

Adaptive reproduction versus misadaptation. Historical, socio-demographic and cultural factors shaping multilingual ecologies in Ahuacatlan, Mexico

In this talk I will discuss the combined results of the long-term quantitative and qualitative research carried out in several Indigenous regions of Mexico where different variants of the Nahuatl language are spoken, with the special focus on the region of Ahuacatlan in the Sierra Norte de Puebla. A careful analysis of the available body of historical sources, as well as their triangulation with contemporary data, provides a complex and nuanced picture of multilingual ecologies at both the community and regional levels.

The multilingual ecologies of Ahuacatlan where Nahuatl and Totonac have coexisted for centuries and are characterized by relational and positive inter-ethnic attitudes that enable forms of linguistic-cultural continuity, despite many centuries of colonial and neocolonial domination. Relying on Indigenous language source and local forms of knowledge production and transmission, it is possible to address and question potentially simplistic claims that assimilation is the only strategy adopted in ingroup-outgroup relationships in Indigenous communities today. While in many places it indeed seems to be a prevailing trend, there also are local ecologies where more relational and nuanced inter-cultural attitudes enable forms of linguistic-cultural continuity, despite many centuries of colonial and neocolonial domination. Factors behind these patterns of continuity include strong social networks cherishing inter-generational family relationships, a place-based socio-economic capital linked to the informal local economy and the ongoing use of local environmental knowledge. This case study of a relatively well-documented long-term evolution of Indigenous-speaking ecologies in Mexico can potentially provide methodological and theoretical enrichment to the field of Western academic theory with its attachment to the compartmentalization of knowledge and social realities. It can be especially informative for the well-established and widely applied acculturation theory and for evolutionary approaches to linguistic-cultural evolution.

Keywords: multilingualism, acculturation, evolutionary approaches, Indigenous languages, Mexico