

Building language in community

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Learning a language means much more than just grammatical structures, verb tenses, nouns and all the other elements that make it up. It means learning to view one's relationship with the world and others differently. Behind every language is a world, a philosophy and a cosmovision. In Mexico, 68 indigenous languages (with 364 variants or dialects) survive. However, in many cases there are very few speakers, so many languages are at risk of disappearing. The majority of these languages are transmitted orally.

I was born and grew up in an urban environment, in Iztapalapa, Mexico City because my parents migrated many years ago to the country's capital. This is one of the reasons why I didn't learn the language. I did learn

many other things through family discussions, like traditions and values, and thus came to understand why my elders had not learned the language (Chocholteca), which has been lost for several generations in the Ngiwa community from which I come. This is the language I want to learn.

In 2015, I found out that a teacher, Aristeo, was developing a workshop to teach the language that was denied to my parents, so I decided to try to learn it and have now been attending his class for five years. He teaches us a bit of vocabulary and the sounds and the images that the words represent. In addition to that, and to reinforce what we have learned, he tells us a legend or anecdote that refers to the way that life used to be in the community.

I already knew about some things because my family had passed them on through oral tradition, but others I did not. I want to emphasize an important aspect of community life that continues to be practiced in almost all the communities of Oaxaca: the "tequio",

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also known as “guesta” or “llesa”, that consists of a type of community and volunteer work for the common good of the community or the town. This tradition is part of extracurricular education that is second nature to Oaxacans and that has allowed for social cohesion.

I got to experience this firsthand on a trip that I took to Oaxaca. I have always loved to take photos, and this time was no exception. When I went out with some of the men and young people from the community who were going to gather wood, I took my camera along to take photos of the scenery. And when we stopped to rest, I took advantage of the moment to take some more photos. But just as we were about to continue, one of them said to me: “Hey, give us a hand!” to which I responded immediately.

I began to remember our family discussions in the San Miguel Teotongo neighbourhood in the Sierra de Santa Catarina, in Iztapalapa. This neighbourhood was founded by groups of migrants from various regions, among them many Oaxacans and, as in the case of my family, of chocholtecos. The stories that they would tell would always make reference to community work and to the way in which the neighbourhood was built when they began to drill holes to put in the drainage system, the clearing of the roads and the construction of the schools.

As I remembered these stories, we continued to carry the wood to the truck, until we were covered in sweat. We worked like little ants: one after the other, cutting and carrying wood, all working towards one objective - the common good. My status as a “city dweller” did not give me any privilege, even though I had only gone along to take photos. Despite being tired

and having sweated like never before, I really enjoyed the experience.

Later we sat in the shade of a tree to eat. I don’t remember the discussion we had at that moment very well, but I do remember the spirit of the people and their smiles and expressions of happiness at having met the objective. After this short break, it was back to ‘Keep at it!’ until we arrived back at Concepción Buenavista, the community from which we had departed. Arriving at the community centre or house of the people (Casa del Pueblo), we started to unload and arrange the wood.

But what does my re-telling this story have to do with language and education? Simply that education in the communities cannot be reduced to the classroom, and that now I understand when the teacher Aristeo tells us what community work is called in the Ngiwa language (Chocholteco): xragutse.

Community work is not exclusive to communities in Mexico. We can also find it in various parts of the Americas, called Minga in Peru or Ecuador for example. It is a practical reality that continues to be part of our traditions in Oaxaca and among the many Oaxacan migrants that have populated other parts of Mexico and the world.

This kind of community activity is reinforced by another - the system of positions and responsibilities. In order to be a municipal president, you have to pass through the hierarchy of positions including topil and alderman, among others. Only then can one become a candidate for municipal president. It is a duty of all citizens to take on a position, and carry it out fully because their word and honour depend on it. They must fulfill this assignment without pay



because it is about contributing to the common good.

Another necessary requisite is that every official must know how to speak, must have the gift of the word and exercise it; but they must also know when to stay silent, to listen and to address others. They must know the community's history and both be respected and respect the laws. Even though written laws exist, word of honour and orality count for a lot.

This is something that the Oaxacan migrants brought with them. This is why from the time that we are children we are taught to honour our word. We hear phrases like: "if you say something, honour it. If you cannot, better not open your mouth." Beyond this phrase itself, you will find the energetic weight of our elders' voices, urging us to make a commitment to the other and to ourselves.

The way that they taught us to see the world from within the bosom of the family is reinforced by the teachings of Aristeo, who migrated when he was young. Still, he was able to undertake various projects in benefit of his community, San Miguel Tulancigo, Oaxaca, such as the restoration of the church.

Sometimes, when we are in class, Aristeo says "Rxu Táa" in the Ngiwa language. Then he starts to explain:

"Rxu Táa, designates the people who are considered great due to their stature, their intelligence and their deeds, but who don't have popular support or social commitment. In previous times, the most important positions were occupied by the most respected people. The Rxu Táa might be a student who then becomes a teacher but without having popular support in the community, so that their teachings have nothing to

do with the traditions and customs of community life. On the other hand, I did not study, except in the school of life, but I have sought to recover a language that is based on practices, traditions and a cosmovision, that is based on a respect for nature and the relationship that we have with the planets that surround us."

Customs and traditions develop a way of life and a vision of the world where you work for the common good, for the community.

Learning a language is an experience that brings us to life, that redefines our conception of the world, that gives us a sense of belonging and builds collectivity. Each word has meaning, suggesting the opening of our senses and representing work. The kind of work that seeks to take care of the other in community, that generates knowledge and that is carried out with respect for nature, to whom we owe our sustenance and from where the language I am trying to learn sustains itself and develops, even very far from the land where my parents were born.

If we want to transform this reality, let us build collectivity, and generate belonging, especially in urban settings that are made up of migrants who may forget their roots or struggle to preserve them in the city. Recovering our Indigenous languages and teaching new generations is not only an act of transformation but also an act of love. We need to build from below, from communities and neighbourhoods, and demand that the education that our children receive be a transformative education that is connected to the culture. This will only happen if we understand the context in which we live.