

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****Social Factors, Language Preservation and Attitudes towards Spanish and Tzotzil in San Pedro Chenalhó in the State of Chiapas, Southeast Mexico****Karla Berenice Del Carpio Ovando\****Modern Languages and Cultural Studies Department, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Canada.*\*Corresponding Author: E-mail: [delcarpi@ualberta.ca](mailto:delcarpi@ualberta.ca)**Abstract**

This paper examines the social factors that have influenced the Tzotzils to maintain their indigenous language even if there are factors that have worked against such preservation. The Tzotzils are an indigenous group found in Chiapas in southeast Mexico, and the participants of this study were the Tzotzils living in Chenalhó, a predominantly indigenous community in central Chiapas. The closeness of Chenalhó to cities, the lack of employment in this community, government programs and especially the establishment of bilingual schools where Spanish is more frequently used than Tzotzil, are examples of the factors that have influenced the Tzotzils to use Spanish. However, Tzotzil speakers identify with their native language, so they are concerned with preserving it and transmitting it to younger generations. Nonetheless, people in this indigenous community realize that speaking Spanish is important so they can communicate with non-indigenous Mexicans and they can have better opportunities in life.

**Keywords:** Spanish, Tzotzil, Indigenous, Language preservation**Introduction**

Mexico is a country with different indigenous communities that speak their own native language. However, many of these communities tend to abandon their language in favour of Spanish, for example, Otomí speakers in Central Mexico [1] and Totonac speakers in East Central Mexico (Lam, in press). This is due to the combination of social, economic, and/or political factors. For example, one of the reasons for Otomí speakers to shift to Spanish is “the necessity of finding jobs outside the community” [2]. The same applies to the Tzotzils, an indigenous group found in the state of Chiapas, southeast Mexico (more on this later).

**Social Justification of the Study**

Indigenous people in Mexico are perceived negatively by the *mestizo*<sup>1</sup> society since they are considered ignorant and inferior relative to *mestizos*. Such perceptions have had a great influence on the way indigenous people perceive themselves and their languages. Some indigenous groups have decided to abandon their language and culture because they do not see much value in being *indígena*, which is an idea perpetuated by

*mestizos* [1]. In Mexico indigenous people are shifting to Spanish therefore it is necessary to promote the importance of preserving native languages because they constitute a valuable element in Mexican culture by maintaining and enriching its ethnic and linguistic diversity. Indigenous languages can also permit intergenerational communication and maintain cultural traditions. For example, young children can use their parents' native language to communicate with elders who do not speak Spanish. By doing so, they can learn their grandparents' traditions and maintain them.

**Background on Chenalhó****Location**

San Pedro Chenalhó, better known as *Chenalhó*, is one of the fifteen municipalities in Chiapas that mainly consists of Tzotzil speakers [3]. This municipality is located in the region known as “Los Altos” or the Highlands of Chiapas, some 34 kilometres north of the touristic colonial town of San Cristóbal de las Casas.

**Population, Education and Language**

According to the *Agenda Estadística Chiapas* [4] there are 27,331 inhabitants in Chenalhó, of which

<sup>1</sup>Mestizo: a person of mixed racial ancestry, in this case usually indigenous and Spanish

23,002 (84.16%) are indigenous. Of the Tzotzil population, 14,834 (64.49%) are monolingual Tzotzil speakers [5]. In Chenalhó, most people (10,933, 57%) only have elementary education, while 628 (3%) have junior high school education, and 136 (1%) have high school education. Only 3 people have Master's or PhD degrees. There are approximately 2 pre-schools, 4 elementary schools and 2 high schools in Chenalhó, the majority of which operates only in Spanish. In theory, these institutions employ instructors who are part of the *Bilingual Educational System (Sistema de Educación Bilingüe)*; however, according to the participants there are not many instructors that use both Tzotzil and Spanish in the classroom because most of them are *mestizos* that do not speak Tzotzil. If *Pedranos* desire to attend university they have to move to cities. Nowadays, due to the establishment of Spanish-language schooling, many young people can also speak Spanish. For example, it was observed that Spanish is mostly used at school whereas Tzotzil is used at home, at church, in the market, in the street and social gatherings. Because most *Pedranos* also speak Spanish or have some knowledge of it (e.g. elders who are not fluent in Spanish but speak it or are able to understand it to a limited degree), it is possible for non-indigenous Mexicans to live in Chenalhó without speaking a word of Tzotzil.

### Economics

Chenalhó is an area rich in high-altitude coffee, timber, sheep and cattle, corn, beans, and other vegetable crop production. However, this area is poor in terms of health care, education, and clean water. The land in Chenalhó is owned by Tzotzil families and can be bought and sold among them with the purpose of doing business with people from their same region. Although the lands usually stay in the hands of the Tzotzils, the modest money they can earn from agriculture, which is one of their main economic bases, forces some *Pedranos* to move to cities to find a job outside their community, for which Spanish is necessary. Their main destinations are Villahermosa, San Cristóbal, and Tuxtla Gutiérrez.

### Access to Chenalhó

Nowadays, it is easy to access Chenalhó from San Cristóbal de las Casas. There are taxis and buses that go to Chenalhó every 20 minutes. Since it is now easy to access Chenalhó, the contact between non-indigenous Mexicans living in San Cristóbal and *Pedranos* has increased, which also increases the exposure of *Pedranos* to Spanish and diminishes the use of their native language.

### Methodology

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### Purpose of the Study

This research aimed to explore the situation of the Tzotzil language in Chenalhó, Chiapas. Since language loss has been spreading in Mexico, this study aimed to investigate if the Tzotzil community has abandoned or is abandoning its native language to switch to Spanish. If so, the study included determination of the social factors that have led to this switch and the Tzotzil speakers' attitudes to both their language and Spanish.

### Research Questions

What is the current situation of the Tzotzil language? What are the social factors that have led to such a situation? What are the Tzotzil community's attitudes towards the Spanish language and the Tzotzil language?

### Participants

The participants were ten Tzotzil-Spanish bilingual *Pedranos* living in Chenalhó, Chiapas. Five of the participants were male and the other five were female. Six of the participants were married and had children, one was a single mother and had a girl, and three of the participants were single with no children. Most of these *Pedranos* were aged twenty to thirty, except for one who was 15 years old. Most of the participants had at least elementary-level education and only two of them did not have any formal education. Also, most of the participants had lived in Chenalhó for most of their lives and only a few had left their community temporarily. All of the participants were content about living in their town.

### Methods

Oral interviews were conducted in Spanish with the Tzotzil speakers. Since Spanish is often used by the participants in their daily lives, most of them were fluent in the language. The participants were asked about their daily lives, the history of their communities and stories related to their childhood. Also, the participants were asked about their knowledge, use, and attitudes towards Tzotzil and Spanish. The conversations, which are used as part of the discussion of this research, were audio-recorded, transcribed and then translated into English for analysis. The collected data were analyzed to focus on similar answers given by the participants in order to identify patterns and factors related to language shift, if any, and the attitudes towards both languages.

### Analysis of Results

In general, it was found that the Tzotzils in Chenalhó, Chiapas, are very proud of their ethnicity. All of the participants in the study

exhibited pride in being indigenous. The reasons they gave were related to their town characteristics and advancements and their traditions that they still preserve (see section 4.2 for further discussion). These factors have made *Pedranos* increase their affection for their community and feel proud of themselves. Such pride does not necessarily lead to maintenance of their native language; however, it could be one of the factors that has influenced their language choice. In addition, most of the participants claimed that they learned Tzotzil at home because that was the language their parents used and in some cases it was the only language their parents and/or grandparents knew. Therefore, for some *Pedranos* Tzotzil represented the only way to orally communicate with older generations (see section on generational issues below). Thus, Tzotzil still plays an important role in their lives.

### Religion

Since religion is integral to the life of inhabitants in Chenalhó, where both Catholicism and Evangelism are prevalent, the participants were asked about the language(s) they use during religious gatherings and mass. They pointed out that *Pedranos* use Tzotzil and that priests generally speak Tzotzil, but if *mestizos* are present they use Spanish. This can be observed in the following quote:

#### Participant 4

(...) Catholics use Tzotzil; they use Tzotzil when talking to God. Pastors speak...if they see *mestizos*, they speak Spanish... or if there are people that come from far away, translators are used. But, in general, Tzotzil is used.

It can be said that the use of Tzotzil in a formal setting such as church has contributed to its maintenance. Also, priests tend to be respected members of the community, so if they are using Tzotzil, it raises the prestige of the language. It should be noted that Tzotzil is also used in some churches in cities, for example, in San Cristobal de las Casas where most of the inhabitants are non-indigenous. However, mass in some churches is given in Tzotzil because of the large number of Tzotzils living in San Cristóbal. For instance, some Catholic masses at noon on Sundays are given in Tzotzil and not in Spanish. The use of Tzotzil in a formal setting in a city could function as a symbolic asset that gives value to its speakers by bringing recognition to the use of Tzotzil. One of the participants mentioned that their Bible, which is in Spanish, has been translated into Tzotzil so that those *Pedranos* who are literate can read their Bible in their first language. This also raises the prestige of Tzotzil by giving it a written form

and not just an oral form. The existence of a translated version of the Bible was confirmed by the researcher.

### Progress in the Community

The participants of the study stated that Chenalhó has had various positive changes that have made them increase their positive feelings toward their town and make them want to continue living there. According to the participants, Chenalhó has prospered in terms of construction, transportation, education, and health care services. Also, the participants pointed out that nowadays more people move to Chenalhó than in the past, for example, *mestizos* from San Cristóbal de las Casas.

#### Participant 2

(...) I remember that there were not many houses and *tortillerías*<sup>2</sup> and there was no electricity. The road was not in good condition. Now the conditions of the town are getting better. There are people that come to Chenalhó to buy land and they move here.

#### Participant 6

(...) yes, yes, the roads and the streets were in bad condition before. Now they are paved. There are more people that come here because the arrival is easy.

Although modernization is documented as a factor against language maintenance [6], in this case it seems that modernization has increased public pride in Chenalhó and this might be a factor that has contributed to the Tzotzils maintaining their native language. The contact that *Pedranos* have had with outsiders has increased the use of Spanish because most *mestizos* that move there do not speak Tzotzil. However, some *mestizos* try to learn the indigenous language; for example, Javier's family determined that it would be beneficial for him and his family to learn Tzotzil since it is the dominant language in Chenalhó. His wife said that she still does not speak Tzotzil fluently, but she tries to use the Tzotzil she knows so she can communicate with *Pedranos* that do not speak Spanish.

### Education

There are some teachers who try to use Tzotzil at schools in Chenalhó, for example, Javier pointed out that Tzotzil is useful for him in the classroom because by using it he can help his first and second grade students. He said that sometimes it is difficult for him to help his pupils because it is common that first graders go to school with no knowledge of Spanish. Therefore, instructors that

<sup>2</sup>*Tortillería*: A place to buy tortillas.

know some Tzotzil try to use it in the classroom. In contrast, instructors that do not speak Tzotzil face more problems when teaching. However, students are expected to understand more Spanish by the third grade and that is when the use of Tzotzil is reduced by the instructors. This suggests that the more the students advance, the more they are expected to use Spanish. The participants of the study mentioned that they are content because most children are able to go to school. As indicated in the following quotes, this is due in large part to a national program called *Oportunidades* "Opportunities" that provides grants to families with school-age children. This program is offered by the Mexican federal government "to ensure that children have the main capabilities they need to become productive adults" [7]. The main components of *Oportunidades* are schooling stipends, health care, cash transfers, and nutritional supplements. The participants think that this program has been a positive change in their community because it has helped them to improve their educational level, although this also means that more children are exposed to Spanish than in the past.

#### Participant 6

(...) most of the kids go to school, they didn't go before because they were not allowed, but now it's changing.

#### Participant 9

(...) all of the kids go to school, if parents don't allow their kids to go to school, they have to pay a fee or they can even go to jail. Nowadays, all parents send their kids to school.

#### Participant 2

(...) since we have the support from *Oportunidades*, kids can go to school. Children weren't sent to school before because their parents had to spend money on that. *Oportunidades* gives kids economical support, a little bit of money every two months.

#### Participant 4

(...) now most of the children go to school. Before, they didn't because their parents were poor and they had to spend money on uniforms (...) now kids go to school because they have *Oportunidades*, they have support.

The parents that took part in the study mentioned that it is important that their children learn the official language of Mexico so that they can communicate with *mestizos* and can have a better future. The parents in the study see it as their role to teach Tzotzil and the role of the school to teach their children Spanish. This is important because

there are other communities in Mexico where parents think that it is their role to teach the children Spanish, and the teachers reinforce that belief. The participants stated that if their children speak Spanish when they are adults they can attend university and/or work in the city. It is possible to say that *Pedranos* have a positive attitude toward Spanish because they perceive it as a tool for better opportunities in life, but they see the school as the place for learning Spanish, not the home. Parents in indigenous communities can register their children in regular schools or in bilingual schools. The bilingual schools are directed by an agency of the ministry called *Dirección General de Educación Indígena* (DGEI). Unfortunately, this agency "has few resources, politics plays a large part in its appointments, and consequently it has not been very successful in maintaining indigenous languages" [1]. Another problem is that some bilingual instructors that speak an indigenous language may be assigned to a community where a different indigenous language is spoken, while other instructors are not even bilingual but *mestizos* from the cities. As a result, parents tend to choose schools that are close to their house even if they are not bilingual because they know that Spanish is used in both types of schools.

The use of Spanish at schools in Chenalhó is significant. This does not necessarily imply a wholesale shift to Spanish outside of school as well. However, it has influenced some *Pedrano* children who prefer to use Spanish outside of school rather than Tzotzil because most instructors in Chenalhó use Spanish in class. Nevertheless, the participants stated that most of the instructors allow children to use Tzotzil because they know that is the children's first language. This is positive because it takes away some of the pressure to use Spanish. However, not all of the teachers allow their students to use Spanish, which can be seen in the quote from the seven-year-old child of Participant 9.

(...) my instructor talks to me in Spanish, I understand when he asks me "do you know what I'm telling you?" He doesn't scold me (...) I like Spanish, I don't like Tzotzil because sometimes I don't understand very well (...) sometimes one of my instructors said that we shouldn't speak Tzotzil because he didn't understand us. Since he doesn't speak Tzotzil, he doesn't know when a kid curses, so he prefers we speak Spanish.

The fact that this child's instructor speaks Spanish in class and the child is asked to avoid Tzotzil might be a factor influencing his preference for

Spanish and this could affect his language choice outside of school as well. The child's mother pointed out that she speaks Tzotzil to her children and her husband speaks Spanish to them so that they learn both languages. The child's comments show that he prefers Spanish over Tzotzil, which could be due to his father's influence at home or the teacher's attitudes.

Teachers are also asking parents to use more Spanish at home so that their children can familiarize themselves more with Spanish and they can better understand the lessons at school:

Participant 2

(...) some instructors are from Chenalhó, but most of them come from Tuxtla or San Cristóbal. If a child speaks Tzotzil, his/her parents are asked to come to school and/or asked to teach him/her more Spanish (...) the instructors don't get mad at kids if they speak Tzotzil.

However, the parents mentioned that they perceive this as not having to stop using Tzotzil, but by using both their native language and Spanish it would be easier for their children to understand their teachers.

It can be argued that both parents and children in Chenalhó are receiving mixed messages from teachers. In terms of positive messages that could help preserve Tzotzil, there are some instructors who try to use Tzotzil and some books at school are in the indigenous language. Most teachers say that children are allowed to speak Tzotzil in class, but it is not clear whether what they say is what they actually do. Also, the establishment of more schools in the community means that children do not have to leave if they want to be literate; they can stay in their Tzotzil-speaking community. There are also negative aspects regarding Tzotzil preservation. For instance, classes are almost entirely taught in Spanish, especially from the third grade and on. Bilingual schools are not truly bilingual because Spanish is more frequently used than Tzotzil. Moreover, there are teachers who tell children and their parents to use more Spanish and due to school there are children who prefer to use Spanish rather than Tzotzil. These positive and negative messages regarding language use emphasize the complexity of the issue.

### **Institute of Education for Adults (IEA)**

Adults in this community also have the opportunity to learn how to read and write in Spanish, which is one of the changes they like because they want to be literate. There is an institution in charge of providing literacy for Mexicans aged 15 and up. This institution

(*Instituto Educación para Adultos (IEA)*) aims at providing provide educational opportunities to youths and adults who want to start and/or continue with their elementary education. By doing so, these people increase their opportunities to develop competitiveness to work and develop their skills of perception to face the challenges presented in life [8].

The classes at IEA are taught in both Tzotzil and Spanish, which increases the opportunities for *Pedranos* to be literate. However, they learn to read and write Spanish but not Tzotzil and the materials are only in Spanish, which puts their native language at a disadvantage, despite the fact that according to IEA, "indigenous groups should be taught in their native language due to the pedagogical need of having students in contact with its significance so that an efficient learning can be achieved" [8]. A goal of IEA is to provide indigenous people with textbooks in their native language so that they can have a proper bilingual education by 2012. Unfortunately, IEA has not been explicit whether textbooks will be for learning Tzotzil or Spanish.

The participants stated that instructors at IEA speak both Tzotzil and Spanish and students can choose which language they want to be taught in. This cannot be considered a factor that has helped preserve Tzotzil because they are using it to learn Spanish and not their native language. It was interesting that one of the participants pointed out that she likes to be taught in Spanish, not because she dislikes her native language, but because she has curiosity toward Spanish. She mentioned that she would like to learn more Spanish because it sounds nice and she would like to communicate with other people. These statements show a positive attitude toward the Spanish language, which was also exhibited by other participants, but it does not imply that the participant has a negative attitude toward her first language (Tzotzil). In general, *Pedranos* do not perceive Spanish as an enemy that can extinguish their native language; rather they consider it is important to speak Spanish so that they can expand their social networks and have better opportunities in life. However, this does not make them abandon their first language. In contrast, they want to transmit it to younger generations so that the Tzotzil language can be preserved.

### **Generational Issues**

Most of the participants had learned Tzotzil through their parents and these, through previous generations. The participants commented that they speak Tzotzil because they were taught to do so and because in some cases it is the only

language they can use to communicate with older generations.

Participant 1

(...) I am used to speaking Tzotzil. My parents don't speak Spanish.

Participant 2

(...) I like Tzotzil because it is the language we have always spoken here (...) the spoken language in Chenalhó is Tzotzil because we are *Pedranos*. Those that come from other indigenous communities also speak Tzotzil.

Participant 9

(...) when I was a child I only heard Tzotzil. I moved to Chenalhó with my grandpa and he spoke a little bit of Spanish (...) My grandma doesn't speak Spanish at all just my grandpa (...) I speak Tzotzil with my grandma.

Participant 10

(...) I speak Tzotzil to my parents and they speak Tzotzil to me.

It can be observed that Tzotzil is regularly used to communicate among adults and older generations because in some cases Tzotzil is the only language they can use to communicate with elders in their family. Thus, it is possible to say that the Tzotzil language plays an important role among this population.

#### Transmission of Tzotzil to Younger Generations

It has been found that in many indigenous communities in Mexico, for example, the Otomís in Central Mexico, adults and older generations do not speak their native language (Otomí) to children [1]. This is because the parents think that the Otomí language is not advantageous for their children. That is, parents think that Otomí does not offer their children better opportunities in life, in finding a job outside their community, for example, because only Spanish is spoken. Thus, parents prefer that their children speak Spanish. Also, parents have the mistaken view that bilingualism is difficult and it is better to shift to Spanish only [1]. In contrast, *Pedranos* in Chenalhó consider that it is important to transmit the Tzotzil language from older to younger generations. Fortunately, the attitudes that this indigenous community has towards their native language is different compared to other communities in Mexico where the speakers themselves are ashamed not only of their language, but of themselves, which is the case of Totonac speakers in Central Mexico [2]. Totonacs describe themselves as *gente de calzón* (people of indigenous dress), while they describe non-

indigenous Mexicans as *gente de razón* (people of reason)" [2]. The previous terms show how Totonacs perceive themselves as inferior in relation to non-indigenous Mexicans. Such negative perception is due to the discrimination they as well as most indigenous groups have suffered. Interestingly, *Pedranos* have a different opinion about themselves. They are not ashamed, but rather proud of their origin. It was observed that in most contexts the use of Tzotzil in Chenalhó is predominant over the use of Spanish:

Participant 1

(...) Most of the kids here, young people and adults speak more Tzotzil than Spanish. Most of the people are speakers of Tzotzil just a few speak Spanish.

Participant 2

(...) I speak Tzotzil to my little girl. The impact of Tzotzil in Chenalhó is strong. When I talk to my friends I speak Tzotzil, I use pure Tzotzil. I teach pure Tzotzil to my girl. We teach Tzotzil to those who want to learn it.

Participant 3

(...) my kids will learn Tzotzil because that's my language. They will learn Spanish at school.

Participant 5

(...) I speak Tzotzil everywhere. Tzotzil is the most spoken language here. Most of the kids and the rest of the people speak it.

Participant 4

(...) I prefer to speak Tzotzil because it's a nice language. There are some people that ask me "Why do you speak Tzotzil?" I answer: because it's my mother tongue, because I'm indigenous and I want to preserve it. I teach Tzotzil to my child. I want him to learn it otherwise the language will disappear.

It was also observed that most children in Chenalhó speak mostly Tzotzil when they are talking amongst themselves. For example, the researcher observed that when children played basketball in the main plaza, they used Tzotzil. The same was observed when children or teenagers were playing at a cultural centre<sup>3</sup>. Also, most children speak Tzotzil with their parents. This was observed when children talked to their parents at home, at the store, at the market and in the street. However, there were a few children who used Spanish when talking to their parents. These children were asked why they used Spanish and

<sup>3</sup>La Casa de la Cultura: a public place where people can take lessons in music, painting, dance or handicrafts

they said that it is the language they use at school and the one their father uses when talking to them, so they preferred to use Spanish.

In brief, it is possible to say that most *Pedranos* are proud of their origin, and such sense of pride comes from the modernization they have experienced as well as the empowerment felt as a result of the uprising that took place in Chiapas in 1994 organized by indigenous people (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, EZLN) that made them feel supported by their own people by emphasizing their dignity and their rights.

### Lack of Work Opportunities

Grenoble and Whaley [9] point out that “economics ... may be the single strongest force influencing the fate of endangered languages”. This has been one of the factors that have made *Pedranos* use Spanish. Due to the lack of employment in Chenalhó, some members of this community want to leave their hometown and others have already left even if they enjoyed life there.

#### Participant 1

(...) Yes, I would like to move to cities such as México or Cozumel so I can work there.

#### Participant 2

(...) Yes, I would like to leave my community to look for a job because I'm a single mom, so I need to work. I wouldn't like to go to another community, but to a city, for example, San Cristóbal.

However, most of the participants claimed that they want to stay in Chenalhó because they have their own lands, they run their own businesses, they grow their own products and/or because they know they can have temporary jobs in their community. In contrast, there are people who think it would be better to leave Chenalhó so they can improve their life conditions. The fact that *Pedranos* have to leave their community increases the need for them to speak Spanish, especially if they move to cities where only Spanish is spoken.

### Proximity to Cities

Chenalhó is close to cities such as San Cristóbal de las Casas and Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the capital of the state of Chiapas, where Spanish is the dominant language. These cities are approximately forty minutes and two hours away from Chenalhó, respectively. The closeness of Chenalhó to cities, the good condition of the roads and different ways of transportation have facilitated the access for *Pedranos* to the cities and for non-indigenous Mexicans to Chenalhó. The possibilities for

*Pedranos* to have contact with monolingual speakers of Spanish are high.

As some participants mentioned, they try to go to the city only when it is necessary and then return to Chenalhó, but they still need to know Spanish in order to function in the city. Also, even if *Pedranos* do not leave Chenalhó, there are Spanish speakers in the town, most of whom run their own businesses, for example, *cocinas económicas* (local restaurants) or stores, or work at schools as instructors. Therefore, it would be difficult for a *Pedrano* to avoid Spanish altogether. Also, most of the non-Tzotzil speakers in Chenalhó are perceived to be of a higher social status. Thus, their presence in the town can affect the maintenance of Tzotzil by making Spanish the language of social prestige. This might give *Pedranos* the idea that if they want high social status, they need to speak Spanish.

## Discussion

### General

Indigenous languages in Mexico are “associated with low-prestige people and their socially disfavoured identities that its own potential speakers prefer to distance themselves from it and adopt some other language” [10]. Unfortunately, this is the situation of most native languages in Mexico such as Otomí [1] and Totonac in Central Mexico [2] where indigenous speakers have decided to switch to Spanish, the official language of the country. Some of the reasons for these people to switch to Spanish are the discrimination they have suffered by non-indigenous Mexicans, the establishment of monolingual schools, and the lack of employment in their communities, which force them to leave their town and move to a place where only Spanish is spoken. These factors were also found in the Tzotzil community in Chenalhó, Chiapas; however, the persistence of this indigenous community to preserve their language and culture is apparent. According to Dorian [10], “if members of a subordinate population have the opportunity to learn the language of the dominant group, some or all of them will usually do so. They will not necessarily give up their own ancestral language, however”. This is what has happened with the Tzotzil community in Chiapas. Most *Pedranos* have learned Spanish because they know it is advantageous for them; however, they have not abandoned their native language. In contrast, they are concerned with transmitting it to younger generations.

The Tzotzil community is very proud of speaking their native language because they identify themselves with it. As a result, *Pedranos* want their children to learn Tzotzil so that the language

does not disappear. Also, most children and adults still use the indigenous language in religious ceremonies and in different contexts such as home, the market, the street, the main plaza, social gatherings, etc. Thus, the Tzotzil language has a very special value for them, which shows that “languages have the standing that their speakers want” [10].

### Focus on Education

According to McCaa and Mills [11], “native languages are under assault in Mexico. Education appears to be the “villain” and bilingualism its weapon. Paradoxically, if native languages are to thrive in the next millennium, their salvation likewise will be education and bilingualism their hope”. Therefore, it is important that there are opportunities for the Tzotzil language to be used at schools in Chenalhó. By doing so, bilingualism would not be a weapon against an indigenous language, but a tool to promote its maintenance. However, “It has been found that even among the most ethno linguistically conscious bilingual teachers, language attitudes are marked by conflicting ideas and ambiguity, driven by the mechanisms of cultural and linguistic denigration that operate at the institutional, community-wide and regional levels” [12]. Research has found that bilingual teachers prefer to use the dominant language in the classroom, for example, for written language functions. This contributes to the idea that “indigenous language’s oral “dialectically fragmented” condition is evidence of its inherent deficiency as a language for academic purposes, especially for reading and writing” [12]. This might be one of the reasons for most instructors in Chenalhó to mainly use Spanish in class. Although Tzotzil can be written, it might be perceived as not being a fully developed language, which could be a reason why bilingual schools in Chenalhó do not teach *Pedranos* children to read and write in Tzotzil. Moreover, nowadays, more children in Chenalhó can attend school, which also means more children are exposed to Spanish. The fact that children have the opportunity to be literate can be considered a double-edged sword. Undoubtedly, it is important and beneficial for children to go to school; the problem is that regular schools and bilingual schools have instructors that come from cities or places where only Spanish or a different indigenous language is spoken. Thus, the probability of increasing the use of Spanish by these children is very high. As a result, the more literate children are the more the probabilities decrease to use Tzotzil in formal contexts such as school.

The use of Spanish in school, a place they go to five days a week, might also influence the students’ preference of language choice outside of class. This

was observed in some *Pedrano* children who prefer to speak Spanish because that is the language used at school. This might be the future reaction of *Pedrano* children who will go to school, which could decrease their use of Tzotzil not only at school, but in contexts where nowadays Tzotzil is used. This could lead to language shift in the future. As Grenoble and Whaley [9] argue, “what these children might do in the future is to adapt themselves to use Spanish and maybe abandon their first language because it might be perceived as no longer advantageous to them”. As Gellner points out [9] “literacy is essential to nationalism and language survival in the modern world”. On the other hand, others [9] argue that literacy actually facilitates language loss and this is what is happening with most indigenous languages in Mexico. Thus, it is necessary to design real bilingual programs that assign functions to both the Spanish language and the Tzotzil language in certain situations. For example, Spanish could be used to teach a science lesson and Tzotzil to teach history or vice versa. By doing so, both languages would have the same possibilities of being spoken and indigenous languages would be maintained and might achieve similar status in school, even if there still might be social factors in the community that could keep Tzotzil in a disadvantageous position relative to Spanish.

### Focus on the Community

It has been found that parents in other indigenous communities in Mexico avoid speaking their native language to their children because they think it is not advantageous for them. In contrast, parents in Chenalhó speak Tzotzil to their children at home and in different contexts such as the market, church, social gatherings, etc. From this and what the participants pointed out in their interviews about the importance of transmitting Tzotzil from generation to generation, it is possible to say that “they are making a conscious decision to transmit the ancestral language to their children” [10]. Most parents in this community want their children to speak the Tzotzil language in addition to Spanish, so they try to speak Tzotzil as much as they can so the new generations can learn it as well. Also, *Pedranos* see the home as the place to learn Tzotzil and school as the place to learn Spanish.

It was observed that Tzotzil is spoken by the entire age spectrum, from small children to elders. Also, the amount of Spanish spoken by *Pedranos* is less when compared to the amount of Tzotzil they use in their daily lives. This was verified when the participants were interviewed and they paused or were interrupted to talk to a member of their community. For example, when the researcher was



interviewing Participant 1, there was a man walking in the street and waved at this participant and stopped to greet him. A conversation was initiated by the pedestrian (who did not know the purpose of the researcher's talk with the participant) and they spoke with each other in Tzotzil. The participants were also observed in different contexts such as when they talked to their customers at the store, their neighbours in the street and their children at home, and the predominant language used was Tzotzil. The researcher did not observe *Pedranos* using Spanish when talking to other *Pedranos*.

Thus, *Pedranos* in general are motivated to maintain their language and, accordingly, their culture, which is a crucial factor in preventing language loss. Such attitudes should be supported by different resources that can help *Pedranos* preserve and promote their language. The media "can be used to create access for minority groups and can facilitate communication in the indigenous language" [9]. In recent years, the government of Chiapas has promoted both the Tzotzil and the Tzeltal languages through local television channels where the news is given in these indigenous languages. There are also cultural television programs and social events where the traditions and the languages of the different ethnic groups from Chiapas are promoted. This has helped to increase the importance and respect of these communities.

It is still not possible to say that all non-indigenous people in Chiapas have a positive attitude towards indigenous communities. However, in comparison to people in other states in Mexico, in the researcher's opinion, there is some tolerance and respect for native groups in Chiapas. This could be due to the promotion of these groups and to the different institutions and laws that protect indigenous groups in this state. In the past, they did not receive any attention and now they do (at least more attention than before).

Also, the uprising that took place in Chiapas in 1994 organized by indigenous people (EZLN) made non-indigenous *Chiapanecos* (people born in Chiapas) aware of the power that these groups can have when asking for respect, dignity and rights. This does not mean that this movement changed the perceptions of all non-indigenous *Chiapanecos*, but it made them realize that these groups exist and that they are tired of being discriminated against. This movement may have made *Pedranos* feel some support for maintaining their indigenous traditions and languages.

## Limitations and Suggestions for Further Study

One of the flaws of this study is that instructors that work at bilingual schools were not interviewed. Thus, there is a lack of teachers' perceptions towards indigenous languages in this study. Such perceptions were discussed; however, data obtained from instructors working at bilingual schools would have made it possible to compare their answers with those by the speakers of Tzotzil. Although data from these instructors might not be very reliable because they might say what is politically correct, their responses would at least have provided some insight into the use of Tzotzil in bilingual schools. It would also have been useful to have a greater number of participants from different generations.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The Tzotzil language is widely used in Chenalhó. *Pedranos* are proud of their origin, language, and culture. Therefore, most *Pedranos* try to teach Tzotzil to younger generations in order to preserve their language. The establishment of monolingual schools, government programs (IEA), the lack of employment, proximity to cities and migration of Spanish speakers to Chenalhó have been some of the factors that have increased the use of Spanish in this indigenous community. Many indigenous *Pedrano* children use Spanish at school even when they are supposed to use both Tzotzil and Spanish. "It is an accident of history that the indigenous languages came to be excluded from the domains of schooling and literacy" [12], so there is a need to integrate them and make them part of real bilingual programs that support all the points of the "continuum of biliteracy" [13-14].

However, it is apparent that schooling is not the only reason that makes *Pedranos* speak Spanish. They also face economic pressures and have the need to communicate with Spanish monolinguals. For that reason, it is understandable that *Pedranos* want to learn Spanish in addition to their native language and want their children to do so as well. Tzotzil speakers in Chenalhó seem to be happy to be bilingual Spanish-Tzotzil. Therefore, it is important to help them to maintain their language to avoid a terminal shift to Spanish monolingualism, which is what has happened in other indigenous communities in Mexico. A way to promote bilingualism in this indigenous community could be that parents continue speaking Tzotzil to their children at home and in different contexts such as social gatherings, at the store, in the street, etc. In addition, parents could make their children aware of the importance of speaking their native language, which was already

observed in some families. Although children might not do what their parents say due to the behaviour of the child's peer group and their teachers' attitudes in school, it would be worthwhile trying to make them aware of the importance of their native language, starting at home. For example, parents could make their children aware that in some cases Tzotzil is the only language that can be used to communicate with their grandparents. Parents could tell their children the importance of speaking both Tzotzil and Spanish to reinforce that Tzotzil is as important as Spanish and vice versa. By doing so, future generations might not perceive Tzotzil as inferior and Spanish as superior. Also, they might perceive Spanish as a tool and not as an enemy that could destroy their native language. Another way to promote bilingualism in Chenalhó could be the use of both Spanish and Tzotzil in local advertisements, signs, propaganda and in the media, such as radio and television. By making the use of both languages visual and public, which raises the prestige of Tzotzil, *Pedranos* might want to use both languages with the same frequency and literate children might familiarize themselves with both languages.

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