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The competition between Spanish and Nahuatl for the name for ‘cat’: A trace of the role played by Nahuatl as a lingua franca in early New Spain

Abstract

Domestic cat (*Felis silvestris catus*) was unknown in the New World where only wild cats had their ecological niches, such as cougar / mountain lion / catamount / puma (English *puma* < Spanish *puma* < Quechua *puma* ‘Puma concolor’), cf. Classical Nahuatl (Uto-Aztecan language family = UA l.f.) *miztli* ‘león’ (Molina 1571: 57v; Sahagún 1577: III, 331 [*Miztli*]; Carochi 1645: 5r; Karttunen [1983] 1992: 149; Nagel Bielicke [2009] 2015: 136; Thouvenot 2014: 187). Native languages had two possible strategies for expressing new concepts, either adopting a foreign borrowing or changing the semantic value of an old native word. In the case of ‘horse’ Nahuatl accepted the Spanish loanword *cahuayo* (Arenas 1611: 47) [ka'wajo] < Spanish *caballo* [ka'βalo], in the case of ‘cat’ Nahuatl made use of the diminutive form of *miztli*, i.e. *miztōn* (cf. *mizton* in the Nahuatl-Spanish part in Molina 1571: 57v, but *mizto* in the Spanish-Nahuatl part, Molina [1555] 1571: 65v). On the contrary, a Uto-Aztecan language such as e.g. Cupeño (†)(Southern California, USA) had for ‘cat’ a clear borrowing from Spanish, *gaatu* ‘cat’ < Spanish *gato* (J. Hill 2005: 165). During the 16th-17th centuries, along with Spanish *gato* ‘cat’ the endearment terms *mizo* or *micho* were very fashionable and native languages picked up their borrowings mainly from the latter source, cf. Cuzco Quechua (Peru) *michi*, *mishi*, *pichi*, Ayacucho Quechua (Peru) *misi* (Hermeza Gutiérrez et al. 2005: 318). There was a striking resemblance between Spanish *mizo* (American Spanish ['miso] < Peninsular Spanish ['miθo] < Old Spanish ['mitso]) ‘(male) cat’ (cf. *miza* ‘(female) cat’) and Nahuatl *miztli* ['mistli] ‘mountain lion’, because both words share an identical stem (*miz-* + Spanish masculine *-o* or feminine *-a* / + Nahuatl absolutive *-tli*): in my opinion this correspondence is purely due to chance. Moreover, even derivative forms such as Spanish diminutive *mizito* (M) and *mizita* (F) ‘kitten, kitty, pussy’ and Nahuatl diminutive *miztōn* ‘cat’ bear a certain resemblance. This fact sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish whether the name for ‘cat’ in a native language has a Spanish or a Nahuatl origin if you take into account Guadalajara (Jalisco, Mexico = MX) Nahuatl *mizto* ‘cat’ (Cortés y Zedeño 1765: 86), already attested in 1555 in Molina (see above). Thus, it is a challenging task to individuate the donor language in cases such as Cora/Náayeri, a UA language spoken in Nayarit (MX), which has *mistu* (Santos García 2015: 45), or Albarradas Zapotec, an Oto-Manguean language of Oaxaca (MX), which has *mixt* (Varios hablantes 2011: 12), or Cuitlateco (†)(isolate, Guerrero, MX) *miftu* (from Nahuatl, according to Escalante Hernández 1962: 47), or Seri (isolate, Sonora, MX) *miist* (Moser & Marlett 2008: 445, compared with Eudeve (†) [UA] *místo*), or San Mateo del Mar Huave (isolate, Oaxaca, MX) *mista* beside *miüs* and *mich* (Stairs Kreger & Scharfe de Stairs 1981: 109, 112, 113; Noyer 2012: 352, 357).

We know that the few Spaniards who destroyed the “Aztec Empire” had to resort to thousands of Nahuatl-speaking Tlaxcaltecs (Tlaxcala and Puebla, MX) who were old enemies of Tenochcans (the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan, core of modern Ciudad de México), cf. Tlaxcala Nahuatl *miztoh* for *gato* (Bright 1965: 243). Nahuatl was already a commercial lingua franca in Pre-Columbian Mesamerica,

Spaniards reinforced its role as a political and military vehicular language before imposing Spanish as the only official language. The name for ‘cat’ allows us to follow the expansion of Nahuatl as a lingua franca in the Spanish colony, influencing neighbouring speech communities, either linguistically related or belonging to different language families (in today’s Mexico there are still 11 language families, leaving aside isolates). Pipil, the southernmost Nahuatl variety, now dying out in El Salvador, has *mistu:n* ‘gato’ (Campbell 1985: 349), while Papago or Tohono O’odham (UA, southern Arizona, USA-northern Sonora, MX) has *miistol* (Rea 1998: 104). In the South, Pech or Paya (isolate or Chibchan l.f., Honduras) has *mistóh-á* ‘cat’ (Holt 1999: 36), cf. *mistoh* ‘gato’ (Ramos 2013: 103), whereas in the North we find Caddo (Caddoan l.f., Texas and Louisiana, USA) *míst’uh* (a Spanish loan according to Brown 1998: 160). Xinca (Xincan l.f., Guatemala) *mistun* is considered a borrowing from Pipil by Sachse (2010: II, 919; see also Rogers 2010: 92). Some languages exhibit loanwords from Nahuatl and from Spanish as well. Southeastern Tepehuan (O’dam) of Santa María Ocotán (UA, Durango, MX, Willett & Willett 2015: 125) has both *mistuiñ* ‘gato, gata’ (< Nahuatl) and *miichu* ‘gato’ (< Spanish), while Northern Tepehuan (Ódami, UA, Chihuahua, MX) has only *mixithu* ‘gato’ (Rivas Vega 2014: 81) < Spanish *mizito* or *michito*. In closely related languages we can find a different distribution of the Nahuatl and Spanish borrowings. As for the Totonacan (Totonac-Tepehua) l.f., compare Filomeno Mata Totonac (Veracruz, MX) *mústun* ‘cat’ (MacFarland 2009: 18) with Ecatlán Totonac (Puebla, MX) *mitsi* (Bautista Ramírez 2010: 10). As for the Huastec Mayan group (La Huasteca region, MX), Huastec Mayan of Veracruz has *mistu:n* or *mistu?* vs. Huastec Mayan of San Luis Potosí *mitsu* (Norcliffe 2003: 173). An analogous contrast was shown by two extinct Misumalpan languages, cf. Cacaopera (El Salvador) *miči* ‘cat’ vs. Matagalpa (Nicaragua) *misto* (Nahuatl or Spanish?) (Campbell 1975: 147).

Eventually, I shall deal with the problem of the vocalism of the name for ‘domestic cat’ in some unrelated languages spoken in the USA, i.e. Hopi (UA, NE Arizona) *moosa* (Albert & Shaul 1985: 41), Ute (UA, SW Colorado, E Utah) *múusa-chi* (Givón 2011: 28, 38, 39, 48, 206, 406, 407), Navajo (Athabaskan l.f., NE Arizona, SE Utah, NW New Mexico) *mósí* (Hojjer 1974: 255; Feltes-Strigler 2002: 172), Zuni (isolate, W New Mexico, E Arizona) *mu:sa* (Newman 1958: 32), Tewa or Tano (Tanoan l.f., New Mexico and Arizona) *mu-sa^h* (Dozier 1956: 154), Acoma Keres (Keresan dialect cluster, isolate, New Mexico) *mu-sa* (Miller 1959: 152), Hualapai/Havasupai (Yuman-Cochimí l.f., NW Arizona) *muso* (possibly borrowed from Hopi according to Kendall 1980: 227). Even though it is an issue already widely discussed (Landar 1959; Bright 1960; Miller 1960; Landar 1961; Crowley 1962; Kiddle 1964) a further clarification seems necessary as regards the alleged Proto-Uto-Aztecan (or Proto-Aztec-Tanoan) **musa* ‘cat, feline animal’ (> Nahuatl *miztli*), proposed by Whorf & Trager (1937: 624) and reintroduced by K.C. Hill (1998: 22).