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Projektberichte / Reports on Projects
Rapports de projets

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Presentation of the RELiCTA database

Repertory of Early Modern Linguistic and Catechetical Tools of America, Asia, and Africa*

1. Introducti

Over the past three decades, "missionary linguistics" has become an inalienable part of the historiography of the language sciences. Alternatively, it can be seen as a subfield of historical linguistics. Scholars active in this field of research concentrate on early modern or nineteenth-century language descriptions and catechetical tools composed by missionaries or other fieldworkers overseas. In the wake of proto-globalization, European missionaries were sent by the Catholic Church and by European states, such as Spain, Portugal, and France, to the New World and the Far East in order to convert the native populations to the 'true Catholic religion'. It soon became clear that these large-scale evangelization attempts could be successful only if the missionaries managed to master the respective local languages. In order to pass on their linguistic command — which was often acquired with much toil, patience, and difficulties — to their successors and thus ensure both continuity and progress in their evangelization project, missionaries started compiling dictionaries, writing grammars and translating catechisms, sermons and confessionaries. A

*) This database project could be realized through research grants awarded by the KU Leuven research council and the Volkswagen Foundation. We would like to thank Lieve Behiels, Pierre Swiggers, and Werner Thomas, who are actively contributing to RELiCTA as co-supervisors of the KU Leuven project and who were so kind to give us several useful remarks on earlier drafts of this piece.

considerable number of these linguistic tools were printed, but a much larger number never reached the printing presses. Hundreds of such unpublished manuscripts are preserved in libraries, archives, or in private religious institutions, whereas others have probably gone lost over time.

The significance of this body of linguistic tools developed by European missionary friars was already highlighted and demonstrated by several scholars active in the nineteenth and twentieth century (see, e.g., Dahlmann 1891; Hanzeli 1969). Indeed, the missionary grammars and vocabularies are often the earliest attestations of overall ill-documented languages, some of which are even extinct today. However, from the 1990s onwards, the linguistic undertakings of both early modern and nineteenth- and twentieth-century missionaries have been given more systematic attention, as can be inferred from the specialized biennial conferences organized by Otto Zwartjes and from the publication of a host of collected volumes and monographs.[1] For the most recent state of the art, see Zwartjes (2012). Recently, a series of early modern vocabularies of Amerindian languages was included in Unesco's *Memory of the World* program (*Unesco* 2015), which further underlines the significance of these sources. On the other hand, the recent Brazil's National Museum fire dramatically highlights how vulnerable these precious documents, many of which have neither been studied nor digitized, remain even today (Dreyfus 2018).

This contribution will briefly present our ongoing digital project RELiCTA (Repertory of Early Modern Linguistic and Catechetical Tools of America, Asia, and Africa), whose name evokes both the relative neglect these texts have suffered in the past and their status as a precious, if precarious, legacy, which is worth preserving. RELiCTA is a database that will cover the body of early modern linguistic and catechetical tools for non-European languages, offering metadata such as authorship, place and date of publication, reprints, book dimensions, and persons involved, for example commissioners or writers of prefaces. Currently, RELiCTA contains more than 4000 unique records, but the work is far from finished. A first release of the open-access database is scheduled for the end of 2018. We are confident that this database will increase general awareness of the value of these sources — a necessary first step in fighting oblivion and loss. In addition, the database will enable scholars to approach the body of missionary linguistic tools from a bird's-eye perspective.

Besides presenting the general design of this database, this contribution also aims at outlining some methodological and practical challenges we are currently facing.

1) To name just a few: Hovdhaugen (1996), Zimmermann (1997), Wendt (1998), Zwartjes (2011), Zimmermann/Kellermeier-Rehbein (2015).

2. Which questions do we want to answer?

We are confident that collecting the metadata of early modern missionary linguistic tools and religious texts in indigenous languages will make many linguists, historians, and cultural heritage scholars all over the world aware of the significance of this impressive body of sources. However, the RELiCTA database aims to go beyond a mere collection of all relevant primary source material. In the current state of the research, it is very difficult to give satisfying answers to questions such as:

— What is the approximate extent of the linguistic and catechetical documentation composed by missionary linguists? How many documents do we know of? How many are still preserved?
— What is the absolute size of American missionary linguistics, as compared to Asian missionary linguistics?
— What is the proportion between the number of grammars and the number of wordlists?
— Which indigenous languages are often described, and which ones rarely or never?
— What is the quantitative weight of the different grammatical 'traditions', missionary orders or metalanguages within missionary linguistics?
— Are certain languages tied to specific grammatical 'traditions' while others are described by multiple traditions?

Scholars with a primarily historical interest will also be able to draw on the database. It will help them to identify or establish correlations between the several actors involved in the making and circulation of these tools (such as the missionaries of different religious orders, the usually untraceable 'subaltern' indigenous informants, the printers, etc.), the different languages described, and the most important centers of production. This will lead to a better understanding of the incentives, editorial strategies, publishing instances, intermediaries, reception paths, and deposits involved in the circulation of linguistic knowledge in the early modern period. The initiative will enable both linguists and historians to look at the gradual growth of linguistic data from a macroscopic perspective and will moreover provide opportunities for quantitative analysis.

3. Which sources are included and which sources are not?

The information encompassed in RELiCTA is limited to metadata only. Hence, the database itself does not contain actual texts, although links and references are provided to digitized reproductions or editions. The fields included for each record will be presented below (see 'Database structure'). Basically, they offer information on the title, author, metalanguage, object or target lan-

guage, physical characteristics of the work, etc. Our corpus is strictly delimited in terms of chronology, geography, and the types of work included.

From a *chronological* perspective, the database will encompass the metadata of *early modern* missionary sources; that is to say from the beginning of European overseas missionary activities (c. 1500) until 1800. Before 1500, the European interest in non-European languages was almost inexistent.[2] The first manuscripts in indigenous languages, such as the *Doctrina Christiana en lengua mexicana* by the Franciscan Pedro de Gante (c. 1480–1572) of 1528, predate the first extant language descriptions: the *Arte de la lengua mexicana* written by the Franciscan Andrés de Olmos (1491–1571), dates from 1547. Admittedly, the 1800 limit is somewhat arbitrary: Catherine Fountain (2015: 181) for instance notes that the last *colonial* grammar in New Spain dates from 1810. The database's limitation to pre–1800 sources implies that it only contains records predating the 'birth' of academic linguistics. Moreover, it should be kept in mind that overseas linguistic activities intensified in the nineteenth century, leading to a true flood of published sources, which cannot be processed in one single project.

Our *geographical* focus is on the Americas and the Far East. The number of Sub-Saharan sources is limited, given that African languages remained fairly unknown before the nineteenth century. We do not include European linguistic tools, although one can argue that e.g. the publication of the Old Prussian catechism in 1545 should be seen against the backdrop of missionary endeavors. We also decided to exclude languages such as Hebrew and Arabic, which in the early modern period were mostly designated as "oriental languages" (today as "Semitic" or "Afro-Asiatic"). Especially from the 17th century onwards, these Semitic languages were intensively studied in the theological faculties, as they were deemed to cast new light on Biblical studies. Our main focus is thus on languages that were 'discovered' during early modern explorations and considered 'exotic' in Europe.

From a *typological* point of view, the documents come in two basic kinds. First, there are linguistic descriptions of non-European languages written in European languages, which can either be monograph-length or part of a larger work, including ethno-historical reports, travel reports, ego documents, and published correspondence. Second, we also include religious texts directly written in or translated into non-European languages, such as catechisms, sermons, confessionaries, etc. In our ongoing project, the emphasis is on monographic grammars and wordlists, both published and unpublished. Only for the published grammars and wordlists can we aspire to reach a complete inventory.

2) See, e.g., the fourteenth-century so-called *Codex Cumanicus* (a composite vocabulary including Persian and Cuman words), presented by Considine (2017: 11 ff).

4. Database structure

We have attempted to make a database design that complies with present-day standards established in Digital Humanities. The metadata we are collecting are stored in a *relational* FileMaker database.[3] A simplified model of the database can be visualized as follows:

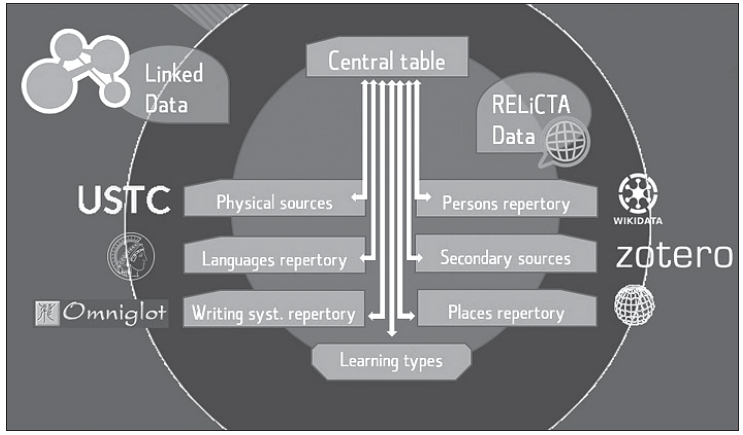

Fig. 1: Visualization of the structure underlying the RELiCTA-database

As can be inferred from Figure 1, the central table is automatically populated with the data stored in several tables. Besides the primary (physical) sources, the database also maps the following entities: persons, places, object or target languages, meta-languages, tool types, writing systems, libraries, and secondary sources. We will now present the most important fields in these different tables.

4.1 The different tables and interlinked repertories

The table "physical sources" focuses on the factual properties of specific versions or editions of a given source-text, which are either in manuscript or in

3) In a non-relational database, all data is stored in one single table, which would for instance imply that biographical information of a prolific missionary author (such as birth date and religious order) should be entered in full for each of the works written. In a relational model, data is organized not in one single, but in multiple tables, each of which represents a different "entity type" (such as 'languages', 'missionary sources', 'persons'). Each record of each table is given a unique key, which enables us to establish links between the records of the different tables. The advantage is that, whenever we change a field in one table (e.g., by adding or correcting the birth date of a missionary in the table "persons"), this information is automatically updated in all related records, which reduces the risk of introducing errors.

printed form. Each record contains information on the title, size, number of pages, metalanguage, date of publication or production, place of publication, and publisher in case of printed sources, place of preservation, and *siglum* in case of manuscript sources.

The table "tool types" allows us to indicate whether the source is a grammar, a vocabulary, a catechism, etc. Language descriptions, such as grammars, vocabularies, etc. are didactic texts that were used for the teaching and learning of indigenous languages. Religious texts, such as catechisms, confessionaries, and sermons are considered a different tool type (Cancinco Cabello 2017: 408). More precisely, the following options are given (see Fig. 2). In the case of wordlists, we also record the directionality (either "European language → native language" or "native language → European language").

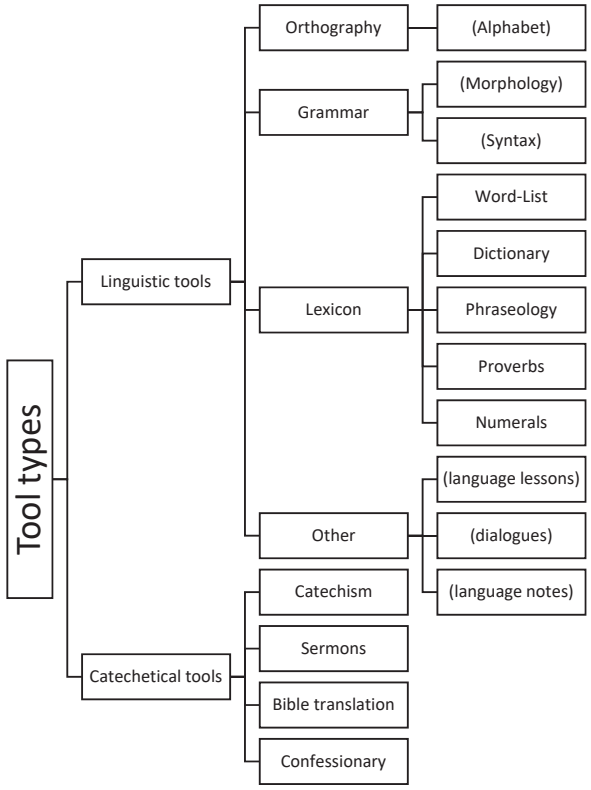

Fig. 2: Tool types hierarchy

The four remaining tables — Persons, Languages, Places, Writing Systems — can be conceived of as repertories, the data of which can be (semi-)automatically derived from other data repertories. This approach has some advantages:

— Choosing from a finite list of possible places, persons, and languages reduces the chance of introducing errors or duplicates.
— By drawing on repertories developed against the backdrop of other larger open-source digital humanities initiatives, we can make the RELiCTA database communicate with these other databases, since RELiCTA makes use of the primary keys of the external data sources. Below, we will illustrate how, for example, the link between our Places repertory and the GeoNames repertory will allow us to plot our spatial data on a world map.

Which data sets can we rely on in order to 'feed' these four tables? Omniglot is a relatively modest inventory of *writing systems*, which will be relevant only for the Asian languages in our database (given that the Amerindian languages were always recorded in the Roman alphabet, with the exception of a few isolated sources in which the Cyrillic script was used). For the table "Languages", we are making use of the Glottolog data. Glottolog offers "comprehensive reference information for the world's languages, especially the lesser known languages" (Hammarström *et al.* 2016). An alternative possibility would have consisted in making use of the data gathered by Ethnologue, but Glottolog presents some decisive advantages for our purposes: it is entirely open-access and offers readily usable geographical and genealogical data. Furthermore, Ethnologue is considered by many linguistic typologists to be less reliable (Hammarström 2015). We have extracted ca. 8000 records from the Glottolog database, containing the following fields:

Glottolog label	Example	Explanation
GlottologID	Aari1239	The primary key
Name	Aari	The present-day name of the language
Family	South Omotic	
Continent	Africa	
Dialects	0	
Longitude	5.95	
Latitude	36.57	

We have selected the data of 24000 *places* (larger than 10000 habitants) of the online gazetteer GeoNames.org. The availability of standard geopositional data (viz. longitude and latitude) enables us to plot and visualize places of preservation (in case of manuscripts) and place of publication (in case of printed publications) on a world map.

GeoNames label	Example
GeonameID	3936456
Place	Lima
Alternative Names	Gorad Lima, LIM, Limao
Longitude	–77,0824
Latitude	–12,04318
Country Code	PE

It is far less obvious to select a ready-made gazetteer encompassing all *persons* involved in the making and circulation of early modern linguistic tools. Most authors are hardly known missionaries who for the time being are not included in any prosopographic initiative. Taking all things in consideration, we will very likely rely on Wikidata.org (Färber *et al*. 2015). In contrast to Glottolog and GeoNames, the Wikidata database is too extensive to be fully integrated into our database. We have therefore developed a 'scraper script', which automatically imports the information online. Here too, the main approach lies in taking over the primary keys of Wikidata (these are characterized by a Q number). Here is an example of the data that Wikidata offers about Andrés de Olmos:

Wikidata	Example
VIAF identifier	17240613
ISNI	0000 0000 8096 1549
Freebase identifier	/m/0275dlh
BnF identifier	12039399z
SUDOC authorities	028588363
place of birth	Oña
place of death	Tampico
date of death	1571
given name	Andrés
occupation	priest; linguist
religious order	Order of Friars Minor
date of birth	1491
Open Library identifier	OL272509A
FAST-ID	1839283

For persons absent from the Wikidata repertory, we are creating new records, which in turn can be offered to Wikidata.

When it comes to online repertories dealing with primary sources, there are a few initiatives that can be mentioned. The Universal Short Title Catalogue (http://ustc.ac.uk/index.php/site/about) gathers information about all books published in Europe until the end of the sixteenth century. Given that the majority of our sources were printed after the sixteenth century, the cross-

fertilization possibilities between both projects are very limited. The same holds true for the *Digitale Bibliothek Deutscher Drucke* (vd16.de, vd17.de, vd18.de) and similar projects in the Netherlands and Belgium: only a very restricted set of sources were printed in Germany or the Low Countries.

4.2 Qualifying the connections

The different tables and repertories so far presented are mutually interconnected by establishing many-to-many relationships (in technical 'bridging' tables). This is necessary, because one and the same source text can describe multiple languages (e.g. a Persian-Hindustani dictionary), whereas inversely, one and the same language (e.g. Hindustani) is the object of a plethora of linguistic tools. These bridging tables, linking the different repertories involved, allow us to further qualify the relationships that are established. Today, many languages are referred to through other glottonyms than in the early modern period. Nahuatl, for instance, is most frequently designated as *lengua mexicana* in the early modern period. Hence, we also record the ways in which early modern authors referred to their object languages. Furthermore, we also added a field indicating on whose authority the connection between the Glottocode and the source text is made. It is sometimes not easy to assign such a Glottocode. 'Hindustani' is a case in point, given that both Urdu and Hindi today correspond to what was known in the early modern period as Hindustani.

Likewise, we are able to qualify the connections between the Central Table and "Person repertory" in a similar bridging table. As a matter of fact, the authorship of many missionary linguistic tools is highly contested. This is why information on the reliability of author attributions is added. Needless to say, we are first and foremost interested in the persons who composed the linguistic tools under examination, viz. the authors. But whenever this is possible, we also include owners, contributors, translators, printers, preface writers, commissioners, addressees. These different roles are also specified in this bridging table.

5. Challenges

Designing and populating the RELiCTA database involves a number of issues (see also Calhoun 2017, offering some "lessons from the digital humanities for the history of linguistics"). The most significant challenges will be briefly outlined here.

5.1 A first set of problems pertains to the *localization* and *consultation possibilities* of the sources. The most fundamental challenge in our undertaking is that it is impossible to inspect every single source text by autopsy. In most

cases we can only rely on references given in either recent or less recent secondary literature, which at times contain conflicting data (especially when it comes to dates given and number of pages). Undigitized manuscripts are very hard to come by, provided that they still exist (many of the sources are irrevocably lost) or that they have ever existed (some unclear or doubtful attributions given in older repertories may have led to the occurrence of a number of 'phantom' linguistic tools).

Among the most significant starting points for our undertaking we can mention:

— The unpublished documentation gathered by Reinhard Wendt and Henrike Foertsch, focusing on the Jesuits in the Americas (Foertsch 1998). We are very much indebted to Prof. Wendt, who was willing to provide us with the documentation of his project.
— The BICRES project supervised by Hans-Josef Niederehe (*Bibliografía cronológica de la lingüística, la gramática y la lexicografía del español*), especially volumes 1, 2, and 3 (spanning the period 1500–1800). This project lists published and unpublished primary sources written in Spanish. For an extensive list of secondary sources related to missionary linguistics, see Esparza Torres *et al*. (2008).
— The John Carter Brown Library has a very detailed Indigenous Languages of the Americas Database, including digitized reproductions, which is available at http://www.brown.edu/Facilities/John_Carter_Brown_Library/exhibitions/ildb/index.php.
— The bibliography compiled by Harald Hammarström (available at http://glottolog.org/providers/hh), containing almost 45000 references, contains a limited number of sources predating the 19th century, which are already enhanced with a Glottocode .

Printed or online catalogs of specific libraries are of prime importance, such as the 1991 Catálogo de manuscritos e impresos en lenguas indígenas de México, de la Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia, or the 2012 Colonial Spanish Sources for Indian Linguistics at the Newberry Library. Particularly useful are a number of pre–20th-century repertories, such as:

— Platzmann, Julius. 1876. *Verzeichniss einer Auswahl amerikanischer Grammatiken, Wörterbücher, Katechismen, u.s.w*. Leipzig.
— Viñaza, Cipriano Muñoz y Manzano. 1892. *Bibliografía española de lenguas indígenas de América*. Madrid.
— Pilling, James Constantine. 1885. *Proof-sheets of a bibliography of the languages of the North American Indians*. Washington.
— Leclerc, Charles. 1878. *Bibliotheca americana: histoire, géographie, voyages, archéologie et linguistique des deux Amériques et des îles Philippines*. Paris.
— Marsden, William. 1827. *Bibliotheca Marsdeniana philologica et orientalis, a catalogue of books and manuscripts collected with a view to the general comparison of languages, and to the study of oriental literature*. London.

Prosopographical projects, often related to a specific religious order, are also of special relevance to our undertaking. Some representative examples that have already been incorporated include the 1951 *Lexicon Capuccinum* and Santiago Vela's *Ensayo de una biblioteca ibero-americana de la Orden de San Agustín* (1913–1931). Finally, the project can benefit from several specialized bibliographies compiled by recent historiographers, often focusing on one specific objectlanguage or metalanguage. Examples include the Benjamins volumes edited by Otto Zwartjes; Blake (1920 [Philippine languages]); James (2000 [Tamil dictionaries]); Bolles (2003 [Mayan vocabularies]); Sueiro Justel (2003 [Philippine languages]); García Aranda (2013 [Cakchiquel]). The database is primarily based on information that can be found in catalogs and reference lists as mentioned above, but also greatly benefits from *in-situ* consultation of library and archive collections. Whenever one of our team members was able to consult a manuscript copy by autopsy, this is also indicated in the database.

Despite the implementation of all these tools, our database project will be far from perfect after its first launch (see **5.3**): most likely, the database will still contain a number of bibliographical ghosts and, on the other hand, we will not be able to include early modern linguistic tools preserved in libraries or archives whose catalogs are hard to come by. Crowdsourcing will enable us to remedy missing or erroneous data step by step.

5.2 A second thorny issue relates to the 'distinctiveness' of the records to be included. We decided that our central table should consist of records that are substantially different from one another, each record having a different linguistic or catechetical tool as its object. It goes without saying that a Jesuit grammar of Japanese and a Franciscan vocabulary of Nahuatl are stored as two different records, as they are prototypically different. However, matters are getting more complicated when it comes to reeditions, translations, and manuscript versions of printed editions. Some of the linguistic tools recorded in our database have more than three reeditions. If we had stored all these reeditions as entirely separate records (which is the approach adopted by BICRES), it would have become impossible to keep a good overview of the entire body of records. This is why all reeditions of one and the same work are stored as belonging to one and the same record of the central table. To a large extent, missionary linguistics can be seen as cumulative work in which several missionaries, standing on their predecessors' shoulders, have elaborated on previous grammars and vocabularies. This leads to the question whether a missionary who clearly copied a linguistic work originally authored by one of his predecessors should be given a separate record or not.

As a rule, we consider two documents to be substantially different, if one or more of the following parameters are not identical:

— author
— tool type
— object or target language (and, for vocabularies, directionality)

If these parameters are identical for two different documents, we can be almost sure that these two documents are not substantially different and thus relate to one and the same record in the central table (the information regarding reeditions, translations, and augmented versions is stored in another table).

Needless to say, not all problems are solved by applying these criteria. A grammar of missionary X that is entirely or partly copied by missionary Y (e.g. Pierre Potier's extensive copying from Pierre Joseph-Marie Chaumonot's grammar of Huron — for the reasons explained above, 'copied' is in most cases a better characterization than 'plagiarized') is stored as a separate record (although the differences between the two works can be negligible), whereas a very thorough and considerably augmented revision of a dictionary by one and the same missionary, as is the case with the 1555 and 1571 editions of Molina's Spanish-Nahuatl dictionary, will not lead to the creation of an additional record. Special problems emerge when two different linguistic tools, published apart from each other (thus bringing about two different records), are printed together in a later edition. Bertonio's numerous grammars of Aymara are interesting in that they reveal the limitations of this approach: his *ars maior* and *ars minor*, both from 1603, are clearly different works, with their own separate title pages, prefaces, and foliations. However, it is unclear to what extent his 1612 grammar should be seen as a continuation of both grammars, or as an entirely new third grammar.

5.3 The online publication of RELiCTA requires a stable and sustainable environment, allowing users to make dynamic and detailed queries, in order to examine the correlations between several parameters. In order to realize this, we will be able to benefit from the expertise of our KU Leuven colleagues in designing Trismegistos, a platform for Ancient World texts and data (Depauw/Gheldof 2014). The online availability of RELiCTA will also enable specialists to correct and add information through crowdsourcing. Apart from the online publication, we are also convinced that the publication of a stable (e-)book will still prove to be very useful.

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