

“Problems are only opportunities in work clothes”: Assets-based approach to the protection of the linguistic diversity of the Huasteca Potosina, Mexico

This talk examines the present-day linguistic ecology in the Huasteca Potosina in Mexico within the framework of Assets-Based Community Development (ABCD) (Kretzman & McKnight 1996). Based on the results of long-term ethnolinguistic research using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the study analyses factors affecting language vitality and linguistic diversity maintenance, such as intergenerational transmission, domains of use, language attitudes and official support. The results of the study show that despite the overall decline in vitality of Indigenous languages in the wider Huasteca Potosina region, the Nahuatl-Tének microregions still retain considerable linguistic diversity. The study argues that in spite of challenges, the Indigenous language situation in the Huasteca also presents many possibilities, focusing on which can be beneficial for the maintenance of linguistic diversity.

The Huasteca has been a multilingual region for centuries (Gerhard 1972). Its two largest Indigenous groups are the Nahuatl and the Tének. As a result of the coexistence of these two groups who engaged in social, political and commercial interactions, using both Nahuatl and Tének was a norm. The growing dominance of Spanish facilitated by, among many, obligatory schooling in Spanish and language ideology that favours Spanish, has contributed to a significant decline in linguistic vitality of Nahuatl and Tének. Despite this, the Nahuatl-Tének borderland communities still engage in a significant degree of multilingual communication. Because of mixed marriages, many people declare both Nahuatl and Tének as heritage languages. While few people are confident about their Nahuatl or Tének spoken competence, many people admit understanding Nahuatl and Tének and using it to communicate with older family members. Moreover, Tének is indicated as the preferred means of communication by even some children and young adults. In addition, declared language attitudes toward Nahuatl and Tének are positive, and there is growing awareness of language shift and the need to protect both languages.

The findings of this study are significant because they identify positive aspects in the declining linguistic ecology of the region that are often overlooked while researching language shift. Such a positive approach can encourage strength-based thinking in future Nahuatl and Tének revitalisation projects. Focusing on what remains instead of what is being lost, can also contribute to the reduction of stigma associated with cultural and linguistic assimilation, and invite more active participation from the Indigenous people. This, in turn, may result in a more sustainable sociocultural development in the Huasteca, and more effective protection of its unique but endangered linguistic diversity.

Keywords: linguistic diversity, Assets-Based Community Development, language shift, Nahuatl, Tének

References

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