

Palatalization, contact and the rise of a new reading style in K'iche' Mayan

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This paper is a study of the linguistic features and the social triggers for the rise and diffusion of a new reading style in K'iche' Mayan, used today by literate K'iche' speakers and political activists as index of a new construction of Mayan identity in post-civil war Guatemala. K'iche' is a Mayan language spoken by 1000000 people in the western and central highlands of Guatemala. Although there is a substantial corpus of documents written in K'iche', some dating early as the middle of the 16th century, only in the last twenty years have reading and writing become widespread practices in K'iche' communities, stimulated by the rise of Maya political and cultural activism in Guatemala. New standard alphabets have been developed based on criteria established by native linguists educated in Guatemalan Spanish-only schools and trained by foreign linguists. One of the most striking features of the new reading style is the absence of palatalization of velar obstruents and ejectives. In most K'iche' dialects, the palatalization of obstruents and ejectives before high front vowels and centralized low vowels is a frequent variable feature, which has been documented at least since the late 16th century (Campbell 1974). Palatalization has spread in the number of consonants affected and the number of vowels that trigger it, though I will limit my discussion to velar obstruents and ejectives. The first column in Table 1 shows the non-palatalized reading style forms and the second the corresponding palatalized colloquial forms.

Standard form (Reading)	Palatalized form (Colloquial)	Gloss
ke:x	k ^y e:x	deer
kaqabanó	k ^y eqabanó	We do it
ukik'él	ukik ^y 'él	His blood
kakik'am kikantelá	k ^y ik ^y ik ^y 'am kikantelá	They carry candles

Table 1¹. Examples of reading & colloquial styles in K'iche' Mayan (Tz'oljche').

¹ I have used the standard orthography officially recognized by the Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, which coincides with the I.P.A. for the examples in Table 1. Primary stressed in marked with an acute accent.

Based on quantitative data from 40 speakers from the township of Tz'oljche', I will describe the linguistic variables that influence the palatalization of velars and ejectives. I will show that contrary to claims that palatalization in K'iche' is the result of consonantal dissimilation across an intervening vowel (Campbell 1974); it is really a case of assimilation preceded by the fronting and rising of unstressed and secondary stressed low vowels. Next I will describe the social and cultural context in which the new reading style arose. I will focus on the impact of Spanish-only schooling on the language ideologies that stimulated the rise of the new register, showing how language ideologies are borrowed across linguistic and ethnic boundaries leading to the rise of new styles, and in the case of K'iche' an overt consciousness of a variable feature, whose variation did not have any particular social evaluation heretofore.

References

Campbell, Lyle. 1974. Quichean Palatalized Velars. *International Journal of American Linguistics*, Vol. 40, No. 2. pp. 132-134.