



LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION, MAINTENANCE AND DEVELOPMENT IN MEXICO: THE CASE OF THE MEXICANO (NAHUATL) LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This article reviews the current efforts undertaken by a group of native and non-native professionals to safeguard and promote the cultural and linguistic heritage of the Nahua people, dwelling along the Balsas river basin in the Mexican state of Guerrero, Mexico, where Mexicano (Nahuatl); the native tongue of roughly 40 thousand people in this region, is still spoken. This includes a discussion of the sociopolitical situation that has given place to a grassroots movement, providing a relatively favorable context to develop effective language planning initiatives. Specifically reviewed are the successful opposition to the construction of a long term planned hydroelectric dam in their territory, together with the development of a culture of recreation and innovation, particularly in the production and commercialization of a series of crafts, which have reinforced the ethnolinguistic awareness of Balsas Nahuas. At the same time, the article pursues to briefly discuss, from a critical perspective; general theoretical, methodological and political issues to develop reversing language shift strategies, especially although not exclusively in Mexico.

Introduction

It is a well-known fact that most languages of the world are threatened of extinction. Of an estimated linguistic diversity of 6000 language world wide, by the year 2050 most of this wealth will become a memory---between 50 and 90%---if urgent action is not undertaken (see Krauss 1992). This is even more so considering that approximately half of the world's languages have less than 600 thousand speakers (Karttunen 2000). In other words, by the end of this new century only about 600 'strong' languages will survive. Linguists and activists in different forums, including publications and conferences, have made a call for action against the demise of linguistic diversity. [1] The destruction of the cultural and linguistic heritage of the world is a growing concern, which has led to the creation of a number of instances to face the threat of extinction and promote cultural and linguistic integrity. This is true most of all in the so-called developed (or rich) countries of Europe and in the USA. [2] Yet the resources available are still few when compared to those of the different organizations in charge of coping with the destruction of the world's biodiversity, another seriously threatened world's legacy. The rate and extend in which the languages are at risk of fading away is by far much higher than what is thought of for the biological species. The challenges are enormous and scholars have had to admit that the faith of several indigenous languages is to decline within a couple of generations. This brings about the difficult and sensitive issue related to the individual and community's rights of keeping or rather giving up their languages as well as the role that linguists can play in language revitalization and reversal proposals (see for example Cantoni 1996: VI; Ola Östman 2000).

As is the case with programmatic formulations of the emergent field of linguistic human rights (for a critique see the articles in Hamel 1997) we understand much more the reasons that provoke (or not) linguistic



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discrimination and language shift than the ways to oppose and reverse these phenomena (see for example Fishman 1991: passim; Grenoble & Whaley 1998: 22 & ff.). Pinpointing some of these forces, this article reviews a series of strategies in progress in a pilot effort to reverse linguisticism (Skutnabb-Kangas 1998), with special reference to the Mexicano (Nahuatl) [3] language in the area of the Balsas River, in the state of Guerrero, Mexico (see map). Based on extensive research, an innovative intervention model that promotes a participatory methodology with the use of the arts in different media (audio, video, Internet) is proposed. The specifics of the case study reported are related to the general issues at stake to develop effective strategies leading to reverse language shift; revitalize, maintain and even develop minoritized languages. [4] Before looking at such issues, let us provide a general outline of sociolinguistic diversity in Mexico.

Source: Amith
1995



Mexico's Linguistic Demography

Comprising a territory of roughly 2 million square kilometers, Mexico is one of the largest, most complex and populated countries of Latin America-- only after Brazil and Argentina. Contrary to widespread beliefs outside Mexico, [5] its geopolitical complexity encompasses parts of North, Central America and the

Caribbean. These three clearly differentiated regions conform an extremely plural and thus complex Mexico. This heterogeneity is clearly manifested in the ethnic composition of such regions, of which the northern part has the lowest prevalence of indigenous population while the Southern region comprises most of the original population of the country. Such differences are correlated to the low economic development of the later as compared to the former. Most of the cultural region referred to as Mesoamerica falls within the Mexican national territory. [6]

Of a total population of nearly 100 million people, today 10 to 15% is of indigenous origin and still speak a prehispanic tongue, together with varying degrees of bilingualism with Spanish: the national, official language of the country; the only fully standardized, a language utilized almost exclusively in mass-media and most public spheres. Historically, Spanish has only become the language with most speakers of the country by the inception of Mexico's independence from Spain in 1810 (see Cifuentes and Pellicer 1989.) Yet even today Mexico occupies one of the first places in linguistic diversity of the world, only after countries like Papua New Guinea and India.

The estimated 10 to 15 million indigenous people comprise over 60 and up to almost 300 different languages, depending on which source one relies on; for example, the Mexican state only recognizes 62 different languages. Manifesting different socioeconomic interests, indigenous people statistics is the subject of intense political manipulation, indexing opposing ideological interests. This is the case with quantitative profiles of minority populations, not only in Mexico, but worldwide (for a discussion see Khubchandani 1989; this publication). In this sense, Mexican demolinguistics ranges from the underestimated figures of the national 1990 census which represents the 10% scale of indigenous population to the overestimated 15% or more figure of the different agencies specifically in charge of such sectors of society (for example the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista*, INI, the National Institute of Indigenous Affairs).

Another eloquent example of the different ideologies orienting quantitative profiles is illustrated by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) figures of the number of existing languages in Mexico, which amounts up to almost 300 languages. This extremely high figure represents a Babel ideology of language, characteristic of SIL missionary linguistics, still the principal source of basic linguistic information worldwide (see <http://www.sil.org/ethnologue/countries/Mex.html>). Such religious approach to language tends to exacerbate every dialect as a separate tongue. Thus Zapotec or Mixtec, languages belonging to the Otomanguan linguistic family—in fact the most diversified linguistic family in Mexico—has 57 and 51 different 'languages' respectively (not to speak of their dialects.) [7] Along these lines, Yuto Aztec languages related to Mexicano, such as *Guarijio*, is supposed to have a separate language (*Maculai*) and *Mayo* and *Yaqui* are considered separate languages. In sum, figures are manipulated according to different ideological schemes and do not necessarily reflect actual sociolinguistic complexity. Quantitative profiles are thus only limited indicators of wider sociopolitical—qualitative—phenomena.

Although there is by no means total accord on the number of linguistic families of Mexico's linguistic diversity, it comprises languages representing several linguistic families, outstandingly the Uto-Aztecan, the Mayan, and the Otomanguan. These three families consist of a number of different languages presenting a variety of situations of language retention and shift. Important Mesoamerican languages include representatives of other families such as the Tarascan (with only one language isolate, *Purepecha*), Totonacan-Tepehua (with two languages *Totonac* and *Tepehua*), Algonquian (with only one language isolate in Mexico, *Kikapoo*), Hokan (with a number of almost extinct languages also extant in the USA, such as *Cocopa*), Huavean (with only one language isolate, *Huave*), Mixe-Zoque (with three languages, *Mixe*, *Zoque* and *Popolucan*), and Subtiaba-Tlapanec (with only one language isolate, *Tlapanec*). [8] Considering that historically they were once related to other languages, the wealth of Mexico's language isolates constitutes an eloquent indication of their endangered status (see Karttunen 2000).

Given the limited comprehension derived from quantitative profiles and in order to minimally overcome this or other narrow conceptualizations regarding Mexican linguistic diversity, I will briefly discuss some representative cases of the continuum of language maintenance and shift, or language conflicts, of the country.

Attempts in Mexico to characterize the sociology of Mesoamerican languages are few (exceptions are Flores Farfán 1989; Lastra 1992; Hamel 1997). Sociolinguistic accounts of indigenous languages have been dominated by one of two major trends: (1) Anthropological (Socio) linguistics (AS); and, (2) the Sociolinguistics of Conflict (SC). Within these opposing types of sociolinguistic research, AS concentrates on the internal organization of language in strong connection to culture at a more 'micro' level. Meanwhile, SC emphasizes the 'macro' inroads of Spanish that from the outside threaten Mexico's original tongues. Confronting these two perspectives a different and much realistic and complex situation emerges (see for example Flores and López 1989). For instance, the series of contradictions that nurture the dynamics of Mesoamerican languages' maintenance and shift are only partially captured by the concept of diglossia (see Hamel 1997). In fact in Mexico one can find a number of situations of polyglossia and of diglossic reversals, as I will schematically illustrate with some representative situations below. Both trends represent the extreme poles of the continuum between language maintenance and shift. A different approach would have to account for the history of language contact and shift in Mexico, a still unwritten chapter in our country (nevertheless see among others Lockhart 1992; Flores Farfán 1999, 2000, etc.). Phenomena such as language interpenetration and syncretism resist the different scales proposed to capture language contact (for Mexicano see Lockhart 1992) and shift (see among others Fishman 1991; Krauss 1997). These proposals advance the idea of a continuum of language substitution, enabling a diagnosis of the endangered status of a given language. As important as they are to understand the history of language contact and conflict, attrition, displacement, and the like, phase theories are still rough approximations to the complexity of endangered languages. Their actual realities do not resist unidirectional characterizations. Language shift and maintenance are often much more dynamic and complex phenomena, including several scenarios that simultaneously correspond to different stages, as is the case of Mexicano. Moreover, a different approach from the received diglossic view to characterize Mexican multilingualism is at stake and requires a much more open conceptualization that could, among other things, describe linguistic syncretism as appropriation and resistance phenomena (see Hill 1993; Flores Farfán 2000, 2001a).

Against the idea of stable bilingualism in Mexico, all Mexican languages are endangered---although to extremely varying degrees. Take for instance Yucatec Maya (Yucatec). Spoken in the Yucatec Peninsula (YP), encompassing three different states (Campeche, Yucatan and Quintana Roo), Yucatec is a fairly strong, vital language. Close to a million speakers, and historically a language that, after the demise of prehispanic Maya civilization, has augmented its number of speakers, Yucatec presents high degrees of intelligibility at the regional level, with minor dialectal varieties. Moreover, consider Yucatec's intelligibility with Lacandon, spoken in the Chiapas jungle of Mexico, and Mopan, spoken in Belize. This permits the claim that these 'languages' are really modalities of one single language, not separate Maya languages; a perception much more in consonance to speakers' perspectives, as opposed to received academic viewpoints.

Another indication of Yucatec's vitality is that regionally it has exerted more influence on Spanish than any other Mesoamerican language. It also enjoys certain institutional support (for example of the *Academia de la Lengua Maya*, The Academy of the Maya Language) and is required (although not officially) in public spheres, especially in the most densely populated Maya regions in the YP; namely, in central Quintana Roo---the YP area with the highest percentage of monolingual Maya population. Thus Yucatec enjoys considerable prestige among important sectors of both Maya and Mestizo

populations in the YP and beyond. Yet this does not mean it is not endangered. Or that Maya is not subjected to stigmatization. For example, consider that due to migration and intensive contact in tourist resorts, Yucatec has most likely disappeared in the coasts of the YP. Given this context, we have recently initiated an intervention project in the YP, looking to develop materials in Yucatec in different media (see Briceño Chel, Jiménez Santos & Flores Farfán 2000) following the participatory model succinctly described for the Balsas Nahuas (see Flores Farfán 2001b).

The case of the Otomanguean family presents the most extreme instances of dialectalization. Compared to Yucatec, a language like Zapotec has at least four clearly differentiated unintelligible varieties or 'languages'. With less than over quarter million speakers as a whole and strong geographical and social compartmentalization, when compared to Yucatec it is the opposite situation in terms of linguistic uniformity.



Within Zapotec itself, one can encounter sharp differences ranging from almost total displacement to language retention and even development. For example, the use of Juchitec, Zapotec's most prestigious modality, is linked to a relative economic wealth, contrasting harshly with other Zapotec varieties; especially, in that it constitutes a language of commerce in Isthmus's markets. This situation reaches the point where speakers of neighboring isolate Huave have to learn to speak Zapotec. In addition, due to a grassroots' movement, Juchitec has become a literary language and has reached the phase of being accepted as written language by at least some sectors of the Juchitec group, a still rare situation in the Mexican indigenous scenario, despite official declarations.

As for the Uto-Aztecan languages a similarly complex situation emerges, considering not only the differences between languages but also even within a single one. Mexicano is also a case in point. If one compares its demography with for example extremely small languages like (Hokan) *Cocopa* (or nearly extinct *Kiliwi* (with less than 50 speakers), one will immediately notice the high number of Mexicano speakers as a whole, with over a million and a half speakers and maybe even more, the most numerous language of the country. Yet Mexicano is spoken in different regions with little or no contact between them, a fact that favors the fragmentation of the awareness of linguistic unity, promoting Spanish as a lingua franca and the dialectalization of the language. [9]

Yet, one can also find situations in which Mexicano is almost extinct, like in the few communities still speaking the language in the Central Mexican plateau (around today's Mexico City). The same is true for neighboring states as Morelos and to a less degree Tlaxcala, in all of which we have also initiated revitalization efforts. As one move away from central Mexico, it is possible to find several isolated Mexicano communities, including the Balsas region, with high rates of Nahuatl population and monolinguals in Mexicano. In these communities, Spanish is still acquired as a second language not only by children but also even in adulthood (some reports on this appear in Hill & Hill 1986), as is also the case in certain instances in the Balsas region.

Reversing Language Shift in Mexico: the Balsas Nahuas

Contrary to the situation that prevailed in prehispanic times, in which Mexicano had the status of *lingua franca* in the Mexica (Aztec) 'empire'; today, likewise all Mesoamerican languages and cultures, Mexicano is endangered. Extensive research on the history and consequences of Mexicano Spanish contact abound (Hill & Hill 1986; Karttunen & Lockhart 1976; Lockhart 1992, Flores Farfán 1999, 2000, etc.). From my point of view the most interesting are those that document cases of resistance and encroachment against fatal assimilation and language shift (see Hill 1993; Flores Farfán 2000, 2001a) This is the case of the Balsas Nahuas, whose tradition of resistance probably runs back to the never total subjugation to Aztec imperialism. Today this tradition of reinvention and political dissent is manifested in for instance the flourishing of native artists, *tlacuilos*, "Painters", whose production is part of the grassroots movement briefly depicted below. [10]

The Mexicano communities of the Balsas region comprise around 40,000 Mexicano speakers dwelling along the Balsas river basin in the state of Guerrero, one of the three most marginalized and poor states of the country. These include communities that historically have undergone different stages of language shift and retention, covering the whole spectrum of the continuum between language maintenance and shift (see Flores Farfán 1999, 2000, 2001a).

Given the relatively low agricultural productivity of the region, Balsas Nahuas have developed other means of economic subsistence and survival strategies, such as the production and marketing of different crafts (*amates*, [11] carved wooden masks, pottery), which Balsas Nahuas sell in different locations, especially enabling them to generate certain economic wealth. The successful integration of a continuous production of crafts for the tourist market, rather than destroying Nahuas' cultural legacy, has tended to endure it (see Good 1988; Amith 1995).

Commerce within Balsas's communities themselves mostly takes place in Mexicano. This fact has abided for a strong sense of ethnolinguistic unity, preventing internal Mexicano dialectal fragmentation and creating an awareness of Mexicano instrumental and ethnic values. This does not mean however that

Spanish is not rapidly penetrating even strongly traditionally Mexicano oriented ambits, like the household (see Flores Farfán 1999).

An additional context worth mentioning that has strengthened Mexicano awareness of ethnolinguistic unity is a successful movement of resistance against the construction of the long-term planned hydroelectric San Tetelcingo dam in the region, almost a decade ago. This led to the conformation of a local opposing organization, the Consejo de Pueblos Nahuas del Alto Balsas (CPNAB), still active to date. For the first time in Mexican history an indigenous movement against the Mexican State project of constructing a dam has succeeded. This fact is telling both of the strength of these communities and the new conditions on which the relationship between minority populations and the Mexican State are defined. Just before this paper was submitted for publication, a note on the newspaper alerted on the intentions of Mexico's actual government to reactivate this project, to which the indigenous organization immediately reacted stating that that they would even fight with their lives to maintain their ancestral territory and impede the construction of the Tetelcingo dam.

All in all, the threat of displacement by the construction of the dam has also privileged and paradoxically toughened the awareness of Mexicano ethnolinguistic unity. Much more than any official educational program in the region, no matter how 'bicultural', 'bilingual', 'intercultural' it might be decreed or supposed to be (for a critique of official indigenous education see Flores Farfán 1999).

As has been documented for a number of minority groups struggling for their human and linguistic rights within different nation states (see for example Hamel 1997), this type of reinvention of ethnic identity has played a crucial role in vindicating modern basic communities demands. A good example is the right to ancestral territory and education in the mother tongue (for a discussion see Hylland Eriksen 1997).

The grassroots movement that emerged and is still strong against the San Juan Tetelcingo dam has also stressed Mexicano as an emblematic symbol; intensively manipulated in political identity formation, against the Mexican State's hidden assimilation trends. Taking advantage of the new global correlation between indigenous populations and the national states worldwide, this context has favored the emergence of a group of political leaders who ironically by and large stem from a most Hispanized community in the Balsas region, Xalitla. Due to some of these leaders urge to claim a *Mexicaneroidentity* in negotiating political legitimacy, these middle-aged men pretend to speak Mexicano; that is to say, they are pseudo-speakers (see Flores Farfán 1998, 1999, 2001a). This 'new' type of speakers is distinguished from quasi-speakers (see Dorian's 1981 similar notion of semi-speaker) Quasi-speakers also participate in these movements as leaders and have been empowered as well. Today they gain more and more visibility in the broader political scene, and this context has actually motivated them to become more active Mexicano speakers, at least emblematically. As we will see below, reactivating a passive competence has also been one of the most outstanding results of our revitalization efforts.

The Use of Multimedia and the Arts in Language Revitalization and Development

All in all, there are few, if any, high-tech efforts in the field of language revitalization and development, especially in the so-called under-developed countries. The emergence of Balsas Nahuas culture of innovation and recreation of their ancestral heritage provides a positive context to establish intervention proposals to revitalize and develop Mexicano. Rooted on such tradition of recreation, together with local actors, including a native artist, Cleofas Ramírez Celestino, we have co-authored a number of books on Mexicano riddles and tales (see for example Ramírez Celestino and Flores Farfán 1998, 1999, etc.: see references). Her two daughters, Paula and Félix Alejandro Ramírez, both in their early twenties, have also been integrated in the project, producing a series of voices of the tapes that accompany the books and videos. A most stimulating and interesting result, derived "naturally" from the development of the project itself, is precisely the re-activation of what used to be a passive (quasi) competence of these young ladies, giving place to an active one. Today, they communicate with their grand mother in Mexicano, in contrast to what used to occur in their childhood, when they replied in Spanish to their grand mother's allocutions. In contrast to other villages such as San Agustín Oapan, where Mexicano is still the mother tongue of the community and one encounters important Mexicano monolinguals sectors, including children, these females come from Xalitla, which is in a very advanced stage of language shift, almost reaching the tip of extinction (for details see Flores Farfán 1999, etc.). This result shows that it is indeed possible to reverse



language shift, inasmuch there are relevant socioeconomic, emotional and even aesthetic motivations involved.

Based on an intercultural approach, we look to reinforce the indigenous language and culture, recovering its innovative character, by adapting all types of media to several Mexicano oral and pictographic genres, such as local riddles and tales, illustrated in amates and transferred to for example video and the Internet (see for example <http://www.kokone.com.mx>). This multimedia initiative allows reaching a wide public and does not limit our efforts to indigenous people, pursuing to (re) educate the general audience regarding the values and aesthetics of indigenous languages and cultures, especially although not exclusively through children informal education. Through this approach long rooted educational practices that separate indigenous people from mainstream education are opposed, considering that such division has tended to segregate and ghettoize indigenous peoples, a most subtle and pervasive way of discrimination.

In our proposal, promoting the use of Mexicano is not linked to hegemonic institutions of Castilianization, such as the school apparatus. The history of schooling in this as well as in many other regions throughout the country has been and still is the history of Castilianization. Speaking Spanish is the overwhelming expectation that most parents have regarding its role and function in most communities, even in the so-called "bilingual" system, which is overwhelmingly a transitional one. Mexico is a clear case in which schools play a central role *not* in the revitalization and promotion of native tongues (for an exception in the U.S. see McCarty 1998). Rather, in Mexico schools are one of the principal inroads of Spanish and thus of acculturation and assimilation, no matter how "bilingual", or even "intercultural" they pretend to be.

Given this context, in a first stage the proposed intervention model opts to develop extra-school workshops conducted totally in Mexicano, or what can be called inverse monolingualism. The dynamics of the workshops are as follows: Mostly although not necessarily in the Saint Patrons' festivities of these communities, we invite children to participate in a video projection. This allows us to first warm up the atmosphere, conceiving such an exercise NOT as a school activity, but rather as a part of the feasts games or activities. Afterwards we ask the children to comment on the content of the video, what type of things they did like more (or not), if they know different versions of the stories, (more) riddles, etc. Finally, we stimulate participation distributing books with tapes to those who have taken a more active role. By the end most everybody has something to say, and we basically bring back as many materials as possible through these workshops. At this point we have distributed thousands of tapes and books in the whole region and beyond. In general the workshops have produced very positive results in terms of attendance and participation. Many children attend the workshops together with their parents, a fact promoting and reinforcing intergenerational transmission of the language and culture, one of the main aims of reversing and even preventing language shift.

The fact of recreating traditional Mexicano genres, such as the opossum (see Ramírez Celestino and Flores Farfán 1995a), recovering the oral medium and local pictographs, the "amates de historias" ("amates that tell histories", a local way of "writing" Nahua social life) while at the same time setting them in three dimensional animation to produce high quality Mexicano "cartoons" has proved to have very positive effects. Among others, it provides status to the local contents, including the language, stimulating its use in joyful ways, creating interest in consuming the products that are distributed in the workshops. In passing, consider that it is common to have a tape recorder in the households, something that at least warrants the possibility of the local consumption of these products on an everyday basis. We are still in the phase of evaluating the appropriation of the distributed materials at the community level.

Launched a decade ago, our project is in consonance with the emergence of the CPNAB and the conditions described above. The participation of native and non-native artists and linguists has reinforced the constructive conditions also briefly depicted, favoring not only the development of the type of educational proposals schematically reviewed in this and other articles (see Flores Farfán 1999, 2001b), but intercultural dialogue and mutual learning. This includes the production and development of bilingual materials in Mexicano and Spanish, which are not limited, and not even exclusively based on the introduction of literacy. Historically writing indigenous languages in Latin characters has been an external need imposed by the colonial power for purposes of Castilianization or evangelization. [12]

Ironically, in Mexico the few existing efforts to "salvage" indigenous languages are almost exclusively based on writing, a practice by no means widespread among the indigenous layman of the

communities. [13] Often times writing is deployed as a cultural capital by indigenous *caciques*, an illustrated elite mostly co-opted by the State, as a sign of social differentiation and status. In other words, writing in alphabetical script as part of the symbolic violence (Bourdieu e.g. 1994) exerted by the State towards indigenous people, is still a fairly unfamiliar experience for most community members, stemming from an ethnocentric need imposed from a outside "educational" model, at times pervasively interiorized by indigenous people themselves as a legitimate sign of a what a real language is (or not). In contrast, our current intervention efforts look for consonance with the alluded tradition of innovation, recreating the cultural specific Nahuas legacy in different media, on a much more from the bottom up model.

In sum, based on culturally relevant genres (such as riddles and tales), and illustrated in amates by native artists, our model produces bilingual audio books for children, which in turn constitute the base for the production of high-tech videos. These materials are utilized in community-oriented workshops, looking to recreate new spaces for the reinforcement of the Mexicano language and culture while at the same time producing and bringing back the materials to the communities themselves.

Conclusion

Nearly all of the world's languages are confronting the danger of vanishing away. This is particularly factual in large, multicultural states such as Mexico and the U.S. where ventures in the domain of language revitalization, retention and cultivation are relatively scarce. The calamity and paradox of this context is that North America is likewise the place of the highest development of technology advances in the globe, progressions that could be recovered to seize and even reverse language shift drifts. Albeit such frequent positions, there are slender attempts in Mexico to shape a fertile appliance of miscellaneous media to improve the use of native tongues, such as Mexicano. The examination of the possibilities and actual use of manifold technologies for linguistic and cultural endurance proves to be of notable worth to animate educators to advance apropos materials sensible to distinct educational contexts. Our goal is that the pilot proposal reported would be the commencement of a productive, long-winded application of novel media that would induce language revitalization and reversal in various scenarios.



See *tosaasaanil*, see *tosaasaanil*
 Maaske maas tikitasneki,
 Xweel tikitas
R: Itakeeyey, otneiv, dniw

Hay que adivinar,
 no lo puedes ver,
 aunque sin esfuerzo
 Lo sientas correr

what is something you
 can't see? But it will
 hit on you and me?

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[1] Consider for instance the idea of responsible or community linguistics posed by Hale (1992) or Grinevald (1998) respectively, contra Ladefoged (1992) viewpoint of scientific detachment in linguistics. Such contradictory positions reveal different interests at stake in the field of linguistics and in general academia. Often times telling of the dissonance between the different motivations that orient work with languages by linguists as opposed to the perspectives of the speakers themselves. Thus for example, the interest of mainstream linguists in endangered languages (over) emphasizes a strictly 'internal' interest in languages (studying such phenomena as linguistic attrition leading to language change and universals). This is often opposed to speakers urge to either give up their language (due to instrumental or ethnic motivations) or rather develop strategies to revitalize and promote the use of their mother tongue. For a recent discussion including the ethical issues of fieldwork on endangered languages see Grinevald (1998: 257 and ff.)

[2] For instance, in the case of Europe consider the work of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Gramstad 1997) and Euromosaic (Strubell 1997). For the USA a good example is the American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI: see Watahomigie & Yamamoto 1992). Given the growing presence of indigenous voices in the Mexican political scenario, a series of resources have or are been allocated to cope with indigenous people demands. For instance a recent decree in Mexico postulates the creation of the *Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas* (National Institute of Indigenous Languages.) Yet as many other political practices derived from the Mexican state, it is still more a programmatic, declarative action than a real alternative of language planning for the linguistic diversity of the country.

[3] Mexicano is the name that speakers themselves utilize to refer to their own language in this and many other regions where it is spoken, a practice that I will follow here. Other names used to refer to the language are Nahuatl and the much more misleading term Aztec (for a critique see Lockhart 1992).

[4] The set of terms related to language efforts leading to different types of linguistic intervention are still in need of systematic clarification (see Krauss 1992; Henze & Davis 1999). For instance, the term



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revitalization, stemming from a biological analogy, entails a critical situation of a living albeit extremely threatened species. Likewise, the term moribund languages (Krauss 1992) also suggests that the endangered language is in an extremely difficult situation, as opposed to for instance the term development (for a brief discussion see Flores Farfán forthcoming.) Such biological analogies might prove useful as shorthand to describe the different stages of language maintenance and shift, inasmuch we do not obliterate that we are dealing with heterogeneous human groups, which of course entail specific characteristics of their own. For example, in contrast to the biological species, a language can be in deed 'revived' (the case of Hebrew is the most well known example; see Fishman 1991; Nahir 1998).

[5] For instance in England or the USA children are taught that Mexico is in 'Central' or even 'South America'. Such a misconception is very common and at times even prevalent in academic circles.

[6] Mesoamerica refers to a vast cultural area: it ranges from contemporary Mexico, excluding the bordering Mexican states with the USA, down to El Salvador and Honduras in Central America. It is characterized by the domestication of maize and the birth of agriculture around 600 BC. This 'maize culture' is linked to the development of some of the greatest civilizations of the Americas, the ones who erected magnificent pyramids, superb pieces of art and advanced calendric and astronomical systems. Mesoamerica includes well-known cultures such as the Maya, the Mexica (so called Aztecs) and the Zapotec, which among many others constitute the Mesoamerican *Sprachbund* (see for example Suárez 1983.)

[7] Yet another good illustration at the international level is the fairly high figures of the number of languages still prevailing in the USA and Canada which according to Krauss (1998) amount up to 210; yet, only 34 of these are presumed to be spoken by children. Or the 50-language figure posed by Hinton (1994) in the case of California: none of these are currently transmitted to children. These language profiles are based on the passive knowledge of at best a handful of speakers, most of them only remembers, quasi or even pseudo speakers of the languages (for these definitions see Flores Farfán 1998, 1999, 2001).

[8] Due to international migration one can also find a number of socio-linguistically uninvestigated Indo-European languages, including Low German (Mennonite) and Romani, along with Arabic, Chinese, and Afro-Seminole (Creole).

[9] Authors such as Suárez (1983) speak of a dozen Nahuatl languages, a relatively low figure compared to the way over 20 varieties listed in the SIL's website.

[10] Painters like Nicolás de Jesús, a well-known talented painter and engraver, whose recurrent themes revolve for instance around the Zapatista struggle across the nation for the recognition of indigenous rights in Mexico, a movement that most local *tlacuiles* support.

[11] The *amate* refers to a sort of "paper" made of the bark of a tree on which Balsas Nahuatl produce several different types of paintings, describing ritual and everyday Nahuatl life, or what Nahuatl themselves denominate "amates de historias" (amates that tell histories). This product became fairly popular in the tourist market in the mid 70s and 80s, when Nahuatl started experimenting with a number of different materials; it is still one of the main sources of income for a number of these communities. Itinerant merchants *par excellence*, Balsas Nahuatl travel long distances to sell their amates and other products, including most tourist resorts of the country and even the US. The *amate* has been such a powerful means of economic survival and ethnic reaffirmation, that it has even been used as a sociopolitical weapon to manifest political dissent against the Mexican state intentions of destroying Nahuatl territory with the construction of the already mentioned hydroelectric dam in the region (see Amith 1995).

[12] Mexicano is probably the indigenous language of the whole continent with more written documentation, comparable to any literary Classical tradition. To better fulfill their assimilation purposes,



Spaniards recovered the previous situation of Mexicano as a lingua franca and trained several indigenous speakers in the humanist tradition of alphabetical reading and writing. Writing Mexicano as a social practice even survived into the 18th century; a tradition afterwards rooted out by the need to impose Spanish as the national, only official, written standard of the country.

[13] The literacy rates in Mexico are still fairly low. It is estimated that Mexicans in general read a third of a book a year, if at all, no to speak of indigenous population, a sector where such figures are even lower