Gladwin, R.F. (2004). Issues of language use among the Guatemalan-Maya of southeast Florida. *Florida Foreign Language Journal*, 2(1), 8-15.

# *Issues of Language Use Among the Guatemalan-Maya of Southeast Florida*

**Abstract**:

Using oral survey methods, this study examined potential language maintenance or loss of Mayan languages among the Guatemalan-Maya communities of Southeast Florida. Among dislocated immigrants and their children, the language of the dominant socio-economic forces often displaces other languages (Fishman, 1967). A Guatemalan community in Los Angeles, California was studied and predicted to be in a state of transitional Spanish/Mayan/English trilingualism to eventual Spanish/English bilingualism with Mayan language loss (Peñalosa, 1985). Focusing on current language use and intergenerational language maintenance, this study predicts a similar potential future for the Guatemalan-Maya of Southeast Florida, unless contexts for use and strong legitimacy of Mayan languages are developed among community members.

## Historical Context:

The Maya, an advanced culture with a strong written, oral, and religious history, were noted architects, artisans, and mathematicians for over six hundred years throughout modern-day Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Belize. However, the Spanish conquest was particularly brutal to the Mayan civilization. Within a century after the Spaniards' arrival, the native Maya lost fifty to ninety-five percent of their population (Arias & Arrianza, 1998; Wellmeier, 1998). In spite of this loss, the Maya, primarily in Central-America and specifically in Guatemala, presently survive with their history, beliefs, and over twenty Mayan languages. Today, forty-three percent of the population of Guatemala speaks a Mayan language (World Factbook, 2003).

Unfortunately, the late twentieth century was a time of war, resistance, and expulsion for the Maya. During the complicated and violent four-decade civil wars, thousands of Guatemalan-Maya were murdered. Systematic rape was commonly used as

a means of community control, as the Maya were a specific target of both guerrilla groups and government forces. Possibly over a million Maya were assassinated or forcibly relocated – many from Western Guatemala. This "Mayan Diaspora" led to today's reality in which between 200,000 and 300,000 Maya live in the United States as both legal and illegal refugees (Wellmeier, 1998). The 2000 Census lists 28,000 Guatemalans living in Florida; however, these figures don't distinguish between Mayan and non-Mayan Guatemalans, and Guatemalans have been known to classify themselves as Mexican for assimilation purposes and to avoid detection (Driscoll, 2004).

Historically, Indiantown, Florida, bordering Lake Okeechobee in Central Florida, was little more than a crossroads connecting the center of the state with Stuart, Florida. However, Indiantown is known in Guatemala as a place of refuge for the Maya, with at least 15,000 Mayan refugees now residing in this community (Wellmeier, 1998). Indiantown hosts annual festivals and functions as a Mayan ceremonial center with many residents wearing traditional clothes and freely speaking Q'anjob'al, K'iché, Chuj, Jakalteco, and Awaketecko in the streets (Burns, 1993). Indiantown remains a growing community for the Guatemalan-Maya, but the Maya have begun locating in more coastal areas of Southeast Florida. Seeking higher pay and full-time non-seasonal work, many newer arriving Guatemalans to Florida have settled in the coastal communities of Stuart, Jupiter, and Lake Worth (Petit, 2004).

**Issues of Language Maintenance**:

Fishman (1967) theorized that, among dislocated immigrants and their children, the language of the dominant social forces surrounding the group will displace other

languages. In other words, the language used at work and school comes to be the language used at home. Paulstone (1994) tested Fishman's theories and proposed three linguistic results of prolonged contact between linguistic groups: language maintenance, bilingualism, or loss/change of native language. She contended that language maintenance is very rare, except in a few cases. For example, language maintenance may occur if the use of the language is central to the immigrant group's religion or if there is extreme geographic isolation of the group. Group bilingualism is also rare, especially if there is access to a dominant language and if there are socio-economic incentives for language shift. The most common result of contact between linguistic groups is language loss of the less-dominant language (Paulstone, 1994).

Among the Maya in Florida, there are two dominant languages, English and Spanish, surrounding the communities. Each language has certain economic and social incentives. English tends to be the language connected with education, while Spanish is often connected with social interactions among other Latinos and work, commonly agricultural or construction labor. Having arrived as Spanish/Mayan bilinguals, many Maya now speak Spanish, a Mayan language, and some English. Thus, many Guatemalan-Maya in Florida are trilingual.

Peñalosa (1985) investigated a similarly unique trilingualism among a young Guatemalan community in Los Angeles, California. He interviewed 134 adults and concluded that social acculturation was generally to the Spanish-speaking Latino community and, to a lesser extent, to the English–speaking Anglo community. Spanish was necessary to keep in contact with the surrounding Latin community and English was necessary to be part of the larger national culture. He concluded from his data that the

community was in a state of transitional Spanish/Mayan/English trilingualism away from Spanish/Mayan bilingualism and towards Spanish/English bilingualism.

A decade later, Light (1995) returned to the same Guatemalan immigrant community in Los Angeles to examine Peñalosa's earlier predictions. She and several assistants interviewed seventy adults, focusing on the women and adolescents in the community. Her results could neither confirm nor deny Peñalosa's hypothesis that the community was shifting from trilingualism to bilingualism. Mayan languages continued to be spoken, as did Spanish. However, she found, like Peñalosa had predicted, that English use had increased among the community, with many youth speaking English both outside and inside the community. Future generations remain to be studied and long-term studies need to be conducted to confirm or disprove Peñalosa's prediction of ultimate Mayan language loss within the Guatemalan-Maya community as a result of its shift to Spanish-English bilingualism.

**Research Questions:**

Using oral survey questions, the researcher hoped to answer the following research questions concerning Guatemalan residents of Southeastern Florida communities:

1. What characteristics do the adults display in terms of age, gender, and number of children?
2. What languages do the adults speak?
3. What languages do the children speak?
4. What are the linguistic attitudes of the parents toward their children learning specific languages?
5. Will intergenerational language maintenance among these communities occur with regards to Mayan languages?

**Procedures**:

To investigate the important issues of intergenerational linguistic actions and attitudes and the subsequent potential language maintenance and/or loss among the Guatemalan-Maya in Southeast Florida, the researcher and an assistant visited three areas, Lake Worth, Jupiter, and Stuart. In Lake Worth, a thriving Maya community connected with el Centro Maya-Guatemalteco, la Escuelita Maya, and la Clínica Maya exists. In Jupiter, many Maya work as construction site laborers and live near several labor contractors. In Stuart, many Maya work and reside on-site at large plant nurseries. Each of these small communities has developed to the point where there are intact families living together, with children from these communities attending nearby schools. The researcher and assistant conducted oral interviews with Guatemalan adults of the communities.

Twenty-four adults were surveyed. Fourteen of the respondents were from Jupiter, five from Lake Worth, and five from Stuart, representing three of the largest Guatemalan communities in Southeast Florida. All respondents were less than forty years old. The researcher witnessed very few adolescents and no elderly in the communities. Seventeen respondents, seventy percent, were male, reflecting a common gender breakdown of immigrant Guatemalan communities in Florida (Burns, 1993). Fifteen respondents, sixty-three percent, reported having children, representing thirty-five children.

After biographical information was assessed (gender and age), the following questions (in Spanish) were asked of each individual surveyed:

1. What languages do you speak?
   "If a Mayan language was not spoken, question two was not asked."

2. When do you speak _____?
   "This question was asked for any Mayan language(s) spoken by the respondent."

3. How many children do you have?
   "If the respondent answered 'none', question four and five were not asked."

4. Where do your children live?

5. What languages do your children speak?

6. Do you want your children (or hypothetical children) to speak _____?
   "This question was asked for each language that the respondent spoke."

**Results and discussion**:

Seventeen respondents, seventy percent, reported speaking a Mayan language, reflecting the high number of Mayan speaking among Guatemalan immigrants in the United States (Vlach, 1992). Ten respondents, forty-two percent, identified themselves as Spanish-Mayan bilingual. Seven respondents, twenty-five percent, identified themselves as Spanish-Mayan-English trilingual. Seven respondents, thirty-percent, identified themselves as Spanish monolingual. The researcher did not observe or question any monolingual Mayan speakers or monolingual English speakers.

Of the seventeen respondents that spoke a Mayan language, eleven, sixty-four percent, spoke K'iché, four spoke Q'anjob'al, one spoke Mam, and one spoke Tz'utujil. This high number of K'iché speakers correctly reflects the linguistic situation in Guatemala, where K'iché is one of the four major Mayan languages spoken (World FactBook, 2003). Of the seventeen respondents that spoke a Mayan language, all responded that they use the Mayan language to speak with family, friends, or both.

Sixteen respondents, sixty-seven percent, reported having children. In informal, non-survey, discussion with the respondents, many reported that their children lived

away, usually in Guatemala, Nicaragua, or Mexico, but that they wanted them to live with them in the United States. All sixteen respondents spoke Spanish, and all reported that their children spoke Spanish. Seven of these sixteen respondents spoke English, and all reported that their children spoke English. Twelve of the sixteen spoke a Mayan language, but only half reported that their children spoke a Mayan language. Of these twelve respondents, nine reported that their children lived with them in Florida, representing nineteen children. Of these nine respondents, only four, forty-four percent, reported that their children also spoke a Mayan language.

One hundred percent of respondents wanted their children to speak Spanish. Seventeen respondents, seventy-one percent, responded with the words "to speak" or "to communicate" as part of their reason for their desire that their children learn Spanish – two respondents answered "to work" and one respondent stated "to study."

Twenty-two respondents, ninety-two percent, reported English as a language that they wanted their children to learn. The two respondents that did not specifically want their children to learn English cited the difficulty of learning English as their reason – one respondent noted it is "too difficult" and another stated, "Only if they can, it is difficult." The reasons respondents wanted their children to learn English varied; however, six respondents, twenty-seven percent, specifically cited "to study" or "for school," four cited "to work," and four "life in the United States" or "living here" as the reason. One respondent answered that learning English "is very important" for his children. Another said, "English is the universal language." One respondent commented that English is needed "to be proud" and another responded that it should be learned "to get off the bottom."

The respondents were split in their attitudes toward Mayan languages. Fourteen respondents, fifty-eight percent, wanted their children to learn a Mayan language. Of these, half cited "family" as the reason. Other responses included, "to return home," "to really express themselves," and "it is very important." Ten respondents, forty-two percent, did not want their children to learn a Mayan language. Two respondents cited "no, unless they want to." Other responses included "not important," "Tz'utujil is difficult to learn," "we live here now," and "I don't like K'iché."

Even among the seventeen respondents who spoke a Mayan language, six, thirty-five percent didn't want their children to learn it. Among the nine surveyed that both spoke a Mayan language and had children living with them in Florida, four, forty-four percent, had a negative view toward the idea of their children learning a Mayan language.

All respondents had a positive view of Spanish and wanted their children to speak Spanish. Spanish was seen as connected with the dominant social forces, as many noted its importance in communicating with those in their immediate surroundings. English, and sometimes Spanish, was seen as a language connected with the dominant economic forces. Five respondents mentioned "to work" as the reason for their children to study English. One mentioned Spanish in this context. English and Spanish were both mentioned as languages needed for education. Again, a primary goal of school is eventually to obtain "good" work – a socio-economic incentive. No respondents mentioned work or study as a reason to learn a Mayan language.

The language connected with the dominant social forces will displace other languages (Fishman, 1967), and if there is economic incentive for language change, then language loss becomes more likely (Paulstone, 1994). Clearly, in these communities

Spanish and English are dominant languages with social and economic incentives that potentially predict eventual Spanish/English bilingualism with Mayan language loss. Also, language change is often a result of exogamy, marriage to someone outside the language community (Paulstone, 1994). Of the seventeen Mayan speaking respondents, five, twenty-nine percent, gave this exact reason either for why their children don't speak their language or they don't feel that their children need to speak it.

Peñalosa (1985) noted similarly after studying the Los Angeles Guatemalan community that the residents, surrounded by the Latin community, needed Spanish to talk with neighbors and negotiate work. However, English was needed to leave the community and was projected as a need for the next generation to attend schools in the United States. Peñalosa concluded that the future of Spanish/English bilingualism or trilingualism, with continuing use of Mayan languages, among the community likely rested on the parents' attitude.

In Florida, the Mayan speaking residents typically reside in linguistically mixed communities, where even fellow Maya speak different Mayan languages. The researcher informally observed that all residents used Spanish as the preferred method of communication among themselves. Thus, without the linguistically cohesive communities found in Guatemala, even social incentives to speak specific Mayan languages do not appear to be strong.

There were strong home-directed reasons stated to learn a Mayan language, such as "to talk with my family" or "to return to Guatemala." However, attitudes among even the Mayan speakers themselves don't reveal strong loyalty to Mayan languages among the community – something very important for language maintenance (Hornberger,

1988). Parents often instill these traits when they speak publicly and privately in their native languages with their children. Unfortunately, it may take immigrants some time to rise to a certain social level before they feel comfortable publicly using their native language (Peñalosa, 1985). In these communities, parents do not appear to be successfully attaching strong loyalty or legitimacy to Mayan languages.

Results from this study seem to predict eventual intergenerational Mayan language loss among the Guatemalan-Maya of coastal Southeast Florida. Nearly half, forty-two percent, of respondents surveyed were negative toward the maintenance of Mayan languages among their children or future children. Actual Mayan language use, forty-four percent, among the young mirrored these attitudes. Spanish use and the recent use of English were highly valued. Strong educational, economic, and social incentives for Spanish and English support a shift to eventual exclusive Spanish/English bilingualism. However, due to the sample size of the study, a categorical prediction may not be made. The researcher recommends that similar studies be done with larger sample sizes. Children themselves should also be studied to determine linguistic attitudes.

Guatemalan-Maya immigrant communities are often threatened with survival needs, which are primary concerns. Such needs often supplant efforts to organize events celebrating native culture. However, recently there have been well-received efforts at promotion of native Guatemalan culture and traditions. Corn-Maya, Inc. in Jupiter helped co-sponsor the Fiesta Maya 2003 and continues to lobby for a local community center (Brannock, 2003). At the Escuelita Maya after-school programs in Lake Worth and Boytnon Beach, children receive both academic help and lessons in Mayan art, dance, and culture, as well as, Q'anjobal instruction (Driscoll, 2004). Unfortunately, Corn-Maya,

Inc. continues to experience funding shortages, and the popular, but limited enrollment Escuelita Maya programs have nearly one-hundred and fifty children on waiting lists and thus unable to attend (Brannock, 2003; Driscoll, 2004). These activities, and other potential efforts, such as church services in native languages or communal celebration of native holidays, legitimize Mayan heritage, including language use and maintenance (Peñalosa, 1985). Without loyalty to their heritage, traditions, and languages, the Guatemalan-Maya face the potential reality of Mayan language loss among these Southeast Florida communities and the results, specifically to youth, of language and culture loss: negative academic and cognitive effects as well as possible familial alienation (Riegelhaupt, Carrasco & Brandt, 2003). To avoid such negative effects, efforts to support Mayan culture and language among the Guatemalan-Maya of Florida should be encouraged and promoted.

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*Ackowledgement: The author sincerely thanks Jonita Stepp-Greany for her editing assistance and Ryan Gladwin for his help in surveying respondents.*