Resisting threats to linguistic diversity: lessons from Zapotec language activism

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National Council on Interpreting in Health Care Annual Membership Meeting
The money cage

The place where you can just scoop up money,
it’s far away from home.
I arrived here,
I grew up here.
What kind of person am I?
I speak Zapotec,
but only deaf people live here.
I cry at night—
where is my family?
I live in the foreigners’ country.
This place is a money cage. (translation mine)

Gyec muly
Laty rria muly
zhyet riani loguezh.
Bzeinya ricy,
brua ricy.
Tu buny naa?
Dizhsa rgwia,
per nazh dicwat ri ricy.
Wzhiny runua—
cuan ra sa?
Lazhzyet bunyi nua.
Gyec mulyi nai. - Felipe H. Lopez (2018)
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Tu buny naa? What kind of person am I?
Dizhsa rgwia I speak Zapotec
| **Tu buny naa?** | What kind of person am I? |
| **Dizhsa rgwia** | I speak Zapotec |
| **Buny Dizhsa** | Zapotec person (Zapotec language person) |
du’

noun  yarn
(Spanish) hilo

listen

Speaker: Janet Chávez Santiago
du’

noun  yarn

(Spanish) hilo

listen

Speaker: Janet Chávez Santiago
du'

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(Spanish) hilo

Speaker: Janet Chávez Santiago
Languages

- 3,586 smallest languages
- 2,935 mid-sized languages
- 83 biggest languages

Speakers

- 0.2% of the world's population
- 20.4% of the world's population
- 79.4% of the world's population

Dr. Gregory D. S. Anderson and Dr. K. David Harrison, Living Tongues Institute
Language “hotspots”

Language Hotspots
Hotspots are areas with many languages near extinction.

Dr. Gregory D. S. Anderson and Dr. K. David Harrison, Living Tongues Institute
Indigenous languages in Mexico

- 7% of the population speaks an indigenous language in Mexico (INEGI 2015: 60)
- 60% are in danger of disappearing (INALI; Notimex 2019)
Threats against indigenous languages

- Mestizaje was a symbolic ideology for Mexico in the process of nation building after independence
- Mestizo / mestizaje - combined European and Indigenous American descent
- “Our indigenous problem is not to conserve the Indian as Indian, nor to indigenize Mexico, but rather to Mexicanize the Indian.”
  -President Lazaro Cardenas in a speech before Mexican Congress, 1940
Distribution of indigenous languages in Mexico
Most widely spoken languages in Mexico

- Nahuatl (1.4 million speakers)
- Yucatec Maya (750,000 speakers)
- Mixtec (500,000)
- Zapotec (400,000)
Oaxaca
Oaxaca

Felipe H. Lopez (in Munro et al. 2007)
Zapotec languages

- Slightly over 400,000 speakers of Zapotec languages
- Communities are shifting to Spanish in more and more contexts
- All Zapotec varieties are endangered
- Many Zapotec varieties are critically endangered
- Most speakers of Zapotec do not write their language
- Discrimination against speakers of Zapotec (and other indigenous languages) has a long history and continues today
So there were two of those guys working there.
DIZHSA NABANI

LENGUA VIVA

LIVING LANGUAGE
Zapotec as a minoritized language

- Zapotec is not taught at schools and is seen as lacking scientific, mathematical, and educational value
- Zapotec is not often used in (non-Zapotec) public places
- Zapotec is seen as “traditional,” unchanging, and linked to the past; thus is not seen as having value in modern society
- Spanish is considered versatile, modern, and full of opportunities for economic and social status gains
- Zapotec and other indigenous languages are seen as something less than a language—“dialectos”
- The written history of Zapotec is denied and Zapotec is claimed to be impossible to write
Experience & ideologies that devalue Zapotec language

Janet Chávez Santiago

When I was in elementary school, in the 90s, I remember children speaking Zapotec in many contexts: playing in the streets, at parties, and during town celebrations— but never at school. Instead, we had to “behave” ourselves by not speaking Zapotec, otherwise teachers could punish us by giving us extra homework or by not letting us eat lunch or even beating us. Teachers made us believe that speaking Zapotec was disrespectful, something to be ashamed of. They devalued our language by calling it a “dialect”.

@JanChvzSanti
As a child, I never saw anything written in Zapotec. All my books and books that my parents bought me were in Spanish, so at some point I thought teachers were right, that Zapotec was a language with no value so nobody wanted to write books in my language. By the end of the 90s there was no need to prohibit children speaking Zapotec in the school, because in order to avoid their children being punished, parents had switched to speaking in Spanish to their children at home. These days, there are very few children who speak Zapotec in my town.

-Janet Chávez Santiago,
in Mannix, Lillehaugen, & Chavez 2015
Zapotec writing
Zapotec alphabetic writing
Administrative texts

Wills / testaments
Bills of sale
Testimonies
“Possessions”
Letters
Meta-linguistic & religious texts
TICHA

A DIGITAL TEXT EXPLORER FOR COLONIAL ZAPOTEC
@TichaProject  http://ticha.haverford.edu

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May Helena Plumb, *Haverford College* ‘16 @mayhplumb

...and many other contributors
Access - physical access
### Access to corpus: browse

#### Available Handwritten Manuscripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Document</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Archive</th>
<th>Type of Document</th>
<th>Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Testament from Oaxaca de Juárez, 1633</td>
<td>1633</td>
<td>Oaxaca, Mexico</td>
<td>Archivo Histórico de Notarías del Estado de Oaxaca, Oaxaca City, Mexico</td>
<td>Testament</td>
<td>Zapotec</td>
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<td>Testament from Santo Domingo, 1643</td>
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<td>Testament?</td>
<td>Zapotec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill of sale from San Miguel Tlistaca, 1656</td>
<td>1656</td>
<td>San Miguel Tlistaca, Oaxaca, Mexico</td>
<td>Archivo General del Poder Ejecutivo del Estado de Oaxaca, Oaxaca City, Mexico</td>
<td>Bill of Sale</td>
<td>Zapotec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testament from Oaxaca de Juárez, 1670</td>
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<td>Archivo Histórico de Notarías del Estado de Oaxaca, Oaxaca City, Mexico</td>
<td>Testament</td>
<td>Zapotec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill of sale from San Jerónimo Tlacochahuaya, 1675</td>
<td>1675</td>
<td>San Jerónimo Tlacochahuaya, Oaxaca, Mexico</td>
<td>Archivo General del Poder Ejecutivo del Estado de Oaxaca, Oaxaca City, Mexico</td>
<td>Bill of Sale</td>
<td>Zapotec</td>
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<td>Testament from San Jerónimo Tlacochahuaya, 1675</td>
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<td>Archivo General del Poder Ejecutivo del Estado de Oaxaca, Oaxaca City, Mexico</td>
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<td>Zapotec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testament from Tlaxcoapan, 1687</td>
<td>1687</td>
<td>Tlaxcoapan, Oaxaca, Mexico</td>
<td>Archivo General del Poder Ejecutivo del Estado de Oaxaca, Oaxaca City, Mexico</td>
<td>Testament</td>
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</tr>
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</table>
Process

- The texts are made publically available on Ticha as soon as possible (at any stage of analysis)
- The acknowledgement of existence of these texts is important to the community and gives public prestige to the language
- It makes visible a written history of a language currently seen as “only” an oral language
- Project grown collaboratively with undergraduate students and Zapotec speakers & community members
Results and opportunities:
training and pedagogical methods

BYxoccetonooho! Quiiebaa nachibalo: Naciroo cica-
ni Laalo: Quellacooqui xtennilo quira cica ruraij:
Nirizigueelalo cica raca quiaa quiieba, laanicica
gaca raurii layoox Xicónina quixee quixee penèche cica annaa:
Chela conitilooicalo, ni rexiihuina: Cicatonoo reniiitto-
nna, ni pexihi lezaana: Chela á cozaanañaacicalo tonoo,
nllani yá quexiihuina: Peziilla cica tonoo nilaxtenni, quiraa
quella huechhie. Gaca ciiga cica.
Jefus.

DIOS TE SALVE MARIA LLENA
eres de gracia, &c.

Access to linguistic information

2.2 Declinación

2.2.1 [Nominativo]

Declinemos ahora el nombre, pichina qui
re deñir Venado o Culebre, pues díelse así:
No minatíuo pichina, en este caso no ay difficul-
tad, porq es regular y va así en todos los nombres.

Genitivo.

DECLINACION.

GENITIVO.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcription</th>
<th>Modern Spanish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ARTE</td>
<td>ni tienen terminaciones ni artículos como los del Latin, ni tampoco directamente tienen caños como los nuestros. Sino añadiéndole algunas parti culas, o anteponiendo o postponiendo el nòbre o por circunloquios pañan con ellos por los caños. Para cuyo exéjlo nos parece declinar aquí vn nó bre, como para modelo de los demás, porque todos van por aquel camino.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REGLA</td>
<td>Dezimos que no tienen artículos, y es, que para ninguna cosa inanimada le ay. Y per la criaturas animadas no tienen mas que eíte. V.g, gónná, post pueño para todas las hembres, y níg-nío, para todos los machos. Ye pénigónná mu ger, péninigujo, bòbre, mánigónná, animal hembre, máninigujo, animal macho.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| péní gönná | péní gönná |
| person female | 'woman' |

| pichina | pichina |
| 'deer' | 'deer' |

| minatíuo pichina | minatíuo pichina |
| 'easy' | 'easy' |

| xabaya | xabaya |
| 'animal' | 'animal' |

| xabaya, mi, xabaya, xabaya, xa, xabo, y, a, a, a, a |
| 'animal' | 'animal' |
Zapotec people & modern language visible and audible

=a sp. var. of = ya 'I; me'
aca no, not (negative particle). (Also attested as acua, haca.)
acua sp. var. of aca 'no, not'
alani item (used to mark items in a list). See also alarini.
alarini item (used to mark items in a list). See also alani. (Also attested as alatini, latini.)
alatini sp. var. of alarini 'item'
aña now. (Also attested as na, yana.)
ananí 'today'
See it in San Lucas Quiaviní Zapotec: na
ananí today. (Composed of ana 'now', chi 'day'.) (Also attested as anachihi, anchi, yanachi.)
See it in San Lucas Quiaviní Zapotec: nazhi
See it in Tlacochahuaya Zapotec: an chi
See it in Teotitlán del Valle Zapotec: nadxi
Your random search has returned 1 entry

bēch

cracks in the soil

Speaker: Moisés García Guzmán

listen
Talking Dictionaries, K. David Harrison, Living Tongues

Inclusion of audio-visual materials allows for participation of community members who are aspiring speakers.

The organization of semantic domains reflects local values with cultural content, ethnobotany, material culture, and foodways prominently featured.
gulaj

shaft frame on a loom (where the weavings are stretched)

(Spanish) estirador en el telar (donde los tejidos son estirados)

Speaker: Federico Chávez Sosa

listen

bookmark

---

gwepy

loom net

(Spanish) mallas para el telar

Speaker: Miguel Ángel Mendoza Bautista

listen

bookmark
du'

*noun*  yarn

(Spanish) hilo

Speaker: Janet Chávez Santiago
• Community needs drive innovations in the platform design.
• The Talking Dictionaries originated on a web-based platform, users preferred to access the dictionaries from their smartphones, which are ubiquitous, even in rural Oaxaca. Future development of the platform was informed by this user preference.
• These dictionaries sit opposite from big data mining, and illustrate the potential value of dictionary projects based on small corpora, including having the flexibility to make design decision to maximize community impact and elevate the status of marginalized languages.
• Methodology -- not just final product-- is of central importance where participation in the creation of these dictionaries can be way to draw more community members into local language teaching and learning programs.
Moisés García Guzmán @BnZunni · Feb 2
When I speak my language, I want to tell other people how I see the world. (@BnZunni) #Usatuvoz

Chi rgüia x-ticha...
rkaza ghatzaa stuv de bnieti...
xha rguia gëch lhew...
ENCUENTRO DE
activismo digital de
genazas indígenas

3-5 de octubre 2014 | Oaxaca, México
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of indigenous languages used on Twitter</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Lee (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016 (March)</td>
<td>170+</td>
<td>Lillehaugen (2016), counting on Indigenous Tweets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017 (August)</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>counting on Indigenous Tweets</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Number of indigenous languages used on Twitter 2011-2017
Re beinychiarēng lo galguty kēn zhub bzyata, xnia chiru kēn bzyia na kēn xieru ra bez. #usatuvoz #IYIL2019 #tepoztlan #zapoteco Buny Dizhsa Iazhu Buny Mexican
@DizhSa
Angel Morales @la_na_angel · Jan 18
Tibüxhgabülollem ruranxhgbüxha gacuxhi,izielorannircuaran parchalexhi chalenuxhigacran #UsaTuVoz #ZapotecoColonial
Moisés García Guzmán @BnZunni · 13 Sep 2017
Bën Za rilo rzak laz de ze’é chi mdian bndag quiadem / Zapotecs believe corn is happy, when it grows small leaves on top #UsaTuVoz
Yaneth Molina @YanethMolina99 · Mar 6
Ha que nanixha ti guiña'bichoxhe #UsaTuVoz
Yaneth Molina @YanethMolina99 · 10 Apr 2017
Vi a’ dani bedxhe ca’ ra ca sachelo lacabe’ gunna sicaru ne galán shini bido’
San Blas 😊 #UsaTuVoz ZapotecoColonial

Translate from Spanish
Zapotec speakers are using Twitter for multiple, overlapping purposes:

- as a place to use their language and perform Zapotec identity
- as a way to practice writing their language
- as a means to communicate with other Zapotec speakers
- as a venue to share their language, culture, and identity with Zapotec and non-Zapotec individuals
- as a form of resistance through digital language activism.
Zapotec Twitter  #UsaTuVoz

- resists false ideologies that Zapotec language cannot be written
- pushes back against the notion that Zapotec language is something only of the past or something only of use in the pueblo, by using language in a modern global context
Zapotec Twitter

#UsaTuVoz

- resists false ideologies that Zapotec language cannot be written
- pushes back against the notion that Zapotec language is something only of the past or something only of use in the pueblo, by using language in a modern global context
- has created a “born digital” Zapotec language corpus!
bia’á

prickly pear cactus pad  
(Spanish) nopal

Moisés García Guzmán 
@BnZunni

Bën Za udily ni goni lo nia, ze'éy bchieldeb Bia’á rë'nì / Loking for food, Zapotecs added tender cactus leaves to their diet
#UsaTuVoz pic.twitter.com/JpFTrE3pES

Speaker: Moisés García Guzmán
Xtyoztën yuad - Thank you - Gracias