

Classification of Language Shift in the Nahuatl-Speaking Community of (Santiago) Tlaxco, Mexico

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This paper examined the stage of language shift in (Santiago) Tlaxco, a Nahuatl-speaking community in Puebla, Mexico. Nahuatl is the most spoken Indigenous language in Mexico with over 1.7 million speakers with 30 variants (INALI 2009, 2015a). Despite having the most speakers, Nahuatl is at some risk of endangerment just like all other Indigenous languages in Mexico. According to an INALI survey (2015b), all the 68 Indigenous languages and their 364 variants are at some level of risk of disappearing. Ethnologue affirms that no Indigenous language is used at an institutional level in Mexico (Eberhard et al. 2019).

The concept of language endangerment is not exclusive to Indigenous languages in Mexico but is rather a widespread global phenomenon. Linguists estimate that at least 50% of the world's 7000 languages are at risk of disappearing by 2100 because they are no longer being spoken as first languages (Hale et al. 1992, Austin & Sallabank 2011). Some factors causing this endangerment are language shift facilitated by social, political and cultural factors, and extinction of speakers by natural disasters, wars, genocide and repressive assimilationist policies (Nettle & Romaine 2000, Crystal 2000).

Our project focused on the Northern Puebla variety of Nahuatl spoken in Tlaxco, a community with approximately 1,700 inhabitants (INEGI 2010). The main goal was to evaluate the status of Nahuatl language maintenance-shift in Tlaxco. To address this goal, we employed the Theory of Ecology of Pressures framework (Terborg 2006) to identify and analyse the pressures that favour or deter language maintenance. We also classified the results based on Terborg's classification of language shift (2016). The research data were drawn from four main sources: two questionnaires (one census in nature, the other more detailed), interviews and fieldnotes. This presentation will focus on the results from the census questionnaire, applied to about 180 respondents in 45 houses. We calculated the values of Perceived Knowledge and Perceived Language Use of the community.

The results indicated that over 85% of the respondents reported knowing and speaking Nahuatl. Our findings showed that the use of Nahuatl is vigorous and used in the home and the community by all generations. We observed that Nahuatl is the language of utmost common routine among adults and the older generation while Spanish is the preferred language of communication among the youth. Based on these results, the current linguistic situation fits category C of Terborg's classification of language shift, where Spanish is gradually replacing Nahuatl as the language of utmost common routine.

This study is the first to analyze the sociolinguistic situation of Tlaxco, Mexico. The findings also provide a snapshot of a community at the early stages of language shift.

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