

# 'Tipping' the scales: Language shift in a Mexican indigenous community

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## The Upper Necaxa Totonac people

- Reside in the rural communities of Chicontla (pop. 3,700), Patla (pop. 1,800), San Pedro (1,000), and Cacahuatlán (pop. 250) in the state of Puebla, Mexico
- Little is known about their origins and history as there is no written tradition
- Regular public schooling not available until 1960s
  - Schooling conducted entirely in Spanish as the large majority of teachers are non-Totonac
  - Average education level between 4 to 5 years; 1/4 of adult population have never gone to school; illiteracy rate approx. 30%
- Traditional economy based on subsistence farming of corn, beans, and chilies
  - Coffee introduced into region in early 20th century by large *mestizo* (non-indigenous) landowners
  - Many men and women worked as day-laborers on the plantations for supplementary income
- 1960s: due to rise in value of coffee, economy switched from subsistence farming to small-scale coffee production
  - Resulted in a rise in standard of living: running water, government medical clinics, electric power lines, roads fit for vehicles
  - People became dependent on cash as economic improvements allowed them access for the first time to things that they needed, such as modern medicines, and things that they wanted, such as televisions and cars
- 1990s: value of coffee plummeted, so many people moved to Mexico City or United States in search of paid work
  - Some have invested in other crops or cattle-ranching, but most are forced to rely on the meagre income provided by coffee and other small jobs found locally
  - Current attitude among Totonacs: there is no money to be made in their communities



## The Upper Necaxa Totonac language

- Member of the isolate Totonac-Tepehua family spoken in states of Puebla, Veracruz, and Hidalgo
- Approx. 3,400 speakers of Upper Necaxa Totonac, the overwhelming majority (95%) bilingual Totonac-Spanish
- In Chicontla, the intergenerational transmission of Totonac to children has ceased among Totonac-speaking parents under age 65 in the sample
- In Patla, the intergenerational transmission of Totonac is still continuing, but only among a minority of families and always in combination with Spanish
- Current parent generation Totonac-dominant bilinguals; current children generation Spanish monolinguals with only a few bilingual but Spanish-dominant; current grandchildren generation virtually all Spanish monolinguals



First contact: pre-1700s

What changed in the last 40 years was not the desire to speak Spanish but the opportunity to do so.



Permanent tip to Spanish?

## Negative perceptions of indigenous cultures

- Most non-indigenous Mexicans occupy positions of social prestige (e.g., large landowners, priests, merchants, teachers, doctors)
- Negative attitudes not only among non-indigenous Mexicans but among the Totonacs themselves
  - Totonacs call their language a *dialecto* "dialect" and refer to themselves as *gente de calzón* "people of indigenous dress" while non-indigenous Mexicans are *gente de razón* "rational people"
- Non-indigenous Mexicans treat as ignorant those who can't speak Spanish

[...] some collectors came and I began to give them my service, and they sent me there to notify someone: "Go there to notify them." But no, no, I didn't even know what they were talking to me about, so they scolded me, and no, so I came back and "Yes, he's going to come," I tell them even though I didn't go to notify them [...] (LBS: 09/08/03)

- Not knowing Spanish leads to feelings of shame

[...] before no, I couldn't greet them, like, "good day!" or "what are you doing?" or "how are you?", no, no, I couldn't say anything, right, I didn't know anything, right, but now I understand well now [...] before, no, I was ashamed to get together with the, the rational people eating over there [...] (RMM: 26/07/03)

- Some Totonacs make a point of speaking Spanish to each other in public

[...] I don't know, why, why they speak to each other, um, they speak Spanish to each other and they know Totonac [...] Well, they, um, they feel that they know more, they feel, like, proud, and they feel proud because, because, because, because, um, because they know how to speak Spanish [...] (CFM: 16/07/03)



## Establishment of Spanish-language schools

- Teachers are not Totonac speakers and strongly discourage use of Totonac in class
- [...] me, when I was in school, well only Totonac, we spoke only Totonac until the teacher scolded us and, and what are we going to do about it if it's our dialect? Because there are also some [kids] who can't speak Spanish and so they talk in Totonac and so, until [the teachers] told us: "Be quiet! You are like parakeets, I don't understand you at all." (GMM: 23/07/03)
- Results in bilingual children who become proficient enough to transmit Spanish to other siblings and later to their own children

- Children who don't know Spanish are at a disadvantage academically

[...] it's a pity, the children who don't learn Spanish, because there they sit, they don't know what the teachers tell them, there they sit, but no, or they don't listen or they do listen but they don't understand, right, so it's better to speak to them in Spanish so that in school they don't have problems, so that they understand everything the teacher explains to them, yes. (AFM: 03/08/04)

- Parents believe that speaking both Spanish and Totonac will harm the child's linguistic development

[...] and this is causing the, the language to break down because, you no longer explain the same way in Spanish because you speak Totonac and you speak Spanish, you speak more Totonac than Spanish, so it's no longer, no longer, I can't explain well in Spanish because you speak too much Totonac [...] (LVN: 06/07/06)



**Linguistic tip** (Dorian 1981:51) = a demographically stable language suddenly falls out of favour with its speakers when a series of factors that have been working against it finally reaches a critical level

- in the case of the Upper Necaxa Totonacs, the tip to Spanish resulted from the interaction of long-standing negative attitudes of indigenous cultures with new social-institutional and economic conditions that greatly increased the communicative need for Spanish and greatly decreased the communicative need for Totonac