

**Language loss and linguistic suicide:  
A case study from the Sierra Norte de Puebla, Mexico\***

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Abstract

In this paper we propose the term “linguistic suicide” to refer to situations where parents who are speakers of a minority language deliberately choose not to teach this language to their children and instead adopt a majority language in their home. In the case of speakers of Upper Necaxa Totonac, a language of East-Central Mexico, the principal reasons for the cessation of language transmission are the low prestige attached to the minority language and concerns about the children’s ability to achieve fluency in Spanish, the socially- and economically-dominant language. Although these considerations contribute in the short term to the decision by speakers to kill off their language, in the long run the speakers themselves often realize that this process is a self-destructive one.

Language loss and language endangerment are most frequently discussed in terms of the forced or forceful extinction of a minority language under pressure from a dominant majority language. This type of scenario is particularly relevant in the Canadian context, where the term “language loss” occurs in discussions of Aboriginal languages — where transmission of language between generations was interrupted by deliberate government policy — and minority languages such French in Western Canada or the languages of immigrant communities, where transmission is broken by children willingly adopting the speech of their peers from the majority language group. In both of these cases (though more acutely in the former), the loss of the language is involuntary from the point of view of the minority speech community and is frequently perceived as undesirable, particularly in the eyes of an older generation with little or limited access to the majority language. In other parts of the world, however, these are not the only ways in which languages are lost. In this paper, we will present a case study of a third scenario of language death which we will call “linguistic suicide”. Linguistic suicide occurs when an older generation of speakers dominant in a minority language deliberately chooses not to teach this language to their children and adopts a majority language as the language of child-rearing, thereby willfully interrupting the transmission of their language to the next generation.

The data used in this paper are drawn from the authors’ experiences in the field in the Sierra Norte of Puebla State, Mexico, and from interviews conducted (principally by Lam) in July and August of 2003 with native speakers of Upper Necaxa Totonac, a small indigenous language spoken by some 3,000 people in three villages in the Necaxa River

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Valley (Map 1). One of the two villages we work in, Chicontla, is a regional centre and has a total population of nearly 5,000, many (though still a minority) of whom are immigrants from *mestizo* (non-indigenous Mexican) communities outside the valley. The second village, Patla, is smaller, with about 1,500 people, nearly all of whom are Totonac.<sup>1</sup> In Chicontla, about half of the adult population speaks Totonac but relatively few people under thirty are more than passively bilingual and, to our knowledge, no children are learning the indigenous language as a mother tongue. Virtually the entire population of Patla, on the other hand, is Totonac-speaking and Totonac is used and understood by children. There are, however, only a handful of homes where the principal language of child-rearing is Totonac, and very few children are now acquiring it as their dominant language. The majority of young children are spoken to by their primary care-givers in Spanish and learn Totonac from grandparents, older siblings, or other children, and many young children seem to be acquiring a primarily passive knowledge of the indigenous language. What is especially remarkable about this situation is that the parents of these children are themselves late learners of Spanish who function most comfortably in Totonac in most other contexts (e.g., interaction with peers, public activities, commerce, and, in some cases, religious worship). In the context of child-rearing, however, these speakers have chosen not to use Totonac, but have opted for their weaker language, thereby interrupting the transmission of the indigenous language to the next generation of potential speakers. Should this practice continue, the children currently learning Upper Necaxa Totonac will be the final speakers of the language, which will have been deliberately killed off by the people who speak it in an act of linguistic suicide.

## 1 Factors in language loss

In any given situation, language loss is the result of the complex interplay of many different factors, both external and internal to the speech community. In his theory of language death, Sasse (1992) lists a number of external factors that lead to language loss including cultural, historical, economic and political forces. He argues that these forces in turn have an effect on how a speech community behaves, creating internal conditions which shift patterns of language use towards a majority language or foster negative attitudes towards the minority language which disfavour its use. In all situations, however, a key factor in language loss is the failure of parents to transmit the language to their children, and for Sasse the interruption of language transmission is the first phase of language loss. Interrupted transmission leads to a lack of proficiency on the part of the younger generation, who then adopt the majority language as their home language and the language of child-rearing, resulting in the ultimate demise of the minority language.

Although the cessation of transmission is a key step in the process of language loss, few studies have examined the reasons underlying parents' decisions not to teach the minority language to their children. One of the causes most frequently cited in the literature is the low prestige attached to a minority language. Minority languages are frequently associated with traditional cultures and older ways of life that are being displaced

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<sup>1</sup> Cacahuatlán, the third Upper Necaxa village, is much smaller, with probably 400 or 500 residents, nearly all Totonacs, in their majority related to families in Patla. We have had little direct contact with this community and will have nothing further to say about it.



by modern, more technologically advanced societies; this, in turn, leads to psychological associations of the minority language with lower standards of living and the poverty that often comes with the economic exclusion of members of indigenous cultures by the larger industrialized societies that surround them. These socio-economic and/or socio-psychological pressures frequently lead to the development of a negative attitude towards the language and to doubts on the part of speakers about the usefulness of language loyalty (Sasse 1992). Jones (1996), in a case study of Breton speakers in Plougastel-Daoulas, Brittany, found that many of her consultants did not consider Breton to be of any practical use and therefore saw no need for their children to learn it, preferring instead that they learn French or even English. She suggests that “the focal point of the *commune* has changed from the world within to the world outside and for the most part, the attractions of the latter outweigh those of the former” (p. 65). In her case study of the Mayan community Mazapa, Garzon (1992) also found that parents were concerned with their children’s ability to be successful in the outside world and believed that teaching the minority language would hinder their children’s ability to learn Spanish and do well in school. In her opinion, these internal factors were more influential than external factors such as the socio-economic dominance of the majority language speakers, government policies that encouraged the assimilation of indigenous communities, and the prohibition of the minority language in schools.

In many cases, the net result of such socio-political and economic influences and of the internal psychological pressures they create is a deliberate decision by parents not to speak the minority language with their children, even if they themselves are imperfect speakers of the majority language. In Plougastel-Daoulas and in Mazapa, there were no official policies prohibiting the use of Breton and Tekiteko by parents in their homes, but in both cases parents opted not to do so, at least with their children — although in the former case, many parents did use Breton at home with other family members: over 80% of them spoke Breton predominantly to members of the family who were older than themselves (e.g. grandparents and their own parents), and half of them used it with their siblings. However, only 20% of Breton-speaking parents spoke it with their children and a mere 10% of speakers used Breton with their grandchildren (Jones 1996). This was true despite the fact that standard Breton is taught in the schools, meaning that, as Jones notes, “for the under twenties, it is the school, rather than the home, which is ensuring the inter-generational maintenance of Breton” (p. 60). The disadvantage of parent not using the language with their children is that children then have nowhere to practice the Breton they learn in school, so in many ways the teaching of Breton is futile for the maintenance of the language as long as it is not supported by the parents. The decision of parents to speak or not to speak the minority language to their children is crucial for that language’s survival. Even government policies that favour the maintenance of the minority language, as in the case of Plougastel-Daoulas, are not sufficient if parents voluntarily choose not to speak it with their children. It is to this deliberate choice of parents to “kill off” their language that we apply the term “linguistic suicide”.

The term “linguistic suicide” is clearly related to the term “language suicide” which is first introduced by Denison (1977), who is arguing against the idea that language death is occasioned by structural impoverishment or decay reaching the point where a language is no longer a viable linguistic system. Dennison argues that languages

die, not from the loss or decay of formal rules, but instead are lost when parents cease transmitting the minority language to their children.<sup>2</sup> He writes that

there comes a point when multilingual parents no longer consider it necessary or worthwhile for the future of their children to communicate with them in a low-prestige language variety, and when children are no longer motivated to acquire active competence in a language which is lacking in positive connotations such as youth, modernity, technical skills, material success, education. The languages at the lower end of the prestige scale retreat from ever increasing areas of their earlier functional domains, displaced by higher prestige languages, until *there is nothing left for them to be used about*. In this sense they may be said to “commit suicide”. (Denison 1977: 21, emphasis in the original)

Denison’s formulation of the term “language suicide” here is a bit misleading, however, in that it seems to attribute a certain agency to languages independent of that of their speakers: however, languages have no will of their own, and so they cannot kill themselves. The impoverishment of the number of a language’s communicative domains in these situations results from the behaviour of the speakers, not from internal linguistic phenomena. Furthermore, this formulation distracts from the fact that the speakers in these situations make a deliberate choice not to transmit the language to their children, just as it fails to distinguish situations of linguistic suicide from other circumstances leading to language loss in which the process is involuntary on the part of the speakers. The reduction of functional domains in which a language is used may also be caused by external coercive forces, or by young children, rather than parents, rejecting the minority language unwittingly by adopting a higher prestige peer-group or majority language in their daily activities. Linguistic suicide is a social process that is the net result of the behaviour of individual speakers as willful agents within a speech community, and our recasting of the term is intended to reflect that agency. In the remainder of this paper, we present a case study that sheds some light on the factors that can lead to linguistic suicide and why it is that parents choose not to transmit their first language to their children, opting instead to speak solely in an alien majority language.

### 1.1 *Prestige and prejudice*

In Chicontla and Patla, the typical attitude among the Totonac-speaking parents of young children today is that learning Spanish is more important than learning Upper Nexcaxa Totonac. Parents consistently attribute their decision not to use Totonac as the language of child-rearing to a desire on their part that their children learn Spanish. This is frequently linked to concerns that the children speak Spanish well when they get to school, and to fears that children learning Totonac will be confused and unable to achieve fluency in the socially-dominant language. The following comments by GMM, a 36-year-old resident of Patla and mother of three children, are typical of her generation:

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<sup>2</sup> See also Sasse (1992): “The idea that a language can ‘kill itself’ by becoming so impoverished that its function as an adequate means of communication is called in question [and] that it must be abandoned for structural reasons is not compatible with empirical facts. Structural impoverishment and so-called ‘bastardization’ may help accelerate the process of language death in the final stage ... but it will always be the consequence rather than the reason for linguistic obsolescence” (pp. 10 – 11).

With as much as I knew [of Spanish] I began to speak to my children, already when I had my first child, I began to speak to her in Spanish. ... And when she spoke, well she didn't speak in Spanish but in Totonac, because her grandmother looked after her more than I did. ... But I never spoke to her in Totonac, I spoke to her in Spanish, and she answered me in Totonac ... . All of them [I spoke to] in Spanish from the time they were born, Spanish, Spanish, because, well, I thought, it's better this way because, so that they would not be like me, I learned as an adult but my children, I don't want them to be that way, my children, I want them to speak Spanish. Because we always have visitors and if my children don't understand Spanish then poor them. They won't be able to answer or know what they are being told. ... [but the first and] the second [child] were the same, he started to speak Totonac. ... I said to them, "Why don't you answer me the way I talk to you?" And they answered in Totonac. ... At times I would scold them ... . Until the third child came along, this one, the youngest, and the first words he said were in Spanish. Now I was happy because my child now, my baby, now he was starting to speak in Spanish. ... Sometimes with little children if you don't teach them [Spanish] then they learn Totonac before Spanish. But I think that it's better for them to learn Totonac as adults than [to learn] Spanish [as adults]. Because it's more difficult to learn Spanish as an adult than as a child. ... So I started speaking to them in Spanish and didn't teach them any Totonac. [GMM: 7/23/03]

AVV, a 50-year-old mother of 8 from Patla, voiced similar concerns, stating that it was more communicatively useful for her children to learn Spanish than Totonac:

I've been speaking to them in Spanish since they were little. ... I didn't like speaking to them in Totonac. ... I wanted them to learn Spanish. ... Because, for example, someone comes like you do now, and if he doesn't know Totonac, then he'll talk to them in Spanish, mm hm, and because many people who come don't know Totonac, and if you don't know [Spanish], how are you going to talk to someone if they don't know [Totonac], right? So I liked it better that they learned Spanish than Totonac. [AVV: 8/7/03]

People in the local communities who are unable to communicate in Totonac include many of the merchants who sell at the weekly markets, coffee-buyers and government officials who come on administrative business, and the local school teachers, the majority of whom are not from Chicontla or Patla. Speakers often report a feeling that it is impolite to speak a language in the presence of someone who doesn't understand it, as indicated in this quote from GMM:<sup>3</sup>

Well, sometimes it's embarrassing, what is the person going to think, "Right, he's talking about me ... ." So that people don't think badly [of us], if you run into a friend, and if you're chatting and someone is there who doesn't know Totonac, well, we speak in Spanish so that he doesn't feel bad ... . Like me, when my

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, some of the parents we spoke to remembered being scolded by their teachers for not speaking in Spanish because the teachers could not understand what the students were saying.

visitors come, if my children speak to me I answer them in Spanish even if they speak to me in Totonac. [GMM: 7/23/03]

In addition to the issue of politeness and making oneself understood, the typical non-Totonac speakers in the community occupy positions of high prestige, re-enforcing the necessity of Totonac-speakers to accommodate them and underlining the lower social-status of the indigenous language and its speakers.

The low prestige according to the language is also frequently alluded to by Totonac-speakers in discussions of language use. According to JGAM, a 54-year old male speaker from Chicontla,

Lots of people are ashamed of speaking Totonac, they're ashamed, they say "I don't want to teach it because of the sophisticated people [in the village]." They don't want these guys to see their face because they speak Totonac, they're ashamed ... the thing is, there are people that don't value it, they don't appreciate it, what you would call their heritage, what we've received from our grandfathers, eh? [JGAM: 7/19/03]

In Chicontla, where the non-Totonac population is larger and the language is farther gone, the situation has reached the point where native Totonac speakers will frequently address each other in public using Spanish, although they might not necessarily do so in their own homes. Many fluent Totonac speakers deny knowing the language when asked about it, and group conversations frequently shift to Spanish if a Spanish monolingual (particularly one from outside the community) is within earshot. Being able to speak Spanish well is occasionally worn as a badge of honour by Totonac-speakers in both communities, and a number of consultants reported that certain individuals make a point of using only Spanish in public and a way of showing that "they know more" [CFM: 7/16/03] than other people in the community.

The negative attitude towards Totonac found locally is a reflection of the attitude of the larger Mexican society towards indigenous peoples and indigenous languages. In Mexican Spanish, the words *indio* 'Indian' and *naco* 'simpleton' (believed locally to derive from the word *totonaco*) are nasty insults. The word *dialecto* 'dialect' rather than *idioma* 'language' is used to refer to indigenous languages, which are felt to be substandard because they don't have a "grammar". These terms are used in the same way by indigenous and non-indigenous people, and the Totonacs themselves distinguish the two groups with the terms *gente de calzón* 'people of indigenous dress' and *gente de razón* 'rational people'. The number of locals who continue to use traditional dress is extremely small, confined to people in their 60s and older. This number is greater among women, who largely remain in the community, than men who travel outside the villages for work and deal more with outsiders for reasons of business and governance. Such attitudes lead many parents to feel that their children are better off leaving the traditional language and culture behind and trying to integrate more fully into the larger "more civilized" Mexican society from outside the valley.

## 1.2 The march of “civilization”

Part of the difficulty for the maintenance of the Totonac language in these communities is that Upper Necaxa Totonac is associated in the minds of its speakers with hard times and pre-industrial living conditions. Traditionally, the Totonac were subsistence slash-and-burn agriculturalists, growing corn, beans, and chilies in often marginal conditions. The climate in the region is tropical, but is subject to fluctuations in the amount and timing of rains, and crop failures are reported by the older speakers to have occurred more than once in their life-times. Coffee was introduced into the region in the first half of the Twentieth Century and many men worked as day-laborers for large *mestizo* landowners on coffee plantations. Working conditions were poor and people’s illiteracy and ignorance was frequently taken advantage of to cheat them out of land, wages, and basic human rights. Public schooling was not available until the 1960s, and roads fit for vehicles, running water, government medical clinics, and electric power lines did not appear until the 1980s, when the price of coffee rose enough to subsidize large-scale local processing. At this point many people abandoned the cultivation of food crops and dedicated themselves to small-scale coffee production, and there was (at the time) a general increase in the standard of living, which brought with it an influx of consumer goods from the outside such as radios and televisions. The language of the new economy — as well as that of public schooling, health care, and the established church — was Spanish, and Totonac became the language of backwardness, ignorance, and poverty. As the influence of Spanish in the communities increased, Totonac became the domain of those too poor or marginalized to send their children to school or to participate as cultivators in the cash-crop economy.

Another factor that has come into play as access to and from the community has increased is the out-migration of young people to Mexico City and the United States. As the Upper Necaxa communities shifted away from subsistence farming to a cash-based economy, the need for hard currency to buy food, supplies, and consumer goods increased, and many people began to leave the area in search of paid work, particularly in the off-season between coffee harvests. This practice became more common as the price of coffee fell in the 1990s and many people lost their land or found themselves unable to pay off debts incurred in the shift over to coffee cultivation. The number of families abandoning the area on a permanent basis rose, and a large number of men began to migrate illegally to work in the United States. In Chicontla, it is estimated that there are 500 people (about 10% of the population) currently working in the U.S. The linguistic result of this out-migration is a large number of Totonac children raised as Spanish monolinguals in non-Totonac communities, as well as a generation of bilingual teens and young adults who leave the communities for extended periods of time and become Spanish-dominant. The practice of out-migration is also further incentive for parents who remain behind to abandon Totonac and teach their children Spanish, the language they will need to function in the outside world. As LCT, an 88-year-old male resident of Chicontla, explained, in the old days those who did not know Spanish could not leave the village to find work elsewhere:

Before, really, no one, you can’t imagine how many, didn’t speak Spanish, only Totonac, mm hm, but now, they can’t leave [the village], they didn’t go to Mexico City, they didn’t go, but now, a lot of people are going, a lot are going, mm hm,

because they went to school, they learned how one speaks, they know how to read, they've left. [LCT: 8/8/03]

PSM, a 46-year-old male resident of Patla, also emphasized how important it is for young people to learn Spanish so that they have the opportunity to find work wherever it is available:

Now, what they really need is to learn a little Spanish, yes, so that they know when they want to leave to work ... so that they know how to hold their own, when they arrive at a place where they only speak Spanish, so that they also know how to get by, chat or have a job and they know, they understand what is what, what is being said to them, because if they're only going to learn Totonac then I think that's not right, when they want to leave to work in a place where they don't speak any Totonac, then they're going to have problems. [PSM: 7/18/03]

The marginality of Totonac in the current economy, where the only way to make money is to leave and find work elsewhere, is echoed by JGAM who, when asked why more children do not speak Totonac, replied:

It's what I tell you, their fathers, their mothers didn't teach it to them, they didn't teach them to speak it because they think that it's not worth anything, why should I learn it, it's doesn't do anything for me. [JGAM: 7/19/03]

Although this may seem somewhat alien to linguists, whose bread-and-butter is language conceived of as an object with its own, inherent abstract value, the Totonac attitude to Totonac revealed by many of our consultants is a purely utilitarian one. The choice made by parents in the Upper Necaxa communities was seen by them as a purely practical decision, a choice between keeping their children in a world of backwardness, poverty, and exclusion, or helping them function in the language of the larger society and, hopefully, giving access to a wider world of opportunities. This is not to say that speakers are unaware that their language may have some more abstract, intangible value, but, as we shall see in the following section, these considerations seem to take a back seat, at least in the short term, to more worldly concerns.

## **2 Second thoughts?**

One of the paradoxes that characterizes many situations where a minority language is threatened by a majority language is what Sasse (1992) refers to as a “schizophrenic” attitude among speakers of the minority language in which “the retention of the [minority] language is valued positively for one reason, and negatively for another” (p. 14).<sup>4</sup> In the Upper Necaxa communities, for instance, parents tell us that they have deliberately chosen not to transmit their language to their own children, while at the same time they proclaim that it is part of their heritage and that it would be a shame if it were to be

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<sup>4</sup> The term “schizophrenic” is used by Sasse (1992) to describe the split attitudes that speech communities manifest towards their own language. We feel that this is an erroneous use of the term “schizophrenia”, which, as a mental illness, is unrelated to split personality disorders.

lost. A typical example is JGAM, who told us many times how proud he was of being able to speak Totonac — yet of all his children, only his son has limited proficiency in Totonac, and his daughters have no knowledge of the language at all. In another case, a bilingual (Totonac–Spanish) teacher in Chicontla, whose professional training is in the maintenance of indigenous languages in native communities and whose wife is also a fluent Totonac speaker, has raised his children entirely in Spanish. Jones (1996) observed a similar split attitude among the Breton speakers: those who used Breton the most were also the ones least supportive of its inclusion in the school curriculum. It seems that the prestige of the language and its socio-economic usefulness are overwhelmingly the predominant factors in determining its value to its speakers when making choices about language use and transmission, in spite of their awareness of the value of the language on a more intangible level. But if in the short term practical considerations seem to trump intangibles, in the long run the balance can shift as the true costs of linguistic suicide become manifest.

The real tragedy of language loss — and particularly of situations of linguistic suicide, where there is no overt coercion involved — is that its negative consequences are not immediately apparent to the speakers themselves until the process is in an advanced stage, often beyond the point of no return. Loss of identity, social disintegration, lack of cultural continuity between generations, and loss of traditional knowledge are only obvious when they are extreme, and they are often only obvious to those least in a position to be able to turn the process around. In the case of Upper Necaxa Totonac, there seems to be a growing awareness among the older speakers, those that raised their own children to be Spanish-dominant and are now confronted with a third generation of monolingual Spanish-speaking children, that they might have made a mistake by not making a stronger effort to transmit their language. A typical example is AVV:

I've spoken to [my children] in Spanish since they were small, that's why they barely know [Totonac]. No, I didn't like to speak to them in Totonac. But now I want them to know because ... I mean, I could have taught them when they were young, and now you see they don't like it, or maybe they want to speak it but they can't. Mm. And it seems that I did a bad thing not telling them to speak like that [in Totonac]. [AVV: 8/7/03]

Of AVV's children, the two oldest boys are in the United States, and two of the girls have moved to the city and one of these has married a Spanish-speaker. The three youngest children are still at home but speak only Spanish — of the eight children only the oldest girl, AMV, who married in Patla and has two young children, is able to speak the language. AMV's children speak Totonac, but they represent a small and dwindling group of simultaneously bilingual children. It seems unlikely that, if present trends continue, this generation of speakers will pass on the language to their own children.

Ironically, even though the decision to break the transmission of the language was a deliberate choice about something that was under the control of the speakers who made the decision, getting the language back is not. Those who decided to commit linguistic suicide are not the ones who are in a position to reverse it; their children, the current child-rearing generation, are — or would have been had they been given full command of the language by their parents. This puts the speakers of Upper Necaxa Totonac on a par with speakers of other languages that have been pushed unwillingly on to the road to ex-

inction. The net result of all paths to language endangerment is the same — the creation of a generation of children unable and/or unwilling to pass on their knowledge to subsequent generations. The more familiar situations are those in which this generation is created by force (as in the case of North American residential schools) or in which it is self-created (as in immigrant and certain minority language communities). Although linguistic suicide is a less familiar — or at least less written-about — situation, it is likely no less common on the world stage and is probably typical of many situations in which speakers of a minority language perceive, rightly or wrongly, that the shift to the dominant language is in the short-term best interests of the next generation.

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