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Nahuatl: a lasting influence

By Gil Griffin
March 7, 2004

Before the 16th-century Spanish conquest of Central and South America, the Nahuatl language was, according to San Diego educator Mario Aguilar, "the lingua franca" from central Mexico through Central America.

Nahuatl, one of about 250 indigenous languages spoken in Mexico, is related to other tongues spoken by North American Indian groups such as the Comanche, Pima and Shoshone. Nahuatl writings represented words through pictographs.

Spanish influence meant some Nahuatl words and dialects changed, taking it from its classic to its present-day form. Aguilar likened the process to old English evolving into American English.

Pronunciation of Nahuatl words is challenging. The language is pronounced NAH-waht and the "tl" in many Nahuatl words is pronounced like the "tl" in the word "Atlantic," not as in "bottle." The "x" in Nahuatl words is pronounced "sh" as in "shark."

"You know you're saying words right," Aguilar said, "when you feel the air coming out of both sides of your mouth."

Nahuatl words range from the recognizable, such as ahucamolli (guacamole), chilli (chili) and ahucatl (avocado) to the unfamiliar, like miztontli (little cat), conetl (baby) and huitzilil (hummingbird).

The fact that Nahuatl words such as tomatl, (tomato) chocoatl, (chocolate) and coyotl (coyote) found their way into everyday words in Mexican Spanish and English attest to its ongoing significance.

If you're interested in learning the language through the Aztec dance group Danza Mexi'cayotl, contact Mario Aguilar at (619) 948-8861. Classes are held Monday nights at the San Ysidro Recreation Center, 212 W. Park. Ave., and on Thursday nights at the Sherman Heights Community center, 2260 Island Ave., San Diego. The group's Web site is www.mexicayotl.org. You can also check out www.mrs.umn.edu/academic/history/Nahuatl/gateway.html for more information on Nahuatl.



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