

## Bridging divides: A proposal for integrating the teaching, research and revitalization of Nahuatl<sup>1</sup>

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This paper discusses major historical, cultural, linguistic, social and institutional factors contributing to the shift and endangerment of the Nahuatl language in Mexico. As a practical proposal, we discuss our strategy for its revitalization, as well as a series of projects and activities we have been carrying out for the last several years. Crucial to this approach are several complementary elements: interdisciplinary research, including documentary work, as well as investigation of both the historical and the present state of Nahua language and culture; integration of both Western and native-speaking indigenous researchers as equal partners and the provision of space for indigenous methodologies; creation of teaching programs for native and non-native speakers oriented toward the preparation of language materials; and close collaboration with indigenous communities in developing community-based programs. The operability of this strategy will depend greatly on our ability to foster collaboration across academic, social, and ideological boundaries, to integrate theory, methodology and program implementation, and to efficiently combine grassroots and top-down approaches. An important aim is to restore the culture of literacy in Nahuatl through our monolingual *Totlahtol* series, publishing works from all variants of the language and encompassing all genres of writing. We also strive to strengthen the historical and cultural identity of native speakers by facilitating their access to the alphabetical texts written by their ancestors during the colonial era.

*As events of the past few years and the present in various parts of the world show,  
 our global village must be truly multicultural and multilingual,  
 or it will not exist at all.*  
 [Nettle & Romaine 2000: 204]

**1. INTRODUCTION.** Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs and still the largest indigenous tongue in North America with reportedly 1.5 million speakers would not seem to be in

<sup>1</sup> This research was financed within the programme of the Minister of Science and Higher Education in Poland, under the name “National Programme for the Development of the Humanities” between the years 2013 and 2016. This paper builds on our two earlier publications dealing with the revitalization of Nahuatl (Olko & Sullivan 2014 a, b). In addition to expanding some of their major ideas, it discusses recent revitalization activities and their aims.

danger of extinction, but in fact it is.<sup>2</sup> The prevailing attitude of racism in Mexican society along with a stepped up national educational and mass media policy of Hispanization has drastically slowed the intergenerational transfer of the language. We begin this paper by evaluating the current situation of Nahuatl, starting with its historical background and then discussing the problems and challenges it faces today, identifying the major cultural, linguistic, social and institutional factors contributing to its endangerment. We then formulate a proposal for revitalizing the language which integrates teaching, interdisciplinary research and concrete revitalization activities into a wide and diverse network of collaboration. A fundamental aspect of our methodology involves transforming the traditional academic division between the ethnographer and the language community under study: native speakers can be trained to do research, collaborate on projects with non-indigenous investigators as well as create and implement their own research and teaching methodology. This will not only empower native speakers, but will enrich ethnographic research with the addition of the insider perspective which it has always lacked. The important culture of Nahuatl literacy developed during the colonial period needs to be revived and extended in indigenous communities in order to strengthen their historical and cultural identity: we can promote creative and academic writing in Nahuatl, publish contemporary and older texts in standardized orthography, circulate them and encourage people to read and discuss them. The isolation of Nahua communities and the lack of interregional communication can be overcome by holding interdialectal encounters, both in person and using videoconferencing technology, and by promoting monolingual communication in indigenous languages in the social media. Finally, we need to tear down the existing ideological barriers to revitalization by widely disseminating the results of research showing the clear and irrefutable benefits that multilingualism offers to all of society.

An important framework for our research and revitalization activities is an international research project, *Endangered languages. Comprehensive models for research and revitalization*, that deals with three minority languages in two countries: Nahuatl in Mexico and Wymysiöeryś and Lemko in Poland.<sup>3</sup> Despite important differences, such as the economic, sociopolitical and cultural contexts in which these communities operate, many challenges and problems are shared by all the three minority groups: they include the diminishing role or virtual lack of intergenerational transmission, the absence of efficient support and monolingual spaces in the educational system, the unavailability of sufficient literary and educational materials, and a pervasive negative language ideology. The collaborative activities we have carried out in Wilamowice, Poland, during the last years are proving crucial for the development of strategies and activities aimed at the revitalization of Nahuatl. They have led to the implementation of new forms of academic and non-academic partnerships, including an efficient mode of collaboration between two leading Polish universities, local non-profit organizations and activists, municipal authorities, school authorities and inter-

<sup>2</sup> While the Mexican National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) cites a population of 1,544,968 native speakers of Nahuatl, 5 years or older, based on the 2010 national census, there are no reliable statistics regarding active versus passive speakers, literacy, every-day language use, intergenerational transmission or access to Nahuatl education at school.

<sup>3</sup> This project is financed within the National Program for the Development of the Humanities of the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education, and carried out at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” of the University of Warsaw, with the direct participation of the Instituto de Docencia e Investigación Etnológica de Zacatecas (IDIEZ), in collaboration with Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and the “Wilamowianie” Society. It complements our major research project, *Europe and America in Contact. A multidisciplinary study of cross-cultural transfer in the New World across time (2012–2017)*, financed by the European Research Council within the Ideas Program, and focusing on language and culture change and continuity in Nahua culture across five centuries of interaction with Spanish/Mexican culture.

national groups of participating scholars. As a result, language instruction has begun at a local school; language transmission has been reestablished and several young neo-speakers have appeared; literary and teaching materials have been published; vivid artistic and dissemination activities related to the language have been launched with broad community participation; a notable positive change of attitudes toward the language has begun to manifest itself in the community and more broadly in Polish society; and finally, the local economy is exploring commercialization opportunities related to linguistic-cultural heritage, involving the creation of a touristic cluster in order to offer a broad range of activities promoting local language and culture. This experience is extremely valuable and useful for other projects and there are essential elements of an integral strategy that can be applied in both Polish and Mexican contexts. However, we have also become increasingly aware of specific differences and necessities regarding conditions and elements of language revitalization programs. One of them concerns the overt involvement of academic partners in collaboration with local institutions and agents: the successful model implemented in Wilamowice, fully complying with and supported by national and European legislation and academic practices, rules of funding and ethical concerns and procedures, cannot serve as a direct model for working with Nahua communities. Perhaps the fundamental characteristic of the Mexican context involves the colonial and postcolonial policy of dominance and discrimination over indigenous communities, and the way in which its enduring impacts and threats are currently perceived by the members of those communities. This context constitutes an unresolved challenge, both for indigenous people and for collaborating external partners who are interested in revitalization; it must be taken into account when planning and implementing each community-based project. The revitalization of literary languages in wealthy countries, especially those that possess a long tradition and enjoy a healthy degree of institutional support, differs greatly from projects dealing with unwritten languages in developing countries plagued by serious economic problems, migration, a colonial/postcolonial heritage and discrimination (Coulmas 2013: 220). However, both in European and postcolonial contexts, minority languages tend to be undervalued and abandoned in language-contact situations, in favor of the dominant national and/or international language, be it Spanish, Polish or English, which facilitates access to social and economic opportunities. In summary, our proposal takes into account European experience while focusing on the specific challenges and conditions related to the survival of the Nahuatl language. It combines grass-roots or community-based approaches with certain top-down forms of support, and allows for academic partners to play an important and positive role.

**2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF NAHUATL.** Nahuatl, a Uto-Aztec language, enjoyed great importance in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica over a long period of time, and its speakers have survived to this day, inhabiting several regions of Mexico. Although it was recently suggested that the Proto-Uto-Aztecan community developed in Mesoamerica between the time when maize was first domesticated and 4500 B.P. (Hill 2001: 913–934), more tangible evidence of the preconquest history of Nahuatl appears in the first half of the first millennium AD during the time of the Teotihuacan empire when loanwords from Nahuatl appear in Maya script (Macri &Looper 2003). While identification of the dominant language of Teotihuacan remains a controversial issue, it is generally acknowledged that the Toltecs (ca. 800–1050 AD) spoke Nahuatl, but there was probably a major dichotomy characterizing its variants, consisting on the one hand, of the early arrivers identified as “Toltecs” and, on the other hand, of the later Chichimec migrants who came in several waves after ca. 1200 AD. In addition, and as a result of population shifts, move-

ments, and influences branching in many directions in central Mexico, the distinguishing traits which at one time characterized these two major groups would have been modified, blurred or lost (Canger 1988: 63). Thus, it has been proposed that the first group of Nahuatl speakers, including the “Toltecs” in central Mexico and further south were the ancestors of today’s users of the variants of La Huasteca, Sierra de Puebla, Isthmus, and Pipil. The later incomers would have spread into the Valley of Mexico and to the east and south, including Tlaxcala, central Puebla, Morelos, and to a certain degree Central Guerrero, perhaps contributing to a three-way geographical split in the early group: La Huasteca, Sierra de Puebla, and Isthmus (Canger 1988: 64–65).

Best documented are the Central Mexican Nahuas who at the time of the Spanish conquest populated numerous local ethnic states (*altepetl*), most of which before 1519 were in some way involved with the powerful organization of the Triple Alliance, often called the Aztec empire by scholars today. Nahuatl was used as a lingua franca throughout the empire and beyond. Although it collapsed upon the arrival of Spaniards, local Nahua states (*altepetl*) survived, maintaining much of their political organization and many other aspects of their culture, in spite of becoming part of New Spain and thus the object of prolonged Hispanization. In the following centuries they continued to function as the seats of Indian municipal government based on European models. The Nahuatl language thrived in the new colonial contexts and was widely used for administrative and religious purposes across Spanish Mesoamerica, including regions where other native tongues prevailed.

Having their own preconquest tradition of books and glyphic records, the Nahuas were well prepared for the arrival of alphabetic writing. They immediately assimilated this tool and used it prolifically, producing an extremely rich and complex corpus of written texts which embraced historical annals, speeches, plays, petitions, assertions of local traditions and rights called “titles”, religious texts and a mass of everyday documentation, including wills, bills of sale, parish records, and censuses. The rapid development of the Nahua writing tradition was made possible by the adaption of the orthographic conventions of the Roman alphabet in the 1530s in such major centers as Mexico-Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco. Beginning in the 1540s various kinds of writing in Nahuatl expanded quickly across the core area of Nahua culture and beyond. By the third quarter of the sixteenth century even small towns had a notary associated with the municipal government (Lockhart 1992: 330–331). The creation and development of Nahuatl orthography was a task undertaken simultaneously by several friars and their indigenous assistants. It was based on the Spanish values of the Roman alphabet representing similar sounds in Nahuatl, a process which was facilitated by the fact that Spanish had close equivalents for the majority of phonetic elements in the native language. In fact, it was Nahuatl that lacked more of the Peninsular sounds. Several phonological features of Nahuatl nevertheless posed a serious challenge. The glottal stop and vowel length were usually left unmarked, but other non-compatible elements were coped with quite well. The native sounds *tl* and *tz* were rendered as digraphs, while the double *l*, lacking in Spanish, was modeled on the Latin *ll*. Early orthographers also became aware of the fact that in Nahuatl voiced consonants are voiceless at the end of a syllable, so they changed prevocalic *hu-* [w] to *-uh* in the syllable-final position, doing the same with *-uc* and *-cuh* for the sound [k<sup>w</sup>].

This system, first developed by ecclesiastics, was immediately reshaped by native scribes and authors, whose primary concern, differing from the European priority given to standardized, conventional forms, was to reproduce not only orality, but also phonetic features that could change as a result of phonetic interaction with the sounds of neighboring words. Unlike for Spaniards, the word as such was neither an important nor easily recognizable en-

tity for the Nahuas, who tended to record sounds in an ongoing string of letters (Lockhart 1992: 336–339). This native adaptation and the relative flexibility governing use of the orthographic conventions did not disappear over time and never gave way to full standardization. Although there were further attempts at standardization undertaken by the Europeans, such as Horacio Carochi who published his outstanding *Gramática de la Lengua Mexicana* in 1645,<sup>4</sup> these had little impact on the traditions of literacy and ways of writing in native communities. Toward the late seventeenth and into the eighteenth century, orthography in indigenous writing became more regionalized, reflecting local, unstandardized variants of spelling (Lockhart 1991: 122–134, Pizzigoni 2007: 35–39). In spite of the lack of standardization, Nahuatl writing and its associated orthography represented a native development, and constituted a long-standing literary tradition used by the Nahuas for their own purposes through the colonial period. As such, this orthographic tradition should be taken into account in the discussion of modern orthographic conventions of Nahuatl (see below), particularly because it has the potential for reinforcing the historical identity of today's Nahuas, which is crucial for language revitalization programs.

Although colonial language policy and Hispanization is often blamed today as the main cause of language shift and the gradual displacement of Nahuatl, legal steps, such as the decision of the Spanish king Philip II in 1570 to make Nahuatl the linguistic medium for religious conversion and for the training of priests and friars working with the native people in different regions, no doubt contributed to its growing importance in Spanish Mesoamerica. It is becoming clear that the use of Nahuatl in the colonial world was not limited to a specially trained group of scribes, notaries and other officials. Members of the nobility belonging to other ethnic groups, as well as numerous non-elite figures of different backgrounds, including Spaniards, used spoken and written Nahuatl to facilitate communication in different aspects of colonial life (Yannanakis 2012: 669–670, Nesvig 2012: 739–758). One of the basic postconquest uses of Nahuatl beyond Nahuatl-speaking communities was Christian instruction carried out by friars and priests, who were allowed to be ordained *a título de lengua*,<sup>5</sup> for the purpose of working as a kind of doctrinal interpreter in indigenous languages. Nahuatl was by far the most commonly spoken indigenous tongue among ecclesiastics. They used it as the language of instruction within linguistically-mixed communities whose members knew Nahuatl as a second language, and in regions dominated by other ethnic groups, such as the diocese of Oaxaca, where Nahuatl had already served widely as a *lingua franca* (Schwaller 2012: 678–687).

**3. CURRENT SITUATION AND DEGREES OF ENDANGERMENT OF NAHUATL.** From the first decades of contact, Nahuatl and other native languages began to evolve in response to the strong and long-term impact of Spanish, undergoing profound changes in a process that continues today. In spite of this heavy influence and a constantly growing number of bilinguals, now a clear majority in native communities, local variants of the language reveal a strong continuity with colonial Nahuatl, a fact which is often denied in mainstream and popular ideology. This continuity is also not sufficiently highlighted by existing scholarship, usually due to the simple reason that researchers specialize exclusively either in colonial or in modern data, making no attempt to connect these phenomena by seeing the language and cultural development over the long-term. As a result, views of modern

<sup>4</sup> Carochi proposed the use of a system of diacritics to represent vocalic length and the glottal stop. Nevertheless, and as a rule, indigenous writers never considered the representation of these two phonetic characteristics important.

<sup>5</sup> “by right of competence in an indigenous language” (Taylor 1996: 94–95).

Nahuatl in academic research have contributed to the current depreciated status of the language and its speakers. The notion of “Classical Nahuatl” has long been considered the only correct and original form of the language, while modern “dialects” are often still seen as little more than its corrupted, Spanish-influenced developments. Perhaps for this reason, Nahuatl dialectology has attracted surprisingly little attention among scholars dealing with diverse aspects of Nahua culture (Canger 1988: 29).<sup>6</sup> The current state of language change in different regions varies considerably, depending both on the degree of contact and urbanization, as well as on more subtle cultural processes. There are also important distinctions within communities between proficient speakers and persons losing fluency and resorting to code-mixing due to the lack of language use. Once the language of empire and colony, one of the dominant languages in the entire pre-Columbian world, spoken by cosmopolitan elites and traders and widely used as a *lingua franca*, Nahuatl is today on the verge of becoming an endangered minority language. The numbers of speakers fall drastically every decade due to catastrophic educational and language policies, economic challenges as well as widespread practices of discrimination toward native speakers. And these adverse tendencies are exacerbated by current globalization processes and educational policies.

With the end of the Mexican War of Independence in 1821 the Spanish Imperial infrastructure that employed Nahuatl alphabetic writing as an official medium for documentation and communication disappeared. The new succession of governments did not make important advances toward integrating indigenous communities into national life, and writing ceased to link Nahua people and their communities to each other within and between regions where the language was spoken. As a result, these communities became more and more isolated from each other and the differences between regional linguistic variants increased. They also remained largely isolated from the rest of Mexican society. During this period, with the exception of a set of *ordenanzas* issued by the government of Emperor Maximilian I (Maximiliano de Hapsburgo) and the works of Faustino Galicia Chimalpopoca (1854, 1859, 1869 and 1870), Nahuatl writing became very scarce, and did not reappear in force until the second half of the twentieth century. At this time, a number of factors including economic integration, the extension of public education and the spread of communication media initiated a renewal of intense contact resulting in a steady loss of native speakers and the progression of Nahuatl toward endangered language status. Although the extinction and rapid fall of speakers are a threat to all current Nahua-speaking communities, the situation of particular variants and groups of speakers varies.

<sup>6</sup> In addition, there are serious discrepancies between existing classifications and attempts to reconstruct the historical development and mutual relationships between variants of older and modern Nahuatl. The first classification covering close to the full geographical area where Nahuatl is spoken was proposed by Juan Hasler, who divided the area into four dialects: Eastern, Northern, Central, and Western (Hasler 1958, 1961), but his definition of dialects was criticized for not having been based on extensive and coherent linguistic data (Canger 1988: 39). Other scholars, such as Yolanda Lastra de Suarez, have emphasized the fact that the lack of data constitutes an obstacle to positing a historical classification; even so, they maintain that there is a basic division between Central and Gulf Coast dialects (Lastra de Suarez 1974). Later on, in her important work “Las áreas dialectales del náhuatl moderno” (1986) Lastra de Suarez analyzed and compared numerous phonological, morphological and lexical traits of the varieties of modern Nahuatl, proposing to distinguish four areas: Center, La Huasteca, Western Periphery and Eastern Periphery. Una Canger prefers to make a fundamental distinction between Central and Peripheral groups of Nahuatl, the latter being defined simply by their lack of a number of descriptive features present in Central varieties. Central groups would embrace dialects which share many important features spoken in the Valley of Mexico, Northern and Central Puebla, Morelos, and Tlaxcala. Huastecan and Central Guerrero Nahuatl are also classified as Central dialects, but possess features that are specific to the two regions they share with neighboring Peripheral variants. The latter include the Western Periphery, Northern Guerrero, Sierra de Puebla, Isthmus, and Pipil (Canger 1988: 45–59).

In the Ethnologue language cloud, several variants of Nahuatl are classified at grade 5 (developing): Central, Western and Eastern Huasteca, Southeastern Puebla, Northern Oaxaca, Western Durango and Mecayapan in southern Veracruz. In the EGIDS scale this status assumes that the language is “in vigorous use” and there is a standardized form of literature used by some of the speakers. The fact is, there is no widely accessible or commonly used literature in Nahuatl today. Written materials are limited to textbooks for the basic level school system and their orthography has not been standardized. Moreover, instruction in Nahuatl and its corresponding teaching materials form part of a school system geared toward overall instruction in Spanish, and it is present only in a portion of Nahua-speaking communities in the above-mentioned areas. The status of Nahuatl in Sierra Negra in Southern Puebla and in Orizaba (Veracruz), some communities in Northern Puebla, Morelos and Guerrero is classified as vigorous (6a), implying that it is used by all generations and in face-to-face communication. In fact, the situation varies from community to community and among different families in each community, because the number of passive speakers is growing rapidly. It is common to find fluently speaking generations between 20 and 40 years of age, who no longer use Nahuatl as their main language of communication inside or outside of the household, and passive speakers under the ages of 20 or 30. Much more common and widespread is the level of endangerment described as threatened (6b), in which native speakers diminish in spite of the fact that the language is spoken by all generations. According to Ethnologue, this is the case of Central Nahuatl spoken in Puebla and Tlaxcala, eastern Durango, eastern Central Mexico (Isthmus – Pajapan), Michoacan, and some parts of Morelos. However, this classification does not reflect today’s language situation in Nahua communities, which can be well illustrated by the example of Central Nahuatl. Except for a limited number of communities, where intergenerational transmission is intact but subject to widespread bilingualism and an entirely Spanish school system (e.g. San Miguel Canoa, San Isidro de Buensuceso, and Santa María Zoyatla in the municipality of Tepeojuma, all in the state of Puebla), the large number of passive speakers in the generations under 50 and 40 years of age threatens to totally disrupt language transmission. This is a prevailing phenomenon today in the region, and it corresponds with the disappearing status described by Grenoble & Whaley (2006: 18) as an observable shift towards Spanish in native communities (where it began to replace Nahuatl in a greater percentage of homes) and an overall decrease in the proportion of intergenerational transfer. Classified as shifting by Ethnologue (7 – with middle-aged adults still using the language, but lacking intergenerational transmission) are Huaxcaleca Nahuatl, the variants spoken in the Temazcaltepec and Coatepec regions in the State of Mexico, as well as that of the Ometepec region in Guerrero. However, this classification actually reflects the current situation of numerous Nahua-speaking communities across Mexico, where the speaker base is constantly shrinking. This status corresponds to the moribund level of Grenoble & Whaley (2006: 18). It is surprising that very few communities are classified in the Ethnologue cloud with the moribund (8a) and nearly extinct (8b) status, categories signifying that only those generations beginning with grandparents use the language.

Summing up, in many cases the Ethnologue classifications need updating and verification because they do not likely reflect the sudden decrease in language use that has occurred within the last two decades. Furthermore, the parameters of an individual community can be very different from those of neighboring native communities in the region and may not be representative even on a microregional scale. More and more, Nahua communities today are becoming reduced islands of speakers, with different degrees of transmission. Although the estimated number of speakers may seem high, all essential criteria of endan-

germent are met by today's variants of the language. These include the low percentage and proportion of speakers within a population, the varying and quickly dwindling extent of language transmission, the loss of functions in language use and its failure to expand to new domains of modern life and media, as well as the proliferation of negative attitudes toward the language (Brenzinger 2007: ix).

The single most crucial factor contributing to language loss is the decrease in intergenerational language transmission within communities at the level of home / family / neighborhood, widely recognized as the key element of language maintenance and survival (e.g. Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Dislocation Scale – Fishman 1991: 395). This is a widespread phenomenon in the Nahuatl-speaking world today, and it is aggravated by a lack of adequate educational support and adverse language ideology, both inside and outside the communities. Another essential factor contributing to increasing endangerment, that should not be underestimated, is the fact that materials for language education and literacy are scarce or non-existing. This situation becomes even more problematic due to the lack of consensus regarding standardized orthography and a common standard form for writing the language. Thus, Nahuatl can no longer be considered a “stable” language (Krauss 2007: 4–5), where the home domain remains essential and strong, not affected by the use of another language at school or work. Different sources of pressure, including all forms of discrimination and negative ideology have caused parents to cease speaking their native language, resulting in the destabilization of the linguistic environment at home. The failure of Nahuatl to expand into use with new technologies poses an additional threat. Functional domain differentiation between Nahuatl and dominant Spanish, the latter primarily associated with educational and labor opportunities, is one of the crucial factors of language shift. Nahuatl is seen as a language of limited potential, spoken only by elders, and lacking any utility in the modern world.

It is not infrequent to find communities that meet the criteria of “endangered” and “severely endangered”, as defined by Krauss; that is, when Nahuatl-speaking parents permit their children to respond in Spanish. And in those communities where the youngest speakers are middle aged or belong to the generation of grandparents, parents cannot teach the language to their children. In fact, many members of native communities, can be classified as “ghost speakers” (Grinevald & Bert 2011: 51), who conspicuously deny any knowledge of Nahuatl in spite of evidence that they do have some level of competence. This happens both inside the community space and in interactions with outsiders, attesting to the prevalence of negative attitudes toward the language, and manifests itself in the form of people refusing to be identified as an indigenous speaker. A strong foundation for this adverse language ideology was formed after the Mexican Revolution, when intellectuals began to forge a new national identity, based in part on pride in a mythologized version of Mexico's indigenous past. However, modern indigenous people, considered culturally backward and an obstacle to modernization, needed to be Hispanized, and their languages needed to be eliminated as quickly as possible. Thus, Mexican multilingualism can be characterized as a conflictive, substitutive and diglossic bilingualism, in which bilingualism/multilingualism is considered a historical stage leading to a new monolingualism (Flores Farfán 2002: 228).

School-based programs in multilingual countries include examples of the most successful cases of language revitalization programs. However, the potential of these strategies has not been applied to Nahuatl and other indigenous languages in Mexico. The use of public education as a focused instrument of Hispanization began in 1964 when the first generation

of bilingual educators was recruited by the federal Secretaría de Educación Pública<sup>7</sup> for the purpose of assuring that indigenous school children gain literacy in Spanish. Nahuatl and other indigenous languages lack the rich and crucial repository of works found in libraries and online in Spanish and in all the major world languages. Indigenous people must have access to these kinds of materials in their own language, if they are to be truly educated for successful participation in an ever more global and multicultural society. A truly multilingual program of education would not seek to replace indigenous languages with Spanish or English; rather it would cultivate in children the unique perspective and cognitive tools available to them through their native language, and complement this with additional perspectives and tools from other languages. Mexican bilingual education grew after its creation and continues to expand to this day, but its goal of replacing indigenous languages with Spanish has not changed. Mexican elementary education is highly centralized, with materials and curricula produced almost exclusively by the federal Secretary of Education. Traditionally, individual teachers do not participate in curriculum development, but are trained as technicians who implement ready-made materials. Bilingual teacher preparation takes place, for the most part, in Spanish, and they are not encouraged to participate in innovating curriculum development and research in the language spoken by their students. This is particularly harmful for indigenous languages, considering that textbooks are only produced for a limited amount of their variants. When these are distributed in communities that speak another variant, they are often rejected. Further, the sons and daughters of bilingual teachers, most of whom are raised speaking Spanish, often inherit their parent's job upon retirement. And new bilingual teachers are routinely given jobs in communities that speak variants and even languages different from their own. It is not uncommon for children to be encouraged to stop speaking their native language at school, while teachers advise parents to speak only Spanish to their children.

In fact, the situation of native-speaking children in Mexico and their Spanish-language proficiency, closely parallels the situation of Native American children who are likely to be stigmatized as "limited English proficient". Whereas the United States has motivated bold new strategies for indigenous schooling that emphasize immersion in the heritage language and community-based planning (McCarty 2003: 147–158), this approach is virtually absent in Mexico. Immersion schools started to develop in the United States in the 1980s, based on the principle that the dominant language of the society should only be worked with in school as a foreign language (Hinton 2011: 298). This kind of immersion based program could begin to be implemented in Nahua-speaking communities, using the model of pre-school language nests, in which the fluent speaking grandparent generation, often the last fully proficient generation of native speakers, would take care of young children using only the indigenous language.

Although *nidos de lengua* were established in Mexico, especially in Oaxaca, beginning in 2008, with at least ten language nests in existence by late 2009, serving the Mixtec, Zapotec, and Cuicatec languages (Meyer & Soberanes Bojórquez 2009), their small scale and limited distribution cannot meet growing challenges. While many adverse language attitudes prevail at the community level, more subtle forms of discrimination take place when the students enter junior high, high school and college. During the presidency of Vicente Fox (2000–2006) the federal government abandoned an initial proposal designed to promote spaces for indigenous education at public universities. Instead, a new system of intercultural universities was created. However, most of these underfunded institutions do

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<sup>7</sup> Secretary of Public Education

no more than offer traditional careers in Spanish to a largely indigenous student population. Curiously absent at all Mexican universities, including the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México<sup>8</sup>, with its flagship program “Mexico Nación Multicultural”,<sup>9</sup> is the one mode of activity with which these institutions could trigger a national movement of indigenous linguistic and cultural revitalization: The large scale practice of curriculum development, teaching and research done entirely within an indigenous language.

2003 saw the creation of a federal law<sup>10</sup> designed to protect the linguistic rights of Mexican indigenous people. Simultaneously, federal education legislation was modified, guaranteeing, at least in theory, speakers of indigenous languages access to basic education in their native tongue. Founded also at that time was the National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI), a state institution charged with overseeing the implementation of the law, within a context of national governmental decentralization. Its primary function was to promote and coordinate the foundation of indigenous language institutes, legislation, and most importantly, statutes providing means of enforcement of this legislation at the level of the individual states. To date INALI has carried out linguistic research and published a national catalogue of languages; it has produced numerous works in and on indigenous languages, including multiple translations of the Mexican constitution and other governmental documents; it has created norms for the preparation and licensing of translators and interpreters; and it has provided limited legal advice in individual cases of linguistic discrimination. However, state legislation in the area of linguistic rights is practically non-existent. Only a few of the thirty-one states have created indigenous language institutes. There are serious impediments to the implementation and execution of laws related to linguistic rights, given that the perpetuation of colonial attitudes is common among lawmakers (Zimmermann 2011: 22–23). INALI has not undertaken or sponsored concrete programs of massive language revitalization and it has been silent in regard to certain key issues: in spite of the aforementioned reform of national education legislation, the majority of native speakers of indigenous languages still do not have access to basic education in their native tongue; the implementation of national standardized testing (ENLACE<sup>11</sup> and EXANI/EGEL<sup>12</sup>) clearly discriminates against non-native speakers of Spanish.

Today in Mexico, the pervasive ideology shared by indigenous and non-indigenous people alike and crossing all professions and walks of life, contends that native languages are “dialects”, and cannot be considered languages such as Spanish and English. Nahua communities suffer from what has been called a social dislocation stemming from their lack of prestige and power, as well as from a closely related cultural dislocation, which results from modernization and globalization (Grenoble 2011: 34). Processes of urbanization linked to social and cultural dislocation and an increasing use of a national language, as well as migration to larger towns and to the United States, usually result in a complete disruption of language transmission. While government agencies, the educational system, and the mass media all participate today to some degree in the process of overall Hispanization, many independent individuals and organizations, such as the *Escritores en Lenguas*

<sup>8</sup> National Autonomous University of Mexico

<sup>9</sup> Mexico: Multicultural Nation (<http://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx>, 10 December, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Ley general de derechos lingüísticos de los pueblos indígenas (<http://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/257.pdf>, 10 December, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.enlace.sep.gob.mx> (10 December, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.ceneval.edu.mx> (10 December, 2015).

Indígenas, A.C.<sup>13</sup> or the Fundación Cultural Macuilxochitl<sup>14</sup> struggle to promote cultural and linguistic plurality.

**4. OUR METHODOLOGY AND ACTIVITIES.** In a nutshell, our methodology consists of promoting native speakers of Nahuatl to the role of protagonist in academic and revitalization activities related to their language and culture. As a rule, Mexican educational institutions do not hire indigenous people to teach courses and conduct research related to their language and culture. Bilingual elementary school teachers are the exception. However, they receive their training in Spanish and do not participate in any aspect of curriculum development, and the few courses in indigenous languages taught at the secondary and university levels are not based on modern second-language instructional methodology. And indeed, the carrying out of “activist documentation”, the development of language revitalization methods, and the production of educational materials by native speakers themselves has begun to be seen as a powerful alternative to traditional approaches to the problem (Flores Farfán & Ramallo 2010: 13–14). The Instituto de Docencia e Investigación Etnológica de Zacatecas (IDIEZ) and the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” of the University of Warsaw have been working with Nahua immigrants from the Huasteca region who are studying at the Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas. Offering an alternative to the general function of the Mexican university as the last step in the educational process of Hispanization, these students are provided with a monolingual space in which to continue practicing and developing their language and culture. Parallel to the careers they study at the university, they are trained to teach Nahuatl and they actively collaborate with Western academics in many types of research projects. Mexican education denies Nahua students access to the pre-Hispanic codices and colonial alphabetic texts written by their ancestors, and as a rule, discourages independent thinking. We provide young indigenous scholars with the opportunity to study these materials, as well as works written by contemporary authors, and they are encouraged for the first time in their academic lives to formulate and express their own opinions. And they do this, also for the first time since their childhood, in their own language. Additionally, we have begun to collaborate with other institutions in Mexico, such the Autonomous University of Tlaxcala and members of Nahua communities in Puebla and Tlaxcala where the need for revitalization is particularly urgent. In January of 2014, we sponsored an activity in which indigenous high school students from Zoyatla, Puebla, studied colonial manuscripts in Nahuatl alongside Mexican and foreign students and researchers.

Research consistently shows, on the one hand, that instruction in a child’s native language and additive bilingualism provide the best foundation for future academic achievement and, on the other hand, that submersion in the dominant language with no linguistic support for the second language learner and subtractive bilingual instruction can impact negatively on self-esteem and achievement (Austin & Sallabank 2010: 10). Mexico employs the latter two models for the basic education of its native population. Indigenous children, then, enter school and immediately cease to employ and develop their language as a tool for critical and creative thinking. Those who reach the university have accepted the idea that the value of their “mother tongue” is restricted to its function as a vehicle for practical and affective communication when they periodically return home to visit their families.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/eliac/menu/01quienes.html> (10 December, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> <http://fc-macuilxochitl.blogspot.mx> (10 December, 2015).

We have been able to develop a method for jump-starting these students back into the use of their language as an academic tool and allowing them to generate knowledge from the unique perspective that the cognitive structures of their language provide. Our aim of providing a safe space for language use and the development of indigenous research methodology stems from the importance we attach to academic expression in a native language. For almost a decade now, we have been working on a monolingual dictionary of Modern Huastecan Nahuatl. When a student begins to work with us, he or she is immediately given the task of formulating the monolingual definitions and example sentences that integrate the dictionary entries. Defining words is a basic cognitive exercise used in many elementary curricula around the world. But these university students have never done it in their native Nahuatl and they employ a unique process for accomplishing the task. In its initial phase, they experience headaches, and they all resort to a mental strategy they have developed over years of coping with a national educational system that is foreign to them: instead of resorting directly to decontextualized abstract thinking in order to produce a definition, they transport themselves mentally back into their homes and communities and imagine themselves in a situation in which the language they are seeking may occur. Collaborative thinking is natural for them, and they begin to gravitate away from the intellectual individualization of their formal education. James Lockhart, the ethnohistorian whose *New Philology* introduced the possibility of studying Mexican colonial society through sources written in Nahuatl, once said that when reading the early manuscripts written in this language he could sense the joy and excitement of the indigenous writers who had recently gained access to the new tool of alphabetic script. This is the emotion that permeates the working atmosphere in our programs, where native speakers of Nahuatl discover that they can use their language to reason and create new ideas.

Stimulating thinking from within Nahuatl is a point of departure for our research, teaching and revitalization activities. Nahuatl is a highly contextualized language. There are no infinitive forms of verbs, for example, and our researchers have created formulae for definitions that reflect this inherent specificity. The Nahua mind is not content to describe an action. It is important to specify which kinds of subjects, for example, can perform it. And since in Modern Huastecan Nahuatl there is no one term meaning “animal”, verb definitions must indicate whether deities, humans, wild animals, domestic animals, flora and/or grammatically inanimate entities can function as the subject of an action. Even this is problematic because mountains, celestial bodies, springs, land, and other natural phenomena are considered more animate than humans. The content of definitions is at times very different from that of a Spanish or English dictionary. For example, the second definition of *ahcuexoa* “to sneeze” is *Macehualli chicahuac quiquixtia ihyo pan iyacatzol quemman quihualillamiqui ce acahya* “A person expels air violently from his/her nose after feeling the sensation of missing someone who is far away.” Native speakers who begin working with us must thus reflect on and reevaluate what Mexican society and Christianity have taught them about the superstitious and valueless nature of their culture.

Creating grammatical and scientific terminology from within Nahuatl is another important and exciting activity we carry out. The grammatical manuals produced for use by indigenous bilingual elementary school teachers simply translate linguistic concepts and terminology from Spanish. So noun, *sustantivo* or *nombre* in Spanish, is rendered *tocayotl* “name” in Nahuatl. However, a Nahuatl noun does not have the same structure as its counterparts in English or Spanish, which do no more than provide a label for an entity. Nahuatl nouns consist of a nucleus surrounded by obligatory subject affixes and optional possessive affixes. In other words, a Nahuatl noun is actually a sentence. So, for exam-

ple, *nicihuatl*, with its first person singular subject prefix *ni-*, its root *-cihua-* (“woman”) and its singular absolutive suffix *-tl*, means “I am a woman”. Therefore a Nahuatl noun involves the process of providing a subject with a name, and for this reason we use the verb *tocaxtia* “to name someone or something” as the basis for creating a neologism, *tlatocaxtiliztli* “noun” or more literally “the process of providing a subject with a name”. One of the most challenging aspects of the monolingual dictionary project was defining the letters of the alphabet, a task that Joe Campbell, the authority in Nahuatl morphology, helped us accomplish during the IDIEZ Summer program in 2010. Obviously this implied describing the vocal processes involved in the production of the allophones associated with each letter. Some words, such as *copactli* “soft palate” were included in pre-Hispanic anatomical vocabulary and are attested in the *Florentine Codex*, a sixteenth-century encyclopedia of Nahua life. However, we had to create many neologisms. Nahuatl morphology is pretty transparent, and once one is familiar with the elements and the rules for their combination, creating new words that make sense is not that difficult. Our neologism for “vocal folds”, *tozcaamayo*, is composed of the root *amatl* “paper(s)” with a suffix *-yo*, one of the functions of which is to use metaphor to create new meanings that many times are associated with the body. So *amayo* can be understood to mean “a part of the body that resembles a sheet or sheets of paper”. *Tozca-*, the combining form of *tozquil* “voice”, is incorporated onto this, producing *tozcaamayo* “a part of the body, associated with voice, that resembles a sheet or sheets of paper”. We then add the first person plural possessive prefix, *to-*, because in Nahuatl all body parts are possessed. So *totozcaamayo* is “our vocal folds”. These simple kinds of activities empower and liberate native speakers by returning intellectual tools that were stripped from them during their formal education.

Research collaboration between Western investigators and speakers of indigenous languages is also crucial to our methodology. Traditionally, Western ethnographic researchers have incorporated native speakers of indigenous languages into their work as informants whose role in the research process is limited to the passive transfer of raw linguistic data. A firm boundary is drawn between the informant (conceived of as a possessor of native cultural knowledge) and the anthropologist (the only participant capable of understanding and interpreting this knowledge at an academic level). We deconstruct this boundary by assigning an active role to students and researchers who are members of the communities under investigation.<sup>15</sup> One of our goals is to train indigenous students to become independent teachers, researchers, and active collaborators with Western scholars. Given the continuing discrimination against indigenous people in Mexico, the fact that the Nahuatl scholars who collaborate with us are able to continue their graduate studies, including the preparation of Ph.D. dissertations in Europe under the auspices of the European Research Council funded project mentioned earlier,<sup>16</sup> will be vital. In our combined projects, we do not “read over the shoulders” of the natives (Geertz 1973: 452), but strive to combine inside and outside perspectives in ways that are new to existing scholarship. In this way, we are also able to overcome certain limitations common to revitalization projects, such as the failure to recognize communities’ actual needs or the undervaluing of local attitudes towards language revitalization.

Individuals who wish to design and implement revitalization projects need to have a solid background in linguistics, but they must also have training in the theory and method-

<sup>15</sup> The need to provide indigenous people with linguistic training, so that language documentation can take place from within their communities, taking into account local concerns and language maintenance, has already been emphasized (Grinevald 2007: 77–78).

<sup>16</sup> See note 2.

ology of second language instruction and learning processes (Hinton 2011: 309). To meet this aim, we are planning to open a monolingual and international master's degree program in Nahuatl language and culture in order to formally pilot the implementation of our teaching and research methodologies in the Mexican educational system. The majority of our students will be Nahuatl speaking bilingual elementary school teachers who will then use what they have learned and co-developed in our program to begin to make major changes in the way Mexico educates indigenous children. However, we also expect to have non-indigenous students and professors from Mexico, Europe and the United States participating in the program. Graduates will be able to teach, conduct research and work as activists in the implementation of concrete revitalization projects. The need to decolonize research methodologies and create spaces for developing and practicing indigenous methodologies has recently been emphasized, especially by native scholars in different parts of the world (e.g. Chilisa 2012, Kovach 2009, Tuhivai Smith 2012). For this reason, the new master's program will establish a foundation and point of departure for indigenous students and researchers to develop methodologies from within their own language, processes for creating and transmitting knowledge, and traditional practices and concepts employed in their communities. Graduates will then apply and continue to develop these methodologies in their own teaching, research and revitalization endeavors.

**5. RESTORING HISTORICAL IDENTITY AND THE CULTURE OF LITERACY IN NAHUATL.** By the fourth decade of the sixteenth century, the Nahuas had mastered alphabetic writing and initiated a written tradition in their own language. Beginning in the 1540s there was an explosion in the production of multiple written genres, including local municipal documentation, land sales, legal cases, petitions, personal correspondence, chronicles, theatre, dictionaries, grammars, and religious works. This writing expanded quickly across the core area of Nahua culture and by the beginning of the nineteenth century constituted the largest corpus of indigenous language texts recorded anywhere in America. Production tapered off after Mexican Independence and was not resumed in force until the 1970s, approximately ten years after the first generation of Mexican bilingual teachers was recruited. At this time, we begin to see works of literature in poetry, narrative, theatre, and essay published in indigenous languages. Many of these writers, such as Natalio Hernández, whose first books were authored under a pseudonym for obvious reasons, emerged from the ranks of these teachers who had become disillusioned with the system.

At no time during this period of almost five hundred years has literacy or the practice of reading and producing literary works been widespread among the Nahua population. However, the tradition and its corpus is a fact, and we believe that unless it is reactivated, spread and developed, no attempt at revitalization will be successful. Our strategy for carrying this out includes emphasizing the continuity between older and modern Nahuatl language and culture; encouraging indigenous people to create monolingual spaces in their communities and educational institutions in order to read and discuss works that their ancestors and contemporaries have written, and to create works of their own; and finally, publishing, through the University of Warsaw's and IDIEZ's monolingual *Totlahtol* series, older and contemporary written works, as well as reference materials, in standardized orthography. Refugio Nava Nava's book of children's literature, *Malintzin itlahtol* (2013), written in Tlaxcalan Nahuatl, was the first work to be published in this series, quickly expanding with other genres by indigenous authors (Zapoteco Sideño 2014, De la Cruz Cruz 2015, Nava Nava & Cuahutle Bautista 2015, Bueno Bravo et al. 2015).

Nahuatl language and culture has evolved in a continuous and uninterrupted fashion from pre-Hispanic times to the present. However, this fact is obscured by the structure of Western academics and by Mexican National ideology. Linguists and anthropologists study the culture of people who are currently alive. Historians and archaeologists study the culture of people who are dead. Works produced from these perspectives give the impression, on the one hand, that present day indigenous culture has no past, and on the other hand, that past culture has nothing to do with the lives of indigenous people today. This illusion is appropriated into Mexican National ideology, which states that the nation has roots in the great indigenous civilizations of the Mayas and the Aztecs, but that indigenous people today are culturally backward and constitute an obstacle to progress.

We believe that it is important to stimulate indigenous students to participate in activities, carried out in Nahuatl, that focus on the reading and commentary of texts written by their ancestors. This is essential if native people are to reconstruct their historical identity and be able to promote the survival and growth of their culture. We are implementing this by involving indigenous students and researchers at IDIEZ as well as Nahua collaborators from Puebla and Tlaxcala in the reading and analysis of older Nahuatl manuscripts and modern Nahuatl texts through participation in our major research projects. We began these activities in 2014 at the Winter Nahuatl Institute in Cholula and continued them at the first *Nahuatl Document Analysis Workshop (XVI-XVIII Centuries) for Native Speakers* held in the Mexican National Archives from August 19 to 21, 2015. Thirty speakers of Nahuatl from diverse communities in Mexico City and the states of Mexico, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Guerrero, Oaxaca and Veracruz took part in the workshop activities, which were conducted entirely in Nahuatl. The participants had the opportunity to personally examine three original manuscripts and then worked together to transcribe, read and analyze the materials in a setting charged with emotion, because these documents constitute a key component in the formation of the historical identity of these modern heirs to the ancient Nahua culture and tradition. The workshop provided a window into the literature written by their ancestors, the existence of which had been previously unknown to many of the participants. Such activities allow indigenous people to directly experience the fundamental relation of continuity between older and modern Nahuatl language and culture.

Crucial to this enterprise is the restitution of literacy in the native language and the unification of its orthography in close relationship to the older tradition of writing in Nahuatl. These goals encounter several major obstacles in Mexico today. There are currently two different types of orthographies used for modern Nahuatl. One group has developed independently of the earlier colonial conventions, grounding itself in linguistic considerations that seek to rationalize spelling: digraphs originating in Spanish orthography are eliminated whenever possible; glottal stops and vocalic length are represented. These systems confuse the concept of everyday writing with that of phonetic documentation<sup>17</sup> and constitute an obstacle to language revitalization and native literacy in several important ways. First, no attempt has been made to standardize any of these systems by means of monolingual dictionaries that could codify the spelling of all words; and this lack of standardization prohibits native speakers from using writing to communicate across variants. Second, their attempt to distance themselves from the earlier writing system widens the artificial academic division between older and modern Nahuatl language and culture. But perhaps more

<sup>17</sup> As Lüpke correctly pointed out, “[i]t is widely assumed by linguists that the basis of the ideal orthography is phonemic. If this was the case, the main difference between a phonemic transcription and an orthography would be the inventory of symbols used” (2011: 331).

importantly, it discourages indigenous people from reading and studying the great corpus of older works that constitute the written cultural legacy of the Nahuatl civilization.

Four factors have contributed to a general feeling of animosity toward older writing conventions that exists in Mexico today. The modern resurgence of Nahuatl writing actually began in the middle of the twentieth century when Protestant missionary linguists, working under the umbrella of the Summer Institute of Linguistics and later in cooperation with the Mexican Secretaría de Educación Pública, began producing bible translations in various indigenous languages. Missionary and governmental goals coincided for a time, for each group believed that indigenous people needed to be redeemed, on the one hand from their pagan religion and on the other hand from their backward culture. Older spelling conventions were considered bridges to the past that needed to be burned. Many people see the use of the modern linguistic conventions as a political statement in favor of the independence of indigenous languages with respect to the Mexican hegemonic culture of Hispanization. And finally, academics who work with older Nahuatl have also contributed to the problem, alienating indigenous people by stating that their modern culture and language is no more than a deformed and pauperized version of the glorious civilization of the past.<sup>18</sup> Two other schools of thought use what can be called enriched traditional orthographies. Both are based on older writing systems and include modifications, such as the use of the <h> to represent the glottal stop or aspiration. Members of the Asociación de Escritores Indígenas, A.C.<sup>19</sup> base their system on Alonso de Molina's dictionary. And we use the enriched traditional orthography based on Horacio Carochi's grammar and modified by Richard Andrews in his *Introduction to Classical Nahuatl* (2003), Frances Karttunen in her *Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl* (1992), and Joe Campbell and Frances Karttunen in their *Foundation Course in Nahuatl Grammar* (1989). We are also preparing a monolingual dictionary of Modern Huastecan Nahuatl in order to codify this orthography. It will be published in 2016 as the first reference work within the *Totlahtol* series, one of the purposes of which is to extend this orthography to other variants.

**6. COMBINING AND SHARING EXPERIENCE.** The success of Nahuatl revitalization efforts in the coming years will depend to a large degree on the ability of native speakers from different regions of Mexico to communicate and collaborate with each other in the planning and implementation of projects for the development of their language and culture. The lack of contact between different isolated Nahuatl communities makes them even more susceptible to rapid language shift (Flores Farfán 2002: 229). However, international cooperation will also be needed if indigenous people are to overcome the general tendency toward Hispanization in Mexican society.

Until recently, geographic distance and the differences between linguistic variants constituted what was considered an insurmountable barrier to the possibility of interregional communication. However, in December of 2011, as part of a research project funded by the US National Endowment for the Humanities,<sup>20</sup> IDIEZ brought together twenty native

<sup>18</sup> A relatively recent justification for the use of modern orthographies can be found in Anuschka van't Hooft's *The Ways of the Water. A Reconstruction of Huastecan Nahuatl Society Through Its Oral Tradition* (Hooft 2007: 11-12).

<sup>19</sup> Some of the members of the Asociación de Escritores Indígenas, A.C. have included Librado Silva†, Francisco Morales, and Natalio Hernández, all of which have been participants in the Seminario de Cultura Nahuatl that Miguel León Portilla has directed for over fifty years at the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

<sup>20</sup> The project *An Online Nahuatl (nci, nhe, nhw) Lexical Database: Bridging Past, Present, and Future Speakers* was directed by Dr. Stephanie Wood from the University of Oregon from 2009 to 2012 (<http://whp.uoregon.edu/dictionaries/nahuatl>, 10 December, 2015).

speakers representing approximately ten variants of Nahuatl for a five-day workshop in Zacatecas. A second Interdialectal Encounter of Nahuatl, financed by the Mexican National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI)<sup>21</sup> and organized jointly by IDIEZ and the University of Warsaw, was recently held over the weekend of January 18 and 19 of 2014 in the city of Cholula with the participation of sixty native speakers and thirteen non-native speakers. Both events were recorded and broadcast by XECARH “The Voice of the Hñahñu People”, a radio station affiliated with the CDI. Normally in Mexico when native speakers of indigenous languages are involved in discussions and conferences, the agenda is predetermined by the organizers, who are usually non-indigenous administrators of government cultural institutions. In our two Interdialectal Encounters, the proposed topics of discussion were reviewed and ratified or modified by the indigenous participants at the beginning of each event, and the actual discussions were held monolingually in Nahuatl. Generating a monolingual environment was problematic at the beginning of the 2011 event and continued to be an issue for the new participants of the 2014 event. Indigenous children learn quickly that Mexican society will not tolerate the use of their language outside of their villages, and in most cases, in their local schools. As a rule, native speakers of indigenous languages converse with each other in Spanish outside of their community. And if they must use their language in a public situation, they will immediately translate what they have said into Spanish. Not surprisingly, this behavior was replicated by many of the indigenous participants at the beginning of each Interdialectal Encounter, probably reinforced by the belief that speakers of different variants of Nahuatl would not be able to understand each other. In fact, before the 2011 event, which probably constituted the first time in hundreds of years that speakers of multiple variants of Nahuatl had had the opportunity to converse monolingually with each other, it is probable that no one really knew if interdialectal communication would be possible. In both events as well as during the AGN workshop in 2015, it immediately became apparent that a high enough degree of intelligibility existed to permit fluid and animated monolingual discussions on a diverse array of topics, including identity, revitalization, rituals and local festivals, ways of greeting, education, immigration, grammatical terminology, linguistic policy, migration, intergenerational language transmission, gender issues, and interculturality. Perhaps most important is the shift in attitude that occurs among the participants as the discussions progress and they are able to experience interdialectal communication for themselves. An initial environment of timidity bordering on distrust gives way to an atmosphere of joy and solidarity, as well as the desire to continue the communication after the end of the event. We will also soon begin to organize live interdialectal discussions using videoconferencing platforms, including members of Nahua immigrant communities in the United States.

We have also started to spearhead the formation of an international consortium of institutions of higher education to foment the teaching, research and revitalization of Nahuatl language and culture. Instruction in indigenous and other minority languages, both for native and non-native speakers, is few and far between at universities in Mexico, the United States and Europe. Reductions in public spending and the general tendency to reduce course offerings in the humanities do not paint a bright future for these areas of instruction. Universities were designed to be self-sufficient islands of knowledge, and to this day the majority of them resist to a more or lesser degree sharing costs and human resources, not to mention the new distance instruction platforms that would make this kind of efficient collaboration possible. We promote these strategies of inter-institutional cooperation in order

<sup>21</sup> [www.cdi.gob.mx](http://www.cdi.gob.mx) (10 December, 2015).

to make Nahuatl instruction available to anyone in the world who wishes it, acknowledging the importance of neo-speakers for research and revitalization projects.

The division between the roles of the investigator and the informant that constitutes one of the major methodological underpinnings of ethnographic research, hinders the production of knowledge. A few years ago, IDIEZ added the component of individual tutoring to its Summer Program curriculum in colonial and modern Nahuatl. Foreign students were required to bring a research topic with them to the program and work on it for an hour per day during the six-week program with a native speaking tutor. The students were invited to consider these sessions as an exercise in mutual instruction. They would explain to their tutors how they had set up their research project so that the tutor would not be restricted to simply supplying information, but instead would be able to participate, along with the student/researcher, in its analysis and interpretation. Every year, more and more of our students involve their tutors in the preparation of their theses and dissertations, as well as long-term research projects. And they are producing a new kind of knowledge generated by combining the perspectives of Western science and the specifically indigenous ways of collecting, organizing and interpreting data. The long-standing colonial Nahuatl teaching program carried out at the University of Warsaw since 2000 has been enriched since 2012 by a course in modern Nahuatl taught by native speakers, making it the only permanent full academic year Nahuatl program of its kind. Yet another complementary endeavor is our revitalization website dealing with three endangered languages: Nahuatl in Mexico and Lemko and Wymysiöeryś in Poland.<sup>22</sup> Its three domains of research, culture (including literature), and education describe, document, and recreate the universe of each of the endangered languages. And they are all presented in monolingual interfaces in each of the three endangered languages, plus English, Polish and Spanish. The website has been designed, on the one hand, as a space available for writers in Nahuatl, Lemko and Wymysiöeryś to publish their works, and on the other hand, as a resource repository for scholars and students working on those languages and their communities. Its target user groups include speakers of endangered languages, students, and scholars.

It is probably safe to say that there has never been a successful indigenous language revitalization project in Mexico. Racism is a structural aspect of Mexican society that is not recognized and addressed in the public forum: unhindered by criticism, it generates pervasive discrimination against indigenous people that cannot be countered by limited and isolated revitalization efforts. We believe that an international consortium of committed institutions and individuals can provide the independent funding, experience, creative theories and strategies, and prestige that may catalyze these projects and assure their success. Even more importantly, however, these initiatives should inspire and support but also provide autonomous space for community-based programs.

**7. BENEFITS OF LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION FOR SPEAKERS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES.** “At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the world’s linguistic and cultural diversity is under assault by the forces of globalisation – cultural, economic and political forces that work to standardize and homogenize, even as they stratify and marginalize” (McCarty 2003: 147). The processes of globalization and homogenization are exacerbated by the still pervasive worldwide belief that the establishment a national language and culture is a fundamental requirement for political stability. Therefore, as in Mexico, most bilingual education systems exist solely for the purpose of humanely transitioning speakers

<sup>22</sup> [www.revitalization.al.uw.edu.pl](http://www.revitalization.al.uw.edu.pl) (10 December, 2015).

of minority languages to the monolingual use of the dominant national tongue. Language and educational policy-makers ignore the fact that languages reflect the most fundamental human experiences, while “their decline will result in the irrecoverable loss of unique knowledge that is based on specific cultural and historical experience”, thus weakening considerably the ethnic and cultural identity of speech communities (Brenzinger 2007: ix).

But more importantly, they fail to understand how the cultivation of linguistic and cultural diversity benefits everyone. The human capacity for solving problems and creating new ideas, which today is the motor of economic production, is distributed in a form resembling that of a living, evolving mosaic within the structure of each different language. UNESCO emphasizes in the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* that creation is rooted in cultural tradition, but is nourished by contact and genuine dialogue with other cultures. Therefore, multicultural heritage fosters creativity in all its diversity because “in the face of present-day economic and technological change, opening up vast prospects for creation and innovation, particular attention must be paid to the diversity of the supply of creative work” (UNESCO 2002: 5).

This idea provides a strong rationale for language revitalization that should be grounded in the social, cultural and economical benefits of cross-cultural transfer, as well as the advantages of extending linguistic diversity. An important aspect of Whorfian thought associates the benefits of ethno-linguistic diversity with pan-human creativity, problem solving, and mutual cross-cultural acceptance (Fishman 1982), while differences in language structure result not only in differences in construal, but are also significant for the performance of nonlinguistic tasks and activities (Gumperz & Levinson 1996, Kövecses 2006). Revitalization should be aimed to strengthen what David Dalby (1999–2000) calls the *linguasphere*: the dynamic, evolving global structure of interacting and interdependent languages. The processes of globalization weaken communities’ ability to maintain, develop and use the unique tools of perception, reasoning, and creation coded within their languages. This tendency not only debilitates the cognitive resources with which they reproduce themselves, but also prohibits them from contributing to the enrichment of the dynamic, evolving global sum of these intellectual tools, which Dalby calls the *logosphere*. Drawing from the resources available in the *logosphere* depends on the vitality of the *linguasphere*, the diversity of the tongues that integrate it, and society’s attitudes regarding the value of multilingualism. The continuity of local knowledge, along with other aspects of empowerment of communities, is a key to sustainable development, which, in turn, is needed for preserving local ecosystems, and through them, the global ecosystem. Language maintenance is an essential part of these local and global ecosystems (Nettle & Romaine 2000: 176–177). However, on the other hand, language planning based on the value of linguistic and cultural diversity is often an initiative of Western scholarship focusing on languages as abstract entities rather than communities of speakers with their realities and postulating what non-Westerners should be doing with their mother tongues (Coulmas 2013: 221). Therefore, the understanding and sharing of deeper benefits related to language maintenance by the community members themselves is in fact one of the fundamental challenges and preconditions of any revitalization project.

While language revitalization is crucial for local ecosystems and traditional resource management in the hands of specific communities, it can also be argued that the preservation and development of an endangered language offers benefits that extend far beyond its community of speakers. The unique perspective that is coded within its structure provides anyone who speaks the language with a distinct set of critical and creative tools that can be applied to solving the problems and enriching the lives of both native and non-native

speakers of a given language. Thus, revitalization strategies should embrace the creation of an important category of neo-speakers (Grinevald & Bert 2011: 51) who may include both younger generations of community members where language transmission had been broken and extra-community speakers, including activists, teachers, students and researchers. This approach is further strengthened by the most recent results of psycholinguistic research that demonstrate a strong correlation between multilingualism and enhanced non-verbal processes. It has been demonstrated that bilingual and multilingual children and adults have expanded cognitive potential, which manifests itself in greater flexibility and capacity for task-solving and in generally higher intellectual and social skills (Bialystok 1999, 2001, Bialystok & Martin 2004, Bialystok & Senman 2004, Bialystok et al. 2012, Costa et al. 2008, Kovács 2009). Current research also suggests that multilingualism enhances executive control, the brain's capacity for staying on track in the selection, organization, and utilization of the data we need to solve problems and achieve goals. And it seems to be particularly important in inhibiting the interference of non-essential information in this process. Advantages for executive control can be seen already in 24-month-old children (Poulin-Dubois et al. 2011: 567–579). On the other hand, bilingualism also offers significant advantages to the elderly, protecting against cognitive decline and possibly delaying the onset of symptoms of dementia (Bialystok et al. 2012: 240–250). Thus, the use of more than one language, which in many cases simply consists of continuing with the “natural” multilingualism and cultural pluralism that has historically characterized many regions of the world, offers benefits for all the age groups of a given society. This exceeds its practical advantages in the normal processes of daily communication.

These findings seem to be backed up by direct outcomes of revitalization programs: it has been repeatedly shown that children coming out of strong immersion models always match or surpass their counterparts participating in the dominant-language programs, in both classroom performance and standardized testing (Hinton 2001: 298–299). It seems highly significant that the success among the Nawaho and Hawaiian immersion programs based on a bottom-up language planning that provided a means of empowerment for native teachers, children, and communities, can also be measured by the fact that its students demonstrated much better academic performance than those receiving school instruction in English (McCarty 2003: 151–157). In addition, recent research has shown a strong correlation between language loss, deterioration in indigenous health, symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress, and elevated suicide rates (e.g. Chandler & Lalonde 1998, McIvor et al. 2009, Ball & Moselle 2013). We believe dealing with health issues should become an essential part of integral revitalization programs.

Thus, the revitalization of Nahuatl and other languages should not be seen as an aim in itself. The strength and vitality of intellectual infrastructure, at the level of both local communities and the larger society, depends on preserving the local ecosystems which assure the quantity, the quality, and especially the diversity of the ideas the society can cultivate. The speaker of a minority language, then, is one of humanity's most valuable assets, for this person perceives the world, its problems and its possibilities for development uniquely, and possesses a special set of cognitive tools for hypothesizing ways to transform it. Revitalization can catalyze the potential of native speakers of minority languages for making unique contributions to the enrichment of life in society as a whole. On the other hand, non-native speakers can also benefit from the acquisition of a rare language, and the application of its specific cognitive tools to their professional activities, including research work. In other words, “cultural diversity widens the range of options open to everyone; it is one of the roots of development, understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but

also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence” (UNESCO 2002: 4). We believe that this approach provides a rationale for creating integral, efficient strategies for revitalization programs of endangered languages, but it also unlocks an important general social and economic potential. Integral strategies of revitalization, education, and usage of endangered languages, if successfully applied, will generate enormous societal and cultural benefits in today’s world where cross-cultural transfer has become a powerful, but at the same time very challenging political, social and cultural phenomenon.

**8. OUR APPROACH: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.** It is essential to recognize that languages are based on local systems of knowledge and ways of life. Preserving these systems is crucial for the preservation of local languages (Nettle & Romaine 2000: 165, Bergier 2014). Traditional cultural and economic systems, however, can only survive and prosper where their members retain control over the resources, the mechanisms of knowledge transmission, and the key activities that constantly reconstitute, redefine, and integrate their communities. Factors such as the state economy, poverty, migration, Western-style education, and discriminating language policies have undermined, displaced, and even disintegrated the forms of organization and knowledge systems employed by the Nahuas and other indigenous groups in the Americas. While many of these processes are irreversible, new strategies are needed to counter and reverse widespread language shift. These may include supporting stable multilingualism in language-contact situations and searching for alternative, sustainable forms of development based on local languages and traditional knowledge. But this also poses special challenges for and demands heightened awareness from external institutions that engage in revitalization programs and community-based activities. While some of the proposed strategies may be applicable to European contexts, working with languages in the postcolonial circumstances of developing countries should address their specific challenges and highly sensitive ethical, ideological, cultural, economic, and psychological issues.

In order for our strategy to work, we need to foster collaboration across academic, social, and ideological boundaries, integrate theory, methodology, and program implementation, and efficiently combine grassroots and top-down approaches at the different interrelated levels (comp. Fishman 2001: 467). We must also address and bridge the gap between theory and practice in revitalization, i.e. between the study and planning of revitalization in academic circles and the implementation of concrete programs, be they community-based, educational or the direct result of governmental language policy. The urgent need to combine different levels of activities in the revitalization of the native languages of Latin America, including the pedagogical, public, and sociolinguistic spheres, has already been emphasized (Zimmermann 2011: 34–36), but it now needs to be put into practice. In the case of Nahuatl, we need to make essential contributions to linguistic knowledge by compiling extensive documentation of both a historical (archival texts) and a contemporary (audio and video recordings) nature. We use these collected resources to create, expand, and enrich dictionaries, grammars, and pedagogical materials, adapting the products of linguistic research for use in revitalization. Indeed, lexical and structural data from historical documentation can be reintroduced into modern language in order to enrich the linguistic tools available to native speakers. We also aim to strengthen the historical and cultural identity of native speakers by making research results available to members of speech communities and facilitating their access to the texts written by their ancestors throughout the colonial era. We further strive to raise the prestige of endangered languages in academic circles and

the broader society by promoting teaching and research, and by harnessing promotional campaigns in the mass media.

Education has an important place in our activities and is linked to our research and publication projects. It is extremely necessary to foster the teaching of Nahuatl on all academic levels. Researchers need to incorporate or facilitate the incorporation of their data into innovative and efficient resources for instruction. We plan to establish a monolingual university program grounded in international collaboration, and strive to work efficiently and productively with state educational institutions in order to improve teaching methodology and extend the presence of native languages in primary and secondary education. Crucial to the fortification and development of Nahuatl education and literacy is the implementation of a standardized orthography that preserves the richness of varietal differences. It is equally important to disseminate and apply the results of psycholinguistic research on multilingualism in order to stimulate positive attitudes on the part of parents, teachers, politicians, social workers and other service professionals toward minority language transmission and multi-language education.

Our approach involves direct collaboration with members of the language communities we are studying and working to revitalize. Native speakers work with us as students and researchers, not informants. And we provide them with training to assure that they may successfully carry out any number of educational, social and political tasks essential for guaranteeing linguistic and cultural growth. They are encouraged to actively develop and extend the use of their language into more and more sectors of modern culture and social life, especially through the creation and expansion of spaces for monolingual language practice. Other essential aspects that need to be incorporated into community-based revitalization projects are master-apprentice and language-at-home programs. These essential components of language revitalization can draw on psycholinguistic research and experience. “Children are perfectly capable of growing up bilingual, trilingual, or even quadrilingual. But parents and mentors must create an environment where both (or all) of the languages can thrive” (Hinton 2013: 230). The success of these approaches depends on training, which provides knowledge of the psycholinguistic and health benefits of multilingualism, helping to overcome fear of discrimination and the resulting failure of children in school or in the job market, negative attitudes toward lack of fluency and language-change, and the pitfalls associated to language purism. In Wilamowice, the formal instruction in the community’s endangered language which came about as a result of our collaboration with local teachers of the language, school administrators, and municipal authorities was preceded by special psycholinguistic and educational workshops for children, their parents and teachers. In the Nahuatl context, a similar initiative has been undertaken by activists from San Miguel Xaltipan (Beatriz Cuahutle Baustista, Refugio Nava Nava) in the form of a special community-empowerment workshop and informal Nahuatl teaching to children. As has been argued, stable transmission at home and the presence of daily speakers in an ethnolinguistic community is much more crucial for language maintenance than any virtual community of speakers or external prestige enjoyed by the language (Fishman 2001: 465).

Revitalization cannot be achieved without the construction of a positive language ideology that is crucial for building native speakers’ self-confidence, strengthening their historical and cultural identity, enhancing their professional performance, and assuring external/international recognition of their language. Positive language ideology should make both native speakers and the broader society aware of the benefits of harnessing an endangered language as a unique cognitive tool. It is essential to overcome the isolation of groups that struggle to preserve their languages, such as different Nahua communities in

many regions of Mexico. Communities can be brought together by focusing their attention on shared problems relating to administrative barriers, discrimination and marginalization, and providing channels for interdialectal discussions and the expression of individual native speakers' voices. Finally, these discussions and activities must be included within the context of a complex and diverse global cultural heritage through the implementation of collaborative research projects, web portals, meetings, conferences, and special courses all involving the participation of both native speakers and international students and researchers.

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