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WHERE SHOULD WE LEARN OUR NATIVE LANGUAGE? FOUR CASES OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN LATIN AMERICA

This research was presented at the colloquium “The fate of linguistic heritage: transmitted to the younger generations or lost?” held at the RAS Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences in May 2021. My presentation was a short overview of the language acquisition patterns within four indigenous communities in Latin America, speakers of the following indigenous languages: South Eastern Huastec (Mayan, Mexico), Tsotsil of San Isidro de la Libertad (Mayan, Mexico), Huilliche/Tsesungun (Mapudungan, Chile) and Mixe (Mixe-Zoquean, Mexico).

I carried out extensive fieldwork and research with these communities (more details can be found in Kondic 2021, Kondic 2021 (forthcoming), Kondic 2015b, Kondic 2014a, Kondic 2014b, Kondic 2011b, Kondic 2010). At the moment my research concentrates on the sociolinguistic situation with the language Mixe (Mixe-Zoquean, Mexico), namely, on their language attitudes.

During each of these four projects I produced learning materials to facilitate language teaching and revitalization (Kondic 2009b, Kondic 2016, Kondic 2015a, Kondic 2013b, Kondic 2015c, Kondic 2018b). The materials I produced and left in the communities are now being used for language teaching and maintenance.

In this article I am going to present my insight into the patterns of native language learning within the above four communities. Many of Mexican indigenous languages are at present in decline and falling into disuse. Language endangerment often causes interruption in the process of language transmission, and it will be interesting to see what the situation is like within these different languages of Latin America that I had an opportunity to work with.

Keywords: *language acquisition, indigenous languages, language endangerment, Mayan, Mapudungan, Mixe-Zoquean, Latin America.*

I South Eastern Huastec (Mayan, Mexico)

South Eastern Huastec (in further text HSF), or as they call themselves, Teenek, is a Mayan language of Mexico, spoken as a native language by about 12000 people in La Huasteca, in the north of the state of Veracruz (Glottolog code huas1242, ISO code is ISO 639-3:hus). This language is considered endangered because it is not transmitted to new generations anymore; there is hardly anyone under 50 years of age who can speak it.

The Huastec have lived there since the split from the rest of the Maya a couple of thousands years ago. The HSF variety has never been described in detail or documented by modern digital means before. Besides the village of San Francisco Chontla, where I was based, HSF is spoken in some other villages of the same municipality (Las Cruces, Arranca Estacas, Encinal) and also in Chinampa, Amatlan and Tamiahua. There are four members of the Huastecan branch of the Mayan languages: HSF, Huastec of San Luis Potosi (HVA), Huastec of Veracruz (HUS), and the extinct Chicomuceltec (COB). According to INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, Mexico) 2015, there are 173 765 speakers of Huastecan languages.

Being isolated from the rest of the Maya for thousands of years, Huastec has lost some of the typical Mayan features (directionals, object incorporation, split ergativity) and has developed some innovations (TAM suffixation, inverse alignment, extensive usage of the middle voice, among others; for more see Kondic 2019, Kondic 2017, Kondic 2011a,). The usage of HSF is restricted, it is used mostly in the family setting. HSF has never been taught in schools. There are no HSF courses for adults in the area, there are no media in HSF.

Language acquisition within the Mayan family has been researched so far by several authors (Pye at al. 2017, Pye at al. 2014, for instance), most often with an interest in the acquisition of a

particular grammatical topic (Pye et al. 2005 on acquisition of ergativity in Mayan, Brown 1989 on children's first verbs in Tzeltal, Brown and Levinson 1993 on acquisition of space in Tzeltal, De León Pasquel 1994 and 1997 on acquisition of space terms in Tzotzil, De León Pasquel 1999 on acquisition of verbs, or De León Pasquel et al. 2001 on acquisition of Spanish in comparison to Mayan languages and Euskera, to mention just a few). However, HSF pattern hasn't been researched in greater detail.

South Eastern Huastec had never been documented before and the data base created during this project and archived with the ELAR SOAS London (Kondic 2009) represents its unique record. It was a collaborative, community based documentation project that started in 2007 and went for several years. Rhodes and Campbell (2018:117) point out that language documentation projects almost never lack a language revitalization component, so I also found it important to facilitate the community efforts to revitalize and maintain their language. During my field work in San Francisco I offered two orthography workshops to the community. And all the collected data served to make the HSF teaching materials that could be used in a revitalization and language maintenance. These materials (Kondic 2009b, Kondic 12b) were deposited at the local primary school library at the village of San Francisco and at the Municipal Library in Chontla. Later, other materials in HSF were added to this collection, for instance, my translation of 'The Little Prince' by Saint-Exupery (Kondic 2017) or the book about the music in their area (Kondic 2018a). Some community members suggested I helped them organize a 'reading club' in their little library, where they would gather once fortnightly or monthly to read the narratives from the books I had left for them. So my HSF revitalization and maintenance materials have been used by the community members and by the local musician Narcizo who now teaches different groups of children and women singing and dancing in Huastec. The community was also informed on several occasions about the possibility of organizing a 'linguistic nest' in the village. They found it interesting and now we have been working on this. Although the language activities with South Eastern Huastec are not too numerous at present, these ideas keep alive the interest in the language of the community members.

II Tsotsil of San Isidro de la Libertad (Mayan, Mexico)

Tsotsil¹ of San Isidro de la Libertad is one of the Mayan languages spoken in Chiapas, Mexico. It belongs to the Tseltalan subgroup of the Mayan family. Tsotsil's ISO code is 639-3 tzo, and the Glottolog code tzot 1259. Its alternative name is Bats'i K'op. According to INALI 2000, there is a total of 235,000 Tsotsil speakers. The number of speakers of the Tsotsil variety in the community of San Isidro de la Libertad is about 300.

The Tsotsil people of San Isidro de la Libertad are very proud of their Mayan identity and highly value their language and culture. It is one of the autonomous communities of Chiapas, totally independent from the Mexican government and autosufficient. They are responsible for the education of their children, among other things. All the children learn Tsotsil at home. Tsotsil is the language of instruction in their primary school, and partly in the secondary. All the communication in the community as well as in the extracurricular activities is in Tsotsil.

The primary school teachers in the community didn't have any teaching materials in their own variety of Tsotsil. In September 2013 I was invited to a holiday celebration in the village, and on that occasion I was asked by the village authorities to 'do some documentation of their language and culture'. One of the results of that project was a collection of narratives in Tsotsil of San Isidro de la Libertad, left in the community for usage in language maintenance and teaching (Kondic 2013b). Many community members contributed to this book which is now used for teaching their language and their culture in the primary school in the village.

¹ Alternative spelling: Tzotzil

The language acquisition patterns of Tsotsil have been researched in particular by Lourdes De León Pasquel, as mentioned above. The specific way of preserving Tsotsil de San Isidro de la Libertad linguistic and cultural diversity is described in Kondic 2014a, and the Tsotsil de San Isidro de la Libertad sociolinguistic profile in Kondic 2014b.

III Huilliche/Tsesungun (Mapudungan, Chile)

Mapudungan (Araucanian) group of languages is a small family isolate, spoken in Argentina and Chile with the total number of ethnic population at 604,349 (Ethnologue 2002; however, according the World Oral Literature Project it is 300 thousands). Main members of the family include Mapudungan, Pehuenche, Huilliche/Tsesungun, Moluche and Ranquel. The languages of this group are highly endangered.

The Huilliche language (ISO 639-3 huh; alternative orthographies and names: Wiliche, Viliche, Beliche, Huillichesungun, Tsesungun, Chesungun, Chedungun) is moribund as spoken by a few elderly speakers (Crevels 2012: 190, Fabre 2005, Campbell 2012). Huilliche/Tsesungun is closely related to Mapudungan but they are ‘barely mutually intelligible’ (Crevels 2012:190). Fabre (2005) states that “the Huilliche dialect is different from the rest of the variants of the group up to the point that it became unintelligible.” The Huilliche/Tsesungun speakers reside in several settlements in the area south of the Mapudungan, in the region Los Lagos and Los Rios including the Archipelago Chiloe, with the highest concentration in the province of Osorno (the community of San Juan de la Costa).

In their study of Mapudungan vitality, Zúñiga and Olate (2017) compare the current situation to the one recorded in Zúñiga (2007) and conclude that Mapudungan is “in a state of greater sociolinguistic precariousness than it was ten years ago, and that the need for public policies and private initiatives leading to an effective and efficient revitalization in the short term is even more imperative if the language is to be saved from extinction.” (Zúñiga et al. 2017:372). Different aspects of language acquisition within the Mapudungan family have been researched also by Wittig González (2011), Wittig González et al. (2019), Lara Millapan (2012), Del Carmen (2005), Luna et al. (2014).

The above statement by Zúñiga and Olate (2017:327) is totally relevant to the Mapudungan’s southern variety, Huilliche/Tsesungun, where the situation is even more serious. In 2015, when I carried out my project, there was under 20 fluent speakers (out of whom under 15 speakers in the Osorno region, including two young men who learned the language from their grandmothers; 2 in the Huapi Island; 3-4 in Archipelago Chiloé) of about 80 thousand ethnic population. The language was, without any doubt, moribund.

During the documentation project with Huilliche/Tsesungun, I assessed the language vitality (Kondic 2015b) and produced teaching materials (Kondic 2015c), a collection of narratives in this language, with a dictionary of the two sub-varieties (Huilliche from the region of Osorno, and Tseungun from the Archipelago Chiloé, with minimal differences), and audio and video recordings. This material was left for the communities in the province of Osorno, Archipelago Chiloé and the Island Huapi. I now translated that book into English, analyzed the narratives and glossed them in preparation for publishing.

This language hasn’t been used for communication for a long time. The intergenerational transmission process of Huilliche/Tsesungun was interrupted several years ago. It is not transmitted to children, whose first language is Spanish. However, the basic language and culture are taught in many primary schools in the region and in some secondary schools. The recent activities in Huilliche/Tsesungun include very popular language and orthography courses for adults in the region of the city of Osorno, and a one hour long daily radio program for Huilliche people, mainly in Spanish. Also, a local shaman in Archipelago Chiloé conducts religious ceremonies in Tsesungun. A group of people with the teacher of Tsesungun Hugo Antipani from Compu, Archipelago Chiloé,

have been recently working on a Tsesungun dictionary. Occasionally, local Huilliche/Tsesungun music groups may sing some songs in this language. The community members, particularly in the Archipelago Chiloé, are very interested in the linguistic nest project and some preparations are on their way.

IV Mixe (Mixe-Zoquean, Mexico)

Mixe are an indigenous people of Mexico who live in the Sierra Norte, the north-eastern highlands of the state of Oaxaca. They speak the Mixe languages (Mixe–Zoquean family). Their endonym is *ayuujk jä'äy*, which means ‘the people *ayuujk*’. The Mixe languages have not been thoroughly researched and there are still undescribed varieties spoken in remote areas.

Several varieties of the Mixe language have been identified so far (Wichmann 1995, De Jong 2017), during this project I worked with three of them belonging to different subgroupings:

[1] Mixe of Tlahuitoltepec, South Highland Mixe subgroup. ISO 639-3 mxp, and Glottolog: tlah 1239. According to INALI 2000, it has about 16 800 speakers.

[2] Mixe of Totontepec, North Highland Mixe. Codes: ISO 639-3 mto, Glottolog: toto 1305. There are about 5500 Totontepec Mixe speakers of this variety (INALI 2000), and the Ethnologue identifies 870 monolinguals.

[3] Mixe of Cotzocón, North Midland Mixe subgroup. Codes: ISO 639-3 neq, and Glottolog: north 2939. This variety has about 13 000 speakers (INALI 2000).

The Mixean languages have been recognized by the Mexican government and are taught in few bilingual primary schools. The lack of educational materials in Mixe is persistent and the teaching is mainly in Spanish. The children learn the language at home, although an increasing number of Mixe families do not transmit the language to their children; some young members of the Mixe communities understand Mixe but don't speak it, and some use it only when addressing a Mixe monolingual speaker (Romero Méndez 2008:14).

Different scholarly works on Mixe languages are available at present, although this linguistic family is far from being described in detail. One of the scarce sociolinguistic works include Suslak (2005) on Totontepec Mixe usage in young speakers, and a doctoral thesis on language acquisition in three Mixe communities by Trujillo Tamez (2012). My own work in progress is about the language attitudes with Mixe in twelve different communities of the Sierra Norte.

During my documentation project in 2019 and 2020 I worked with four different Mixe communities: Ocotepc (Municipality of Totontepec), Cotzocon and Puxmetacan (Municipality of Cotzocon), and Tlahuitoltepec. The vast majority of people in these communities speak Mixe and transmit it to the new generations (although the situation is very different with Mixe migrants in big cities). Working in these communities I also encountered several Mixe monolinguals. The communities of Ocotepc, Cotzocon and Puxmetacan are among the most remote Mixe municipalities, so the intergenerational transmission hasn't been interrupted and the vast majority of children learn the language at home. However, in Tlahuitoltepec, which is close to the city of Oaxaca, some children speak only Spanish. In these communities the language is often taught in primary and in some secondary schools, although it often depends on the teacher: if the teacher is local, he or she teaches in Mixe, if not, in Spanish.

During my field work with the above mentioned three Mixe varieties (and four communities: the Cotzocon and Puxmetacan varieties seem to be identical), I produced teaching materials (Kondic 2018b, Kondic to appear end 2021), which include three collections of narratives, accompanied by a thematic dictionary in each variety and by audio and video recordings. For Cotzocon and Puxmetacan varieties these materials represent the first words ever written or published. The books are left in the communities to be used in language maintenance and teaching.

The recent activities with Mixe languages include popular courses of Mixe orthography and language for adults in some communities and in the city of Oaxaca. Some authors write and publish

in Mixe, especially in Tlahuitoltepec and Ayutla, where these activities are more common. There are some music groups that write their songs and sing them in Mixe. There is a radio program in the variety of Tlahuitoltepec, which, unfortunately, cannot be heard in other communities for technical reasons.

Among my Mixe consultants were Engracia and her husband Rodrigo, Mixe from Ocoatepec (Municipality of Totontepec). They have been ‘*promotores culturales*’ (‘cultural promoters’) in the region for more than 20 years, teaching literacy in Mixe in different courses in the communities and in the city of Oaxaca. They also have performed with their colleagues different theater pieces in Mixe in Mixe villages, about what Engracia wrote a book (Pérez Castro 2007). Engracia’s other book is about the Mixe traditional gastronomy (Pérez Castro 2010). Engracia and whole her family were very interested in my documentation project and contributed to it with several narratives and texts. Engracia also helped me with coordination of the project, especially with ‘recruiting’ the Mixe speakers. Engracia’s family participated in a project of making the apps for online learning of Mixe. Engracia and Rodrigo’s children speak Mixe fluently and can write and read it although they were born and grew up in the city of Oaxaca.

The activities with Mixe include also different linguistic events, for example, ‘Mixe Language Days’ (*Los días de la lengua mixe*), organized every year in different Mixe communities of the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca. They include talks, workshops and discussions on their language and culture, where, for example, the local Mixe teachers can exchange existing teaching materials and create new ones.

Summary

A language can be learnt at home with a family, in school, in extra-curricular activities offered by a school, during some other activities, or in a linguistic nest program. The children in four communities that I worked with experienced different ways of learning their native language. In some communities, the intergenerational transmission process got interrupted a long time ago (Huilliche/Tsesungun), or relatively recently (South Eastern Huastec), but in other communities intergenerational transmission is still a continuing process (Tsotsil de San Isidro de la Libertad, or in majority of Mixe communities). In some communities the language of instruction in primary school is their native language (Tsotsil de San Isidro de la Libertad, and sometimes Mixe). Language courses for adults (mainly orthography) are offered in Huilliche/Tsesungun and Mixe. The children can communicate in their native language in extracurricular activities in Tsotsil of San Isidro de la Libertad, and often in Mixe. Two communities became very interested in a linguistic nest project, namely, the South Eastern Huastecs from San Francisco Chontla (Mexico), as well as Huilliches from the region of Osorno, and especially from Archipelago Chiloé (Chile). In other two cases, Tsotsil de San Isidro de la Libertad (Mexico) and the Mixe (Mexico) communities from the Sierra Norte in Oaxaca it seems there is yet no need for such a project as the majority of children learn their native language with the family at home.

The above situation is presented as a summary in the following grid:

WHERE	South Eastern Huastec (Mayan)	Tsotsil of San Isidro (Mayan)	Huilliche/Tsesungun (Mapudungan)	Mixe (Mixe-Zoquean)
at home	no	yes	no	yes
in school	no	yes	yes, often	yes, often
elsewhere	sometimes	yes	sometimes	sometimes
linguistic nest	interested - planning	not applicable	interested - planning	not applicable

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ГДЕ НАМ ВЫУЧИТЬ НАШ РОДНОЙ ЯЗЫК?

Хотя усвоение языка в раннем детстве в семье является важнейшим условием сохранения языка, многие автохтонные языки мира сегодня уже перестали передаваться внутри семьи. Многие родители считают, что их этнический язык для детей бесполезен, и предпочитают воспитывать детей на официальном языке страны.

В статье я сравню ситуации четырех автохтонных языков Латинской Америки, с которыми я работаю: юго-восточный хуастекский (майя, Мексика), цоциль де Сан Исидро де ля Либертад (майя, Мексика), виличе/цесунгун (мапудунган, Чили) и михе (михе-зокеанский, Мексика). Эти миноритарные языки находятся в разных регионах и в разных социальных контекстах. В некоторых сообществах естественная передача языка от родителей детям уже давно прервана, а в других, напротив, внутрисемейная передача языка поддерживается.

Из этих четырех языков под серьезной угрозой исчезновения находятся, прежде всего, виличе/цесунгун (мапудунган, Чили) и юго-восточный хуастекский (майя, Мексика), поскольку родители перестали передавать эти языки новым поколениям, лишая таким образом собственных детей их языкового наследия. Первым языком детей в этих двух сообществах является испанский. С другой стороны, ситуация с цоцилем де Сан Исидро де ля Либертад (майя, Мексика) и михе (михе-зокеанский, Мексика) гораздо лучше, так как подавляющее большинство детей в этих сообществах говорят на своем этническом языке и усваивают испанский только в начальной школе. Можно добавить, что в Сан Исидро де ля Либертад, как и в некоторых удаленных деревнях михе, в начальной школе преподавание ведется на их этническом языке.

Ключевые слова: усвоение языка, автохтонные языки, угроза исчезновения языка, языки майя, мапудунган, михе-зокеан, Латинская Америка.

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