Perspectives on Language Endangerment:
Zapotec Community Members Navigate the Future of their Language

Helen Margaret Felker
Haverford College
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ABSTRACT

Although the empirical process of language loss has been well documented through statistical analysis and population demographics, the personal narratives of the individuals who speak these dying languages are rarely taken into account. In order to learn more about the personal and emotional effects of language loss, nineteen members of the Zapotec community were interviewed with two simple questions: “What is happening to your language?” and “What does your language mean to you?” Older speakers, who have lived through fines and jail time for publicly speaking Zapotec, often struggle with the grief and loneliness of being among the last generation of fluent Zapotec speakers. Meanwhile, pervasive negative stereotypes that dismiss indigenous languages as antiquated or unnecessary continue to alienate younger speakers. These obstacles do not seem to diminish the deeply personal relationship that many interviewed Zapotec speakers maintain in regards to their language, however. Often referring to their language as a nurturing, anchoring presence in their lives, Zapotec is regarded by many speakers in this collection of interviews as a family inheritance: a treasure passed from parents or grandparents. In the face of a rapidly globalizing world, where hegemonic languages like Spanish or English dominate, remaining speakers struggle to document not only individual Zapotec words, but also the unique local knowledge these words often encode.

The process of documenting and preserving an endangered language often complicates the warm personal relationships many interviewees maintain with Zapotec. In particular, each speaker’s strong familial and personal ties the language provoke questions about the appropriate role of technology in language preservation. Should Zapotec be shared with global audiences through Youtube or Facebook, or should it remain spoken in the local Oaxacan communities where it originated? The role of non-Zapotec linguists and academics are intensely involved in this debate as well. Although linguists from outside of the community can bring with them access to resources, like talking dictionaries, that can broadcast Zapotec to wider audiences, the goals of academia are not always in accord with the wishes of the speaking community, particularly those members who value local autonomy over global accessibility. There are no easy answers for these debates. However, by embedding the interview of Zapotec community members directly into the text, this thesis seeks to allow Zapotec speakers the space to freely represent their own ideas with minimal academic bias. It is clear from this testimony that, in order to be most effective, all language preservation efforts must be led primarily by native speakers. While there is still much work to be done to ensure that the voices of speakers of endangered languages are heard, the insightful comments in these interviews give academic linguists a place to start working.
1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

This thesis is designed as a guide to a group of video interviews of Zapotec speakers: an attempt to give speakers of Zapotec an open forum to share their beliefs about the Zapotec language by explaining how their language has shaped their life experiences and self-identity. By allowing Zapotec community members to speak for themselves, it is hoped that academic linguists will be able to understand the unique challenges and goals of these speakers in order to develop more effective speaker-directed revitalization efforts. In each interview presented, Zapotec speakers have stressed the deep connection they feel with their language, describing it as a familial inheritance as well as one of the most formative aspects of their identities as Zapotec people. Because of this deep connection between language and cultural identity, many speakers struggle with feelings of grief and loss over the linguistic changes brought about by the encroachment of hegemonic languages like Spanish and English. The future of Zapotec in a more globalized, internet-dependent society is also a growing point of tension within Zapotec-speaking communities, as speakers struggle to decide whether a language associated with home, family, and personal identity should be standardized and disseminated online or shared with non-community members. The variety of opinions and personal experiences showcased in these interviews makes it impossible to draw any firm conclusions about the appropriate role for non-community members in the future of the Zapotec language. However, it is clear that any future academic or internet-based efforts for documentation and revitalization should be centered around the ideas and opinions of Zapotec speakers whenever possible in order to be most effective.
1.1 CLARIFICATION OF PERSONAL BIAS

It would be irresponsible not to make note of the fact that this document is written from an academic perspective, and as such, carries a strong bias toward the belief that academic linguists can be helpful in the struggle to document, preserve, and revitalize endangered languages. Despite this inherent bias, I have made a good faith effort to include perspectives from community members who do not believe that academia has a part to play in the future of their language. I have tried to base my analysis on quotes from Zapotec speakers whenever possible, and have spent lots of time trying to ensure that any translations of interviews are as accurate as they can be. All errors in interview translation or in the analysis of said interviews are entirely my own, and original quotes are included in full in the appendix. I understand that the scope of endangered language revitalization is far larger than what can be accommodated in this work, and can only hope that this analysis serves as a part of the ongoing discussion between linguists and the communities with whom they work.

1.2 ZAPOTEC LANGUAGE BACKGROUND

The state of Oaxaca, Mexico sits in one of the most linguistically diverse areas of the world: a “linguistic hotspot” with a long and complex history (Harrison 2010: 87). In fact, the state of Oaxaca alone is home to fourteen indigenous language families (Lewis et al. 2015). The Zapotec language family follows a VSO structure with a complex system of tonal contrast (Lewis et al. 2015). As shown in Figure 1, the Zapotec macrolanguage co-exists with several other diverse languages within the state of Oaxaca alone. Although the Zapotec macrolanguage boasts approximately 400,000 speakers in
total, there are an estimated sixty different Zapotec language variants in existence, meaning that many Zapotec communities in Oaxaca speaking their own Zapotec variant language (Lewis et al. 2015). This means that it is not uncommon for neighboring Zapotec communities to speak variants of Zapotec that are not mutually intelligible.

![Figure 1. A Linguistic Map of Oaxaca.](image)


Because this document draws on personal interviews given by Zapotec community members from many different communities throughout the state of Oaxaca, it is important to give some background about which Zapotec-speaking communities will be represented here. Of the nineteen individuals interviewed, thirteen individuals interviewed belonged to communities from Oaxaca’s Central Valley region, including the communities of Teotitlán del Valle, San Jerónimo Tlacochahuaya, San Lucas Quiavini, and Tlacolula de Matamoros. A map of these communities appears in Figure 2.
Figure 2. Google Maps Image of Part of Oaxaca’s Central Valley

Figure 3. Google Maps Image of San Pablo Macuiltianguis
The remaining six interviewees traced their heritage to the community of San Pablo Macuiltianguis in Oaxaca’s northern Sierra Juárez Mountains, shown in Figure 3. Each of these communities speak their own variant of Zapotec, although communities from the Central Valley spoke Zapotec variants with more regional similarities. Despite the different backgrounds of many of the individuals interviewed, everyone who participated shared feelings of pride and love regarding their home communities.

1.3 METHODOLOGY OF DATA COLLECTION

The crux of this thesis is a series of short video interviews collected over a period of two weeks in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. All interviews were filmed as a part of the NSF REU Linguistics Field School (P.I. K. David Harrison, Theodore Fernald, and Brook Danielle Lillehaugen, Site Grant #1461056): a five-week program funded through a grant by the National Science Foundation.\(^1\) During this program, a team of seven undergraduate students from colleges and universities all across the United States spent two weeks intensively preparing and studying Zapotec language, history, and culture, as well as training to be responsible and ethical field linguists. After this training, two weeks were spent in Oaxaca, Mexico working in collaboration with indigenous communities to help preserve and revitalize each community’s Zapotec language. During these two weeks in Oaxaca, all seven members of the undergraduate team worked together to record interview sessions of approximately two to ten minutes with any willing participant from a Zapotec-speaking community. Nineteen individuals who self-identified

\(^1\) Additional travel funding was provided through the Haverford College Office of the Provost’s Louis Green Fund
as Zapotec community members volunteered to be interviewed; of these, sixteen people were fluent speakers of Zapotec. Their testimonies have been edited into twenty-five separate interviews, each of which strives to answer the same basic questions: “What’s happening with your language?” and “What does Zapotec mean to you? How has it influenced your identity?” Over a period of six months, these interviews have been edited, translated with both English and Spanish subtitles, and posted on the Enduring Voices Youtube channel to be shared with the world².

Although all interviews were conducted in either Spanish or English, Zapotec-speaking interview participants were encouraged to answer interview questions in Zapotec if possible. It was also stressed that all participants were encouraged to answer interview questions in whatever language they felt most comfortable, whether Spanish, Zapotec, or English. Most interviewees who chose to answer the interview questions in Zapotec provided a brief Spanish translation afterward, although there were two interviewees who chose to answer in English. All interview quotes presented in this document have been translated into English, and any errors in these translations are entirely my own. The appendix contains a full list of all untranslated Spanish quotations that have been presented in English in the body of this text. In one interview, the interviewee chose to answer directly in Zapotec (without a provided Spanish/English translation); this interview is also included in the appendix and was translated from Zapotec with the invaluable help of Margarita Martinez. In addition, all interview quotes taken from a video interview are paired with the embedded video interview it quotes

² The plain text URL for the Enduring Voices Youtube channel is <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCmbtQpU9Hd-RtiDmdRbHoUw>
from, as well as active links in the accompanying in-text citation which lead directly to
the correct video. This was done in the hopes that readers will be able to watch these
video interviews in their entirety in order to gain a direct, more accurate connection with
the Zapotec speakers interviewed.

1.4 STATISTICS OF LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT

On March 31, 2015, the Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas (INALI 2015)
released a sobering publication claiming that 364 of Mexico’s indigenous language
variants are at risk of extinction (INALI 2015). According to the most recent census
data, Zapotec communities are unfortunately being affected by a gradual but steady loss
of speakers, especially when it comes to young speakers. In Mexico’s National Census of
2010, nearly 16 million Mexican citizens identified themselves as indigenous people
(INALI 2015). Of these 16 million, only 1 million people were considered to be
monolingual speakers of an indigenous language, while 7 million were fluent speakers of
both an indigenous language and Spanish (INALI 2015). This means that the remaining 8
million self-identified indigenous citizens of Mexico no longer considered themselves to
be speakers of an indigenous language at the time of this census (INALI 2015).

Statistics of Mexico’s younger population show that the amount of younger
speakers of indigenous languages, including Zapotec, is steadily dropping. In 2010,
16.4% of young adults ages 15-29 were considered to be speakers of an indigenous
language in the state of Oaxaca (Perfil sociodemográfico de jóvenes, INEGI). Even in
Oaxaca, a Mexican state with the second-highest population of indigenous people, this
number is a decrease from the 17.4% of young indigenous language speakers in the year
2000 (Perfil sociodemográfico de jóvenes, INEGI). On a national level, the number of
very young children who are unable to speak an indigenous language has been steadily increasing, as demands for more ‘global’ languages like English take precedence in both academic and home settings. In the year 2000, approximately 78,400,000 children in Mexico did not speak an indigenous language, but this number has increased to more than 93,200,000 children in the last ten years (Banco de Información, INEGI).

This precipitous decline in the number of indigenous language speakers is due to many factors, including increased rates of immigration. When 83% of the population of the state of Oaxaca has emigrated internationally at some point, it makes sense that international languages would have a high priority (Migración Internacional, INEGI). One factor that has unfortunately remained unchanged is the ubiquitous discrimination against speakers of indigenous or local languages. The roots of this institutionalized discrimination runs deep, as Spanish has been used a tool to unify Mexico as a nation since its conquest by Spain. There have been an uncountable number of legislative changes since that time, most of them regulating the use of indigenous languages in government and educational spheres. Most recently, la Ley de Derechos Lingüísticos [Law of Linguistic Rights], passed in 2003, gave nearly 60 distinct indigenous Mexican languages co-official status with Spanish as recognized national languages of Mexico, declaring indigenous languages to be “valid, equal to Spanish”\(^3\) (Ley de Derechos Lingüísticos). This legislative change has made some important steps forward, including the creation of the Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas, a government institution designed to “promote the strengthening, preservation, and development” of Mexico’s

\(^3\) Translation of: “válidas, al igual que el español”
indigenous languages (Ley de Derechos Lingüísticos). Since its establishment, INALI has been responsible for the design and implementation of a sociolinguistic census in order to determine which populations continue to use indigenous languages (Althoff 2006: 169). In addition, INALI has created an extensive catalogue of Mexico’s indigenous languages and continues to host academic workshops, including its upcoming “Taller de Tonos” (INALI 2015).

While the creation of a national institute for indigenous languages does offer increased funding and government support for language classes and educational materials, some scholars are wary of any government involvement in language revitalization efforts, believing that “even if the government bodies prove useful for acknowledging language policies and linguistic rights, in some cases they…generate[e] for example, circles of intellectual caciques (i.e. local power-wielding authorities) that monopolize linguistic capital” (Léonard et al. 2013). These are certainly valid concerns. Although the INALI has made contributions to scholarship on Mexico’s indigenous languages, it is inescapably a government entity located in Mexico’s capital city; it has the power to determine which indigenous language efforts receive funding and national recognition and which do not. In order to determine what effect, if any, la Ley de Derechos Lingüísticos and creation of the INALI had on the day-to-day experiences of indigenous language speakers and community members, interviewees were asked if they had ever experienced any kind of discrimination due to their language and if they felt that this discrimination continued into the present. Even without prompting from the interviewer, discrimination both past and present proved to be an important theme that

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4 Translation of: “promover el fortalecimiento, preservación y desarrollo”
appears again and again in nearly all interviews, playing an integral role in how speakers of Zapotec of all ages perceive themselves and their language use.

2.0 THE IMPACT OF LINGUISTIC DISCRIMINATION ON SELF-IMAGE

Manuela Pérez García was the oldest Zapotec speaker interviewed, at the age of eighty-four, with her daughter Virginia Pérez Martínez accompanying her. Manuela lived nearly all of her life in the community of San Pablo Macuiltianguis, a Zapotec-speaking community located high in the northern mountains of the Sierra Juárez. When Manuela was raising her family, Zapotec was widely spoken in the town. Nowadays, San Pablo Macuiltianguis has become a prime destination for eco-tourism: its gorgeous forests of redwood pine trees boast a ‘parque de retiro’ where Mexicans and foreigners alike can rent cabins. A large portion of the population from San Pablo have moved to Los Angeles, connecting what was once a relatively isolated location to a much broader global network. During her interview, Manuela reminisced about the way her town used to be when “everyone spoke our language” (6/8/15 transcript). Unfortunately, this is no longer the case, as Manuela lamented that:

\[ZAP\] wendi benne puru laxtilaba chi rnecaye arubi rnecaye rtisaguetu.
\[SPAN\] Muchas personas solo español ya hablan, no más nuestra lengua.
\[ENG\] Many people only speak Spanish now, not our language
(Pérez García 6/8/15 transcript #2)

She and Virginia talked fondly of the parties the town used to have, where everyone gathered together and told Zapotec stories, insults, and even jokes! (6/8/15 interview transcript). She also described the heavy punishments meted out by the town authorities for speaking Zapotec, which were especially harsh for teaching Zapotec to children.
Manuela explained, in Zapotec, how the town authorities would pass “house by house so that we wouldn’t speak our language, and so we would speak Spanish with our children” (6/8/15 transcript). It was decided by the municipal authorities that Zapotec-speaking children “wouldn’t learn…because they spoke only our language” and therefore would not be able to understand their Spanish-speaking teachers in school (6/8/15 interview transcript). Speaking Zapotec was viewed as a roadblock to learning Spanish and an obstacle to later academic and professional success. If parents refused to follow orders and were caught speaking Zapotec at home or in public with their children, the consequences could be severe:

[ZAP] Que ala gwetu tisa quetuna laancana latiana ichecayentu lisiya multana dhuatu abi ladiba, porqueni arubi arcalasicaye inetu rtisatu.
[SPAN] Porque si hablábamos nuestra lengua con los hijos, entonces nos meterían en la carcel, y nos multaban.
[ENG] Because if we would speak our language with our children, they would throw us in jail and fine us
(Pérez Garcia 6/8/15 transcript #2)

As Virgina pointed out, “it was there that Zapotec started to be lost” (6/8/15 transcript). In order to avoid punishment and help their children succeed in a school system where only Spanish was spoken, most families completely abandoned Zapotec. The consequences of trying to maintain a Zapotec identity for a high-achieving young student can be seen in the interview of Virginia’s husband, Filemon Pérez Ruiz.

Filemón is a highly intelligent man who went on to serve as a municipal leader of San Pablo Macuiltianguis. He can talk about any current event at length, loves history and politics, and absolutely lights up when talking about his beloved hometown. Zapotec was Filemón’s first language, and he shared in his interview how he was forced to learn Spanish in order to attend school at all:
I learned Spanish obligatorily in primary school, in first grade. It cost us kids a lot of work to understand what our teachers were saying to us. They spoke to us in Spanish. There was a time when we were punished for speaking Zapotec in the area around the primary school. They gave us a lot of different punishments so we wouldn’t speak Zapotec, and they succeeded in extinguishing it. (Pérez Ruiz 1:41-2:19)

The discrimination Filemón experienced at school was only compounded by the glaring absence of any indigenous languages in an officially recognized capacity when he was growing up. He explained that the government “In no way…recognized our own languages like Zapotec, Mixtec, or Nahuatl, on the national level” (Pérez Ruiz 1:08-1:28) which in turn “instilled the idea that if we speak, as they say, an indigenous language, that we are second-class citizens. That we’re not the same quality as the other Mexicans who just speak Spanish and nothing else” (Pérez Ruiz 2:20-2:50)

In different Zapotec communities and in younger generations, the effects of discrimination and language shaming still affect how people perceive of themselves as Zapotec speakers. Janet Chavez Santiago, for example, grew up in Teotitlan del Valle, a Zapotec-speaking community in Oaxaca’s Central Valley that is world renowned for its weaving traditions. Zapotec was Janet’s first language, but she also speaks Spanish, English, and French. Janet, too, blames discriminatory school polices as the main reason for the growing disuse of Zapotec in her community:

The fact that children and young people right now don’t want to, or aren’t, speaking Zapotec comes from, well, has its beginnings many years ago in primary schools. It was forbidden to speak Zapotec there because it was considered disrespectful to the teachers. In fact, there were contracts that all parents had to sign accepting…one of the clauses that said that it was prohibited to speak Zapotec in school because the child who spoke Zapotec could be saying something against the teacher, being disrespectful. So it was very, very forbidden. In time, the parents, in order to avoid scoldings for their children or to avoid the punishments that were imposed [for speaking Zapotec] started to speak to them in Spanish so it would be easier for them in school (Chávez Santiago 0:35-2:10)
Nowadays, schools in Teotitlan no longer force parents to sign any anti-Zapotec contracts in order for their children to attend school, largely because such contracts would be ridiculous: barely any children in town speak Zapotec fluently anymore, so there is no longer any cause for concern (Chávez Santiago 2:19).

Despite the fact that the widespread educational discrimination suffered by many adult Zapotec speakers has become more rare, stereotypes about speakers of local or indigenous languages still persist. People who demonstrate obvious ties to indigenous communities are often considered to be less educated, from lower-resource backgrounds, and generally less modern and forward-thinking (Chávez Santiago 2:51-3:25). Often, openly speaking a language like Zapotec or Nahuatl in public places, particularly areas of government and social services, can put one in a distinctly disadvantageous position. Janet explains that:

In public spaces inside the city sometimes you feel…they won’t say it to your face, but there’s this tension. You feel the looks…it’s like a tension that because I speak [a local] language, they might not let me into this public place. In medical spaces, in social spaces, in public services, this tension is also there, that because I speak an indigenous language they think that I don’t know or that I’m not involved in things, or that I deserve different treatment (Chávez Santiago 3:55-4:51).

This troubling stereotype, portraying speakers of indigenous languages as uneducated or antiquated, is bolstered by the false assumption that languages like Zapotec are not really languages at all, but are hackneyed, ungrammatical forms of Spanish. In daily life, many speakers of Spanish as well as some indigenous individuals, refer to languages like Zapotec or Nahuatl as “dialects.” The pervasive disdain and mockery of bilingual speakers of indigenous languages was brought to front page more recently when Lorenzo Córdova, chairman of Mexico’s Instituto Nacional Electoral (INE), was recorded during
a phone call to a friend after a meeting with parents of the 43 disappeared students from Ayotzinapa and their community leaders (Cabrera 24 Horas). During the phone call, Córdova laughed with his friend over the grammatically incorrect Spanish spoken by the leader of the Chichimeca tribe in particular, imitating Chief Mauricio Mata Soria’s accent and manner of speaking at length (Cabrera 24 Horas). Although Córdova’s disrespect of indigenous communities was condemned in the media, the fact remains that such blatant mockery is seen in other mediums as well, including the internet.

The callousness and cruelty of this government official appears in another widespread internet meme, called “Jajatl.” This meme uses pictures of people in traditional indigenous clothing and emblazons mock Nahuatl words on their images. The “Nahuatl” used in this meme is nothing more than colloquial Spanish with the addition of the letters “tl” at the end of every phrase. As explained in her recent opinion piece Jajatl: Es para reírse? Yásnaya Aguilar (@yasnayae) uses the image in Figure 4 as an example of one of the most deeply offensive iterations of this meme:
The image used here was actually taken during the trial of the Guatemalan dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, while on trial for human rights violations due to the widespread “massacres, torture, and rapes” perpetrated by Guatemalan army against under his orders (Aguilar 2015). The women pictured were witnesses (and potentially victims themselves) wearing headphones so that they could understand the Spanish spoken during the trial (Aguilar 2015). The text of this meme, which reads “This cumbia is good!” is written in informal Spanish (as evidenced by the use of the abbreviated “‘Ta” in place of “Está”) which is then turned into faux Nahuatl with the addition of “tl”. The fact that the women pictured here are of the Ixil community in Guatemala and would probably have no knowledge of Nahuatl seems to not have mattered to the creators of this meme, clearly broadcasting a message that all indigenous cultures are essentially the same. The idea that one can turn informal or slang Spanish into an indigenous language with just the addition of two simple letters is a very strong indication of the widespread societal belief that indigenous languages are not languages at all, just sloppy Spanish. With pervasive and damaging language attitudes such as these, it’s no wonder why many younger people are choosing to no longer speak indigenous languages.

3.0 LANGUAGE AS PERSONAL IDENTITY

The fact that many people decide to persevere, speaking their Zapotec language proudly in the face of such hostile and difficult circumstances, is a testament to a deep emotional connection and sense of identity that the language holds for them. Moisés García Guzmán is someone with a deep understanding of how his Zapotec language has
affected his own self-image. Moisés is highly educated, having graduated from business school in Oaxaca before moving with his family to California in the year 2000 (García Guzmán 2:25). While in California, Moisés worked as an English-Spanish translator, speaking Zapotec at home with his family (García Guzmán 2:30). Although Moisés seems to have enjoyed his time in California, he remarked in his interview that being away from home dramatically changed his view over the importance of Zapotec for him:

“Being there [in the US] that’s where the interest started, because in my view, being away from your town, from your state, that’s when you really turn back…that’s when we realized how important [our language] is, because it’s part of our identity.” (García Guzmán 2:45)

Reminiscing about his time growing in the town of San Jerónimo Tlacochahuaya, Moisés also remarked on how powerful it was to speak a language so strongly tied to his town of origin. To prove his point, he explained that Zapotec can function partially as a “way to distinguish ourselves from other people in the same valley [of Oaxaca]” (García Guzmán 3:25). At the market in Tlacolula, which draws shoppers from many surrounding Zapotec communities, Moisés commented that “you hear some expressions, you hear some tones, you hear some variants, and you automatically distinguish” a person’s town of origin within the Central Valley (García Guzmán 3:25). This strong connection between spoken language and one’s place of origin is not as present on such an individual scale in languages like Spanish or English. Moisés’ mother, Angélica Guzmán Martínez, also grew up in the town of San Jerónimo Tlacochahuaya and seems to regard her Zapotec language as something of a natural consequence of growing up in the town, almost like an inheritance given by her community. She explained in her interview that: “I was born in this town, and that’s why, since I was a girl, I learned Zapotec here in Tlacochahuaya”
(Guzmán Martínez 0:20). She made sure to teach Moisés Zapotec because, she reasons: “I wanted him to be a Zapotec person...like we are” (Guzmán Martínez 0:32).

Using language as such a strong tie of personal and communal identity falls in line with David Corson’s idea of language as a shared cultural value. Moisés and his family are perfect examples of how language use can be “cherish[ed] for its own sake, or perhaps cherish[ed] instrumentally that is essential to the maintenance of the group” (Corson, quoted in Gianonni 2014). In this case, Zapotec is used to bind together not only one particular family, but also an entire community. It is not surprising, then, that transmission of Zapotec from parent to child seems to be the norm, “something you learned at home with parents, with grandparents” (Chávez Santiago 5:19). In this sense, Zapotec is very much a family inheritance, a patrimony tied strongly to conceptions of family and home and therefore, to a deeper sense of self.

It seems that for many Zapotec speakers, their language is a living entity, one which encodes collective history as a people as well as a uniquely Zapotec way of seeing the world. María Mercedes Méndez Morales, a highly respected teacher and community member also from the town of Tlacochahuaya, summarized this view when she said: “Thanks to our language, our communities have done a lot. We need to see how they made their traditional medicines, the traditional foods...that they used, that we, because of the influence of all these different cultures, have lost” (Méndez Morales 1:08-1:29). Clearly, María Mercedes views her language as a powerful codex for cultural practices that are simply not translatable into Spanish or English, practices which could easily be lost if the language falls into further disuse. For María Mercedes, her language encodes a specific worldview that includes food, community history, family ties, and even
medicinal practices, all of which add together to create a unique cultural heritage, one which she describes as “the most beautiful treasure that we could ever desire” (Méndez Morales 2:54). Her life mission is to preserve “my own [culture]” by teaching Zapotec classes to the children in her town so that “my countrymen, my people, know about this [culture]” and can reclaim it for themselves (Méndez Morales 1:41).

4.0 MOURNING AND LOSS

It is clear that all of the Zapotec speakers interviewed identify to some extent with María Mercedes’ description of Zapotec as a personal and cultural treasure; losing the Zapotec language would also entail a certain loss of one’s family history and cultural identity. Mrs. Guzmán Martínez, for example, warns parents in her town “that they should pass [the Zapotec language] on to their children so that they don’t forget the origin we have, of a Zapotec community” (Guzmán Martínez 0:45). Unfortunately, many historically Zapotec towns have already begun to lose the few remaining Zapotec speakers in their communities, creating new generations of children who have little to no contact with the language or the community history it encodes. Josefina Antonio Ruiz is one of the few remaining Zapotec speakers in the town of Tlacolula de Matamoros. During her interview, she remarked that when she was younger, she was able to speak Zapotec with her mother and father, as well as many other friends and neighbors in the community (Antonio Ruiz 3:09). She was absolutely thrilled to be able to speak Zapotec to an interested audience during her interview, saying that she usually had nobody to speak her language with in daily life (Antonio Ruiz 3:06). Her daughters had no interest in learning the language when they were growing up, and now Josefina admits that even she is beginning to forget Zapotec through lack of use (Antonio Ruiz 3:23). Although
there are individuals in the town of Tlacolula who are working to create spaces where
Zapotec can be taught to younger speakers, it is impossible to ignore the fact that
Tlacolula’s Zapotec language is in dire straits. Even in Zapotec communities with a larger
percentage of fluent speakers, the lack of young speakers as well as the encroachment of
Spanish and English is dramatically changing the linguistic landscape of Oaxaca.

Josefina’s loneliness and grief as well as Filemón’s righteous anger all fit into a
larger pattern. Dr. K. David Harrison writes that “speakers react differently to loss—from
indifference to despair—and adopt different strategies. Some blame governments or
globalization, others blame themselves” (Harrison 2010:11). These feelings of grief and
mourning are compounded by the knowledge that the disappearance of Zapotec does not
just mean the loss of one system of communication but rather the loss of entire systems of
knowledge. As Harrison notes in The Last Speakers:

Packaged in ways that resist direct translation, this knowledge dissipates when
people shift to speaking global tongues. What the Kallawaya of Bolivia know
about medicinal plants, how the Yupik of Alaska name 99 different sea ice
formations, how the Tofa of Siberia classify reindeer—entire domains of ancient
knowledge, only scantily documented, are rapidly eroding (Harrison 2010: 10)

Zapotec speakers are watching the process of this “erosion” in real time. The loss of
“traditional medicines…[and] traditional foods…that they used” in the past (Méndez
Morales 1:08-1:29) are not the only ideas being forgotten. Elizabeth Sánchez González,
Sheriff of Tlacolula de Matamoros, remarked that “there are things that exist in Zapotec
that you can’t translate into Spanish,” (Sánchez González 5:33). Many of these purely
Zapotec concepts have “a lot to do with jokes, with community life” and even with the
expression of emotional states or family ties (Sánchez González 5:28). It is clear that as

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older speakers like Josefina become more and more rare, younger community members lose access to original Zapotec words describing these innately Zapotec ideas.

Many of the efforts by native Zapotec speakers and linguists to counteract the disappearance of this linguistically-bound knowledge are focused on the documentation of those Zapotec words that are rapidly being replaced by Spanish borrowings. Dr. Felipe H. Lopez first noticed this phenomenon taking place in his own community of San Lucas Quiavini while he was studying for his doctorate in California. He remarked in his interview that “just by speaking to other people in the States and by going back to my village I realized that the language was slowly disappearing” as original Zapotec words became replaced or mixed up “with more Spanish words” (Lopez 0:39-1:05). Realizing this change in the Zapotec he had spoken as a child was the wake-up call Dr. Lopez needed to “do something” about language preservation (Lopez 1:05). His preoccupation that borrowed Spanish words are gradually erasing older, and supposedly purer Zapotec is reiterated again and again by many different speakers, including María Mercedes, who claims that nearly 50% of the Zapotec spoken by young people in her community is not real Zapotec but rather “zapotecización [zapotecization]” (Méndez Morales 0:52).

Drawing this distinctive boundary between “real” Zapotec and “Zapotec-ified” Spanish borrow words is a tricky business. From a purely linguistic point of view, the process of the “zapotecización” often requires the addition of vowel tonality as well as the removal of unstressed syllables from each Spanish loan word before it becomes acceptable as part of a Zapotec lexicon. Instead of using the older Zapotec word beu to describe a turtle, for example, young speakers in San Lucas Quiavini might take the Spanish word tortuga and change it into tortuug (Lopez 8:00). From a dispassionate
scientific standpoint, this process of incorporating Spanish words into Zapotec is an example of language change. Furthermore, separating words that have been newly-created from pre-existing Spanish from words that are considered to be more “purely” Zapotec seems to be based on prescriptivist ideas that are closed off to the more global reality of younger Zapotec community members. Despite these theoretical objections, it makes perfect sense that the introduction of more and more Spanish words into Zapotec vocabulary has sparked a push to document and preserve Zapotec as much as possible, and by doing so, preserve not only the words themselves but also the valuable knowledge they encode. The means and goals of this increased documentation, as well as who should be involved with these efforts, however, remain up for debate.

5.0 WHAT SHOULD LINGUISTS DO?

As previously mentioned, the fact that this corpus of interviews was recorded by a collective of linguists makes it impossible to completely avoid any bias toward the belief that trained linguists do have a role to play in endangered language preservation and revitalization. The NSF REU Linguistics Field School was committed to cooperating with Zapotec speakers in a community-based approach to documentation. Ewa Czaykowska-Higgins defines community-based linguistic fieldwork as that which “involves a collaborative relationship, a partnership, between researchers and (members of) the community within which the research takes place” (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009: 24). She continues to stipulate that:

In its fullest form, Community-Based Language Research involves training members of the language-using community to do the research themselves…[with] the aim of making redundant the presence in the community of academic linguists who are not from the community (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009: 25)
Following this philosophy, a large portion of the NSF REU Linguistics Field School was devoted to working with the speakers of Teotitlán del Valle and San Jerónimo Tlacochahuaya to create and maintain online, Zapotec talking dictionaries. These online, talking dictionaries are dependent on the effort and interest of native Zapotec speakers, who can record themselves saying words and then upload these audio files of their own voices onto an online dictionary. These Zapotec words (with their accompanying audio files) are translated into English and Spanish, with accompanying photos to further illustrate the context in which these words are used. Because of the interest of several community members in the town of Teotitlán del Valle, one of the primary goals of the NSF REU Linguistics Field School was to host an interactive workshop in the main plaza of Teotitlán to teach people how to add their own words to the online dictionary, thereby setting the groundwork to make our own presence as academic linguists eventually obsolete. We set up our laptops under a pop-up tent to show any interested person how these online dictionaries worked, recording new words on handheld recorders to upload to the website whenever possible. We planned to make the dictionary a more crowd-sourced project through a new Android app, in which speakers could record words on their cellphones and then immediately upload these words and pictures onto the dictionary themselves.

6.0 LIMITATIONS OF ACADEMIA

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5 There are currently Zapotec Talking Dictionaries available for the communities of Tlacolula de Matamoros, Tlacolula Valley, San Lucas Quiavini, Teotitlán del Valle, and San Jerónimo Tlacochahuaya. This thesis focuses on San Lucas Quiavini, Teotitlán del Valle, and San Jerónimo Tlacochahuaya’s dictionaries. These dictionaries can be accessed at <www.talkingdictionary.swarthmore.edu/zapotecs>
Despite our attempts to make Zapotec words more accessible online, it immediately became clear to us that not everyone believes that technology is the most appropriate way to revitalize Zapotec. Adrián Montaño approached our tent and told us in no uncertain terms that we were “wasting our time.” The only way to save Zapotec, he argued, would be for Zapotec people to start speaking it again in their homes. Instead of making new online dictionaries, it would be far more useful to spend our time asking Zapotec people why they no longer choose to speak the language. Although I do not believe it would necessarily be appropriate for a non-community member to interrogate Zapotec speakers on their personal language choices, Mr. Montaño’s criticism was very valid, and needs to be taken into account. Of course, any efforts to preserve or revitalize Zapotec will be completely wasted if speakers are not the driving force behind every step. Mr. Montaño was generous enough to grant us an interview in which he explained personal conceptualization of his language:

“This ancient language of our ancestors asks that we never, ever lose it. I don’t agree that it should be lost because it is a culture from before the Spanish came…maybe they destroyed part of us but not all, so because of that it [Zapotec] should never be lost” (Montaño 1:05-1:21)

This description of Zapotec as an ancestral inheritance seems central to Mr. Montaño’s argument, but what is especially interesting is the fact that for Mr. Montaño, continuing to speak Zapotec is clearly a very defiant, politically charged act. Not only does speaking Zapotec honor his ancestors, it validates and continues to fight back against centuries of repression by the Spanish. In the context of Zapotec as a familial and ancestral inheritance, it makes complete sense why non-community should have little to no place in this language’s preservation or revitalization efforts. Mr. Montaño is certainly not the only person who believes that Zapotec, as an ancestral inheritance, should remain...
primarily within the communities who claim it as their own. Despite the fact that resources like the internet are becoming more and more accessible in communities like Teotitlán del Valle, it is true that more academic means of preserving Zapotec are not always entirely useful to the people who speak this language on a daily basis. Dr. Felipe Lopez spent nine years collaborating with Dr. Pamela Munro at UCLA (Munro, Lopez, et al. 1999), creating a very thorough dictionary of the Zapotec language from his hometown of San Lucas Quiaviní (Lillehaugen et al. 2013). After presenting the finished dictionary to his home community in San Lucas, however, Dr. Lopez became disillusioned by the gap that existed between the goals of academic preservation and the lives of the community members he wants to serve:

“To some extent I was kind of disappointed in academia…because yes, that’s a good thing that we published the dictionary, but how did that impact the community? Because the first time we presented the dictionary to the people, to the community…they looked at it and said “What is it?” (Lopez 5:04)

This disillusionment continued for Dr. Lopez after he began teaching a Zapotec class to undergraduate students at the University of California San Diego (Lopez 3:00). Although teaching Zapotec to a university class was a noble and important pursuit, Dr. Lopez knew that these efforts ultimately “had nothing to do with the population that actually needed the language” (Lopez 3:40). Now, Dr. Lopez plans to help teach a Zapotec program at the high school level in Tlacolula de Matamoros, relatively close to his hometown of San Lucas Quiaviní. This new program, created “in order for Zapotec to be retained” at the local level was made entirely by and for community members, which is why Dr. Lopez believes it will be “one of the programs that’s going to have the most impact” (Lopez 3:35). While programs such as this are clearly the most effective in that they are
completely driven by only community members and their needs, is it possible for linguists and other non-community members to play a role?

7.0 EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY-LED FIELDWORK

Establishing the goals of the community and how they envision Zapotec being used in the future is central to establishing the future of academic linguists in language revitalization. For Adrián Montaño, the ultimate goal of Zapotec revitalization seems to be seeing Zapotec spoken again in the homes and communities to which it belongs. This larger vision of Zapotec as an ancestral treasure, one whose primary beauty and function is intimately connected to the land and the Zapotec people, is reiterated by many other speakers. For Moisés García Guzmán, the ultimate goal of any revitalization efforts are “if not to have Zapotec as the official language of town...[at least to] restore its use in local ceremonies” and traditional ceremonial protocols (García Guzmán 9:20). Moisés’ primary fear is that his language is “not being used enough in the proper context” (García Guzmán 2:35), leading to a gradual disappearance. The advent of a more globalized, technology-driven society, as well as the growing trend of migration to the United States from Moisés’ hometown of Tlacochuaya, has led to a necessary re-evaluation of what the “the proper context” for Zapotec really is. Moisés himself admits that his interest in language preservation and revitalization did not begin in earnest until after he had moved from Oaxaca to California in the year 2000 (García Guzmán 2:45). Being away from his hometown, where he was no longer surrounded by Zapotec, forced Moisés to realize how valuable the language was to his sense of identity despite his change of residence. “Even though we are dispersed in the States,” he explains, “we are one as a culture so we need to instill that sense of identity” (García Guzmán 8:20).
With a good friend, Moisés decided to start seriously preserving and teaching his language through a series of Youtube videos. He maintains that at the beginning of his efforts “the most important challenge we faced was the logistic challenge: where do we have a classroom, where do we have equipment? How do we start this project?” (García Guzmán 1:49). Regardless of his lack of formal training in linguistics and no real classroom supplies, Moisés brilliantly devised his own writing system to represent the different vowel tones of his Zapotec language and, using a small whiteboard and dry-erase markers, he recorded a series of short video lessons teaching about pronouns, colors, animal names, and basic greetings. He was thrilled by the results:

They [the video lessons] immediately made an impact because people were writing to us: ‘what a great idea that you have! We wanted something like this [a] very long time ago, very good that you’ve started doing it!’ Now we have messages from people in Mexico City, in Yucatan, in New York and Chicago, people from Tlacochahuaya… (García Guzmán 5:48-6:10)

Despite the success of videos, Moisés was convinced that “Where we really, really need the efforts is in the town itself, in Tlacochahuaya” (García Guzmán 4:45). Moisés continues to create new didactic videos on his Youtube channel, but he has since moved back to Oaxaca from California. His new goal is to start a Zapotec program in his hometown of Tlacochahuaya that would “work directly either with elementary school or kindergarten, because those are the early stages where we think it is the most important to instill in children an interest in their language and also to build that sense of identity as Zapotec” (García Guzmán 8:20).

While it is true that linguists from outside the Zapotec community may not be as deeply familiar with the traditional use of Zapotec in its “proper context”, Moisés

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6 These videos can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwX6_C4eCkc>
maintains that there is a place for linguists in the revitalization efforts of Zapotec. “As specialists in linguistics, you are the ones who are giving us the tools on how to revive this language,” he explains “but all the efforts to revive it also has to come from speakers themselves” (García Guzmán 2:12). Moisés himself has fully embraced the help of linguists like Dr. Brook Danielle Lillehaugen in order to create new platforms in which to preserve and share Zapotec in a more modern, geographically widespread Zapotec community. He is a co-author of an online dictionary for his town (Lillehaugen, Guzmán, et al. 2013), and worked extensively with the NSF REU Linguistics Field School in documenting the Zapotec names of local plants and geographic landmarks. He is a primary example of what can be possible through a community-based method of linguistic fieldwork, where linguists are only present in order to facilitate community goals.

There is no shortage of Zapotec community members who have designed successful language revitalization programs using the work of linguists as a support system. Janet Chávez Santiago is a trailblazer in this respect. In her hometown of Teotitlán del Valle, “there was never a written tradition” of the Zapotec language, or at least not one that was ever “standardized in function or practice” (Chávez Santiago 5:30-6:00). Janet explained that growing up without any written resources made by and for Zapotec speakers was isolating and “disappointing sometimes” as she and her fellow community members were unable to “find a book or find information ourselves written in the language that we know from our parents, from our grandparents, to consult” (Chávez Santiago 6:00-7:00). As an adult, Janet has collaborated extensively with Dr. Troi Carleton, a professor of linguistics at San Francisco State University, to change this. Dr.
Carleton has worked with speakers in Teotitlán to create a standard orthography for Zapotec, an orthography that Janet uses in her online dictionary for Teotitlán del Valle (Lillehaugen and Chávez Santiago, et al. 2015). Janet has used this orthography to create a curriculum to teach Zapotec as a second language. Her class, run through La Biblioteca de Investigación Fray Juan de Córdova, has attracted a large group of diverse students who are interested learning more about the language. Although some of these students “don’t have a family ancestor or any strong closeness with the language” (Chávez Santiago 0:49) and are taking the class merely to broaden their intellectual horizons, Janet says that “the majority of my students are from here, in the city, and their parents or grandparents were from a town where they spoke Zapotec” (Chávez Santiago 0:16-0:20). For most of these students with Zapotec heritage, their family left their community of origin “for economic or family issues…and now they don’t speak Zapotec anymore” (Chávez Santiago 0:20-0:30).

Aside from the workbooks teaching vocabulary and grammar, Janet spends hours creating lesson plans that encourage her students to engage with the real people who live in local communities like Teotitlán del Valle. Her lessons are often interspersed with explanations of traditional town holidays and rites of passage, like weddings and baptisms, as well as anecdotes about daily life in Teotitlán. The culminating event of the course is a field trip to Teotitlán on a Sunday, the main market day. Students are introduced to Janet’s friends and neighbors, and are able to practice the Zapotec greetings and sentences they have learned with native speakers. Additionally, seeing the bustling activity of Teotitlán’s marketplace not only puts Zapotec vocabulary words into real life context and demonstrates that local indigenous communities are very much alive and
thriving in modern Oaxaca. The importance of taking Zapotec into a real-life context cannot be overstated, as a large portion of Janet’s work in her Zapotec class is dedicated to working against harmful stereotypes of indigenous languages and the people who speak them. “It has happened to me,” Janet explained, “where I’ve had students who, at the beginning of the class, still have this wrong idea that a local language, an indigenous language, is a dialect and not a language” (Chávez Santiago 1:26). This makes Janet’s teaching “like a two-part job, because they’re learning about the language and they’re learning part of the culture…and at the same time, you have to educate them…about the valorization” (Chávez Santiago 1:50-2:11). It is clear that Janet’s classes teach more than vocabulary and grammar, instead, they are in and of themselves an important act of social justice. By making her students aware of the rich and complicated lives of Zapotec speakers, Janet believes she is helping people to really see and understand the beauty and complexity of indigenous cultures and communities:

Many people think ‘Why would I learn Zapotec if I can only speak it in certain towns in the state of Oaxaca?’ It’s not like English or some other language where you can speak it in many different countries and in different places. But it’s just that! It’s teaching people that, here in Oaxaca, you walk here to the city center or you go to the market and you hear different languages. And it’s so beautiful to suddenly be able to understand!...The most beautiful experiences I’ve had with my students, the most motivating, is to open their eyes to the world around them right here in Oaxaca (Chávez Santiago 3:12-3:57)

Janet’s self-directed efforts to teach the value of her language and culture are bolstered by the work of linguists. In addition to the orthographic system created by Dr. Carleton, Janet is a co-author of an online dictionary for her community. She encourages the students in her classes to explore her online dictionary as a way to practice the correct pronunciation of new Zapotec words. In the future, Janet hopes “to help others with creating teaching materials or maybe even give trainings…and include other languages in
the program” (Chávez Santiago 5:02-5:15). Because of Janet’s incredible work and dedication, she has been able to use the work of linguists to lay the groundwork for a future where the people of Oaxaca City “can get closer to these communities…and to these speakers through the language they speak” (Chávez Santiago 5:15-5:33).

8.0 CONCLUSION

Although the obstacles facing speakers of Zapotec continue to be daunting, the admirable and largely self-directed work of these community members in the preservation, documentation, and revitalization of their language is exemplary. While the challenges of speaking an endangered language in an increasingly globalized society will not disappear any time soon, academic linguists are capable of lending a hand in the effort to preserve endangered languages if we first listen to the goals of the speaking community through community-led fieldwork. The determination, drive, and resilience showcased by the individuals interviewed here proves that “positive attitudes are the single most powerful force keeping languages alive” (Harrison 2010: 11).
9.0 APPENDIX

Conversation between Manuela and Viriginia, English translation pg. 9-10, From Transcript #1 6/8/15
(Translations by Margarita Martínez)

**Vicky:** [ZAP] *Atiana labi abitetaga ruluana que inacaye bedhia rualu bitu inelu, rtisariu porque adicata rnekaye rtisariu.*

[SPAN] Entonces, no nos callaban la boca cuando hablabamos zapoteco porque en aquel entonces se hablaba más nuestra lengua.

[ENG] We never shut up when we were speaking Zapotec because back then, we spoke our language more

**Manuela:** [ZAP] *Adirula rtisariuba tana*

[SPAN] Sí, todos hablaba en nuestro idioma

[ENG] Yes, everyone spoke in our language.

**Vicky:** [ZAP] *Peru, gulani tu saa, retaavariu ineriu rtisariu.*

[SPAN] Pero, llegó un día nos avergonzamos en hablar nuestro idioma

[ENG] But, there came a day when we were ashamed to speak our language.

**Manuela:** Oh, oh

[SPAN] (indica que sí)

[ENG] (indicates yes)

**Vicky:** [ZAP] *Arubi arcalariu ineriu tuchu racua tu tutea na racwa que risacaina, que abi arcalacani ca benne rulua que abi arcalasi ca benne rulua que interiu rtisariu.*

[SPAN] Como usted decía, en aquellos tiempos, las personas que nos enseñaban en la escuela se molestaban que hablaramos nuestro lengua.

[ENG] As you said, in those times, the people who taught us in school got annoyed when we spoke our language.

**Manuela:** [ZAP] *Oh, oh. Porque abi ridete ca untosa ría escuela labi ridedecana porque ni puru rtisariu rnekana na. Abi ririlincaina como ca maestru naacaye benne lee yesiaba ucuacayena atia eyacayecana que biu inecana rtisa quetu na.*
(Sí). Porque no aprendían los niños que iban a la escuela porque hablaban únicamente nuestra lengua.

Yes. Because the kids who went to school wouldn’t learn because they spoke only our language.

Como nos escuchaban, como al fin en la casa era la lengua que los padres hablaban con los niños. Por eso, el pueblo habló con la autoridad municipal que tenían que hablar con los padres de familia para que no hablan nuestra lengua.

As they had heard us, because at the end of it [Zapotec] was the language that parents spoke with the children. Because of this, the town spoke with the municipal authorities who had to go speak with the parents of the family so that our language wouldn’t be spoken.

Porque si hablábamos nuestra lengua con los hijos, entonces nos meterían en la carcel, y nos multaban.

Because if we were speaking our language with the children, they would throw us in jail and fine us.

Muchas personas solo español ya hablan, no más nuestra lengua.

Many people only speak Spanish now, not our language.

Mucho, porque cuando no había entrada la escuela secundaria, cambiaron [referring to laws about Zapotec]

A lot, because when she had not entered secondary school they changed [referring to laws about Zapotec]

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A lot, because when she had not entered secondary school they changed [referring to laws about Zapotec]

Porque si hablábamos nuestra lengua con los hijos, entonces nos meterían en la carcel, y nos multaban.

Because if we were speaking our language with the children, they would throw us in jail and fine us.

Many people only speak Spanish now, not our language.
and so that we would speak Spanish with our children so that they couldn’t speak our language anymore because

abi ririali anana labi gwadetecana lastila atiana pues scanque gunacaye que intu

no se entendía así no iban aprender español entonces porque si ellos nos escuchaban que nosotros

it wouldn’t be understood. They wouldn’t be able to understand Spanish that way if they listened to us because

tzeetu gwetisa que tu laancana, atiana guduanqueyentu multa.

estuvieramos hablando nuestra lengua con ellos entonces nos multaban.

we were speaking our language with them, so they fined us

Yo aprendí el español obligadamente en la escuela primaria en el primer año. Nos costaba trabajo a los niños pues entender lo que los maestros decían porque ellos no hablaban en español. Entonces…y nosotros…llegó un momento en que nos castigaban porque nosotros hablábamos nuestra lengua en el área de la escuela primaria. Entonces, nos ponían varios castigos para que nosotros no habláramos el zapoteco, y lograron pues en extinguiendo el zapoteco”

El método que nos han enseñado es solamente para hablar español y de ninguna manera nos han reconocido para hablar nuestras lenguas como el zapoteco, y el mixteco, el nahuatl en la nivel nacional. Entonces, éso ha debido pues que mi pueblo ya no se habla el zapoteco.

Y por otro lado, digamos, la cultura que tenemos del español se ha debido de que ellos…nos han infundido la idea de que si nosotros hablamos una lengua como le dicen…lengua indígena somo ciudadanos de segunda, que no somos la calidad de mexicanos como el resto que nada más hablan el español

“esta lengua milenaria de nuestros antepasados nos pedía de perder nunca, nunca. No estoy de acuerdo que se pierda porque es una cultura antes de los españoles llegaron…quizás nos destruyeron parte pero no todo, entonces a lo cual no se debe de perder nunca.”

Adrían Montaño quotes a poem written by Zapotec poet from the Isthmus: “Aye Zapoteco, zapoteco, sé que tú morirás pero morirás hasta cuando el sol muerá” de Gabriel Chiñas, poeta juchiteco.

Muchos de esos esfuerzos van a tener que venir de los hablantes, tienen que ser la iniciativa de los hablantes. Ustedes como especialistas en las lenguas nos dan muchos recursos a nuestro alcance, y eso es muy bueno, pero las iniciativas mas
formales para re-establecer la lengua deben venir de los hablantes…para rescatar este rasgo de identidad cultural nuestra como zapotecos.  
(All of Moisés’ other interviews were given in English)

Janet Chávez Santiago, English translations on pg 15.  
(0:39-2:14, video Parte 1) El hecho de que los niños y los jóvenes en la actualidad ya no quieran o ya no estén hablando zapoteco se van…bueno podemos tener antecedentes de hace ya varios años que, en la escuela primaria. Era prohibido hablar zapoteco porque se consideraba como una falta de respeto a los maestros, y de hecho se hacían estas cláusulas que los padres de la familia tenían que firmar como aceptando…una de las cláusulas que decía que era prohibido hablar zapoteco por esta situación de que…se consideraba como que…el niño que hablará zapoteco podría estar diciendo algo en contra al maestro, faltando el respeto. Entonces era muy, muy prohibido. Con el tiempo, pues los papás, para evitar los regaños a sus hijos o para evitar los castigos que se imponían, ya empezaban hablarle a sus niños en español para que fuera más fácil para ellos en la escuela. Poco a poco, bueno eso se instituyó por mucho tiempo, hasta que dejó, creo, de existir. Pues la misma situación logró que, pues, ya los niños no hablarán tanto el zapoteco y pues ya no era necesario.  

(2:51-3:25, Parte 1) Pero desafortunadamente, la misma gente que “local” digamos [de Oaxaca], trata mal o se burla de las personas que hablan una lengua porque pues, se piensa que es menos, que la persona que habla una lengua local puede ser de escasos recursos, de su forma de hablar es diferente, o gramaticalmente su español es diferente. Entonces, puede surgir muchas situaciones de discriminación o de burlas de las personas.

(3:50-4:29, Parte 1) En los mismos espacios públicos dentro de la cuidad, a veces también se siente como, tal vez no te lo dicen de frente pero, tienes esa tensión, no? Sientes las miradas, sientes…es como una tensión de que [trails off here] porque hablo una lengua, me van a…tal vez no me permitan entrar a cierto lugar que es un lugar público. En espacios médicos, también en espacios sociales, servicios públicos, también existe esa tensión de que, por hablar una lengua indígena tal vez me consideren que no sé o que no estoy enterada en las cosas o que debo recibir un trato diferente.

Janet Chávez Santiago, English translations on pgs. 30-33  
(5:09-6:59, Parte 1) Otra cosa también es que, en la actualidad y desde antes, en el caso del zapoteco, se aprende en la casa: con los papás, con los abuelos. Se viene enseñando y aprendiendo en una tradición oral, y por eso mismo en el caso de Teotitlán del Valle, no ha existido una cultura o una tradición escrita de la propia lengua. Sabemos que el zapoteco se ha venido escrito desde hace muchos años, desde siglos, pero en cierto momento de la historia, se dejó esa práctica. En la actualidad, muy en especial en el caso del Teotitlán del Valle, no tenemos una literatura escrita. Tenemos muchísimas historias, muchísimo contenido pero en manera escrita no se ha documentado. Si vamos a Teotitlán, podemos ver letreros escritos en zapoteco pero realmente no es una ortografía estandarizada. Muchas veces es fonética.
En el caso de los cursos de zapoteco que yo enseño, la mayoría de los estudiantes que tengo son personas que son de aquí de la cuidad, que sus papás o abuelos eran de algún pueblo que hablaban zapoteco, pero por cuestiones económicas y cuestiones de familia, se fueron del pueblo y ellos ya no aprendieron porque fueron a vivir en la cuidad.

Mucha gente piensa, para que quiero aprender zapoteco si nada más lo voy a poder hablar en ciertos pueblos en un lugar, en un estado en Oaxaca. No es como, tal vez el inglés o como otras lenguas que las puedo hablar en varios países o en varios lugares. Pero justamente es éso, no? Es como enseñarle a la gente que, aquí en Oaxaca, caminas al centro o vas al mercado y puedes escuchar diferentes lenguas y es tan bonito como también, te vas caminando y de repente puedas entender y puedas saber qué lengua están hablando. De las experiencias más bonitas que yo he tenido con mis alumnos de zapoteco es abrir los ojos al ambiente que tienen alrededor aquí mismo en Oaxaca.

Pero también en ésto va el hecho de educarlos a ellos en el sentido de la valorización de lengua. Porque me ha tocado a mí tener alumnos que, al inicio, todavía tiene esta idea errónea de que una lengua local, una lengua indígena es un dialecto y no es una lengua…Entonces también es como un trabajo doble…

Estoy trabajando con el zapoteco porque es lo que yo sé. Pero también como tener la posibilidad yo de ayudar a otras personas con la creación de materiales didácticos, tal vez una capacitación de cómo enseñar una lengua como segunda lengua, e incluir otras lenguas en el programa y dar a conocer más lenguas y que se puedan enseñar y que puedan tener la gente la posibilidad de acercarse a los pueblos, a los hablantes a través de las lenguas que hablan.

Pero como yo ya no casi ya no platico [zapoteco] pues. Con mi mamá, con mi papá, con ellos! Viene creciendo en el pueblo, puro zapoteco, puro hablando zapoteco! Y ahorita, pues, ya se me está olvidando algo, también! Porque mis hijas ya no se ocupa. Nadie lo aprendió. Mejor, hasta ahora dicen “cómo no lo aprendí!” Se la perdieron pues porque nadie la aprendieron.

Yo nací en este pueblo por eso es que, desde chica, aprendí el zapoteco aquí Tlacochahuaya. Y por eso yo también, con mi hijo, yo le enseñé, porque yo quería que fuera, pues, gente como zapoteco, que somos. Que aprendiera para seguir transmitiendo la lengua. Y que por ejemplo, yo digo a los padres que, aún practican la lengua que se lo transmitan a sus hijo para que también ellos no se olviden el origen que somos: de un pueblo zapoteco.

Siento que [el zapoteco] está imerso en un hilito y que siento que se va a romper, pero que, tengo que hacer algo por ella de que mis niños de mi tierra, los jóvenes aprendan la lengua para que ésto no se pierda. Para mí, es muy importante el rescate de la
lengua, ya que nosotros hablamos un cincuenta por ciento de la lengua zapoteca y un cincuenta por ciento de zapotecización. Esto quiere decir que hemos perdido lo valioso de nuestra lengua. Y para mí, ésto es importantísimo porque, gracias a nuestra lengua, nuestros pueblos han hecho mucho. Y que necesitamos saber cómo ellos tenían su medicina tradicional, la comida tradicional, la comida auténtica que ellos usaban, y que nosotros, por esta influencia de tantas culturas, la hemos perdido. Pero es importante saber otras culturas, pero también es importante tener la suya propia! Entonces, para mí lo importante es tener la mia propia que mis paisanos, mi gente, sepa de éso.

Elizabeth Sánchez González, English translation found on pg. 22
[Respondiendo a la pregunta “Qué imaginas para el futuro de la lengua zapoteca en Tlacolula? El zapoteco sería hablado por todas las personas?”]

(4:45-5:38) Tal vez no hablado por todas las personas, pero sí no perderla….Lo que yo espero es que los niños y los jóvenes les interese preservar la lengua. Ahorita creo que estamos haciendo un rescate porque mos pocos la habla, pero que la preserven para que no muera la lengua, que es nuestro origen. No es una cuestión nueva sino como entender muchas cuestiones en la comunidad. Porque la lengua tiene mucho que ver con la comida, con los chistes, con la vida de la comunidad, hay cosas que son en zapoteco que no se puede traducir en español.

REFERENCES
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