



## Common questions about Nahuatl

- Which is the correct form: [Nahua](#), [Nahuatl](#), [Nahuat](#), or [Nahual](#)?
- Why does Nahuatl have such [long words](#)?
- What languages are [related](#) to Nahuatl?
- Why do you hear [so many Spanish words](#) when modern Nahuatl is spoken?
- Why do so many place-names and language names in Mexico and Central America [come from Nahuatl](#), even when Nahuatl is not spoken in the area?
- Why do so many place-names in Mexico [end with -tla, -pa, -ca, -cingo](#), etc.?

*(Green underlined words are links to definitions.)*

### Which is the correct form: Nahua, Nahuatl, Nahuat, or Nahual?

Each of these terms has its correct usage. The best-known and most widely-spoken variants of Nahuatl have a [phoneme /t/](#) ([phonetically \[t̚\]](#)), which is the modern reflex of [proto-Uto-Aztecan \\*/t/](#) where it was followed by [\\*/a/](#). In those variants the word would be "Nahuatl", and it is natural that that name is also applied to the family as a whole, naming it for its most best-known members.

Other Nahuatl languages retained the original [\\*/t/](#) sound (or re-simplified the [\\*/t̚/](#) to [/t/](#)); others simplified the [\\*/t̚/](#) to [/l/](#). Because of this, some analysts have made a three-way classification, speaking of "Nahuatl", "Nahuat", and "Nahual" languages, and sometimes "Nahua" is used to specify the language family as a whole. The fact that "Nahua" is easier to pronounce than "Nahuatl" may also have something to do with its attractiveness as a name. (All these names are only two syllables, with the accent on the first, and the "hua" pronounced [[wa](#)].)

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### Why does Nahuatl have such long words?

Nahuatl is an [agglutinative](#) language; that is, it can add many different kinds of [affixes](#)

(prefixes and/or suffixes) to a [root](#) until very long words are formed. For example, there is an [18-syllable word](#) in Mösiehuali (Tetelcingo Nahuatl) which means means "you honorable people might have come along banging your noses so as to make them bleed, but in fact you didn't".

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## What languages are related to Nahuatl?

Nahuatl is, of course, not a linguistic relative of Spanish (although the two languages [have influenced each other considerably](#)). The [Nahuatl family](#) is a member of the [Uto-Aztecan \(Uto-Nahuatl\) stock](#), so it is related, if distantly, to all the languages of that wide group. Within Uto-Aztecan, the family linguistically (and geographically) closest to Nahuatl is the [Corachol](#) family, which includes the Cora and Huichol languages. There is, however, a much greater difference between any Nahuatl language and Cora or Huichol than between any two Nahuatl languages.

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## Why do you hear so many Spanish words when modern Nahuatl is spoken?

This is a very natural part of what happens when languages are in contact with each other. Spanish has been the politically and socially dominant language of Mexico for nearly 500 years. It is very natural, in such a situation, for speakers of other languages to learn the dominant language and to begin to use words from that language, mixing them in with their mother tongue. Especially when one culture has artifacts or concepts which do not exist in the other, it is very common to borrow the neighboring language's words instead of inventing new words.

In this case the dominant language will often also borrow words from the non-dominant one, and Spanish, especially Mexican Spanish, has many "Aztecisms" or "Mexicanisms", loan-words borrowed from Nahuatl (Mexicano). Some of them have achieved world-wide currency and are used in many languages: e.g. in English the words [tomato](#), [chocolate](#), and [coyote](#), come from Nahuatl's [\(xi\)tomatl](#), [xocolātl](#), and [coyōtl](#). The only language that doesn't borrow from its neighbors is a dead language.

The [Mösiehuali](#) language (Nahuatl of Tetelcingo) has a particularly interesting set of rules for treating [borrowed words](#).

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## Why do so many place-names and language names in Mexico and Central America come from Nahuatl even when Nahuatl is not spoken in the area?

When the Spanish first came to Mexico, they fought the Nahuatl-speaking Mexica (Aztecs) of Tenochtitlan (Mexico City), who spoke [Classical Nahuatl](#); many of their allies in that war were also Nahuatl speakers (e.g. the Tlaxcaltecos). So it was natural that they dealt primarily with Nahuatl speakers, and often with speakers of other Indian languages only through Nahuatl interpreters or intermediaries. The extent of the Aztec influence and Nahuatl's status as a *lingua franca* facilitated this trend. It is for that reason that so many place-names ([toponyms](#)) in Mexico and Central America, even though far from the Nahuatl homelands, come from Nahuatl. And for the same reason, the Spanish names of the different indigenous peoples and cultures ([ethnonyms](#)) are often the names, adapted for Spanish pronunciation, that the Nahuatl-speakers gave them.

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## Why do so many place-names in Mexico end with -tla, -pan, -ca, -cingo, etc.?

The names come from Nahuatl, because [the Spanish adopted mostly Nahuatl names](#). Where English uses [prepositions](#) (words like **of, in, on, behind, around**, etc.), Nahuatl has a series of [postpositions](#). Among them are **-tla(n)**, **-pa(n)**, **-ca(n)**, and **-c(o)**, all of which mean something like 'in', or 'at the place of'. "Nahuatlahtohqueh" (Nahuatl speakers) used these forms suffixed to simple or complex noun [stems](#) to name places, and many of those names, often in a form adapted somewhat to Spanish pronunciation, are still used today.

For example, **Cuautla** comes from **cuauh-tlan** /**k<sup>w</sup>aw-tlan**/ 'tree-place', or 'woods', **Tlalpan** comes from **tlal-pan** /**tlāl-pan**/ 'earth-on' 'on land (at the edge of the lake)', **Tehuacán** comes from **teo-a-can** /**teo-ā-kan**/ 'god-water-place', 'place of sacred waters', and so forth. The ending **-cingo** is a combination of **-tzin** '[honorific, diminutive](#)' with **-co**. Thus **Ocosingo** is from **oco-tzin-co** 'ocote-honorific-locative' 'place of the sacred (honorable) pine trees (ocotes)' (or perhaps, 'place of the little ocotes'). The ending **-tenango** is from **te-nan-co** /**-tē-nān-ko**/ 'unspecified.possessor-mother-locative', and probably has reference either to a goddess or to an apparition of the Virgin Mary or a female saint.

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--[David Tuggy](#)

The [graphic](#) at the top of the page represents the Mexica (Aztec) ruler Itzcoatl. It comes from the [codex Mendoza](#), courtesy of Tom Frederiksen. Used by permission.

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