

# Conceptualizing Malinche in discourse: an analysis from a sociocultural perspective.

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## **Abstract**

This chapter analyzes the historical role of Malinche, a woman who has been regarded as both a subject and a mythic figure in Mexican history, art, literature and language. A woman of noble birth, sold as a slave by her own mother, and later on passed around as a commodity, she became Hernán Cortés' mistress, interpreter, plotter, and confidant who eased the conquest of Tenochtitlán, a fact which brought about the destruction of pre-Columbian civilizations by means of war, epidemics, plundering, enslaving and genocide. Because she assisted the conquistadors, she has come to be vilified in Mexican history: her name even led to the coinage of new words, which are still part of the lexicon, a fact that drove the authors to research word use among college students to assess Malinche's significance today. Malinche's legacy remains: she still plays a part in the imagination and the identity of some Mexicans.

**Key Words:** Malinche, malinchismo, Mexican history, Spanish conquest, genocide, gender, women and power, historical perspectives, discourse analysis, literacy, women and power.

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“After God, we owe this conquest of New Spain to Doña Marina” (Hernán Cortés)

## **1. Background: Legends in the making**

Present-day Mexico's territory was the cradle of several outstanding civilizations: the Olmec, the Maya, the Toltec, the Mixtec, the Zapotec, and the Aztec to name a few; but our history as a nation can be basically divided into two eras: pre-Columbian, and the Modern period, which started after European colonization. For our history to be split in two, the conquest had to occur, but Europeans could not have conducted such a feat without the help of military allies and one particular woman: Malintzin, whose Nahuatl name was changed to mestizo-sounding Malinche, and further altered to Christian Doña Marina after her baptism. Her different names eerily evoke her own life: a woman not fully belonging to a specific group, her otherness kept setting her apart. She has also come to be viewed primarily as a traitor who sold out her race to serve

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foreigners, who, in so doing, brought about the downfall of pre-Columbian civilizations in Meso-America, the consequent enslaving of natives, the genocide that took place, and the Spanish domination that lasted almost three centuries. History has also accorded her, the role of a victim doomed by her gender, and that of mother of *La Raza* (the race), the fusion of Caucasian and Amerindian peoples resulting in mestizos, the majority group in Mexico.

## 2. A historical subject: Conquest and myth

As a myth, Malintzin has captured the imagination of foremost writers Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes, and foreigners like Margaret Shedd, who portray her in a negative light, and like Laura Esquivel, who gives a more favorable account. Paz presents Malinche in the following terms: a raped, passive woman (whom he calls La Chingada) who gives birth to a malformed child.<sup>1</sup> In a metaphorical sense, Malinche incarnates La Chingada, who is akin to Indian women.<sup>2</sup> Under this interpretation, she became an allegory of the women, fascinated, raped or seduced by Spaniards. Paz wrongly ascertains that Doña Marina surrendered herself to Cortés of her own volition<sup>3</sup> whilst historians claim that she had been sold by her own mother and stepfather to some merchants who in turn sold her to other merchants until 1519 when she is eventually offered along with 19 female slaves as a present to Cortés upon his arrival to Tabasco.<sup>4</sup> Cortés passes her on to one of his men, Hernández Puertocarrero, who spent some time with Malintzin before leaving for Europe to never return,<sup>5</sup> Cortés then realizes the great advantage of having Malintzin around (she was fully bilingual in Maya, Nahuatl, and probably Chontal); she becomes his mistress and interpreter learning Castilian in the process. After the conquest, Cortés marries Malintzin to Jaramillo, with whom she spent the last years of her life. During that period, she gave a son to Cortés while she was his concubine, and a daughter to Jaramillo as a wife.<sup>6</sup> The vicissitudes she had to endure prove that she was little more than a precious commodity passed around for the benefits men could exact from her. Paz affirms that more than historical figures, Cortés and Malinche are symbols of an unresolved secret conflict.<sup>7</sup> Now, that could have been true in the 1950's, but nowadays few Mexicans might view the two lovers as symbols of any psychological conflict Paz implies. What is true is that her name Malinal or Malinalli underwent alterations: the Nahuatl suffix *-tzin* was added, then transcribed as Malinche. This last term gave origin to the word *malinchista*, a term used to denounce those infected with foreign tendencies.<sup>8</sup> The main dictionaries published in Spain<sup>9</sup> and in Mexico list both the noun *malinchismo*, and the adjective *malinchista*.<sup>10</sup> Their definitions are basically the same: *malinchismo* is the preference or tendency to favor what comes from abroad over what is from the country (it may include people, products,

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customs, values, traditions) with disdain for the domestic.<sup>11</sup> The Corpus of the Spanish Royal Academy lists both the noun and the adjective with occurrences mainly in Mexico and Guatemala.<sup>12</sup> Recently, Malinche has been studied in a more objective way, free from showy nationalism: Cordelia Candelaria (1980) thinks her a feminist prototype; Mary Louise Pratt (1993) regards her a mythic figure, whereas Otilia Meza (1998) considers her a victim. Miralles (2009) pleads that instead of being vindicated and classed among the greatest women in history, she has become synonymous with treason due to bad press.<sup>13</sup> Other scholars have taken a more detached stand: Bourdieu argues that the outside world belongs to men, while women remain recluse,<sup>14</sup> a fact that may apply to many women throughout history; in those respects, Malinche seems different for she accompanied Cortés to forge alliances, to conduct negotiations, and even to wage war. In art she is often depicted by his side, an indication that adds a new dimension to the idea of considering her a mere object. Martínez-San Miguel claims that we cannot think of Malinche as a victim without taking into account that she was involved in dealings with the same men who annihilated so many Amerindians and destroyed civilizations;<sup>15</sup> moreover, Gordon Brotherson affirms Malinche enjoyed a high status as proven by Indian oral accounts and codices.<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein, Georges Baudot believes Malinche was a somewhat free agent and in control of the discourse involved in the exchanges that took place;<sup>17</sup> these statements are confirmed by Díaz del Castillo, who writes that as Cortés' companion, Malintzin commanded over all Indians in the New Spain<sup>18</sup> and that she was an adroit speaker who handled thorny situations successfully and got the Indians to do her bidding on behalf of her lover;<sup>19</sup> on top of that, she also comes off as a conniving manipulator capable of getting thousands killed when she unveils a conspiracy in Cholula.<sup>20</sup> Díaz del Castillo even mentions that Tlaxcaltecas address Cortés as Malinche because she remains by his side during meetings with caciques: he even becomes known as Malinche's captain, in short, Malinche himself.<sup>21</sup> His epithet further proves that her role and rank were of paramount importance during that time. In the words of Díaz del Castillo, "Doña Marina helped the Spaniards in the war in Tlaxcala, Tenochtitlán and the New Spain."<sup>22</sup> González Hernández claims that even though Mexican official nationalism created the Malinche curse, not all Mexicans have followed this trend. A diametrically opposed position is that of the Hispanic conservatives who seek a national identity by rejecting Indian heritage, and claiming that the fatherland emerged after the conquest; not surprisingly, exalting the conquest magnifies Malinche, whom they call Doña Marina, with the title as another evidence of her high rank.<sup>23</sup> Without Malinche, Cortés would not have convinced the Totonacs to join him against the Aztecs, and his entrance to Tenochtitlán would have been anything but peaceful. She did not translate mere words but cultures, in other words, intercultural communication took place.<sup>24</sup> For

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Cortés. Malintzin became the key to Mexican doors.<sup>25</sup> Her deeds were soon forgotten by the Spanish, for no document mentions her death, whatever happened to her remains a mystery that has enriched her myth.<sup>26</sup>

### 3. Traduttore, traditore: Put the blame on that woman

From inception to completion of the conquest, Malintzin, a feminine subject identity, takes control over the language, by becoming *it*, i.e., *la lengua* (language, tongue, in Spanish), a word used synonymously with interpreter. In fact, part of an interpreter's daily activities is, in a figurative sense, to 'betray' the original content while recreating the meaning in the target language. By becoming Cortés' tongue Malinche takes on an active role, as previously discussed; in spite of not being the first intercultural interpreter, her historic responsibility has been enhanced and she gets blamed for the outcome of that encounter. From Díaz del Castillo, we know that there were other translators such as Jerónimo de Aguilar and Gonzalo Guerrero who had mastered the language and integrated to Mayan society; the latter had an indigenous wife and three children, who in fact were the first *mestizos*, not Malintzin's offspring with Cortés or Jaramillo, as history makes us believe,<sup>27</sup> a truth that belies the notion that Malintzin was the primeval mother of the mestizo race, as called in political discourse. The dynamics of a triangulation process in this particular case of translation consisted in Malintzin translating from Nahuatl to Maya, and Aguilar from Maya to Spanish as in the first encounter of Cortés with Emperor Moctezuma, who paused while speaking as "he knew that Malintzin had to translate to Maya and Aguilar to Spanish;"<sup>28</sup> consequently, the responsibility that came with interpreting was at least shared until Malintzin became fluent in Castilian.

Blaming Malinche as a traitor to her nation sets off the wrong supposition that there was one nation, when in fact there existed the Aztec Empire, an oppressive force and several oppressed chiefdoms (Huastec, Totonac, and Zapotec to name a few), one of which Malinche belonged to.<sup>29</sup> Her loyalty and aid to the Spaniards place her as an active agent in Mexican history, "a subversive subject, or an ally of the imperial power",<sup>30</sup> but truth be told, Cortés could not have conquered the Aztec Empire if he had not had 80,000 natives such as the Tlaxcaltecas and Totonacs as his allies: a single woman could not have turned the tide of war.<sup>31</sup> After Mexico's independence in 1821, descriptions of Malinche as a paradigm for treachery gradually increased, specially after the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Mexico starts to vindicate its indigenous heritage as a nation-state in the making.<sup>32</sup> As a historic figure Malinche undergoes changes losing the status of heroine accorded to her by Díaz del Castillo. She goes from a "very excellent woman...good-looking, of an inquisitive spirit, and intelligence"<sup>33</sup> to the "great

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pagan prostitute”, a symbol of betrayal to both femininity and ethnicity.<sup>34</sup> The devalorization of Malinche continued steadily until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with some shifting from a historic subject to an object (a victim of circumstances, a slave) betrayed by her own race, abused and discarded by Cortés: becoming an object, renders her blameless. Her positive aspects, her evaluation as “good” emerge with the appearance of contemporary feminist writers, who brought up her reevaluation, opening up a space to sympathetic discourse (Castellanos, Alberú, Esquivel). Esquivel presents Malinche as an object, a silenced victim, destined to service men<sup>35</sup> but at the same time as a subject, who feels that “by translating, [she can]change meanings and impose her own vision of deeds”.<sup>36</sup> The “good” and the “bad” discursive treatment of Malintzin are present in Mexican society; the former one as the national hero, the mother of a mestizo, syncretic culture, and the latter as the antihero, the ethnic traitor.

## **5. Intersecting history and current discourse: A case study and conclusions**

The evidence of changing perceptions of the concept of Malinzin in discourse, mainly in young people’s lexicon, was documented by Fernández in 2008.<sup>37</sup> In her study, which included 538 young people and children from Mexico City as informants, she had them assign Malinzin different characteristics that were classified into two basic groups: positive and negative. Fernandez’s results demonstrate that positive characteristics prevail (in 57.95% of the cases) despite the fact that Malintzin has been historically maligned. However, in the perception of Mexican youth, 79 out of 478 characteristics displayed in the study labeled her as a traitor, which shows that public views of her as such have weakened in the current discourse patterns of Mexican youth from Central Mexico.

As the authors of this chapter, we assumed this pattern would repeat in the case of students in the BA programs in Teaching and in Translation at the Faculty of Languages of the Autonomous University of Baja California. We randomly picked one group from each major. We wanted to ascertain if the dichotomy Malinche as victim-traitress was still present in our students’ perceptions; furthermore, we anticipated that translation majors would assign Malintzin positive traits, due to the fact that she was an interpreter herself. When defining Malinche in an open question, the most commonly description would include ‘indigenous woman’ for the Language-teaching majors (60.52%), while translation majors defined her as an ‘interpreter’ (in 78.57% of the cases) or as a translator (15.78%). In the first question, only in 15.78% of the cases the students include ‘traitress’ as Malinche’s characteristics. In the next question, students were specifically asked if they perceived Malinche more as a victim or as a traitress. The scores were slightly

higher for traitress in language majors' opinion (26.31%-21.05% respectively), and exactly the same proportion in the translation students group ( 23.68% for each). Despite the fact they were given the two options, the percentage of students who did not agree with classifying Malinche in either of the proposed terms (victim-traitress) was higher than those who would favor one position or the other. Thus we could confirm that black-and-white vision in the appreciation of Malintzin is not reflected in the discursive patterns of our students. Students were also asked to define the concept *malinchismo*; here we could observe the main constituents for being judged as *malinchista* would be open preference for things foreign (36.36%) or other reasons, geographically determined, such as grocery shopping in the US. The concepts *malinchismo* and *malinchista* are actually associated with Malintzin (46.96%), while 42.42% considers the two concepts not so closely related, and if so, just by origin of the word, not by its actual meaning. We also let them evaluate five discourses/speech acts, which carry characteristics most commonly associated with *malinchismo*. Perhaps because our sample students are multilingual and living in a binational, bicultural area, they do not label any of those acts as *malinchistas*. Proportionally more favorable, although still negative among the vast majority, the discourse of a Mexican linguist who wrote that "in Mexico we do not speak Spanish but "indiolect," (referring disparagingly to indigenous languages and the Mexican dialect of Spanish), was perceived by 37.87% of our respondents as *malinchista*. To conclude, we observed that present-day generations of Mexican students who live in multicultural settings and study foreign languages in their BA program view Malinche in a much more positive light than that that the role traditional history attaches her.

## Notes

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3 Ibid., 94.

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6 Ibid., 38.

7 Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*, 95.

8 Ibid., 95.

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- 18 Díaz del Castillo, Bernal. *Historia verdadera de la conquista*, 38-39.
- 19 Ibid., 69.
- 20 Ibid., 69.
- 21 Ibid., 63.
- 22 Ibid., 39.
- 23 González Hernández, Cristina. *Doña Marina (La Malinche) y la formación de identidad mexicana* (Madrid: Ediciones Encuentro, 2002), 13.
- 24 Miralles, Juan. *Hernán Cortés, inventor de México Vol. II*. (Mexico: Ediciones Folio, 2004), 395.
- 25 Ibid., 395.
- 26 Miralles, Juan. *La Malinche: Raíz de México* (3rd ed.) (Mexico: Tusquets Editores, 2004), 287-299.
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