Can minority languages survive?

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Abstract

This sociolinguistic study examines whether the current generation of young speakers of a minority language, Tutunakú from Mexico, are likely to pass it on to their children. Although difficult to quantify, this research seeks to assess the value and usefulness associated with the language in the minds of its young speakers. Attitudes and beliefs are interrogated, language practices observed, and the management of language in the local environment is researched. A characteristic of the study is knowledge exchange as a guiding principle and methodology.

Mother tongue speakers of Tutunakú outside their Spanish-medium school with the English teacher, a mother tongue Welsh-speaker.

Introduction

Linguistic diversity is being lost at an alarming rate, and with it untold loss of human knowledge. It is estimated that by the end of this century, half the languages spoken today will be extinct.[1] Endangered languages are not necessarily minority languages in terms of numbers of speakers, but they do live in the shadow of powerful languages (or language communities) which encroach on their land and lifestyles. Investigating the factors which accelerate or brake language loss can help not only the research community to understand the relationship between society and language, but also a global community of minority language activists trying to take remedial action. For example, many of Mexico's indigenous languages such as Tutunakú (or Totonac) survived conquest first by the Aztec and later by the Spanish, only to spiral into decline after independence. **In this project, research is undertaken with young speakers of Tutunakú in a community that has been resilient in maintaining the original language.** The aim is to understand what the situation has been in the past, and consider prospects for the language in the future.

Huehuetla, the study's location, is in steep mountain forest in the north-east highlands of Puebla, Mexico. Most speakers of Tutunakú live well away from the road in homesteads

Nearly half the estimated 250,000 speakers of Tutunakú live in Puebla; in Huehuetla / Kgoyom, 90% speak Tutunakú as a first language, and around a third of adults and most pre-school children speak little or no Spanish.[2]

Research Questions

The literature tells us that the survival of any language starts in the home, with the decision by new parents to use it with their own children. It must be used across the age groups in the family, and in social interaction and bonding with other inter-generational networks.[3] Whether a language is passed on depends on many factors, but attitudes towards it and the value afforded to it by its younger speakers are crucial. Their language behaviour can reveal a great deal about their own attitudes and about the language's prospects. [4, 5]

Research Questions

Among young bilinguals, what is the nature of:

- **Language Beliefs,** e.g. attitudes, assumptions, connotations, and associations which feed into how the language and its speakers are perceived. How does this affect how the language is valued?

- **Language Practices,** e.g. language behaviour in private and in public, among friends or strangers, in transactions or in emotional exchanges. Where does the indigenous language gain or lose ground?

- **Language Management,** e.g. actions which directly or indirectly cause language practices or beliefs to modify, weaken or consolidate. Who is managing language, how and why?

Methodology

Adolescents are trained to research among their peers

Peer Research

A team of young bilinguals act as direct informants to the researcher on local language beliefs, practices and management; in addition they are trained to conduct research among their own peers. This includes:

- conducting interviews and group discussions
- applying written questionnaires
- observing language behaviour

For example, peer researchers might watch a young relative at home, or a friend walking home along tarmac roads and forest pathways. Using a template, observers record which language the young person uses with different people in different locations, or their use of different languages with the same people for different purposes. This is known as *code-switching*, and is complex both to record and to analyse. However, it helps us identify the social networks which sustain a minority or threatened language, and reveals the important communicative functions (or purposes of spoken interaction) the threatened language performs.

Most Tutunakú speakers reach their homes on foot, along mountain tracks and pathways. It is rare to meet someone on a mountain pathway who is not a Tutunakú speaker. Most Spanish monolinguals live close to tarmac roads and use public transport. However, it is less rare to meet someone on a bus who speaks no Spanish.

Rationale for peer research

By involving and training young people, the aim is to:
- Raise local awareness around language loss
- Build local capacity, i.e. to transfer skills, knowledge and equipment
- Improve the character of the qualitative data

An assumption of the method is that young people will respond more openly and behave more naturally among their peers. It reduces the risk that informants perform what they believe the researcher wants to see, and it enriches subjective responses. However, informants may be liable to peer pressure, which can also skew results. There is an extra need to sift for errors and irrelevant data. This method is demanding of time, energy and resources, and perhaps better suited to teams.

A peer researcher records a sibling's use of Tutunakú with people of different ages

People much older than him

People much younger than him

People about his age
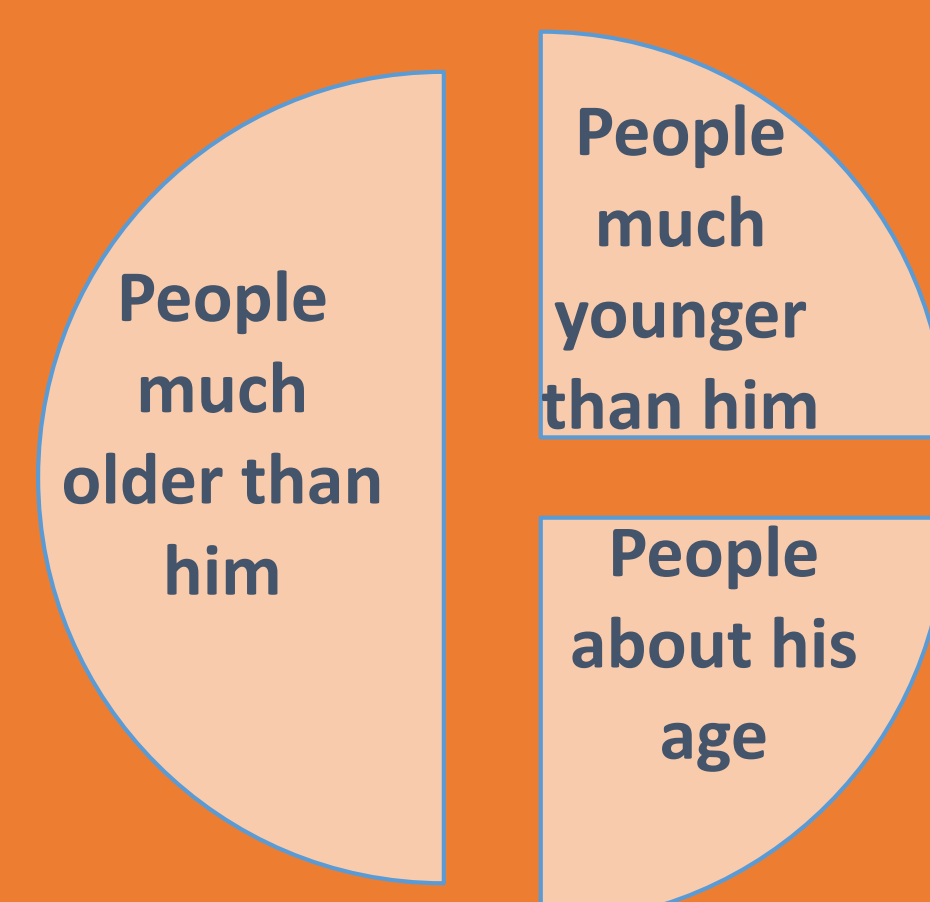
The pie shows relative quantities of spoken interactions during 90 minutes in the home

Which language does my friend use more often?
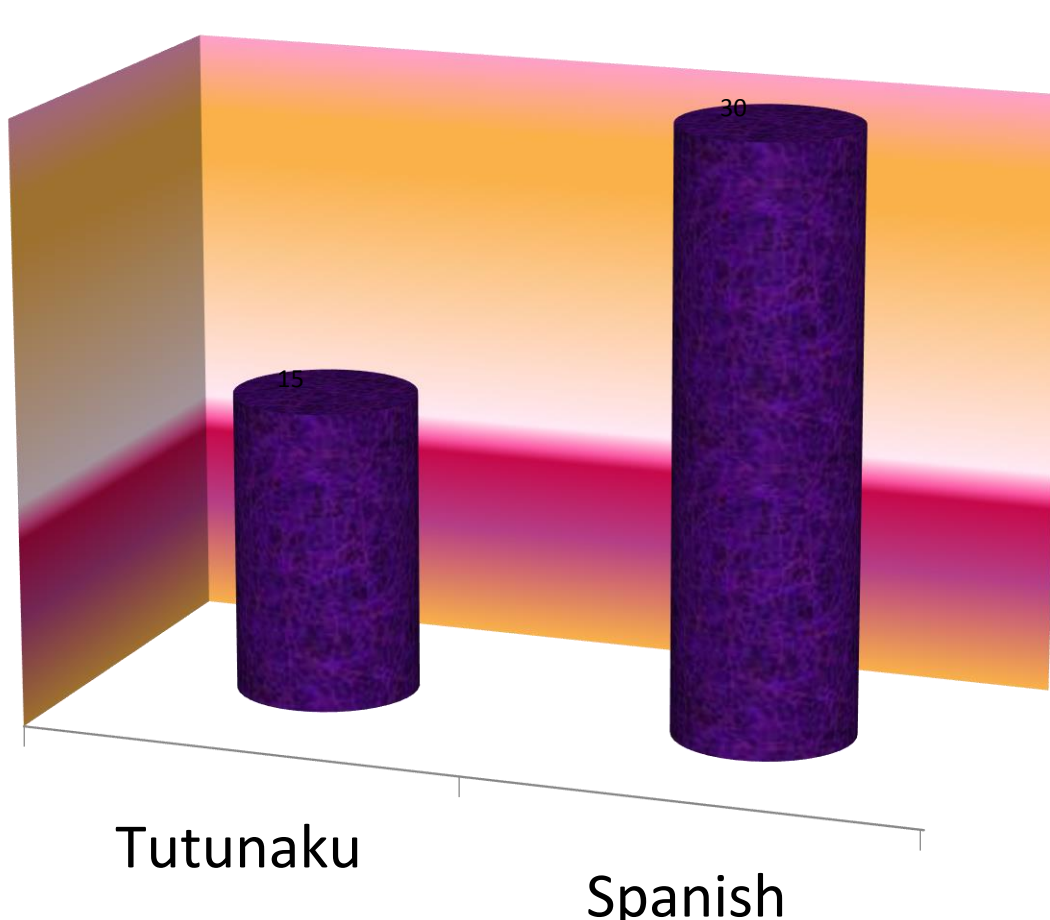
A peer researcher records code-switching to see how often a classmate uses the minority or majority language with his friends: the bars show spoken interactions relative to one another during a school break-time

Tutunaku   Spanish

Results

... Language beliefs

Early results suggest that young bilinguals:

- hold Tutunakú in high esteem and say they will use it with their own children

- do not regard their own extensive use of Spanish as a threat to it

- do believe they experience disdain and discrimination as an indigenous language community

... Language Practices

Early results suggest that young bilinguals:

- are just as likely to speak Tutunakú with someone their own age or younger, as with an older person

- use Spanish twice as often as Tutunakú in certain public spaces and for certain functions

- are likely to use Tutunakú for highly cooperative tasks, but use either language for having fun

... Language Management

- Most primary and all secondary, further and higher education provision is conducted in Spanish; tuition in or about Tutunakú is negligible

- New education maintenance grants, plus rapid local expansion of all types of provision, is increasing the years spent in Spanish-medium education

- In local higher education there is some evidence of indigenous language research and revitalization

Peer researcher Dolores and her mother Regina selling tamales (stuffed corn polenta) at the market. In local commerce, product and location determine language use: tamales are sold by female producers, mostly in Tutunakú, on street corners; bread is sold on from small bakeries to corner shops; in both outlets Spanish predominates

Although it is too soon to draw conclusions, early results suggest the perceived economic value of each language may be decisive in modifying young people's beliefs and practices. Access to education, jobs, and the internet all steer them towards Spanish (and English), but subsistence agriculture demands strong family and community ties, close cooperation, and reinforces the use of Tutunakú.

References

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Further Reading

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