Scholar's Dictionary Of Aztec Language May Take a Lifetime

To Find the Words, Mr. Amith Collects Bugs, Folk Tales, Endures Village Rivalries

By Bob Davis

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Click on the linked words throughout the article to hear their pronunciation.

SAN AGUSTÍN OAPAN, Mexico -- Taking a break from grilling tortillas, Paula Panteleon showed off her latest catch: a bug floating in alcohol at the bottom of plastic soda bottle. "*Pinawistli*," she said in her native language, Nahuatl -- "mother of scorpions." According to local lore, the insect, which looks like a water bug, gives birth to scorpions but doesn't have as nasty a sting.

Jonathan Amith

Jonathan Amith, an American anthropologist who is recording and preserving Nahuatl (pronounced NA-watl), thanked her and asked her to trap a *tlalokolotl*, or "earth scorpion" -- whose bite is reputed to be so powerful it can kill cattle. He will send both bugs to a Mexico City entomologist to identify their scientific names, and what they are called in Spanish and English. "Knowledge of the words is disappearing," he said.

Word by word, Mr. Amith is creating an extensive archive of Nahuatl, the language spoken by the Aztecs at the time of the 16th century Spanish conquest and now the first language of 1.5 million Mexican Indians. He records fables and personal histories, collects plants and insects, and keeps up a nonstop patter with locals, searching for

information to add to a Web site he is building that is part dictionary, part encyclopedia and part storybook.

His goal is both daring and quixotic: to preserve Nahuatl so that native speakers don't discard their language as they turn to Spanish, which they need to compete in contemporary Mexico.

Mr. Amith, a stubbled 52-year-old Yale University Ph.D., has recorded Nahuatl for more than 20 years and may have 20 years of work ahead of him. He moved to central Mexico in 1979, bored with graduate-school courses and determined to learn the language of the region he planned to study. He took a job with Mexico City bricklayers, who taught him basic, often scatological, Nahuatl words. He then moved to impoverished Balsas River villages, about 75 miles northeast of Acapulco. In the village of Ameyaltepec, a local gave him a place to sleep: a storage hut filled with donkey feed.

Every moment he could, he jotted words and their meanings on three-by-five cards, which now number 15,000. "He harkens back to the 19th century tradition of the adventurer-scholar who says, 'I'll go out and do something and the world be damned,' " says Tyler Cowen, a George Mason University economist who studies Nahuatl-speaking villages.

Jonathan Amith records the stories of Paula Panteleon

He focused his efforts on Ameyaltepec and San Agustín Oapan, where a high percentage of residents still spoke Nahuatl. About two-thirds of the 2.5 million

Nahua-Mexicans, who mostly live in a broad swath of central Mexico, still can speak their native language, which has as many as two dozen variants.

Native languages are endangered around the globe, as indigenous people leave their ancestral homes. The problem is especially acute in Mexico, which has more than 50 Indian languages and a surge in immigration to the U.S. Few Nahuatl-speaking children are proficient at reading or writing their language, which they call "Mexicano."

Current dictionaries don't help much; most were compiled by missionaries and range broadly in quality. A handful of scholars are working on new dictionaries, including groups at the University of Oregon and the University of Zacatecas, north of Mexico City.

In recent years, the Mexican government has shifted from hostility to native speakers to support, passing a law in 2003 calling for native languages to be recognized as official languages of the state, along with Spanish. It also has created a National Institute of Indigenous Languages, which is mapping where different indigenous Mexican languages are spoken.

Nahuatl strings together prefixes, word roots and suffixes, sometimes into very long words. One 18-syllable Nahuatl word used in towns near Cuernavaca is translated "you honorable people might have come along banging your noses so as to make them bleed, but in fact you didn't," according to SIL International, a religiously oriented linguistics group that is translating the Old Testament into Nahuatl. Others are simpler: the Nahuatl words *chicolatl* and *tomatl* gave English "chocolate" and "tomato."

Mr. Amith recruited computational linguists to devise software to separate Nahuatl words into their component parts, which is vital for looking them up on his Web site. Few Nahuatl-speaking towns have computers or Internet connections, so he is starting by printing tales from his computerized archives, including those recorded by Joaquin Herrera, a 59-year-old farmer who heard them as a young boy during fiestas.

One of his favorites describes babies who are switched at birth for animals. He never told the tales to his only child, Irma. "Since she is a woman, I thought she wouldn't be interested," he says. "If she was a boy, maybe." Now 26-year-old Irma listens to a CD of her father's tales as she goes to sleep. Mr. Amith scours the stories for words to add to his dictionary.

Over the years, Mr. Amith has deepened his ties to Nahuatl-speaking villages in the Balsas area, which have become renowned for their folk artists. In the early 1990s, he helped local artists produce an illustrated calendar to raise funds for a movement to defeat a proposed dam they worried would flood the town. In 2001, he built a house with one of the first showers in San Agustín Oapan and a small building where he trains assistants to transcribe stories he records.

Still, he must contend with the suspicion of locals who figure he is somehow getting rich from their language and with the reality of begging U.S. foundations for money. He has never had a permanent university post and splits his time between San Agustín Oapan and a small office at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania, which administers his latest grant, from the National Science Foundation.

The 3,000 residents of San Agustín Oapan are bitterly divided into political factions and rival neighborhoods that fight over the modest grants Mr. Amith sometimes can wrangle for the town. They seem to live up to a local saying: "To protect a donkey, you kill it."

Sixto Carbañas, an Indian-rights activist and the town's secretary, figures Mr. Amith is pocketing money from his work and not sharing it with townspeople. "Yes, it's good to preserve the language, but not at the cost of being robbed," he says. "He's a foreigner. He should tell us anything he does."

Mr. Amith, who says he has never earned more than $40,000 in a single year from grants, has had a falling out with some of the artists he once helped and is worried that Mr. Carbañas could impede his research. Recently, the town wouldn't grant him permission to study local birds.

During a week-long visit in January, Mr. Amith and a colleague collected 70 plant specimens in nearby Atliaca to identify by their Nahuatl and scientific names. A specialist in the region's grasses is coming this summer.

He also drove two hours, over axle-bending roads, to the town of San Juan Totolsintlan to meet with elementary-school teachers who teach Nahuatl. Even they stumble over standard school texts, which use a variant of Nahuatl different from the one spoken locally. Why not use local stories, Mr. Amith asks them, from recordings he has transcribed?

"*Kas*" -- "maybe" -- they respond. "Sometimes indigenous people find foreign things hard to accept," says sixth-grade teacher Alfreda Gasparillo Pineda. Mr. Amith is

planning to outfit Ms. Gasparillo's town, Zitlala, with a computer and Nahuatl reading material in the fall.

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