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# Cora (Mexico) – Language Snapshot

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<b>Language Name:</b>	Cora (also Náayeri)
<b>Language Family:</b>	Uto-Aztecan, Corachol Branch
<b>ISO 639-3 Code:</b>	crn, cok
<b>Glottolog Code:</b>	cora1260
<b>Population:</b>	20,078
<b>Location:</b>	21.743889°, -105.228333°
<b>Vitality rating:</b>	EGIDs 5

## Summary

Cora is a Uto-Aztecan language spoken by the Cora ethnic group of the state of Nayarit in Western Mexico. The homeland of the Cora is a region in the mountainous north-east of the state, known as ‘El Gran Nayar’. Other groups who occupy this area are Huichol, Tepehuán and Mexicanero (speakers of a variety of Nahuatl). The Cora and Huichol languages belong to the Coracholan branch of the Uto-Aztecan family. To the present day, the Cora maintain religious and cultural practices dating from the pre-contact era. These traditions and the Cora language are however under threat due to rapid economic and demographic change in the region.

## 1. Overview

Cora is a Uto-Aztecan language spoken by the Cora ethnic group, who live primarily in the state of Nayarit in Western Mexico. The homeland of the Cora is a region in the mountainous north-east of the state, known as ‘El Gran Nayar’. Other groups who occupy this area are Huichol, Tepehuán and Mexicanero (speakers of a variety of Nahuatl). Cora and Huichol belong to the Coracholan branch of Uto-Aztecan. Rural Cora communities depend upon slash-and-burn farming of maize, squash and beans. These crops are staples of a diet supplemented by hunting, gathering and fishing (Jáuregui, 2004). Crops guarantee yearly subsistence while seasonal work brings cash into Cora communities. Cattle farmers, tobacco and coffee plantations are the main employers in this area. Internal migration and emigration to the US has led Cora people to work in other sectors such as construction, the service industry, domestic work. Local government is conducted according to the cargo system, a form of government in indigenous communities dating to the colonial period. In the cargo system, prominent local men are assigned to positions of civil and religious authority for one year before passing them on.

Following centuries of resistance to Spanish rule, the Cora territories were conquered in 1722 and submitted to the authority of Jesuit missionaries. However, in 1767 the Jesuits were expelled from Mexico. Their legacy was to introduce aspects of Catholicism, the Spanish language and establish mission-settlements, the bases of contemporary Cora towns (Jáuregui, 2004). In spite of this, much of the Cora worldview, religion and culture remained unchanged from pre-contact times. Two key events in the religious calendar are the *Pachitas*, which corresponds loosely to the Christian Carnival, followed by the *Semana Santa*, a striking and idiosyncratic version of the passion plays common across Latin America during Easter. The *mitotes* are agricultural ceremonies, celebrated three times a year, to correspond with key phases in the cultivation of maize (Valdovinos 2009). Some daily religious observances are leaving offerings at sacred sites, fasting, and the practice of curanderos, healers who attend to people’s spiritual and medical problems.

The dialectology of Cora has not received extensive treatment in the literature. Tereseño, Meseño, and Mariteco<sup>1</sup> are the varieties with the most speakers, and most recognized by linguists. Separate varieties have been proposed for the communities of San Juan Corapan, Las Gavilanes, Presidio de Los Reyes, Dolores, Rosarito and San Francisco (Casad 2012; Vázquez Soto 2009; Valdovinos 2017). The number of identified varieties of Cora

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<sup>1</sup> Named for the settlements Santa Teresa, Mesa del Nayar, and Jesus María.

varies from five (Vázquez Soto 2009) to eight (Casad 2012), depending on the source consulted. The earliest published work on Cora was the Jesuit priest José de Ortega's vocabulary of Mariteco in 1732. Linguistic work has been sporadic since then and mainly focused on Meseño, and Mariteco. Significant works on Cora are as follows: two grammar sketches of Mariteco (Preuss 1932; Casad 1984), a Cora-Spanish glossary of Meseño (McMahon 1959), and articles by Verónica Vázquez Soto (2000, 2001), and Rodrigo Parra Gutiérrez (2015a, b), analysing topics in morphosyntax, phonology and semantics of Meseño and Mariteco respectively.<sup>2</sup>

According to INALI<sup>3</sup> (2010), there are 20,078 speakers of Cora. This figure, which may seem encouraging, does not indicate the actual number of speakers in each settlement, and the rates of bilingualism with Spanish. If we consider these factors, a clearer picture emerges. A recent survey of San Juan Corapan (Santos García & Quintero Gutiérrez 2015) found that in this town of 491 people, under 50% of those interviewed reported being able to speak Cora. Despite a long tradition of self-determination, the Cora face many unprecedented challenges to maintaining their society, language and culture. The development of highways in the region during the 1990s brought improved access to healthcare and education along with an unprecedented influx of outsiders into Cora communities (Valdovinos 2015). Anthropologist Philip E. Coyle documents how the arrival of drug traffickers into the community of Santa Teresa has disrupted the complex ritual interaction between kinship groups (Coyle 2000). In Jesus María, where *mestizos* (mixed European and Indigenous heritage Mexicans) now make up a large part of the population, it is estimated that only 20% of children speak Cora (Valdovinos 2017). The arrival of *mestizos*, and the predominant use of Spanish in education and media are decisive factors in the endangerment of the Cora language. In San Juan Corapan, for example, Spanish is now dominant in most domains. Cora is still however, essential in the *mitote*, the *Pachitas* and *Semana Santa*, where prayers, chants and songs are recited in Cora.

Multiple orthographies have been proposed for Cora by SIL, the Bilingual Education system in Mexico, and the authors of *Wa'mwatye Náayeri nyúuka*, a textbook for adult learners. Valdovinos (2017) describes the merits and faults in each of these proposals. Though the Government and SIL have produced materials in these orthographies, they have not inspired a high rate of literacy among Cora speakers. The use of literacy

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<sup>2</sup> Other than the works of Parra Gutiérrez, the reader may find references for the above works at the Glottolog page for 'Coran', referenced in this article.

<sup>3</sup> Mexico's National Institute for Indigenous Languages.

materials in education often does not take into account varietal differences. Members of some communities simply refuse to read texts produced in other varieties (Vázquez Soto 2010). Literacy in Spanish is far more common, reflecting the greater amount of resources afforded to instruction in that language, and its perception as a language of culture and modernity.

## 2. Current research

In November 2017, I spent five weeks in San Juan Corapan, collecting data on the undescribed and endangered Corapeño variety. Using data from this field trip, I wrote my MA dissertation on grammatical relations and second-position clitics in Corapeño (Parker 2018). In 2018, I was awarded a Small Grant by the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP) to continue work documenting this variety of Cora, with the institutional support of CIES-IUL, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa. This grant covers six months of fieldwork. I will document everyday conversation and endangered cultural practices, including verbal art (narrative, ritual speech, song and wordplay), traditional techniques in agriculture, and the use of local plant species in medicine and cooking. The recorded material will be archived digitally with the Endangered Languages Archive at SOAS, University of London, and accompanied by ten hours of interlinearized transcriptions. The project will also include outputs for the community, such as storybooks or a vocabulary. The form and content of this output will be decided in collaboration with community members. This documentation project will serve as a first step for the study of Corapeño Cora and its comparison with other varieties, and as a record of the richness of Cora language, culture and environmental knowledge.

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