Nebrija in the New World. The Question of the Letter, the Colonization of American Languages, and the Discontinuity of the Classical Tradition

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Walter D. Mignolo, Nebrija in the New World. The Question of the Letter, the Colonization of Amerindian Languages, and the Discontinuity of the Classical Tradition. — An underlying topic in the works of the Castilian grammarian Elio Antonio de Nebrija was the complicity between linguistic sovereignty and territorial management. His influence manifested itself in the composition of hundred of grammars of Amerindian languages and in the spread of literacy in the Spanish colonies. However, the linguistic experience of the New World forced a detour from the philosophy of language underlying Nebrija’s program and, by the same token, revealed the underpinning of the Renaissance philosophy of language on which Nebrija’s work was built. The « letter » was not only the unit of the alphabetic writing systems but also a sign of a civilizing process which reversed the priority that the voice had within the platonic and aristotelic traditions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The expansion of the Christian West since 1492 and the subsequent process of colonization in several parts of the globe had as one of the most obvious consequences the composition of grammars of native languages with the purposes of converting the colonized to Christianity. It happened that the colonizing countries (such as Spain and Portugal, during the 16th century) were countries in which alphabetic writing was already established and taken for granted, while alphabetic writing was either unknown in the colonized areas or picto-ideographic writing systems were the common and accepted way of writing. Consequently, writing grammars of native languages implied, more often than not, the conquest of a sound system alien to European languages and the translation of this system into the Latin alphabet. This move resulted in a clear discontinuity of the Greco-Roman linguistic and philosophical traditions and in a hybridization of symbolic representations common in most, if not all, colonial situations. I propose to explore the significance of the letter in this process. As a reference point, I shall take the relevance attributed to the alphabet and, therefore, to the letter during the late Renaissance and

will use, as my main examples, Nebrija’s Latin (1481) and Castilian grammars (1492) as well as his orthography of the Castilian language (1517).2

My explorations will be framed in two distinct but interrelated contexts of description. The first could be labelled « the history of writing and the writing of history » with specific reference to the New World. I was attracted to this topic about ten years ago when I read a letter in which father Acosta, in Peru, was asking father Tovar (in Mexico) how could the people from the valley of Mexico be as sophisticated in their speech (« retóricos ») as father Tovar was informing him that they were ; and how could they have history if they did not have writing (Garcia Icazbalceta 1881, II : 263-267). The second context of description is more recent and began after reading Balandier (1951). He also proposed a theoretical approach to colonial situations according to which an ethnic minority, technologically advanced, and practitioners of Christianity, imposed themselves upon an ethnic majority, technologically less advanced and practitioners of non-christian religions. He also suggested the need for conducting interdisciplinary research in order to understand better colonial situations.

When Balandier (1951) proposed his theoretical approach to colonial situations, the colonization of language was not an issue that could have piqued the interest of historians, sociologists, economists or anthropologists, to mention the main disciplines targeted in his article. When some fifteen years later, Foucault (1969) underlined the social and historical significance of language (l’« énoncé ») and discursive formation, the colonization of language was still not an issue attractive to those who were attentive to the archeology of knowledge. Such an archeology, founded on the paradigmatic example of what is generally understood as « Western » tradition, overlooked the case history in which an archeology of discursive formation would have led to the very root of the massive colonization of language which began in the sixteenth century with the expansion of the Spanish and Portuguese empires. Said (1979) went one step further than Foucault by departing from his notion of discursive formation to confront the West’s construction of the East and, by the same token, opened up the doors to understanding the role of discourse in colonial situations. More recently, Mudimbe (1988) followed the same pattern by analyzing the importance of missionary discourse in the colonization of Africa and Gruzinski (1988b) revealed the significance of writing and painting in the « colonization of the imaginary ».

2. Letters, Languages and Territories4

2.1. A few years after the end of the Renaissance period, 1300-1600, according to the chronology proposed by Kristeller (1980), Bernardo José de Aldrete pondered the interrelations between languages, letters and territories. The complicity he underlines between the letter and the territory
overruled the interconnections between language (speech) and territoriality we found in human communities, both before and after the invention and consolidation of alphabetic writing systems. Pre-colombian cultures as well as postcolonial colonized and non-alphabetic cultures provide telling examples (Menchú 1984).

Aldrete had good reasons and historical examples, however, which supported his case:

When a nation receives another language, it also jointly admits the letter with which the language is written, and if it loses its spoken language, it also loses the form of the letter with which it is written [...] The point is that nobody who writes Latin, as he should, writes in Greek letters, nor vice versa: and the same is true of all languages which have a particular form of letter. Thus whoever receives a new language also receives the letter with which it is written, and if they lose the language, they also lose the characters of that language (1606, cap. xviii ; italics added).

In my reading of Aldrete's paragraph, I perceive the development of two main theses: the first asserts that the letter changes when language changes because it has to be adapted to a new territory. The second contends that when a language dies the letter also disappears and, consequently, the territory is emptied. If my understanding of Aldrete's main theses is correct then the main presupposition underlying them is that writing developed from speech. I consider this belief to be one of the most important (and erroneous) legacies of Renaissance philosophy of language and writing. The history of writing has revealed, in the recent past, that writing emerged in connection with record-keeping and economic transactions (Naveh 1982; Goody 1986: 45-86) and not as representation of speech.

In my discussion of Aldrete, however, I do not intend to refute his assertions but, rather, to introduce some of the most widespread convictions in Renaissance philosophy of language. Thus, one of the logical consequences of the complicity between language, letters and territoriality is the fact that the consolidation of states and nation will depend on the homogenization of language and, that the homogenization of language will depend a great deal on the control that the letter can exert upon the sounds of a language.

2.2. The letter and the management of the voice. When Aldrete wrote the paragraph noted above, almost one hundred years had elapsed since the proclamation of the Laws of Burgos (1512). Furthermore, his writing was contemporary to several laws and decrees posted by Philip III with the intention of hispanicizing the Indies. Theoretically, Aldrete's theses do not contradict the linguistic politics of the Crown, although they are valid enough to explain the linguistic realities of the colonies. However, it is necessary to recall Aldrete's ideas and compare and contrast the basic tenet of Renaissance philosophy of language with the linguistic experience in the New World's colonies in order to understand the first discontinuity (the inversion of the oral/written hierarchy)
of the Classical tradition (Havelock 1982). The survival, in fact, of native languages from Rio Grande to Tierra del Fuego, as well as the cultural patterns and traditions associated with those languages, shows once more that it is in and by speech that territories are created (or invented) and not necessarily by the letter (Gossen 1974; Aguirre Beltrán 1983). The Renaissance « man of letters » (letrado) was, clearly enough, not in a position of understanding the interconnections between the letter, language and the territory as otherwise. Nebrija’s grammatical and philosophical enterprises can be read in this context.

To write as we pronounce and to pronounce as we write (Gramática castellana I, X; Reglas de ortografía, second principle) were Nebrija’s axioms as regards Spanish phonetics and orthography. A theory of the letter which is at the same time a theory of writing is presented in the description of the parts into which grammars are divided (1481, 1492). Nebrija began his grammars as well as, later on, his rules for Castilian orthography (1517) by devoting several paragraphs to the letters. He assumed in every case that the invention of the alphabet was one of the greatest achievements of human civilization. This is one reason why, in order to support his assertion, Nebrija was constantly looking into the history of writing and of the invention of the letters. Let me give an example, from Gramática castellana (1492, I, chap. II: 14), of the merge between the significance of the letter and its origin and history.

Among all the things that human beings discovered through experience, or that were shown to us by divine revelation in order to polish and embellish human life, nothing was more necessary, nor benefited us more, than the invention of letters. Such letters, which by a common consent and the silent conspiracy of all nations have been accepted, have been invented—according to those who wrote about antiquity—by the Assyrians; with the exception of Gelio, who attributed the invention of letters to Mercury in Egypt.

In his Reglas de Ortografía en la lengua castellana, « compuestas por el maestro Antonio de Lebrixa » (1517: 5-20), he states:

Among all the things that human beings discovered through experience, or that were shown to us by divine revelation in order to polish and embellish human life, nothing has been more necessary, nor benefited us more, than the invention of letters. It seems that this invention originated from the fact that before letters were discovered, images were used to represent the things which people wanted to record, such as the figure of the right hand stretched out which meant generosity, and the closed fist which meant avarice, and the ear denoted memory; knees meant mercy; a coiled snake indicated avarice, and the ear denoted memory; knees meant the year, and so on. But since this business was endless and very confusing, the first inventor of letters—whoever that was—looked at the amount of different voices in his language, and made as many figures or letters; by means of these figures, when placed in a certain order, he represented all the words he wished, as much for his memory as for speaking with those who
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were not present and those who were about to come. *Thus the letter is nothing more than a trace or figure by means of which the voice is represented* (Book I, chap. ii: 234; italics mine).

The quotation shows, on the one hand, that Nebrija continued to hold in his theory of the letter for over twenty-five years; on the other hand, it shows the semiotic context in which the letter is conceptualized. While the letter is conceived in relation to the voice, the signs enumerated beforehand are conceived in relation to their meaning (e.g., the ear to signify memory which, of course, is meaningful in the context of an oral tradition).

The celebration and history of the letter was followed by Nebrija's *pharmakon* (Derrida 1972: 69-198) since, once the letter was defined as the representation of the voice, Nebrija became concerned with correcting and maintaining the complicity between them. A successful cure for the inconsistencies between sound and letter, for example, as well as a successful preventive remedy depends on the grammarian's success in taming the letter. Otherwise, speakers would pronounce in one way and write in another which, according to Nebrija, is just the opposite of the reasons for inventing the letters. Therefore, Nebrija's reasoning states an a priori need to explain a long and complex historical development (e.g., the letters were invented to represent the voice) and he forces himself to assert the need for a remedy which will prevent the deterioration and subsequent disintegration of the language (e.g., the control of the voice by means of letters).

Why Nebrija was so concerned about the complicity between the letter and the voice is clear in his prologue to the *Gramática castellana*, so often quoted in the context of « la lengua compañera del imperio » (Ascensio 1960). Why the Mendicant or Jesuit friars writing grammars of Amerindian languages would follow Nebrija's example is clear at the technical level, not at the ideological one. If Latin and Castilian grammars were taken as models to write grammars of Amerindian languages, the programs underlying Nebrija's grammars did not coincide, necessarily, with the friars' program and ideologies, and, therefore, the ideological differences between both grammars were ignored.

A glance at Amerindian language grammars written by Castilian friars during the 16th and 17th centuries shows that the majority of the grammars began with a discussion of the letters and by identifying those letters Amerindian languages do not have. The common concern with identifying the missing letters indicates that celebrating the invention of writing and finding its origin is no longer an issue. The new preoccupations suggest that the letter has been promoted to an ontological dimension which attributes to it a clear priority over the voice. The Classical tradition has been inverted and the letter no longer has the ancillary dimension attributed to it by Aristotle (*De Interpretationes*), but has become the voice in itself. Without acknowledging the discontinuity of the Classical tradition during the encounter with Amerindian languages we would not be able to understand the common expression « esta
lengua carece de tales letras» («this language lacks such and such letters») if indeed the person who made such an assertion was not presupposing that the letter is not located in the voice but «outside».

The Jesuit Horacio Carochi, in his well known Arte de la lengua mexicana (1645), begins his work by noting that the Mexican language lacks seven letters (Cap. I, 1) and, in the next section, urges those learning the language to pronounce it correctly (Cap. I, 2). There is an understandable paradox, but paradox nonetheless, between the assertion that a language lacks a given number of letters in relation to an alphabet created for a non related language and the urge to pronounce it correctly. Indeed, Amerindian languages did not necessarily lack letters but implied different ones, namely those that were not within the sound system of the romance languages. But, after all, the friars' program consisted in taming (Nebrija and Carochi used the word reducir) the Amerindian languages and not in analysing the connivance between ideographic or hieroglyphic writing and speech, which was of a different kind than that between speech and alphabetic writing.5 I am making this observation with the intention of understanding the interrelation between Renaissance theories of writing and the colonization of the native languages and not—of course—with the intention of criticizing father Carochi.

2.3. Nebrija's pharmakon and the Prince's glories. I have analyzed, so far, the complicity between the letter and the territory, on the one hand, and the connivance between the letter and the voice, on the other. It is the interrelation between the letter and the writing of history which now requires our attention. The letter is not only necessary to tame the voice but also to record the past which is, at the same time, a way of building the territory. Thus, the conspiracy between the letter and the Prince's glories. This is one of the reasons Nebrija composed, in Alcalá de Henares, in 1517, his Reglas de ortografía en lengua castellana.

The first two paragraphs of the prologue celebrate, once more, the great achievement of humankind with the invention of letters but, this time, goes beyond just grammatical considerations:

The past days, when your worship submitted the History of the Illustrious King John the Second to Arnao Guillen for printing, I informed you that the reason for which we had been using letters in Castilian was for the most part corrupt. I am not saying now that old words should be replaced by new ones, since this would mean corrupting books, as opposed to reforming them; rather I say that these days no one writes our language purely, due to the lack of some letters which we pronounce but do not write, and others, on the contrary, which we write but do not pronounce.

In the paragraph which follows this quotation Nebrija argues in favor of the glory and eternity of all « the Princes of our century ». The reason for Nebrija's argument is that if the Princes were as hungry for fame as those from antiquity, they would not overlook the complicity between the letter, the writing
of history and their own glory. One of the examples, among many, that help
us understand the logic and semantic connections between the letter and the
prince's glory, is as follows:

For Palimedes in the Trojan War did not win as much renown in organizing battles,
giving the passwords, passing on his surname, assigning the watches and vigils, in
discovering weights and measures, as in the invention of four letters: the Greek y,
and three more aspirated letters: ch, ph, th (Prólogo o Prefación, Ortografía; italic
mines).

From the letter to the glory of the Prince there is indeed a great gap. A
distance which is large enough to frame, precisely, the idea of civilization and
to marginalize the barbarians who do not know Latin letters but also, and perhaps
mainly, those who do not have letters at all. And the same gap also exists
between the letter as graphic mark representing sound and the letter as a graphic
mark recording and preserving glorious events so that we can understand not
only the connections between the letter and the Prince's glory but, also, the
questions addressed by Father Acosta, from Peru, to Father Tovar, in Mexico,
which I mentioned in the introduction to this paper. A few years later, Father
Acosta would devote a great deal of Book VI of his Historia moral y natural
de las Indias (1590) to literacy and the interpretation of culture which was what
the connections between the letter and the Prince's glory amounted to. In fact,
Acosta establishes a hierarchy of civilizations according to the writing system
each possesses placing, first, the alphabetic system of the Christian West; second,
the ideograms of the Chinese and, third, the pictograms of the Aztecs. Such
a hierarchy of writing systems allowed Acosta to distinguish between civilizations
which have alphabetic writing and history and civilizations, like the Aztec and
the Incas, whom were able to record the past (by means of pictograms or quipus)
but who cannot—according to Acosta's logic—have history. History was, within
this Renaissance theory of writing (Mignolo 1992a), a matter of the letter and
of alphabetic writing and so also was the Prince's glory. Which, of course,
forms a link with the cultural construction of territoriality.

3. The Colonization of Native Languages: Grammars
And Vocabularies, Law for the Hispanization of the Indies
And the Teaching of Latin

3.1. The preceding section was devoted to Nebrija's theory of the letter
as an invention which allowed both the control of the voice and of the territory
by means of written history which celebrated the glory of the Princes. The
focus was on the first discontinuity of the Classical tradition. In this section
the focus will be on the New World and on the second discontinuity
(alphabetization and writing grammars of non-western languages) of the Western
legacy. The Greco-Roman legacy in Renaissance theories of writing, which
ran parallel to the need for consolidating the emerging Western imperial states (such as Spain), presented new facets in the colonization of the New World. In the following pages I shall explore this issue taking as a reference point the presence and influence of Nebrija in New World literacy.\(^6\)

3.2. The Mystery of the « Arte de Antonio ». Both the friars who undertook the task of composing grammars of native languages as well as contemporary scholars who studied the history, politics and ideology of alphabetization and conversion during the colonial period, agree in recognizing Nebrija's influence. It is not clear, however, to what extent and in what capacity Nebrija’s presence in the New World left its mark. Since I am assuming that the degree of his influence is not clear, although his impact is out of the question, I should explain why I think we are facing an important issue here. We should distinguish between two levels of Nebrija’s influence. One is technical and relates to the model offered by his Latin and Castilian grammars to those who were interested in writing grammars of the native languages. The other is political and ideological and is related to the programs Nebrija attached to his grammar of Latin, first, and to his grammar and orthography of Castilian, second. Let’s take these issues one at the time:

3.2.1. Which grammar? It is common to find among Nahuatl specialists assertions such as the following:

In one sense it is important to stress that Antonio de Nebrija’s linguistic model, as much in his Arte as in his Diccionario, both published in the final decade of the fifteenth century, was the foremost contribution in contemporary Europe and an inspiration for other works of a similar nature in the Old World, and not long after in the American continent as well (León-Portilla 1988: 6).

The date mentioned in the paragraph (« década de los noventas ») indicates that the Gramática castellana is referred to. The assumption made by Nahuatl specialists contrasts, however, with observations made by specialists in Neo-Latin in New Spain. According to their findings, the expression « el arte de Antonio » referred, during the colonial period, to Nebrija’s Latin grammar as opposed to his Castilian grammar (Osorio Romero 1979, 1986a). On the other hand, scholars who have studied the impact of Nebrija in Europe have underlined the extraordinary success of the Latin grammar (Introductiones latinae, 1481) and the curious neglect of Castilian grammar:

The extraordinary success of the Introductiones—no less than 50 editions in the author’s lifetime—contrasts with the Gramática castellana, which fell into almost complete oblivion and was never reprinted. The amount of attention which has been lavished on both works in our day is merely an indication of a serious distortion, and the most shocking example of this is to be found in the accepted explanations of the statement (made by Hernando de Talavera) that « language is the companion of
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Empire », a topos of Classical origin, modified in the Middle Ages, especially by Saint Augustine, and widespread in the Florence of the Medicis, during which time the Rules of the Tuscan Language was composed, the first grammar of a Romance language since the Provençal treatises (Rico 1981b : 8).

To complicate the mystery further, let us remember the Arte de la lengua castellana y mexicana, published in 1571 by Alonso de Molina. In his prologue the author reported that the first part of his grammar is devoted to the morphology of the Mexican language and that he follows the model of the Latin and Castilian grammars. Therefore, he divided the sentence of the Mexican language in eight parts. This indication is most valuable since we know that Nebrija was clear in saying, and in pointing out, why the Latin sentence is divided into eight parts while the Castilian is divided into ten. In conclusion, Molina had followed the Latin grammar although he does not seem very concerned about making the distinction between the former and the latter. This is probably because, at the technical level, when there is a grammatical model of two languages which are closely connected it does not make much difference which one is used to write the grammar of a language totally unrelated to the model.

In any event, we have enough information to assert that the Latin grammar was the one really used in the New World colonies. Moreover, the fact that the Castilian grammar was not reprinted until the second half of the 18th century is already an important indication that Castilian was the language of communication but not of learning. The study of Mexican libraries during the 16th century (Mathes 1982 ; Osorio Romero 1986b), has shown that the often quoted « arte de Antonio » refers to the Latin but not to the Castilian grammar and that it is the Latin and not the Castilian grammar that had been found in monastic libraries. If, however, the differences between the two possible models (Latin or Castilian grammars) may be negligible when it comes to writing grammars of the native language, we cannot ignore the ideological programs attached by Nebrija to both grammars if our aim is the understanding of the complex politics of language in colonial times. Let’s first quickly review Nebrija’s two programs in order to turn, then, to New Spain.

3.2.2. Two grammars and two ideological programs. I am more interested here in a theoretical exploration of the cultural significance of the ideological and political linguistic programs written by Nebrija than in an empirical description of hundreds of grammars of native languages in search of the traces of Nebrija’s impact. Both programs, teaching Latin in Spain and teaching Castilian in the Spanish domain, are well known and it is not necessary to describe them in any detail here. The comparison between the two and their respective preponderance in the New World—to my knowledge—has not been studied. I shall first briefly summarize both programs in order to analyze their weight in the colonization of Amerindian languages.
The context in which Nebrija wrote and published his *Introductiones Latinae* has been studied in detail by Rico (1978, 1981a, 1981b), from whom I borrow some basic information. It has been pointed out repeatedly that in the Iberian Peninsula Nebrija was one of the fundamental pillars of the continuity of the Classical tradition. In the prologue of the 1481 edition Nebrija justifies the need of a Latin grammar in Castile as a foundation of the *studia humanitatis* (Di Camillo 1976). The program was not original, certainly. It came from Italian humanism and, particularly, from the influence of Valla’s *Elegantiae lingua latinae* (Ascensio 1960; Valla 1952 [1442]; Besomi e Regoliosi 1986). In 1488, Nebrija emphasized the need of knowing Latin, « the foundation of our religion and Christian Republic » (italics mine). Latin, the language of religion and the Christian Republic, was also the language of knowledge and *scientia*. Furthermore, according to Nebrija, Latin was necessary for the Law since it is the law that allows human beings to live together in society and to build a civilization. It was also necessary for the foundation of medicine, on which our health depends. The program as well as the examples clearly show two aspects: Nebrija’s belief that in order to have law, medicine, religion, and civilization human beings need Latin and, second, the main goal of this program is the civilization (in terms of religion and *studia humanitatis*) of the growing Castilian territoriality. Thus a new culture, from the perspective of Italian and Castilian humanism, should be housed in the Crown of Castile and based on the knowledge of Latin and the Classical tradition. This program grew, year after year, from 1481 to 1522, when Nebrija died. The fight against the barbarian implied, in this context, the fight against the scholastic mentality and against the ignorance of Latin (Gil Fernández 1981: 99-126).

Regarding the second program, we owe to Ascencio (1960) the report on the relationship between Valla’s program to save Rome and Nebrija’s program to contribute to the expansion of the Spanish empire. It is in this program that we perceive the merging of two of the principles analyzed in the first part of this paper: « To speak as we write and to write as we speak » and « Language as companion of the empire ». It is worthwhile to remember, in this context, the well known anecdote in which Queen Isabella received from Elio Antonio de Nebrija the first Castilian grammar. The way in which Nebrija (or rather the Bishop of Avila) told the Queen that grammars were necessary for the consolidation of kingdoms has often been mentioned and celebrated:

*Now, Your Majesty, let me come to the last advantage that you shall gain from my grammar. For the purpose, recall the time when I presented you with a draft of this book earlier this year in Salamanca. At this time, you asked me what end such a grammar could possibly serve. Whereupon, the Bishop of Avila interrupted to answer in my stead. What he said was this: « Soon Your Majesty will have placed her yoke upon many barbarians who speak outlandish tongues. By this, your victory, these people shall stand in a new need; the need for the laws the victor owes to the vanquished, and the need for the language we shall bring with*
us. » *My grammar shall serve to impart to them the Castilian tongue, as we have used grammar to teach Latin to our young* (Prologue; italics mine).

Nebrija was building his program on the belief that language (speech and writing) is — among all human semiotic practices (« arts » in Nebrija's terminology) — the most distinctive feature of humanity. However, he also assumed that speaking was not enough and that human beings gained in humanness once they stopped « speaking outlandish tongues » and were converted not only to Christianity but were also incorporated into the civilization of the letter (Mignolo 1992b). It comes as no surprise that Queen Isabella was striving to understand what use a grammar of a vernacular language could possibly have. Although she was aware of the prestige which would be brought to the tongue by having a grammar which until then had been restricted to the language of the Scriptures (Hebrew, Greek and Latin), she had not yet made the connection between language and power via colonization. To think about such issues was the task of the humanist (*litteratus*) and men of letters (*jurisperitus*) rather than for women of arms. Nebrija was very familiar with Lorenzo Valla’s reevaluation of « letters » in order to save the Roman Empire from total ruin (Valla 1952). He knew that the power of a unified language, via its grammar, lay in teaching it to barbarians, as well as controlling barbarian languages by writing their grammars. Nebrija was able to persuade Queen Isabella that her destiny was not only to conquer but also to civilize.

How much of this was relevant in the colonization of the New World? What are the signs of the discontinuity of the Classical tradition in the expansion of the Spanish colonial empire? The first program, the latinization of Castile as a model, found in the New World (more specifically, in New Spain) three different houses: the first, and most transitory, was the college of Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, where Castilian was used although Náhuatl and Latin were taught (Ricard 1986; Kobayashi 1974). The second was the University of Mexico, founded circa 1550, where Cervantes de Salazar occupied the first chair of Latinity (grammar and rhetoric; Carreño 1963) and, finally, the college of San Pedro and San Pablo was founded a few years after the arrival of the Jesuits in Mexico (1572) (Gómez Robledo 1954; Osorio Romero 1979). The former, teaching Castilian to the Amerindians, in practice offered more difficulties than Nebrija’s triumphant program suggested. Contrary to the teaching goals implemented by the Mendicant friars and the Jesuit orders during the colonial period, hispanicizing the Amerindians remained at the level of edicts, royal orders and laws. Let us take a closer look to both programs in New Spain (from circa 1520 to 1650), beginning with the hispanicizing of the Natives.7
4. LANGUAGES AND TERRITORIES: MULTILINGUAL AND PLURICULTURAL REALITIES IN THE NEW WORLD COLONIES

4.1. The unexpected difficulties of teaching Castilian. Since the promulgation of the Laws of Burgos (Leyes de Burgos, 1512), which caused so many worries for Bartolomé de las Casas, the encomenderos (concession holders) were asked to teach the Indians how to read and write. In 1526 Charles V also ordered that the natives be instructed about the purposes and programs that the Crown of Castile was in the process of implementing for New Spain. In 1535 a fundamental law was proclaimed (Recopilación de leyes I, 211-212; Libro I, tit. XXIII, ley II) in which school education to the sons of Aztec chiefs and principal lords was mandatory. The schooling process was thought to be supervised by the friars instead of the encomenderos and, in addition to Castilian, the Amerindians selected for schooling were supposed to learn « Christianity, decent morals, good government and the Castilian language ». Charles V proclaimed the same law a second time in 1540; Philip II followed suit in 1579. In the following century (1619 and 1620) the law was yet again circulated (Brice Heat 1972: 68-96; Aguirre Beltrán 1983: 45-66). A cursory glance at the Leyes de Indias since the promulgation of the Laws of Burgos and the creation of the Council of the Indies (1524) shows that throughout the colonial period, until the eighteenth century, regardless of the great amount or lack of emphasis on concessions to the linguistic politics of the Franciscan friars, the aphorism « la lengua compañera del imperio » expressed a concern of the Crown and a reality at the level of the norms since Castilian was the language of everyday transactions but not necessarily of formal schooling. The two enemies for the implementation of Nebrija’s program in New Spain were, first, the friars conviction that their goals would be better achieved if they learned and wrote grammars of Amerindian languages instead of teaching Castilian to the natives and, second, the conviction of the University and Jesuit Colleges that the studia humanitatis was the best model of education in order to civilize the New World colonies (in the case of Colombia, see Rivas Sacońi 1949)\(^8\), by teaching it to the Creole population.

4.2. Native languages, literacy and christianization. As it is well known, the Mendicant friars were less interested in teaching Castilian to the Amerindians than in converting them to Christianity. The incongruous goals of the Crown and the friars revealed that a curious inversion of Nebrija’s programs was taking place: while Nebrija proposed the learning of Latin as the means of unification and consolidation of Castile, the friars in the New World had recourse to Amerindian languages in order to fulfill the same goals regarding the Christian Republic. As a result, Amerindian languages were considered « adventitious languages » not at the same level as Latin, Greek and Hebrew; but, on the other, Amerindian languages (especially in the case of Nahuatl and Quechua, as lingua franca of a large number of Amerindian communities)
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became an instrument of Christianization competing at the same level with Castilian and Latin. The Colegio Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco remained a paradigmatic example of the linguistic trilogy of the New World (Nahuatl, Latin, Castilian).

Thus, writing grammars as well as preaching and writing sermons and vocabularies of Amerindian languages had priorities within the Mendicant friars and, later on, within the Jesuit orders over teaching Castilian languages and the Castilian way of life. From the point of view of the friars, the fight against the Devil was more important than the socialization and the political integration of colonized communities to the consolidation and expansion of the Spanish empire. In this case, the influence of the first Nebrija, the Nebrija concerned with the Christian Republic, seems quite obvious, albeit it was no longer Latin the language of knowledge and wisdom, but Nahuatl that served the purposes at hand. In 1570 the Franciscan friars had already convinced Philip II that in New Spain Nahuatl was indeed the language companion of the empire. In the same year Philip II announced in a royal order (Cedulas Reales, 47, Archivo General de la Nación, México), that Nahuatl would be the official language of the Amerindians. What is remarkable in this case is not the implicit assumption that language and human territoriality could be settled by royal decrees rather than by human nature and human memories, but the fact that Philip II modified a previous decree, published by Charles V in 1550, as well as his own edict of 1565, which established that Castilian would be taught to the Amerindians (Brice Heat 1972: 52-53).

4.3. The teaching of Latin: the studia humanitatis and the Christian Republic. The traces of the first Nebrija (e.g., the program justifying his Introductiones Latinae) are obvious in the library of the college of Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco. Mathes (1982), who made a library inventory, found that between 1535 and 1600 approximately a dozen of the three hundred books in the library were written in Castilian and the rest in Latin. Three books written by Nebrija were part of the collection. One of them was an edition of his Latin grammar printed in Granada, in 1540. It comes as no surprise, then, that « Indios latinistas » graduated from the college of Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco. We know that being taught Latin did not require only learning a foreign language, but mainly learning a whole body of knowledge and system of thought. The well known Badianus Codex (1552) (Cruz 1964) remains as a paradigmatic example of the studia humanitatis taught to the Amerindians. The true title of the Badianus Codex is Libellus de medicinalibus indorum erbis. It was written by an Indian doctor, Martin de la Cruz, who was not so much a doctor by training as by experience, and the text was translated into Latin by Juan Badiano, also a student at Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco9. The existence and influence of the Colegio was — as I have already pointed out — transitory, although extremely relevant from 1536 to the last fifteen years of the 16th century, when teaching Latin and studia humanitatis to the Amerindians was perceived as a dangerous
enterprise. When the Jesuits arrived in Mexico, in 1572, the teaching of Latin and the humanities changed direction and was targeted toward the Spanish and Spanish descendant population, rather than to the children of the Amerindian nobility.10

Thus, the actuality of Nebrija was more discernible during the 17th century among the Jesuits, and, once again, not because of his Castilian but because of his Latin grammar. We should bear in mind that while grammars, vocabularies, sermons and Christian Doctrines were written in Latin and the humanities were taught to the children of the Amerindian nobility, Castilian was mainly an instrument of communication and not of scholarly learning. This reality was no exception among the Jesuits. Osorio Romero (1979) has collected an impressive amount of information about the libraries and curricula of the Jesuit colleges, and I would like to underline two of his findings:

1) Vicencio Lanuchi, well known for his knowledge of Latin, Greek and Hebrew, was one of the most important figures in the foundation of Jesuit studies in New Spain. Grammar was, of course, the core of a curriculum in which Latinity was the main concern. Osorio Romero quotes from a letter addressed to Pedro Sanchez (« provincial de la compañía en México ») and signed by Mercuriano (« General de la Compañía de Jesús » in Rome):

En los estudios de letras humanas deseo mucho se guarde el orden, cuanto se pudiere, que aquí en Roma se tiene, que es el más útil y más compendioso de todos. El padre Vicencio Lanoche tiene pratica desto, y podrá ayudar a que asi se efectué; porque destos principios de latinidad, importa mucho el exercicio y el buen orden que acá (en Roma) se tiene.

In the study of the humanities I would like, as far as possible, to follow the same order that we follow here in Rome, which is the most useful and comprehensive of all. Father Vicencio Lanoche is practised at this, and he will be able to help its being carried out; because of these principles of Latinity, the training and good order that we follow here in Rome is of great import.

Nebrija’s program for the latinization of Castile was not antagonistic to the Jesuit one (Scaglioni 1986). It comes as no surprise, then, that the Jesuits would take Nebrija’s Latin grammar as one of their basic text books.

2) A report written in 1586 about the State of Mexico included a section about the Jesuit education in the city in which it has been pointed out that grammar was studied in four classes: rhetoric, philosophy, two lessons on theory and one on cases of conscience (« léense en este colegio gramática, en cuatro clases: retórica, filosofía, dos lecciones de teoría y una de casos de conciencia »). It was in this context that Mateo Galindo, in 1636, published the first edition of his Explicación del libro cuarto de Antonio de Nebrija, which was reprinted during the 17th and 18th centuries. In 1640 Tomás González published his Explicación de las sílabas sobre el libro V de Nebrija and, in 1642, the Explicación de la cuantidad de las sílabas sobre el libro quinto del Arte de Antonio de Nebrija. Toward 1650 Diego de López published Breve
explicación del libro cuarto de Antonio Nebrisense; Tomás González published De arte rhetorica libri tres and Arte de Antonio, in 1652 and 1657 respectively. It should be remembered that the «arte de Antonio» refers to the Latin and not to the Castilian grammar.

4.4. From the letter to literacy and literature: cross-cultural dialogues in colonial situations. We have arrived at 1657 and the publication of grammar books in Mexico having begun in 1481 with the question of the letter. Nebrija introduced, in his Reglas de la ortografía castellana (1517), a theory of writing in which the domain of the letter took over the domain of the voice reverting the ancillary role of the letter with respect to the voice in the Greek philosophical tradition (Plato, Aristotle). This inversion was, indeed, the first manifestation of the discontinuity of the Classical tradition in the modern world. The second manifestation took place the moment the modern world encountered the «other», and alphabetic writing met oral traditions and ideographic and hieroglyphic writing systems. While in Castile (Nebrija, Aldrete) and in Europe (Champigny) the theory of the letter led to a theory of writing that transcended the regionality of spoken languages and colonized the voice (Teuber 1989), the application of the theory in the New World led to the colonization of Amerindian languages (by writing their grammars) and the colonization of the Amerindian memories (by writing their histories), as the «letter and the glory of the Prince» suggested.

The transcendence of the alphabet above the regionality of speech suppressed the differences between cultural traditions in different languages (e.g., the Greco-Roman) and emphasized the power of the letter in the colonization of the voice. Thus, the traditions embedded in Amerindian languages were overruled by alphabetic writing (the letter) which ended up by controlling the territory (to use Aldrete’s old expression) or by colonizing the «imaginary» (to use Gruzinski’s current expression), not necessarily by completely suppressing Amerindian cultural and territorial organization (e.g., Gossen 1974). While the letter imposed itself in the organization of New World society, speech and memory kept alive the traditions and conceptual organization of Amerindian cultures.

At this point, the conflict between the Crown and the Franciscan friar was an internal one, within the confines of the colonizing country. They were both implementations, by different means and with different ends, of the same goals, contained in the two different programs we have identified in the two different grammars written by Nebrija. Thus, beyond the differences between the Crown and the Friars the theory of the letter underlying both programs also generated a value-laden educational philosophy that privileged the alphabetic writing and Western books as measurement of civilization. The underlying philosophy of writing which we saw in the educational program of both the Franciscans and the Jesuits was not divorced from the number of edicts, orders and mandates published by the Crown with the intention of making Castilian available to
the Amerindian and, together with teaching how to read and write in Castilian, the transmission of Castilian values and manners. It is in this context that beyond the colonization of native languages or the implementation of a linguistic politics for the expansion of the language of the empire, the theory of the letter also gave rise to a program for the interpretation of culture. Although cannot move in that direction, I should point out, however, that the question which Acosta directed to Tovar with which I began this paper, could be traced backward to Pané and Las Casas and forward to Torquemada (1615, I, 3) in order to read in them all a method for the interpretation of cultures based on the lack or possession of writing and on the lack or possession of alphabetic writing.12

5. Conclusion

The New World colonies, as the case of Mexico suggests, were a linguistic and cultural mosaic. Its appearance to the eyes of the Castilian interpreters was molded, a great deal, by the Renaissance philosophy of writing and theory of the letter.13 The contribution of both to the discontinuity of the Classical tradition took the form, first, of the colonization of the voice and, second, of the appropriation of languages and cultures outside the realm of the Greco-Roman tradition. One of the consequences was the fading out of Amerindian’s writing system. However, and contrary to Aldrete’s beliefs, the death of a writing system does not imply the disappearance of a culture and its cultural construction of territoriality. Economic possession and legal control cannot be equated with cognitive mapping. Amerindian cultures continued and continue to live, nowadays, in their oral traditions, witness the hundreds of Amerindian communities in the Yucatan peninsula or in Andean Peru.

Certainly, Nebrija’s Castilian grammar found its home during the second half of the 18th century and, mainly, during the post-colonial period. Nation-building went hand in hand with the final victory of the Castilian language. Although Latin was still taught it lost the charm and appeal it had during the colonial period. Finally, Castilian was a language to be taught and used in writing the memories of the new (national) territories. Another historical paradox: the grammar which Nebrija had intended to serve the expansion of the Spanish empire in fact served as a helpful tool to build the nations which would arise from the liberation of the Spanish colonization.14

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NOTES

1. This paper is based on an academic lecture delivered at the Primer Simposio de Filología iberoamericana: Literatura hispanoamericana y español de América (Seville, 26-30 March, 1990). I have benefited from the lectures by and comments of Eugenio Coseriu, « El español de América y la unidad del idioma »; Juan Gil, « El latín en la América del siglo xvi: lengua general y lengua de elite »; Paulino Casteñeda Delgado, « La iglesia y la corona ante la nueva realidad lingüística de Indias »; and Fray Antonio Frago Gracia, « El andaluz en la formación del español americano ». I am indebted to Francisco Rico, who put his Nebrija contra los bárbaros into my hands, in Ann Arbor, during the spring of 1981; also to Ignacio Osorio Romero who, since 1982, has been providing me with more information I can handle about Latin education and libraries in Mexico; and more recently to Steve Dworkin for asking about Nebrija’s Castilian grammar in the New World and to Bernhard Teuber, who shared with me his research on the idea of alphabetic writing as a colonization of the voice. Last but not least, to Noel Fallows who not only translated all quotations from Spanish into English but who also carefully read the manuscript and made very valuable editorial recommendations.

2. It should be kept in mind that the question of the letter during the Renaissance exceeds the strict relationship between spoken language and alphabetic writing. For instance, the question of the letter related to calligraphic writing was compelling in the context of education and civility. Luis Vives, De Ratione studii puerilius (1523); Erasmus, De Civilitate morum puerilium (1530); Richard Mulcaster, The First part of the elementaire (1582), are paradigmatic examples. On the other hand, the question of the letter was formulated in a body/knowledge context of which the works of Geoffroy the TORY are telling examples (Champfleury. Auquel es contenu l’art et science de la deue et vraye proportion des lettres attiques, qu’on dit autrement lettres antiques et vulgairement lettres romaines proportionnées selon le corps et visage humain (Paris, 1529); and L’Art et science de la vraye proportion des lettres attiques, autrement dites romaines, ou antiques, selon le corps et visage humain (Paris, 1549).

3. Although « imaginary » in English is not a noun but an adjective, I am taking the liberty of translating « colonisation de l’imaginaire » as « colonization of the imaginary ». Although Gruzinski himself has redefined the concept of « imaginaire » I still find it useful to distinguish the colonization of symbolic communicative practices from economic production and exchange as well as from social organization. Even if producing and exchanging potatoes is similar to exchanging sound-words or written signs, they differ in the context of interactions in which they function. By « symbolic communicative practices » I am referring to the context in which words or graphic signs are exchanged instead of potatoes or gold. However, at the level of conceptualizing the exchange of words, potatoes or gold we are certainly back to the realm of symbolic communicative practices and, therefore, at the level of the « imaginary » which—as language— could be colonized.

4. I am using « territory » and « territoriality » in a cognitive rather than a geographic context. The « territory » is a space-time (geographic boundaries and past memories) matrix underlying cultural constructions by means of which human communities conceive and describe their habitat. My use of the term comes mainly from sociobiology (Lumsden & Wilson 1981); and geography (Malmberg 1980; Sack 1986; Taylor 1988). Although I am less indebted to Deleuze and Guattari (1972) than to the previous sources, I should also recognize that it was their chapter « Sauvages, barbares, civilisés » (pp. 217-226) that first called my attention to the idea of territoriality. For a more detailed exploration see Mignolo 1990.

5. Thus, the question of the notion « to read ». In Nahuatl, for instance, amoxitoa can be translated as « to read ». The word comes from amoxtli (a kind of tree which flourished in the lake of Mexico) and toa (a verb which could be translated as « to narrate » or « to tell »). The members of a culture without letters tell or narrate what they see written on a solid surface, although it does not necessarily read in the sense we attribute to this word today. Eugenio Coseriu pointed out to me that the case is similar in Latin: legere means basically « to discern ». The synonymy between « to discern = to read » came about when the use of the verb was restricted and applied to « discern » the written words.

6. Grammars of the Castilian language aimed at those who speak other languages, began to be published—under the influence of Nebrija— toward 1550 (LóPE BLEANCH 1979). The first attempt in the European context is the well known Díálogo de la lengua by Juan de Valdez, written in 1535-1536 although published at a much later date (MayANS & SISCAR 1737).

7. We should remember, in this context, the long tradition concerning the scope and significance of Castilian, from MOREL FATIO (1913) to MÉNÉDÉZ PIDAL (1942: 101-119; 1945: 169-216) and GARCÍA BLANCO (1958). In colonial New Spain, the amount of documents written in Nahuatl (ANDERSON, BERDAN & LOCKHART 1976) shows that native languages were more relevant in the social life of New Spain than official histories of Latin American culture suggest.
8. The Castilian Crown accepted the Tridentine Ruling about the need to use native languages in the process of christianization. The Tercer Concilio Provincial Mexicano stated that « siguiendo en toda la autoridad del concilio Tridentino, manda [...] A los españoles y a los negros esclavos, aun a los que lo son solo por parte de uno de sus padres (mulatos) y a los chichimecas, ensesese la doctrina en lengua castellana; mas a los indios en su propia lengua materna » (Galván Rivera 1859; italics mine).


10. The Jesuits have also been concerned with teaching Spanish to the Amerindians (Osorio Romero 1990: 59). However, their efforts to achieve this goals did not reach the same splendor that their achievements in higher education.

11. The thesis advanced by Erasmus in his De recta Graeci et Latini sermonis pronunciatione (1528) illustrates this situation. The dialogue between Ursus and Leo develops in such a way that the reader is convinced that the « humanity » of human beings depends on the letters. Ursus, for instance, departs from the fact that the Latin word to designate speech is sermo. He proves that, etymologically, sermo comes from serendo, which means « to sow ». Consequently, the analogy between « to sow » and « to speak » allows for the interpretation of speech as the sowing of the letters. We are facing almost a total inversion of the Greek tradition in which the letter takes precedence over the voice and justifies, indirectly, the belief that « humanness » depends on the letter and alphabetic writing rather than the voice and speech. This Renaissance meaning is in striking contrast with the analogy between writing and plowing (Curtius 1948), which underlines the physical aspect of scratching solid surfaces in the act of writing rather than the relationship between the voice and the letter (Mignolo 1987).

12. Take, for instance, Bartolomé de las Casas' four kinds of barbarian: « La segunda manera o especie de barbaros es algo mas estrecha, y en esta son aquellos que carecen de literal locución que responda a su lenguaje como responde a la nuestra la lengua latina; finalmente, que carezcan de ejercicios y estudio de las letras, y estos tales se dicen ser barbaros secundum quid, conviene a saber segun alguna parte o calidad que les falta para no ser barbaros » (las Casas 1967: 638, italics mine).


14. From the perspective of the tensions between an idiomatically defined Hispanic-America and a culturally conceived Latin-America, it is helpful to remember the three main stages of Castilian languages from the colonial period to the present. The first stage, the Colonial period, is explored in this article; the second stage, could be framed as the period of nation-building and the coalition between the Spanish language and national identities; the third stage, whose beginning we are currently witnessing, brings to the force the multilingual and pluricultural nature of Latin America, and can be illustrated with examples of an emerging linguistic-cultural paradigm: Chicano literature as exemplified, among others, by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987); the cultural unity of the Caribbean beyond its linguistic diversity, as illustrated by Brathwaite (1984); the pluricultural nature of countries such as Peru, brought into focus in Vargas Llosa's (1987) novel, El Hablador.

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RESUMÉ

Walter D. MIGNOLO, Nebrija et le Nouveau Monde. La question de la lettre, la colonisation des langues amérindiennes et la discontinuité de la tradition classique. — L’œuvre du grammairien castillan Antonio de Nebrija, qui souligna l’étroite dépendance de la domination territoriale et de la domination linguistique, a exercé une influence durable sur la colonisation du Nouveau Monde. Elle s’est traduite par la composition de grammaires de langues indigènes et la diffusion de l’écriture alphabétique sur le continent américain. Mais à son tour l’expérience linguistique du Nouveau Monde a mis en cause les postulats de la philosophie du langage que prônait la Renaissance et s’est écartée des programmes conçus par Nebrija. La lettre, notamment, en est venue à acquérir une primauté ontologique sur la parole, à l’encontre de la tradition aristoléciennne. (Trad. Carmen Bernand.)

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG


RESUMEN

Walter D. MIGNOLO, Nebrija y el Nuevo Mundo. La cuestión de la letra, la colonización de las lenguas amerindias y la discontinuidad de la tradición clásica. — La obra del gramático castellano Antonio de Nebrija, quien señaló la estrecha dependencia de la dominación territorial y de la dominación lingüística, ha ejercido una influencia duradera en la colonización del Nuevo Mundo. Ha sido traducida por la composición de gramáticas de lenguas indígenas y la difusión de la escritura alfabética en el continente americano. Pero a su vez la experiencia lingüística del Nuevo Mundo ha puesto en primer plano los postulados de la filosofía del lenguaje que preconizaba el Renacimiento y se ha alejado de los programas concebidos por Nebrija. El sentido, en especial, ha llegado a adquirir una primacía ontológica sobre la palabra, en oposición a la tradición aristotélica.