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Indigenous Education: Cultural Preservation and Linguistic Diversity

Educación indígena: preservación cultural y diversidad lingüística

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In 2020, according to data from Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), 23.2 million people 3 years or older identified themselves as indigenous in México, which represents 19% of the population of that age range (INEGI, 2020). Indigenous populations in Central America present significant variations depending on the country. Guatemala, for instance, has a large indigenous population: in 2018 approximately 6.5 million people identified themselves as indigenous, which amounts to nearly 44 % of the total population. In Belize, during the 2010s and 2020s, the indigenous population was estimated as being between 10% and 20%, made up mostly by Mayas (Mopán, Q'eqchi') and Garifunas. In most other Central American countries, including Costa Rica, indigenous population in the 2020s usually represented less than 10 % of the total (Caffrey, 2020).

In this sense, we may speak of self-ascription; that is, people identify themselves as indigenous, belonging to an ethnic group, not as people who speak an indigenous language. This constitutes a great difference in the way we conceive and think of indigenous populations, since it involves the shaping of an ethnic identity and the way in which they ascribe themselves as individuals within a cultural and social framework, with a worldview of their own which is different from that of other ethnic and population groups.

This means that self-ascription is a matter of identity, and not exclusively of being speakers of an indigenous language. In Mexico, institutions such as INEGI before 2000 used the linguistic criterion as the only characteristic to determine if a person was indigenous or not, which was a major bias since it left out all the people who did not speak an indigenous language but did consider themselves as belonging to an ethnic group. For this reason, since 2020 INEGI registered not only speakers of an indigenous language but also those who stated that they did not

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speak an indigenous language but identified themselves as indigenous because they belonged to an ethnic group. Thus, INEGI now defines self-ascription as the "recognition by the population of belonging to an ethnic group, based on their own concept" (Zolla & Zolla Márquez, 2024).

For this reason, now in Mexico people may identify themselves as indigenous even if they do not speak an original language, which brings up another highly important issue: the linguistic displacement of indigenous languages by Spanish and other languages such as English, which in Mexico, due to the high levels of migration to the United States and Canada, is being experienced by indigenous communities. Gregorio Regino (2022) and UNESCO (2010) coincide in stating that it was after Mexico became independent, after 1821, when the Mexican state policies centered in the shaping of a homogeneous nation both linguistically and culturally, based on the idea of the superiority of Spanish and Western culture. During that time indigenous languages were degraded and their writing was almost completely lost, which is why they survived only orally.

In Central America, of the seven countries that make up this sub-region, Panama and Belize have a different history from the other five, which unfolded in more or less similar conditions. According to data from the *Atlas of the world's endangered languages* (UNESCO, 2010), their linguistic history is as follows:

> Around 1821, the different provinces had achieved their Independence from the metropolis and finally became five independent countries whose official language was Spanish. Panama was part of the southern region since 1570 and became independent in 1903, when the Canal was constructed. Belize was settled by pirates and later by Jamaicans. In 1862 it became a British colony and became independent in 1981. Its official and teaching language is English, but most inhabitants of Belice speak a creole language based on English, although there are also speakers of Maya, Spanish, and Garifuna. Two Amerindian languages in this region are considered vulnerable: one is clearly endangered and the other in serious danger (p. 106).

So the question arises: What characterizes an endangered language? According to UNESCO (2010) not even linguists themselves have arrived at a concrete definition of what constitutes an endangered situation, as well as to the degree of threat that must be taken into account. In this respect, UNESCO states that "the simplest definition we can provide is this: a language is endangered if it is not being transmitted to younger generations (pp. 9-10)". This reinforces the idea that, to a large extent, the vitality of languages depends on how and how much it is spoken by younger generations.

What implications does speaking or not an indigenous language have? First, we must take into account that a language is not limited to its grammar and its vocabulary but goes much farther since it involves a worldview, not just a way of speaking but of conceiving life and the

self, the community that speaks it. In the view of Natalia Toledo, a Zapotec poet (quoted in Diplomacia Cultura, 2021), "a language is not just sounds, not just something abstract from the past: it is a vital, living language in which one talks, loves, conquers, sells, because in our alleys, in our house corridors, those voices are always coming in […] The Word in which a person was made, which made our thoughts, it's all out there, it draws itself, it is spoken, it is preserved".

Historically, indigenous languages in Mexico and Central America have survived thanks almost exclusively to orality, since very few have an alphabet or writing system. Some have never even had a formal, much less standardized, writing, while others had it and lost it, as is the case of the Zapoteco language spoken in Oaxaca, a state in the south of Mexico. Mexico has 68 indigenous languages, but only 14 of them have writing norms. This means that 54 indigenous groups do not yet have established writing standards (Romero Frizzi, 2003, pp. 24-25).

In this sense, there is currently discussion about the creation or not of writing standards for indigenous languages. On the one hand, there are a number of speakers and researchers who see as positive the actions towards the preservation and revitalization of original languages, not just in Mexico and Central America but throughout the world. However, there is still debate with opposite positions about these initiatives, since there are other scholars and speakers who defend orality as the only way to keep them alive.

However, faced with the loss of speakers of indigenous languages in the world, especially children, the creation of alphabets for indigenous languages, from this author's standpoint, constitutes a valuable tool to avoid their extinction. Thus, in recent decades there have been a large number of projects for the writing of indigenous languages, such as the CASA Awards, promoted by the late painter Francisco Toledo, which promotes texts in the categories of narrative (novels or stories), poetry, songs, children's literature, and texts based on oral tradition written in Zapoteco, Mazateco, Mixe, Mixteco, Chinanteco, Chatino, Ombeayiüts, and Triqui. The results have been extremely satisfactory, since "Between 2010 and 2024, we have received more than 2,200 texts for participation and have awarded prizes to 199 writers in original languages" (National Institute of Indigenous languages, INALI, 2025).

In spite of that and of these revitalization initiatives that seek to foster not only speaking in these languages – mostly by children and youths – but also writing in them, the latter requires an alphabet, and the problem is that not all indigenous languages have established writing standards. On the other hand, there is also the problem of indigenous languages that do have some kind of writing, but it has not been standardized. The most visible consequence of the lack of consensual alphabets is digraphy; that is, different ways to write the same words in the same language. Hence, nowadays speakers of indigenous languages do not have the tools (alphabets, books, dictionaries, and teaching materials in general) to write in their own language, and write it as they pronounce it or hear it, following the Spanish alphabet with some adaptations.

Throughout this debate it has become evident that the linguistic and educational reality of the indigenous peoples in Mexico and Central America faces profound structural challenges, but also emerging opportunities of revitalization. The transition from the census criterion based on monolingualism to indigenous self-ascription – promoted by INEGI since 2000 and consolidated in 2020 – represents a significant epistemological development, since it recognizes ethnic identity as a complex cultural and social phenomenon that cannot be reduced only to speaking a language. This methodological shift makes millions of people visible who, even though they no longer speak their mother tongue, continue to ascribe themselves as indigenous and maintain active links to their cultural heritage. From the standpoint of this text, the creation of alphabets and written materials for indigenous languages does not represent a threat to oral tradition but a complementary tool that is essential to their survival.

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