Cholula, Mexico”, Grigory Kazakov overviewed the history of Polyglot Conferences, highlighted the main topics of the latest one (see above) and commented on some of the speakers' key ideas. He also observed that, compared to the previous ones, the Cholula conference became more multilingual (in terms of the languages of the talks) and more socially conscious (in terms of prioritizing socially significant purposes that polyglot expertise could serve).

The following presentation, “Nahua culture codices”, delivered by the director of a cultural centre in Cholula and a native speaker of Nahuatl, Osvaldo Zúñiga, was devoted to the manuscripts and epigraphic sources of the Aztec language and their historical and ethnographic context. Using colourful illustrations as examples, the researcher demonstrated the problems of interpreting such texts and the use of some characters of the Aztec writing in the heraldry of modern Mexico.

In the talk “Learning to read different scripts, languages and literatures: a polyglot's perspective”, the famous polyglot Alexander Arguelles raised the question of how reading acquisition differs in modern and ancient languages. He noted that the latter tends to be more analytical, and posed the question of how ancient languages could be approached more like modern ones. To reduce the difficulties when reading in different languages, the speaker suggested considering them not in isolation, but as interrelated aspects of a single phenomenon, and also from time to time leaving one or another language, like a field, “fallow” (without intensive practice) in order to later return to it with greater productivity.

In the course of the expert comments that followed, the President of the Nepalese Society of Geolinguistics, Aita Bishovkarma, emphasized the connection between writing and the development of civilization, named the writing systems used in various languages of Nepal, and raised the problem of teaching



reading in minority languages. In her turn, Natalia Lavrova, a professor at MGIMO, spoke about historical examples of the decipherment of ancient scripts and commented on the character traits of Yuri Knorozov as a researcher and a personality.

In the ensuing general discussion, Pavel Petrov invited everyone to consider the difficulties of translating between languages with different counting systems, using the example of a woman from one of the Aboriginal tribes of Australia who did not have numerals above two in her native language but could count above that in the language of her husband from a neighbouring tribe [2, p. 35]. Alexander Arguelles compared this phenomenon with the discrepancy between the measuring systems in different countries (e.g. Celsius vs. Fahrenheit).

In conclusion, the participants of the seminar paid attention to the fact that the year 2023 marks the 10th anniversary of modern polyglot studies (since the first Polyglot Conference in Budapest and the first academic conference on this topic in New York in 2013) [3], which deserves an international event of the appropriate level to discuss the results achieved over these years and to set new goals.

To summarize, both of the events reviewed spotlight the unique opportunities that open up for indigenous and minority language studies from the polyglot perspective. While few linguists venture to learn a smaller and lesser-known language (one of the reasons, perhaps, being the lack of learning materials), polyglots tend to be more ready for such challenges and can thus help bridge the gaps between the native community, academia and the general public. All this prepares a more prominent social role for polyglot studies.

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