

# Agency and Ideology in Language Shift and Language Maintenance<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

A common understanding of language shift in popular western culture, in some endangered language speech communities, and often among professional linguists, is that speakers choose to give up one language for another, achieving personal gain (such as an economic advantage) for this exchange. The language given up may be thought to be "no longer advantageous" said to have a "decreased efficacy" in the community (Grenoble and Whaley 1998, 22). Two ideologies underlie this popular understanding of language shift and influence both the ways we document endangered languages and devise applied linguistic projects for language maintenance in endangered language communities. The first of these ideologies finds agency, an ability to act in the world, emanating from rational individuals, who are motivated to maximize their own gain. The second ideology is one where monolingualism is assumed to be the normal state for individuals and communities. Here language shift is seen as the exchange of one language for another. Under the influence of this ideology, bilingualism is seen as a transitional state—a temporary waypoint—while the population moves from one monolingual state to another, such that "bilinguals" are believed to be always becoming "monolinguals."

A challenge to scholars conducting research on situations of cultural change (like language shift and language maintenance) is to recognize that what may seem to be an uncontroversial understanding about the motivations for change may in fact be biased in the

ideological position of the analyst's representation.<sup>2</sup> This challenge has formed part of a reflexive critique within anthropology, where some scholars have worked to make explicit the ideologically positioned observer's condition and question what seem to be "common sense" understandings of culture, as well as motivations for cultural maintenance and cultural change (see for some examples Asad 1973, Clifford 1988, and Clifford & Marcus 1986). This critical assessment was not unique to Anthropology, but formed part of a general reaction across a number of disciplines against structuralism for its failure to account for people's actions and for structural change. The critique has since become part of the canon of anthropology to which students are indoctrinated.

Various social scientists have argued that agency, rather than the free will of an individual acting from a rational position, is emergent in social practice (Ahearn 2001, 2000, Bourdieu 1972, Giddens 1979, Ortner 1996). Actions are socioculturally constrained in both the possibility of their deployments and in their effects. From this perspective individuals are not simply free agents of their actions but are positioned subjects. Ahearn (2000, 13) writes, "The level of analysis appropriate for scholars interested in agency should not automatically be considered to be the individual, since such a tight focus on individual agency is likely to render invisible larger social structures...that shape possibilities for, and types of, agency." Consider, for example, how access to the right to vote restricted by gender or race delimits both individual and group agency in political decision-making. Acts that change and sustain a society are situated in the social and cultural matrices of which persons are a part rather than solely in individuals. It is thus problematic to assume agency is located solely in individual action. Even an individual's ability to contribute to the flow of information in conversation is contingent upon

the interactional matrix of institutions and participation roles presupposed in the speech event (Mannheim and Tedlock 1995). Agency is emergent in practice and not reducible to individuals or societies.

It is also problematic to assume monolingualism is a natural human state. Through cross-cultural accounts it has become clear that most of the world's populations are multilingual. Monolingualism is rather an ideological norm that rests on a recent history of nation-state formation in which a particular language often became a sign of a particular nation, and on ideas of linguistic tribalism, where geopolitical units linked to a territory were thought to be correlated with linguistic units. Linguistic anthropologists have argued against such assumptions that necessarily link languages with social units in a history that includes such well-known work as Franz Boas' separation of language, culture, and race into three independent variables, as well as Dell Hymes' (1968) argument against the then still generally accepted notion that tribes could be reliably be defined on linguistic bases. Still, however, the common understanding of language shift is that of a speaker's choice to exchange one language for another to provide some advantage with the loss of a language described as the loss of a culture. It may be, but this is not a necessary entailment.

I wish to argue here that the agency represented in a speaker's choice between language shift and language maintenance is a contingent agency based on the past history of community practice and on its social organization. Individual speakers model their choices for action in historical models for social interaction. My account draws on Sahlins' (1981) understanding that processes of cultural change are themselves ordered by cultural logics, which can vary in time and space. In considering the way that the arrival of Captain Cook interfaced with the history and mythology of the Hawaiians, Sahlins wrote that "[t]he great challenge to an historical anthropology is not merely to know how events

are ordered by culture, but how, in that process, the culture is reordered. How does the reproduction of a structure become its transformation?" (1981, 8). In studying cultural change, we should recognize that what may look like the same event on the surface (e.g. a postcolonial language shift) may have very different motivations in different historical situations. I will present two examples that illustrate how different community practices contributed to the shift to Spanish monolingualism in one community and the maintenance of Zapotec-Spanish bilingualism in the other. In both communities we can observe that speaker choices had great effect on the outcome. The choices were not free choices but were rather modeled on the local histories and constrained by the social and political organizations of the communities. For such reasons, I make the case that applied linguistic work in endangered language communities must include analyses of the cultural framing of speakers' language choices. Such understandings can better allow researchers to theorize the agentive roles in language shift that can be distributed among speakers, communities, and the institutions linking them to larger social groups, and to apply this knowledge to language maintenance in specific ethnographic situations. I thus argue that a quick and ready typology of language shift that we can apply consistently across cultures, does not exist, and that it is only through dedicated, long-term ethnographic work in and with particular speech communities that a maintenance effort can be designed to fit a specific situation.

## 2. The Ethnographic Region

I draw the information for this paper from twenty-six months of fieldwork I conducted between the years of 1997 and 2005 in a multilingual region of the Sierra Sur of Oaxaca, Mexico. During numerous field seasons ranging in length from several weeks to 12

months, I documented linguistic structure and practice as well as metalinguistic knowledge, local histories, and the social relationships among networks of towns linked through marriage, kinship, and the ritual kinship of co-parenting known as compadrazgo. The region is a border zone between several Zapotecan languages and several Mixtecan languages, with Spanish spoken across the whole area. Predominantly Spanish speaking communities are either colonial foundings known in the historically indigenous towns as pueblos piratas or are towns where an indigenous language was once spoken and where the population has shifted to the national language.

While an area of great linguistic diversity, the people in the area used no names for the languages other than Spanish (a.k.a. *Castellano*), and *Dialecto*, meaning dialect or more popularly, a non-language, defined by its not being written (or believed to not be writable), by not having literary art forms, or by just being Indian. Some referred to what they spoke more broadly as *Idioma*, a generic word for 'language'; or generally as *Zapoteco*, or *Mixteco* (ethnonyms referring to language families); others asked me (the linguist) what language I thought they spoke.

Out of sixteen indigenous towns in this mountainous area of Oaxaca, twelve have shifted to Spanish recently enough that some elder speakers remain who can speak Zapotec and tell the story of its loss. Shift has been rapid and recent but has stopped short of a complete sweep, leaving four towns where the language was in strong use in 2005. Historically, the region was multilingual but has become mostly monolingual, with the vast majority of towns adopting Spanish-only linguistic practices within the last 50 years. I contrast here two towns from this region in the year 2005: Asunción Mixtepec, a Spanish speaking town where seven elder speakers of Zapotec live, and Santa María Lachixío, where the children are growing up bilingual in Zapotec and Spanish.

While monolingualism is becoming more popular across the Mexican nation, Oaxaca, like many regions of Mesoamerica, has a long (pre)history of multilingualism. For example, Campbell, Kaufman, and Smith-Stark (1986) evaluate several widespread linguistic features that define a Mesoamerican linguistic area and can only be explained through stratified multilingual practices among the prehistoric populations.

Addressing more recent times, Hill and Hill (1986) describe structured bilingualism in central Mexico between the indigenous language of Mexicano and the national language of Spanish. The current multilingual situation opposes local languages to Spanish in a hierarchical relationship, with Spanish dominating the public media, education, trade, and politics. The situation in Oaxaca is very similar to the situation that Hill and Hill (1986) describe among Mexicano speakers of central Mexico. Like many indigenous populations of Mexico, most Mexicano speakers up until the late 20th-century have practiced what Hill and Hill term a "syncretic project," a blending of the speech practices of two languages that allowed Mexicano speakers to adapt to the changing sociopolitical circumstances that brought them into intensive contact with Spanish. Through practices of bilingualism, code-switching and extensive borrowing from Spanish, speakers of Mexican indigenous languages resisted an outright shift to Spanish monolingualism for centuries—a shift that would also have symbolized an ideological shift away from an indigenous identity.

### 3. Geographies of language shift

On my first trips to southern Oaxaca, I was surprised to find that the most remote mountain towns I visited had all shifted to Spanish but more central towns had maintained Zapotec. We would normally expect the opposite: that a community's remoteness would help maintain traditional practices like language reproduction. This is indeed what we find in

many language shift situations, such as Welsh, for example, where the most remote regions were also the most resistant to language shift (Parry and Williams 1999). I found rather that small remote pueblos in the region of my fieldwork were more likely to have given up their indigenous languages than the more central and larger pueblos, such as the larger population of Lachixío for example, where the children grow up today speaking Zapotec.

This pattern, where the people of a more remote, less metropolitan town shift to monolingualism in the national language while the people of a more metropolitan and central town resist the shift has been observed in another Zapotec area of the state of Oaxaca. Thomason (2001, 83) cites Paul Kilpatrick's personal communication of a contrast between two Zapotec towns in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Kilpatrick noted that in the large Zapotec town of Juchitán, he observed little Spanish being spoken during his fieldwork. However, in a remote mountain town about a two-hour bus ride from Juchitán, only men over 40 still spoke Zapotec. The more remote town was obviously undergoing a rapid shift to Spanish led by women.<sup>3</sup> Kilpatrick reported that the local women decided to speak only Spanish instead of Zapotec so their children would learn enough Spanish to get jobs at a nearby cement factory an hour away. Thomason uses the example to show how contrasting attitudes toward the national language could result in different outcomes in a language-contact situation—the militantly Zapotec community of Juchitán maintaining Zapotec even when access to Spanish was easier because of its centrality and the remote mountain town shifting to Spanish because Spanish becomes valued for economic advancement. (See also Karstedt, this volume, for a consideration of economic factors leading to shift).

While the example does show how attitudes can affect the outcome of a language-contact situation, and I do not want to rule out individuals'

economic motivations to abandon Zapotec for Spanish in this case, I think that the rational explanation of the shift and maintenance offered by Kilpatrick focuses too much on individual agency and, following Ahearn (2000), it renders invisible the larger social structures that shape possibilities for the women's agency in shifting languages. The account leaves me with some questions about their social actions: What social organization allowed the women to act in their decision? Did they act together or was the community language shift the outcome of many individual decisions? Why was the choice of the women one of monolingualism rather than bilingualism? Where did the women learn their Spanish? What does enough Spanish mean? What role did the national education system play?

This last question comes up again and again in considering the recent language shifts in Mexico. (For examples of the interaction of national education systems with endangered languages in other parts of the world, see Kazakovigh and Lindweer, this volume. Lindweer shows that such interaction does not have to be detrimental and can leave us optimistic about the potential role of the state in language maintenance). One of the larger social processes that has contributed to the ideologically charged relationship between the national language and the indigenous languages of Mexico has been the national education program as developed and implemented in post-revolutionary Mexico. In both towns of Kilpatrick's example, as well as in Asunción and Iachixío, the national education system was working to bring Spanish in as a common language for the Mexican nation. The practices of teachers as agents of the government and reactions of the townsfolk to their interventions play important roles in the case studies illustrated in this chapter. In analyzing my cases, I choose to make this background explicit.



#### 4. Universal Spanish-language education in the latter half of the 20th-century

Language shift in Mexico has clearly accelerated in the last sixty years. Numerous factors have contributed to this including infrastructural changes like the building of roads and the electrification of rural towns, allowing an intensified contact between Spanish speaking populations and Indigenous populations through mass transit and mass media. Strong influences on cultural changes have also been exerted by the expansion of state institutions, like public health and public education. In the 1940s the importance of showing a national unity of will intensified for Mexico and other nations that were aligned on one or the other sides of WWII. Mexico was in a position then that it has been in several times since (including today), displaying a national unity of will in a world at war by means other than troop contributions.<sup>4</sup> Note here how the agency of the Mexican executive and legislature was contingent upon the world of nations that was the audience and the actions of previous Mexican statecraft, which provided the backdrop. With a great diversity of indigenous languages inside its borders, Mexico's project for national Spanish literacy and universal Spanish language education demonstrated the will for one unified Mexican voice, expressing the ideological "one-to-one" relationship where unity-of-language was taken to indicate unity-of-nation.

After a post-revolutionary period that experimented with bilingual education through the Lázaro Cárdenas administrations of the 1930's and which allowed for bilingual education (at least on paper) through the mid-1940's while Torres Bodet was secretary of education, the new national policy under the administration of Miguel Alemán and his secretary of education Manuel Gual Vidal put bilingual education aside in an attempt to quickly reduce the "problematic" diversity of languages within the nation (Heath 1972). While little of Oaxaca had benefited

from the previous national experiments with bilingual education, the new policies favored monolingual Spanish language education in even the most rural reaches of the nation. Bilingual education was seen to be in direct conflict with the goals of the 'Emergency Law for Spanish Literacy' and was not quickly producing the universal Spanish literacy that would symbolize a unified Mexican nation to the world stage.

In the Sierra Sur before the 1940's, the local town governments arranged Spanish-language education with private teachers. By 1947, government teachers were residing in Lachixío and Asunción, at least part-time as they often worked a cycle of towns in a region. They were in charge of Spanish instruction to the second grade level, the highest level offered by the state at the time. Teachers varied greatly in quality, in how often they would show up, and in the level of violence they would use in the classroom to ensure the valorization of Spanish and denigration of Zapotec. In Asunción, these experiences caused wounds that still affected some elders I met during my fieldwork: like the old man who was beaten on his legs in his youth and who could be seen in the church before services Sunday mornings rubbing his legs with church candles; or the man who showed me the lump of a wrist bone displaced from a beating on the day he decided to leave school for good. While illiterate in Spanish, he still speaks Zapotec today, a situation he shares with the other six elders who spoke it in Asunción during my fieldwork. All of them either left school after a short time, or never attended the Spanish language school at all.

This section has pointed to the educational institutions in the background of language change in Oaxaca, the next section shows how the introduction of specific educational practices interacted with traditional cultural practices to affect local language shift and language maintenance.

## 5. "The structure of the conjuncture:" cultural traditions in the face of universal Spanish education

Sahlins' discussion of the structure of the conjuncture is a discussion of agency in social change because "the relationships generated in practical action, although motivated by the traditional self-conceptions of the actors, may in fact functionally revalue those conceptions." (1981, 35). He theorizes historical change from the privileged vantage of cultural contact, where the received system most clearly enters into a meaningful dialectic with cultural practice to bring about cultural change beyond the intentions of any actor (1981, 33).

This section presents an account of community actions contributing to either shift or maintenance. In both cases the history of social practices provides a framework for speakers' agentive actions in response to the ideological and material pressures introduced with the government practices designed to produce unified Mexican national subjects out of a rural indigenous diversity. The first case considers practices of linguistic exogamy and endogamy. The second case considers practices of political autonomy and democratic decision-making.

### 5.1. Multilingual genealogies

One striking geographic fact about language shift in this region of the Sierra Sur is that all of the towns bordering on mutually unintelligible languages have shifted to Spanish monolingualism. Genealogical research I conducted in Asunción Mixtepec demonstrates affinal links between Asunción and surrounding towns that speak other Zapotec languages and Mixtec languages. It is convincing that, in this sub-region of Oaxaca, intermarriage between speakers of mutually unintelligible indigenous languages contributed to their language shift

to Spanish. An informal linguistic exogamy between pueblos at language boundaries produced families where each parent natively spoke either of two mutually unintelligible Zapotec languages or a Mixtec language. I call this "informal linguistic exogamy," because there was no cultural mandate to marry with someone from outside of the linguistic group, rather, with small populations, it was very common that partners were chosen from nearby pueblos where a distinct language was dominant. Thus, the situation is different from some of the most formal linguistic exogamy known in the ethnographic literature, such as is found in the Vaupés region across the frontiers of Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil. For the Vaupés, Sorenson (1967) and Jackson (1974) described a multilingual ecology maintained through marriage outside of ones patrilineally defined linguistic group.

Lachixío has a larger population base than Asunción. In the mid-20th-century the population was around 1000 people compared to less than 400 in Asunción. Lachixío, at the center of its language area, is also located between two towns with intelligible speech. Marriages there were mostly linguistically endogamous (with a partner who speaks a mutually intelligible variety). Asunción is located between two mutually unintelligible Zapotec languages and a Mixtec language. In contrast to Lachixío, marriages in Asunción were more often linguistically exogamous, extending to the towns where the popular language was mutually unintelligible.

Through such an informal linguistic exogamy, towns at the borders between languages participated in exchanges of membership that forced family and individual decisions about what language, or languages, to use in the socialization of children. Here individual agency was structured in the cultural practices of marriage exchange. Culturally patterned action begot and delimited individual action. All of these border towns shifted to Spanish together in the second half of the

twentieth century, an era after which Spanish became the common second language of rural Mexico through universal Spanish-language education. Across Mexico, bilingualism between an indigenous language and the national language displaced local patterns of multilingualism among and between neighboring pueblos. Whereas in the recent past linguistically exogamous marriages would produce indigenous multilingualism or shifts between indigenous languages, now Spanish, the common second language given by the movement for national literacy, provides the common denominator, a default language for child rearing among parents who natively spoke different indigenous languages. Given the traditional social practice of informal exogamy, shift to Spanish was almost automatic with little room for individual agency. The interaction between the cultural structuring on the part of the national education institution and the cultural structuring of local marriage exchanges together contributed to the structured transformation of multilingual indigenous practices to monolingualism in the national language.

This is a case where a traditional social practice, like marriage exchange, interfaced with a modern development, like generalized bilingualism in the national language, to contribute to language shift. This is not to say that this was the only reason for language shift, but that this was a contributing factor, one of many no doubt, and one in which agency was constrained in the historical interaction between local and national practices. The example I want to consider now, shows how a history of community autonomy and democratic practices may have made a difference in Lachixío's resistance to language shift, helping to maintain multilingualism in the Lachixío community.

## 5.2. Contesting ideologies of monolingualism

In addition to greater access to the national language, the teachers coming to rural Mexican pueblos from the major cities brought

with them ideologies of monolingual norms (one-to-one mappings of language to culture, language to nation, and language to individual). Speakers in the Sierra Sur told me that some teachers claimed that bilingualism was bad for both individuals and languages, because learning Spanish would take more time; and because the languages would affect each other, becoming "tangled" and "mixed." Parents were told that avoiding the use of Zapotec and speaking Spanish at home would help their children advance in school, itself often taken as a primary sign of cultural advancement. Note the parallel here to the Zapotec town in Kilpatrick's description.

People in both Asunción and Lachixío reported that teachers spoke directly with individual parents, suggesting that they raise their children monolingual in Spanish and thus prepare them for the monolingual Spanish education they would receive in school. Several speakers in Lachixío reported that the parents there formed a committee that met to discuss the teachers' suggestion, bringing the contrast between bilingualism and monolingualism to public attention through meetings between parents and between parents and teachers in which the parents worked together as a democratic block to oppose the teachers. The following segment of a transcript is from a man's recollection about these events. Consider particularly the verb txé'e (line 4), which foregrounds the indirect discourse of the teachers. This verb specifically means 'to exchange one thing for another', which indexically refers to the teachers' ideology of monolingualism, where the choice provided by the teachers was of one language being exchanged for another.

(1)

1. Bèe padre de famíllya oyo'o tòkko reunyón	The heads of family had a meeting
2. liññi salón shkwélla nóo	in the school house because
3. nìi arkì' bèe olla shkwélla nóo	the teachers wanted that
4. <u>txé'e</u> dya'llo	Zapotec was exchanged (for Spanish because)
5. netemàa nekka atrasáado bèe endò'	it was making the children fall behind

The parents decided to tell the teachers that the parents spoke Zapotec and would continue to do so. They further informed the teachers that the parents did not speak Spanish well and that the teachers were in town to teach the children Spanish, so the teachers should not expect the parents to teach the children Spanish. Their resolution was that the children would learn both languages as shown in the following.

(2)

1. Láa zella bèe zxà enze'e	No, they didn't want that
2. mejóora nìi ka'	better to speak here
3. nzekka né shkwasya'	leaving it the same
4. nìi ka' bèe endò' dya'llo noo	The children speak here Zapotec and
5. nìi bèe ì distílla	they speak Spanish.

This move on the part of the parents speaks in several ways towards questions of agency. First, we see the cultural construction of different types of agents. The parents did not see themselves as capable agents for instructing their children in Spanish. It was made clear by the examples cited and by several repetitions throughout this

narrative that the parents saw the teachers as the actors responsible for, and capable of, Spanish instruction. The teachers did not offer their own agency in learning to speak Zapotec. The organization of parents itself follows a history of communal decision-making that is strong in Lachixío, an agency localized in an identity of community autonomy independent from the state and distributed in the democratic processes historically practiced in the town.

The parents acted together to contest the idea of Spanish monolingualism at home and support the idea of bilingualism in the community as seen in the transcription in (2). This communal act both raised awareness of bilingualism itself and gave parents all over the community a model on which to base their linguistic behavior, interactive practices that were sanctioned as community practice. Agency here is both emergent from and modeled on the communal action the heads of families took in the meeting. The agency of individuals is contingent here upon the agency of the group, and of an institutional agency embedded in the history of social practices that provides for such committees of townsfolk to organize.

Asunción had no such meetings. The town provided no collective model to counter the national institution supposedly represented in the teachers. In contrast to the community response of Lachixío, a response that linked the families of the community through the local democratic process, Asunción's response to the teachers was not collective and families shifted one-by-one to Spanish monolingualism.

Thus Lachixío and Asunción differ historically in community practices. While today both towns make many decisions through community assemblies in which the heads of families gather, local decision-making has a longer and stronger tradition in Lachixío spanning to before the Spanish conquest, where Lachixío was a relatively autonomous town center. Asunción has always been dominated by the larger nearby



community of San Bernardo Mixtepec of which it reportedly was founded as a small military outpost to guard the frontier with the Mixteca (Oudijk 2000). Its autonomy from San Bernardo seems to be a relatively recent occurrence. Here again the different actions taken by individuals in Asunción and Lachixío are contingent upon community organizations, histories, and cultural models.

This account illustrates just a few factors that contributed to the Language shift in Asunción and the resistance to shift in Lachixío. Interactions between teachers and townspeople differed crucially in Lachixío, whose people organized a metadiscourse about the discourse on language in town; one that contested the ideas of monolingualism represented in the teachers.

## 6. Discussion

All but a few elders today in Asunción are monolingual Spanish speakers. According to government policy only these elders are of Zapotec ethnicity. Language is the primary sign in Mexico for ethnicity. At the time of my fieldwork, Lachixío was still maintaining Zapotec-Spanish bilingualism. Zapotec was the primary language of the household and Spanish was learned, for the most part, in school from kindergarten on. It needs to be noted, however, that during my fieldwork I observed young mothers in Lachixío "double talking" to their infant children providing Spanish glosses for the mothers' Zapotec speech. When I asked why they were doing this, several responded that it was so their children would be better prepared for the Spanish-language school.

I should add here a note regarding the differences between the teachers of the past characterized by speakers who lived through those times and the teachers I encountered in the Sierra Sur. While the teachers in these towns still do not originate in these towns and are

monolingual Spanish speakers from the city, some teachers explicitly supported bilingualism among the populations, a factor that reflects the wider social changes in teacher training and middle-class values. In Lachixío some primary and secondary school teachers have even learned a few phrases of Zapotec to use in the classroom. While the Zapotec phrases are token gestures since all instruction is in Spanish, there is no longer from some teachers the explicit antagonism that speakers described among previous generations of teachers who would never have admitted Zapotec into the classroom at all. Some teachers do still believe that bilingualism harms children's abilities to learn Spanish and express this view publicly, but, gratefully, this seems to be a minority opinion.

## 7. Conclusion

The case studies I presented here support a concept of agency in which action is structured through historical social practices and language shift was shown to be the displacement of a bilingual norm for a monolingual norm by the adoption of an ideology of monolingualism rather than the exchange of one language for another. Language maintenance in Lachixío is the direct result of the public adoption of an ideology of bilingualism that contested the national ideology where one language was offered as a sign of a unified nation.

I began to approach questions of agency in social change because my field situation presented me with data that could not be explained by rational choice models of language shift and I needed to look elsewhere. In graduate school I trained in both linguistics and anthropology programs completing the core curricula of both disciplines. I found that the canon we are expected to engage in linguistics does not include much of the post-structural critique, or social theory in general. As a linguist coming as well from the ethnological tradition of anthropology,

a contribution that I believe linguistic anthropologists are positioned to make to endangered language research is to bring some specific lessons and histories from debates in ethnology and social theory to bear on questions about language shift and language maintenance and make them available to a wider audience of linguistic scholarship. This chapter is an attempt toward this task, illustrated by an analysis of language shift and language maintenance from my work in a Zapotec region of Mexico. The examples I present contradict popular understandings of agency in language shift. They support a concept of agency in which action is structured through historical social practices, and where language shift in Oaxaca is better understood as the displacement of a bilingual norm by a monolingual norm through the adoption of an ideology of monolingualism rather than simply the exchange of one language for another.

Many of the issues in understanding "language shifts" are not new but are rather classical themes of social theory that include questions about "free will and determinism, agency and structure, interpretation and explanation" (Karp 1986,134). While the focus on language shift and the documentation of endangered languages has gained (or regained) its popularity in linguistics only recently, we should recognize the parallels to questions of cultural change that have been long asked in anthropology and pool our resources to analyze situations and histories of language shift and language maintenance. One of the lessons we have learned along the way is that "it is crucial that scholars interested in agency consider the assumptions about personhood, desire, and intentionality that are built into their analyses" (Ahearn 2000, 14). Linguistic anthropologists are in a position to turn to linguistics, on the one hand, where there is a tendency to privilege individual agency, and on the other hand, to turn to political and social scientists, where there is a tendency to privilege the agency of social institutions—a

separate task which is beyond the scope of this chapter. Linguistic anthropologists with an arm in social theory and an arm in linguistic theory are well positioned to bring social theory and an ethnographic perspective to bear on questions of language endangerment. This is an obligation, which I have taken up regarding some questions of agency and ideologies in language shift and maintenance raised in a Zapotec region of Oaxaca.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> For work that considers locations of agency in language maintenance and shift, including roles for both children and adults, see Hinton 2001, Kulick 1992, and Meek 2007.

<sup>3</sup> See Gal 1978 for a discussion of a language shift led by women.

<sup>4</sup> The Mexican constitution forbids the contribution of troops for foreign interventions.

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