



Looking for interpreter zero: (3) Melchor, Julián, Pedro, Géronimo and Marina

Accounts of early European expeditions of exploration and conquest gave scant attention to the role of interpreters, but there were notable exceptions.

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As we saw in [the previous chapter](#), we don't have much of a picture of Magellan's Enrique. Likewise, **when it comes to the roles and identities of the early Conquistadors' interpreters, we have but mere glimpses**. These people are known to us by their Christian names and disappear from the record once their journeys are over.

The Spanish empire-builders who set out from Cuba to explore lands to the west of the Caribbean took Columbus' improvisational approach to interpreting. When Francisco Hernández de Córdoba led an expedition in February 1517 to what was to become Mexico, he may have had some Cuban *Indians* on board. They would not have been able to help much when a group of Maya Indians came out in canoes to meet his ships, however, because their Taino language was not in any way related to Maya. That was why he decided to take two local men with him when he left Yucatan; the captives, known as **Melchor and Julián**, were expected to learn Spanish and help out on future expeditions.

Things did not bode well: Melchor was a fisherman with limited Maya vocabulary and Julián became depressed on being taken from familiar surroundings. Enrique had a privileged relationship with his master by comparison. Julián returned to Yucatan with the 1518 expedition from Cuba under the leadership of Juan de Grijalva. Most of his work on the explorers' behalf seems to have involved asking for gold. That may have yielded some results early on, but because he was a Yucatec Maya, he could not communicate with the Chontal Maya-speakers in northern Yucatan.

Grijalva's solution was to seize and baptise four more Indians to do the job. One of them was named **Pedro Barba**, after his godfather - one of Grijalva's captains. Pedro Barba became involved in what Hugh Thomas describes as 'double translation' [\[1\]](#). Grijalva spoke Spanish to Julián who relayed the message in Yucatec Maya to Pedro Barba who was able to put it into Chontal Maya. This system is highlighted as one of the main contributions of that expedition, which is not surprising as it was adopted by Hernán Cortés on the third expedition, the one which led to the conquest of Mexico.

Cortés may have borrowed the relay system but his communication with local people was an improvement on the systematic reliance on unreliable captives. One of his interpreters was a Spaniard. **Géronimo de Aguilar** had been shipwrecked in Yucatan in 1511; he and a shipmate, Gonzalo Guerrero, had survived and made their lives among the Chontal Maya. Having had word of Cortés's presence in Yucatan, Aguilar was eager to join him and was able to help out in the expedition's dealings with local people. (Guerrero for his part had 'gone native' and stayed behind with his wife and children.)





Aguilar's presence was note-worthy but it did not prove to be as significant as the fact that the main interpreter on the expedition was a woman. She was one of twenty women given to Cortés by a Chontal Maya leader on the Tabasco coast, a young woman baptised **Marina** in March 1519. It turned out that she was the child of Nahuatl-speakers who had been sold to Maya merchants after her father's death; she was bilingual and able to serve Cortés, working in tandem with Aguilar before she learned Spanish. She played a key role in the meetings between Cortés and Moctezuma, and in the conquest of Mexico.

'Marina' became Malintzin to Nahuatl-speakers and her name was back-translated into Spanish as Malinche. It is as La Malinche that she has had a surprisingly enduring role in Mexican history – which I'll be looking at in my next instalment.

[1] Thomas, H. (1994). *The Conquest of Mexico*, p114. London, Hutchinson.

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