

# How a moribund dialect can contribute to the bigger picture: Insights from Acazulco Otomí

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In the documentation of lesser-studied languages and their varieties, it is not uncommon for some dialects to be given only a cursory description. This situation is sometimes accompanied by the assumption that linguistic analysis only requires that a few key varieties of a dialect group be well described in order to get a reasonably clear picture of the entire group.

A case in point is the Otomi dialect continuum of central Mexico, belonging to the Oto-Pamean branch of the Oto-Manguanean language family. Since the 1930s, studies of this language group have focused on the western dialects, with only two important works on eastern varieties. On the basis of these studies it was generally accepted that “[Otomi] dialects show very little differentiation” (Newman & Weitlaner 1950:p3) and further investigation of dialectal variation has not been seen as an urgent need. Indeed, until recently Otomi has often been described as a single language in spite of the fact that many varieties are mutually unintelligible.

Based on our case study of the almost wholly unstudied moribund dialect of San Jerónimo Acazulco Otomi (AcOt), we show that many phenomena of value to different lines of linguistic inquiry may be waiting to be found only in seemingly insignificant dialects. Studies of minor dialects may contribute importantly both to the larger picture of the language group in question and to the core disciplines of general linguistics, in this case phonology.

AcOt is the only described dialect of Otomi to conserve several phonological contrasts going back to proto-Otomian (as reconstructed by Bartholomew 1960), but which have been obscured by series of innovations in the better described dialects, making the dialect highly interesting to Oto-Pamean historical linguistics. As it turns out, AcOt is also peculiar by being clearly aligned with the eastern dialect group, in spite of being located deep within the territory of the western dialects.

Our preliminary analysis of instrumental phonetic and distributional data suggest that AcOt has a phonological system featuring cross-linguistically rare voiceless nasals, glottalized approximants, and a rich series of stop consonants which includes aspirates and ejectives. These sounds have never been studied with the instrumental techniques of modern phonetics, and have traditionally been described as sequences of stop + /h/ or /ʔ/. Coupled with a system of both lexical stress and tone, which has only been sketchily described for other dialects, an understanding of this intricate interplay may help us get to the heart of questions regarding what it means to be ‘segmental’ or ‘suprasegmental’. For instance, to what extent can we ascribe linguistically relevant and temporally dependent manipulations of vocal fold vibration to suprasegmental status? How do glottalization and aspiration, traditionally regarded as segmental features, fit into the picture? A detailed study of AcOt phonology can function as a case study to help us shed light on these questions.

In sum, AcOt, far from being an obscure footnote in the history of Oto-Pamean linguistics, in fact may prove to be important in both Oto-Pamean historical linguistics and in phonology as a whole. We believe that AcOt is an excellent example of why we should leave no stone unturned in our bid to document even the tiniest of endangered linguistic varieties.