South Eastern Huastec (Mayan, Mexico):
The First Teaching Materials Ever

Ana Kondic

Ana Kondic is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney, Australia and the Université Lumière Lyon 2, Lyon, France. Her main research interests include language documentation, endangered languages, Mesoamerican languages, Mayan languages, Morphosyntax, grammar writing, and indigenous languages. Kondic has just finished her project on documentation and description of South Eastern Huastec, a Mayan language of Mexico. Kondic has been teaching Spanish and French at the University of Sydney, Australia, since 2002.
Abstract

South Eastern Huastec (Ethnologue code HSF) is an endangered Mayan language spoken in the region of La Huasteca, in northern Veracruz, Mexico, by about 1700 people. It has not been passed to the new generations for about twenty years. The author spent 12 months on field work in the village of San Francisco Chontla collaborating with the members of this indigenous community to document and describe this least known Maya language and its culture. The materials for teaching that the author has produced are the first ever in South Eastern Huastec. They have been made with the aim to facilitate the future revitalization efforts and with a hope that they will be used by future speech community to learn, teach and revitalize South Eastern Huastec, at least to some extent. These materials include stories (personal and legends), songs with exercises, and a small dictionary. They are illustrated by the photos taken in the village and by drawings produced by local children. In this article the author shares her experience in collecting the data for this task, the community response to it and the process of elaboration of these teaching materials.
**Introduction**

Revitalization and maintenance of endangered languages seems to be a growing global phenomenon that has attracted a lot of attention in recent years. The processes of language revitalization and maintenance have been considered from different points of view including that of linguistics (Hinton & Hale 2001, Tsunoda 2006), sociolinguistics (Fishman 1991, 2001), critical sociolinguistics (Jaffe 1999), language policy and planning (Romaine 2002, 2006), linguistic anthropology (Field & Kroskrighty 2009, Kroskrighty 2009) or sociocultural anthropology (Wallace 1956). All these sources emphasize the importance of teaching materials for the process of language revitalization and maintenance. In this article I would like to share my experience in elaborating the teaching materials for South Eastern Huastec, a Mayan language spoken in Mexico.

South Eastern Huastec\(^1\) is a Mayan language of Mexico. It is spoken as a native language by about 1700 people in the north of the state of Veracruz, in the region called La Huasteca. South Eastern Huastec is considered endangered because it has not been transmitted to new generations for about twenty-five years; children do not speak this language anymore. The South Eastern Huastec has never been described or documented before. Among the community members there is a certain interest in teaching this language to the primary school children.

This project of documentation and description of South Eastern Huastec was a PhD project in cotutelle undertaken by the author at the University of Sydney, Australia and Université Lumière Lyon 2, Lyon, France. Its target was to document the usage of the language in all its varieties and to create a digital database as well as to elaborate teaching materials. This project was financed by a SOAS HRELP grant (Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Program with the School of African and Asian Studies of the University of London, UK), a Mexican Government scholarship and several grants by the ALLEDD DDL ISH of the Université Lyon 2 in France. The South Eastern Huastec collection of primary data is deposited with ELAR SOAS London for long term archiving, where it is accessible to other interested parties.

\(^1\) Ethnologue code HSF according to its alternative name Huastec of San Francisco; also known as Huastec of the Sierra de Otontepec, or Teenek; alternative spelling Waxtec.
The field work on South Eastern Huastec as spoken in the village of San Francisco Chontla, Veracruz, went for almost one year and was conducted in three parts: first, a stay of eight months (October 2007–May 2008), and then two shorter stays of about 3 months each in 2009 and 2011. The major part of the fieldwork time was dedicated to data collecting with the aim to document the language. The same database was used for creation of the teaching materials.

In this article I would like to relate my experience in collecting the data and elaborating the first ever teaching materials in South Eastern Huastec.

**The Huastec and Their Language**

Huastec, or as they call themselves, Teenek, are an indigenous people of Mexico historically based in the states of Hidalgo, San Luis Potosi and Veracruz, and concentrated along the route of the Panuco River and along the coast of the gulf of Mexico. This area is called la Huasteca. The Huastecs have lived here for a couple of thousands of years, since the split from the rest of the Maya (Kaufman 1990, Robertson&Houston 2003).

Besides in the village of San Francisco, South Eastern Huastec (HSF) is spoken in some other villages of the same municipality like Las Cruces, Arranca Estacas, Ensinal, or in neighbouring municipalities of Chinampa, Amatlan, and Tamiahua. Other neighbouring villages in the area are Nahuatl.

HSF is a Mayan language and together with other two varieties, Huastec of San Luis Potosi (HVA), and Huastec of Veracruz (HUS), and the extinct Chicomuceltec (COB), belongs to the Huastec branch of the Mayan family. There are 103,788 speakers of the Huastecan languages (1990 census). As already mentioned, HSF is spoken by about 1,700 people in the village of San Francisco Chontla.

The HSF has an interesting position in the Mayan family because of its features: being isolated from the rest of the Mayas for thousands of years the languages of the Huastecan group have, on one hand, lost (or haven’t developed) some of the typical Mayan features like directionals, object incorporation, split ergativity, for example, and on the other hand have created some innovations, like suffixation of TAM, inverse alignment, extensive usage of the Middle Voice, among others (Kondic 2010, Kondic 2012).

The usage of HSF is very restricted: it is used only within the family, and sometimes in social interaction in local shops. South Eastern Huastec has never been taught in schools; recently, a group of primary school teachers is working on opening a bilingual local school in the village where they plan to use Huastec along with Spanish.
**Documentation project**

The objectives of this project were to create a comprehensive digital database (audio, video and texts), to produce teaching materials and to write a descriptive grammar. This project aimed at documenting the usage of the South Eastern Huastec in the context of cultural expression, tradition and practices, and everyday life. About 50 consultants, some casual and some permanent, of different gender, age, and educational background helped to gather the appropriate samples of different HSF speech varieties in its natural context. They were compensated daily or hourly depending on the kind of their contribution. Working with the members of the community, I applied the principles from the “National Statement of Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans from June 1999”, an authority in Australia in the field of Humanities.

For collecting the data in South Eastern Huastec a combination of different data collection techniques was used: elicitation of lexical items and grammatical paradigms and audio and video recording of the widest variety of texts possible (oral histories, myths and oral traditions, recipes, procedurals, prayers and religious texts, descriptions of visual stimuli, and conversations).

For the purpose of documenting this language, I used all available new digital technologies like a video and a still camera, and audio recording devices to help me produce as rich as possible data basis. As I had a chance of borrowing the field work equipment from a branch of the PARADISEC, a language archive based at the University of Sydney, I took with me to the field a video camera SONY DCR-TRV900E PAL that worked with mini tapes; an audio recorder Nagra Ares BB+ with a microphone Sony ECM-MS 957, and my own still camera Olympus SP-310. For data processing I used a laptop Toshiba Satellite 100/400 (120 GB HDD, 200 GB RAM) with Transcriber, Toolbox and ELAN.

**Creation of the HSF Teaching Materials**

As mentioned earlier, one of the aims of this documentation project was to produce teaching materials for South Eastern Huastec that could be used for language maintenance and revitalization. The materials for the maintenance of this language that have been produced in this project are the first ever in South Eastern Huastec. They have been made with the aim to facilitate the future revitalization efforts and in hope that they would be used by future speech community to learn, teach and revitalize South Eastern Huastec, at least to some extent.
Stage One: Defining Community Needs

The first stage of the process of elaboration of these teaching materials started by several conversations with the community members to define their needs; their participation and collaboration in production of these materials was crucial. The community members who participated in these talks were very interested in the revitalization of their language. The elderly members of the community especially expressed an opinion that the children of the village and the area should be taught the Huastec language. The community suggestions gave me a perspective necessary for an adequate elaboration of the HSF teaching materials.

As mentioned above, the children of the area do not speak South Eastern Huastec and have Spanish as a native language. This means that they should be considered as second language learners and that in elaboration of the materials for their needs, second language acquisition principles should be applied.

This language has never been taught in schools and has no existing language learning resources at all. It was clear that any language material would be welcomed. It was also mentioned in the community that there is a need for qualified teachers, at the first instance, who would use these materials to teach the local children.

Stage Two: Data Collection

After gaining perspective of their needs in the beginning of the project, I proceeded with data collection. That was the second stage in the production of these materials. It is important to mention that this data collection was needed for writing the grammar too; recording a corpus of texts by HSF speakers provided data for the research and a foundation for a comprehensive description of South Eastern Huastec.

The HSF data were collected with the aim of covering all the domains of oral traditions and expressions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, traditional knowledge and daily life. I collected materials on the community’s religious rituals and cosmology: my consultants told me about the value and symbolism of the local holidays, festivities and beliefs, like the celebration of the Day of the Dead, Thipaak (God of Maize) harvest ritual or the “Dirty ones” dance as a part of the spring Carnaval, among others. Although HSF is never used in church, there are several groups of people in the community who regularly gather to pray at the home of some of them; on one occasion I was invited by my main consultant to video record a prayer that was going to be held in Huastec. I also collected some interesting descriptive texts: how funerals are organized (differently for an adult and for a child), and about ceremonies on the occasion of childbirth.
Traditional medicine, ecological wisdom and local pharmacopeia are also domains that provide a lot of interesting texts: a herbalist told me how he uses the herbs that grow in the area to heal the members of the community and I recorded him making different remedies, as for example a tincture for a sore throat, a compress for a hurting stomach or an ointment for an ulcer. The history of the village and the region was a hobby of one of my consultants who provided me with different texts on this topic, like stories from the times of the Mexican revolution as experienced in the area, or from a post-revolutionary period that he witnessed personally. A local legend about an enchanted church bell is also a part of this collection.

The domain of their lifestyle and traditional arts and crafts was also explored. Several texts from how to make embroideries, how crops are seeded or how traditional houses or food is made (atole, tamales, tortillas, coffee) to how to repair a bicycle form part of this HSF collection. The two eldest members of the community described the lifestyle in the village in the yester days.

On several occasions I documented the contemporary everyday life in the village of San Francisco Chontla. I spoke to the villagers about their daily routine and other aspects of their life, starting from simple stories like ‘What did you do yesterday?’, or “What is your daily routine like?”, and continuing with more precise or personal topics like “What was your son’s wedding day like”, or “Can you describe your family members for me?”, for example. Villagers told me about different aspects of their daily life. Besides the stories that individuals told me, I tried to record as many conversations as I could. This was not an easy task as many people are often not comfortable with being recorded. These conversations were casual, although I tried to prepare the topic with the consultants in advance: a conversation between two friends about their daily life and families, a discussion about composing music and singing; a conversation about a two-day religious retreat in the neighbouring village, or interaction among people in a local shop.

After a twelve months fieldwork, the HSF database contained the following materials:

- 85 stories/items of all genres: personal narratives, expository texts (explaining tradition), procedural texts, creative (fiction), historical texts
- 3 hours of conversations (casual, spontaneous, without my presence) and several hours of elicitations
• 17 hours of video recordings documenting the usage of the HSF: stories, celebrations, religious ceremonies, traditional knowledge, different culturally relevant events, as well as gestures, body orientation, facial expressions and similar.

• Several language/grammar questionnaires and a wordlist of about 3,000 items

At the moment there is about 1,500 pages of South Eastern Huastec texts, annotated and translated into Spanish or English. These data were the base for the production of the HSF teaching materials.

**Stage Three: Designing HSF Teaching Materials**

The third stage was the design of community materials for language maintenance and revitalization. All the aforementioned collected data enabled me to produce different materials that could be used by teachers of the language in the future: a thematic dictionary that contains the majority of the words collected during this documentation project; the stories, conversations and songs in South Eastern Huastec were grouped according to their topic and made into small booklets—on the left side page there is the text in HSF and on the right page the translation into Spanish. A separate song book contains six songs by the local musician Narcizo de la Cruz Dominguez. The songs are in HSF and in translation into Spanish, with simple lexical and grammatical exercises. In every booklet there is a reference to the audio or video recording. All the materials are illustrated with the photos taken in the village or with drawings by local children. At the end of every booklet there is the HSF alphabet and the list of the people who participated in this documentation project. The materials produced during the project are as follows:

• Thematic Dictionary Huastec—Spanish with 3,000 words

• Booklets of stories for children and for adults, translated into Spanish:
  • Our lives
  • Our stories
  • Our traditions and legends
  • Our songs

• Several DVDs in South Eastern Huastec translated/subtitled into Spanish.
The HSF teaching materials were handed over to the community at a small ceremony during the Day of the Death festivities in November 2011. They are archived at the public library of the Municipality of Chontla and the little library at the primary school in the village of San Francisco.

My sincere hopes that the materials for language revitalization and maintenance would be used by the community were realized, at least partly, last autumn. During my last stay in the village in November 2011 I found out with great pleasure that the materials I produced for revitalization are already being used for those purposes! The local musician Narcizo de la Cruz Domínguez had gathered a group of about thirty local children (7 to 15 years of age) that meet twice a week at his home. Narcizo teaches them the basics of South Eastern Huastec and how to sing songs in this language. For these purposes Narcizo uses the materials he helped me to produce: the booklet “Our Songs”. He and his group participate in cultural life in the area, sing at weddings and similar happenings. They have also participated in some national and international festivals of indigenous music in Mexico.

On this occasion I would like to again thank all the community members of San Francisco Chontla who helped me in this project. Without their friendly support and interest in the project these teaching materials would have never been created.
**Bibliography**


The 2011 Symposium for Teaching and Learning Indigenous Languages of Latin America (STLILLA) was the second in a biennial series of symposia organized by the Association for Teaching and Learning Indigenous Languages of Latin America (ATLILLA). The Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame hosted STLILLA-2011 in collaboration with partner institutions.

For more information: kellogg.nd.edu/STLILLA