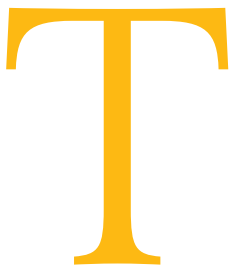


# The Indigenous Languages Initiative at The University of Texas at Austin

by RYAN SULLIVANT



## The Teaching of Indigenous Languages at UT

**ON A CHILLY** morning in April, Manuela Tahay walks into her classroom wearing a gray coat over an embroidered blouse and wraparound skirt typical of the traditional dress in her hometown of Nahualá in Guatemala. Tahay is Maya, and she is here to teach her native language of K'ichee' to

a group of students at The University of Texas at Austin.<sup>1</sup> She hands each student a photograph of typical Guatemalan market scenes and asks them to describe the action they see. This exercise is all about building sentences with both a subject and a verb, no small feat given the complex K'ichee' verb, which is assembled by adding a handful of prefixes and suffixes indicating different grammatical features to a root. Then the students have to put their assembled words into the correct order in this language where verbs begin sentences. Tahay's students perform the task splendidly, describing a woman sitting in front of a basket of *chiles* for sale as *Kuk'ayij ik le ixoq*, and a man carrying a bundle of vegetables as *Karerej wa le achi*.

Learning languages has long been part of the collegiate experience and is frequently required of students, but most students in the United States elect to study one of just a handful of languages:

German, French, Italian, and Spanish. These four languages (along with English) are the native tongues of only about 13 percent of the world's population. For some, this state of affairs reflects a missed opportunity to educate students more broadly on the many different languages spoken worldwide. One entity that would like to see less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) in more U.S. university curricula is the U.S. Department of Education, which awards Title VI funds to institutions so that they can improve language instruction programs in LCTLs and area studies, offering U.S. college graduates a deeper and broader understanding of the languages and cultures that may have been overlooked previously. Building on UT's particular expertise and association with Latin America, LILLAS Benson has applied for Title VI funds to teach the indigenous languages of Latin America both on the Forty Acres and during immersive summer programs.

Spanish and Portuguese are the predominant languages in Latin America, whose very name refers to these Romance languages. However, the region's strong association with these two European languages obscures the fact that Latin America is a place of great linguistic diversity. Over 700 indigenous languages are spoken in Latin America, and the region contains two hotbeds of linguistic diversity: Mesoamerica and the Amazon basin (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2014). On the South American mainland, only Uruguay lacks an indigenous language spoken within its borders.

Tahay's K'ichee' courses are part of a larger push at The University of Texas to give students the opportunity to study the indigenous languages of Latin America. Beginning in the fall of 2014, students will be able to sign up for K'ichee' courses offered through Latin American studies to satisfy their university foreign language requirements, same as Spanish, German, or any other language offered at UT. The courses that are offered through this Indigenous Languages Initiative have a pedagogical focus on communication skills, student interaction with native speakers, and grammar. In practice this means that on my visit to her classroom, Tahay's students greeted each other in K'ichee' and spent some time asking each other *Jas xab'an iwir?* "What did you do yesterday?" to gain practice in the kinds of situations in which they can expect to use the language. They also meet individually with the instructor to practice their listening skills with a native speaker, as well as study lists of vocabulary and the thornier points of grammar, such as the formation of antipassive verbs and the proper use of pronouns in this ergative language.<sup>2</sup>

Though study of a language's grammar and memorization of lists of vocabulary are unavoidably necessary to develop proficiency, having the opportunity to immerse oneself in a language allows for the seeds planted during those hours of classroom instruction to sprout and bloom into truly fluent language skills. In discussing his own immersion when learning the Miskitu language of Nicaragua, LLILAS Benson director Charlie Hale said, "It's a great experience. You're just working on [learning the language] all the time, and you can feel yourself advancing day by day when you can ask for a drink of water when you couldn't the day before." The students in UT's K'ichee' program will have the opportunity to do just that at a summer program in Guatemala administered by UT in concert with Vanderbilt University, the University of New Mexico, and Tulane University.

K'ichee' is just the first indigenous language to be taught at UT. Beginning in the fall of 2015, Nahuatl—a language of Central Mexico that was spoken in an earlier form by the Aztecs, and is a distant relative of the Comanche language once widely spoken in Texas—will be added to the roster. Sergio Romero, assistant professor in the

Department of Spanish and Portuguese and language education coordinator for the Indigenous Languages Initiative, hopes to be able to introduce Quechua not long after, and sees many good candidates for future offerings, including Chile's Mapudugun<sup>3</sup> and one of the Zapotec languages spoken aboriginally in Mexico's southern Oaxaca state and now also spoken in the U.S. by sizable communities in Los Angeles.

Many Latin American indigenous languages are now written. Some, such as Nahuatl, Zapotec, and Mixtec (among others), have been literary languages since the early colonial period, with some Mayan languages written



K'ichee' instructor Manuela "Nela" Tahay

in hieroglyphs since well before the arrival of Europeans. Very few have instructional textbooks suitable for teaching the language at a university level, though a few textbooks, such as *Cali chiu?* for Valley Zapotec and *La ützwäch?* for Kaqchikel Maya, have been developed (see, respectively, Munro, Lillehaugen, and López 2007; and Brown, Maxwell, and Little 2006). Romero suggests that a successful application for Title VI grants could allow for

the development of similar curricula for the languages taught at UT in addition to possibly increasing the number of indigenous language instructors that the university can employ.

Many of Latin America's indigenous languages are spoken by relatively few people—half of these languages are spoken by fewer than 2,500 individuals—but some are spoken by great numbers. K'ichee' and the Andean language Aymara are each spoken by over 2 million people, and Guaraní is spoken by some 4.8 million in Paraguay. Nearly as many people are native speakers of Swedish (8.7 million) as Quechua (8.9 million). But number of speakers is not the only measure of the importance of a language since, as Romero points out, languages spoken by smaller populations are often "spoken by nearly everyone in their respective area[s]," making them invaluable for anyone interested in the culture or history of the people.

Studying these languages and cultures not only helps students learn more about different parts of the world, but also allows for the voices of these indigenous communities to be heard, as all too often they are left out of policy and social discussions. The denial of indigenous communities' voices in regional or national discourses frequently takes the form of denial that the communities have a language. Hale remarks on this sentiment, saying, "These languages are becoming smaller because the people that speak them are discriminated against. Their language is said to be inferior or incapable of expressing complex ideas. The more we value these languages and teach them and learn them, the more people there will be to work on their behalf."

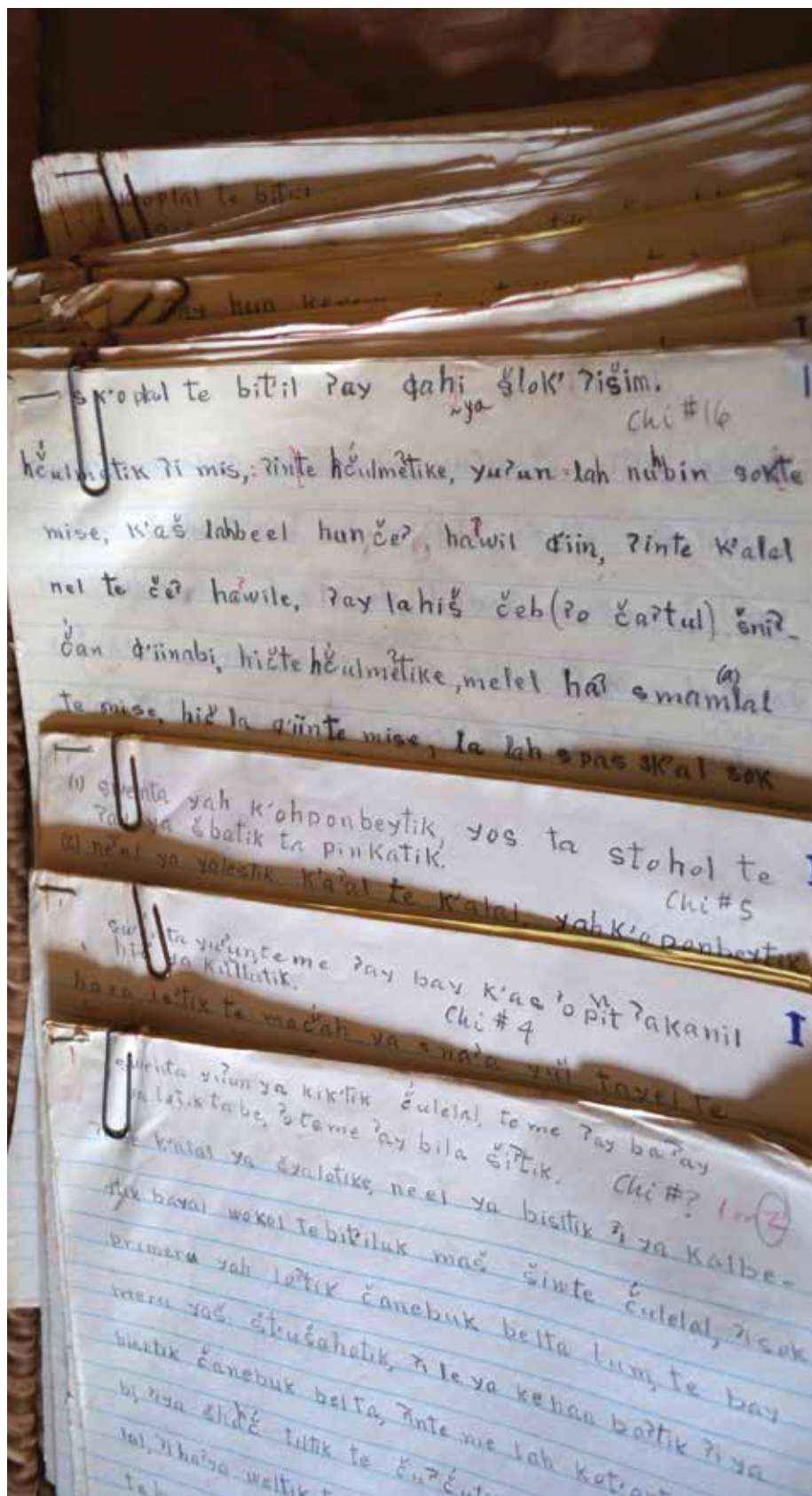
Romero also notes that, "with millions of indigenous Latin Americans living and working in the U.S., there is an increasing interest [in indigenous language instruction] among migrant advocacy groups, law enforcement officials, and Latino activists." Given his knowledge of K'ichee', Kaqchikel, and Q'eqchi'—all Mayan languages—Romero himself is often asked to interpret for indigenous Latin Americans with a weak grasp of Spanish.

**Research on Indigenous Languages at UT** Research on indigenous languages at UT is carried out through the Center for Indigenous Languages of Latin America (CILLA), directed

by Professor of Linguistics Nora England. CILLA has worked to foster this research by hosting a biennial international conference on Latin American indigenous linguistics that attracts scholars from all over the U.S., Latin America, and beyond. In recent years, it has emerged as one of the preeminent conferences of its field, and has been particularly successful in including indigenous Latin Americans as well. At the last conference, in 2013, nearly 18 percent of the attendees were themselves native speakers of an indigenous language.

Many of the indigenous languages of Latin America are endangered, as speakers in those communities shift from speaking the local language to another language. Occasionally the shift is to another indigenous language, such as Tucano or Nheengatu in the Amazon and Guaraní in the Chaco, but in most cases the shift is to Spanish or Portuguese. Some estimates of language shift predict that half of the languages spoken today will not be spoken one hundred years from now (Krauss 1992). Even in communities where children are learning the indigenous language, some specialized genres of speech such as ritual chants, oratory forms, and language games are not being learned by the youngest speakers and will no doubt be absent from the communities' linguistic repertoire in the future. Beyond the urgent need to collect and record languages and forms of speech before they are no longer spoken, there is also the risk that existing language recordings might be lost to fire, flood, or magnetic signal deterioration if they remain only in researchers' basements and bottom drawers.

Helping to preserve these languages and ways of speaking at UT is the Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America (AILLA), founded and directed by Professor Emeritus Joel Sherzer. In the Benson Latin American Collection, past the microform reading room and the card catalogue cabinets, Susan Smythe Kung and a small team of research assistants and interns are busy adding to an online archive that stores digital materials in and about Latin America's indigenous languages and makes them available for download. In doing so, AILLA is striving to fulfill its three-pronged mission: creating a permanent record of Latin American languages, making these records accessible,



Samples of written Tzeltal, a Mayan language spoken in Oxchuc, Chiapas, Mexico, Kaufman archives, collected 1960–1961





Kaufman archives awaiting processing for AILLA

and fostering collaboration between speakers and scholars of indigenous languages.

AILLA makes these recordings available and accessible by digitizing audiocassettes, reel-to-reel tapes, and minidisks so that the archive visitors of today and tomorrow can listen to them on any digital media player rather than having to find a working open-reel player to hear what is on the tape. These

digitized recordings and natively digital files, which are given to AILLA to archive, are periodically backed up to provide greater security against any accidental loss of data. The materials are then made available free of charge to anyone who would like to download them, whether they are researchers interested in studying the language, people wanting to use the materials to develop pedagogical

materials for revitalization efforts, or community members who want to hear a story told by their grandmother in their ancestral tongue. Improvements in Internet connectivity in much of Latin America now mean that for many communities, these materials can be accessed more easily at a local Internet café than at a physical archive in a regional or national cultural center or library, which may be located far from the community.

One example of the wealth of language materials in the AILLA collection are the archives of University of Pittsburgh professor emeritus Terrence Kaufman. While many linguists devote their careers to the study of only one language, Kaufman has performed or overseen research on scores of languages over his career. After completing a dissertation on the Tzeltal of Aguacatenango, Chiapas, Mexico, in 1963, he began working on, as he puts it, “as many Mayan languages as I could,” bringing to attention a previously unrecognized language, Teko,<sup>4</sup> in the process (Kaufman 2010, 5). He helped organize and oversee two large-scale linguistic research programs, the Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín from 1970 to 1979, on the Mayan languages of Guatemala, and the Proyecto para la Documentación de las Lenguas de Mesoamérica (PDLMA), from 1993 to 2010, on many of the languages spoken in central and southern Mexico.

One of the goals of this latter project was the reconstruction of earlier forms of these languages in the hopes that this might help to decipher the Epi-Olmec script found on monuments at several archaeological sites in Mexico. To do this, the PDLMA undertook in-depth research on thirty languages in the Mayan, Otomanguean, Uto-Aztecan, Totonacan, and Mixe-Zoquean families whose speakers’ ancestors were thought to have practiced writing or produced complex iconography. The compilation of this data has resulted in the creation of dictionaries of sixteen of these languages, twelve PhD dissertations, and boxes upon boxes of audiocassettes, compact discs, and reams of handwritten transcriptions and translations of stories. All of these documents and recordings have formed the sizable Terrence Kaufman Latin American Languages Collection, which has kept Kung and her team busy digitizing, scanning, and organizing an invaluable archive that will prove useful for

researchers and community members alike for years to come. As of press time, AILLA has archived 632 hours of audio, 18 hours of video, and over 15,000 pages of documents in 40 languages, a number that will increase as the last portions of the collection are accessioned this year. ☀

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#### Notes

1. The name of the language has been spelled several different ways, and *K'ichee'* and *K'iche'*, which differ only in whether or not the long vowel is indicated, are now preferred to earlier spellings such as *Quiché*. The first apostrophe in the name indicates that the *k* is ejective or glottalized, and is pronounced with a burst of air, and the second apostrophe indicates a glottal stop, meaning that all air is stopped in the vocal tract, as between the vowels of the English exclamation *uh-oh*.

2. Unlike European languages (with the notable exception of Basque), Mayan languages are ergative in that the pronouns used for the subjects of intransitive verbs are the same as those used for the objects of transitive verbs, rather than the subjects of transitive verbs as in English. It would be as if English speakers said *Her walked away* rather than *She walked away*. The antipassive, like the passive, turns a transitive sentence into an intransitive sentence, but it is the subject, not the object, of the original sentence that is the subject of the resulting intransitive sentence.

3. Mapundugun is perhaps still more widely known as Mapuche, a name considered offensive by many Mapundugun.

4. This language is also known as Tektiteko. It is not to be confused with the language named Teko, or Emerillon, spoken in Suriname.

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This on-demand text can be purchased at <http://www.lulu.com/shop/pamela-munro-and-brook-danielle-lillehaugen-and-felipe-h-lopez/cali-chiu-a-course-in-valley-zapotec/paperback/product-1617372.html>.



AILLA manager Susan Smythe Kung reviews Kaufman archives