

Bridging Gaps and Empowering Speakers: An Inclusive Approach to Nahuatl Research and Revitalization

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In this paper, we present our integral approach to the research and revitalization of Nahuatl, developed within an international team project, *Endangered languages. Comprehensive models for research and revitalization*¹, that deals with three minority languages in two countries: Lemko and Wymysiöeryś in Poland and Nahuatl in Mexico. The research is being carried out at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” of the University of Warsaw, with the direct participation of the Instituto de Docencia e Investigación Etnológica de Zacatecas (IDIEZ), Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and the Pedagogical University of Krakow.

The speakers of Nahuatl, a Uto-Aztecan language of enormous political and cultural status in pre-Hispanic and colonial Mesoamerica, have survived to this day, inhabiting several regions of Mexico. Best documented are the Central Mexican Nahuas who at the time of the Spanish conquest were a dominant group within the powerful organization of the Triple Alliance, often called the Aztec empire. During that time and much before, Nahuatl was used as a lingua franca throughout the empire and beyond. After the arrival of the Spaniards the Nahuatl language thrived in the new colonial contexts and was widely used for administrative and religious purposes. The language of the Aztecs is still today the largest indigenous tongue in North America with almost 1.4 million speakers; and nevertheless, it is in danger of gradual extinction. The prevailing attitude of racism in Mexican society along with a stepped up national educational and mass media policy of Hispanization has drastically slowed down, and in many cases, entirely broken the intergenerational transfer of the language. Except for a limited number of communities, where intergenerational transmission is intact but subject to widespread bilingualism and an entirely Spanish school system, the large number of passive speakers in the generations under 40-50 years of age threatens to totally disrupt language transmission. These adverse tendencies are strengthened by widespread migration to larger towns and to the United States, the loss of functions in language use and its failure to expand to new domains of modern life and media, the lack of adequate educational support and adverse language ideology, a waning sense of continuity/connection with the culture of the past; the educational system does not provide any form of access to the history and literature of the ancestors of the modern Nahuas.

A project for revitalizing an endangered language and culture should start with a clear understanding of why the endeavor is necessary in the first place, as well as the benefits it offers to society in general. We draw on research done in Canada and the United States that demonstrates how the physical and mental health of indigenous people, whose cultural continuity is challenged over a long period of time, is adversely effected in ways very similar to victims of PTSD. On the one hand, we plan to replicate these studies with Mexican indigenous populations residing both in Mexico and in the United States; on the other hand, we will adapt models for healing this trauma, developed originally in Canada and the United States, for implementation in these communities. Finally, we want to conduct research in order to demonstrate that the perspectives generated by the presence of multiple and diverse

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languages and cultures in a society actually increase the critical and creative tools that are needed to solve its problems and enrich the lives of its people.

Our current study of contact-induced change in Nahuatl, beginning in the sixteenth century and continuing in modern communities today, is important for revitalization in two ways. First, the awareness of cultural continuity which is so important for the health of a community's identity, is challenged by the perception that its language and culture have only been interrupted and damaged by contact with Spanish. Our extensive team research on language change demonstrates in fact, that Nahuatl and Spanish have mutually enriched each other: through cross-cultural transfer, each language has incorporated elements of the other's vocabulary and grammatical structures, gaining as a result new communicative possibilities. On the most part, Nahuatl has evolved, in contact with Spanish, on its own terms and according to parameters established by its own structure. This knowledge contributes to the construction of a positive language attitude, and in turn strengthens cultural identity. Second, comparison of the results of language change in communities in different regions and over time, allows us to identify the presence of risk-factors associated with language displacement, and thus propose timely interventions.

Concretely, our revitalization strategy involves a series of principles and activities designed to get native and new speakers of Nahuatl to develop the language and use it more frequently and in ever-increasing contexts. Most important is the establishment of monolingual spaces where Nahuatl can be spoken and ceremonies can be practiced. Teachers, researchers and revitalization activists can be trained here, and simultaneously participate in the development of theory and methodology for these activities from within the Nahuatl worldview. These spaces, be they physical or virtual, can host interdialectal encounters, in which speakers of different variants of Nahuatl from different regions of Mexico can begin to overcome their current isolation, share experiences and plan the future of their way of life. Monolingual spaces and activities should not lead to further isolation. An essential part of a broader strategy is opening access to the literature left by colonial ancestors of modern Nahuas and restore the literary tradition while standardizing the orthography, which, in turn, will facilitate communication across variants. Curriculum development as well as teaching and reference materials should be done monolingually, while education in the language should be extended beyond the primary school up into special monolingual university programs, the first of which will soon be created under our supervision in the Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas.

Once indigenous people have begun the path to re-empowerment by reclaiming agency in those areas of their life, such as government, education, health services and research (in which their participation has been limited to the role of informant), that have been appropriated by outsiders, dialogue and collaboration with non-Indians will produce mutually enriching results. For example, Western and indigenous researchers can collaborate in bridging the artificial academic and ideological divide between the study of indigenous life of the past and the present or language and culture studied as separate entities/domains. This will strengthen historical identity by contributing to overcome intergenerational trauma and reinforce cultural continuity, and by permitting indigenous people to more effectively access, reevaluate and assimilate their past. This, eventually, will enable them to participate more critically and productively in their daily lives as well as actively promote the survival and development of their culture.