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Language attitudes and educational opportunities: Challenging a history of oppression and assimilation among Indigenous communities in Mexico

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Abstract

The cultural, economic and sociolinguistic trajectory of native communities in Mexico can be explained by some aspects of acculturation theory, in which ethnolinguistic vitality is an essential predictive component. I argue that at least in the first two or even three centuries of contact successful integration strategies seem to have co-existed with separation. Many Indigenous communities demonstrated considerable resilience and ethnolinguistic vitality during the colonial period, but the situation has changed drastically in modern times. This significant transformation came in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when integrational and separationist forms of existence gradually gave way to assimilation and marginalization. These changes were of course part of complex social, political and economic processes, especially the dispossession of corporate Indigenous land that has led to the undermining of native economies and their sustainable ways of subsistence. Also racism and negative language ideologies have been widely internalized by members of Indigenous communities. The perceived low economic value of the heritage language versus Spanish and English is still supported both by the dynamics of economic and social relations in the communities and by the conditions imposed by the external job market and its mechanisms of social advancement. Cultural dispossession is probably most profound and difficult to reverse or counteract if the language of the community is lost. While diagnosing these adverse processes, this paper also discusses the opportunities for challenging economic marginalization and cultural dispossession of Indigenous groups, including both community-driven initiatives and collaborative



projects embracing academic and Indigenous agents. Showing how language loss has been largely provoked by assimilationist educational policies, I also argue that reversing these negative processes can be achieved by collaborative educational strategies, the empowerment of speakers and the development of spaces for practicing Indigenous research, teaching and language activism.

Key words: Mexico, Indigenous people, Nahuatl, assimilation, language ideologies, Indigenous education, language revitalisation

Introduction

In this paper I propose to view the long-term historical trajectory of native communities in Mexico from the perspective of cultural acculturation processes, the outcomes of which are typically described as integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Taking into account the notion of ethnolinguistic vitality as an essential predictive component, I also highlight the mechanisms and effects of different aspects of the language and educational policies and the economic conditions that have affected Indigenous people from colonial times, through the formation of the independent Mexican state to the present day. My focus is on the speakers of the Nahuatl language and their experiences of oppression, cultural dispossession and assimilation. I argue that an essential part of assimilationist policy was the homogenizing educational system of the independent Mexican state. Assessing the impact of these adverse processes based on specific testimonies and field records, I discuss the language ideologies and related language attitudes shared by the members of modern Nahua communities that face the imminent threat of linguistic annihilation. Internalized racist ideology and widespread identity change are important mechanisms contributing to the heritage language loss and its postvernacular usages that are manifest in present contexts. However, I also argue that this alarming diagnosis can be a point of departure for overcoming the history of

discrimination and assimilation. A better understanding of the past and the current situation of speakers of Indigenous languages should be taken into account while planning and implementing present-day and future educational strategies oriented toward the revitalization of linguistic-cultural heritage.

A historical overview: From colonization to assimilation

The Nahuas, or speakers of the Nahuatl language, are the most numerous Indigenous group in Mexico today. Their history in Mesoamerica goes back at least to the first millennium A.D., while Nahuatl forms part of the Uto-Aztecan family, spreading from the southwestern United States to Salvador and Nicaragua. Before the most recent period of the nineteenth and twentieth century the sociocultural environment in which the Nahuas lived was multiethnic and multilingual as they coexisted with speakers of many other Indigenous languages in the Mesoamerican ‘melting pot.’ Despite the extinction of many languages and the widespread shift to Spanish, Ethnologue estimates that 287 distinct languages are still currently spoken in Mexico (Lewis et al. 2015), all of them endangered, and some critically. Nahuatl is perhaps best known as the language of the ‘Aztecs’, who created strong regional states between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. The most powerful of them was Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Mexicah, which at the time of the Spanish arrival in 1519 was the largest metropolis in the Valley of Mexico and the head of a tributary empire encompassing vast areas of Mesoamerica. Its successful military, economic and cultural expansion was a direct result of the creation of the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlan, Tetzcoco and Tlahcopan. While the core area of the Aztec empire corresponded with the Valley of Mexico and consisted of mainly Nahua-speaking communities, its tributary lands extended well beyond this area and included multi-ethnic and multilingual areas in the present Mexican states of Hidalgo, Guerrero, Morelos, Puebla, Oaxaca, and Veracruz. The Mexica-Tenochca and their imperial allies did not require strict integration of multilingual and multicultural provinces. Their empire expanded through a number of well-coordinated and diversified

political strategies, but the forms of control were often based on co-optation of local elites and the threat of military intervention.

These political relationships proved very fragile when Hernan Cortes and his people, who put their feet on the shore of the Gulf of Mexico in the spring of 1519, along with local allies, seized the imperial capital in August of 1521 after several months of siege. The imperial infrastructure collapsed and disintegrated rapidly, but the local organization of Nahua regional states proved much more resistant to conquest and colonization. Many core elements of Indigenous sociopolitical organization along with the entire system of beliefs as well as ritual and cultural practices continued under the guise of the new political and religious order. What seriously affected Indigenous population were series of epidemics and forced *congregaciones* (congregations or resettlements). It is estimated that the native population in central Mexico (from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in the south to Nueva Galicia in the north) was reduced from ca. 25 million in 1518 to ca. 1.9 million in 1585, and to only 0.75 million in 1622 (Borah 1983: 26). By around 1620 new diseases (especially smallpox, measles, and typhus) had reduced this figure by perhaps 90 percent (Nutini & Isaac 2009: 33). The traumatic impact of epidemics and congregations was in fact stronger than the conquest itself, especially in those communities for whom the experience of military confrontation had been often indirect or remote.

For most of the local Nahua communities there probably wasn't very much difference between subordination to the Aztec empire and subjugation to the Spanish Crown, at least in the first decades of Spanish presence. Tributary obligations were open to negotiation, at least to a certain degree, with a remote power center, while local matters remained in the hands of local elites. Christianization efforts, which were soon supported with severe punishments by friars and civil authorities as well as by inquisitorial proceedings, brought about a shocking realization, on the part of the Indigenous people, regarding this novel aspect of the new circumstances. Violent measures aimed at the eradication of preconquest beliefs and practices in the early colonial period deeply transformed numerous aspects of social and ritual life: they had broad repercussions and were remembered by the Nahuas as the time of 'terror.' The impact of the ways that Christianity was introduced in the native population can be considered a source of cultural trauma, occurring in a relatively short

span of time and with a wide scope of traumatogenic and unexpected changes touching many aspects of life, including the overturning of the traditional hierarchies, beliefs and practices underlying the constitution of society (Alexander 2004: 1; Sztompka 2004: 155-89; Olko & Brylak 2018). Many aspects of the prolonged trauma continued in Indigenous communities through the colonial period.

As far as the local economy is concerned, the Spanish colonization was the source of a set profound changes in this sphere of life of native states and communities. Series of epidemics and the resulting depopulation, excessive tribute requirements, forced labor (e.g. in silver mines), resettlements (*congregaciones*, *reducciones*), the disintegration of preconquest long-distance trade networks, as well as the introduction of new crops, domesticated animals and production modes and the gradually increasing pressure on Indigenous land-holdings and urbanization, were among the key factors of economic change. The market economy was well developed both in native communities and in towns originally founded as Spanish settlements (such as Puebla), where native vendors and producers were important providers of goods (Lockhart 1992: 189-191). These innovations notwithstanding, the traditional economy remained a basic source of income for native nobles and commoners throughout the colonial period. Rulers and nobles not only supervised tax collection for the Spanish Crown, but also received tribute and labor from their subjects as well as crops from their land worked by dependent laborers. However, due to rapid population decline, excessive taxation demands and then, especially in the late colonial period, Spanish and mestizo pressure on native land, the economic position of both the traditional elites and commoners was gradually weakened. On the other hand, Spaniards, many of whom originally relied economically on such colonial institutions as the *encomienda*, gradually acquired more and more native land as the colonial period advanced. In their agricultural enterprises and other kinds of economic activities they had to rely on the local workforce in multiple contact zones (Lockhart & Schwartz 1983: 15-16, 122-130).

The colonial reality has been seen as “a world marked by (proto) racialized sociopolitical tensions,” with a legal system that was “aimed at locating, and subsequently maintaining colonial subjects in specific positions in the social, political and economic hierarchy”

(McDonough 2014: 35). In practice, however, the socioeconomic hierarchy was to a certain extent flexible, and Indigenous people learned how to use the existing regulations for their own benefits, especially drawing on the privileges resulting from the adscription to their own group (*indios*). The existing legislation, from the mid sixteenth century, directly or indirectly supported the use of native languages, and especially Nahuatl, at least in certain contexts, such as Christianization. However, the colonial period was followed by profound changes, which initiated at its conclusion and were fully implemented during the first century of Mexican independence, when the category of *indios* was abolished, along with its rights, privileges and some important administrative and organizational principles at the community level. The process of making Indigenous people legally equal with other social and ethnic groups resulted in the lack of legal protection.

In colonial times Indigenous towns operated as dynamic and active corporate organizations with essential economic, political, religious, judicial and educational functions. The so-called Lerdo Law (*Ley Lerdo*) of 1856 gave the state the right to sell corporately held property, including the lands held by indigenous communities. Most of this land was acquired by large estates, strongly undermining and reducing the resources and economic autonomy of the native people. Once communal land and jurisdiction over towns was taken away from the communities by regulations under the independent Mexican state, many of their inhabitants joined the hired workforce in *haciendas* and *ranchos*, rural estates, including plantations, mines and factories or a combination of different production modes. Thus, from the onset of the Mexican republic, the project of 'modern' nation building envisioned no place for native communities, their traditional base of subsistence, their culture or their languages. The idealized, remote ancestors of Indigenous people were conceived of as a mythical native nation of the past which was important for the ideology of the Mexican state; however, a huge distance was created between the 'historical Indian' whose prestigious past deserved to be recalled and glorified, and the real, modern Indian belonging to the most strongly marginalized sector of the society (Villavicencio Zarza 2013: 81-82). While the general and enduring strategy oscillated between extermination and assimilation, one of its aims was to weaken the links of native people their rural communities and integrate them in the

global labor market. This policy provoked numerous Indigenous riots and rebellions in the nineteenth century as a response to the deprivation of lands and threats to corporate forms of organization (Villavicencio Zarza 2013: 86-87).

Today the descendants of the Nahuas survive in numerous communities in different Mexican states, including Estado de Mexico, Puebla, Guerrero, Morelos, Tlaxcala, Hidalgo, Veracruz, Oaxaca and San Luis Potosí. Their local organization, economic activities and religious practices reveal strong continuity with the former native corporate government, sacred worship and social relations. Many of these communities still preserve the heritage language, but its knowledge and/or usage is more common in rural than in urbanized settings. With few exceptions, it is only in the most secluded peripheral communities that Nahuatl is still transmitted to children, but on an increasingly diminishing scale. Some scholars have seen this in terms of furthering the *indio-mestizo* transformation (Nutini & Isaac 2009) or *indio-mestizo* continuum, where the transition from the stigmatized and despised status of *indio* toward the ‘mestizo pole’, linked to the national Mexican culture and ‘modernization,’ accelerated in the 1970s with the construction of new roads, urban expansion and the pressures of the educational system toward the shift to Spanish (Robichaux 2005). In modern Mexico racism is pervasive, based on the cultural standards of beauty and ideals of physical appearance that are strongly European. It is continuously reinforced through television and visual advertising, influencing people to emulate them in terms of both their physical appearance and ethnic identity (Nutini & Isaac 2009: 53).

Language and educational policies of the Mexican state

The policies developed and implemented by the Liberals throughout the nineteenth century provided a strong foundation for the present situation of Indigenous communities and their languages. Spanish became absolutely dominant in the political and administrative spheres, displacing Indigenous languages and confining them to private zones. Thus, the communities speaking Indigenous languages were gradually

reduced to secluded hamlets whose speakers barely knew some Spanish and lived marginalized. Persons who left their communities and incorporated themselves into the external labor market, had to face the necessity of interacting with people who did not speak Indigenous languages (Villavicencio Zarza 2013: 56). In terms of diglossia, Spanish, as an official and national language, was the only prestigious and high ‘variety,’ while all Indigenous languages became low varieties (Zimmermann 2010: 911). Justo Sierra, an influential Mexican writer, historian, and ‘liberal’ political figure of the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century (serving as a Secretary of Public Education between 1905 and 1911 under the Díaz regime), proclaimed the following at the inauguration of the High Council of Public Education in 1902:


We call Castilian a national language not only because this is the language that the modern Mexican society spoke from its infancy and because it became the heritage of the nation, but because being the only classroom language, it will atrophy and destroy local languages and thus the unification of the national speech, an invaluable vehicle for social unification, will become a fact.” (Sierra 1919: 191; transl. JO)1

In the nineteenth century, the traditional rural teachers of the colonial period, known as *doctrineros*, were being gradually replaced by ‘professional teachers’ (*maestros*) of the Mexican state. The *doctrineros* were usually literate Indigenous persons teaching the Christian doctrine in their communities of origin, relying on oral instruction in the local language, and performing only some basic elements of instruction in reading. Their salaries were paid by internal community funds or treasuries, the so-called *cajas de la comunidad*. The *maestros*, who took the place of the *doctrineros*, were often *mestizos*, not originally from the community where they were assigned to teach, not familiar with a local language, and not willing to learn it. They conducted their teaching in Spanish and received remuneration directly from the municipalities. This policy obliged local communities to hand funds from their *cajas* over to the constitutional municipalities

1 . “Llamamos al castellano lengua nacional: no sólo porque es la lengua que habló desde su infancia la actual sociedad mexicana, y porque fue luego la herencia de la nación, sino porque siendo la sola lengua escolar, llegará a atrofiar y destruir los idiomas locales y así la unificación del habla nacional, vehículo inapreciable de la unificación social, será un hecho.”

(*ayuntamientos*), which, in practical terms, implied a loss of control over the teaching process (Villavicencio Zarza 2013: 91-97). Moreover, schools established in the nineteenth century were characterized by ethnic and racial segregation. Pupils were divided according to the *castas* despite the laws of the Mexican republic, which formally abolished the existence of these mixed-race categories. Thus, in one part of the room *niños de razón* ('children of reason' derived from the colonial category of *gente de razón*, 'people of reason') were seated; another part of the room was reserved for Indigenous children who only received oral instruction in the *doctrina* and, in most cases, were not taught to read (Villavicencio Zarza 2013: 94).

The educational system of the independent Mexican state became more efficient and widespread in the twentieth century. After 1950 school policy became its most efficient tool of Hispanization and annihilation of Indigenous languages and, despite the declared changes in educational policy in favor of a 'multicultural Mexico', it has remained the driving force of language endangerment and shift to the present day. An apparent change in Mexican language and educational policy came with the idea of 'bilingual education', which encouraged students to maintain their native tongues while acquiring the Spanish language along with the principles of modern society and culture. Centers of Indigenous Education were launched in 1933, creating boarding schools in Indigenous areas; their students were taught Spanish in the classroom, but were not forbidden to speak their own tongues in the space of the school. This approach recognized the effectiveness of the use of local languages as tools for the transmission of the national culture and language to the native population, opening initial and limited space for training rural teachers in local tongues (Heath 1972: 95-97). After President Lázaro Cardenas established the Department of Indian Affairs in 1934, basic education and literacy in Indigenous languages, especially as the first step before acquiring Spanish, began to be seen as a possible successful educational approach. While a pilot program was carried out in the Tarascan area, the actual implementation of this approach remained limited (Heath 1972: 106-118). However, the ideas of 'bilingual education' remained in force through the rest of the twentieth century and until today, despite the limited scope of the program and its clearly under-pronounced goal of quickly transitioning Indigenous children to Spanish. Directors and functionaries of



independent agencies and programs, such as that of *Patrimonio Indígena*, established in 1951, varied in their attitudes toward teaching the native peoples in their own tongues. Many guidelines and recommendations were misunderstood and subject to incorrect implementation at the local level. Rural school teachers who were accustomed to the direct method of Spanish instruction, very often continued this way of teaching and did not adopt the bilingual method at all due to racist attitudes, arguments that surfaced against the usefulness of writing in native tongues, inadequate training, lack of sufficient knowledge of Indigenous tongues and the shortage of appropriate didactic materials (Heath 1974: 141-143). In 1979 the Program of Hispanization for children at preschool age, from five to seven years, was launched and implemented by personnel with minimal preparation. In view of its failure, the program gave way in 1981 to another initiative called ‘educación bilingüe-bicultural,’ the most recent myth serving as a disguise for the imposition of Spanish. The official aim of this approach is to develop literacy in a native language before teaching Spanish, but, in the end, the role of a heritage language became reduced to a medium of instruction of the target language (Flores Farfán 1999: 40-41).

Thus, despite a number of official programs distancing themselves from assimilationist policies, the ‘direct method,’ or, simply stated, education in Spanish, remained the most common practice. It was often combined with a more or less official prohibition of the use of heritage tongues at school and the stigmatization of children who did not speak Spanish. Sometimes the abuse of native children by teachers provoked the resistance of parents, as was the case in Acxotla del Monte in Tlaxcala. The local school was closed because of parents’ complaints about physical violence toward their children for using Nahuatl. In 1956 the school was reopened on the condition that parents would collaborate with teachers so that their children spoke Spanish (Robichaux 2005: 78-79). The most common pattern was, however, that parents, including those who could hardly speak the Spanish language, followed the strict recommendations of teachers believing that speaking the national language to their children would save them problems at school and in adult life as well as protect them from discrimination. Instructions by school officials against using Nahuatl were provided along with hygienic and health-related recommendations (Hill & Hill 1986: 113). In addition, since in the mid-1970s most small towns and villages had no schools beyond the sixth grade, all youths who wished to

continue education had to travel to the city (Hill & Hill 1986: 39). Thus, students from Indigenous communities were exposed to ethnic discrimination if they could not pass for ‘mestizos’ and they often internalized the dominant ideology. For many Indigenous children from communities that still use their local language this process continues to this day.

Acculturation processes and language loss

From a long-term perspective, the cultural, economic and sociolinguistic trajectory of native communities in Mexico can be well explained by some aspects of cultural acculturation theory, according to which ethnolinguistic vitality is an essential predictive component. Ethnolinguistic vitality is here defined as “the amount of social advantages a group has or has not attained in terms of pride in its history, membership numbers, and the visibility of its culture and communicative codes within society” (Giles, Bonilla & Speer 2011: 249), with a special emphasis on the role of the heritage language in a group’s self-identification and perceived value in comparison with the outgroup. Outcomes of acculturation processes are typically described as integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. While integration refers to a simultaneous adherence to the original culture and accepting (to different degrees) the new culture, assimilation differs in its rejection of the heritage culture. Assimilation is typical for contexts where a subordinate group seeks a more positive social identity and joins the dominant group in order to gain social or economic advantages. On the other hand, in the strategy of separation, the original culture is retained, while the dominant culture is rejected (Berry 1980; Bourhis et al. 1997). In all of these acculturation strategies, group vitalities of minority or immigrant as well as mainstream groups are instrumental for possible outcomes of intercultural contact (Tajfel & Turner 1986; Giles, Bonilla & Speer 2011: 245-249). Differences between dominant and subordinate groups are manifest in forms of cultural dominance, levels of education and income as well as economic and social opportunities. Therefore the more prestigious, attractive and powerful the perception of

the external group, the stronger the motivation for a given community or ethnic group to abandon its distinctiveness.

At least in the first two or even three centuries of contact, during the colonial period, successful integration strategies seem to have co-existed with separation. They depended on geographical location, proximity to Spanish settlements or administrative seats and topographic conditions providing natural communication barriers. Communities that can be seen as examples of integration, actively participating in the exchange with Spanish culture, were often part of large cities, such as Mexico Tenochtitlan or were located close to large Spanish towns (e.g. Puebla de los Ángeles), such as native settlements in the area of Puebla or Tlaxcala. At least in the initial period of co-existence, native communities were able to retain their forms of organization, language, and culture, and even a high degree of autonomy in their political organization recognized by the Spanish crown. Nahuatl remained in use and expanded to new media and spaces, such as alphabetic writing, the Spanish legal system and Christianity. Community members entered into different forms of contact and relationships with Spaniards, accepting and assimilating numerous elements of their material, intellectual, spiritual and economic culture. Bilingualism was not widespread, although it grew in urbanized zones toward the end of the colonial period; however, it was also quite common for members of the dominant group to learn Nahuatl for practical purposes. Of course some of these urban communities, depending on a number of factors, underwent assimilation already in the latter part of the colonial period. On the other hand, separation was the norm for communities that continued their traditional forms of livings at the peripheries of the colonial system and remained very weakly exposed to contact or any form of integration.

Many Indigenous communities demonstrated considerable resilience and ethnolinguistic vitality during the colonial period, but the situation has changed drastically in modern times. This significant transformation came in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when integrational and separationist forms of existence gradually gave way to assimilation and marginalization, depending on the outcome of the acculturation strategy and on the geographical location. Those communities which were located in more urbanized zones were assimilated toward surrounding ‘mestizo’ communities,

abandoning their language and identity, even if preserving some elements of their sociopolitical organization and religious beliefs. Others, in more isolated locations, became economically marginalized. Even if they managed to keep the heritage language and other elements of culture, their disadvantaged situation has eventually led to migration and the gradual adoption of the more prestigious status associated with modernization, the use of Spanish and the ‘national identity’. While most of the Nahua communities were exposed, in differing degrees, to contact with the Spanish language and culture from the 1520s or 1530s, this contact did not constitute a serious threat to the heritage language used by Indigenous groups because their ethnolinguistic vitality was high, especially during the first phase of the colonial period. The pressure of the dominant language became much stronger after Independence, changing the nature of cultural and linguistic contact toward aggressively assimilationist scenarios.

These changes were of course part of complex social, political and economic processes, especially the dispossession of corporate Indigenous land and the concentration of land and resources in the hands of land owners and entrepreneurs, which led to the undermining of native economies and their sustainable ways of subsistence. In effect, assimilation affected both urbanized and eventually also more isolated rural communities, even when the economic disadvantage and marginalization of the latter continued. Although such general patterns can be discerned, there were also clear exceptions with far-reaching consequences affecting the current situation of Indigenous people. One of the most salient was no doubt the movement and partisan revolt organized by Emiliano Zapata during the Mexican revolution (1911-1917) in order to bring land and its control back to Indigenous farming communities. The legacy of Zapata has survived and has been continued in later Zapatista movements, especially the militant organization *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (the Zapatista Army of National Liberation) active in Chiapas. The movement acts through organized civil resistance and focuses on securing the autonomy of Indigenous communities from the Mexican state and especially their control over resources and infrastructure, including healthcare, education and sustainable agricultural systems. From the framework of acculturation theory, the Zapatista movement and its tangible results can be considered an example of a successful separationist strategy, overtly questioning the model,

authority and control of the Mexican state, and characterized by the very strong social, political and ethnolinguistic vitality of participating Indigenous agents.

Internalized racism and language attitudes

The history of oppression, cultural dispossession and assimilation, that took a particularly harsh course through the dominant national ideologies, language policies and educational strategies of the modern Mexican state, have had profound effects at the local level. Racism and negative language ideologies, such as the conviction that Nahuatl is inferior to Spanish, have been widely internalized by Indigenous people (e.g. Flores Farfán 1999; Sandoval Arenas 2017). Ethnic discrimination continues to affect members of marginalized Nahua-speaking communities and often comes from residents of more ‘modernized’ towns, often Indigenous until quite recent times. According to the testimony of a woman coming from San Francisco Ixquiuhacan (Zacatlan, Sierra Norte de Puebla), who married into a central Tlaxcalan community and has been living there for twenty years, she was mocked and discriminated against because of her origin even by members of her new family who themselves are native speakers of Nahuatl or at least learned this language in their youth:

[...] nocuñado [...] siempre nechilhuiaya que ne niindio patarajada. Aha nechillaya huan niquilliya tleca niindio gracias zan indio patarajada ticatqui in tehhuatl [...] Quien zabe porque tehluan techdizcriminoah porque tihualahqueh de Zacatlan. My brother-in-law was always calling me a bare-footed india. He was telling me that. And I would tell him why am I an india, you are here thanks to a bare-footed india. Who knows why they discriminate against us. [Perhaps] because we came from Zacatlan (San Miguel Xaltipan, Tlaxcala, 2017).

In an internalized positioning of their language, members of native communities

situate Nahuatl at the very bottom of the language hierarchy. Spanish is in the middle as a national language and that of the dominant ‘modern’ society. Most recently, English claimed its place at the very top as a symbol of upward social mobility and opportunities. It is associated with technology, business, youth and popular culture. For community members with high rates of migration to the US, it is also the language of remote opportunities and a symbol of a better life. English is an obligatory subject in all Mexican schools, including those in native communities, although the levels of teaching and acquisition are very low. While in the previous century Spanish was the language of social mobility and access to the labor market, English is gradually starting to occupy this place in the professional sphere. Spanish, in turn, remains linked to all basic dimensions of social life, as the unique language of education, politics, work, legal, and public services. When compared with these two languages, Nahuatl’s unique domains include household, family and agriculture as a lower-status tongue of *campesinos* (peasants), situated in a much less advantageous position than professionals who hold a much higher place in Mexican society (Sandoval Arenas 2017). Children who learn at school that their mother tongue has no value, often decide to choose a path for a better social position than their parents. Denial of the value and utility of Nahuatl is strengthened at the community level where no public services are performed in the language, despite the linguistic rights guaranteed by the 2003 Mexican law. This lack of recognition and perspectives has a negative impact on the perception of the language’s vitality and chances for survival even among proficient young speakers:

Quemman, quemman polihuiz nahuatlahtolli naltepeuh, tleca tlacameh ihuan cihuameh amo quimatih ihuipan sirve para qué, para qué sirve, tleca, tlen ipatiuh. Nochtin tlacameh ihuan cihuameh amo tlahtoah ipan iyolloco centro, ipan Ayuntamiento [...] Porque tleca personas amo tlahtoah nahuatlahtolli, entonces amo patiyoh. Amo patiyoh quimatih nahuatlahtolli.

‘Yes, yes Nahuatl will perish in my town because the men and the women do not know what it can be used for, what it can be used for, why, what is its value. All the men and women, they don’t speak [Nahuatl] in the town center, in the municipality.

Because those people do not speak Nahuatl, so it has no value. They know that Nahuatl has no value.’ (Cuextlaxcoapan, Puebla, 2015, speaker in his late 20s)

The last quote also reveals the importance of language accommodation strategies especially with regard to those individuals who are perceived as being power holders or, more generally, as having a superior social, economic, or political status. Thus, members of Indigenous communities, especially those who make negative comparisons with external groups, will tend to accommodate their language choice to their interlocutors (cf. Giles 2016). In terms of linguistic choices, while the change is inherently linked to other components of identity shift, it should also be viewed in the context of language conflict. The latter implies instability due to a strongly asymmetrical relationship entailing complex and contradictory valuations, an unequal position in the power hierarchy, and unequal patterns and distribution of use (Flores Farfán 1999: 68). The users are thus subject to “the structures of the linguistic market, which impose themselves as a system of specific sanctions and censorships” (Bourdieu 1991: 37), adapting the way they choose to speak to the demands of their audience embedded in social and economic relationships. Thus, it is through the way of speaking and linguistic choices that individuals pursue their goals and negotiate power relations imposed by the ‘linguistic market’, relations that often take the forms of ‘symbolic domination’ and violence. This ‘symbolic capital’ that involves the ‘positioning’ of a specific language with regard to its economic, educational or other kind of value, is usually determined by dominant groups and institutions directly linked to the state and its language policy (Bourdieu 1991: 50-52, 105-162).

The forms and impact of symbolic violence are especially pervasive when the perceived value, positioning and status (including official, political and institutionalized roles as well as not-institutionalized standing) of languages such as Nahuatl and Spanish are so disparate and unequal. Conversely, the rank of Spanish is strongly supported by dominant ideologies that became internalized at the level of speech communities. Thus, as I have already pointed out, many members of Indigenous communities in Mexico have adopted a hierarchical ranking system in which their heritage language occupies the lowest position. Those persons who decided to switch to the dominant language would

sometimes discriminate against other community members who still use their mother tongue or have limited skills in Spanish, often their own peers, adopting certain forms of symbolic violence and dominance. This is of course not only the case of the Nahuas: it extends also to all other Indigenous languages, especially if they continue to be strongly marginalized and disadvantaged, while having even less academic recognition and public presence than Nahuatl. In daily reality, when Indigenous people from more isolated (often mountainous but also rural) communities go to nearby urban centers to sell their goods to earn a basic living or when native children commute to regional schools, they have been commonly subject to many kinds of abuses and forms of discrimination, including mockery and verbal violence. Language and traditional ways of dressing are perhaps the most frequent identification markers, so many Indigenous persons have been hiding their ethnic attributes in order to avoid mistreatment (Bergier & Olko 2016; Arenas 2017). Speakers often recall physical and psychological violence suffered at school:

Onechnohnotzaya nonantzin cuac ye oyaya caltlamachtic, ezte, nomontahtzin nohuihqui techtlapohuia, oquinmagayah intla tlahtoayah nahuatl, tlahtoayah caxtillan tlahtol, nahuatl amo.

'My mother told me that when she was at school, and also my father-in-law was telling us the same, that they would beat them if they spoke Nahuatl, [so] they were speaking Spanish, not Nahuatl.' (San Miguel Xaltipan, Tlaxcala, 2017)

The denial and intentional erasure of identity has been so strong that some members of Indigenous communities in Mexico changed their original surnames to Spanish ones in the second half of the twentieth century. But even today, manifesting visible signs of an Indigenous identity, such as the use of Nahuatl, is often an act of courage. As noticed by one of the persons from a community which suffered the shift to Spanish and who, as an adult, makes efforts to learn the language of the ancestors, “it is difficult to come back to our roots because this means going against the tide” (Santa Ana Chiauhtempan, Tlaxcala, 2017). The traumatic experiences of discrimination and shame have not been addressed, reworked and challenged. Some people are convinced the language is about to die: many still know it, but nobody speaks it *pampa pinahuah*, ‘because they are ashamed.’ The perceived low economic value of the heritage language versus Spanish and English is supported both by the dynamics of economic and social relations in the community and by the conditions imposed by the external job market and its mechanisms of social advancement.


This is a very recurrent theme in the testimonies of members of communities shifting to a dominant language, and it is often presented as a rationale/justification for the shift to Spanish. In communities where shift is incipient or ongoing, the heritage language is often used and transmitted mainly in poor sectors of the town or by poor families, as documented in San Isidro de Buensuceso or in the communities in Guerrero (Nava Nava 2016a; Iglesias Tepec, personal communication 2018). This widespread social fact reinforces the association of the native language with poverty and low status. Along with ongoing external and internal discrimination and lack of institutional support, the link with poverty contributes to very low levels of ethnolinguistic vitality and strong

feelings of collective inferiority among Indigenous people today. Their ethnolinguistic identity is strongly undermined by the long-term wish to dissociate from the perceived low status of the group in order to have access to the benefits of ‘modernization’ and achieve personal economic success. Such utilitarian attitudes are typical for a group with lowered vitality, rejecting its own linguistic and cultural practices (2009, 1010, 2011). Indeed, the uselessness of the heritage tongue along with the economically and socially disadvantageous positioning of Indigenous status are among the key motivations declared by members of Nahua communities as reasons for the shift to Spanish:

Neh oniczaloh nin tlahtol ihcuac nicpiyaya mahtlac huan ce xihuitl huan oniczaloh inahuac nocihtzin. Notahtzin huan nonantzin amo nechittitihqueh tlica yehhuan oquihtoayah ‘yocmo, yocmo sirve, nin tlahtol yocmo sirve.’

I learned this language when I was 11 years old. And I learned it from my grandmother. My father and my mother did not teach me because they were saying it is not useful anymore. This language is not useful anymore. (2014, Contla/Tlaxcala, male speaker in his 50s)

In Tlaxcala, where language shift in the last several decades has been widespread and profound, negative language attitudes are still present, but they seem to be more covert and weaker if compared with the sociolinguistic situation documented forty years ago by Hill and Hill (1986). Paradoxically, a more positive language ideology and the idea of ‘language revitalization’ has been coming mainly from the outside (especially from academic circles) and, in a way similar to the former negative valuation of the language and racist ideology, is becoming internalized. At the same time, diminishing proficiency and language skills in Nahuatl are accompanied by decreasing purist attitudes that were very strong back in the 1970s and 1980s (Hill & Hill 1986). While it has been observed that the more endangered the language, the stronger and more extensive purist attitudes may surface, as has happened in Santa Ana Tlacotenco (Flores Farfán 2009: 90), this is no longer the case for the universal picture in Tlaxcala, despite the moderate presence of declared purist speakers. The profound shift seems to have changed the



vitality of purism, its criteria and the acceptance of what speaking the language is. In such communities as San Miguel Xaltipan, recent revival activities, rather than restoring the previous spaces of Nahuatl as the tongue of habitual communication, have opened new avenues for postvernacular, symbolic uses of the language (cf. Shandler 2006).

Such uses demonstrate some forms of language knowledge and survival by setting conventional, usually very limited spaces for its presence that are distinct from usual forms of daily communication. The case of the Nahua communities in Tlaxcala also shows that interrupted intergenerational transmission can change norms and expectations with regard to who can be considered a ‘speaker’ of the heritage language. Its postvernacular and symbolic use in the form of songs and basic greetings or expressions gain more acceptance as a form of language survival or even ‘revitalization’. The fact that some of the speakers (presenting varying degrees of proficiency) in the Contla region of Tlaxcala have reached a high, recognized, respected economic or political status within the community and sometimes also outside, has made it possible for them to reevaluate, consciously or not, their connection to and identification with the heritage language. Since the shift to Spanish has been profound and widespread, with the role of Nahuatl largely reduced to postvernacular use, they can simply afford speaking it without exposing themselves to discrimination or denigration. In other words, this postvernacular presence or recognition of Nahuatl no longer poses a threat for community members who have achieved the unquestionable economic, social, political, or educational status of respected and prosperous citizens of the Mexican state. Thus, without changing their habitual language of daily communication, which is usually Spanish, they can reveal themselves as active speakers in different contexts and use it on social occasions with other community members.

Some elderly speakers say the heritage language is still alive because they occasionally use it in communication with their peers, but do not think the shift is something bad because ‘people will be able to communicate with each other more easily.’ Hence, the attitudes of fluent elders versus those of semi-speakers of the same or younger generations became tolerant and appreciative: the number of ‘dormant speakers’ is so huge, that even people over 50 or 60 years of age, fully socialized in Nahuatl as

children, have difficulty expressing themselves. Therefore some of the elder speakers in San Miguel Xaltipan would claim that the heritage language is ‘safe’, because ‘many people can still speak it’ (even if their children and grandchildren cannot) and because one of the local activists is teaching children. Since they know these children haven’t been able to acquire active language skills, the symbolic use of the language in the form of songs and basic greetings or expressions is becoming an acceptable solution to the problem of language loss. But even that component of the traditional culture is commonly rejected by the young generation.

[Nic]piya ce noixhuihuitzin de macuil xihuitl yomocuicatiaya huan axxan ye ocachi ye hueyi, yocmo quinequi. [...] Huan yomocuicatiya, zan omocuicatiaya, pan ye [qui]zaloh, huan ye yomocuicatiya. Axxan niquillia mocuicati, amo quinequi, yocmo quinequi.

‘I have a five-year old granddaughter. She was already singing but now she is already older. She does not want [to do it] anymore. She was already singing. She was only singing. With it she learned, and she was already singing. Now I tell her to sing, [but] she does not want to. She does not want to anymore.’ (San Pedro Tlalcuapan, Tlaxcala, 2017).

Neh niquinilliah ma quimomachtican, pero amo quinequih, neh envecez niquinnotza iuhcon, iuhcon. Quientenderoah nomaz amo quinequih [...] En vez niquinillia iuhcon pero para quimomachtican, envecez pero zan nechittah, zan mocahuah tlachiztohqueh, amo nechilhuiah quema o amo, amo quinequih tlazalozqueh.

‘I tell them to learn, but they do not want to, I sometimes address them this way, this way [in Nahuatl]. They understand, but they do not want [to speak]. Sometimes I speak to them this way so that they will learn, sometimes, but they only look at me, they only keep looking, they do not tell me yes or no, they do not want to learn.’ (San Miguel Xaltipan, Tlaxcala, 2017)

Some internal attitudes perpetuate the forms of violence associated with language

loss and the sense of guilt and harm. For example speakers who had learned the language as children but abandoned its use as adults and did not raise their children as active speakers often blame them as the ones who refuse to speak:

Tlica opoliuh? Porque yocmo quinpactia [...] Los niños jóvenes se avergüenzan de nuestro idioma.

'Why has it disappeared? Because people do not enjoy it anymore. Children, the youth are ashamed of our language.' (San Francisco Tetlanohcan, Tlaxcala, 2017)

Paradoxically, with respect to children or grandchildren, speakers sometime use Nahuatl not as the language of affection but as the language of scolding. This practice reinforces its negative associations and lack of emotional attachment on the part of the youngest generations:

Queman yonicuala en vez [...] niquinahhua ica mexicano para amo quimomacazqueh cuenta tlen onon oniquinillih.

'Sometimes when I get angry I scold them in Nahuatl so that they will not realize what I have told them.' (San Miguel Xaltipan, Tlaxcala, 2017)

Convergent accommodation to Spanish speakers from both outside and inside native communities is a common direct consequence of prolonged symbolic violence, often reinforced by more overt forms of physical and psychological punishment and discrimination. While during the period of accelerated transition such language choices must have been strongly marked as the manifestation of affiliation or identification with a non-Indigenous group, today the usage of Spanish is the most obvious unmarked choice. Speaking Nahuatl would be a highly marked choice that is also triggered by convergent accommodation (cf. Giles, Coupland & Coupland 1991). Paradoxically, such behavior can be again linked to perceived power and status. When our international group of researchers, students and activists organized a field school in the community of San

Miguel Xaltipan in August 2017, with numerous Indigenous participants coming from different regions of Mexico, the main language used in our activities was Nahuatl. Our hosts, who use Spanish as their habitual language of communication, but had been socialized in Nahuatl as children and youths, began to reveal their differing language skills and tended to respond in the heritage language when addressed in it. For example, on seeing many foreigners and natives using Nahuatl in daily interactions and public performances, one of the event's waiters shyly decided to reveal himself as a Nahuatl-speaker and entered into direct interaction with the group. His skills, hidden in normal community life, turned out to be a clear asset in this context. The same occurred with other native speakers who were somehow involved in our collaborative activities, some of them coming from poorer, more isolated locations to work in the town. I witnessed a similar situation in Mexico City. After one of our Nahuatl workshops in the Mexican National Archive (Archivo General de la Nación) we entered a popular chain restaurant as a mixed group of foreigners and Indigenous participants speaking Nahuatl. One of the waiters—a young man coming from a Nahuatl-speaking community in the mountains of Puebla—surprisingly responded to us in Nahuatl and continued the conversation despite astonished looks of other staff members. Unfortunately, in both of these cases the fact that foreigners publicly spoke the language was probably the most decisive factor triggering language choice.

Responses to marginalization and cultural dispossession

Cultural dispossession is probably most profound and difficult to reverse or counteract if the language of the community is lost. In the case of the Nahuas and other Indigenous groups from Mexico this loss is grounded in colonial and postcolonial/modern oppression, including policies of discrimination and Hispanization as well as prolonged marginalization, directly linked to economic and social disadvantage. As pointed out by Bourdieu, “economic dispossession is combined with the cultural dispossession which provides the best apparent justification for economic dispossession” (Bourdieu 1984:

386-387). Another dimension of this process is the modern appropriation of Indigenous cultural heritage by the state, which constructs the ideology of a glorious preconquest past and simultaneously disassociates this heritage from today's 'impoverished' and 'hybridized' native groups. As has already been pointed out, this process of parallel appropriation and dispossession has continued since the foundational phase of the modern Mexican state. And its essential aspect is folklorization: reducing the presence of Indigenous cultures to more easily accepted and attractive forms of visual diversity, such as traditional dress, dance, crafts or food. The latter can be easily commodified and commercialized for the needs of the tourist market that emphasizes the cultural richness and uniqueness of Mexico. No place has been foreseen in these safe and accepted layers of folklorization for the use of Indigenous tongues or Indigenous knowledge, except for some easily recognizable 'labels' in native tongues, and occasionally bilingual publications, songs or even literary competitions proudly organized by state educational institutions for Indigenous children who are encouraged to recite poetry in their heritage languages but not to actually speak them.

This 'safe' reevaluation of heritage languages is also reflected and replicated at the community level by their symbolic and postvernacular uses that do not aspire to assume the communicative functions dominated by Spanish. Rather, as I have pointed out, they result from the profound psychological loss and harm that have not been yet addressed. Some of the elder community members would deny anything really happened, affirming there was neither pressure nor overt discrimination: everybody in the neighborhood just started to speak Spanish. This erasure of recent and painful experiences relating to the sociolinguistic dimension of the community's and individuals' lives fits well into a widely shared image of modernization and a peaceful transition to a better status. The latter has been widely associated with the current, better conditions of existence of the community, while the heritage language is the most visible sign of the previous state of existence, an iconization of backwardness, indexing the social status of *indios* as the lowest, most disadvantaged and retarded social group (cf. Irvin & Gall 2000: 37-38). Changing language ideology is often not enough to heal painful memories and counteract the erasure. Paradoxically, the postvernacular use of the heritage language seems to be one of the most easily accepted strategies for dealing with the current sociolinguistic


situation, especially with broken intergenerational language transfer and the impact of cultural dispossession.

Thus, similarly to racism and dominant language ideologies, folklorization of native cultures and languages is sometimes also internalized by members of Indigenous groups. This phenomenon has been called ‘self-folklorization’ and is seen as the result of prolonged symbolic violence and colonization, which reduces cultural differences to the level of esthetics, but replicates social inequalities and divisions. Thus, scholars have viewed it as an expression, in the language of the colonizers, of those who are in fact unable to challenge their subordinate position (Klekot 2014)². While this can certainly be true for some contexts, I don’t believe that it is a universal and, above all, a static phenomenon. This also refers to the symbolic or postvernacular uses of heritage languages. While such uses may be an initial response both to experienced harm and changing language attitudes, they can also become the seed of an actual language reclamation and revitalization, through its reevaluation and the questioning of the linguistic *status quo* in the community. Therefore, all such efforts should be valued and supported in collaborative research and activities with the speakers of endangered languages and their communities. Even symbolic forms of reclamation can carry the potential of transformation into powerful strategies against social degradation and cultural annihilation.

The same is true of other elements of Indigenous cultures, which are the common objects of folklorization and commodification. Thus, the heritage language can be brought into meaningful and powerful acts along with the use of local dress and the memory of traditional performative activities. Rather than examples of ‘imposed self-folklorization’ they can become important spaces for building positive ethnic and historical identities, asserting agency and pursuing decolonization. As an example I wish to share the experiences of several professional groups that participated in our 2017 language revitalization field school carried out in several Nahua communities in Tlaxcala and Puebla. Two come from San Miguel Tenango, Puebla: *Cihuatitzin Macehualmeh Matiquitinih* and *Macehualcihuatitzin tepaquilizmacanih*. The first gathers women who do traditional crafts and promote Nahua clothing; importantly, these are not just

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I thank Bałomiej Chromik for bringing this topic and this specific study to my attention.




for performance or for sale: they wear the clothing everyday, on principle. The second group performs traditional dances and songs in public. Two other organizations were established in San Francisco Tetlanohcan, Tlaxcala: the *Grupo de Tercera Edad* and the *Zohuameh Citlalimeh*. The first of them includes elderly people who have decided to spend some free time together and bring back the traditions they learned long ago from their parents and grandparents, now almost gone in the community. The *Zohuameh Citlalimeh* is a female song and dance group that has challenged the dominant language ideology by started to sing in Nahuatl in church. In the beginning they provoked many negative reactions in the community, which had cut off its Indigenous roots on its road to ‘modernization’. But the female organization grew and they also began to dance and gain appreciation outside the community, including in the United States (Nava Nava 2016b). How did it happen? San Francisco Tetlanohcan is probably the most depopulated Nahua community in Tlaxcala through massive immigration to the US. The young generations from a huge amount of the local families live there, and rarely, if ever, come back. Their parents, grandparents and family members usually stay in Mexico. Some of them decided to create new community links and ‘communities of practice’ (cf. Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992) and this is how the group was formed.

For both organizations in Tlaxcala, wearing traditional dress, singing Nahuatl songs and performing is an opportunity to socialize and gain recognition; it is also an opportunity to travel to the US and visit children as a professional group, which has happened several times so far. When they talk about their happiness and wellbeing, they relate it to the new bonds created in dance groups and performing together. In addition, the oldest people, often abandoned by their children and separated from their grandchildren, are re-evaluated as the last speakers and knowledge-holders. Throughout their lives, and especially in their youth, they have been despised, discriminated against; they had to abandon their traditional dress and hide their knowledge of the heritage language from the external world, including their own children. I had an opportunity to meet one of the leading members of the *Grupo de la Tercera Edad* in New Haven (Connecticut) when she was visiting her children and grandchildren. I addressed her in Nahuatl and we spoke. Her children were deeply shocked, and her daughter started to cry as she has never heard her mother speak Nahuatl. Now, in the context these people

are pursuing, their despised skills and knowledge have become essential social assets; now they have decided to bring them back as the tools and signs of their agency. While those performances, when looked at through the lens' of scholars, could be seen as instrumental spectacles aimed at achieving certain benefits or perhaps as examples of 'refolklorization', I argue they are means of empowerment, building a community of practice based in local identity and spaces of agency. They should be seen as an identity-construction process that challenges conquest, colonial oppression, assimilation and discrimination. Therefore, while it is necessary to be aware of the possible threats of folklorization and the commodification of local heritage, we should look at these different kinds of activities as opportunities for challenging economic marginalization and cultural dispossession of local communities.

The aforementioned organizations are clear examples of community-driven initiatives that embrace many ethnic groups in Mexico. Some of them are entirely grassroots initiatives. For example *La Cooperativa Tosepan Titataniske*, an Indigenous organization encompassing many Nahuatl and Totonac communities in the north-eastern mountains of Puebla, goes back to the 1970s. It aims at increasing local well-being, quality of life, control over resources and local cultural identity; hence the scope of action includes not only economic activities and needs, but also health and education, with special regard to preserving local languages and securing the autonomy of native teachers. When assessing multi-faceted grassroots initiatives, the potential of their educational aspects cannot be overestimated. Artistic performances can play a clearly important role in reevaluating local heritage and stimulating the agency of community members. However, place-based teaching strategies are indispensable for counteracting the loss of a heritage language. Such initiatives should take into account the challenges posed by the long-term pressures leading to assimilation and marginalization. They should also aim at overcoming the internalized forms of racism and dominant language ideologies that influence minority speakers' attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, new educational strategies must depart entirely from the path taken by state education, including both monolingual Spanish instruction and the alleged 'bilingual' and 'multicultural' programs that have become the most efficient tool of Hispanization in Indigenous communities. I believe new approaches can be most successful if they




combine immersive language instruction with teaching in the language and incorporating local systems of knowledge into the curricula. Among pioneering programs of this kind are the long-term grassroots initiatives of the Ayuuk (Mixe) communities in Oaxaca, whose members have been engaged in developing their own educational and language revitalization programs and activities. They teach not only how to read and write in Ayuuk, but also their history, mathematics, traditional culture, beliefs and oral traditions. They have been developing their own teaching methodology and their own educational materials, using the heritage language as the medium of instruction and discussion. Among the tangible and long-standing results are the local schools established as part of the initiative of the *Servicios del Pueblo Mixe* (Reyes Gómez 2005; 2018).

External institutions also provide support through initiatives and programs, often operated by educators from native communities, themselves speakers of heritage languages. One example is the *Project on revitalization, maintenance, language and cultural development* (PRMLCD), which created a revitalization corpus in a number of native languages in direct collaboration with speakers and activists. The project organized workshops on language revitalization based on promoting audio-visual tools to promote the teaching and use of endangered languages (Flores Farfán 2011). An extremely successful experiment in introducing immersion-based superior education in Nahuatl has been undertaken by the Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural in Sierra Zongolica, which offers classes linked to local heritage and sustainable development in Nahuatl, and supports the writing of theses and other materials in this language. Whereas most ‘intercultural universities’ in Mexico have programs on language and culture, they rarely use Indigenous languages as a means of instruction in the classroom. The bold initiative in Zongolica is one of very few exceptions. Among many obstacles its authors have to face are negative language attitudes shared by students from the region, and strengthened by local primary, secondary and high school systems, that also significantly reduce the language proficiency that students had acquired at home. When entering the program, many local students are ashamed to be speakers of Nahuatl and even deny such status. However, while advancing in their immersive studies, they experience a process of self-decolonization and empowerment (Sandoval Arenas 2016: 9-11). This educational experiment shows that the negative trends and their profound effects on

members of Indigenous communities, and especially the youngest speakers, can be successfully reversed and overcome by immersive teaching programs that integrate language instruction with local epistemologies and respond to the specific needs of local communities.

Working closely in Poland and Mexico with speakers of endangered languages, we have also developed together a number of collaborative strategies aimed at language revitalization and the development of spaces for Indigenous research, teaching and other activities (see e.g. Sullivan 2011; Olko & Sullivan 2014; 2016; Wicherkiewicz, Król & Olko 2018; Olko 2019). Our approaches embrace raising the prestige and promoting the teaching of local languages in both community-level and academic contexts; incorporating new speakers; publishing monolingual materials for learning and entertainment written by Indigenous scholars, activists and community members; working with Indigenous students as partners in research projects and supporting their practices of critical reflection and academic writing in their heritage languages; organizing capacity-building and empowerment workshops oriented toward a number of topics, such as language revitalization strategies and teaching methodologies. In the case of the modern Nahuas, of special significance to us has been the participatory reading and discussion (carried out in modern Nahuatl) of historical sources written in the colonial period by their ancestors in older Nahuatl, organized regularly since 2014 in close collaboration with the Mexican National Archive and local communities. This approach is based on new forms of collaboration and relationship between ‘professional historians’ and non-academics, including Indigenous students and activists. It has been inspired by participatory approaches to history as a vehicle of social justice (e.g. Rosenzweig 1998; Kalela 2012) and the notion of ‘historiographical criticism’ that is concerned with fundamental problems of the contemporary world and emphasizes the role of the past in shaping present agency and visions of the future, as well as the performative function of history and its strong pedagogical potential (e.g. Domańska 2007). The performativity has been essential also for our collaboratively developed artistic and educational activities such as theatrical works with school children from Indigenous communities that enhanced the visibility of speakers of local languages. Key ideas underlying these activities include not only the support for grassroots initiatives



and the empowerment of minority activists, but also the mobilization of external resources and engagement in the academy while seeking non-patronizing and equitable partnerships with communities. Showing the usefulness and value of endangered languages has also been an important goal and outcome of such initiatives.

As part of the marketing of language revitalization we have also focused on channeling empowering arguments to community members, parents and grandparents who have experienced language discrimination and violence. This strategy includes sharing the results of research on the increased cognitive potential and social skills of multilingual individuals as well as the impact of the use of the mother tongue, throughout the stages of an individual's development and education, on improvement in self-esteem and psychological well-being, allowing one to better deal with stress and experienced trauma or discrimination. What needs to be shared and communicated through educational strategies is also the fact that speakers of non-standard and non-national languages can positively influence the labor market. Users of languages other than the dominant/national ones should see themselves and be seen by potential employers as important assets for the cognitive potential of a workplace. And individuals who hold their ethnic origin in high-esteem will perform much better than those who are ashamed of their roots and who suppress communication in their mother tongue. Many language activists and Indigenous scholars have been able to make these important discoveries on their own, often as part of the difficult process of post-traumatic growth. As academics and educators we have important tools to contribute to this process on a much larger scale. However, an important dimension of this involvement should be constant self-reflection on the nature of our partnerships and collaboration with local communities, our ideological posture and the imperative of decolonization, including our practices, ways of conducting research and teaching and our ways of thinking.

Concluding remarks

As I have argued in this paper, the colonial and postcolonial history of the Nahuas and other Indigenous groups in Mexico, when viewed within the perspective of acculturation processes, shows a transition from integration and separation marked by strong ethnolinguistic vitality in the colonial period to marginalization and progressive assimilation in modern days. A key factor in these processes has been linguistic and educational policies. Their adverse impact was particularly salient after the creation of the independent Mexican state. Forced assimilation, cultural dispossession, negative language ideologies and the perception of the low status and lack of economic value of Indigenous languages have contributed to a rapid shift to Spanish. The acceptance of more positive language ideologies, both those originating outside the community and from local language activists, often leads to postvernacular usages rather than an actual linguistic revival. Real change in overcoming the colonial and postcolonial legacy can be achieved with decolonizing educational strategies that question the impositions of the national policy and assure safe spaces for cultural and linguistic reproduction and development.

Indigenous children who acquire their heritage tongue at home and then learn at school that it has no value, often choose to pursue a path to achieving a higher social position than their parents by speaking Spanish and learning English. It is quite unusual that after taking this path, they would come back to valuing and using Nahuatl. But it is not impossible. Empowerment and sound educational initiatives are of the utmost importance for assuring that such positive scenarios happen on a wider scale. Summing up this paper, I quote the testimony of a young and successful engineer from a Nahuatl-speaking family in San Miguel Tenango, Puebla, who decided to actively engage in developing his skills in the heritage language and promote its use in his home community:

Huan ne escuelah teilhuiah tlan ticnequi ticahciz ce tequitl cualli, ximonextili titlahtoz inglés. Huan ne onipeuh nimomachtia ingles. Huan opeuh, onyolhuih ce tonal, ni inglés tepitzin nelohhuih [...]. Huan nonyolhuih, pues ye nimonextilihtoc nitlahtoz inglés ¿huan nahuatl? Neh noiuhqui nicmati quen ce quihtoa, huan zan amo nicmati tlahcuiloz, amo nicmati queniuhqui niquihcuiloz, pero neh nicmati quenin caquizti. Huan oniquihtoh puz tlan nimonextilihtoc nitlahtoz inglés, noiuhqui ma nimonextili nitlahtoz, nitlahcuiloz huan nitlahtoz yec nomacehualtlahtol.

‘And at school they say that if you want to find a good job, teach yourself to speak English. So I started studying English. When I started, I said to myself one day, “This English is indeed difficult.” Then I said to myself, “So I am learning to speak English, and what about Nahuatl? I also know how to say [something], and I only do not know how to write it. I do not know how to write it, but I know how it sounds.” And I said. “So, if I have studied to speak English, I should also teach myself to speak, to write and to speak my language well.”’ (San Miguel Tenango, Zacatlan, Puebla, 2015)

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