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The Situation of the Tsotsil Language from Chiapas, Mexico: Orality and Writing

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ABSTRACT: *This manuscript emphasizes the linguistic and cultural richness of Mexico as it is the country that has approximately 68 language groups. Mexico is considered one of the countries with the largest indigenous population in Latin America. The languages of these communities have been characterized by their orality. However, the speed with which many indigenous languages have disappeared globally shows the need to look for solutions that contribute to their revitalization and promotion. This article focuses on the indigenous Mayan Tsotsil language spoken in Chiapas, Mexico to give a concrete example of the reality of indigenous languages and the efforts of their speakers and various agents to ensure these languages are used, preserved, and promoted. Also, the manuscript stresses the importance of accompanying the orality of indigenous languages to a writing system to increase the possibilities of their use not only in the present but also in the future. It is emphasized that the writing of indigenous languages contributes to vindicating, valuing and strengthening the languages and cultures of indigenous peoples. In addition, the writing system of indigenous languages helps to expand the (informal and formal) domains in which these languages can be used and decreases the possibility for these languages to be replaced by Spanish. It also increases the prestige (of these languages) and the pride of their speakers. It is concluded that any attempt to maintain and foster the vitality of the linguistic and cultural diversity of indigenous peoples is worthwhile since the linguistic diversity is a basic principle that contributes to peace and safety by promoting collaboration among peoples through education, science and culture with the purpose of universal respect for justice, freedom and human rights.*

Key words*: Chiapas, Indigenous languages, Mexico, orality, Tsotsil, writing.*

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1. Mexico and its Indigenous Languages



Figure 1. Linguistic map of Mexico (Google Images, 2025.).

Mexico is known for being one of the countries with the most indigenous languages in the world and in Latin America. The Mexican nation has approximately "7,382,785 speakers of native languages. There are approximately 25,694,928 people who identify as indigenous, 21.5% of the country's total population" (Government of Mexico, n.d.). Therefore, Mexico is home to approximately 364 linguistic variants spoken by 68 indigenous groups.

2. The Oral Nature of Indigenous Languages and Their Disappearance

Indigenous languages are characterized by their orality, since the verbal aspect constitutes an essential axis through which identity networks are built. Likewise, orality represents "a rich source of ancestral wisdom, which contributes substantially to the variety and richness of the diverse cultural expressions in each of the Latin American countries, in whose territory the respective indigenous communities live" (Alchazidu, 2021, p. 36). This orality is considered an integral aspect of humanity's cultural legacy. Alchazidu (2021) reminds us that:

> Until relatively recently, the oral manifestations of indigenous peoples were transmitted exclusively orally, passed from mouth to mouth through various types of narratives linked, in specific cases, to certain rituals, ceremonies, or acts of a more or less performative nature. These types of indigenous oral manifestations have only begun to be systematically and rigorously documented since the 20th century, when researchers began using modern technology to make different types of recordings, from the simplest, in audio format, to the most sophisticated, in audiovisual format (p. 40).

Similarly, Alchazidu (2021) points out that the speed at which oral expressions of indigenous peoples' traditions are disappearing is worrying, as many indigenous languages are in danger of extinction. For this reason, it is important that indigenous peoples continue to use the oral expressions of their languages so that they can continue to fulfill their original role. Likewise, it is necessary for indigenous communities to speak their native language in all aspects of their daily lives. Today more than ever, it is essential to promote and revitalize indigenous languages, not only to preserve the linguistic richness of their speakers, but also their worldview, cultural legacy, and ancestral wisdom. Pastrana (2012) mentions that just as there is the extinction of species and political systems, there is also the rapid disappearance of indigenous peoples.

It is worth noting that there are approximately six thousand languages worldwide. However, 2,500 of them are in danger of extinction. Mexico is one of the nations with the highest number of endangered

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languages; it ranks fifth worldwide, with 144 languages in some degree of danger, according to the Atlas of Languages in Danger of the World (Pastrana, 2012). UNESCO (2003) highlights that a language dies when its speakers disappear or when they begin to speak another language, most often a stronger language used by a more powerful group. Languages are threatened by external forces, such as military, economic, religious, cultural, or educational subjugation, or by internal forces, such as a community's negative attitude toward its own language. Likewise, increased migration and rapid urbanization often bring with them the loss of traditional ways of life and intense pressure to speak a dominant language that is, or is perceived as, necessary for full civic participation and economic progress.

The Media Department of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) in Mexico (2023) notes that the threat to Mexican indigenous languages has motivated linguistic resistance among their speakers. Although Spanish, the country's dominant language, is strong in certain territories, there are activities where indigenous languages still play an active role, for example, in religious ceremonies. However, it should be emphasized that the family is no longer the primary site of vitality for languages being displaced by Spanish. In other words, the family is no longer the primary focus of linguistic resistance in societies where languages have entered a process of extinction.

For this reason, it is worth seeking various ways to prevent the extinction of indigenous languages, for example, through the creation and implementation of language revitalization programs. To do so, we must recognize the specific characteristics of each indigenous people, in addition to "determining the status of linguistic conflict at the public, community, and private levels, as well as considering the interests and motivations of the communities" (Media Department of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), 2023, para. 7). It is therefore important to implement positive linguistic ideologies so that the verbal aspect of indigenous languages plays a primary role in various spaces. Likewise, this oral expression can be accompanied by the written aspect of these languages, at least those that have a writing system, which could contribute to strengthening these languages, both now and in the future.

3. Indigenous Languages Writing



Figure 2. Writing standard of the Tsotsil language (Google Images, 2025).

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Although indigenous languages are known for their oral tradition, "there is a tendency, as part of public language policy, to promote writing as a means of vindicating, valuing, and strengthening languages and, consequently, culture" (Government of Mexico, n.d., para. 7). Today, it is possible to find narratives in indigenous languages in both verbal and written forms. The creative processes involved in creating narratives are represented in literature, which is based on writing, while orality is based on the creation and transmission of narratives verbally. This contributes to the revitalization and strengthening of indigenous languages.

Being able to count on narratives in verbal and written forms allows us to preserve the linguistic and cultural legacy of indigenous peoples, since their realization through writing allows these languages to have "the capacity to represent a concrete manifestation, which endures over time, a fact that, at the same time, allows not only to overcome temporal distances, when the reader today can enjoy reading a text written in ancient times, but thanks to writing, the text can overcome geographical and cultural distances, through translation" (Alchazidu, 2021, p. 40).

It should be emphasized that the writing of indigenous languages has not been an easy task, as it is a lengthy process that requires consensus among speakers of an entire linguistic group, who must consider the different linguistic variants that comprise it in order to reach agreements regarding the writing rules of their language (Government of Mexico, n.d.). It is worth mentioning that the purpose of writing standards is "to expand the areas of public and private use through the strengthening and development of communication strategies in accordance, primarily, with new social, intellectual, cultural, and technological needs" (National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI), 2017, para. 1). The purpose of standardized writing is to establish a hierarchy for the recovery and development of the areas of use of indigenous languages. This could contribute to reversing the trend of these languages being displaced by Spanish, considering the needs and interests of indigenous peoples.

The establishment of writing standards for indigenous languages, which are agreed upon by their speakers as well as by various stakeholders, helps foster knowledge, recognition, and appreciation of the linguistic diversity of their countries of origin. It also contributes to the promotion and strengthening of these languages. It is important to highlight that the fact that indigenous languages have writing standards also helps increase their social prestige; it helps expand their written record and their access to means for recording texts. Furthermore, the writing standards of indigenous languages allow for "understanding spelling conventions, promoting the practice of writing and reading in indigenous languages, and the use of the language's own toponyms" (National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI), n.d., p. 6), which is essential for recovering and occupying other spaces of use that, to date, have been restricted to indigenous languages. It should be emphasized that establishing orthographic conventions for the writing systems of the languages of indigenous communities does not seek to eliminate linguistic variants, that is, it does not seek to homogenize linguistic resources, but rather to standardize the criteria for using these resources.

In the case of Mexico, the writing standards for approximately 14 indigenous languages have been published, meaning that there are still 54 indigenous groups that do not have a fixed standardized written system. This indicates that their written system is created according to one or more writing rules proposed by different speakers of that language, or it means that the language does not have any writing rules at all. Therefore, it can be said that the languages of indigenous communities are living entities that adapt or change to historical times and the social and cultural contexts of their speakers. This motivates the frequent review and updating of written materials in indigenous languages.

4. The Tsotsil Language (Bats'i k'op)

As highlighted, Mexico is home to 68 linguistic groups, with the Tsotsil language being one of the best-known indigenous languages in the southeast of the country. It is on this language that we will focus our attention in the following lines. Tsotsil or Bats'i k'op is an indigenous Mayan language spoken by approximately 550,000 people, mainly in the state of Chiapas, in southern Mexico, and also in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz. This language is closely related to Tzeltal and Ch'ol , and is part of the Cholán-Tzeltalán branch of the Mayan language family (Omniglot, n.d.). Tsotsil has seven linguistic variants and is distributed in 31 municipalities in the state of Chiapas (National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI), n.d.).

Tsotsil is a verbal language and has a writing system; therefore, it is used as a medium of instruction in primary schools and some bilingual secondary schools in Spanish and Tsotsil. The fact that the Tsotsil

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language has a writing system strengthens its maintenance and dissemination over time. It also contributes to Tsotsil children having access to textbooks in their native language, which can increase the chances of meaningful learning as they continue to develop the four skills of their native language: reading, writing, listening, and speaking.



Figure 3. Tsotsil alphabet and textbook (Google Images, 2025).

Today, there are audiovisual materials, textbooks, children's stories, and various written materials in the Tsotsil language. This contributes to its prestige and dissemination beyond the family context. There are also radio and television programs in the language, as well as cartoons focused on Tsotsil children. All of this helps ensure that there are spaces in the media dedicated to the Tsotsil language and culture and to highlight the linguistic and cultural richness of the state of Chiapas.

The above supports national language policies that seek to strengthen, maintain, develop, and utilize the languages of indigenous peoples. The efforts of the National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI) have been fundamental to achieving these goals, as they have been able to disseminate indigenous languages through various projects. Furthermore, the speakers of these languages have played an active and essential role in this endeavor, for example, through the capsules entitled "Nothing for Us Without Us." This project consists of approximately 22 capsules featuring speakers of indigenous languages. The capsules are three-minute audiovisuals, which reflect "the way in which INALI addresses the fundamental principle of the Centrality of Indigenous Peoples, established for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (DILI) 2022-2032, where speakers of national indigenous languages are placed at the center, as subjects of law" (National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI), 2024, para. 4).

It is also worth stating that today there is a National Registry of Interpreters and Translators (PANITLI), with updated information on translators, interpreters, and other bilingual agents with knowledge of the normative systems of indigenous peoples. All of this shows that giant strides have been made with respect to indigenous languages and cultures in Mexico, for example, in the case of Tsotsil and other indigenous languages of Chiapas, in southeastern Mexico, where various projects exist, such as "Guidelines for Thinking in Indigenous Languages" (PaPeLe), aimed at indigenous children. PaPeLe is an educational model with a

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curriculum that considers kindergarten, primary, and secondary levels. PaPeLe aims to motivate "genuine curiosity as a driver of learning, develop critical thinking skills from indigenous languages, promoting the development of the four language skills" (PaPeLe, 2025, para. 2). This project operates in the six languages of the state of Chiapas: Tsotsil, Tojolabal, Ch'ol, Tzeltal, Zoque and Mayan.

This project supports the discovery of the environment and its relationship with human beings, which emerges from children's knowledge and is informed by community knowledge. This educational model is "based on educational radio series complemented by teacher guides, activity sheets, videos, songs, and other complementary materials; available on this freely accessible digital platform" (PaPeLe, 2025, para. 2).



Figure 4. The Agua Azul waterfalls in Chiapas, Mexico (Google. Images, 2025).

This educational model called PaPeLe, like the various projects carried out by INALI, shows, in a certain way, the progress that has been made with respect to the preservation and dissemination of the languages and cultures of the native peoples, not only in Chiapas, but also in other states of the Mexican Republic, which should motivate us to continue joining efforts to maintain the linguistic and cultural wealth of the native peoples of Mexico.

5. Conclusion

The Tsotsil language, like other indigenous Mexican languages and all indigenous languages around the world, is characterized by its oral expressions, which have served as the basis for the cultural identity of its speakers. However, it is important to emphasize that the oral expression of various indigenous languages is at risk of falling into disuse, and in the case of some of these languages, their total disappearance is predicted due to the internal and external pressures their speakers face. In Mexico, Spanish, the country's dominant language, has weakened and, in some cases, displaced some indigenous languages. Therefore, it is necessary to find ways to strengthen and disseminate them in formal and informal settings. It is also essential to transmit them to new generations, since linguistic transmission is one of the most powerful tools for the vitality of a language. This transmission can begin at home and continue in school. This is why, it is so important to support the oral expression of indigenous languages with a writing system. Having written materials in Indigenous languages contributes to the preservation and transmission of the linguistic and cultural heritage of Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, the writing of Indigenous languages increases their prestige and the spaces in which they can be used, for example, in schools, workplaces, government settings, and so on.

Speakers of indigenous languages need support through the implementation of language policies that promote the use of these languages and their dissemination at the local, national, and international levels. Any

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effort to maintain and foster the vitality of the linguistic and cultural diversity of indigenous peoples is worthwhile, as linguistic diversity is a basic principle that contributes to peace and security by promoting collaboration among nations through education, science, and culture, with the goal of universal respect for justice, freedom, and human rights.

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