

# The Mixtec language in New York: Vitality, discrimination and identity

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## 1.0 Introduction

The Endangered Language Alliance's language map of New York City (Perlin & Kaufman 2019, Kaufman & Perlin 2018) reports over 640 languages in the greater metropolitan area, likely representing the highest linguistic diversity of any city in the world. The foreign-born population of New York has doubled from the 1970s to the present day, where it stands at over a third of the general population, but our knowledge of the various linguistic communities within this third is highly uneven and lags far behind the facts on the ground. Much has been written on New York's Spanish, Russian, Mandarin Chinese and Yiddish speaking communities (e.g. Garcia & Fishman 2002) but smaller language communities are only described in passing and are largely anecdotal in nature.

Despite a population of well over half a million people, New York's Mexican-born community has traditionally been thought of as a monolithic Spanish-speaking bloc when it is in fact one of the most multi-ethnic and multilingual populations in the city. This diversity has only recently come to light for a larger segment of the public due to the catastrophic impacts of the Trump administration's anti-immigrant policies and the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020. City agencies scrambling to communicate with previously neglected populations have for the first time created messaging in Indigenous languages of Latin America but the inadequate resources to meet growing needs for interpretation in languages such as Nahuatl, Mixtec, Zapotec, Mam and K'iche' have rightly been considered a crisis of its own (Nolan 2020, Torrens 2011).

In the present chapter, I focus on the linguistic predicament of Mixtec New Yorkers with a view towards understanding language use and attitudes in the community. A primary research question, which is approached here for the first time, is whether Mixtec will survive as a spoken language among the younger, New York born members of the community. While we cannot prognosticate how the landscape may change over the decades to come, we can make fairly clear projections about what would happen were the current sociolinguistic and economic conditions to continue as they are.

The primary data which this chapter is based on come from several related sources. Most of the interviews cited here were undertaken as part of "A Qualitative Study of Well-Being and Cultural Continuity through Language Among Indigenous Latin American Immigrants in New York City" (DOHMH IRB#17-132), a collaborative effort led by ELA and sponsored by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. The project collected thirty hour-long interviews across members of six ethnic groups in New York (Nahuatl [Mexico], Mixtec [Mexico], K'iche' [Guatemala], Mam [Guatemala], Garifuna [Honduras, Guatemala and Belize], and Kichwa [Ecuador]) and sought to better understand the contexts in which Indigenous languages are used in New York City, language transmission, issues of access and discrimination, as well as prevalent health issues in the six communities.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Our approach sought to empower community members as co-researchers by training one person from each group to carry out the interviews in their native language, make time-aligned translations of the recordings, and assist in the interpretation of the transcripts themselves. This is rather unique in the literature on indigenous migrants in the US, as all studies heretofore have been based on interviews in Spanish, carried out with or without the help of insider co-researchers. This excludes a crucial population of Indigenous migrants we have striven to include here, those who fall within a range of being fully monolingual to not expressing themselves fully in Spanish.

I rely most heavily on interviews with five Mixtec speakers, whom I refer to with pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity. Our Mixtec co-researcher in the project, Maximiliano Bazan, who carried out most of the interviews, is cited by name.<sup>2</sup> From the same project, I also cite group discussions I led together with collaborators around questions of language. These were held at the LSA Health Center in East Harlem with Mixtec-speaking mothers living in the same neighborhood.<sup>3</sup> In two cases ([1] and [15-16] below), I make use of previous interviews and discussions I have undertaken with Mixtec speakers as part of ELA, the original sources for which can be found in the notes.

The chapter is organized as follows. I present the requisite socio-historical background on the Mixtec people both in Mexico and New York in §1.1 and give a brief historical and typological overview of the Mixtec language in §1.2, including the state of the language in New York City. In §2, I discuss the division of a Mixtec speaker's daily life by language domain, which I argue is crucial to understanding the language's vitality in the diaspora. In §3, I briefly examine experiences of linguistic discrimination and the potential effects of this discrimination and its perception on language use. In §4, I look at insider perceptions of the value of the Mixtec language and the factors that will determine its future in diaspora. I conclude in §5 with a note on the remaining gaps in our knowledge and directions for further study.

## 1.1 The Mixtecs in Mexico and New York

The majority of Mexican-born New Yorkers have migrated over the last 35 years, displacing to some extent Puerto Ricans and Dominicans as the prevailing Spanish-speaking communities in neighborhoods such as East Harlem, Corona and the South Bronx. Mexican migration to New York increased considerably in the 1980s and 1990s due in large part to the amnesty granted to previously undocumented migrants and the subsequent family reunifications, as part of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), which conferred legal status on those undocumented immigrants who arrived before 1982. Up until that point, the Mexican state of Puebla was the most significant source of Mexican immigration to New York and the immigrants were largely from the rural mestizo (mixed European/Indigenous ancestry) population. The pre-IRCA migrants from Puebla have been described most prominently in Smith's (2005) ethnography, which examines various aspects of a transnational immigrant community from a single town as they negotiate the social, economic and cultural pressures of leading parallel lives across an American inner city and a rural Mexican *rancheria*. The tightly organized, transnational communities described by Smith may be typical of the mestizo Mexican migrants who benefitted from IRCA. However, in more recent years the state of Guerrero has become the dominant sending region for migrants to the Northeast US (Massey et al 2010) and the more recent arrivals from Guerrero are of a significantly different profile. A larger proportion are of Indigenous ancestry, belonging to the Mixtec, Nahuatl, Amuzgo and Tlapanec ethnolinguistic groups, among others. The Mixtec speakers, our focus here, comprise the fourth largest indigenous group in Mexico but are historically less integrated into the Mexican state both socially and economically.

As with many indigenous groups of Mexico, the Mixtecs are most widely known by the Nahuatl name given to them by the Aztecs. Their popular contemporary endonym, *Ñuu Savi*, descends from earlier Mixtec *Ñudzahui* and means 'people of the rain/clouds'. The

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<sup>2</sup> I also make use of ancillary group discussions conducted as part of the larger project as well as interviews conducted prior to this project. Quotes not attributed to any of the pseudonymized interviewees below come from this material.

<sup>3</sup> I use the first person plural throughout to refer to findings from the collective interview project which serves as the primary source material for the current analysis.

language is referred to commonly as *Tu'un Savi*, *Sa'a Savi* or a variant thereof, meaning 'language of the rain/clouds'.

Mixtec civilization is evidenced by a rich archeological record and a large number of Spanish and Mixtec language manuscripts produced during early Spanish colonial period (see Terreciano 2001 for a comprehensive overview) as well as a vibrant oral culture.

The small-scale agriculture practiced by Mixtecs for millennia provided a viable subsistence until the introduction of livestock by the Spanish (Pérez-Rodríguez 2016, Amith 2005), which altered the landscape considerably and had far reaching consequences on the economy and livelihood of the indigenous population. More recently, a major turning point emerged in the 1990s, when conditions suddenly worsened as the value of produce depreciated with new US subsidized competition introduced by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (Stephen 2007:122-131, Galvez 2018). The negative economic consequences of NAFTA on small-scale farmers were severe enough to single-handedly force thousands to find alternative means of survival. When indigenous migrants from Guerrero speak of migration, they therefore describe it as a necessity more often than an opportunity. The ensuing Mixtec diaspora now comprises communities throughout the western states of California, Oregon and Washington. However, the northward migration is very much based on village and regional networks. Consequently, we find that the majority of Mixtecs on the west coast originate from communities in Oaxaca but the vast majority of communities in New York and the east coast originate from the neighboring state of Guerrero with very few migrants from Oaxaca.

There is a dramatic disparity in the percentage of speakers of indigenous languages among the Mexican born population in New York and Mexico itself. Official statistics report that 6% of Mexicans speak an indigenous language (INEGI 2010) while a survey of 1,500 people conducted by the Mexican consulate in New York found that 17.26% spoke an indigenous language, almost three times the rate of that reported for Mexico itself. Assuming that the estimate of half a million Mexicans in New York City is correct, this puts speakers of indigenous languages at roughly 86,300 individuals. Two factors lie behind this disparity. Firstly, emigration push factors appear to disproportionately affect Indigenous people regardless of country or region.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, over the last three decades the source of migration to New York has shifted from towns and cities dominated by mestizos to some of the most linguistically diverse regions of Mexico, where over 20% of the population speaks an indigenous language.

The more recent Mixtec migrants to New York have far fewer hometown organizations than earlier Mexican immigrants. Their social networks are the extended family unit and, due to their work schedules and family obligations, they typically have little opportunity to congregate with others from their hometown. Furthermore, they are dispersed throughout far flung neighborhoods within larger Spanish-speaking populations, such as Corona, East Harlem, Sunset Park, the South Bronx, and the Richmond Hill area of Staten Island. As commented upon elsewhere (e.g. Hernandez-Corchado 2014:245), it seems impossible to estimate the number of Mixtecs in New York City with any accuracy, but a figure of 25,000-30,000 has been posited by Martino-Velez (2010), which appears reasonable based on the number of migrants from Guerrero.

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<sup>4</sup> Cohen (2004:70, 92-3), for instance, notes that speakers of indigenous languages in areas of Oaxaca appeared more likely to emigrate to the US than to migrate internally and surmises that anti-indigenous discrimination within Mexico may account for this. Urbanization (i.e. internal migration) has also been shown to affect Native Americans of the United States and Canada disproportionately, as well as indigenous populations from Asia. A recent survey done within the Nepali immigrant community in New York showed that 58% of the respondents belonged to indigenous "adivasi" ethnicities, contrasting sharply with their minority status in Nepal itself, where they are only 36% of the general population (Hangen & Ranjit 2010:10). Nonetheless, in the Mexican case, at least, anti-Indigenous discrimination continues largely unabated in the US (Lynn 2007, Holmes 2013).

## 1.2 The Mixtec language

### 1.2.1 Historical and typological overview

Mixtec is best considered a subgroup (i.e. Mixtecan) within the larger Otomanguean family rather than a single language. Estimates of the number of Mixtecan languages based on linguistic criteria vary between 20 to 50. Almost every individual town has an identifiable variety of the language and these varieties can differ considerably within relatively short distances. Varieties of Mixtec are thought to be spoken by over half a million people across Mexico.<sup>5</sup> There is no good estimate for how many Mixtec speakers live in the United States.

All Mixtec varieties are tone languages most of which have intricate systems of tone sandhi and highly irregular inflectional paradigms in which tense, aspect, mood and person agreement are indicated at least in part by tonal morphology. Syntactically, Mixtec is a head-initial language with a basic clausal word order of Verb Subject Object. There are roughly two dozen modern descriptive grammars and grammar sketches of Mixtec varieties, most of which were authored by members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics from the 1980s onwards.<sup>6</sup> There also exist hundreds of articles and unpublished theses on various aspects of Mixtec phonetics, phonology and grammar. Pioneering work by Longacre (1957), Josseland (1983) and Dürr (1987) have improved our understanding of the historical development and diversification of the Mixtecan languages although much work still remains to be done to understand the subgroup's internal diversity and its relation to other Otomanguean subgroups (L. Campbell 1997, E. Campbell 2017).

Mixtec already had a two thousand-year-old written tradition when the Spanish arrived in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century but within a relatively short time, indigenous manuscripts and knowledge of writing were almost completely destroyed. Remnants of Mixtec pictographic writing are still actively being deciphered (see Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2011 for a recent overview) but detailed knowledge of its use was erased. Presently, Mixtec is written in the Latin alphabet and is promoted by the Mixtec Language Academy, Ve'e Tu'un Savi ('House of the Mixtec Language'), a non-governmental organization, through orthography design and literacy workshops, as well as by governmental organizations such as INALI (Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas). Ve'e Tu'un Savi is mainly concerned with *normalización*, the creation of a written standard that can be applied widely within the Mixtec speaking area. The internal diversity of Mixtec has become politicized as the work of INALI in identifying and cataloguing Mixtec *languages* counters the understanding of community organizations such as Ve'e Tu'un Savi, who prefer to speak of varieties of a single language. The Mixtec language activists and intellectuals associated with Ve'e Tu'un Savi understandably fear that the presentation of Mixtec as a multitude of independent languages only serves to further fragment the community and will ultimately frustrate the creation of a common standard. This is the converse of an earlier but still ongoing struggle to recognize indigenous languages of Mexico as *lenguas/lenguajes* ("languages") as opposed to *dialectos* ("dialects"), as per the common Spanish practice. The Spanish usage carries over to the present day, in which *hablar dialecto* 'to speak dialect' is still the common parlance for speaking an indigenous language in Mexico.

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<sup>5</sup> INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática) statistics from 2015 show 517,665 speakers of Mixtec languages in Mexico over the age of three.

<sup>6</sup> Macaulay's (2016) grammar of Chalcatongo Mixtec is probably the most complete description of any variety while Zylstra's (2012) grammar sketch of Alacatlazala Mixtec is the best description for varieties of the Guerrero region discussed here.

Currently, there is little multilingualism across speakers of indigenous languages in Guerrero. Even though there are several areas, especially Metlatonoc and Tlapa, where speakers of various indigenous languages have lived side by side for generations, we have not encountered anyone in New York who can understand multiple indigenous languages. This was not always the case but it does appear to hold widely today at a time when Spanish is the uncontested lingua franca.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, Mixtec New Yorkers typically live in a complex multilingual environment involving Mixtec, Chilango/Mexican Spanish, Caribbean Spanish/Spanglish, and English.

### 1.2.2 The language in New York

With regard to New York's "language landscape", Mixtec, and Otomanguan languages more generally, are entirely invisible. They have no written representation, neither in signage nor in informal writing. This might be expected given that the vast majority of the language community has no experience reading and writing in their mother tongues but even the symbolic use of language as seen, for instance, in the widespread use of Nahuatl names of restaurants and other establishments, is completely absent for Mixtec. The Mixtecs, like many other indigenous peoples of Mexico, had to contend with multiple erasures, first that suffered under the Aztec conquest, then the one imposed by the Spanish colonizers, and now that of the Anglophone world in which many are forced to earn their living.

Another factor in the invisibility of Mixtec is that only the youngest migrants may have had exposure to their mother tongue as a medium of instruction; bilingual education in Guerrero is a relatively new phenomenon and is not distributed evenly throughout the region. More surprising than the absence of written Mixtec in New York is the relative absence of spoken Mixtec on the streets and workplaces, given the large number of speakers. As discussed below, Mixtec speakers typically prefer to use Spanish in the workplace, if possible.

In New York's school system there is no official recognition of any indigenous Latin American languages being spoken by the student population. All too often, children whose families speak indigenous languages at home are incorrectly assumed to be Spanish speakers and placed in a Spanish language track, often with negative consequences (Velasco 2010, Velasco 2014, Pérez et al 2016: 259). Velasco and Kabuto (2019:142) note that, "When registering their children for school, Mixteco families rarely share that they are Mixteco speakers when reporting home languages on formal school documents or in conversations during parent-teacher conferences." Indigenous languages have been so denigrated over the last several centuries in Mexico that, for many speakers, they are no longer considered to belong to the same ontological category as Spanish and English. They are unwritten *dialectos* with neither status nor grammar.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, for those who came in the 1980s and early 1990s, there is a strict separation between the Spanish domain of education and the Mixtec domain of the home. Transgression of this barrier in school often resulted in physical punishment.

It is only within the last three years that city agencies have begun responding to the need for translation and outreach to Mixtec speakers with occasional promotions and

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<sup>7</sup> Sicoli (2011:171) makes an interesting observation that the tendency for speakers of different Otomanguan languages to use Spanish between themselves has led the borderlands between language groups to become areas of increased shift to Spanish.

<sup>8</sup> Attitudes toward indigenous languages are improving in Mexico amid increased efforts at rehabilitating their prestige. Most important among these efforts are the amendments to the Mexican Constitution implemented in 1992 that seek to recognize and protect indigenous languages. But those who migrated to New York in the 1980s and early 1990s did not benefit from these developments.

informational material in Mixtec, among a handful of other indigenous languages from the region.<sup>9</sup>

## **2.0 Language domains**

The work of Joshua Fishman (1972 et seq) bestowed a key role on the notion of social domains in understanding language maintenance and revitalization, specifically, the question of “Who speaks what language to whom and when?” (Fishman 1965). As shown in a large body of subsequent work, language shift proceeds by domain as does effective revitalization. Overall, all Mixtec interviewees were aware of changes in language use after arriving in New York City, which uniformly consisted of an increase in Spanish use, and few reported any significant use of English (although many made efforts to acquire English through free classes). However, to assess the present state of Mixtec in New York and the prospects of its survival it is essential to understand language choice in context and which if any social spaces remain for the language in the diaspora. A summary assessment of language use is offered in the following for the domains of work (§2.1), school (§2.1), religion (§2.3), healthcare (§2.4), the home (§2.5), and written communication (§2.6), although this must be understood as merely the first step towards a more detailed picture.<sup>10</sup>

### **2.1 Work**

Again and again, we find Spanish to be the preferred medium of communication even in social domains that would have been amenable to Mixtec use in the hometown. AA, a 26 year old from Cuautipan, a majority monolingual Mixtec town of roughly 30,000 people, works with five other Mixtec speakers from Guerrero in a restaurant kitchen yet he reports that they never use Mixtec in the workplace. In contrast, Mixtec speakers working the fields of Guerrero would rarely if ever communicate in Spanish showing that even between interlocutors with similar origins, we cannot talk about an undifferentiated domain of “work”, as the fields produce entirely different conditions from a restaurant kitchen in New York City. The former context is where family members and townmates congregate to undertake a form of labor that has been passed down from generation to generation. The latter is a new and often unfamiliar context for those coming from Guerrero. Despite many New York City kitchens today being populated entirely by indigenous Mexican laborers from Guerrero and Puebla, they are typically supervised by people of different origins. As we return to below, the mere potential of being overheard by outsiders appears to be a powerful factor in language choice. At the same time, we cannot completely discount the possibility that differences in hometown pose difficulties in communication but the fact that so many Mixtec speakers hail from the area around Tlapa de Comonfort makes this an unlikely cause for what appears to be an overwhelming preference for Spanish at the workplace.

### **2.2 School**

Education had already been firmly within the domain of Spanish when most of our interviewees were coming of age in Guerrero and only a few were taught to read and write in Mixtec, although this is becoming increasingly common as bilingual education expands. As

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<sup>9</sup> In one recent example, the Mayor’s Office for Immigrant Affairs produced advertisements for a municipal identification card in Mixteco. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJqOhm5S1oY&t=29s>.

<sup>10</sup> Note that the information reported here is almost entirely self-reported on behalf of the interviewees. Follow up work should employ participant observation across these domains to understand aspects that may not emerge forthrightly in interviews.

already mentioned in §1.2.2, Mixtec parents generally do not state their mother tongue in school language surveys that specifically seek such information (both in New York City as well as in the Californian contexts discussed by Pérez et al 2016). This is most likely carried over from their own experiences with schooling. Not only is Indigenous identity not offered on request, it is often actively hidden and occasionally suppressed from within the family. JS, a Mixtec woman with a son in the public school system related to us the following:

- (1) Just three or four days ago, I was arguing with my brother because one of Irwin's [son] teachers came to our house and I began speaking with him and my brother yelled at me. "Why are you yelling at me?" He said, "Aren't you embarrassed to speak dialect in front of them?" "It doesn't matter," I said to him. First of all, it's visible [that you're indigenous]. My brother got annoyed with me a little. What I always tell my brother is, "You try to speak in Spanish, but what happens? Your Spanish is not correct." I tell him. There's always a point or an accent missing, I tell him. I always tell him and he gets more annoyed with me.<sup>11</sup>

Note that the mere act of speaking Mixtec in the presence of a school teacher made the interviewee's brother anxious and led him to police his sister's language use within the home. This type of behavior cannot be understood independently from the long colonial and post-colonial policy of punishing children for speaking their mother tongues within the school grounds. The picture that emerges from the interviews is one in which Mixtec speakers need a good excuse for using the language in earshot of outsiders. GS, a 38 year old woman from a small town in the Metlatonoc region who grew up monolingually, is proud to have a command of her language and even wishes to pass it on to her children, yet she states,

- (2) I only speak it [Mixtec] with my mother. They hear me. I'm not ashamed to speak it because I speak it in front of people with my mother even if they don't understand me. I say that I'm speaking with my mother.

Note that GS is prepared to counter her hypothetical critics; she is speaking to her monolingual mother and thus has no choice but to use Mixtec even if that excludes the others around her. We return to this point in more detail below in §3.0.

### 2.3 Religion

Most Mixtec families are Catholics although there is a growing number of evangelicals both in Mexico and in New York City. O'Connor's (2016) study of Mixtec Evangelical Protestants does not find a clear link between language and religion in the Oaxacan towns she examines, although she does not elaborate on language use within church ceremony. On one hand, Mixtec Catholics can be said to be more traditional, for example, in typically honoring the town fiestas, patron saints, and rendering their services for *tequio*, village-based corvée labor. From this perspective, we might expect active membership in the Catholic church to correlate with higher use of Mixtec as these both represent culturally conservative features. On the other hand, it is largely through the Summer Institute of Linguistics (Instituto Lingüístico de Verano) that Protestantism has made inroads into Indigenous Mexican communities and this organization is centered around Indigenous language literacy (for the ultimate purposes of Bible translation and proselytization). Thus, Mixtec Protestants are more likely to have

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<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huMtG6v1YcQ> for context.

encountered their language in writing in religious contexts. However, it seems the question of religious domains is moot in New York City, as neither religion appears to offer a space for Mixtec language in New York. Despite the large numbers of Mixtecs who attend Catholic services in the city, there has never been an effort to cater to this community linguistically on the part of the church. The Evangelical Protestant churches that Mixtecs attend, on the other hand, are operated in Spanish and cater to congregations with origins not only in Mexico but also Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Latin America. While we did not investigate frequency of church attendance in our interviews, none of the interviewees reported using Mixtec in any religious function. Rather, all religious functions are carried out in Spanish.<sup>12</sup>

## **2.4 Healthcare**

In the domain of medicine and, the many Mixtec speakers who only have a basic knowledge of Spanish are at odds to communicate their needs to healthcare providers. New York City hospitals provide interpretation in-person and through the telephone but we only encountered a single Mixtec speaker who availed of these services. More often, we heard stories of misunderstanding and a feeling that language barriers prevented Mixtecs from receiving proper care. The entire notion of patient's rights and language rights in healthcare is poorly disseminated and remains obscure to the local indigenous immigrant community. As a result, anyone who can communicate with even the smallest amount of confidence in Spanish elects to use Spanish in the healthcare contexts, assuming this is their only option. This, in turn, results in an apparent lack of demand for Indigenous language interpretation and a general lack of attention to Indigenous populations on the part of health agencies and healthcare providers. Consequently, there is a sense of resignation in the face of language barriers in this setting. "Sometimes we understand the doctors and sometimes we don't," as GS put it.

## **2.5 The home**

The home is perhaps the most complex language domain of all and certainly the most crucial for the survival of the language in diaspora. Within the home, we can immediately identify telephone conversations with family in Mexico as the only consistent source of Mixtec for children. In most cases, the parental generation of Mixtec migrants speak little to no Spanish and thus conversations with elder generations are conducted entirely in Mixtec. This was recognized by all interviewees as their primary use of the language in New York, especially now that it is relatively easy and cheap to place calls to Guerrero (as opposed to just 15 years ago). Children who have any familiarity with the language are forced to use it on the telephone with grandparents who do not speak Spanish. However, as would be expected, children who were raised in Spanish are not able to pick up the language from conversations between their parents and other family members. Thus, the telephone appears to serve as a reinforcement for those children with a basic grasp of the language but never a source of Mixtec linguistic competence.

It remains unclear whether language choice in telephone conversations is affected by migration. Some interviewees did report switching to Spanish when talking on the phone with family members, whether in the United States or Mexico, with whom they previously used to speak Mixtec. GS states,

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<sup>12</sup> The Jehovah's Witnesses are the one religious organization which does proselytize in Mixtec (using translated tractates) but there do not seem to be many Mixtec adherents in New York. Barchas-Lichtenstein (2013) describes the complex linguistic dynamics of Jehovah Witness adherents in another Indigenous community of southern Mexico.



- (3) In New York I know very few people [from my town]. My cousins are two and maybe about 20 that I know here but in Florida, Virginia, Los Angeles, San Diego, I have relatives who are there. Yes, we connect but we always speak Spanish, we don't communicate in Mixtec. I don't know why.

In most cases, Mixtec speakers were married to fellow Mixtec speakers, although not necessarily from the same town. One can compare Velasco's (2014) study, in which, out of 23 Mixtec speaking mothers in NYC, 21 were married to Mixtec-speaking men. However, in neither her study nor the present one do we find strong evidence that the presence of two Mixtec-speaking parents at home ensures any level of child-directed speech in Mixtec. Velasco (2014:96) reports:

In families in which both parents speak Mixteco, this is the language used by the couple with friends and relatives who are all part of the same generation and who speak Mixteco as their first language. However, even these couples, both of whom are Mixteco speakers, seldom use Mixteco with their children. This language shift does not seem to be propelled by the children, as is usually the case with second-generation immigrants, but by the parents themselves. Children born in New York to Mixteco parents are not consistently addressed, or spoken to, in Mixteco.

One of the most interesting and consequential challenges here is understanding the determinants of language choice in child-directed speech at home. First of all, there are the lasting effects of discrimination that all speakers related to us (examined further below). Second, there is the notion that Mixtec is not a practical language for socio-economic advancement in New York. Third, the time spent between parents and children may simply be insufficient for acquisition of the parents' mother tongue. In many cases, both parents work or, if only one parent is working the other parent is too occupied with the business of providing for their children to be able to engage with them sufficiently. In many of the families we have interviewed and observed, television, smart phones and other devices play a large role in keeping children entertained when caretakers are stretched too thin. Although there are often opportunities to play with siblings and cousins, it is only the parental generation that has a full command of Mixtec.

FC, a 49 year old near monolingual Mixtec speaker, consciously points to this as an explanation for why he must speak Spanish to his children:

- (4) In our town where we were born, we speak the language day and night because they're all Mixtec. I speak Mixtec the most because I grew up with it. I speak very little Spanish, broken Spanish. [I use Mixtec] with my sister in Mexico when I call them. I speak to my wife in Mixtec a little bit. I speak to my kids very little and in Spanish because I don't really see them. They go to school [in the morning]. In the afternoon is when I see them. Just a little bit because then they go to sleep. If they spoke to me in Mixtec, I would speak to them in Mixtec. [...] If they start speaking with me in Mixtec, I would speak with them in Mixtec.

GS echoes a similar state of affairs in describing her attempts to communicate in Mixtec with her children:

- (5) I speak sometimes [Mixtec], I taught some words to my daughters. But it is difficult, for example, the one who is 12 years old, she no longer pays attention to me, because I was not with her when she was little. [At that time] I was working hard, so when I got home what I wanted was to rest and there wasn't much communication.

The normal thing in the town is that one goes out when the sun rises and works and when the sun goes down one goes home to rest and here there is no time for a person to work like that. There are many different [shifts]. Some work in the morning, another in the afternoon, another at night. There is never a time to communicate.

Indeed, when asked what the primary challenge of living in New York was, GS answered,

- (6) Here it is perhaps the time. That is, a mother and father don't have time to dedicate to their children like before.

The possibilities for language transmission are severely limited by the grueling socio-economic reality Mixtec migrants face. When asked to sum up Mixtec living conditions in New York, Maximiliano Bazan pointed immediately to isolation and the practical enslavement imposed on the community by their working conditions. It was particularly surprising to find many cases where children and parents do not share any common language in which both are truly comfortable. It is not uncommon in immigrant households of all national origins for children to have only a passive knowledge of their parents' language and for the parents to have a minimal command of the language of wider communication but in families such as FC's, the parents are only comfortable in Mixtec. FC's wife learned more Spanish than him in New York while FC himself claims to only speak "very little broken Spanish". The children, however, are said to not only lack basic comprehension of Mixtec but also to lack Spanish:

- (7) Although it's me that can't speak Spanish or English, but my kids that were born here also can't speak Spanish. They speak English. With the kids, Mixtec is no longer there. They can't speak it. When I talk to my wife, they don't pay attention, they're away from us, they don't pay attention. [My wife] doesn't speak [to them in English]. She speaks a little bit [of Spanish], she learned a little bit more than me. Yes, she learned a little bit more than me. When she first came with me, she couldn't speak Spanish at all.

The home situation described by FC and others is a pidginization scenario: the parents speak to their children in a language they learned only recently; the children, on the other hand, are English dominant and only have a passive knowledge of Spanish. Furthermore, it appears that the English input children typically receive before entering preschool is largely from media and peers who are in the same situation. In such households, Spanish may not be used between the parents and other family members, who typically all speak Mixtec with each other. The two potential outcomes for children in these circumstances are that (i) they face severe difficulties in school due to the variety of English they speak coupled with a lack of Spanish and (ii) communication between children and parents may be severely limited. A serious understanding of these outcomes is of the utmost importance not only to the future of the Mixtec language in New York but to the future of the youth who are caught in this unusual linguistic gray area.

## 2.6 Written communication

As mentioned above, only a very small number of Mixtec speakers in New York have any real experience reading or writing the language because Indigenous language literacy has only been recently introduced into the Mexican school system and is still implemented very unevenly. Many Mixtec migrants arrive in New York with only basic Spanish literacy or no Spanish literacy at all depending on their primary school education. Migrants under 40, who typically make frequent use of social media, appear to have become more literate in Spanish in New York, most likely through the regular use of these electronic means. While all the interviewees made some use of platforms such as Facebook, Whatsapp and other messaging services, they solely employed Spanish in these domains. Those who employ Mixtec on social media are dedicated language activists most of whom are Oaxacans living in Mexico or California.

## 3.0 Discrimination, alienation, and the mestizo gaze

Few forms of discrimination are more overt and unambiguous than name calling and there is no shortage of denigrating terms deployed against Indigenous Mexicans. The discrimination experienced by Mixtecs, even as manifested by name calling, comes partly from fellow community members who have internalized the racist attitudes of the surrounding society, as well as from outsiders. SQ, for instance, reports Mixtecs disparagingly calling each other *indio*:

- (8) We go through that a lot back home, even Mixtecs do that. Racism. Yes. That's what they call racism. I don't know what's going on with our community because they do it with their own kind. I went through it. Sometimes when we leave and go to another country, and we might not know who the people are, but they could say, who is this *indio*? And that is already racism. Our own people would do it.

But discrimination is not typically produced or perceived with such little ambiguity. One common theme affecting public language use that emerged not only from our Mixtec interviewees but also from the other five Indigenous groups included in the larger project (see §1.0) can be referred to as “the mestizo gaze”. Two representative examples from our interviews serve to illustrate:

- (9) ZC: My own sister feels ashamed to speak like that in public places. She feels ashamed because they look at her.
- (10) AA: We get embarrassed because when other people come, they look at us. They look at us. Some of them, they don't say anything, they just pass by, because other people have their own language. Sometimes we do the same thing. We look at them when they speak their language, because they speak a different language. It's their language. We feel the same thing. When I'm on the streets and I speak, and they look at me I feel that a little. Yes, they look at you. They listen to you. They can hear what you're talking about.

This theme is also reflected amply in Menchaca Bishop & Kelley's (2013) study of Mixtec and Nahuatl women in New York City, as exemplified by one of their interviews:

- (11) Sometimes, when I ride the subway with my country-people, we speak Mixteco and the people in the train stare at us as if saying, "... What could it be that they are speaking?" But no, they give us dirty looks, but I don't care. Yes, they look at us as if they are saying, "indios!" (Menchaca Bishop & Kelley 2013: 105)

A common assumption appears throughout the interviews but is only rarely substantiated overtly in the narration: the mestizo gaze is always perceived as belittling or disparaging rather than as innocent curiosity. It is impossible to ascertain how much of these perceptions represent accurate readings of an ambient anti-Indigenous racism in New York City and how much it is colored by the traumatic racism experienced in Mexico. What seems clear is the widespread interpretation of public staring as a belittling stance and the concomitant effects on public language use.

A peculiar phenomenon not reported elsewhere and perhaps unique to New York is the reference to Mixtec as "Chinese". While in some languages "Chinese" can be a common stand-in for anything unfamiliar (cf. "Greek" in American English), the particular pairing of Mixtec with Chinese, which we did not encounter with other Indigenous languages, may not be completely arbitrary. First, various Chinese languages are spoken widely throughout the city and thus the sounds of Chinese, broadly speaking, are very identifiable to most New Yorkers both young and old. Second, Mixtec and Chinese are very saliently tone languages and bear some surface similarities in their phonotactics. The transference of the term Chinese to Mixtec by outsiders, on its own, may thus have been unremarkable. What is surprising is that several Mixtec parents reported that this unfortunate usage has been adopted by their own children, as one young mother commented,

- (12) I speak Spanish to her [my daughter] because I've spoken Spanish with my husband since we met, but my mother-in-law does speak Mixtec to her and sometimes she understands a little of what's spoken to her. [...] Now when I want to speak to her in Mixtec she says that I speak Chinese. She says, 'That's not Mixtec. That's Chinese!' and that she no longer wants to speak Mixtec. When I speak Mixtec she teases me. She says 'No mommy, that's not Mixtec; that's Chinese.'

Another mother participating in the same group discussion corroborated this on the basis of her son:

- (13) Also as she says, children say we speak Chinese. My son, the other boy, is 8 years old and says that I should learn to speak in English because he does not want to speak in Spanish and Mixtec. He just wants to speak in English. 'You have to learn English to speak to me because I don't want to speak Spanish or Mixtec, because that Mixtec is Chinese,' says my son.

This appears as the ultimate act of alienation; not only is the language rejected as a means of communication, the mere identity of the language is distorted beyond recognition (cf. Ruiz & Barajas 2012). Although ironically coming from a child of two Mixtec parents who has no ulterior political motives, statements such as these fit into a larger pattern of denying the existence of Indigenous languages back home.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Velasco Ortiz (2005:70) cites a Mixtec interviewee who recalls the erasure of her identity and language within the local school:

"Tlacotepec was a parochial and municipal center; therefore the Church and educational programs came to disturb us. Both played a part in destroying the indigenous language. I remember when we

In the face of the language policing, discrimination and alienation that speakers are subjected to, it must be emphasized that the vast majority of our interviewees never claimed to be ashamed to speak their languages outside of the workplace despite reporting that they often feel like objects of curiosity and suspicion in such instances. I return to this apparent paradox in the conclusion.

#### 4.0 The value and future of the language in New York

What can be prognosticated about the future of the Mixtec language in New York? Firstly, militating against its survival are grueling economic circumstances which radically reduce the meaningful hours that parents can spend with their children. Beyond this, we find two conflicting discourses with regard to whether Mixtec *should* be passed down to children outside of the Mixtec homeland in the first place. Many Mixtec parents speak of the importance of the language but, simultaneously, many still view indigenous language as a possible impediment to learning English and Spanish.<sup>14</sup> Since there are few if any countervailing forces that encourage parents to use Mixtec with their children, the misconception of children being confused by multilingual input persists across time and space despite all evidence to the contrary.

Not all Mixtec parents in New York who speak solely in Spanish to their children do so out of an ideological motivation. Some of our interviewees, in fact, express regret that Spanish has become the default language of the home despite their desires to pass down the language. However, for many who do actively avoid passing down the language, this appears as intergenerationally reproduced behavior. Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer (1998), among others, discuss how parents who have been punished for speaking their Indigenous language in school find it exceedingly difficult to overcome their trauma and speak to their own children in their mother tongue. This was reflected in our interviews, as well. MB, a 37 year old domestic worker with three children, explained how her husband's father forbade his wife to speak Mixtec in the home because "he did not want his children to learn *dialecto indio*." As a result, not only does her husband lack the ability to speak Mixtec, he also reproduces the same attitudes towards their children in New York, as MB herself is a fluent Mixtec speaker who would speak to their children in the language were it not for her husband. A trauma inflicted by a far removed grandparent in Guerrero thus continues to play out in New York many decades later (see Perry 2009:66 for a very similar case).

In asking the interviewees about the value of their children knowing Mixtec, practical concerns often outweighed issues of identity. In circumstances where expressions of culture and identity have become a luxury this should not be surprising, yet several interviewees shared interesting responses to this line of questioning. After explaining that Mixtec is necessary for communication with the elders, who are still largely monolingual in many areas of Guerrero, AA goes on to say that there is also a kind of sharing that occurs when Mixtecs of different towns congregate:

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were in Tlacotepec's school, the teacher said to us, 'You are not indigenous...here there are only mestizos.' The indigenous language was the loser."

<sup>14</sup> This misconception is often reinforced by educators and speech pathologists. Pérez Báez (2013:39) discusses a case in which a speech pathologist, visiting a multilingual Zapotec household in Los Angeles where a child was feared to be developmentally delayed, recommended to the mother that she stop speaking Zapotec to her child. There seems to be a real gap deserving further study in how the field of speech pathology presents an officially progressive stance towards multilingualism in the home and "the facts on the ground", as evinced by many similar reports.

- (14) We can say that, because people come from different towns, when they start talking to each other, they will tell stories and talk about things. You know, ‘we speak this way, they speak that way,’ but they gather. So we can’t let it disappear.

AA, uniquely among our interviewees, posits the idea that informal dialect comparison itself (‘we speak this way, they speak that way’) is a positive experience, presumably as a unifying intellectual exercise, which could clearly not continue without the language being actively spoken. Another view is expressed by Maximiliano Bazan, who sees language as the last remnant in a long colonial process of deculturation:

- (15) As you know, before the Spaniards, we did have plenty of things. We had land. We had everything. Now the only thing we have left is our language, our culture, traditions, things like that. If the language dies, well, I believe everything is going to die, including us.

This is more than metaphorical in the Mexican context, where command of an indigenous language is precisely what determines one’s official status as indigenous or mestizo in the state’s classification system. Under this system, a Mixtec town that shifts to Spanish has effectively ceased to be Mixtec. Similarly, on the level of the family, a couple may emigrate from Guerrero as Mixtecs and return decades later from New York as mestizos.

The popular and academic discourse around language endangerment (Nettle and Romaine 2000, Harrison 2007, Evans 2011, *inter alia*) often points to the loss of ritual, traditional song, oral literature and environmental knowledge as some of the most dire consequences of language loss. None of these themes, however, were mentioned by any of our interviewees. Indigenous ritual, song, and oral literature were largely driven underground and eliminated by the Spanish in their mission of total subjugation. Today, cultural production and spirituality are largely channeled through a syncretic Catholicism which still dominates much of rural Mexican society. In most areas in the Mixtec homeland, it appears that indigenous rituals carried out in the Mixtec language only remain among traditional healers and those who petition the traditional deities for rain and a successful harvest.<sup>15</sup> Most of our interviewees, despite being dominant in Mixtec, were unable to recall traditional songs in their mother tongue from back home and there was no reported use of Mixtec in any explicitly spiritual-cultural sphere in New York. Folk stories and traditional trickster tales, on the other hand, have been preserved far better although none of our interviewees volunteered these genres as part of an endangered cultural heritage that would be lost as a result of language shift. Nonetheless, Mixtec-speaking interviewees did not hesitate to state their strong attachment to their mother tongue claiming that, as an indigenous language and as the language of their parents, it could not be traded away and should not disappear. And yet these powerful motives may not be sufficient given the utilitarian orientation of the New York based community.

## 5.0 Conclusion

I began by noting New York City’s hidden linguistic diversity; despite decades of surveying, over 500 languages had gone completely uncounted. Among the uncounted are dozens of Indigenous Mexican communities. Some, like Cuicatec, are only represented by a handful of speakers in the city while others, like Mixtec, by a population of thousands. And yet

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<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Amith and Rey Castillo García have documented several examples of such rituals as part of the Guerrero Mixtec Language Documentation Project (<https://clar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI492067>).

Mixtec in New York is a language hidden in plain sight; the first-hand accounts reported on here begin to shed light on why. A combination of historical trauma, ongoing discrimination and economic pressures conspire to suppress the use of Mixtec in public and prevent the transmission of Mixtec to the next generation.

As emphasized by Pérez Báez (2013:31), the impact of diasporic indigenous communities on the survival of their languages is understudied and of increasing importance. In addition to the survival of the language in diaspora, we must also consider the linguistic effects of diasporic population returning to the hometown either to visit or settle (Pérez Báez 2009, 2013, 2014). Clearly, the diaspora Mixtecs will play a large role in the survival of their language as their traditional homeland continues to lose its young people due to ever increasing economic pressures.

There is an apparent paradox in the picture I have presented here which is worth highlighting. On one hand, all New York Mixtecs we have interviewed claim pride in their linguistic heritage and feel strongly that the Mixtec language must survive. On the other hand, their patterns of language use do not indicate significant language loyalty. How can these facts be reconciled? I believe the factors at play which conspire to suppress the use of Mixtec in New York can be distilled to the following (with possible further reduction):<sup>16</sup>

- (i) an ideology of accommodation which leads many speakers to prefer Spanish in the presence of outsiders.<sup>17</sup>
- (ii) the historical destruction of exclusively Mixtec language domains
- (iii) a pragmatic view of language choice in the diaspora
- (iv) the fear of ridicule and discrimination

None of these powerful factors are incompatible with a feeling of pride and a desire for the language to continue. Kulick's (1992) well-known study of the Gapun shows how a community's attitudes towards (and perception of) their language use can diverge widely from their actual quotidian linguistic practice. Mixtec New Yorkers, on the other hand, do not seem to entertain many illusions about their language use and their difficult linguistic situation embedded within the surrounding Hispanophone and Anglophone society. The differences between life in Guerrero, where resources were few but working hours finite, and New York City, where time is the rarest commodity, are apparent to all. The consequences of work schedules on child rearing and language transmission are just as obvious. The paradox is thus merely apparent. Mixtec language loyalty may be considerable but the forces arrayed against it are far more powerful. Language loyalty can be seen to emerge in unexpected places, as in confrontations with the perpetual curiosity that indigenous Mexican languages in New York elicit in bystanders. MC, a young Mixtec mother from the Bronx related the following subtle expression of resistance in such an encounter:

- (16) Me and my sister were speaking Mixtec in the street and a lady came up to us and asked 'What are you speaking? Is it English? It can't be English because I don't understand it!' And my sister said, 'Of course it's English. But it's our English!'<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Note that while these factors are distinguishable from each other none are truly independent; most if not all result directly from the indigenous experience under colonialism.

<sup>17</sup> Although, accommodation to younger community members can clearly play major role, as well. Pérez Báez (2013, 2014) argues that accommodation to younger, US born Zapotecs is accelerating language shift to Spanish in the community of San Lucas Quiavini, Oaxaca.

<sup>18</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RYoJunu7a0>

Not only does MC position Mixtec on par with English as a language rather than a *dialecto*, overturning an enduring false dichotomy, she also puts Mixtec on par with English as yet another language of New York, a city where everyone has their “English”. It is perhaps in these miniature skirmishes that language loyalty is hashed out most clearly rather than the pressured and historically fraught context of child-directed language.

There are deeper questions of ideology here for which our data are insufficient. For instance, what is the Mixtec view of language acquisition and socialization? Pérez Báez (2013:37) reports that Zapotec speakers of San Lucas Quiavini believe children are born speaking the language of the land, a view which simultaneously explains why Zapotec children born in Los Angeles do not speak the language and assuages any fears of language loss in the hometown. Although our interviews attempted to get at the relation between land and language, we were only able to scratch the surface. A perhaps more glaring lacuna in our study regards how Mixtecs perceive success in New York. Beyond the basic desire for comfort and stability common to most humanity, we do not really know how the current Mixtec diaspora envisions “the good life” and how much it depends on aspirations for personal achievement as opposed to commitments to the hometown. This is of course in constant flux as temporary migrants lay down long term roots and we may thus not find much consensus. Nonetheless, a family’s perceived connections and long-term obligations to the hometown may very well have consequences for their language use in the diaspora. These are all fruitful directions for future research.

Finally, I hope to have drawn attention to the harm that is unknowingly being done to those Mixtec children raised in an L2 Spanish by parents pressured, either explicitly or implicitly, out of speaking to them in their mother tongue. This has repercussions for their education and leads to their (mis)classification in the school system as Spanish speakers, which often only leads to further difficulties. It also has consequences for the bonds between Mixtec-dominant parents and children in families where there is no easy lingua franca.

Despite the challenges discussed, the picture offered here should not be seen as an ineluctable march towards oblivion. Many cities outside the US are taking an increasingly active role in facilitating multilingualism among their immigrant communities and New York has now begun to acknowledge the importance of Mixtec, as well. As a small example, in 2020, for the first time anywhere in the US, a Mixtec language advertisement was produced by an official branch of city government. The Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs featured three Mixtec speakers promoting a new municipal identification card and speaking about the importance of belonging. The city-funded study that formed the basis of the material cited here is another such example. By addressing the root causes of the language’s invisibility, including the severe economic challenges faced by its speakers, there is yet hope that Mixtec can survive alongside the many varieties of Italian, Chinese, Yiddish, and other major heritage languages established in New York City during the twentieth century.

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