

Linguistic Diversity in Mexico: The Gaps of “Multicultural” Celebration

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Linguistic rights for the Indigenous Peoples of Mexico was recognized by the Ley General de Derechos Lingüísticos de los Pueblos Indígenas in 2003.¹ This established a framework for the continuity, nurturing, and development of native languages. Additionally, the national law states that languages in Mexico are equal and “obligates” the government to offer all public services using Indigenous languages. Despite this new legal framework, in the public realm of society Spanish and English continue having prestige over Indigenous languages. Within its own law, the Mexican government is bound to provide services for Indigenous communities, including the strengthening of their languages; however, linguistic pluralism has not been encouraged by the very institutions and agents of the state. Indigenous languages have been underappreciated for many years, and reversing the negative ideologies is a challenging task. In order to offer a critical reflection on these issues, I will use the examples of Chatino languages spoken in southern Oaxaca, Mexico.

Mapping the Chatino

For the past 15 years, I have conducted research in the Chatino communities. The Chatino people have lived historically in what is known today as the state of Oaxaca, in Mexico. Regarding the issue of language, over the years I have seen how it is critically present in Chatino life both positively and negatively. I have observed how the youth claim their Indigenous identities and languages, helping to form their own sense of pride and agency in society. For the past decade, social media has been widely available in Chatino communities. Many young people are using social media to express their pride in their Chatino identity, but

most of their posts are written in Spanish. It appears that their sentiments are orally spoken in Chatino, but written in Spanish. The youth usually express through social media that they want to continue speaking their language, wearing their traditional clothing, and practicing their traditions. These beliefs are shared with Chatinos residing in the communities, other Mexican cities, and in the United States. One would wonder why individuals do not write in Chatino. In my view, the main reason is that Chatinos have not had the opportunity to study their own language. As a result, Chatinos write in Spanish. The majority of children in Chatino communities are literate in Spanish and not in their native language. Even with the linguistic law in Mexico that states that the speakers have the rights to be educated in their native language, this practice continues. Furthermore, it is common to use Spanish when dealing with public services (education, medicine, legal counseling).

Most schools in Mexico, particularly within the Chatino region, do not use Chatino as a language of instruction. Still, teachers promote dances and different forms of “folklore” surrounding Indigenous cultures. In many Chatino communities, children acquire Chatino as a first language. The first place they encounter Spanish is in school, as many parents send their children to school to become fluent in it. The fact that Chatinos parents want their children to learn Spanish is understandable, but also practicing and learning well their own language is a tie to their native culture.

Linguistic Discrimination and Educational Gaps

The eradication of native languages began many centuries ago, but with the arrival of schools, these languages were affected. In the twentieth century, the *castellanización* project created different mechanisms to integrate Indigenous communities into the larger mestizo Mexican society. During the 1960s and the 1970s state institutions hired Chatino speakers to become teachers. These teachers were placed outside of their linguistic areas, where they were obligated to speak the “common” language, Spanish. Unfortunately, this tradition has not changed in the state of Oaxaca. Teachers are placed in areas where they do not speak the linguistic variety of their native regions.

In Mexico, the gap in formal schooling between Indigenous peoples and mainstream non-Indigenous society is still a problem. After the Mexican Revolution, there have been attempts to bring schooling programs to Indigenous communities. However, the education system has discrepancies that range from linguistic exclusion and limited access to lack of admittance into upper-level education. Indigenous peoples’ educational marginalization is related to a number of interconnected factors, such as poverty, language barriers, and geographical isolation. Even though the federal government in Mexico recognizes that “there is a problem,” they have very unreasonable solutions. According to the Instituto Nacional de Evaluación Educativa (INEE), Mexico’s Indigenous schools are in worse condition than non-Indigenous schools.² One-fifth of Mexico’s Indigenous population is illiterate. In regions with the largest Indigenous population, students are more likely not to continue their education. The INEE’s study also includes the educational background of teachers, reporting that teachers in Indigenous schools do not have undergraduate degrees. However, the data on literacy that the INEE reports is focused only on the Spanish language. The INEE’s main concern is that there is a large illiterate population in Spanish, dismissing the question of illiteracy in Indigenous languages. This reflects the absence of a real support for native languages within the educational system in Mexico. In my view, there is a lack of understanding

concerning the importance of our languages not only in schools but also in our own Indigenous communities. There is little sign of support from the state, teachers’ unions, and the teachers who speak Chatino.

In the past, schools punished students if they spoke their Indigenous languages. According to my own mother, there were two types of punishments: the first one consisted of standing at the corner of the classroom, holding a brick with your hands facing up; and the second one targeted female Indigenous students: in this case, a male classmate would aggressively comb the girl’s hair. These acts were certainly uncomfortable for children, and clear exercise of colonial violence against them.

Linguistic discrimination is still happening in social settings in Mexico. When I was asked to give a presentation in the local middle school of my native village, I had the opportunity to discuss their educational experience with community members. My presentation was about the linguistic rights law that passed in Mexico in 2003. I started my talk by asking the teacher to read a small piece about the benefits of being multilingual, specifically the importance of speaking native languages. After the teacher’s speech, I recited the stipulations from the linguistic law, stating “NO ONE can tell you not to speak your native language. You can speak your native language in the streets, work, schools, church, anywhere, because this is a law. If someone tells you not to speak your language, this person is violating the law, and this is called linguistic discrimination.” I was not able to continue with the rest of the presentation because the students started to confront their teacher. I was not aware of this situation, nor was I expecting it. I tried to mediate between the students and the teacher. The students got up and told the teacher: “You write our names on the blackboard when we speak Chatino.” The teacher said that the parents agreed to ban Chatino from classrooms because the students were not respectful toward the teachers when they spoke Chatino with each other. I did not finish the presentation due to the fervent conversation between the students and the teacher.

That day I presented in three classrooms. The situation was similar, but I was more prepared as it seemed that the first teacher warned the other teachers to be prepared with a response to the students. During breaks, I asked students about their experience in classroom. I specifically asked the punishment that they would get once their name was on the blackboard. In this process, my presence at the middle school was not welcome by the teachers, but it was good for the students.

After the events, the principal of the school asked the parents and the local authorities to sign a document. The document stated that there was no linguistic discrimination in the school, and that what the students told me was a fabrication. In any case, during these controversial weeks the students had the opportunity to tell their teachers what their stance was on the linguistic rights of Indigenous peoples and their members. Both parties realized that language has power. The students perhaps made fun of their teachers in the Chatino language, but this would happen even if they only spoke Spanish. Young people have a tendency to be rebellious against people in power, in this case, their teachers. This experience is common across communities within Mexico, as my work with the youth has allowed me to hear their stories of linguistic discrimination.

How would one would feel if someone prohibited us to speak our native language and forced us to speak another language because they are in power? I asked the same question to the students who have gone through this experience. How do you feel speaking only Spanish to your friend when you both speak Chatino? Most of them said that it was very strange because they were used to speaking their native language to communicate with their peers.

Even though the students would get in trouble for using their native language in classrooms, there are many forms of expression that promote Indigenous cultures in local schools. This includes dances, music, feasts, and so on. February 19 is the Day of Native Languages. To celebrate this, some schools have mandated a “Native Language Day,” in which it is mandatory that the teachers talk about linguistic diversity in the classroom. I interviewed

Indigenous students about this day. A common shared story was that the teachers asked the students to translate a natural science text from Spanish into a native language. The students did not know much of the Spanish terminology of the text, so they were not able to finish the assignment. In many cases, teachers got upset at students because they had the “opportunity” to use their language in the classroom and they did not successfully use it. The student who shared his experience with me said that this happened not because they “didn’t want” to use their language, but that they didn’t know how to translate words unknown to them.

A Final Reflection

The celebration of linguistic diversity in the country has become a common trend in the narratives of a “multicultural” Mexico. However, the reality contradicts this celebratory narrative and unveils disparities and inconsistencies in regard to the status of native languages. The state of Oaxaca has 16 Indigenous languages, and most of the teachers in the local schools in these communities use Spanish as the language of instruction. Furthermore, Indigenous teachers are not assigned to work in areas where they can use their own Indigenous language. Instead, teachers are placed based on seniority, and as result they have to use the Spanish language in classrooms and in their interaction with parents. Many community members argue that the first place where Indigenous children encounter discrimination and learn that their language and their culture is not important is in schools.

Finally, what is most alarming about the cases presented here is that this is still occurring in different regions of Mexico, including the punishment of children for speaking their native languages. The education system in Mexico has shown incompetence to facilitate programs for linguistic diversity. The system is rapidly eliminating native languages and allows abusive, discriminatory, and racialized practices against the Indigenous youth in schools. Moreover, it is clear that the Mexican educational system is failing to provide effective schooling programs to Indigenous peoples. Mexico is linguistically diverse, officially.

The government recognizes 364 native languages in the country. Nevertheless, there is no suitable curriculum for Indigenous communities, as they use one curriculum for the entire country. This homogeneous curriculum is having a negative impact upon the present and future of Indigenous languages. Furthermore, it is inhibiting Indigenous Peoples from pursuing higher education. When the students complete high school, their level of writing and reading skills in Spanish is at an elementary school level due to the ineffective curriculum created by the state. This means that when native speakers from Indigenous communities apply to a university, they cannot compete with the non-Indigenous students. In my view, in the case of Mexico, it is crucial to work with parents, academics, social services providers, the state, and teachers concerning the impication of the 2003 law on linguistic rights, to create more awareness about and a true engagement in Indigenous languages.

Notes

¹ See http://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/257_200618.pdf.

² *Directrices para mejorar la atención educativa de niñas, niños y adolescentes indígenas* (Mexico City: INEE, 2017), <http://www.inee.edu.mx/images/stories/2017/directrices/Directrices4.pdf>. //