**The Náhuatl Language of Mexico: From Aztlán to the Present Day**

**By John P. Schmal**

Across the 761,606 square miles (1,972,550 square kilometers) that comprise Mexico you can find a great variety of landscapes and climates. While mountains and plateaus cover more than two-thirds of her landmass, the rest of Mexico's environment is made up of deserts, tropical forests, and fertile valleys. Mexico's many mountain ranges tend to split the country into countless smaller valleys, each forming a world of its own. Over the last few thousand years, this has been a factor in the differentiation of a wide range of indigenous Mexican languages.

Within these many little worlds, there are 11 linguistic families. And, according to the ***National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI ‒ Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas)***, within these linguistic families, **68 languages and 364 dialects are spoken**.

From 1900 to 2010, the Mexican Censo (Census) has noted a significant increase in the total Mexican population and a corresponding increase in the number of indigenous speakers 5 years of age and older, but a large drop in the percentage of indigenous speakers (from 15.2% to 6.4%), as noted in the table below:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Year** | **Total Population of the Mexican Republic** | **Speakers of Indigenous Languages 5 Years of Age and Older****(in Millions)** | **Percent of the Population 5 Years of Age and Older Who Speak Indigenous Languages** |
| 1900 | 13,607,259 | 2.1 | 15.2% |
| 1910 | 15,160,369 | 2.0 | 12.9% |
| 1921 | 14,334,780 | 1.8 | 12.7% |
| 1930 | 14,028,575 | 2.3 | 16.0% |
| 1950 | 21,821,032 | 2.4 | 11.2% |
| 1970 | 40,057,728 | 3.1 | 7.8% |
| 1990 | 70,562,202 | 5.3 | 7.5% |
| 2000 | 84,794,454 | 6.3 | 7.1% |
| 2005 | 90,266,425 | 6.0 | 6.6% |
| 2010 | 101,808,216 | 6.7 | 6.4% |
| Percent Change 1900-2010 | 648.2% | 322.0% | -8.8% |
| Sources: Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), Censo General de Población, 1900-2010 (No. II through XIII). |

As people living in indigenous communities sought employment in the large metropolitan areas and the rural agricultural regions of other states, they and their children usually assimilated and many of them lost their connection to their ancestral language and culture. Only in the traditional homelands did some indigenous speakers maintain their linguistic link to the past and to their ancestors.

**The Most Common Languages of Mexico**

The following table illustrates the number of speakers for the top seven indigenous language groups of Mexico in the 1970, 1990, 2000 and 2010 censuses. In addition, the last column shows the percentage of indigenous speakers for each language (out of the total number of indigenous speakers in the country) in 2010:

|  |
| --- |
| **Indigenous Languages Spoken in Mexico (1970-2010)****All Years are for Persons 5 Years of Age and Older** |
| **Indigenous Language** | **1970 Census** | **1990 Census** | **2000 Census** | **2010 Census** | **2010 Census %** |
| **Náhuatl** | **799,394** | **1,197,328** | **1,448,936** | **1,544,968** | **23.1%** |
| Maya | 454,675 | 713,520 | 800,291 | 786,113 | 11.7% |
| Mixtec Languages  | 233,235 | 386,874 | 446,236 | 476,472 | 7.1% |
| Tzeltal | 99,412 | 261,084 | 284,826 | 445,856 | 6.7% |
| Zapotec Languages | 283,345 | 403,457 | 452,887 | 450,419 | 6.7% |
| Tzotzil | 95,383 | 229,203 | 297,561 | 404,704 | 6.0% |
| Otomí | 221,062 | 280,238 | 291,722 | 284,992 | 4.3% |
| Other Languages | 924,909 | 1,810,643 | 2,022,088 | 2,301,704 | 34.4% |
| **Mexican Republic** | **3,111,415** | **5,282,347** | **6,044,547** | **6,695,228** | **100%** |

As clearly noted in the preceding table, the Náhuatl language has been the most commonly spoken tongue in Mexico since 1970, with Maya in second place by a wide margin.

**The Aztec Empire**

The widespread use of the Náhuatl language throughout Mexico today is primarily due to the incredible success of the magnificent Aztec Empire, which reached its pinnacle during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The multi-ethnic, multi-lingual realm stretched for more than 80,000 square miles through many parts of what are now central and southern Mexico. Fifteen million people, living in thirty-eight provinces and residing in 489 communities, paid tribute to the Emperor Moctezuma II. A published map of the Aztec Empire can be viewed at:

<https://www.ancient.eu/image/2321/>

**What is an Aztec?**

The popular term, ***Aztec***, has been used as an all-inclusive term to describe both the Aztec Empire and its people. The noted anthropologist, Professor Michael E. Smith of the University of New York, uses the term ***Aztec Empire*** to describe “the empire of the Triple Alliance, in which Tenochtitlán played the dominant role.” Mexico City now stands on the majestic city that was formerly known as Tenochtitlán.

Quoting the author Charles Gibson, Professor Smith observes that the Aztecs “were the inhabitants of the Valley of México at the time of the Spanish Conquest.” These Aztecs were Náhuatl speakers belonging to “**diverse polities and ethnic groups**.” In essence, it is important to recognize that **the Aztec Indians were not one ethnic group, but a collection of many ethnicities, all sharing a common cultural and historical background** **(including the Náhuatl language).** In contrast, the Mexica of Tenochtitlán were the Náhuatl people who eventually dominated the Aztec Empire, but they were only one of the original seven Náhuatl tribes that migrated to Central Mexico.

**The Original Náhuatl People**

According to Aztec legends, over a period of time, seven tribes that lived in **Chicomoztoc**, or “the place of the seven caves,” left the legendary **Aztlán** to settle in the Valley of Mexico and surrounding areas. The seven Náhuatl-speaking tribes comprised the following:

1. **The Xochimilca** — The Xochimilca were the first Náhuatl tribe to arrive in the Valley of Mexico, settling around 900 A.D. in Cuahilama, near what is now Santa Cruz Acalpixca (in Mexico City). They were eventually subdued by the Mexica and became part of the Aztec Empire.
2. **The Chalca of Chalco** — The Chalca were the second tribe to arrive in the Valley. They established themselves east of the Xochimilca about 25 km (16 miles) east of Tenochtitlán. Chalco was conquered by the Aztecs around 1465.
3. **The Tepaneca** — The Tepanecs or Tepaneca were the third tribe to arrive in the Valley of Mexico in the late 12th or early 13th centuries. They settled in Azcapotzalco on the northwest shore of Lake Texcoco. In 1428, Tepaneca became part of the Aztec Empire.
4. **The Acolhua of Texcoco** — The fourth tribe to arrive in the area, the Acolhua, settled on the northeastern shore of the Lake Texcoco. They occupied most of the eastern Basin of the Valley of Mexico, with their capital in Texcoco. Today, Texcoco is a city and municipio located in the State of Mexico, about 25 km (15 miles) northeast of Mexico City.
5. **The Tlahuica** — The Tlahuica were the fifth Náhuatl people to arrive in central Mexico. They were organized into about 50 small city states located in what is now the state of Morelos; their largest cities were Cuauhnahuac (modern Cuernavaca), about 85 km (53 miles) south of Mexico City, and Huaxtepec (modern Oaxtepec), about 60 km (37 miles) south of Mexico City. The Tlahuica eventually became part of the Aztec Empire.
6. **The Tlaxcaltecans (Tlaxcalans)** — The Tlaxcalans settled to the east of the Valley of Mexico. Their major city, Tlaxcala, is 125 km (78 miles) to the east of Mexico City today. The Tlaxcalans opposed the Aztec Empire and their nation evolved into an independent enclave deep in the heart of the Aztec Empire. By 1519, Tlaxcala was a small, densely populated confederation of 200 settlements with a population of about 150,000, surrounded on all sides by the Aztec Empire.
7. **The Mexica —** The **Mexica**, according to Professor Smith, were “the inhabitants of the cities of Tenochtitlán and Tlatelolco.” They were the last of the Náhuatl-speaking groups to arrive in the Valley of Mexico and they eventually became the masters of the Aztec Empire.

**Successive Migrations over Time**

In areas that had been conquered by the Aztecs, Náhuatl settlers came as traders, soldiers and emissaries. However, they had been preceded by other Náhuatl speakers who had settled in the same areas earlier. As a result of the successive migrations of people from different Aztec cultures over a period of three centuries, some of the Nahua languages became mutually unintelligible in areas such as Puebla, Veracruz and Guerrero.

**The Conquest**

After a two-year campaign, Spanish forces under Hernán Cortés ‒ assisted by a coalition of allied indigenous forces ‒ captured Tenochtitlán in August 1521. With the destruction of the Aztec Empire, the territories within it devolved to the control of the Spaniards.

**The New Alliance**

But the conquest gave way to a new alliance of the surviving Aztecs and the Spaniards. As Spanish military expeditions set out north, south and west of Tenochtitlán, they brought with them their newly converted indigenous allies who served as interpreters, scouts, emissaries, soldiers and settlers. Because of their previous trading and military relationships, the former subjects of the Aztec Empire became invaluable to the Spaniards because of their knowledge of the people living in other areas of Mexico. Thus, the Náhuatl tongue became the other “lingua franca” (besides Spanish) of Mexico. To this day, locations in every corner of Mexico have Náhuatl place names.

**Náhuatl in Mexico (1895-1940)**

At the time of Mexico’s 1895 census, 659,865 Mexican citizens classified themselves as speakers of the Náhuatl language. This group represented 32.1% of the total indigenous-speaking population of 2,055,544. However, a total of 10,574,793 persons were classified as Spanish-speaking individuals five years of age and older, and it is possible that a number of these persons may have been bilingual Náhuatl speakers who did not claim an affiliation with an indigenous language.

In the next three decades, the numbers of indigenous speakers dropped steadily with the violence and bloodshed of the decade-long Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). However, by 1930, the Náhuatl language was still the most widely spoken language among monolingual indigenous speakers. The 1930 census classified 355,295 persons five years of age and over as monolingual speakers of Náhuatl, representing 30.0% of the 1,185,162 persons who exclusively spoke indigenous languages in the entire Mexican Republic. The states with the largest number of Náhuatl speakers in 1930 were:

1. Puebla (132,013)
2. Veracruz (70,993)
3. Hidalgo (66,823)
4. Guerrero (45,619)
5. San Luis Potosí (24,074)

In the 1940 census, Puebla continued to have the largest number of Náhuatl monolingual speakers in the Mexican Republic, with 117,917 persons five years of age and older, representing 32.7% of the total Náhuatl monolingual population of 360,071. The other states with significant numbers of Náhuatl monolingual speakers were: Hidalgo (77,664), Veracruz (76,765), Guerrero (41,164), and San Luis Potosí (32,251).

**Náhuatl in the 1970 Census**

By the time of the 1970 census, the number of Náhuatl speakers in Mexico had increased dramatically. In that year, 799,394 persons were classified as speakers of Náhuatl five years of age and older. These people represented 25.7% of the entire indigenous speaking population of 3,111,415. The distribution of the Náhuatl speakers in 1970 by the four leading states is indicated in the following table:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
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| **Speakers of the Náhuatl Language in 1970****(All figures are for persons five years of age and older)** |
| **State** | **Speakers of the Náhuatl Language 5 Years of Age and More** | **Percentage of the Entire Náhuatl Speaking Population of the Mexican Republic** |
| Puebla | 266,181 | 33.3% |
| Veracruz | 199,435 | 24.9% |
| Guerrero | 160,183 | 20.0% |
| Hidalgo | 115,359 | 14.4% |
| Other States | 58,236 | 7.3% |
| Mexican Republic | 799,394 | 100% |
| Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática (INEGI), “ Estados Unidos Mexicanos. Resumen General IX Censo General de Población y Vivienda. México (1970). |

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**Náhuatl in the 2000 Census**

The 2000 census registered Náhuatl speakers in every state of the Mexican Republic. The states containing the largest numbers and percentages of Náhuatl speakers in that census are illustrated in the following table:

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| --- |
| **States with the Largest Populations of Náhuatl Speakers: 2000 Census** **(All figures are for persons five years of age and older)** |
| **State** | **Population** | **Percentage** |
| Puebla | 416,968 | 28.8% |
| Veracruz | 338,324 | 23.3% |
| Hidalgo | 221,684 | 15.3% |
| San Luis Potosí | 138,523 | 9.6% |
| Guerrero | 136,681 | 9.4% |
| México | 55,802 | 3.9% |
| Distrito Federal | 37,450 | 2.6% |
| Tlaxcala | 26,662 | 1.8% |
| Morelos | 18,656 | 1.3% |
| Oaxaca | 10,979 | 0.8% |
| Jalisco | 6,714 | 0.5% |
| Sinaloa | 6,446 | 0.4% |
| 20 Other Mexican States | 34,047 | 2.3% |
| Mexican Republic | 1,448,936 | 100% |
| Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática (INEGI). Estados Unidos Mexicanos. Tabulados Básicos XII Censo General de Población y Vivienda, México (2000). |

**Náhuatl in the 2010 Census**

In the 2010 census, 1,586,884 persons three years of age or more were speaking Náhuatl throughout the Mexican Republic. They represented 23% of the 6,913,362 Mexicans three years of age and older who spoke dozens of indigenous languages. The Mayan speakers numbered 796,405, running a distant second to Náhuatl, with 11.9% of the indigenous-speaking population.

The table on the following page shows the number of Náhuatl speakers in 12 states and the Mexican Republic, as well as other pertinent information:

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| **States with the Largest Number of Náhuatl Speakers: 2010 Census****(All figures are for persons three years of age and older)** |
| **State** | **2010 Census: Population of Náhuatl Speakers 3 Years of Age or Older** | **2010 Census: Percentage of Náhuatl Speakers Among All Indigenous Speakers in the State or Jurisdiction** | **Rank of the Náhuatl Language Among All Languages in the State or Jurisdiction** |
| Puebla | 447,797 | 72.5% | 1 |
| Veracruz | 355,785 | 53.7% | 1 |
| Hidalgo | 245,153 | 66.3% | 1 |
| Guerrero | 170,622 | 35.5% | 1 |
| San Luis Potosí | 141,326 | 55.1% | 1 |
| Distrito Federal | 33,796 | 27.4% | 1 |
| Mexico | 25,849 | 16.3% | 3 |
| Tlaxcala | 23,402 | 83.7% | 1 |
| Morelos | 19,509 | 61.1% | 1 |
| Oaxaca | 11,690 | 1.0% | 10 |
| Jalisco | 11,650 | 16.4% | 2 |
| Tamaulipas | 10,029 | 42.7% | 1 |
| Mexican Republic | 1,586,884 | 23.0% | 1 |
| Source: INEGI, Censo de Población y Vivienda (2010): Panorama Sociodemográfico de México (Published: March 2011). |

**The 30 Dialectal Variants of Náhuatl**

Although the Mexican Government agency, ***Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI)*** treats Náhuatl as a single language for the purposes of the census, many localized dialects have evolved apart from one another in widely dispersed areas of central, southern, and eastern México. Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas (INALI) refers to **thirty** **variantes dialectales de la lengua Náhuatl (Dialectal Variants of the Náhuatl Language)** spread throughout the various states of Mexico.

The academic resource on the Náhuatl language **Ethnologue.com** has classified 28 Náhuatl languages in the country. Each of the Náhuatl languages and dialects has developed unique characteristics depending on its environmental conditions. As a result, some of these dialects have become mutually unintelligible to one another over time.

**Náhuatl Clásico (Náhuatl Classic)**

Náhuatl Clásico (Náhuatl Classic) is the language that was spoken in Mexico City and the Valley of Mexico during the early colonial period, but was also spoken by people in adjacent areas, such as Morelos, Tlaxcala and Hidalgo. It is considered a more elegant and cultured Náhuatl. Over the last 500 years, this language has been gradually displaced by the Spanish language and has evolved into several of the modern Náhuatl languages discussed below.

## The Náhuatl Languages of Puebla

## As indicated in the earlier table regarding 2010 census data, the Náhuatl people are the single largest indigenous group in the east central state of Puebla, with over 447,000 people speaking the language. In fact, Puebla contains 28% of all the Náhuatl speakers in the Mexican Republic and at least eleven Náhuatl languages are still spoken in various parts of Puebla today.

## The most common Náhuatl languages in Puebla include the *Central Náhuatl*, the *Eastern Huasteca* and the *Central Puebla*. The Nahuas who live in the northern mountain ranges of Puebla are known as the *Nahuas de la Sierra Norte de Puebla* (they call themselves Macehuale). There are over 140,000 Sierra Náhuatl living in nineteen municipios that lie within triangle that is marked by Teziutlán, Cuetzalán del Progreso and Tetela de Ocampo. The *Sierra Negra Náhuatl* and *Southern Puebla Náhuatl* languages are spoken in southern Puebla.

**The Náhuatl Languages of Veracruz**

More than half of Veracruz’s 662,760 indigenous speakers 3 years and older in the 2010 census (53.7%) were Náhuatl speakers. And Veracruz contains more than one-fifth (22.4%) of the Náhuatl speakers in Mexico. Because Náhuatl was the language of the Aztec conquerors, its use dominated the area for the several decades before the arrival of the Spaniards. As a result, the Nahua speakers of Veracruz today actually consist of four separate groups living in different regions of the state:

* ***The Nahuas of Huasteca:*** The Huasteca region extends from northern Veracruz into eastern Hidalgo and southeastern San Luis Potosí (discussed in greater detail later in this report).
* ***The Nahuas of Totonicapán:*** Totonicapán extends through both Veracruz and the Sierra Norte de Puebla region of Puebla State.
* ***The Nahuas of the Sierra de Zongolica:*** Situated in the Grandes Montañas of the west central region of Veracruz, this area is comprised of 12 municipios. The Náhuatl speakers in this area speak the ***Orizaba Náhuatl*** dialect. In 1991, speakers of the Orizaba dialect through all states numbered 120,000. Orizaba Náhuatl has about 79% intelligibility with ***Morelos Náhuatl***.
* ***The Nahuas of Southern Veracruz:*** Náhuatl speakers inhabit some portions of the southern region of Veracruz. It is believed that over 27,000 people in southern Veracruz speak the ***Isthmus Náhuatl*** dialect.

**The Náhuatl Languages of Guerrero**

## With the expansion of the Aztec Empire, the Náhuatl language was introduced into and gradually dominated several regions of Guerrero, including the Sierra del Norte, the Central Valleys, a sliver of Costa Grande and the Tierra Caliente. Today, the Náhuatl-speaking enclaves that exist in some of the far-flung reaches of the former Aztec Empire represent the remnants of the early colonies established by the Mexica during their fifteenth century expansion into southern Mexico.

In the state of Guerrero, the Náhuatl speakers number more than 170,000 and represent more than one-third of the indigenous speaking population of the state and they are distributed through forty-five municipios in the mountainous interior of Guerrero. Náhuatl was the primary language spoken in seventeen of Guerrero’s municipios in 2000. And Guerrero presently has over 15% of all Náhuatl speakers in Mexico. Ethnologue.com has classified the Náhuatl speakers in Guerrero by the four regions in which they exist:

* Náhuatl de Ometepec
* Náhuatl de Coatepec
* Náhuatl de Guerrero
* Náhuatl de Tlamacazapa

**The Náhuatl Languages of San Luis Potosí**

Náhuatl speakers live in almost every municipio of San Luis Potosí (SLP), but have a heavy concentration in several municipios in the southeastern portion of the state that border the states of Veracruz and Hidalgo. These municipios include Tamazunchale, Axtla, San Martín Chalchicuautla, Xilitla, Coxcatlán and Matlapa. According to Ethnologue.com, the two most widely spoken Náhuatl languages in SLP are:

* ***Central Huasteca:*** spoken by persons in the states of Hidalgo, Veracruz and SLP.
* ***Western (Oeste) Huasteca***: spoken in 1,500 villages by an estimated 400,000 persons (circa 1991) in both San Luis Potosí and Hidalgo.

**Náhuatl de la Huasteca (Huasteca Náhuatl)**

***Huasteca Náhuatl*** is spoken by over a million people in the Huasteca region, which is a huge and historically important region of northeastern Mexico once inhabited mainly by the Huastec Indians when their civilization was at its height in the Mesoamerican period. Today this topographically and climatically diverse area is considered a rich agricultural region which takes in parts of several states: southern Tamaulipas, southeast San Luis Potosí, northeast Querétaro, northeast Hidalgo, northern Veracruz and the extreme north of Puebla.

Ethnologue divides Huasteca Náhuatl into three languages — Eastern, Central and Western — and has noted that there is about 85% mutual intelligibility between the Eastern and Western dialects. Nearly half a million (450,000) people speak the ***Eastern Huasteca*** in Hidalgo, western Veracruz and northern Pueblo, while another 450,000 speak the ***Western Huasteca*** dialect in San Luis Potosí and western Hidalgo.

**Náhuatl in Morelos and Tlaxcala**

As mentioned earlier in this report, the early Náhuatl tribes that took part in the migration from Chicomoztoc included the ***Tlahuica*** who settled in the present-day State of Morelos and the ***Tlaxcalans*** who settled in the present-day State of Tlaxcala. While many people in these states speak Spanish today, some 50,000 people living in Tlaxcala and nearby Puebla still speak the ***Central Náhuatl*** language, which still has a strong resemblance to the original Náhuatl Classic of Central Mexico.

Another 15,000 are believed to speak the ***Náhuatl Morelos*** language in the region. These languages have changed their phonetic structure over time due to their contact with the Spanish language and the urban environment in which they have developed.

**Náhuatl de la Periferia Occidental**

The Náhuatl Languages of the Western Periphery include several Náhuatl variants spoken in the states of Michoacán, Colima, Jalisco, Nayarit and Durango. The dialect spoken in Jalisco is now extinct, while the dialect in Michoacán is only spoken by about 2,000 people in the state’s coastal region. The **Náhuatl de Durango** dialect is also known as **Náhuatl Mexicanero** and is believed to be spoken by a thousand people in the towns of San Pedro de las Jícoras and San Juan de Buenaventura, as well as by some scattered populations of Zacatecas and northern Jalisco.

One of several sources on the current Náhuatl languages of Mexico can be accessed at:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nahuan_languages>

Another recent source of information regarding the Náhuatl languages spoken is available at:

<https://issuu.com/revitalization/docs/cruz>

**Conclusion**

From the fifteenth century to the twenty-first century, the Náhuatl language has held a preeminent position within the Mexican Republic. Even with the Spanish domination of the country from 1521 to 1822, the Aztec tongue continued to play an important role in communicating through nearly all parts of the country. Now, in 2018, it is likely that the Náhuatl language will continue to be the most spoken indigenous language in Mexico for the foreseeable future.

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