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Maintaining Indigenous Mexican Languages in Oregon,
a Preliminary Assessment

by

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Abstract

Minority languages around the globe are losing speakers at an unprecedented rate. As researchers attend to the documentation and maintenance of these languages, one group residing within the United States remains largely overlooked: Indigenous Mexican migrants and immigrants. Because their languages lack support in both Mexico and the U.S., Spanish and English threaten to replace them within a few generations. Focusing on communities in Oregon, this paper assesses the attitudes of community members toward their languages to determine whether there is a precedent for pursuing a language maintenance project. Ethnographic scholarship on Indigenous Mexican migrant issues indicates their established civic, social, and cultural organizations as the optimal facilitators for this work. This paper suggests frameworks for community-based development and implementation of language maintenance programs.

Key Words: Endangered languages, Indigenous languages, Language maintenance, Indigenous Mexicans, Mexican migrants.

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1 I follow the scholars of Indigenous Nations Studies in capitalizing ‘Indigenous’ to acknowledge its importance as a component of individual and group identities.
Introduction: Who are Indigenous Mexicans?

People of Mexican nationality have long resided within the borders of what is now the United States. In recent history, the U.S. Southwest was, in fact, Mexican territory. Following U.S. acquisition of these lands in 1848, Mexicans continued to visit, use, and work in these areas. Though the migratory routes of Mexican laborers have long included locations across the U.S. South and along the West Coast, it was not until the 1970s and 80s that unprecedented large-scale migration and settling within the U.S. borders resulted in majority Hispanic populations throughout California. Oregon is a part of this trend as well. Woodburn, a mid-sized town in Oregon’s northern Willamette Valley, is the state’s most notable settling location with a Hispanic of slightly more than 50% of the total. A significant portion of Mexican families in Woodburn and other settling locations are Indigenous. Despite having little to no knowledge of Spanish or English upon arrival, Indigenous immigrants are rapidly shifting away from their Indigenous languages (ILs) in to Spanish and English. Indigenous ancestry often makes IL speakers the targets of unfair labor practices and discrimination in Mexican enclave communities. Mexican Indigeneity is further marginalized in the U.S. by terms such as “Hispanic” and “Latino” that erase ethnic distinctions. Beside Spanish, 62 ILs are spoken in Mexico. Though Indigenous Mexican migration to the United States has come in such significant numbers that California now has more “American Indians” than Oklahoma (Huizar Murillo & Cerda, 2004, p. 279), “Mexican migrants in the United States are still widely assumed to be an ethnically homogenous population” (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004, p. 1).

The U.S. public’s failure to acknowledge the Indigenous identities of many newcomers from Mexico results in our ignorance of this population’s endangered languages. Existing largely in rural isolation in Mexico, migrants to the U.S. experience numerous pressures to
abandon their languages and risk losing ethnocultural identities. This phenomenon is part of the distressing trend of language loss taking place around the world.

**Why Revitalization for Mexican ILs?**

The global population currently finds itself in the midst of a mass linguistic extinction. Ninety percent of all languages are predicted to lose their last speakers by the end of this century (UNESCO, 2003, p. 2). Among the approximately six or seven thousand languages spoken today, Indigenous languages are generally the most vulnerable to language shift (Brenzinger & de Graaf, 2006, p. 1; Lewis & Simons, 2009, p. 4; UNESCO, 2003, p. 2). In the aftermath of colonization, oppression, and forced assimilation, these languages do not have robust speaker populations to sustain them. Rarely are they institutional languages that provide access to socioeconomic opportunity. Current trends in urbanization and globalization intensify the pressure on already marginalized speech communities to shift to dominant languages in increasingly homogenous linguistic environments.

![Languages and Speakers](http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/langhotspots/globaltrends.html)
Figure 1 above illustrates the disparity among speaker population sizes that leaves some languages susceptible to dominant language pressures. “97% of the world’s people speak about 4% of the world’s languages; and conversely, about 96% of the world’s languages are spoken by about 3% of the world’s people” (Bernard, 1996, p. 142 cited in UNESCO, 2003, p. 2, italics not mine). Of the 6,604 languages Anderson and Harrison (2007) evaluate, a mere 83 are spoken by an overwhelming 79.4% of the world’s population. In contrast, a significantly larger number, 2,935 languages, are spoken by 20.4% of the world’s people. The majority of languages, 3,586, are dispersed among a miniscule 0.2% of the population. The unprecedented disparity among speaker populations suggests that the global shift to these 83 dominant languages is already in an advanced stage. As minority languages continue to lose speakers to dominant ones, this disparity grows. Already, half of all languages are not being taught to children (UNESCO, 2003, p. 2). In the case of Mexico, the intergenerational transmission of virtually all 62 ILs is declining as Spanish becomes more dominant.

Spanish, the de facto national language, not only dominates the political, social, and economic arenas of Mexico, but is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. With 414,170,030 speakers, Spanish has the second largest L1 speaker base of any other language worldwide. Ninety-three percent of Mexicans speak Spanish (104,000,000 people), making it the largest Spanish-speaking nation in the world. The United States has the fifth largest Spanish speaking population, after Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, and Spain (Lewis, Simmons, & Fennig, 2014). Meanwhile, the 62 Indigenous languages of the county account for only 6.7% of the total population combined, dropping from 10% in the 1990 census. Náhuatl\(^2\) is by far the best

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\(^2\) The literature on Mexico’s ILs provides numerous spellings of the same language. For the sake of uniformity, I represent languages with the spellings used in the Mexican national census, devised by Manrique Castañeda as
represented among them with a speaker base of more than 1,500,000 (Schmal, 2012). Náhuatl, accompanied by Maya (786,113 speakers), Mixteco³ (476, 472), Tzeltal (445, 856), Zapoteco (450, 419), and Tzotzil (404, 704) are the only Mexican ILs categorized in Figure 1 as medium-sized languages. The remaining 57 are severely endangered. At the time of the 1990 census, twenty-eight of the ILs had more than 10,000 speakers and twenty-four had fewer than 1,000 (Terborg, Landa, & Moore, 2006, pp. 432-434). In Figure 2, the red outline demarcates where the languages of Mexico find themselves within the global trend of language endangerment. If nothing is done to maintain the Mexican ILs, they will be among those to soon disappear. Some of the languages with the smallest speaker populations may have already lost their last speakers with the reduction in the IL speaker population since 1990.


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³ The figures for Mixteco and Zapoteco include regional varieties collapsed into one category.
In Oregon, the intergenerational shift away from the Mexican ILs in favor of Spanish and English warrants the attention of linguists and language planners. The geographic proximity and sizes of speaker populations offer an accessible site to address language endangerment and the human rights violations with which language shift is associated. Furthermore, the lack of support for these languages in both countries lends urgency to the task of promoting domains of usage for speakers here. Before turning to the circumstances surrounding Mexican ILs in the United States, and specifically Oregon, a glimpse of their position in Mexican history and society will illustrate how they became endangered and demonstrate their marginalized existence in the U.S.

The following section presents the history of language policy toward Mexican ILs that leads to their present-day endangerment. In addition to demonstrating the movement of speakers into Oregon, I also illustrate the pressures for and resistance to language shift among these communities. I then explore the language attitudes and organizational systems of Indigenous Mexican communities. I locate several examples of cultural maintenance and identity assertion that indicate appropriate domains for the development and implementation of language revitalization programs. Finally, I offer different frameworks for a maintenance program and present several questions that continued research should address before such programs can be realized.

The Language Situation in Mexico

Despite more than 300 years of colonial Spanish rule and the devastating effects of conquest on the Indigenous population, the threat to the Indigenous characteristics of Mexican

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4 The following discussion proceeds in large part from Terborg, Landa, & Moore (2006). Unless otherwise noted, all page citations refer to that work. The reader is invited to refer to it for the original references. Many of the statistical data are updated figures from the same sources these authors used.
identity begins relatively late. The Spaniards arrived in Mexico at the end of the 15th century. Even though the native population was reduced to 99% of its pre-contact size and more than 100 languages were lost, 80% of Mexicans still spoke an IL at the time of Mexican Independence in 1821 (p. 419). The Mestizo\textsuperscript{5} government of newly sovereign Mexico embraced a one-language-one-nation ideology supporting Spanish as the country’s unifying language. This dramatically altered the linguistic makeup of the nation and within fifty years, Spanish emerged as the L1 of 70% of the population (p. 441). Although many Indigenous languages disappeared under Spanish rule, the majority of Mexicans still spoke an IL until the mid-nineteenth century. The changes to the linguistic landscape of Mexico came swiftly and had far-reaching effects.

Those who did not assimilate linguistically were predominantly peoples in isolated rural communities. Largely ignored by the government, many of these areas lack basic infrastructure such as electricity and running water to this day. Although the remote living conditions are harsh, it is precisely this remoteness to which the ILs owe their longevity. The ability of these insular communities to preserve their languages is demonstrated by the surprising statistic from the 2010 Mexican census that 15.2% of IL speakers remain monolingual (Schmal, 2012). The hardships of rural living, however, are now driving members of these communities to seek work in agribusiness areas or urban centers throughout Mexico and the United States. Once there, Indigenous peoples encounter a need for Spanish and/or English, as well as discrimination based on their Indigenous identity and language. The decline in monolingualism among Mexican IL speakers between 2000 and 2010 reveals the negative impact emigration from traditional rural communities has on IL vitality. The age groups most likely to leave and experience pressures to

\textsuperscript{5} I am aware that this term often has pejorative connotations and may cause offense despite its wide use in the literature. Virtually all of the texts I encountered in my research, including those coming from scholars at Mexican universities, use this term. Because it is commonly used in academic works and I know of no effective substitute, I use it here to contrast Indigenous peoples with members of the dominant group in Mexico.
shift to Spanish also have the lowest rates of monolingualism. The census shows that IL speakers 15 to 29 years old are only 6.8% monolingual and adults ages 30 to 64 are 12.5% monolingual (Schmal, 2012). In comparison, children 5 to 9 are 36.9% monolingual and adults 65 and older are 23% monolingual.

In Mexico, Indigenous identity has long been based on a person’s knowledge of an IL. In fact, until the 2010 Mexican census, official recognition of a person’s Indigeneity relied entirely on the ability to speak an IL. This most recent census was the first to allow respondents to self-identify as Indigenous regardless of the language they speak. This raised the count of Indigenous Mexicans from the 6.9 million IL speakers to 15.7 million, including 8.8 million who feel Indigenous despite not speaking an IL (Schmal, 2012). Such a large figure of individuals identifying as Indigenous without knowledge of an IL may be indicative of the recent intensity with which language shift has transformed Indigenous communities. Although younger generations may not speak an IL, if the older generations do, the youth will still be aware of their Indigeneity. In terms of language revitalization, this figure is promising. Even if a language no longer has any speakers, revitalization is possible as long as individuals continue to identify that language has part of their cultural heritage.

**Language Attitudes and Shift**

The pressure to shift to Spanish comes from social discrimination and Indigenous people’s hindered access to economic opportunities. Not only is Spanish language often a necessity for survival, but an Indigenous identity or accent may lead to dispreference for employment (pp. 497-500). These factors contribute to the negative attitudes IL speakers hold toward their languages. The perceived uselessness of the IL may lead to the belief that even
knowledge of it is implicitly detrimental. A different study by Terborg reveals the belief among one community of Otomí speakers that knowledge of their language predetermines educational inadequacy (Terborg, 2004 as cited in Terborg, Landa, & Moore, 2006, p. 502). Furthermore, people do not recognize Mexican ILs as fully fledged languages. Rather, people speak of dialectos, lower than the Spanish lengua in the Mexican language hierarchy. This dichotomy of prestige reflects the domains of language usage. The traditional agricultural activities, rural lifestyles, and already depreciated status associated with Indigenous people contribute to the view that their speech is an inferior, incomplete, and inadequate attempt at language, i.e. dialecto. Spanish, on the other hand, has demonstrated itself to be the language of the powerful. It is used in governmental, economic, educational, and artistic domains. Associated with Euro-colonial conceptions of “civilization,” Spanish fulfills the dominant colonizer-imposed criteria of a fully expressive language, i.e. lengua (Meek & Messing, 2008, p. 112).

**Recent IL Policy**

Aside from socioeconomic and ideological pressures elevating Spanish over any IL, the spread of Spanish can also be examined through governmental education policies targeting rural Indigenous peoples. These policies come in three phases: incorporation, integration, and participation. The first two represent a paternalistic, unilateral policy type that does not consider the rights or agency of Indigenous peoples. Instead, it works to assimilate them into mainstream culture and society (p. 439). Both of these phases make use of a subtractive form of bilingual education. A common characteristic of such subtractive models is the initial reliance on the L1 for acquisition of the state language, after which the L1 is phased out and the state language becomes the sole language of education. The example I give above from Terborg’s (2004) work with Otomí speakers reveals the effect this can have on community language attitudes.
The third phase is participatory language policy. In contrast to the first two, this phase seeks collaboration between the state and IL communities to create education programs. The expressed goal is to provide the Spanish language skills necessary to function within the wider society and access economic opportunities without harming the vitality of the IL. Although this policy type is the guiding vision for contemporary Indigenous education in Mexico, it fails to include substantial directives for implementing bilingual programs and developing IL materials (p. 439). This failure leads to criticism from scholars and Indigenous activists that the policy of the past 20 years is participatory in name only, while the government, in fact, continues practices of subtractive bilingualism and assimilation (p. 503).

The unrealized promises of IL language preservation may be easily explained by the generally poor state of rural education where IL bilingual programs should be implemented. Critics propose that the legal protections for Indigenous rights to language, culture, and identity are merely political gestures resulting largely from government agreements with the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) after its 1994 insurrection in Chiapas. Beginning as a guerrilla rebel organization of Indigenous agrarian communities, the Zapatistas advocate for Indigenous management of their own land resources. When Mexico joined NAFTA, the predicted harmful impact that membership would have on Indigenous communities prompted them to declare war against the government and seize control of Chiapas. Negotiations between the government and the rebels led to the San Andrés Accord. This document secured official recognition of the legal, economic, and cultural rights of Indigenous people in 1996. Unfortunately, recognition of the existence of rights does not equate with the removal of barriers Indigenous people encounter to economic opportunity, free cultural expression, and justice.
Even before the San Andrés Accord, Indigenous peoples had been organizing in Mexico since the 1980s. In 1992, the 500th anniversary of the “discovery” of the Americas prompted the government amended articles 4 and 27 of the national constitution to recognize the *multilingual* and *multicultural* makeup of Mexico (p. 442). Despite the pride citizens express in their state language-- recalling the impact of the one-language-one-nation policy-- Mexican nationalism seeks to position Mexican identity as unique and oppositional to the historically dominant colonial power (p. 426). This ideological stance allowed for legislation reacting against the notion of Mexico’s “discovery” 500 years prior. In addition to emphasizing these unique Indigenous cultural features, the amendments also charged the government with the responsibility of preserving the Indigenous languages and cultures of Mexico. This appears to have amounted to little, however, because before the EZLN uprising, minority language issues were almost never mentioned in newspapers (p. 422).

Following the uprising, Indigenous groups were again able to captivate national media attention in 2001 when they nearly unanimously rejected a proposed constitutional amendment that threatened the 1992 clauses acknowledging Mexico’s multilingual and multicultural character. In response, the government issued the General Law for the Linguistic Rights of Indigenous People (GLLRIP). Article 4 of this document gave ILs national language status and legitimized them as components of the national heritage. This decree represents a significant interruption of Spanish language dominance in a country where only 6.7% of people speak an IL, and the overwhelming majority of citizens view Spanish as an important part of their individual and national identity (pp. 415, 426).
Despite the significant amount of legislation in favor of IL preservation and education, the few efforts underway find little success. In the next section I explore some of the difficulties involved in the development and adoption of IL materials in Mexican classrooms.

**Existing Documentation and Materials Development**

The historical discrimination of IL speakers in Mexico has severely limited the amount of research and documentation available for current language development and policy initiatives. The essential first step in policy formation requires determining language relatedness and mutual intelligibility (p. 429). Without this knowledge it is impossible to efficiently produce materials for closely related, but slightly divergent endangered ILs. Effective development initiatives prefer that a single dialect serve as the standard for speakers of related varieties. Not only does this economize materials production, it also merges multiple disparate language communities into one larger entity capable of sustaining the IL. Because of the contentious politics surrounding identity and language, community investment in a unified standard must be exceptionally high for language planning based on this model to succeed.

Nevertheless, categorization and standardization are paramount considerations for a nation with limited resources seeking to accommodate great linguistic diversity. The treatment of Yucatec Maya, a language with relatively little dialectal variation, illustrates the extreme difficulty of standardization (Guerrettaz, 2013). Because Yucatec Maya is one of the largest minority languages in Mexico and even enjoys a degree of prestige on the Yucatan Peninsula, it warrants the painstaking effort of standardization. Considering the difficulty involved in the standardization of this relatively “uncomplicated” language, it is apparent that the process for
smaller languages with more variation will be exponentially more difficult (Terborg, Landa, & Moore, 2006, p. 421).

The lack of foundational research and documentation of Mexico’s ILs makes their widespread standardization a daunting task. The best-understood languages, Náhuatl and Maya, owe their thorough documentation, in part, to the efforts of early missionaries (p. 427). Beyond these languages and the existence of three great language families, Uto-Aztecan, Otomangue, and Mayan, there is little on which scholars agree (p. 429). The main voices in the discourse have posited anywhere between seven and twenty families (pp. 428-30). Even estimates for the number of languages spoken in Mexico are disputed and range from 59 to 282 (p. 415). The lowest figure comes from Anya (1987). The Ethnologue (2014) provides the highest estimate at 282, while Manrique Castañeda (1997), designer of the 1990 Mexican census language categories, lists 89 (cited in Terborg, Landa, & Moore, 2006, pp. 432-3). Both Castañeda and the Ethnologue give much consideration to how groups divide themselves politically, as well as the different names that exist for the same language. Language ideology, unfortunately, can confound the process of determining relatedness. Often, people who speak closely related languages claim them to be mutually unintelligible to emphasize their distinct group identities. The census must attempt to balance structural categorizations with the ideologies of speakers themselves. If speakers do not feel represented by a census category meant to capture them, there will inevitably be inaccuracies in the statistics. Terborg, Landa, and Moore (2006) borrow Castañeda’s categories and collapse the regional varieties of languages like Zapoteco into a single category. The result is 62 languages. Though they mention the difficulty and arbitrariness of creating rigid “language” boundaries between speech varieties, the authors deem this figure useful for vitality assessments and standardization (p. 431).
Academics and Indigenous activists have criticized IL policy and education, as mentioned above. The Mexican Secretariat of Public Education (SEP), oversees state education for primary and lower secondary schools. Its responsibilities include curricula and materials development and dissemination, teacher training, and administrative oversight. Problems with the execution of all of these create barriers to fully implementing the new multicultural education policy. Various language development initiatives and organizations, however, have produced a number of materials that can easily be utilized in the maintenance project proposed below.

Reading and literacy materials include those developed by the General Directorate for Indigenous Education (DGEI), a branch of the SEP. I have not found the languages for which they produce materials, but it has been noted that these tend to be rudimentary introductions to orthography (Francis & Reyhner, 2002, p. 210; Terborg, Landa, & Moore, 2006, p. 446). Additionally, DGEI materials for Náhuatl are less attractive than free Spanish textbooks and are of lower quality than those community teachers produce in their homes (Meek & Messing, 2008, p. 112). The ILs position within a matrix of the dominant language and the lack of respectful reference to the language in accordance with cultural norms are problems Meek and Messing point out (pp. 109-112).

Adult literacy book series are available in 21 different ILs from the National Institute for Adult Education (INEA) (Terborg, Landa, & Moore, 2006, p. 447). The General Association of Indigenous Writers has 60 members producing literature in 22 languages, with Maya, Chiapaneco, and Zapoteco best represented. A number of language-specific, independent

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6 Chatino, Chinanteco, Chol, Huasteco, Mazahua, Maya, Mazateco, Mixe, Mixteco, Náhuatl, Otomí, Purépecha, Tarahumara, Tlapaneco, Totonaca, Tojolabal, Triqui, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Zapoteco, and Zoque.
academies and organizations exist for Hñahñu⁷, Maya, Purépecha, Tenek⁸, Kiliwa, Mixteco, Náhuatl, Chinanteco, Mazateco, and Zapoteco (pp. 448-449). They are active in various areas of cultural research and language documentation and development. Some universities engage in similar efforts, offering IL courses to L1 Spanish speakers, and employing native IL speakers as instructors and researchers (pp. 456, 462, 464).

In terms of IL media, radio is the most prevalent and accessible form; ninety-nine percent of Mexican citizens has access to radio (p. 483). The National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI) operates 20 AM and 4 FM radio stations broadcasting in 31 ILs (p. 484). Additionally, the National Indigenous Institute (INI) broadcasts in 14 languages, both ILs and regional varieties of Spanish (p. 483). While radio presents an impressive breadth of languages and is highly accessible, there are legislated restrictions on IL media. According to the Federal Law on Radio and Television, IL programs may be only 30 minutes in length and must be followed by a Spanish language synopsis. Additionally, the names of the station and “the location where it is installed should be expressed in Spanish” (p. 482). The majority of television broadcasting is in Spanish; however, local languages appear on TV in some regions, particularly Mayan ones (p. 485). Indigenous language films are also allowed by the Federal Law of Cinematography. These do not usually take the form of popular film, but are instead documentaries produced by Indigenous peoples about their home communities, cultures, and struggles (p. 487). Print media such as newspapers typically exist only in urban areas with large Indigenous populations, such as on the Yucatan Peninsula.

⁷ Hñahñu is a variety of Otomí spoken in the Mezquital Valley. Speakers have popularized this name. (Lewis, Simmons, & Fennig, 2014; Terborg, Landa, & Moore, 2006, p. 429)
⁸ Tenek does not appear among Castañeda’s categorizations, nor does it yield search results on Ethnologue.com.
The outline above presents a number of Mexican IL materials and media resources with potential for application to a language maintenance program in the U.S. Before I discuss the particulars of developing and instituting such programs, the next section explains how speakers of these languages came to live in Oregon, the circumstances surrounding their migration, and the sociolinguistic environment to which a maintenance effort must be tailored.

**Indigenous Mexican Migration to the U.S.**

The history of Mexican migration into the United States begins the very moment the borders were drawn between Mexico and the newly acquired U.S. territory of California in 1848. The successful military efforts securing U.S. control of the lands in the present-day U.S. Southwest made outsiders of those who had previously been working their own Mexican land (Stephen, 2007, p. 66). The contemporary large-scale contribution of Mexican labor to the U.S. agriculture economy has its roots here. At first, Chinese outnumbered Mexicans among non-U.S.-American agricultural workers. When the advent of WWI created a labor shortage, a temporary worker program under the Immigration Act of 1917 recruited predominantly Mexican workers, allowing them to surpass the other represented ethnic groups in number (p. 70). The U.S. government preferred Mexican workers because their proximity to the Mexican border allowed them to be deported with relative ease once the program ended. Originally intending to employ and then return these workers to Mexico, this program set a precedent for future labor shortages. The Bracero Program (1942-1965), along with the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) and its Special Agricultural Workers (SAW) program granted amnesty to tens of thousands of Mexican migrant workers on which the U.S. agricultural sector relied (Stephen, 2007, pp.70-76).
Mexicans historically migrating to the U.S. have been predominantly non-Indigenous peoples from rural central and western Mexico; however, there have always been Indigenous cohorts among them (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004, p. 1). While extreme poverty in neglected rural areas has been driving Indigenous migration for some time, these migratory patterns remained largely domestic, centering around Mexican urban and agribusiness centers until the large-scale migrations to the U.S. in the 1980s (p. 2). Even before this great spike in Indigenous Mexican migration to the U.S., the Bracero Program’s amnesty offers attracted significant numbers of Purépechas from Michoacán and Mixtecs and Zapotecs from Oaxaca between 1942 and 1964 (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004, p. 2; López & Runsten, 2004, p. 254). The settling of some Indigenous families in California under this program made the U.S. an attractive destination for later waves of desperately impoverished Indigenous migrants and facilitated their entrance into the labor force.

In the 1980s, it was difficult for rural farmers to earn a sustainable income in the face of the Mexican economic recession and economic liberalization measures preceding NAFTA, such
as the 1986 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (Rivera-Sanchez, 2004, p. 419; Stephen, 2007, p. 123-4). The history of rural peoples engaging in seasonal patterns of migratory work eventually gave rise to established migratory networks across Mexico and parts of the U.S. These vast extensions of contacts are grounded in relationships to an individual’s place of origin, or hometown, and became central features of migrant communities. Emergent transnational hometown communities allow absenteees to remain active in hometown affairs and civic life, while also facilitating the arrival of newcomers to labor sites and migrant enclaves. Migrants use these networks to regularly send collective remittances and manpower back to the hometown for public works projects. Circulating community political positions may also require a migrant to return home and serve his term. In some hometowns, 20% of people may be absent at any given time (Stephen, 2007, p. 57). The migrant network provides a lifeline that maintains community relationships and allows those who stay behind to survive.

The central feature of hometown networks among migrants has proven to be a powerful organizing structure upon which hometown associations, state-wide Indigenous federations, and Mexican pan-Indigenous organizations are based. These groups have proven extremely successful in targeting employers and growers, as well as various levels of government in Mexico and the U.S. to secure labor and migrant rights. The activist work of some of these groups has also given rise to branches concerned with identity and cultural preservation. I will revisit these groups later as potential arenas for language maintenance programs. For now, I explore Indigenous migrant issues in the U.S.

Illegal, Invisible, Indigenous

The 1986 IRCA granted legal residency to thousands of migrant laborers in 1986, but also tightened the border and restricted access for those who had not received amnesty. The
effects of heightened border control reinforced perceptions of Mexicans as “illegals” or “potential illegals” (Stephen, 2007, p. 145-6). While this has not interrupted the migration patterns I discuss above, undocumented workers’ fear of legal repercussions has allowed growers and employers to take advantage of them. Often, monolingualism in an IL makes workers reliant on labor providers and subject to inhumane working conditions and unfair wages resembling indentured servitude.

Ninety percent of incoming migrant farmworkers to California between 1995 and 2000 were undocumented (p. 76). In Oregon, it is estimated that between fifty and eighty percent of farmworkers are undocumented (p. 148). One reason for the sustained levels of undocumented labor following large-scale amnesty programs is that legal residents generally bring their families to settle with them. Distant relatives and acquaintances may also be inclined to seek work in the U.S. if they know someone already established there. Another reason is the need of growers to replenish their cheap labor supply. Workers with legal residency have more political and economic power; they are less afraid to contest unfair wages and poor working conditions than “illegals”. They can also leave the agriculture sector in search of more secure and better paying jobs in production or service industries. Because of this, growers actively seek out undocumented workers whom they can intimidate and control with the threat of deportation or legal action. Labor contractors reach deeper into the Indigenous pockets of Mexico to recruit workers precisely because they often (until recently) have no contacts in the U.S. and have limited or no Spanish proficiency. Their restricted access to information makes them unlikely to complain about working conditions. Further, their IL monolingualism renders them completely dependent on the contractors. Their employers are able to overwork and underpay them, and provide inhumane living conditions without the fear of prosecution (pp. 165-167).
Concomitant with the silence of exploited Indigenous farmworkers is their invisibility. Hidden in illegal laborer camps or in multifamily dwellings, Indigenous migrant workers and the abuses they endure go unnoticed. One way to bring attention to this invisible demographic and secure services for them is to utilize the U.S. census. Until 2000, the format of questions about ethnicity and race prevented respondents from identifying as both Hispanic and Indigenous. Historically, the categorization of Central and South American peoples in the U.S. has been a complicated and unclear project. In the 1930 U.S. census, “Mexican” constituted its own racial category in order to account for all Mexican migrant workers. Since this time, the racial designation for Mexicans has been white, despite the fact that most Mexicans are actually racially mixed and considered non-white in U.S.-American media and consciousness (Stephen, 2007, p. 221). Before adopting the label “Hispanic” in the 1980s, the ethnic categorization of Mexican, Central American, and South American peoples was determined by language in the 40s, surname in the 50s and 60s, and country of origin in the 70s (p. 223). While accepting the “Hispanic” ethnic designation on the census form, Latinos overwhelmingly mark their race as “Other”, often filling in the blank with their home country (p. 226). Clearly the top-down racial designations used in the census do not coincide with actual Hispanic racial identities.

For Indigenous Mexicans, it is not obvious that identifying oneself as a Hispanic Native American on the U.S. census conveys one’s Mexican origin and Indigenous heritage. In order to accurately represent the number of Indigenous Mexicans residing in California, the Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front (FIOB) mobilized to encourage their communities to correctly identify on the 2000 census (pp. 227-229). Of the 407,073 individuals who marked “Hispanic American Indian” in 2000, 5,081 were in Oregon (p. 229). In 2010, this number raised to 10,497 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). However, Stephen (2004) cites “informed estimates” suggesting a
permanent Mixtec population in Oregon closer to 10,000 and a circulating migratory population between 20,000 and 30,000 at any given time (p. 184). While “the Hispanic American Indian category helps to make a previously invisible group more visible,” (Murillo & Cerda, 2004, p. 287), scholars agree that there is a massive undercount significantly hindering Indigenous Mexicans’ political potential and access to services in the U.S.

There are many shortcomings in the presentation and administering of the census. The inability to list more than six individuals per household renders many living in illegal laborer camps and makeshift housing unaccounted for (Kissam & Jacobs, 2004, p. 315). The tendency among undocumented migrants for multiple families to share the same lodging and live in undetectable housing suggests an alarmingly massive undercount. In Arvin, California, Kissam and Jacobs conducted their own count of IL speaking Latinos, finding they constitute 10% of the population. For the same location, the 2010 census results show only 2.5% (2004, p. 313). These authors estimate that the Indigenous undercount ranges from 11-38% throughout the city’s Indigenous neighborhoods (p. 325). The difficulty in accurately counting the “Hispanic American Indian” population is further emphasized by the discrepancy between the findings of the 2010 census and the 2006-2010 American Community Survey. Both of these counts are administered by the U.S. Census Bureau, yet the census shows only 10,497 Indigenous Mexicans in Oregon while the American Community survey shows 21,959 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2010, 2010). The latter more closely reflects the estimates posited by Stephen (2004) and suggests the longer duration of the survey may increase accuracy.

**Indigenous Organizing**

Because official statistics do not accurately capture the size of the Indigenous Mexican population in the United States, Indigenous migrant groups have come to rely on a number of
organizational strategies to assert their indigenous identities and make their presence known. These organizations use their political power to combat human rights abuses and improve access to medical services and information about migrant and laborer rights (Santos, 2004, p. 71).

At its most fundamental, Indigenous migrant organizing consists of hometown associations. These groups are comprised of individuals from the same Mexican locality living in the same place in the U.S. Hometown associations are essentially local chapters of a community’s migratory network (Rivera-Salgado & Escala Rabadan, 2004, p. 153-4). Hometown associations in California have banded together into larger federations based on state of origin or even pan-Indigenous Mexican identity. An advantage of these larger conglomerate organizations is that they are able to pool resources, political power, and reinforce Indigenous identity. Some, such as the Oaxacan Federation of Indigenous Communities and Organizations in California (FOCOICA) and the Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front (FIOB), have been successful in levying their political power against multiple levels of Mexican government on issues related to migrants in the U.S. (pp. 166-167).

Oregon has numerous examples of Indigenous Mexican migrant organizing as well. Before I more fully illustrate the functions these organizations fulfill, I provide information about migration to Oregon and contextualize the Indigenous Mexican experience here.

**Indigenous Mexicans in Oregon**

The first Mexican families to settle in Oregon through the Bracero Program in the 1950s came to the small agricultural communities of Woodburn, Hubbard, and St. Paul between Salem and Portland (Stephen, 2007, p. 84). Indigenous Mexicans, overwhelmingly Mixtec, began arriving in Oregon in the 70s as they followed harvest seasons up the West Coast. From California, agricultural migrants entered Oregon to pick berries before continuing into
Washington for the apple harvest (pp. 85-6). The settling locations of Indigenous immigrants reflect their earlier routes; the map below shows the sizeable Indigenous Mexican communities all lying within Oregon’s agricultural corridor. As noted above, the overwhelming majority of Indigenous Mexicans in Oregon are Mixtec. However Triqui, Zapotec, and Mayan farmworkers were also among those to receive amnesty through the IRCA’s 1986 SAW Program mentioned above. Many of them settled in Salem after their families joined them (p. 241).

![Map of Oregon cities with significant Indigenous Mexican populations](image)

Figure 4. Oregon cities with significant Indigenous Mexican populations. Borrowed from Stephen (2007, p. 85).

Woodburn, with 50% of the population being Mexican in 2000, has been characterized as transnational “Mexican Woodburn” (Stephen, 2007, p. 91). As such, it is also the site of much organizing around the issues of labor and migrant rights. The Northwest Farmworkers and Treeplanters United (PCUN), while not necessarily exclusively Indigenous or Mexican, has
come to represent them and is active in their struggle for better labor conditions. The Oregon Law Center is also engaged in the efforts of Indigenous migrants. It launched the Indigenous Farmworker Project, which seeks to overcome the barrier of monolingualism preventing many Indigenous workers from accessing information about their rights as migrants. Workshops, radio announcements, and cassette tapes disseminate information about immigration and labor laws in Spanish, Mixteco Alto, Mixteco Bajo, Triqui, and Zapoteco. Additionally, the Oregon Law Center has provided training for interpreters to accompany IL speakers to court, the doctor, and their children’s schools. The languages available include those just mentioned, along with Náhuatl, Poqochi⁹, Purépecha, and the Guatemalan Maya languages Akateco, Kanjobal, Q’uiche, and Mam (p. 265).

The fact that PCUN is a union working for the rights of all agricultural workers facilitates the dismantling of discrimination-inspired barriers between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Mexican community members. Participating with equal membership and receiving equal protection from the union, Indigenous members achieve “cultural citizenship” in the wider Mexican immigrant community (Stephen, 2007, p. 252).

Language Attitudes and Shift

Ending discrimination against Indigenous members of the Mexican migrant community in the United States is one of the primary goals of Indigenous organizing. Ethnographic research and numerous first-hand accounts from Indigenous migrant communities in the U.S. reveal that the same discrimination perpetuated against Indigenous peoples in Mexico is recreated within enclave communities here. As in Mexico, this discrimination translates into pressure on Indigenous people, particularly school-aged children, to shift to the dominant groups’ languages.

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⁹ Poqochi does not appear in Castañeda’s census list, nor does it yield Ethnologue search results. The Guatemalan languages are spelled as they appear in Stephen’s reference to them.
The shift to Spanish and English in U.S.-based communities is not surprising considering the human rights abuses monolingual IL speakers encounter. Although the Oregon Law Office’s interpreting services and information dissemination help people in important ways, these acts present ILs as obstacles to be overcome. Along with the numerous resources available to help Indigenous migrants access services and legally protect themselves, there are also programs to teach them and their children Spanish and English. The fact that no initiatives encourage learning and speaking an IL, either for heritage speakers or community outsiders, reveals the lack of relevance these languages have to migrants’ new lives in the U.S. That they are not useful, not powerful, and not valued contributes significantly to the shift away from them.

I was fortunate to hear about community language attitudes from one young Woodburn woman whose grandfather and uncles speak the Mexican IL, Huichol. Many like her in Woodburn have Huichol speaking relatives, but learned Spanish as a first language. She says she wishes she knew Huichol, but that many people believe this language will hinder their children from excelling in the U.S. Some parents do not even want their children to speak Spanish for fear that they will encounter prejudice for not being English-speaking Americans.

A 2003 survey in Woodburn finds that 10% of household heads are Mixtec dominant. However, only 4% of all household members under eighteen are Mixtec dominant, suggesting that intergenerational transmission has already been disrupted and more than half of children in Mixtec households have already shifted languages (Stephen, 2007, p. 92). It is common for children to shift in greater numbers than older generations in situations of language endangerment. In the context of Oregon, this is likely because they are the first to grow up in close, sustained contact with the dominant Spanish-speaking members of Mexican society. Furthermore, they generally attend school in English. If bilingual programs exist, they are only
Spanish-English, further perpetuating the notion that Spanish is the language of all Latinos and promoting it as a powerful language well-suited to an educational domain.

Interviews with informants in Woodburn, Oregon and Oxnard, California shed light on the social categories within the Mexican diasporic community in the United States and the role of language here (Stephen, 2007). There are “Americanos”, apparently synonymous with white people, and “Latinos”, a catch-all term for any Mexican person or their descendents. Within the latter group there are Mexicanos and Chicanos. Mexicanos are those born in Mexico, while Chicanos are American-born and speak either no Spanish or mix English with Spanish. Mexicanos can be further divided into groups based on where they are from. Interestingly, all state-based groups with the exception of Oaxacans are characterized by stereotypical personality traits or dispositions. Oaxacans, on the other hand, are named “Oaxaquitos”, a derogatory term referring to the stereotypically short stature of Indigenous people. It is both racialized, drawing on physical attributes, as well as diminutive and paternalistic, reflecting the attitude of dominant Mexican society toward the Indigenous (Stephen, 2007, pp. 214-6). To protect themselves from racism and name-calling, many deny their heritage. Researchers report several instances in which informants suggest that many Indigenous Mexicans are embarrassed if their surnames sound “too Indian.” They may refuse to say where they come from and deny their Indigenous descent.

“A lot of them don’t even know about their own culture, and in some cases they even deny its existence. This contributes to the discrimination that exists among mestizos toward indigenous peoples.” (Valentín Sánchez, Secretary of Organization of Oaxacan Indigenous Migrant Communities (OCIMO) as cited in Stephen, 2007, p.267). This quote shows that community members understand the pressures encouraging the loss of their languages and
cultural identities to originate from their racist societies. It also demonstrates the belief that in order to end discrimination, one must assert his or her Indigeneity in spite of it.

“They always talk about us like we are not worth as much as everyone else. They don’t like the people from Oaxaca...We should be proud of being from there and of speaking our languages. We shouldn’t be ashamed of this culture.” (Dolores as cited in Stephen, 2007, pp. 214-215).

In her quote, Dolores acknowledges the discrimination against Indigenous peoples, but resists dominant assertions that their cultures and languages are inferior. Alejandrina Ricárdez indicates a need to maintain cultural authenticity: “You are no longer seen as fully Oaxacan because you no longer speak the indigenous language.” (Alejandrina Ricárdez as quoted in Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004, p. 98). She points to the role of language in constructing her authentic Oaxacan identity.

“It is beautiful to have this language, Mixtec. But there is going to come a time when we are going to lose this language, when we are going to forget it. Our children don’t want to speak it. It’s good for you, I say, but they don’t listen to me.” (Mariano González as cited in Stephen, 2007, p.216).

Here, González expresses his sorrow over the disappearance of his language and the adversity of the younger generation to maintaining traditional culture. González’ son, a Salem highschool studet, returns us to the point on which Sánchez comments above, beginning the series of quotes. When asked why he does not follow his father’s advice and learn Mixteco, he responds, “We don’t want to be called Oaxaquitos. We speak English and Spanish.” (Mariano Junior as quoted in Stephen, 2007, p. 216). His comment illustrates that young people experience significant pressure to shift to a dominant language. It also reveals that linguistic assimilation is a useful
tactic to avoid discrimination and bullying. While some community members cast off their Indigenous heritage language for self-preservation, others lament the loss of this component of their identity and desire to see it passed on. The sentiment that “the only way to decrease discrimination among ourselves is to learn who we are and disseminate this information to the mestizos and the larger community” drives Valentín Sánchez’ projects as well as those of many Indigenous organizations throughout Oregon and California (as cited in Stephen, 2007, p. 267).

Asserting Indigenous Identity

One way in which Indigenous groups show who they are “to the mestizos and the larger community” is through the organization of large-scale public festivals. By drawing 10,000 people to the first annual Los Angeles celebration of Guelaguetza, an important Indigenous Oaxacan festival, the aforementioned FOCOICA powerfully demonstrated the Indigenous presence in the city. Organizers mention that asserting Indigenous identity and showcasing Indigenous culture in the LA Sports Arena, “where all great events of Los Angeles take place”, lent prestige to the festival (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004, p. 84). “This Guelaguetza was the point when Oaxacans began to leave their anonymity behind...They are realizing that our culture can be demonstrated at any event, even at the world-class level. And they are doing it.” Today, five different annual Guelaguetza celebrations are held in LA every year.

Cultural events are also the focus of Grupo Maya in Oakland, California, and Se’e Savi, a teenage Oaxacan folk group in Fresno (Martinez-Saldanna, 2004, p. 136). In 2005, Valentín Sánchez collaborated with two linguistic anthropologists to hold a workshop on ancient Mixtec codices, ancient pictographic texts from their Indigenous civilization. Members of the wider community, including PSU and OSU students attended. Sánchez finds it important to “promote
the idea of people in our community learning their own history and sharing it” because the
codices are not acknowledged by the educational authorities in Mexico (as cited in Stephen,
2007, pp. 268-269). Educating community members about the codices promotes the history of a
great Mixtec civilization and the view of Mixtec culture as sophisticated and advanced.

The efforts of Indigenous organizations to promote their identities and cultures with
public festivals and workshops are examples of “self-differentiation” (Kearney, 1998 as cited in
contest their subcategorization as Hispanic Mexicans and resist the discrimination they
experience. As “Indigenous research projects”, their activities are part of “the struggle to
become self-determining, the need to take back control of our destinies” and seek “the survival
of peoples, cultures, and languages” (Linda Tuhiwai Smith as cited in Stephen, 2007, p.282).

I have located no efforts explicitly targeting Indigenous languages among the community
activism discussed here. However, the importance of Indigenous language to some community
members, along with the self-differentiating Indigenous research projects of others, suggests that
language revitalization would be a timely complement to current activities.

Language Maintenance for Indigenous Mexicans in Oregon

A review of the ethnographic literature and personal accounts from Indigenous Mexican
organizers and community members suggests a community-internal precedent for IL
maintenance. Community members are conscious of language shift and the pressures
contributing to it. Some sectors, particularly the adult/parent and grandparent generations, are
concerned with the eventual loss of their languages and cultural identities. Language
maintenance would complement current community activism working to assert Indigenous
identities and combat discrimination. Before designing and implementing a revitalization program, however, additional field research is necessary. The attitudes and opinions expressed in my secondary sources may not be universal representations of all Oregon IL communities.

**Continued Research**

The next research steps should include extensive community surveys, interviews, and focus groups. These seek to provide a thorough understanding of two areas: community composition and community desire. Community composition includes information about the number of Mexican ILs represented in Oregon, their geographic dispersal, and the number of speakers and potential learners. Assessment of community desire takes into account individual attitudes toward ILs and language maintenance. These opinions promise to guide the development of programs that appeal both to cultural norms and popular preferences.

To make contact with community members and informants, I intend to employ a friends-of-friends approach. In addition to the woman with Huichol speaking relatives I mention above, I have a friend and a former co-worker who are both from families where Mixteco is a heritage language (HL). In this context, heritage language refers to a traditional or immigrant language other than English that is associated with individual or group ethnocultural identity. A heritage language is known or spoken by at least some family members to varying degrees, but is not necessarily spoken by all and is generally restricted to home, family, or community in-group functions. If participants willingly introduce me to additional interviewees and informants, I can gradually develop a network of potential language project stakeholders. Because I rely on participant contributions and introductions to guide this research, community members dictate the collaborative project’s scope and development. They determine the information I access, the validity of the information, as well as which other speech community members I am able to
contact. By establishing this check-and-balance on my research activities, I hope to ensure that
speakers retain ownership of language projects and that I remain within the appropriate bounds
for a researcher (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006, pp. 192-195).

Previous research shows Mixteco speakers make up the largest portion of the Mexican IL
community in Oregon (Stephen 2004, 2007). The project I propose aims to develop a language
maintenance model that can be applied to all Mexican ILs in Oregon, and adapted to speech
communities across the U.S. Rather than exclusively targeting Mixteco varieties for the
convenience that a large speaker population provides, initial field research should assess as many
languages as possible. Knowledge about each speech community’s size, geographic dispersal,
dialectal variation, and linguistic vitality (i.e. stage of shift and number of fluent speakers)
provides a community profile that stakeholders can use in their consideration of features their
language program should have.

Assessment of community desires through interviews and focus groups seeks to
determine the amount speaker buy-in a language program might encounter. Identifying the
number of potential participants allows for the formation of community-led groups to discuss
what maintenance frameworks they should pursue and how these will operate.

Preliminary Suggestions for Maintenance Programming

Previous language maintenance efforts in other endangered language communities
provide a number of guidelines for the development of Mexican IL projects in Oregon. First,
community attitudes and cultural norms should determine the scale and setting of maintenance
programs. These may range from small community classes and language-based cultural
activities to the intensive development of web-based materials and fully-fledged academic
curricula for use in local or independent schools. Whatever mixture of approaches community members deem appropriate and feasible, some general guidelines for language maintenance may ease the development of these initiatives.

Maintenance efforts should include the use of existing textbooks and literacy materials from Mexico wherever possible. If print materials do not exist for the language in question, the production of new materials may require collaboration with linguists to document the language and record speech acts for community use. In these scenarios, fluent speakers and learners from the community should be included in materials development. Whether materials include written texts and stories or audio and video media, involving community members can increase participant investment in projects.

An IL with few learners and speakers may benefit most from adopting the Master-Apprentice model of language acquisition (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006, p. 60). In this method, one learner is paired with one fluent speaker. The two agree to spend a predetermined number of hours each week engaging in a co-constructed language immersion setting. Aside from language acquisition, practicing cultural activities and passing on traditional knowledge are generally emphasized.

Game-like language acquisition models are also useful for communities with few speakers. One example, “Where Are Your Keys?” (WAYK), offers a fair degree of learner autonomy and relies on speech, hand signs, repetition, and participant interaction. The novelty of WAYK is that as it teaches the language, it simultaneously trains new teachers. As players advance through “setups” emphasizing various vocabulary and sentence structures, they are capable of acting as the facilitator for a lower level (Gardner, 2011). This approach creates a
playful environment ideal for young learners and children. Because children are arguably the most influential agents in language shift, it is important that any language maintenance effort focus some of its attention on children and families. Attending to family participation emphasizes the home as a stable IL domain of language use and can assist in maintaining it as the site of much transmission of linguistic knowledge.

The growing importance of digital technologies and cyber space is another factor to consider in the maintenance of ILs among younger generations. As young people spend increasing amounts of time on the internet and use digital technologies to engage in social interactions, the ability of a language to adapt to these new domains is extremely influential in determining its longevity. If a standardized orthography is not already available, significantly more work is required to develop one (see Grenoble & Whaley, 2006, pp. 153-159). However, because language use for social purposes in cyber space is predominantly colloquial, the language standardization so important in curriculum development is less urgent here.

The internet may also prove to be a useful resource for small, geographically dispersed speech communities. Online distance learning classes can connect fluent speakers and learners across Oregon, and even across the U.S. and Mexico. Speech community collaboration over such distances establishes a significantly larger speaker population and facilitates the sharing of resources and materials. Replicating the organizational structure of hometown associations and federations may encourage language networks to harness their political power and advocate for language and educational policy favorable to ILs in the U.S.

If Mexican IL speakers can successfully interrupt the dominance of English and Spanish in their schools by with Mexican IL language class offerings or afterschool IL groups, children
can benefit from encountering their home language in an institutional setting. A language’s presence in schools lends it prestige and encourages positive attitudes toward it. This powerful maneuver can raise the conceptualized status of ILs among the local Mexican community from *dialectos* to *lenguas*. Furthermore, schools are ideal locations for the development of new vocabulary for technology and other aspects of speakers’ lives in Oregon not present in the traditional agricultural settings ILs typically reflect (see Grenoble & Whaley, 2006, pp. 181-183).

Numerous examples of Indigenous Mexican organizing and political maneuvering demonstrate that Oregon communities are capable of achieving IL development and institutionalization. Especially hope-inspiring is the example from the Woodburn citizen group, Voz Hispana. In 1997, after the Woodburn school district refused to name two new schools after César Chávez, the group organized and pressured the district to not only name a library after Chávez, but to also establish César Chávez Day district-wide and institute extensive annual activities around the historical figure (Stephen, 2007, pp. 251-252). The profound perseverance and strength of Oregon’s Indigenous Mexican communities promises the possibility of cultural and linguistic survival. Still, the fate of these languages remains to be determined by the actions of speakers themselves. Presenting a foundation for future collaboration with communities in Oregon, this paper closes with the hope that any local action succeeds in upholding the inherent human right to one’s language and culture.
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