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Researchers Seek Ways to Preserve Indigenous Languages in Mexico

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There is strong concern in Mexico that indigenous languages are in danger of dying out if parents and teachers do not encourage younger generations to use these languages. A study by the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI) found that parents and teachers in indigenous communities have been promoting the use of Spanish over a native language. The study, based on information provided by the national statistics agency Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), divided each of Mexico’s indigenous languages into sets of age groups.

CDI anthropologist Ludka de Gortari said Maya, the second-most-spoken indigenous language in Mexico, after Náhuatl, was surprisingly also one of the languages that appeared to be losing the most ground. De Gortari, who spoke of the findings at a conference in Mexico City in early October, said many Maya speakers have the false idea that their children will go farther in life if they learn Spanish as their first language. The anthropologist pointed out that many Maya speakers, ironically, are unaware that learning the native language makes learning Spanish easier.

The CDI study found that Náhuatl is also rapidly losing speakers.

De Gortari added that Tzetzal and Tzotzil, spoken by indigenous communities in Chiapas, are the languages that are most learned by young people. This trend, she noted, is because of the high appreciation among Tzetzal and Tzotzil families for their ancestral traditions. The strong support for cultural preservation in indigenous communities in Chiapas is not surprising, since this has been a priority for the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN). As part of their negotiations with the government, the Zapatistas promoted implementing structures that would preserve indigenous culture (SourceMex, Feb. 21, 1996). The bill that Congress eventually approved was a watered-down version of the original agreement negotiated in 1996 (SourceMex, Aug. 22, 2001).

Very small percentage of Mexicans speak indigenous language

The issue of preserving indigenous languages has also come up in other forums. A study released by the Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas (INALI) earlier this year indicated that at least 64 or the 364 indigenous languages in Mexico are at risk of disappearing. In an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal, INALI director Javier López said part of the problem is that many of the languages are only spoken by 100 or fewer people. These languages include Kiliwa, spoken by members of a 10-person community in Baja California, and Diapaneca, used by only 21 people in community in Tabasco.

López said INEGI statistics indicate that only 7 million Mexicans, of a total population of 112 million (2010 census), currently speak some pre-Hispanic language. The INI director said a major problem is the discrimination suffered by Mexicans who speak a language other than Spanish.

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At a separate forum in Mexico City in August, researcher María del Carmen Fernández Chapou of the Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey (ITESM) said another obstacle is the lack of defined government policy to promote the preservation of indigenous languages.

Fernández Chapou said a lack of integration into society has hindered indigenous communities, and she urged the government to establish a policy where native tongues are taught concurrently with Spanish in these communities.

"There has never been a generalized policy to include indigenous languages in the public space, including the communications media," said Fernández Chapou. "How many communications outlets include an indigenous language?"

Fernández Chapou acknowledged that community radio stations exist in some communities. "Their role is very important, but many of these don’t even have the proper recognition," said the ITESM researcher.

In early October, the community of Tlahuitoltepec in Oaxaca state hosted a conference on community radio in indigenous organizations from the Americas. Adelfo Regino Montes, Oaxaca’s state secretary for indigenous affairs, said the purpose of the conference was for people from throughout the region to share their experiences and try to replicate their successes. Organizers said participants included representatives of indigenous communities in Colombia, Guatemala, Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Peru, Uruguay, Canada, the US, and several states in Mexico.

"These indigenous and intercultural radio stations have as an objective to preserve culture and indigenous languages while promoting community development," Regino Montes said in an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma.

Regino Montes said indigenous communities in Mexico are allowed to operate radio stations under the protection of Article 2 of the Mexican Constitution, which defines protections for indigenous rights and culture.

Still, despite these protections, some community radio stations in indigenous communities have been seen as threats by established powers (SourceMex, April 30, 2008).

Native languages on social media
A major obstacle in the protection of some indigenous languages has been the lack of an alphabet, as has been the case with Chatino, a language spoken by 20 small communities in rural Oaxaca. The Christian Science Monitor said that Hilaria Cruz—a doctoral candidate in linguistics at University of Texas in Austin and a native of one of the Chatino communities—recently helped develop an alphabet to aid in the preservation of languages. She now uses the alphabet to communicate on social media with friends and relatives in Oaxaca.

"Social media have become a crucial bridge between the academics, activists, and young people who want to preserve the more than 360 variants of indigenous languages alive in Mexico today and the communities who actively use them," said The Christian Science Monitor. "Many of these don’t have any formal written system, but a growing number of indigenous young people, computer savvy and sometimes far from home, want to Facebook, tweet, and chat in their native tongue. Both

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through social media, and perhaps because of it, they're joining a burgeoning movement to create alphabets and a way to write previously unwritten languages like Chatino.

Social media has changed the criteria to develop a written language. "In past years, the creation of a writing system was left to academics or local committees who were prone to interminable debates over minutia like whether there is a "p" in the Mixtec alphabet," Michael Swanton, linguist and director of the Oaxaca-based San Pablo Academic and Cultural Center, told The Christian Science Monitor. "It's taken the issue of writing a language out of the committees and the classroom and put it more and more into the hands of the people writing every day."

There are more than 140 indigenous or minor languages currently on Twitter, said Kevin Scannell, a professor in the department of math and computer science at Saint Louis University. Scannell—who has advised a social media company on how to make its coding more friendly to the symbols sometimes used in indigenous tongues—said usage varies according to the language. Some of the more popular languages have attracted as many as 300,000 users, while others are just starting to become popular. These include Náhuatl, which at present has about 17 users.

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