Variable adaptation of Spanish loanwords in Nahuatl

Marcela San Giacomo (LSCP, Paris) & Sharon Peperkamp (LSCP, Paris)

Much research has been devoted to the modifications loanwords undergo when they are adapted to the phonology of the borrowing language. There can, however, be variation as to whether a sound or sound sequence is adapted or not. We report on a sociolinguistic study investigating this latter issue.

Data were collected in Tagoctepec, a Nahuatl village of about 500 inhabitants in Mexico. In this village, Spanish is used for commercial and educational purposes. Inhabitants younger than 30 years have all learned Spanish in school, but 17% of the population consists of monolingual speakers of Nahuatl. The village is divided into two parts by a river. One of them is close to the main road; most commercial, educational and religious activities take place in this part, which counts 81% bilingual speakers. The other part is more remotely located and contains 65% bilingual speakers.

A game - involving a board containing a collage of 270 pictures of objects whose names are Spanish loanwords in Nahuatl - was used to elicit spontaneous productions of Spanish loanwords. Seventy-one participants (about 15% of the population), were recorded while they were engaged in this game. They produced 671 loanwords for a total of 4631 tokens. For each loanword token we coded for each illegal aspect of it how it was pronounced: with adaptation (nativized) or without (non-nativized). We also coded speaker information, his or her relationship with the other participants, as well as the frequency of use of the loanword within the community.

A multivariate analysis revealed significant effects of five variables on the presence or absence of adaptation: location, age, and sex of the speaker, as well as the relation of the speaker with the interlocutors, and the loanword’s frequency of use.

We will discuss these findings in light of theories of loanword diffusion and adaptation.