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Meso-American Languages in the Wiregrass:
An Investigation of Language Maintenance in North Florida/South Georgia

Abstract:

This study used oral survey methods to examine first the diversity of Meso-American languages and second the potential language maintenance or loss of these languages among Meso-American language speakers in Wiregrass country (North Florida-South Georgia). Language shift, the process of gradually changing from one first language to another first language over successive generations, often occurs among displaced immigrant populations (Fishman, 1967). In a similar study Gladwin (2004) predicted potential Meso-American language shift/loss among surveyed Meso-American language speaking respondents in Southeast Florida. The current study in North Florida/South Georgia also predicts potential Meso-American language loss, however, the present findings showed greater linguistic diversity and a stronger loyalty to Meso-American languages among the respondents in Wiregrass country.

Research Context:

Using oral survey methods, Gladwin (2004) examined potential language maintenance among Meso-American language speaking communities in Southeast Florida. The study surveyed seventeen Meso-American language speaking adults. Among these respondents, four Meso-American languages, K'iche', Q'anjob'al, Mam, and Tz'utujil, were reported. One hundred percent of those surveyed wanted their children to speak Spanish, and ninety-percent wanted their children to speak English, with economic and educational reasons cited in support of learning both languages. There were home-directed rationales stated to support learning Meso-American languages, but thirty-five percent were negative toward the maintenance of Meso-American languages among their children or future children. The study results were consistent with earlier studies of immigrant Meso-American language speaking communities (Penalosa, 1985; Light,

1995) in that they suggest eventual intergenerational Meso-American language loss among the Guatemalan-Maya of coastal Southeast Florida.

The study called for “similar studies to be done with larger sample sizes” (Gladwin, 2004, page 12) to establish reliability for the results among the Meso-American language speaking immigrant community. The current study follows this recommendation. Using similar research questions and study methods, the present study examined forty-three Meso-American language speakers in the area of North Florida-South Georgia called “Wiregrass country” to first determine the variety of Meso-American languages spoken and to second investigate intergenerational language maintenance with regards to Meso-American languages.

Historical Context:

Meso-America as a geographic and cultural entity stretches from central Mexico to Honduras. The region included several of the most sophisticated cultures of the Americas, including the Olmec, the Teotihuacan, the Maya, and the Aztec. These pre-Columbian cultures flourished before the arrival of the Spanish in the 15th and 16th centuries, with the Maya and the Aztec still widely remembered today. The Maya, whose verified dwellings date to c. 1800 BC along the Pacific Coast of Guatemala, were known for their complex mathematical systems and their artisan tradition (McKill, 2004). The principle Mayan language, Cholan-Maya, was developed in the Yucatan area and parts of adjacent Chiapas and Guatemala c. 2100 BC (Campbell, 1984). The Aztecs were similarly known for their building skills and resourcefulness, along with their aggressiveness. The name Aztec was given by the Spanish to speakers of the Nahuatl

language in the central Mexico area, but anthropologists date the Aztecs to c. 1100 AD (Blanton, Kowalewski, Feinman, & Finstein, 1993).

Thus, many modern day Guatemalans, Mexicans, and other Central Americans, residing in or near their ancestral homes, are direct descendents of Meso-American cultures. They speak Tzozil, Mixteco, Cajoal, and dozens more Meso-American languages – many direct linguistic descendants of the language(s) of the Maya and the Aztec.

However, the Guatemalan Civil War, the longest in modern Latin American History (from the 1960s to the 1990s), decimated these populations (Wilkinson, 2002). Indigenous peoples were targeted by all sides with premeditated mass murder, systematic rape, and forced relocation. This nearly half-century of sustained violence led to the “Maya Diaspora” in which hundreds of thousands of ethnic Meso-Americans sought legal refugee status in and/or fled to the United States (Wellmeier, 1998).

Many of these immigrants live and work in “Wiregrass country,” which extends across South Georgia and into Northwest Florida. The tall grasses found beneath the pine forests give the region its name. This historically poor, under populated region has long relied on farming as its principle means of survival (McGregory, 1997). Today farming continues as a major regional occupation and the population of new Latino immigrants continues to rise, as the region “relies on Latino migrant farm laborers to harvest several key crops . . . and many of them are choosing to settle in the area permanently” (McGregory, 1997, p. 36). José "Israel" Cortez, Coordinator for Southern Pine Migrant Education Agency for South Georgia and a member of the Latino Commission for a New Georgia, shared that many migrants come to North Florida and South Georgia from the

extreme south of Mexico, primarily from the Chiapas area and the lands along the border of Mexico and Guatemala. Many of these immigrants speak a Meso-American language in addition to Spanish, and immigrant families often reside in Florida and work in Georgia, or vice-versa (J. Cortez, personal communication, April 4, 2008).

Issues of Language Maintenance:

Language bestows a sense of community, kinship, and value to a people and its loss is a significant cultural impairment (Fishman, 2000). However, language shift, the process of gradually changing from one first language to another over successive generations, often occurs among displaced immigrant populations. Language shift occurs to the language(s) of the dominant surrounding socio-economic forces (Fishman, 1967). The incentives linked to dominant languages include access to work and/or school. Language loss is a major linguistic issue today in the United States with even the most widely spoken minority language, Spanish, showing language loss (Fishman, 1996). Language loss of less-dominant languages is the common result of contact between linguistic groups (Paulstone, 1994), and language shift away from Indigenous languages is a reality for most Native American societies (Goodfellow & Pauline, 2003). Indigenous languages in the United States face a difficult future with forty-five of the one hundred and seventy-five Native American languages still spoken in the United States predicted to soon be extinct (Crawford, 1996).

Among Meso-American language speakers in the United States such language loss has been documented. Peñalosa (1985) concluded from his investigation of a Los Angeles, California Guatemalan community that the members were in a state of transistional Spanish/Mayan/English trilingualism away from Spanish/ Maya

bilingualism and towards Spanish/English bilingualism. Light (1995) investigated the community a decade later and verified much of what Peñalosa found, but with English increasingly utilized among the youth. Gladwin's (2004) study of Mayan language speakers in Southeast Florida similarly predicted a potential language shift/loss of Mayan languages.

Research Questions:

Using oral survey questions asked in Spanish, the study hoped to answer the following research questions concerning the Meso-American language speaking residents of Wiregrass country.

1. What characteristics do the respondents display in terms of age, gender, and number of children?
2. What languages do the respondents speak?
3. What languages do their 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 Meso-American languages?

Where Interviewed:

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

1. ¿De dónde es usted? ¿Where are you from?
2. ¿Tiene hijos? ¿Do you have children?
If the respondent answered no, the interviewer skipped questions three and six.
3. ¿Dónde viven sus hijos? ¿Where do your children live?

4. ¿Cuáles son los idiomas que habla? ¿What languages do you speak?
5. ¿Cuándo usa _____? ¿When do you use _____?
This question was repeated for each language spoken.
6. ¿Cuáles son los idiomas que hablan sus hijos? ¿What language(s) do your children speak?
7. ¿Quiere que sus hijos hablen _____? ¿Por qué?
Do you want your children to speak _____? Why?
This question was asked in regards to English, the Meso-American language(s) spoken by the respondent, and Spanish.

Results:

Forty-three Meso-American language speakers were surveyed in Wiregrass country. The respondents were surveyed in multiple locations (for example, along the Florida/Georgia border near Lake Park, Georgia and between Tallahassee, Florida and Thomasville, Georgia) and in varied sites (for example, a medical clinic, church, and worksite).

Demographic results revealed a population sixty-three percent male and thirty-seven percent female. Three respondents appeared to be less than twenty-years of age, and three respondents appeared to be greater than fifty years of age. Thus, thirty-seven of the respondents, eighty-six percent, appeared to be between the ages of twenty and fifty. All of the respondents were from either Mexico (twenty-five respondents, fifty-eight percent) or Guatemala (eighteen respondents, forty-two percent). Thirty-seven of the respondents, eighty-six percent, reported having children, while six respondents, fourteen percent, reported not having children.

Only speakers of Meso-American languages were included in the study data. Forty respondents, ninety-three percent, reported speaking Spanish and were Meso-

American/Spanish bilingual speakers. Six respondents, fourteen percent, also spoke English and were English/Meso-American/Spanish trilingual. Twelve Meso-American languages were reported. Thirteen respondents spoke Tzotzil (or a close linguistic variation) and ten respondents spoke Mam. Six respondents spoke Nahuatl, five respondents spoke K'anjo'al and four respondents spoke K'iche'. Two respondents spoke Zapoteco. One respondent each spoke Kaqchikel, Maya, Ixil, Tojolabal, Tarasco, and Mixteco.

The respondents reported varied times for when the languages are used. For Meso-American language use, twenty-one reported Meso-American language use with *family*; nineteen reported Meso-American language use at *home*, ten reported Meso-American language use with *friends*; two reported Meso-American language use at *work*. For Spanish speakers, nineteen reported Spanish use at *work*; eleven reported Spanish use at *home*, six reported Spanish use at *church*; four reported Spanish use with *family*; two reported Spanish use with *friends*. For English speakers, five reported English use at *work*; two reported English use with *family*; one reported English use at *school*. Responses of "always" or "never" were common with ten responding that they always speak a Meso-American language(s), thirteen responding that they always speak Spanish, and one responding that he/she always speaks English. Thirteen reported that they never speak English.

All forty-three respondents, one hundred percent, wanted their children (or future children) to learn English. When asked why, thirty-two responses linked to *work*; nine responses linked to *improvement*; nine responses linked to *education*; three responses linked to *live here*; two responses linked to *help others*. All forty-three respondents, one

hundred percent, also desired their children to learn Spanish. When asked why, ten responses linked to *homeland*; five responses linked to *help others*; three responses linked to *education*; three responses linked to *work*; two responses linked to *family*. Thirty-two respondents, seventy-four percent, wanted their children to learn a Meso-American language(s). When asked why, nineteen responses linked to *homeland*; twelve responses linked to *family*; one response linked to *education*. Eleven respondents, twenty-four percent, did not want their children to learn a Meso-American language.

Thirty-seven respondents had children. Of these, twenty-three, sixty-two percent, reported that their children speak a Meso-American language. Fourteen respondents, thirty-eight percent, reported that their children do not speak a Meso-American language.

Discussion:

The age and gender breakdown (a majority young and male) reflects a common gender breakdown found in immigrant communities in the United States. Also, Mexico and Guatemala are the two most common countries of origin of U.S. migrant workers (Passel, 2006) and many migrants come to Wiregrass country from the Chiapas area of South Mexico and the lands along the border of Mexico and Guatemala (J. Cortez, personal communication, April 4, 2008).

The 2004 study respondents reported four Mayan languages, K'iche', Q'anjob'al, Mam, and Tz'utujil. The present study respondents reported twelve Meso-American languages. Thirteen respondents reported speaking Tzotzil and ten reported speaking Mam. Tzotzil is a major Mayan language spoken by over a quarter of a million people; similarly, Mam is a major Mayan language spoken by over half a million people. Five other languages were reported by multiple respondents: Nahuatl (six respondents),

K'anjob'al (five respondents), K'iche' (four respondents), and Zapoteco (two respondents). Modern Nahuatl, of which the Aztecs spoke a classical variant, is the most commonly spoken Meso-American language in Mexico with over a million and half speakers. K'anjob'al and K'iche' are both Mayan languages. K'iche is part of the same sub-family as Mam, with roughly the same number of speakers, while K'anjob'al is a less frequently spoken language. Zapoteco is a commonly spoken language in Mexico, with over half a million speakers, of the third major Meso-American linguistic family, Oto-Manguean (Campbell, 2000; SIL International, 2009).

Six languages each (Kaqchikel, Maya, Ixil, Tojolabal, Tarasco, and Mixteco) were reported spoken by just one respondent. Kaqchikel is a major Mayan language spoken by over half a million people. Maya, sometimes called Yucatec-Maya, is a major Mayan language spoken by almost a million people. Tojolabal is a much less frequently spoken Mayan language of the same sub-family as K'anjob'al. Ixil is a less frequently spoken Mayan language of the same sub-family as Mam. Tarasco is a less frequently spoken Meso-American language that is not a Mayan or Aztec language, as it does not share common linguistic traits with either linguistic groups. Mixteco, like Zapoteco, is commonly spoken in Mexico, has roughly half a million speakers, and is of the Oto-Manguean language family (Campbell, 2000; SIL International, 2009).

Thus, the study reported languages representing the three major Meso-American linguistic families: Oto-Manguean, Mayan, and Aztec-Tanoan. Specifically, Ixil, K'anjob'al, Kaqchikel, K'iche', Mam, Maya, Tojolabal, and Tzotzil are of the Mayan family. Nahuatl is of the Aztec family. Mixteco and Zapoteco are of the Oto-Manguean family. Tarasco, a linguistic isolate, was also reported. (Campbell, 2000; SLI

International, 2009). These thirteen reported Meso-American languages represent a significant linguistic diversity among the Wiregrass country respondents, and they represent the reality of living Meso-American languages in the United States that are an ancestral linkage to civilizations that far predate the colonized Americas.

Language use data showed strong home-directed reasons for Meso-American language use with ninety-six percent of responses linking to family, home, or friends. Spanish use was more mixed with forty-eight percent of the responses showing home-directed rationales linking to family, home, or friends and fifty-two percent of the responses linking directly to work. English use was similarly mixed with seventy-five percent of the responses linked to school or work and twenty-five percent of the responses home-directed. Spanish and English, with evident economic incentives, are dominant languages.

The language use data combined with the desire for language maintenance seem to predict eventual intergenerational Meso-American language loss among the Meso-American speakers in Wiregrass country. With clear economic incentives attached to English, one hundred percent of the respondents wanted their children to learn English. For a variety of reasons, one hundred percent of the respondents also wanted their children to learn Spanish. Pride in Spanish and to its use as a lingua franca among Indigenous peoples of Latin America is common (Riegelhaupt, Carrasco & Brandt, 2003). Seventy-percent wanted their children to learn Meso-American languages, and sixty-two percent reported that their children speak a Meso-American language. While this represents a substantial majority, strong loyalty to a language is vital to its maintenance (Hornberger, 1988), and thirty percent of the respondents had a negative

attitude toward maintenance of Meso-American languages and thirty-eight percent of the Meso-American language speaking parents reported that their children do not speak a Meso-American language. The researcher recommends that future studies investigate specific reasons for why respondents do not desire their children to speak a Meso-American language.

In comparing the previous study to the current study, two differences in the groups emerged. First, those in Wiregrass country displayed greater linguistic diversity. The 2004 study reported four Meso-American languages among the seventeen respondents, while the present study reported twelve Meso-American languages among the forty-three respondents. Second, those in Wiregrass Country displayed stronger loyalty to Meso-American languages. Specifically, in the 2004 study forty-two percent of the respondents were negative toward the maintenance of Meso-American languages, while the current study reported only thirty percent of the respondents as negative toward the maintenance of Meso-American languages. This difference was also found in actual language maintenance. Forty-two percent of the Meso-American language speaking respondents in 2004 reported that their children speak a Meso-American language, while sixty-two percent of the respondents in the present study reported that their children are Meso-American language speaking.

The study did not seek information on the length of time the respondents have been in the United States, but the researcher recommends this as an additional research question for future studies. The Guatemalan presence in towns such as Indiantown, Florida has been evident (and growing) since the 1980s (Burns, 1993). From the data collected, English was more prevalent among the respondents in Southeast Florida.

Specifically, twenty-five percent reported speaking English compared to fourteen percent among those surveyed in this study. Perhaps the differences in language attitudes and language maintenance link to a longer time in the United State among the respondents, as those in the United States for a longer time would be further along the path to language shift.

Implications:

The researcher hopes this study serves to publicize the linguistic diversity of the immigrant community in Wiregrass country. Stereotypes abound of these Latino immigrants (for example, they are all Mexican and Spanish speaking) and they have been met with discrimination and persecution in some Wiregrass country communities (McGregory, 1997). In contrast, this study clearly depicts the reality of these immigrants as multi-lingual individuals connected to a proud ancient ancestry.

Unfortunately, the study data suggests eventual intergenerational Meso-American language loss among the Meso-American speakers in Wiregrass country. Compounding this threat, these immigrant groups are threatened with immediate survival needs that often supplant efforts to preserve native culture and languages. These needs have increased in the present economic climate, as the continuing recession significantly impacts all immigrants and their search for stable work to provide basic sustenance. (Sachetti, 2009).

In the 2004 study, the researcher reported on efforts in Southeast Florida to preserve Meso-American languages and culture, such as an after-school language program and a Mayan community festival. These efforts continue, with the festival now a larger annual Fiesta Maya held in Jupiter, Florida (Tejedor, 2008). And, the El Sol

Neighborhood Resource Center, also in Jupiter, recently opened as an employment facility, but it also serves as a cultural resource for thousands of Guatemalans in the area (Moffet, 2009). These activities are integral to Meso-American language maintenance and should benefit future generations – specifically the young in school, as “there is a link between knowledge of culture and language and overall academic success” (Riegelhaupt, Carrasco & Brandt 2003, page 134).

In Wiregrass country no such Meso-American language or cultural preservation efforts were found. Without fealty to their heritage and language and beset by immediate survival needs, the respondents face the potential reality of language shift/loss, which brings negative cognitive effects as well as familiar alienation (Riegelhaupt, Carrasco & Brandt, 2003). However, education is a beginning. Specifically, teachers can play a significant role in language support by acknowledging Meso-American language loss and advocating for Meso-American language learning (Cantoni in Reyhner, 1997). In fact, in other language preservation efforts, young people have proven pivotal, as they have shown themselves to be knowledgeable and responsible in passing on their heritage and language (Goodfellow & Pauline, 2003). This process begins with support and awareness: empathy for Meso-American language speakers young and old and an active awareness of the Meso-American languages alive and spoken among us.

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