

# Language and Storytelling

*José Griego*

Language reflects the history of a culture and the languages of New Mexico reflect a combination of many people's customs, values and stories. Although English is the official language of public institutions in New Mexico, many New Mexicans are bilingual and in some cases multilingual. Hispanic leaders assured the continuation of and respect for their language by making a provision mandating bilingual education in the State Constitution. But Spanish, English and even the Athapascan languages of the Navajo and Apache are relatively new accents and tonalities carried on the high desert winds of New Mexico. The Pueblo Indian descendants of the ancient Anasazi who have inhabited this land for approximately 35,000 years tell their stories in Tewa, Tiwa, Towa, Keres and Zuni.

These cultures often borrowed vocabulary from each other, creating new dialects of their respective languages. The English language of the Southwest uses many Spanish words for ranching terms that newly arrived Anglo settlers learned from Hispanic neighbors. Lariat (*la reata*), chaps (*chaparreras*), hackamore (*jáquima*), mustang (*mesteño*) and many others came from Spanish words with the same meaning. Aztec culture had a very strong impact on the Spanish language of Mexico and New Mexico as many words, especially names of animals, were incorporated from the Nahuatl language — *zopilote* (buzzard), *helote* (ear of corn), *hololote* (corn husk), *tecolote* (owl) and *coyote*, to name a few. Some Tewa words in New Mexican Spanish include *teguas* (moccasins), *chaquegüe* (blue corn meal mush), *chacuaco* (cigarette), *chanate* (coffee). The Tiwa language adopted many Spanish terms, especially for new products and introduced customs, e.g., *manzana'a* (apple), *pera'a*

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(pear), *compa'e* (Godfather). Many English words are also used in New Mexican Spanish, especially words connected with modern technology, e.g., *brecas* (brakes), *parquear* (to park) and *clocha* (clutch).

Language plays an important part in preserving traditions, especially in storytelling on the long winter nights that lend themselves to meditation and imagination. In a huddle around the fireplace, as the children get ready for sleep, elders hand down stories they heard of the origin and survival of their families in this land. Their stories mix legends from other cultures and tell of encounters with these peoples and customs. Pueblo elders recount the mythical origins of the ancient Anasazi with such stories as the giant serpent that devoured the village of Jemez, or the spirit of the Spider woman that resides in the Sandia Mountains. Juan Rael collected and published hundreds of Hispanic stories (Rael 1955) that recall medieval adventures of kings, queens and princesses, as well as accounts of Hispanic New Mexicans' first awkward contacts with newcomers after a virtually complete isolation from the rest of the world for three centuries.

The dialects of New Mexico can be heard, I tell you, as three *viejitos* recline against a warm adobe portal wall to enjoy the *resolana*. As they light up a *chacuaco* of Prince Albert tobacco mixed with anise seed and sip on a cup of *chanate* or *chaquegüe*, they observe and joke about the customs of the *turistas*. *Tío Abenicio* in faded overalls, drives up in his Ford tractor to join the daily ritual of *comraderie* and *mitote*.\*

## *Citation*

Rael, Juan. 1955. *Cuentos de Nuevo Mexico y el Sur de Colorado*. Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press.

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\* *viejitos* = old ones; adobe portal = porch of earthen brick; *resolana* = the warmth of the sun; *chanate* = coffee, *chacuaco* = cigarette; *chaquegüe* = blue corn meal mush; *turistas* = tourists, *Tío* = uncle; *mitote* = gossip.