

# Recuperando Nuestro Idioma: Revitalizing San Jerónimo Tlacoachahuaya Zapotec Across Borders

by PERLA GARCÍA MIRANDA

**D**URING THE summer of 2013 I had the opportunity and privilege of traveling to Oaxaca, Mexico, and living in San Jerónimo Tlacoachahuaya, my maternal family's hometown. For ten weeks I did research on the decline of Zapotec language transmission and the current efforts of language revitalization. As the daughter of Mexican migrants, with a father from the northern state of Durango and a mother from Oaxaca, I grew up bilingual in San José, California, where the language spoken at home was Spanish and I learned English at school. Though my brother and I grew up hearing conversations in Zapotec among our maternal family, we were not taught the language. Furthermore, my experiences of visiting family in Mexico led me to question why my generation, including cousins raised in Tlacoachahuaya and California, were not taught the Zapotec language.

San Jerónimo Tlacoachahuaya is located 12 miles south of Oaxaca City, the state capital, in the Central Valley region, which is formed by the northern Sierra Juárez and southern Sierra Madre del Sur mountain ranges. Upon entering the town, via a curving road off the Pan American Highway, one sees the Cerro Negro and Cerro de las Azucenas. The pueblo is known for its sixteenth-century temple and ex-convent of San Jerónimo, as well as the church's organ, which is registered with the Institute of Historic Organs of Oaxaca. About 3,000 people live in the pueblo, and there are an estimated 1,500 community members in the migrant diaspora who are located within Mexico and throughout the United States, with the majority in California (Sánchez Gómez and Barceló Quintal 2011). Approximately 39 percent of the town's population speaks its own variety of Valley Zapotec; nonetheless, this is concentrated in the older generations (Martínez Hernández 2011). Today's children are not learning the

local Zapotec language, a fact many community members associate with "*la pérdida del zapoteco*."

I arrived in Oaxaca in the height of summer, a season of harvest in the farming community of San Jerónimo Tlacoachahuaya, where garlic, black beans, corn, and *chile de agua* are the main agricultural products. During the month of May, black beans are the main harvest. Previously, *campesinos* would use bark sticks to force the beans out of the pod. Today they lay the bean pods on the streets and drive over them with cars. The beans are then removed from the rest of the by-product and further sorted to separate them from pebbles. After this process was explained to me by my Tío Genaro, I asked him about the use and role of the Zapotec language in the farming process and within the community. He explained that nowadays it is mostly elders and adults who speak the Zapotec language at fiestas, when they greet each other on the street, or in their homes. A few generations ago, Zapotec was the main language of communication; today, Spanish is more widely used in many aspects of daily life.

## Language Shift

A consensus that surfaced in my interviews with Zapotec elders (60 years and older) is that the assimilationist Spanish-language education imposed by the Mexican state in Tlacoachahuaya during the 1930s was negative and discriminatory toward speakers of indigenous languages. Many elders said that speaking Zapotec at school was not only prohibited, but also punished. For many, including my mother, this experience of Zapotec language stigmatization led them not to want to pass on Zapotec to their children because they wanted them to avoid the embarrassment of not knowing Spanish when entering school. However, socioeconomic mobility and status are also attributed to Spanish. If one spoke Spanish, this not only

facilitated one's education in the community but also increased the opportunity of obtaining a higher-paying job in nearby Oaxaca City or elsewhere in Mexico. Likewise, adults (40–59), of whom some are fluent Zapotec-Spanish bilinguals and others self-identify as passive bilinguals who are fluent in Spanish and understand Zapotec but don't speak it, recalled in interviews that their educational experience was in Spanish and many parents discouraged their acquisition of Zapotec. The negative educational experiences of elders, and Spanish being regarded as the language of socioeconomic mobility, has given rise to a change in language socialization practices, which in turn has contributed to a shift to Spanish in Tlacoahuaya. This language shift has contributed to language loss, with the decline of Zapotec language transmission to children. Likewise, by the time of mass U.S.-bound migration in the 1980s, community members were migrating either as fluent or passive Zapotec-Spanish bilinguals while witnessing the language shift that had been occurring over the past four generations.

### Language Revitalization Efforts

Two language revitalization projects have emerged—one in Mexico and the other in the United States—with the goal of maintaining the Tlacoahuaya Zapotec language by transmitting it to children and fostering novice speakers. In Tlacoahuaya, Zapotec language tutoring classes for children began after a conversation between the *autoridad* (local government), linguists from Centro de Estudios y Desarrollo de las Lenguas Indígenas de Oaxaca (CEDELIO, the Center for Study and Development of the Indigenous Languages of Oaxaca), and a professor from the Escuela Normal Bilingüe e Intercultural de Oaxaca (ENBIO, the Bilingual and Intercultural Normal School of Oaxaca) to address language decline.

Retired elementary school teacher María Mercedes Morales is a bilingual Zapotec-Spanish speaker who was selected to lead the tutoring project because of her teaching and language experience. When María started the project she was surprised and challenged by the difficulty of recruiting children for the lessons. Once she had a group of twenty children, she offered two-hour lessons twice a week in the afternoons. She also visited the homes of the children who lived with Zapotec speakers and urged them to help with the efforts. She told them, “Now that I started them off and have their interest in the language, support them. Speak to them in Zapotec at home so they won't forget what they learned.” María's work was interrupted in late 2010, when she was appointed to the Electoral Committee—the group responsible for selecting community members for the 2013 municipal elections. She attempted to seek a replacement to lead the tutoring project but was unable to find anyone. In mid-2012, she announced to the students that the language lessons would be suspended until she finished her responsibilities with the Electoral Committee in 2013; as of this writing, they have not resumed. For María this was a hard choice because of the time and energy it had taken to get the children invested in the classes. On her last class day she made sure to tell the students that her departure was only temporary and that they needed to continue practicing the language. She encouraged them to seek the help of Zapotec-speaking elders.

While one project was put on hold, another language revitalization project for Zapotec is being developed in southern California

through the efforts of two members of the Tlacoahuaya migrant diaspora. I had the opportunity to interview Moisés García Guzmán, a thirty-seven-year-old trilingual Zapotec-Spanish-English speaker who was born in Tlacoahuaya. He recalls Zapotec as his first language, taught by his parents and grandparents. He learned Spanish in grade school and English in Oaxaca during his undergraduate studies. In 2000 he migrated with his mother to Los Angeles to join his father. Since 2007, Moisés has been uploading videos of music, dances, and history from the pueblo onto the YouTube channel titled BnZunni, the Zapotec word for Tlacoahuaya. It was through the comments section of the BnZunni channel that the suggestion for online Zapotec language lessons emerged, which also contributed to existing conversations among members of the diaspora about how to address the language loss that they saw unfolding in both Los Angeles and Tlacoahuaya.

In collaboration with Edgar Ángeles, also a member of the migrant diaspora, the Rescate Oral del Zapoteco de Tlacoahuaya project came online in March 2013. The project's name, Oral Rescue of Tlacoahuaya Zapotec, refers to the use of oral transmission in developing the lessons. The lessons are taught in Spanish and Zapotec and range in length from 15 to 25 minutes, consisting of vocabulary review. Moisés predicts that this will be a two-year project with the goal of first building the audience's vocabulary before turning to the grammar and structure of the language. Moisés and Edgar reference and use the vocabulary documented in Fray Juan de Córdova's 1578 text *Arte del idioma zapoteco* (Art of the Zapotec Language) to build the online lessons. According to Moisés, “The Internet is a tool that can and should be used for cultural maintenance and diffusion.” Because the project is still being developed and just turned a year old, the impact and use of these online lessons are yet to be seen and analyzed. To date there has not been a survey of the audience, but the project's creators plan to gather this information.



Speaking Zapotec at the market, San Jerónimo Tlacoahuaya



Children studying Zapotec

### The Challenges Ahead

Challenges to the preservation and teaching of Tlacoahuaya Zapotec vary. In Tlacoahuaya itself, lack of communication and planning input across the community are just two of the challenges confronting the language-teaching effort. In interviews and conversations, some residents mentioned being aware of the tutoring project while others were unaware and said that nothing was being done to rescue the language. The small number of students who attended the tutoring lessons indicates that while there is awareness of language loss, commitment to participate in its mitigation is low. Further hampering these efforts is the continued discrimination against indigenous language users and the demeaning of indigenous languages in labeling them as dialects. This discrimination contributes to indigenous language decline and discourages language transmission to children. There needs to be a process of healing and discussion surrounding the stigmatization of indigenous languages, one in which indigenous language speakers feel empowered to challenge these negative notions. The Biblioteca de Investigación Juan de Córdova in Oaxaca City has begun a campaign called *Todas Se Lllaman Lenguas* (They All Are Called Languages) to challenge the view of indigenous languages as dialects. Thus, raising public consciousness of indigenous languages as valuable ancestral inheritances to be maintained is an important and necessary part of language revitalization efforts.

In the case of online lessons, although they allow for self-paced learning, the audience is currently unknown. In addition, because

the online classes are in Spanish, the non-Spanish-speaking children of migrants are excluded from this opportunity. Nonetheless, the online project has the potential for use in Tlacoahuaya. One possibility is a partnership between Moisés and one of his cousins, who owns an Internet café in Tlacoahuaya and could offer free Internet access to view the lessons.

In Tlacoahuaya, interviewees expressed a desire to maintain the Zapotec language because it allows the pueblo to distinguish itself from surrounding communities and Oaxaca City. Likewise, the Zapotec language strengthens and complements the community's Zapotec identity. Among the diaspora, I would argue that the Zapotec language can be embraced as a way of strengthening ties with the home community. Currently, there exists a male youth dance group in Los Angeles that practices *La Danza de la Pluma* (the Feathered Dance), another cultural marker of Tlacoahuaya. This demonstrates that there is interest in maintaining cultural ties with Tlacoahuaya. It is through these spaces, both in the diaspora and in the home community, where Zapotec language learning can create empowerment among youth. Likewise, both communities need to take advantage of the Zapotec-speaking elders and adults in their midst. In the home community, language nests for children are the ideal. The latest news I heard is that some pre-schools in Tlacoahuaya are beginning to teach the Zapotec language. For youth and adults in both communities, a language immersion project such as a Master–Apprentice program (Hinton, Vera, and Steele 2002) would allow for elders to transmit the Zapotec language alongside cultural practices.

The biggest obstacles to revitalization in the home community and the diaspora are socioeconomic. Long work shifts decrease the amount of time available to contribute to language-teaching efforts. Many residents of Tlacoahuaya seek work in Oaxaca City, where they labor 8-to-10-hour shifts in addition to commuting an hour each way. For those who work or attend school in Oaxaca City, the language domain is Spanish. In the United States, jobs in the service sector replicate a similar work situation. Furthermore, migrants may experience language stigmatization on two fronts, which fuels the challenge of maintaining Zapotec and/or Spanish fluency

among their children. Nevertheless, the two language revitalization projects that have emerged to maintain Tlacoahuaya's Zapotec language demonstrate that there is interest in preserving the language in both the home community and the diaspora.

The case of Tlacoahuaya leads me to strongly believe in and endorse transnational language revitalization for indigenous communities facing language endangerment and outbound migration. Language revitalization research should support and propose transnational efforts that promote indigenous language maintenance among both the home community and the migrant diaspora. In a time when hometown speech communities are often smaller in population than the diaspora, these efforts are urgent. Therefore, further work needs to be conducted in Los Angeles and Santa Ana, California, where a critical mass of Tlacoahuayans reside, in order to understand the linguistic repertoire and gauge the level of interest in revitalization efforts. This process will also require that indigenous communities heal from the negative educational experiences that stigmatized indigenous language use, and become empowered through commitment and language planning to support maintenance and revitalization of their languages. ☀

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