



# Language ideology, space, and place-based identity formation among the Tzotzil Maya of Chiapas, Mexico



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 16 June 2015

Received in revised form 20 April 2016

Accepted 12 June 2016

### Keywords:

Language ideology

Ethnicity

Tzotzil Maya

Chiapas

## ABSTRACT

In this paper we explore notions of within-group language variation in a Tzotzil Maya town of Chiapas, Mexico. Integrating GIS mapping, cultural domain analysis, and ethnographic research we find that the Tzotzil of Chenalhó hold a center-diffusion model of language variation in their municipality. We show that, counter to dichotomous models of identity, people see variation between communities as continuous and use spatial distances as a proxy for estimating linguistic differences. However, contrary to our expectations, people do not estimate linguistic distances from their own community; instead, they use the presumed pre-conquest center of the larger ethnic group as a point of reference from which variation emerges. Estimations are further influenced by a notion of a linguistically homogeneous center as well as by socio-political knowledge and stereotypes. These findings suggest that spatial cognition, combined with social and historical factors, may play a pivotal role in processes of identity formation and maintenance. Linguistic ideologies inscribe both deeply buried histories as well as people's conceptualization of space and their place in it.

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*When Our Father Sun changed the languages, people began to split up. They scattered; Some went to the lowlands, Others, like ourselves, scattered here and there in the highlands. Those who went off together were those who had the same language. The different groups were divided according to those who had the same language. Chamula Tzotzil oral legend (Gossen, 1999)*

## 1. Introduction

In this paper we revisit a debate on the relationship between ethnicity, language, and space by exploring how the Tzotzil Maya of Chenalhó, Mexico perceive and locate within-group language differences. We focus on the production of identity as it emerges through the construction of within-community language differences. Our findings are twofold. First, we show that local understandings of space and place can shape the construction of identity, a finding which complicates dichotomous models of ethnicity. In dichotomous models, identity formation is the product of partitioning processes in which notions of 'other' are built in opposition to 'self' (Gal and Irvine, 1995; Bucholtz and Hall, 2003). Instead, we propose a model in which categorization and ranking of social groups coexist with continuous notions of otherness – that is, people construct identities

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not only by using binary schemas, but also by estimating degrees of difference. Spatial knowledge, we argue, provides one possible tool people use to reason about such differences. Second, we show that the Tzotzil-Maya of our studies use within-group language differences as social commentary, telling us more about the perception of ethnicity than about language. Refusing simple dichotomies such as indigenous vs. non-indigenous, or state vs. subaltern, we find that the distribution of perceived language differences constitutes socio-historical commentaries that can be described both as native historiography and an act of resistance. While difficult to observe directly, we show that these historical and social commentaries can be detected through the use of indirect elicitation methods combined with ethnographic observation.

Constructed language differences present an idiom for rationalizing and imagining social difference. As such, they provide us with a window into identity construction, ethnicity, and social history. We take *the multiple ideas about language* not as simple representations of language, but as complex representations of people, their relations, and histories. The way people think and talk about their language is inextricably tied to the formation and maintenance of social identity (Hymes, 1974). Folk ideas and theories about language have been known as *linguistic ideologies*, a concept which highlights the partial, socially constructed, and interest-laden aspects of beliefs about language (Woolard and Schieffelin, 1994). Linguistic ideologies encompass and interrelate representations of linguistic features and their distribution, social categories, and moral and aesthetic values. As such, they cannot be seen neutral representations of linguistic phenomena (i.e. as existing independently of other cultural/cognitive domains), but rather are associated with social hierarchies and stereotypes and evoked by interested groups or individuals (Kroskrity, 2004). Though language ideology can relate to any aspect of a cultural system, most works on the subject have emphasized its role in mediating between forms of talk and social stereotypes. Irvine and Gal (2000) have conceptualized this phenomenon as *iconization*, a semiotic process by which certain linguistic features become associated to – and seen as iconic of – social identities. Iconization is accompanied by *fractal recursivity* – the notion that certain oppositions between groups can generate divisions within those groups at smaller scales – as well as by *erasure*, a process by which some social oppositions and groups are made more salient while others are rendered invisible or ignored. Research on language ideology emerged out of the recognition that social processes such as these can influence language change, thus posing a challenge to theoretical frameworks that explained change based on internal factors. For example, through *iconization* the status of groups can be transferred to the linguistic traits associated with them, creating a ‘linguistic economy’ in which certain ways of speaking are seen by speakers as more prestigious and desirable than others, shaping incentives that determine processes of language acquisition and change (Bourdieu, 1977; Silverstein, 1979; Irvine, 1989).

An example of how social hierarchies and linguistic ideologies interact is found in Tzotzil Maya origin myths (recorded by Norbert Ross in San Andrés Larráinzar, 1991). Here, the characteristics of the mythical founders of respective villages are sometimes evoked to explain the inter-community linguistic variation encountered. For example, regional mythology tells us that *SanMiguel* sat on a stone singing and playing the guitar while his older brother (*bankilal*) *SanAndrés* worked hard to establish their new home, San Andrés Larráinzar. *SanAndrés* eventually grew tired of his brother and sent him away; *SanMiguel* went on to found San Miguel Mitontic, and for this reason, people there are said to speak in a singing voice.<sup>1</sup> Both, the singing voice – and the implicit “laziness” expressed by it – and the older/younger brother dichotomy inscribe a hierarchical relation between members of the two communities. *Its’inal* and *bankilal*, “younger” and “older” brother [of a male individual], are terms that establish hierarchical relations between Tzotzil men. The two kinship terms are used beyond kinship relations when two men of different social status address one another, establishing a common framework for the ongoing interaction. As we can see, myth-based explanations of linguistic differences do much more than simply explain or describe variations in speech patterns: here, they are used to rationalize status differences between two communities. The inverse is the case when people imagine linguistic differences based on the existence of real or imaginary social differences. In both cases, a clear relation between social groups and language differences is established, and as a result, the two are hardly separable.

Here we examine how people construct within group differences by focusing on how perceptions of linguistic differences and similarities interact with political and geographic boundaries. We are not concerned with the **content** of differences (how people talk), but with how people perceive dialectal distances and classify variation. We use quantitative methods to elicit perceptions of linguistic and geographic distances within a Tzotzil Maya municipality, combined with GIS analyses and ethnographic research to explore how space and place interact with linguistic/social knowledge. Several of our findings are noteworthy: first, we show that notions of within-group linguistic differences are strongly influenced by people’s perceptions of geographic distances between communities. This finding adds a new dimension to the study of language ideology, as it suggests a strong interrelation between folk knowledge of geography and perceptions of linguistic difference. Second, and contrary to our initial expectations, our data show that the center for these social/linguistic distance estimations is not a speaker’s speech community (Ego’s position), but the (presumably) pre-colonial center of the municipality. It is in this area that people locate the best and purest Tzotzil spoken, and it is to this area that they ascribe the heart of their ethnic identity. Given the post-colonial relocation of the center town, the *cabecera*, by non-indigenous people (*Mestizos*), we argue that this reflects both the construction of a local identity as well as a social criticism on past and present ethnic relations. Identifying the community identity with a pre-colonial center rather than the contemporary political center of the municipality, the *cabecera*, people undermine the symbolic function of the latter. Third, we show that social identity is not only conceptualized in dichotomous terms (as in ‘we vs. them’), but also be understood in continuous terms, radiating from a central place. This

<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Irvine (1989) documented how Wolof villagers of West Africa explain linguistic variation by way of invented migration histories, seemingly also adhering to the one people one language theory.

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