

LANGUAGE DEATH IN CENTRAL MEXICO: THE DECLINE OF NAHUATL AND THE NEW BILINGUAL MAINTENANCE PROGRAMS

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The article argues that Nahuatl, the most widely spoken indigenous language in Mexico, is at risk of replacement by Spanish, the language of greater economic power, education, and social prestige. Both to promote Mexico's cultural and linguistic diversity and improve education for indigenous children, the Mexican Ministry of Education has proposed the implementation of bilingual maintenance programs. An analysis of the likelihood of the survival of Nahuatl, based in part on Fishman's (1991) model for language revitalization, and a critique of the new bilingual programs with respect to the role they may play in promoting the revitalization of Nahuatl are provided. It is concluded that current programs will assist in revitalizing Nahuatl if they obtain grassroots support in Nahuatl-speaking communities.

Introduction

Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, was spoken throughout Central Mexico at the time of initial European contact. With the advent of colonialism, the Spanish language became the language of prestige and power, and began slowly to replace Nahuatl and other indigenous languages as the monolingual norm, especially in increasingly urban areas. In more remote communities, the abandonment of indigenous languages occurred much more slowly, and a diglossic state of Nahuatl-Spanish bilingualism prevailed for several centuries in central Mexico. More recently, however, Nahuatl has declined in use, as indicated by recent census data, and its low status relative to Spanish may well lead to its eventual demise.

Below I discuss the historical and linguistic context of modern Aztecs, and present recent census data and interviews with Nahuatl speakers from different regions of central Mexico. I then present an overview of current initiatives by the Mexican government to implement bilingual Nahuatl-Spanish programs purportedly aimed at improving the education of monolingual Nahuatl speakers while maintaining and promoting the use of Nahuatl in communities where it is still in use. Working within the theoretical framework of Fishman's (1991) model of language shift and revitalization, I present a positive review of these recent initiatives mixed with some specific additional recommendations for Nahuatl language revitalization.

The Language Situation of Modern Aztecs

The Nahuatl-speaking people, like speakers of Mexico's other indigenous languages, have retained their language for nearly five hundred years despite tremendous societal

pressure to shift toward the adoption of Spanish. This has been possible, in part, due to the remoteness of their linguistic strongholds and the fact that "progress," with all its accompanying cultural destruction, has thus far not affected them. In a sense, whether consciously or unconsciously, today's Nahuatl speakers have paid the price of limited access to modern medical care, education and other social benefits, in the face of extreme derision from non-Nahuatl speaking Mexicans, in order to retain as much as possible of their original culture. To begin to understand the processes that have enabled Nahuatl to persist in a hostile society, we turn to a brief discussion of the history and linguistic context of the Aztec people from the point of their initial clash with European culture. Current trends which point to the eventual demise of Nahuatl are discussed in the context of census and interview data.

Historical and Linguistic Background

The conquest of the Aztecs, or "Mexica" people, by Spain began in 1519 with the arrival of Hernán Cortés and was completed by 1521. From "Mexica" was derived the name "Mexico" and the language of the Mexica, Nahuatl, is also called "Mexicano" by some today. Before the arrival of the Spaniards, the Mexica themselves had reigned supreme as one of the greatest imperial powers in the New World, demanding tribute from subjugated peoples all over Mesoamerica. Many of those peoples allied themselves with Cortés, in fact, in the fight against the Mexica, not anticipating that their fate would be far worse under the European yoke. In the words of Carlos Fuentes,

La conquista de México fue algo más que el asombroso éxito de una banda de menos de 600 soldados europeos frente a un imperio teocrático. Fue la victoria de los otros indios en contra del soberano azteca. Fue la victoria del mundo indígena contra sí mismo, puesto que los resultados de la conquista significaron para la mayor parte de los indígenas, exterminio y esclavitud. (*El Espejo Enterrado*, 123)

The conquest of Mexico was something more than the amazing success of a band of fewer than 600 European soldiers against a theocratic empire. It was the victory of the other Indians against Aztec domination. It was the victory of the indigenous world against itself, since the results of the conquest signified for most of the indigenous people extermination and slavery. [translation mine]

Genocide or slavery faced most of the indigenous peoples, and those who survived the first terrible years of Spanish domination were then faced with cultural genocide by being forced to acculturate as rapidly as possible to the language and ways of life of the Spanish-speaking oppressors.

This cultural genocide has not yet been completed, though it has changed somewhat in form. Oppression occurs not only as the direct result of colonial domination, perpetrated overtly by a ruler or government, but it also can result from the "unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchy and market mechanisms, in short, the normal ongoing processes of everyday life" (Young 1992). Marginalized groups are often racially marked, including indigenous peoples in Latin America. Interestingly, however, the most marginalized groups in Mexico, the indigenous peoples who still maintain their languages and cultures, are not necessarily racially distinct

from the masses of “assimilated” people who speak Spanish and live as members of the dominant culture and refer to themselves as “mestizos,” meaning that they consider themselves of mixed European and Indian blood. While many peasants engaged in agricultural pursuits are poor, they belong to the dominant culture, are monolingual Spanish speakers who identify with the Spanish-speaking mainstream, and may or may not be of mixed ancestry. The poorest and most marginalized of Mexicans are labeled “indios” or “indígenas,” meaning, essentially, that they don’t speak Spanish well or at all, but rather are speakers of an indigenous language. As Riding (1984) explains,

In reality there is no consensus on the correct definition of an Indian in Mexico, with blood, language, costume, territory and economic status used variously as gauges. Strangely perhaps, blood is the least reliable test since most Mexicans have some Indian blood and many “full-blooded” Indians now form part of mestizo society. Language and traditional costume, on the other hand, will clearly identify an Indian, although there are Indians who speak Spanish and wear Western clothes who retain the traditions and beliefs of their ancestors. (Riding 1984, 207)

Hence, race constitutes much less an exclusionary factor than language and other cultural markers. While some indigenous people are bilingual in Spanish and their native language, many members of indigenous groups face severe discrimination due to their lack of Spanish proficiency. Spanish is popularly held to be superior to indigenous languages, and speaking Spanish is referred to as “speaking Christian,” in contrast to speaking a pagan (indigenous) language. While Spanish differs in many respects from indigenous languages, which in turn can differ substantially from each other, no linguistic claim can be made for valuing one language over another (Pinker 1994; Newmeyer 1986).

Nahuatl differs greatly from Spanish and other European languages in that it is polysynthetic (that is, it has full noun incorporation and full subject/object agreement paradigms). Below is an example sentence in Nahuatl, morphologically parsed and translated into English; notice that the Nahuatl sentence contains only two words, the first with subject and object agreement morphemes on the verb, and the second with the object noun fully incorporated (MacSwan 1999).

Nikneki nitlakekoas
ni-k-neki ni-tlake-koa-s
1S-3Os-want 1S-garment-buy-FUT
‘I want to buy some clothes’

Nahuatl is a rich and expressive language, like any other. Unfortunately, the low social status of marginalized Nahuatl speakers has (predictably) been transferred to the language, and Nahuatl is often referred to by Mexicans (Nahuatl speakers included) as a “dialecto,” meaning that it is some inferior mode of communication, not a true language. Nahuatl speakers explain that they are ashamed to speak Nahuatl outside of their community, and that they believe it is important that they speak Spanish to their children, rather than Nahuatl, in order to provide them with the language of power that will afford them the greatest opportunities for success in the mainstream culture. These attitudes suggest that Nahuatl is not highly valued by its speakers, a situation that may contribute to a gradual shift away from the use of Nahuatl and toward the use of Spanish. Such language shift can occur when one language in a society is perceived as conferring higher social status (Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor 1977).

The coexistence of Nahuatl and Spanish has long constituted a diglossic¹ context, or a society where two languages are in use. The term *diglossia* is used to distinguish societal from individual bilingualism (Ferguson 1959). Diglossia describes a society, such as in Switzerland, where several official languages are used but few people speak more than one language. Diglossia can also be used to describe a context where all or most members of a society are bilingual, but where the two languages have different functions; one language may be used in official or formal contexts and the other more informally. Diglossia is considered to be a stable situation due to the relative separation of the two languages—separation either by monolingual groups or by compartmentalized functions (Fishman 1980). However, an unstable, nondiglossic situation is said to exist when most people in a society are bilingual and the two languages are used interchangeably with no separation of function. Fishman (1980, 1990, 1991, 1993) and Hornberger (1998) argue that, in instances such as this, one language will inevitably gain status over the other, and the lower-status language will become progressively less used. In this respect, Nahuatl-Spanish diglossia parallels that of several diglossic communities in the U.S., such as Navajo-English diglossia (Crawford 1997), where English is seen to be rapidly winning out over minority languages. Unlike the Navajo-English situation, Nahuatl speakers do not have the potential benefit of a cultural and linguistic geographic territory such as that of the Navajo Reservation.

Nahuatl-Spanish diglossia is of the monolingual type, with few speakers proficient in both languages. Recent demographic changes in Mexico, however, are reflected in a rise in the number of bilingual Nahuatl speakers. In order to maintain diglossia in central Mexico, it is important for the two languages to become functionally separated. However, given the marginalized status of Nahuatl, it is unlikely that Nahuatl will begin to be used in official contexts or outside of the immediate community. It is, rather, more likely that Spanish will continue to encroach on the functions that have belonged traditionally to Nahuatl, and that the status of Nahuatl will continue to decline. In the next section, I show that in addition to its decline in status, Nahuatl appears to be declining in other ways as well, as indicated in Mexican census data.

Census Data

The indigenous peoples comprise various linguistic and cultural groups, but the largest group, numbering over a million, speaks Nahuatl. Nahuatl speakers, or Nahuas, are found in each of the thirty-one Mexican states and the Federal District, but are concentrated in and around the ancient homeland of the Mexicas in central Mexico. Figure 1 shows the number of Nahuatl speakers by state, with Puebla, Veracruz, Hidalgo, San Luís Potosí and Guerrero far surpassing most other areas.

FIGURE 1: NAHUATL SPEAKERS BY FEDERAL ENTITY
IN MEXICO (RANKED BY POPULATION), 1995

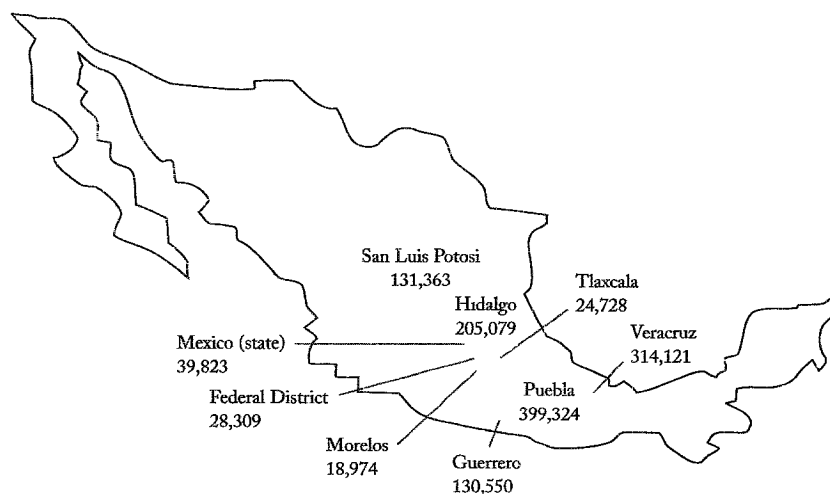
Mexican Federal Entity	Nahuatl Speakers	Mexican Federal Entity	Nahuatl Speakers
Puebla	399,324	Tabasco	719
Veracruz	314,121	Durango	691

Hidalgo	205,079	Colima	686
San Luis Potosí	131,363	Querétaro	655
Guerrero	130,550	Quintana Roo	639
Mexico (state)	39,823	Guanajuato	492
Federal District	28,309	Nayarit	478
Tlaxcala	24,728	Coahuila	380
Morelos	18,974	Sonora	364
Oaxaca	9,158	Chiapas	355
Tamaulipas	5,072	Campeche	314
Jalisco	3,580	Baja California Sur	288
Nuevo León	3,560	Chihuahua	265
Michoacán	2,785	Zacatecas	173
Sinaloa	1,129	Aguascalientes	153
Baja California Norte	1,106	Yucatán	127
<i>Total speakers (age 5 and older)</i>		<i>1,325,440</i>	

Mexican census data (INEGI 1997, 154-71).

Figure 1 indicates that the total number of Nahuatl speakers in Mexico is 1,325,440. Nahuatl is by far the most populous indigenous language in Mexico, spoken by nearly 23% of indigenous people (INEGI 1994, 139). The concentration of speakers in central Mexico is illustrated in Figure 2, a map showing the states containing the greatest number of Nahuatl speakers.

FIGURE 2: MAP OF MEXICO SHOWING FEDERAL ENTITIES
WITH 10,000+ NAHUATL SPEAKERS, 1995

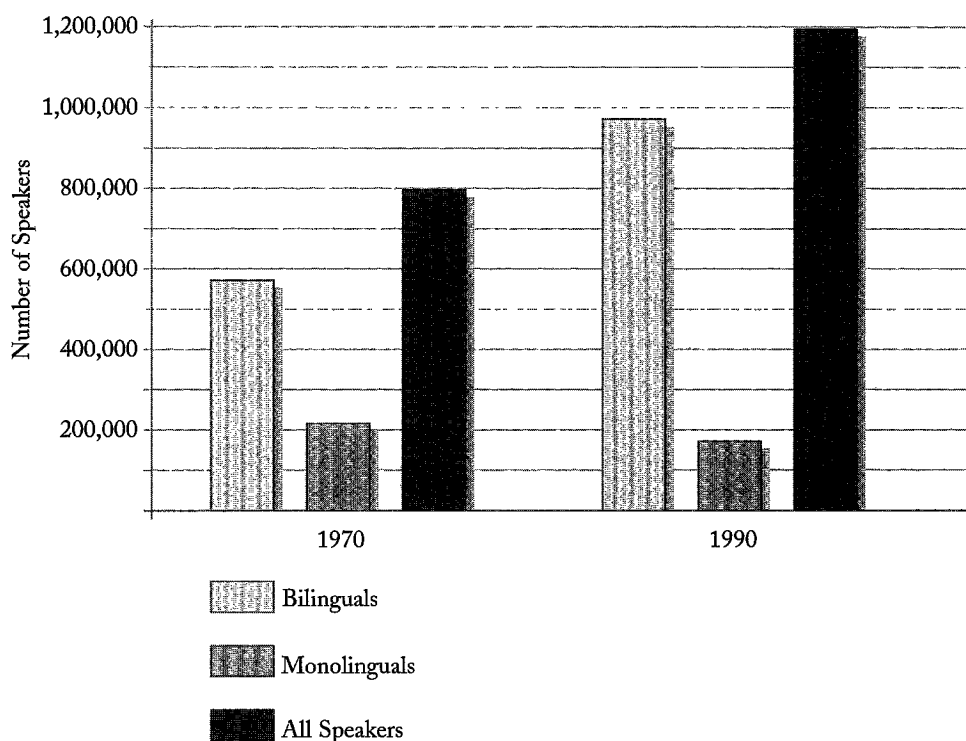


Mexican census data (INEGI 1997, 154-71)

In terms of raw numbers, Nahuatl could be said to be on the increase, since the census data indicate that the number of Nahuatl speakers rose from 799,394 in 1970 to 1,197,328 in 1990, as shown in Figure 3. Over that same period, however, the number of monolinguals decreased from 227,757 to 179,370. The percentage of Nahuatl speakers who were bilingual in Spanish increased from 71% in 1970 to 81% in 1990.

The decrease in proportions of monolingual to bilingual signals an underlying process of shift from Nahuatl monolingualism to Nahuatl-Spanish bilingualism.

FIGURE 3: NAHUATL MONOLINGUALISM AND SPANISH-NAHUATL BILINGUALISM, 1970 AND 1990



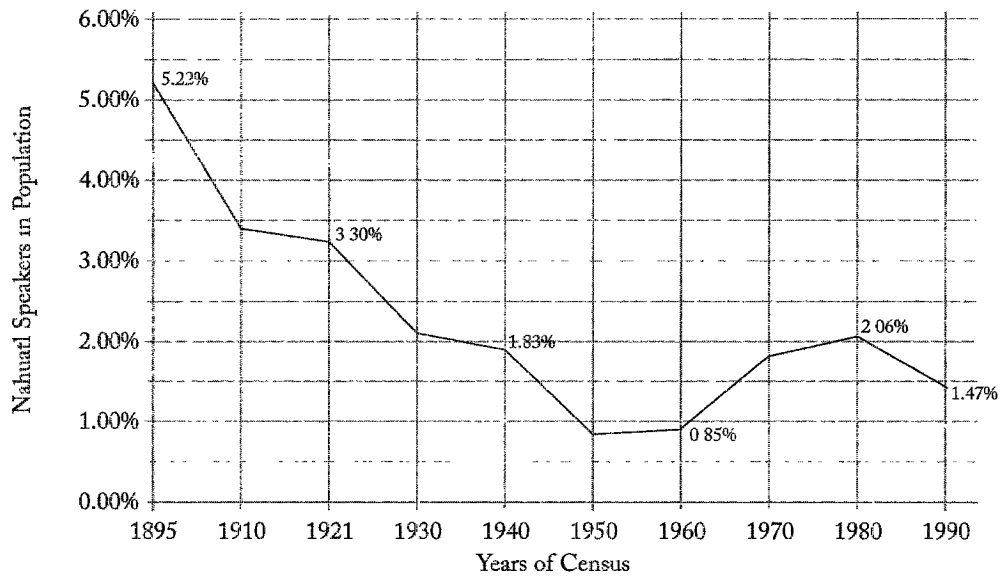
Mexican census data (INEGI 1993, 17).

(Note: 50,048 Nahuatl speakers did not specify whether they knew Spanish or not in 1990 and are therefore not included in the 1990 monolingual/bilingual breakdown.)

Figure 4 illustrates the downward trend in the Nahuatl-speaking population in relation to the total Mexican population. From a high of over 5% around the turn of the century, the number of Nahuatl speakers had declined to just below 1.5% by 1990.

The number of Nahuatl speakers appears to have risen somewhat between 1960 and 1980, but was on the decline again by the 1980s. The overall trend remains downward.

FIGURE 4: PERCENTAGE OF NAHUATL SPEAKERS
IN MEXICAN POPULATION, 1895-1990



Mexican census data (INEGI 1994, 13, 136-39).

Figure 5 shows internal emigration out of the most heavily Nahuatl-speaking states. Over one and one-half million people have emigrated over each of the last two decades. While the numbers of Nahuatl speakers who emigrated were not provided, it is likely that some of the emigrants were Nahuatl speakers. The destination of emigrants is also unknown, although it is likely, given current trends, that many of them have moved to the cities. Unless their destination is other rural Nahuatl regions, the emigration of Nahuatl speakers would constitute a drain of the Nahuatl-speaking community—a drain which may lead to language shift—since among the factors encouraging language loss is a shift from rural to urban areas (Conklin and Lourie 1983).

FIGURE 5: INTERNAL EMIGRATION FROM THE FIVE MOST
POPULOUS NAHUATL STATES, 1970-1990

Five Nahuatl States	1970-1980	1980-1990
	Net Population Loss	Net Population Loss
Guerrero	-307,187	-392,755
Puebla	-376,961	-384,812
San Luis Potosí	-352,689	-353,675
Hidalgo	-348,222	-336,285
Veracruz	-128,815	-290,155
Total	-1,513,874	-1,757,682

Mexican census data (INEGI 1994, 50-51).

It is estimated that the trend toward urbanization, which has been very strong during the past three decades, will continue into the next century, and that by the year 2010, Mexico City alone will house one out of every three Mexican citizens (Ponce G. and Alonso C. 1989). Internal emigration and increased urbanization suggest that as Nahuas leave their homelands, they will leave Nahuatl behind.

In summary, the Mexican census data show that while Nahuatl speakers can be found in every Mexican state, the highest concentration of Nahuatl speakers is in central Mexico, and that, while the number of bilingual Nahuatl-Spanish speakers has risen somewhat, the number of monolingual Nahuatl speakers has declined. Furthermore, there has been an overall decline in the proportion of Nahuatl speakers to the general Mexican population, and the emigration of Mexicans from states with the highest numbers of Nahuatl speakers has been substantial. These data suggest that the use of Nahuatl is in decline in Mexico, and that a trend of language shift has begun. This conclusion is further corroborated by interview data, discussed below.

Interview Data

Lengthy, ongoing informal interviews were conducted with four Spanish-Nahuatl bilingual men³ from San Juan Tetelcingo, Guerrero, and San Sebastian Zinacatepec, Puebla. I interviewed one man in his mid-thirties who was born and raised in San Juan Tetelcingo in the Alto Balsas region of Guerrero. He spoke Nahuatl exclusively until he was seven years old, at which time he began learning Spanish at school. He later graduated from a technical college in Mexico City, and now teaches Nahuatl part-time to adults in Mexico City while he attends graduate school. He said he believes that Nahuatl is losing ground in communities where it had formerly been very strong, and that one culprit is the lack of strict separation between Nahuatl and Spanish among bilingual speakers. Specifically, he worried that switching between languages, especially within a single sentence, means that a speaker's Nahuatl proficiency is weak, and that such switching signaled the inability of the speaker to pass on the Nahuatl language to children.

In San Sebastian, I interviewed two young men in their mid-twenties who were native Nahuatl-Spanish bilinguals. They had known each other all their lives, and had become related by marriage. Both had small farms where they grew just enough produce to sell to support themselves, their wives, and children. They also worked for hire on larger farms seasonally. Both spoke only Nahuatl with their monolingual wives and grandparents, but Nahuatl and Spanish with parents and siblings. Each man said that he tried to speak only Spanish with his children to ensure that the children will be proficient in Spanish should they have the opportunity to go to school when they are old enough.

These men revealed that there is a severe social stigma in speaking Nahuatl outside of their close-knit community, such as when they go to shop in town. They said that Nahuatl speakers always avoid speaking Nahuatl within earshot of monolingual Spanish speakers to avoid calling attention to their "indio" status and possibly being mistreated. One of these men explained that when he goes to a store in the city, for example, with a friend or family member who speaks only Nahuatl, they strategize in advance about how to conduct transactions without resorting to communication in Nahuatl. Typically, he reports, the Nahuatl monolingual will remain silent while the Spanish speaker makes inquiries of the salesperson. They then excuse themselves to a place where the Spanish-Nahuatl bilingual can translate without having the salesperson discover that they are speakers of an indigenous language.

Although both these men's wives were monolingual Nahuatl speakers, and the men therefore spoke Nahuatl with their wives, they said that the bilingual couples they knew tended to use only Spanish during courtship, and often after marriage as well. Many of their friends and family who were bilingual had made conscious decisions not to speak Nahuatl with their children, preferring that their children not learn the language at all, so that their opportunities will not be limited in the majority society.

When these men were shown Nahuatl texts and asked whether the variety of Nahuatl in the text was similar to the variety they spoke, they stared in amazement, and said that they had not realized that Nahuatl could be written. While both men were literate in Spanish, they struggled to sound out the Nahuatl words in the text. When I explained that the books contained Aztec legends, the men asked why someone had written them in Nahuatl. I told them that it seemed appropriate to me that Aztec legends should be written in the Aztec language. In further conversation about the Aztecs, the two men reported that while they knew who the Aztecs were, they had never realized that the language they spoke was a modern variety of the language of the Aztecs. They seemed pleased to learn that they could legitimately claim to be descendants of the Aztec people.

A fourth man who was interviewed, also from San Sebastian, was raised hearing only Nahuatl from his monolingual parents, and learned Spanish when he began school at age seven. He was preparing to work as a teacher among the people of the "sierra," a remote mountainous area with a number of monolingual Nahuatl-speaking communities. This gentle, unassuming man expressed his eagerness to teach Spanish to Nahuatl-speaking children without requiring them to give up their Nahuatl language. While he felt he did not have the resources to teach the children literacy in Nahuatl, he seemed excited about offering them a vision of bilingualism that would bring them the benefits of education without destroying their sense of cultural and linguistic identity.

Unfortunately, the problems this man faces in becoming a teacher in the sierra are many and daunting. The political environment is extremely hostile to outsiders, due to the belief on the part of the local political boss, or "cacique," that misappropriation of funds intended for public use may be obvious enough to warrant reporting to outside authorities. The young man I interviewed described a recent homicide in the community where he was slated to begin work, which he attributed to political disagreements. In addition, while he had been officially employed during his one-year training period and would begin teaching in a school the next month, he had been told that he would not receive any pay during the first 9 to 12 months. He was also told that although funds for materials had been allocated to the school, there would be no paper, pencils, books, or any other materials for teaching available, so he should bring with him, at his own expense, whatever he deemed necessary. The sorts of difficulties this teacher faces, from murder to lack of teaching materials, are common enough in these areas not to warrant public attention, a fact that renders the implementation of any educational program problematic.

In San Sebastian, I also met with a group of six schoolchildren, age nine, one or both of whose parents in each case were Nahuatl speakers. Two of the children had begun kindergarten as Nahuatl monolinguals, and the rest had been bilingual. A Nahuatl-speaking assistant attempted to engage the children in conversation in Nahuatl, and while they seemed eager to respond in Nahuatl, most of the children were unable to do so. One child then stated that they could easily respond in Spanish, and that was better than speaking 'dialecto' anyway.

In summary, then, the interviews with these men and the brief conversation with the children revealed their belief that most people think of their language as a "dialecto," or an inferior way of speaking. The interviewees seemed to accept the relegation of their language to an inferior status and accepted that inferiority as inherent in the language. The men interviewed concurred that young adult bilinguals today tend to speak Spanish, rather than Nahuatl, with each other during courtship and often after marriage. They also suggested that there is a widespread belief that parents should speak only Spanish to their children in order to pave the road to greater opportunities in the larger society.

These beliefs about Nahuatl among Nahuas are supported by Hill and Hill's ten years of ethnographic research among Nahuatl speakers in another region, in and around the towns surrounding the Malinche Volcano.

An important reason for the abandonment of ways of speaking which are defined as 'Mexicano' is that the Mexicano language has been redefined by many Malinche people as a marker, not of an identity which is somehow special and valuable, but of an identity which is worthless and oppressed. (Hill and Hill 1986, 403)

The Hills further describe the tendency for Nahuatl speakers to denigrate their own language with the support of the general Mexican population.

In their attack on their own usage, speakers join in a wider public project. Urban people stigmatize modern Mexicano as an ignorant jargon, a broken-down relic of what even at its best was a barbarian tongue. (Hill and Hill 1986, 445)

Nahuatl speakers in the Malinche region express deep linguistic insecurities, and even shame to have been raised speaking Nahuatl. Hill and Hill (1986) found very few young people who would admit to speaking Nahuatl at all, even in the face of strong evidence that they did indeed know the language.

The prevalence of negative opinions of Nahuatl on the part of the greater Mexican population and on the part of the Nahuatl-speaking people further suggest that the Nahuatl language suffers from extremely low social status, a factor which has been implicated in contributing to language loss. Taken together with indicators of a decline in Nahuatl use revealed by Mexican census data, it is likely that the trend toward language shift which began during the Spanish Conquest will continue unless pro-active measures are taken in the Nahuatl communities.

Language Loss and Revitalization

The census data, combined with the low opinions of Nahuatl expressed by members of several Nahuatl communities, support the conclusion that the Nahuatl language is on the decline in contemporary Mexico, and that a pattern of increasing language shift has begun. The research on language decline and the reversal of language shift is quite extensive, and Fishman's (1991) model, in particular, has been very helpful in illuminating what community-based changes lead to language revitalization. Fishman has identified eight stages of language shift which he correlates with predictions of language death. As shown in Figure 6, in the strongest (read "most remote") Nahuatl communities, Nahuatl appears to be in Stage 6, with proposed bilingual programs pushing for the attainment of Stage 5. Fishman shows through his thorough study of minority language situations around the world that if a language can transcend Stage 5, it may be able to turn the tide toward revitalization. If not, he argues that decline is inevitable.² It is also important to note that

Stage 6, with intergenerational transmission of the language, is absolutely fundamental; without native speakers born into the language, no amount of public school learning will stop language decline. In order for a threatened language to begin the revitalization process, it must build upon the foundations represented by the previous stages; if intervention is attempted without the proper foundation, the effort is likely to be wasted (Fishman 1991). Figure 6 shows Fishman's model of stages for reversing language shift, slightly modified, with my placement of the current situation for Nahuatl shown at Stage 6. Stage 6 reflects the status of Nahuatl as an intergenerationally active language still used in homes, families and neighborhoods, although its continued transmission may be in danger. In order for Nahuatl to be revitalized, the next goal should be to achieve Stage 5, the establishment of schools for Nahuatl literacy acquisition for the old and young.

FIGURE 6. FISHMAN'S (1991) STAGES OF
REVERSING LANGUAGE SHIFT

Stages of Reversing Language Shift: Severity of Intergenerational Dislocation

(Read from Bottom Up)

(X-ish the endangered language, Y-ish the dominant language)

1. Education, work sphere, mass media and governmental operations at higher and nationwide levels.
2. Local/regional mass media and governmental services.
3. The local/regional (i.e., non-neighborhood) work sphere, both among X-speakers and among Y-speakers.
 - 4b. Public schools for X-ish children, offering some instruction via X-ish, but substantially under Y-ish curricular and staffing control.
 - 4a. Schools in lieu of compulsory education and substantially under X-ish curricular and staffing control.

II. Reversing language shift (RLS) to transcend diglossia, subsequent to its attainment

5. Schools for literacy acquisition, for the old and for the young, and not in lieu of compulsory education.
6. The intergenerational and demographically concentrated home-family-neighborhood: the basis of mother tongue transmission [current state of Nahuatl in contemporary Mexico].
7. Cultural interaction in X-ish primarily involving the community-based older generation.
8. Reconstructing X-ish and adult acquisition of XSL (X-ish as a second language).

I. Reversing language shift (RLS) to attain diglossia

If steps are not taken to ensure the continued transmission of Nahuatl to children, and Nahuatl literacy programs are not successfully implemented, the language is in danger of slipping into Stage 7, where it would be used primarily by the older generation, and eventually into Stage 8, where it will have died out.

Working in a similar vein, Conklin and Lourie (1984) have provided a list of political, social, demographic, cultural, and linguistic factors which encourage either language maintenance or language loss. While the factors they list are related to the immigrant experience, many factors overlap with the language situation of indigenous peoples. Among the factors suggesting language loss which are relevant to the Nahuatl context are those involving the demographic changes discussed above, such as the decaying vitality of the language community, occupational shift to urban areas, and especially the denial of ethnic identity in the face of ethnic discrimination. Among the relevant cultural factors are the lack of Nahuatl institutions such as schools and mass media, and the emphasis on, and acceptance of, majority language education. Perhaps most telling are factors related to linguistics and literacy, since Nahuatl consists of many varieties with no single standard, and literacy in Nahuatl is almost unheard of. Moreover, Nahuatl is of no international importance, and may be said to have too much tolerance of loan words, which may in itself lead to language loss (Hill and Hill 1986).

Given these factors, and the fact that Nahuatl is still being transmitted, at least in some areas, to children as their mother tongue (Fishman's [1991] Stage 6), the next step to be taken to ensure Nahuatl vitality is to push for education and literacy in Nahuatl (Stage 5). In the next section, the Mexican government's new programs for the education of indigenous children are described and critiqued.

Nahuatl-Spanish Bilingual Education Programs in Mexico

Recent developments in Mexican education have resulted in the establishment of bilingual education programs aimed at maintaining and perhaps even reviving indigenous languages. The stated goals of the bilingual maintenance programs promoted by the Mexican Ministry of Public Education (SEP 1994) are to aid students in attaining similar levels of competency in the indigenous language and Spanish, to facilitate the re-diffusion of the indigenous language in all local social communication spheres, and to establish regional-ethnic, national-universal cultural content for speakers of the indigenous language. In addition, the Ministry suggests that local communities and teachers should take the initiative to protect and develop their indigenous languages. The stated community recommendations from SEP (1994) hold that teachers should take the responsibility to create indigenous language texts in any way possible (writing down oral stories, for example); that teachers should advocate the use of the indigenous language in the community; and that the general community should post signs in the indigenous language, and push for TV, radio, and general broadcasts in the indigenous language.

It is clear from the statement of these goals that the authors of SEP (1994) and presumably also the Mexican Ministry of Education, recognize the necessity of a grassroots approach to language revitalization. The responsibility placed on teachers to push for social change with respect to the maintenance and revival of indigenous languages can also be effective in helping teachers to link the curriculum tightly with student experience, a sound pedagogical method (Peitzman and Winningham 1991; Short and Harste 1996). In addition, the use of oral histories compiled by local teachers as school and curricular resources has been recommended as a way of broadening the scope of instruction to include a critical perspective on the conditions of life in the community (Giroux and McLaren 1986). If Nahuatl is to survive, speakers of Nahuatl must become critical of the relegation of their language to an inferior status. These objectives could be achieved at the

same time as the language of the text is studied and used as a valuable linguistic resource. The inclusion of these features in a developmental bilingual program would provide a powerful opportunity for critical teaching, supporting the development and maintenance of Nahuatl among schoolchildren who should be encouraged to feel pride in their heritage and who will ensure that Nahuatl is not lost.

The step of establishing schools which use Nahuatl as a language of instruction is not at all easily taken. The obvious places to do so would be in communities where Nahuatl is still in use, and where children could be encouraged to maintain and develop Nahuatl as their native language. Unfortunately, these happen to be in the remotest places, often high in the sierra, far from the reach of mainstream civilization, but where local caciques, or political bosses, hold a tight grip on the people and the resources of the community. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a teacher committed to social change may face significant risks in attempting to address issues of social inequities in the sierra, even more so than in other areas in Mexico. The power of the caciques endures, supported by the government. Where education is available at all, it is not permitted to deviate from the most basic of functional literacy curricula. In this context, schools can unquestionably be described as "outposts of domination" (Levine et al. 1995).

Discussion and Conclusion

I have argued that Nahuatl is at risk of replacement by Spanish, the language of greater economic power, education, and social prestige. While the bilingual programs designed and implemented by the Mexican Ministry of Education will certainly promote the cultural and linguistic diversity of the country as well as improve education for indigenous children, they constitute only a first step in the struggle to revitalize a dying language. As Fishman's (1991) work indicates, a grassroots interest in preserving the language will also be necessary if the Nahuatl language is to survive.

The problems inherent in addressing the decline of the Aztec language are thorny indeed, in that many changes must be made on several levels. In order to transform society, there must be some critical mass of individuals who are willing and able to engage in the struggle. A first step in that direction might be that of establishing bilingual education programs, but in order to achieve even that objective several conceptual and attitudinal changes must occur first: individual speakers must be taught to appreciate the value of their cultural and linguistic heritage and to undertake to pass it on to their children; communities must be persuaded to adopt Nahuatl for use in public interactions; and the mainstream community must be won over to the value and beauty of an ancient and unique way of speaking, perhaps by stressing the links between the Nahuatl of today and that of the ancient Aztecs. In doing so, it is hoped that the dangers of pushing a "tourist multiculturalism," in which ancient Aztecs remain disconnected from their descendants and the glories of the past constitute the entire lesson, could be avoided (Derman-Sparks 1995). In addition, it is crucial that the government support the use of Nahuatl in many arenas, especially that of education. With current trends in the Ministry of Education, the educational use of Nahuatl appears to be a possibility; however, there are many factors that prevent a thorough-going implementation of bilingual programs.

The first obstacle to bilingual education is the lack of qualified bilingual teachers. A second obstacle is the complete lack of resources or funding available to teachers, as illustrated by the experience of the teacher who had been hired to teach far off in the sierra

where there was no pre-existing classroom. He went with no money, no books or any other materials, not even paper or pencils, and no prospect of receiving any pay for his teaching for at least the first nine months on the job. A third obstacle is the lack of enthusiasm on the part of parents, who are already unwilling in many cases to send their sons to school. (Daughters are rarely sent to school, as their education is seen as unnecessary for family life.) Parents are more willing to send boys to school when the learning of Spanish and Spanish literacy is emphasized; there is virtually no value placed on acquiring literacy in Nahuatl. Given these obstacles, the establishment of bilingual programs would likely be seen as an imposition from uninformed outsiders more than any sort of plan with ultimate benefit to the community, and perhaps rightly so. A massive campaign would be necessary to win over adherents to the program, and no such campaign is likely to be waged, considering the lack of mass media in these marginalized communities.

A second, perhaps more practical, approach to solving the problem of gaining more speakers would be to introduce two-way immersion programs, where native and nonnative speakers could be taught in Nahuatl. This sort of program could be instituted in the cities, where immigration of Nahuatl speakers provides sufficient native speakers who will otherwise soon lose their ability to speak Nahuatl. Immigration to the cities, especially Mexico City, is common, and can be inferred partly by the evidence shown in Figure 5. But social disdain of Nahuatl as an inferior "dialecto" prevents most Spanish-speaking Mexicans from considering this sort of language experience for their children. Unfortunately, the good intentions on the part of the Mexican Ministry of Education are not likely to lead to any real implementation of bilingual programs, given the complexity of these issues. Yet, in the absence of any such educational programs, the survival of the Aztec language is unlikely, and the continued decline in what remains of Aztec culture points to the continued oppression of the Aztec descendants, leading to their eventual assimilation.

In conclusion, it is clear that Nahuatl, the most widely spoken indigenous language in contemporary Mexico, has been greatly declining in use since the Spanish Conquest. The Mexican government has designed a new bilingual maintenance program aimed at developing first and second language literacy in both Nahuatl and Spanish for the more remote, marginalized communities. Even though the program is well designed and will have some positive effect, it is not sufficient to turn the tide of language shift for Nahuatl communities. In addition, the program appears to suffer from serious problems of implementation, and lacks the sort of grassroots support it must have to be successful. In order to obtain grassroots support, the negative perception of Nahuatl, linked to historical disadvantage and oppression, must be attacked at every level, particularly in the majority community. Without such increased, positive social and educational support, it is unlikely that the language of the Aztecs will survive.

Notes

¹The term *diglossia* was initially used to refer to the use of two varieties of a single language in a society where one variety is "high" (for use in formal contexts) and another is "low" (for use in informal contexts) (Ferguson, 1959). Fishman (1972) widened its definition to include two different languages rather than different varieties.

²For criticism of Fishman's compartmentalization theory of language maintenance, see Pedrasa, Attinasi and Hoffman (1980) and Glyn Williams (1992).

³Although female perspectives would also have been valued, no Nahuatl-speaking women were available for these interviews, due in part to the difficulty of locating bilingual women, and in part to cultural constraints against women's working closely with outsiders.

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