

International Linguistic Association

Monthly Lecture Series

Saturday, May 6, 2023. 11 AM - 12 PM (EST)

Dr. Kathleen O'Connor-Bater
SUNY at Old Westbury

Benjamin Lee Whorf and the Maya Rosetta Stone

Abstract:

Fray Diego De Landa (1524-1579) was a Spanish Bishop, sent to the Yucatán in 1549 charged with Christianizing the Maya people; and, in keeping with the mandate of the Inquisition, burning nearly all of their manuscripts in an effort to eradicate their pagan idolatry (1). The loss of these writings did immeasurable damage to our decipherment of Mayan written texts for hundreds of years. Nevertheless, De Landa's documentation of the Maya religion, culture language and writing system, titled *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, published in Spain 1566, became a source for the decipherment of a several hieroglyphs that twentieth century scholars were able to build upon as they attempted to decode the Mayan writing system (despite experiencing much trial and error in the process) (2). One independent scholar, Benjamin Lee Whorf, availed himself of De Landa's text with its later markings referring to it as a kind of Rosetta Stone, (3) which would allow a linguist to decode both phonetic and grammatical information in looking for patterns in the decipherment of syllables made up of phonetic sequences in complete sentences.

This talk is dedicated to the memory of Joseph L. Malone. It examines Whorf's work, which, while not free of flaws in interpretation, succeeded in breaking the ground for new approaches to deciphering Maya glyphs as a "fully literate" code for which he devises a formula for its analysis: Begin by deciphering the linguistic markers, then by finding the meaning of glyphs as words organized into sentences. According to Whorf,

"There is only one road to the decipherment of the Maya hieroglyphs It is through a growing concatenation of sentences, proceeding from the less to the more difficult... with the linguistic interest and the linguistic findings kept constantly foremost..." (op. cit, p. 197)

Date & Time: May 6, 2023 at 11:00 AM Eastern Time (US and Canada)

ZOOM LINK: <https://bmcc-cuny.zoom.us/j/83219251181>

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Kathleen O'Connor-Bater is Associate Professor of Modern Languages (Spanish/French) at the State University of New York, College at Old Westbury. Her PhD from Columbia University is in Spanish Linguistics with the dissertation on the topic of Spanish material metaphors. Her books include *A Bilingual Anthology of Poems by Rubén Darío*, Edwin Mellen Press, 2016; and *The Intellectual and Cultural Worlds of Rubén Darío*, Routledge Studies in Latin American and Iberian Literature, 2023. She is currently preparing a book proposal on the linguistic thinking of Benjamin L. Whorf, which she calls a cognitive biography.