Abstract

This article reports on the sociolinguistic situation of towns in the state of Tlaxcala, Mexico, where the Nahuatl language known locally as Mexicano is spoken by a rapidly diminishing group of speakers. Ongoing ethnographic research in the indigenous region that skirts the Malinche (Malintsi) volcano in Central Mexico on language shift and linguistic ideology shows varying degrees of language retention and shift. Here I focus on the nature of code restriction to particular social spheres, contrasting language use contexts that are intimate, sometimes “private,” with more power-laden ones, locally viewed as “public.” I consider the types of contexts in which Mexicano and Spanish are spoken, including the disjunction that can occur when private, intimate family languages are brought into the institutional, public sphere such as schooling for language revitalization purposes.

1. Introduction

In San Bernardino Contla, a semi-rural municipal county of 35,000 people in the state of Tlaxcala, Mexico, the Nahuatl language known locally as Mexicano is spoken by a rapidly diminishing group of speakers. By contrast, in the more remote town of San Isidro Buensuceso (pop. 5,000), the language is still in daily use by speakers of all generations, most of whom are bilingual (Messing 2003). The ethnographic study that gave rise to the findings reported here focused on the spaces that the indigenous language still occupies in daily life, in the indigenous region that skirts the Malinche (Malintsi) volcano in Central Mexico. This research centered on language shift, ideologies of language, and indigenous education in this rural/semi-rural industrial corridor a mere three-hour bus ride from Mexico City. Ongoing fieldwork, begun over a decade...
ago, has investigated Tlaxcalan people’s ideologies of language, identity, and modernity in these two regions — the county of San Bernardino Contla, whose jurisdiction is distributed over a dozen towns and includes a central “head town,” as well as San Isidro Buensuceso — which were chosen due to their differences in language maintenance and traditions. This article focuses on the description of the sociolinguistic context of Contla county, specific to the towns located on the upward slope of this mountain county itself, with comparisons drawn from my secondary site, San Isidro. In Contla, an ancient textile industry flourishes both in people’s homes and in large, lucrative factories (Nutini 1968; Nutini and Isaac 1974), while the more remote town of San Isidro has not seen the same degree of industrialization and economic development. The head town of Contla is the county seat of a municipality by the same name — San Bernardino Contla de Juan Cuamatzi, which is a densely populated collection of small towns in close proximity to the small textile city of Santa Ana Chiautempan, the state capital of Tlaxcala, and the large city of Apizaco. The degree of language retention varies even among the small towns comprising the Contla de Juan Cuamatzi county, referred to locally as simply “Contla” (thus simultaneously referring to the county seat, or head town, and the towns that pertain to the county).

The Mexicano population in this region of Mexico straddles the states of Tlaxcala and Puebla. The state of Tlaxcala is the smallest state in Mexico. Tlaxcala is a combination of rural and semi-urban areas; in rural areas, a mix of “traditional” life and modern services and technologies coexist. The century-old textile industry has accounted for most local employment opportunities, in the form of both formal factory work, consisting mainly of production of yarn from raw materials, and informal work in households with blanket-weaving on large, wooden looms. Many people have migrated to the neighboring city of Puebla, to Mexico City, or in fewer cases to the United States or Canada in search of employment. The railroad, improvements to local roads, and a major national highway running through Tlaxcala are factors leading to a population increase over the past thirty years in the largest cities in the state, such as Apizaco and the capital Tlaxcala City.

My research into language use in the vicinity of the county of Contla indicates that Mexicano in these communities has retreated, with native language use restricted predominantly to certain social contexts. In the town of San Isidro, a greater degree of community bilingualism remains; nonetheless, there is a generalized agreement there that schooling should be in the official national language, Spanish (Francis 1997). These facts together — native language retreat, a preference for schooling in Spanish
even where Mexicano remains relatively strong — raise questions about the chances that schooling can be effective in native language revitalization (Fishman 1991; Hinton 1994).

The ideology of fostering homogeneity and a national Mexican identity under a single language was historically attempted through the institutionalization of Castilianization — teaching Spanish with the goal of bringing all of Mexico’s speakers of indigenous languages into the national political and economic system (Brice Heath 1972). This ideology was disseminated through linguistic policies in schools around Mexico, and was the principal basis for bilingual-bicultural education in Mexico, until the idea of language maintenance surfaced in recent years, despite a lack of teacher-training specific to language revitalization. The educational bureaucracy in Mexico is large and centralized, requiring all students from grade one to six to use the same textbooks; many people outside the field of education are critical of public educational endeavors because of this uniformity, in the face of great cultural and linguistic pluralism in the country as a whole. In this article, I focus on the issue of using intimate or home language for a “public-sphere” purpose such as educating children in school.

Mexicano, or Nahuatl, is part of the Uto-Aztecan language family, and has roughly one million speakers living in various parts of central and southern Mexico. There are numerous dialects of the Nahuatl language in Mexico, including some that are not mutually intelligible. Indeed, the difference between local and regional dialects often causes bilingual speakers to fall back on communicating in Spanish, rather than their ancestral tongue; this is also the case even within the region.

There is evidence that serious language shift and loss is occurring in this region (Garza Cuaron and Lastra 1991; Hill and Hill 1986; Messing 2003). Nevertheless, in these communities quite a number of people across generations still speak the local dialect of their ancestral native language. They are the descendants of the Tlaxcalans, contemporaries of the Aztecs whose language they shared, but whose domination they successfully kept at bay.³ Today, because of widespread negative attitudes toward speaking Mexicano, and conversely purist attitudes toward speaking “proper” Mexicano, I found that the actual degree of use of Mexicano is very hard to ascertain, for both locals and outsiders, particularly in the Contla county towns. This is because, without a certain degree of trust, Contlans do not admit knowledge of the language. People may say that they are not “good speakers,” even as they appear to be completely fluent in the language.⁴

At first, I was told that no one speaks Mexicano in Contla any more; my observations suggested a more complex reality. After considerable
time, interviewees began to speak of conflicted feelings about passing on
the ancestral language to their children. Indeed, the retreat of Mexicano
to certain spaces and times in Contla daily life are a direct result of years
of internalized discrimination against indigenous people (Messing 2003b).
Especially in the presence of outsiders to the community, there is laughter
and embarrassed, sidelong glances when the language is spoken or men-
tioned during a conversation otherwise in Spanish. Flores Farfán (1999)
reports that Mexicano speakers in the Mexican state of Guerrero think
of themselves as cuatreros, speakers who make mistakes, an idea echoed
by my interviewees who mostly see themselves as ‘half-speaking’ (medio
hablar), and as one speaker figuratively put it, many local speakers medio
lo mastican, or ‘sort of half chew it [Mexicano]’. Countless times I have
had people, mostly under forty-five, tell me: lo entiendo pero no lo puedo
pronunciar (‘I understand it but I can’t pronounce it’). I have observed a
great disparity between claimed communicative competence in Mexicano
and demonstrated communicative competence, for instance, when chil-
dren or adults laugh at the punch line of a joke that someone has just
told in Mexicano. The concepts of semi-speaker (Dorian 1977) and
quasi-speaker (Flores Farfán 1999) are helpful in describing this socio-
linguistic context, as we seek to find qualitative ways of describing the
linguistic knowledge of speakers.

The Mexicano spoken locally includes the native language combined
with Spanish loan words and grammatical constructions that were incor-
porated into the indigenous language. Most often these are prepositions
and conjunctions, Spanish language numbers, and various other lexical
items that were borrowed into Mexicano and have been adapted to Mex-
icano grammar (i.e., de, Spanish ‘from’ becomes den in local syncretic
Mexicano speech) (Hill and Hill 1986). Local purism surfaces in talk of
legítimo Mexicano (‘legitimate Mexicano’) of the kind described by Hill
and Hill (1986), in which speakers’ purist ideologies encourage speech
that is completely Mexicano, without any trace of its syncretic elements
whose source is the Spanish language.6

What initially prompted my research in Contla was the information
that a new bilingual school had opened there (Jane Hill p.c.). During
pilot research in Contla, many people told me that Mexicano was not
spoken anymore in Contla, and that I should visit San Isidro to hear the
“legitimate Mexicano.” Several people specifically mentioned San Isidro
as an ideal site for an anthropologist, since there Mexicano is spoken
among speakers of all ages and in many social contexts — more so than
in other parts of the state of Tlaxcala. This town appears to many Tlax-
calans as more authentically “indigenous” or “traditional.” The dozen
towns in Contla county served as my base for the study, and schooling
offered a site for the study of multiple conflicting ideologies of identity
and language.

Despite first impressions, longer-term observations in Contla suggested
that use and understanding of Mexicano varies not only by micro-region,
but also by family and individual (Messing forthcoming). This realization
prompted extra attention to determine the exact contexts and circum-
stances of seemingly hidden native language use. My conclusion was that
Mexicano is viewed as an intimate-sphere language that locals rarely
consider appropriate (or even desirable) for schooling in the towns, which
are in the process of undergoing great language shift, as the Contla
county.

2. Language shift and linguistic ideology

Studies of language shift must focus on the process of language shift, “as
an instance of socially motivated linguistic change” (Gal 1979: 2). Thus,
we ask how do changes in the social uses of languages in multilingual
communities, including the contexts of these uses, help us understand
shift? Here I focus on the nature of code restriction to particular social
spheres, contrasting language use contexts that are intimate, sometimes
“private,” alongside more power-laden ones, locally viewed as “public.”
The latter include schools because of their primary sponsorship by the
nation state. A focus on ideology calls attention to varying dimensions
of power and identity in communities (Philips 2000), and offers an alter-
native to a static, apolitical sociolinguistic view of diglossia as governed
by status differences; language use can then be seen in actual practice
as connected to and governed by ideologies of language.7 In multilingual
societies undergoing shift, attention to the ideologies (and the attitudes
they foster) that underlie local descriptions of language use assists in ex-
plaining why and when one language is chosen over another, particularly
when one language is considered appropriate for particular purposes and
contexts while the other is relegated to ever shrinking social situations.
Language ideologies serve an explanatory role for an in-depth under-
standing of how shifting ideologies of contracting languages are explained
locally, and are an important part of the process of language socialization
in multilingual societies in general, teaching children to make sense of the
linguistic pluralism in the world in which they live.

In Tlaxcala, each communicative code is considered appropriate for
particular contexts that involve different degrees of implicit intimacy and
solidarity, on the one hand, and of publicness and power-laden identity
on the other. Most speakers hold Mexicano to be the language of
intimacy, politeness, and respect, and, conversely, the colonial language is associated with power, social distance, wage labor, and rudeness (Hill and Hill 1986). In Mexicano, group solidarity can be expressed through an elaborate system of honorifics, and with four levels of politeness, providing a linguistic resource unavailable in Spanish. Today, these honorifics are still heard, and most of these ethnolinguistic conventions remain common, even while others have fallen out of use among younger, Spanish-dominant Tlaxcalans (Messing 2003). At the time of Hill and Hill’s (1986) research, the use of Spanish (including loan words) as a power code was imbued with meaning that indexed social distance, economic exchanges, urban regions, obscenity, drunkenness, and could be a marker of evil in myths. Today, this is still true for San Isidro, due to its strong Mexicano maintenance, but less true for the Contla region. In the large county of Contla today, the specificity of the domains of use has altered due to the extent of language shift, but the distinction between intimate and powerful languages still holds true.

3. Language use in public/private social contexts

In the Contla county towns, there are many factors that influence the use of the native language in everyday conversation. These factors are variable and dependent on the context, but some generalizations can be made. There is a greater likelihood that one will hear Mexicano in private, intimate contexts, where there is a great degree of trust (confianza) and respect. Confianza, a social concept that is very important in native parts of Mexico, has been defined as trust that is offered, and accepted, from family and others in personal relationships, including mutual reciprocity, exchange, and support (Aguilar 1984). This mutual trust and reciprocity can be both tangible (i.e., gift-giving) and verbal (exchange of greetings, speeches to mark special occasions), and it is also the hallmark of fictive kin relationships (compadres) and of religious sodality (cofradía) groups.

Showing respect to one’s interlocutors is of utmost importance in the Malinche region. Among fluent speakers of Mexicano, the ritual greetings between compadres (fictive kin) are a commonly heard example of daily talk. While Spanish has only two levels of politeness or respect marked by Tú and Usted (cf. Brown and Levinson 1978), Mexicano has four. The existence of honorific speech in Mexicano allows for more levels of solidarity to be communicated both directly and indexically, distinctions that are lost in Spanish. One can see that, with these four levels of linguistically marked respect, a Mexicano speaker might easily find Spanish a...
very rude language, with its comparatively limited options for marking social distance and respect (Hill and Hill 1986; Nava Nava 2003).

Below, an interviewee talks about the importance that mutual trust (confianza) exist among interlocutors in order for him to speak Mexicano.

(1) Miguel: That’s why there are a lot of people, of those that I know, if they don’t know Spanish, they know that I understand in Nahuatl and we communicate. And we, we enter more into confianza [mutual trust] well then I get to speaking in Nahuatl. Only that later they tell me “it’s that you don’t speak it very well” because of the lack of practice also. That is, I speak it but a little bit a lot, like then some words don’t come out very well, so that the situation is that sometimes, it’s better that I don’t talk. Then I’ll tell them “you all talk in Nahuatl and I’ll answer you in Spanish and we’ll understand each other.” (Translation of Spanish original mine)

Confianza, which favors private contexts, is the key factor in two (or more) speakers using Mexicano with one another in Contla, but in addition the speakers must be sure that their interlocutor understands Mexicano and must have established a pattern of using Mexicano with one another. Hence the strong association between Mexicano and private contexts.

Some young Contla residents do understand and speak Mexicano, even when their siblings may speak less than they. This may be because of affinities between individuals of different generations in the family, or because a child grows up being interested in local tales, or just simply being interested in learning more of the language.

I consider next the types of contexts in which Mexicano and Spanish are spoken, including the disjuncture that can occur when private, intimate family languages are brought into the institutional, public sphere such as schooling for language revitalization purposes.

In some of the upper elevation Contla towns on the Malinche mountain, such as San Felipe Cuahutenco and Ocotlan, there exists a tradition that the male head of household, and on occasion the female head of household, attend town meetings. These meetings are part of an indigenous tradition that has been maintained until the present day. Interestingly, Mexicano is the dominant language at these meetings, although some younger people (under 30) use Spanish. With the exception of these occasions, the language of meetings in public — outside of people’s homes — is most often Spanish. Communication with or among
older members of the community can often be in Mexicano, if interlocutors know each other well. Sometimes Contla residents will use Mexicano with people who are Mexicano-dominant speakers from outside the region (despite dialectal constraints). In the bilingual school system, Mexicano conversations take place occasionally among individuals, but no “official” conversations are held in Mexicano; speakers use Spanish to communicate, with Mexicano playing primarily a symbolic role.

The aforementioned meetings in Cuahutenco are a good example of Mexicano usage that is public but at the same time private because attendance is limited; this is a use of Mexicano that seeps into the capitalist, “power-code” sphere otherwise thought to be occupied today by Spanish. A second example exists in symbolic uses of Mexicano in very public, official contexts. In 1999, the Municipal President of Contla county attended a public event that I was asked to organize, to celebrate the publication of the translation (from English to Spanish) of the book “Speaking Mexicano” (Hill and Hill 1986). As our special guest, at this event that included local Nahuatl scholars and language promoters, Mexico City academics, and the authors and translators, this Municipal President presented a speech in Mexicano as part of his official opening of the event. This is not a likely speech event in Contla, and his use of Mexicano indicated praise of both the event and the book publication, at the same time that it subverted expected linguistic norms and symbolically expressed support for the public use of the language. Indeed, this same politician was known to hold official audiences in his Mayoral chambers in the native language, something which had not been heard to happen in many decades. The seventy-person audience included both Mexicano-Spanish bilinguals and Spanish monolinguals.

Though the contexts for the use of multiple codes in multilingual societies are often divided into public/official/power-laden and private/intimate, we should note that these dichotomies can be problematic because of an ideological division (McElhinny 1997; Gal 2002), so that the dividing lines between the two are often arbitrary or “leaky” (Hill 2001). Here, based on research in Tlaxcala, I take public spheres to be local spaces where the national government has put in place national policies. Schools, for instance, are seen as iconic of the government, of outsiders, and also of outsiders’ racist attitudes, while paradoxically they are also viewed as sites for potential socioeconomic progress. A key question therefore with regard to local determinations of appropriate language use, and possibilities for language revitalization is: how can schools today foster the use of native languages in a social space that is markedly national (i.e., governmental), when, until a generation ago, the use of
the native language was discouraged and forbidden (both officially and informally)? Consider this interviewee’s perspective:

(2) Jua´n: Well, my whole life my father always spoke with us in Spanish, and my mother spoke with us in Mexicano, always. So, “why?” I asked myself afterwards. Perhaps at the beginning I wouldn’t have realized, I didn’t ask myself why, I didn’t realize. Why do they speak Spanish with me over here, and over there they speak to me in Nahuatl? But my father, the explanation is that, well, he lived through times in which the school, well, it viewed the Nahuatl language as an obstacle. And it was [it created] a problem for learning, or self-development in school and he didn’t want it. He thought that we, that we wouldn’t have that problem, if we could acquire an education in school, and not have any of that type of obstacle, and continue on. [. . .]

I feel that [if] we did not speak [in Mexicano] since we were little, this was not to put an end to the actual language, but rather, it was so that we would continue on, or manage to have access to studying [education]. (Translation of Spanish original mine)

In Juán’s discussion, we learn that “not speaking” the native language, particularly in the school context, was equated with moving ahead when he was a child. School is charged with goals of community and economic development in Mexico. Then for Juán, the questions about his parents’ language socialization practices have to do with schooling as a part of “progress,” and this image of government schooling does not include a space for Mexicano-teaching in the minds of many local people. Regarding his own schooling, Juán says that for the most part his teachers were from outside the region and did not speak or understand Mexicano, while the students did occasionally speak Mexicano with each other. The association of schooling with the official language makes it paradoxical that schooling is now looked to as a component in revitalizing native languages in Mexico and elsewhere (cf. Messing and Rockwell 2006; Meek and Messing forthcoming).

4. The politics of indigenous/bilingual education in Mexico

Bilingual-bicultural, or bilingual-intercultural education, in Mexico is a topic that inspires numerous, often conflicting opinions. As Juán
mentioned in the interview quoted above, Mexican schools have a long history of having been (both officially and unofficially) against the use of native languages. Because Mexicano has come to be viewed as a familial, private sphere language, it is then deemed unsuitable for contexts as markedly “public” as schools, creating a major hurdle for educators in attempts at bilingual indigenous education in Contla today. To appreciate this ideological positioning, it is important to understand the history of education with regard to indigenous languages in Mexico. Spanish is the official language and has been the language of schooling ever since the 1930s post-revolutionary process of state formation led to the creation of a centralized educational bureaucracy. Revolutions often focus on effecting social change through education (Vaughan 1994), and in Mexico post-revolutionary schools are considered to have contributed to the idea of a centralized state (Nahmad 1981; Rockwell 1994). Thus, education in Mexico is seen as the key to the government’s project of creating a national ‘imagined community’ of homogeneous Mexican citizens (Anderson 1991; Vaughan 1994). Indeed, schooling in Mexico was given the role of “civilizing” peasants and indigenous people, in order to transform them into nationalist, technologically skilled workers and create a level playing field for citizen employment (Vaughan 1982; Brice Heath 1972); this was done through language teaching. Spanish became a symbol for the new Mexican state and for all of its individual citizens, regardless of what language was dominant for them, thus relegating indigenous languages to inferior statuses. Schools established in the post-revolutionary state formation period, in the first part of the twentieth century, often are blamed for the retreat of Mexicano to intimate spheres.

The reader should note that bilingual education in Mexico differs from well-known United States and Canadian models of bilingual education, mainly due to the nationalization of the Mexican educational system. In Mexico, one must distinguish between two types of bilingual education: (i) the long-established type, efforts to Castilianize children who are monolingual in a native language (similar to transitional bilingual education in the United States), with the ultimate goal of Spanish-only education; and (ii) the more recent type, attempts to revitalize native languages in bilingual, or formerly bilingual, communities such as Contla (Modiano 1984; Varese 1983). Valiñas (1987) points out that Mexican schools offer indigenous communities an educational experience completely alien to their cultural reality. Flores Farfán (1999, 2001) has further argued that bilingual-bicultural education, an apparent attempt to foster the teaching of indigenous languages through schools, has in actuality not achieved nor even defined a reorientación real de las prácticas y las actitudes lingüísticas (‘true reorientation of linguistic practice and attitudes’;
translation mine) (1999: 44). This critique is well taken, but I suggest that we must also look at schools as community institutions as well as impar-
ters of a national, standardized curriculum handed down from within a Mexico City office building.

My own research has focused on the reality of the local: the privateness of public school, and the publicness of the private language in the local setting. As a social sphere, schooling in Mexico involves a state institution that has carried out pro-Spanish, and thus anti-native, language policies. Yet the local school is at the same time just that — a local as well as a national institution.

At the time of this study, Contla and San Isidro each had one school within the bilingual-indigenous system. Most schools in Tlaxcala are still monolingual in Spanish. In a dozen of Tlaxcala's public elementary schools, there has been an effort in the past decade to add a bilingual element to the required national curriculum taught in schools across Mexico. The Dirección General de Educación Indígena (DGEI, General Directorate of Indigenous Education) today produces pedagogical ma-
terials in multiple indigenous languages, but these are “stand-alone” texts that do not directly coordinate with the larger bureaucratic institu-
tion, the national educational secretariat, the SEP (Secretaría de Edu-
cación Pública) (Messing 2003; Messing and Rockwell 2006). My field study was motivated by the desire to see what “really happens” in rural Tlaxcalan bilingual schools. I observed that in the schools Nahuatl study only happens in isolated instances within a highly regimented school schedule, and that the language is used at certain symbolic events dur-
ing the school year. At the local level, the institution of the public school in Tlaxcala is both a part of a nation-wide school system and a community institution made up of teachers, students, and parents — all members of the community that constitute this institution. There are in fact teachers who spend hours creating their own indigenous-language textbooks, vying with each other for recognition by the SEP, or simply seeking funds to reproduce these texts and distribute them to their local colleagues.

In San Isidro, when the state educational bureaucracy decided to make an existing elementary school into an “indigenous/bilingual school” in the early 1990s, local families chained and locked the front gate to pre-
vent teachers from opening it. Eventually, some teachers who both served as representatives of the state and also sincerely believed that they would create a true bilingual program succeeded in their negotiations with the parents, explaining that their children would not only learn Mexicano but would also achieve literacy mainly in Spanish, and the school was allowed to open. The teachers were predominantly from other Mexicano
regions and not San Isidro, and none had explicit training in language revitalization.

5. Using a private-sphere language for public-sphere purposes

Through schooling, Mexicano is then forced into the nonintimate sphere of the school, where speakers may or may not have relationships of reciprocity and confianza with each other outside the school. Citing work in East Sutherland Gaelic-speaking areas, and building on Kroskrity (1993), Dorian (2002) has pointed to the usefulness of a continuum between power and solidarity in the discussion of different social contexts that correlate with the languages used; thus a distinction between power and solidarity is exemplified in Tlaxcala by the assignment of Spanish (as the power code) and Mexicano (as the solidarity code) to quite distinct contexts. Dorian (2006) further discusses another similarity between her fieldwork context and my own, with regard to a disjunction between the use of a local dialect of Scottish Gaelic as a private-sphere language and its use for a hyper-public–sphere purpose, in this case, making a television documentary. Her report on using “a private-sphere language for a public-sphere purpose” (2006) highlights the challenges in using local languages for purposes that are considered “public” or “official” and thus violating local language ideologies. Additionally, public uses of more intimate/private-sphere languages can be a cause for linguistic insecurity, since it may expose lexical gaps, for instance, as well as borrowings from the expanding language. Dorian’s conclusion for her fieldsite is similar to my own with regard to the Tlaxcala situation: scholars must recognize the difficulty faced by local speakers of minority languages when they violate powerful prevailing language ideologies for appropriate language use, even when the violations are supportive of language revitalization goals. Indeed, this issue has also been considered by Woolard (1998: 17), who suggests that “[m]ovements to save minority languages ironically are often structured, willy-nilly, around the same received notions of language that have led to their oppression and/or suppression,” e.g., “imposing standards, elevating literate forms and uses, and negatively sanctioning variability.”

A Tlaxcalan scholar with whom I have worked states that true revitalization programs must have an ideological component that stems from the community itself; he does not believe that a far-reaching revitalization program can exist solely in and through schools.

A real program of revitalization must have an ideological base in the community itself, developed by the members of that community and overall as
a real communicative practice. [...] Revitalization cannot happen in an artificial scheme such as in schooling. (Nava Nava 2003: 49; translation of Spanish mine)

The paradox discussed by all these scholars shows us the importance of paying attention to the ideological dimension of language shift, which as Nava Nava explains, is the key to shifting communicative practice.

6. Conclusion

A focus on the ideologies of local patterns of language use within contexts that are more familial and intimate versus contexts that are formal and power-laden helps us understand the ideological dimension of language shift. As this article has shown, the local, ancestral language is often relegated to the private sphere, while the colonial (or otherwise power-laden) language takes over increasing aspects of that which is “public.” Attention to local ideas of “public” and “private” is important to the functional distribution of codes in language-shift situations. No sharp boundary between “public” and “private” can be established cross-culturally, as students of culture and of gender have shown by focusing on the ideological and symbolic nature of any such boundary making.

I believe that direct ethnographic attention to the types of ideological paradoxes that surface in multilingual settings with a majority language and one or more minority languages can inform the work of local language promoters. The future of “alternative language revitalization” (cf. Urla 2001; McSherry 1999; Flores Farfán 2001) does depend on ideological and practical support from communities themselves. If we were to seriously consider designing a viable bilingual-education program — something my interviewees discussed with me at great length — we would need to take into consideration the necessary use of a private language for a very public purpose. The critique of schools that purport to teach/revitalize native languages, cited above, takes schools to be power-laden institutions of the state, but has neglected the localness of this public-sphere space, and the agency of potentially influential locals, some of whom are language promoters (Fishman 1991).

The hope that I see in an otherwise sad language-shift situation is the activism among a small number of local language promoters who understand that, as Joseph and Nugent (1994) and Gal (2002) have pointed out, “publics” are themselves contexts that are socially constructed by local people and are thus open to the possibility of change, particularly
through collaborative revitalization endeavors that open up new discursive spaces.

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Notes

* I wish to thank Nancy Dorian for encouraging me to submit this article, and for her valuable commentary on the first draft. I am grateful to Susan Philips and Jane Hill for many enlightening exchanges regarding this research. I thank the Fulbright Commission, Spencer Foundation, University of Arizona, University of South Florida, José Antonio Flores Farfán, Elsie Rockwell, Refugio Nava Nava, Ramos Rosales Flores, Nieves Ahuantzi Calderon, and Desiderio L. Marcos.

1. Unlike indigenous communities in the United States, Mexican native communities do not have reservations, nor do they refer to themselves as “tribes.”

2. These are the full names; following local convention I will refer to them simply as “Con- tla” and “San Isidro.”

3. Tlaxcalans are renowned in Mexico for their support of the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés in his capture of the Mexica’s (Aztec) Tenochtitlan, which is today Mexico City. During the initial phase of the colony, Tlaxcala enjoyed a degree of special status as an independent republic.


5. Hill and Hill make the case that speakers in the Malinche region have survived years of cultural and political infiltrations by integrating elements of Spanish into their Mexicano speech. They describe Mexicano as syntactic speech. This syntactic Mexicano includes Spanish loan words and grammatical constructions — especially prepositions and conjunctions, numbers, and lexical items in a Spanish that has been adapted to Mexicano grammar.

6. On Nahual purism elsewhere, see also Flores Farfán (2003).

7. Anthropological linguistics has, in recent years, focused on the importance of paying attention to the ideological dimension of language use (Irvine 1989: 255).

8. Gender studies and anthropology have questioned the existence of “public” and “private” spheres, taking Habermas’ treatise on the topic to task (cf. Habermas 1991 [1989]). The volume Languages and Publics (Gal and Irvine 2001: 4) suggests that “the category of the public [is] a language-based form of political legitimation,” and asks the question, how is a public sphere constructed in social life and through speech? Also, what are local constructions of public and private? Thus, privateness can seep into public discourse. For our purposes, Gal’s (2002: 77) argument that the public/private distinction should be “analyzed as a communicative phenomenon — a product of semiotic processes” is of particular relevance. She finds, too, that Habermas, among other theoreticians of public and private spheres, offers several levels of “publicness” and “privateness” in his writing.

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