

The consequences of the contradictory and ambiguous language policies for speakers of indigenous languages in Mexico

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Mexico, multilingual country: What does it mean?

Heritage Speakers and Mexican indigenous languages speakers

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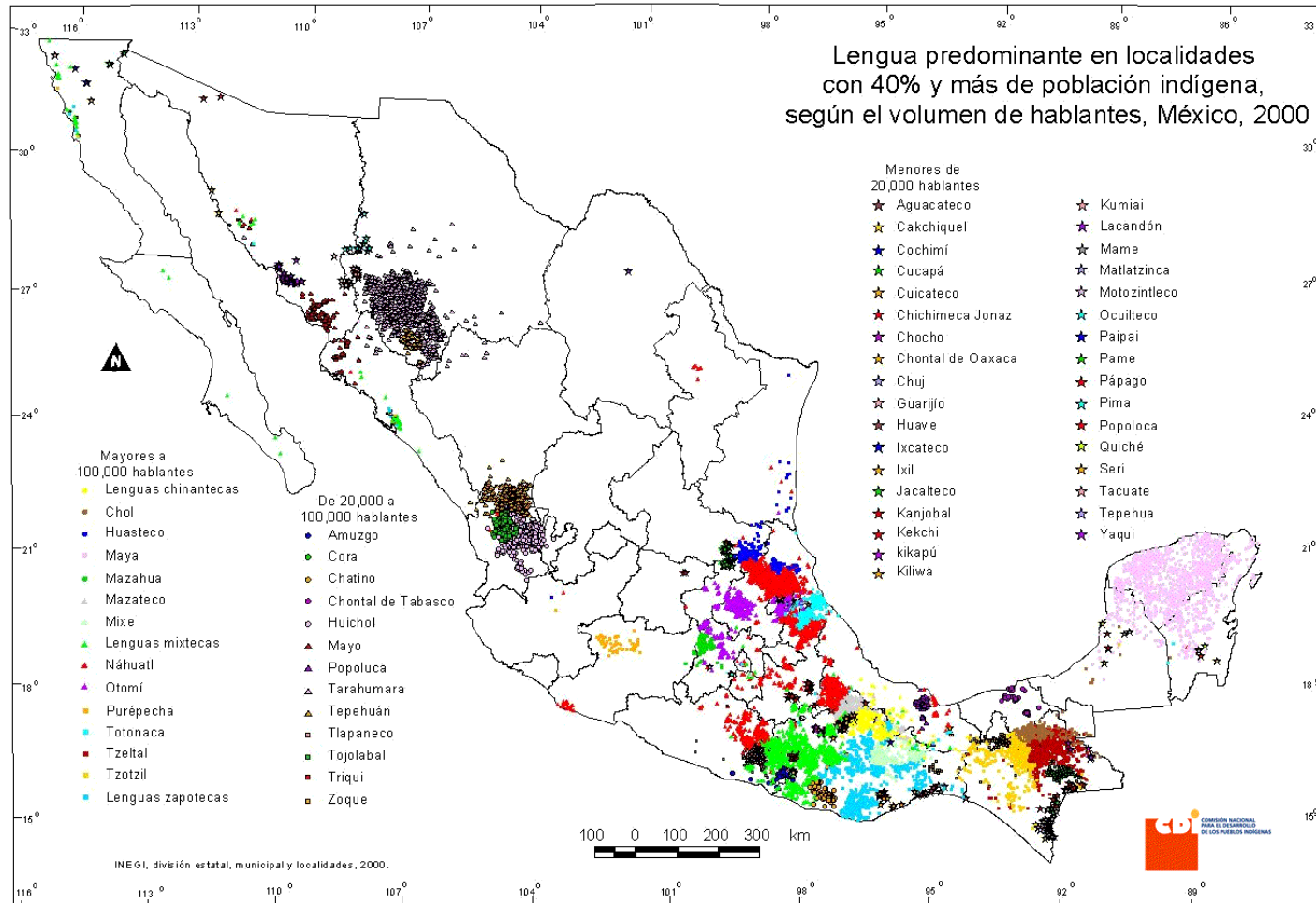
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- Bilingualism
- Interculturality
- Literacy

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Preamble: Linguistic diversity of Mexico ¿Blessing or Punishment?



Research Questions

- How do the educational system responds to the indigenous population needs ?
- Which are the main barriers in schools that block the embracing diversity possibilities of the indigenous population?
- How parents face their children's linguistic challenges?
- Which is the status of their language writing and reading skills?
- Which are the teachers' attitudes towards understanding the problems this children face?
- How can we break the barriers of discrimination and segregation?

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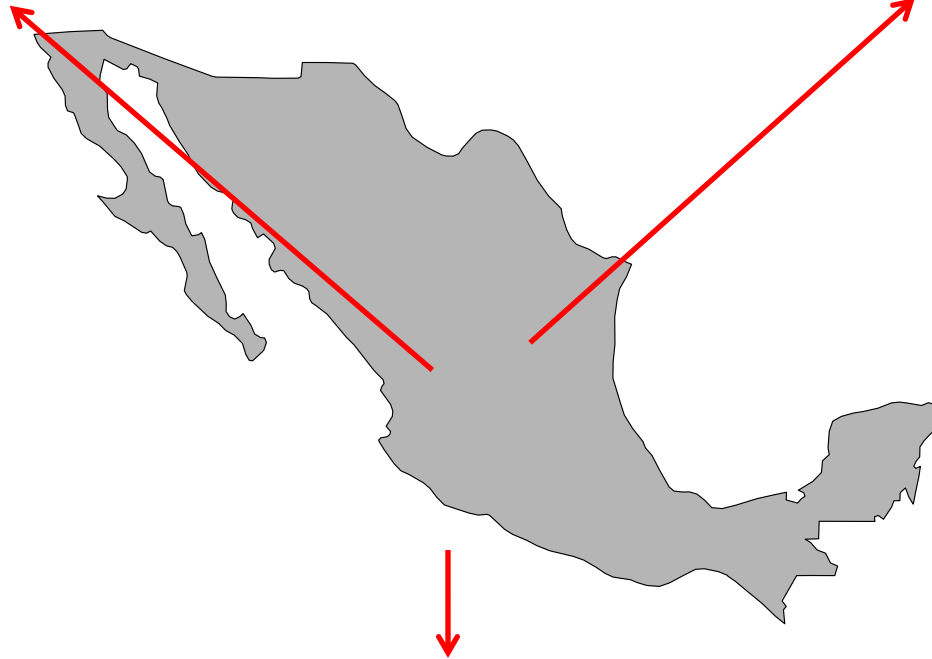
Mexico, multilingual country: what does it mean?

Linguistic diversity

63 indigenous languages with their dialects

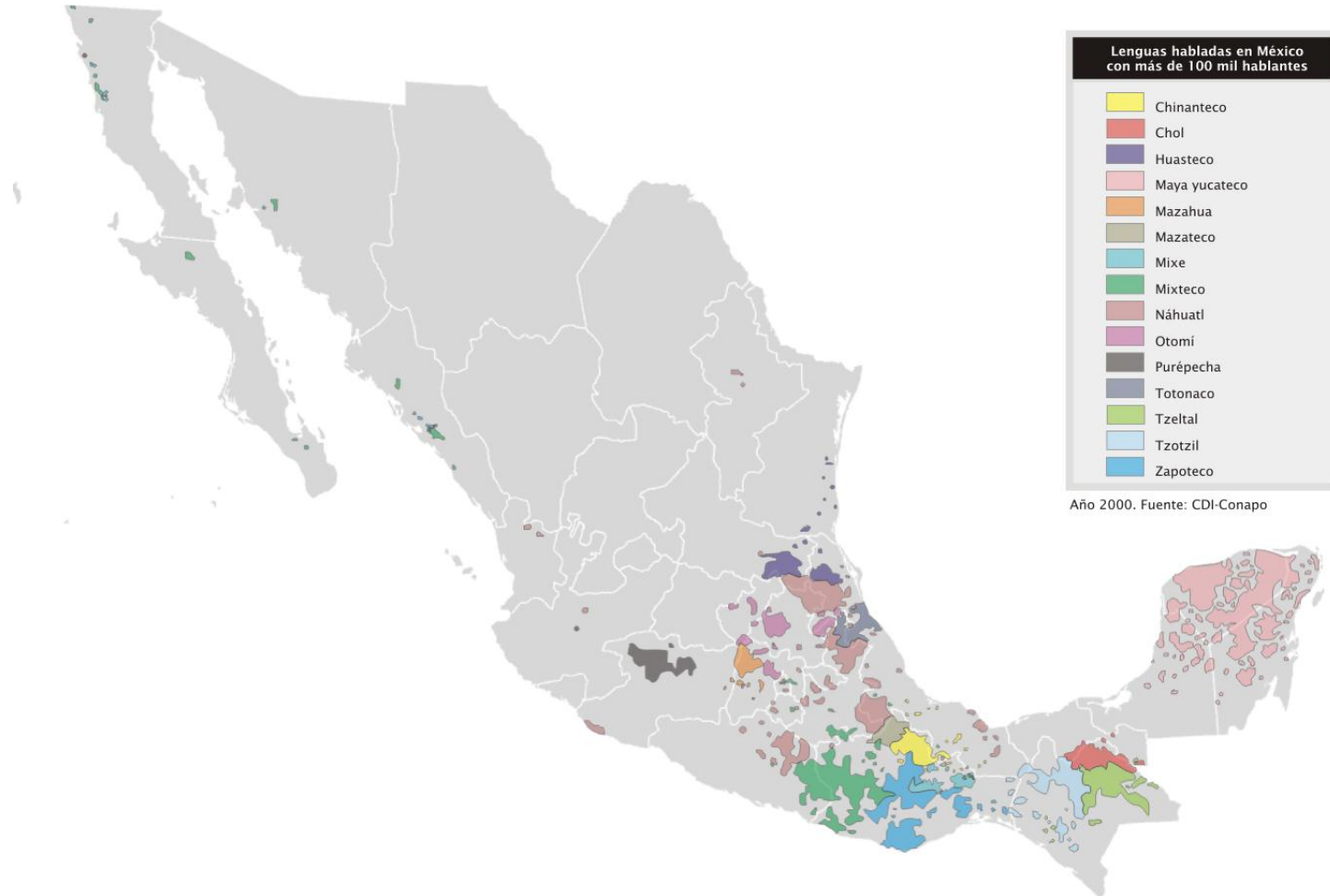
Conflicting

Languages in contact



Diversity of educational problems

Languages with more than 100 000 speakers

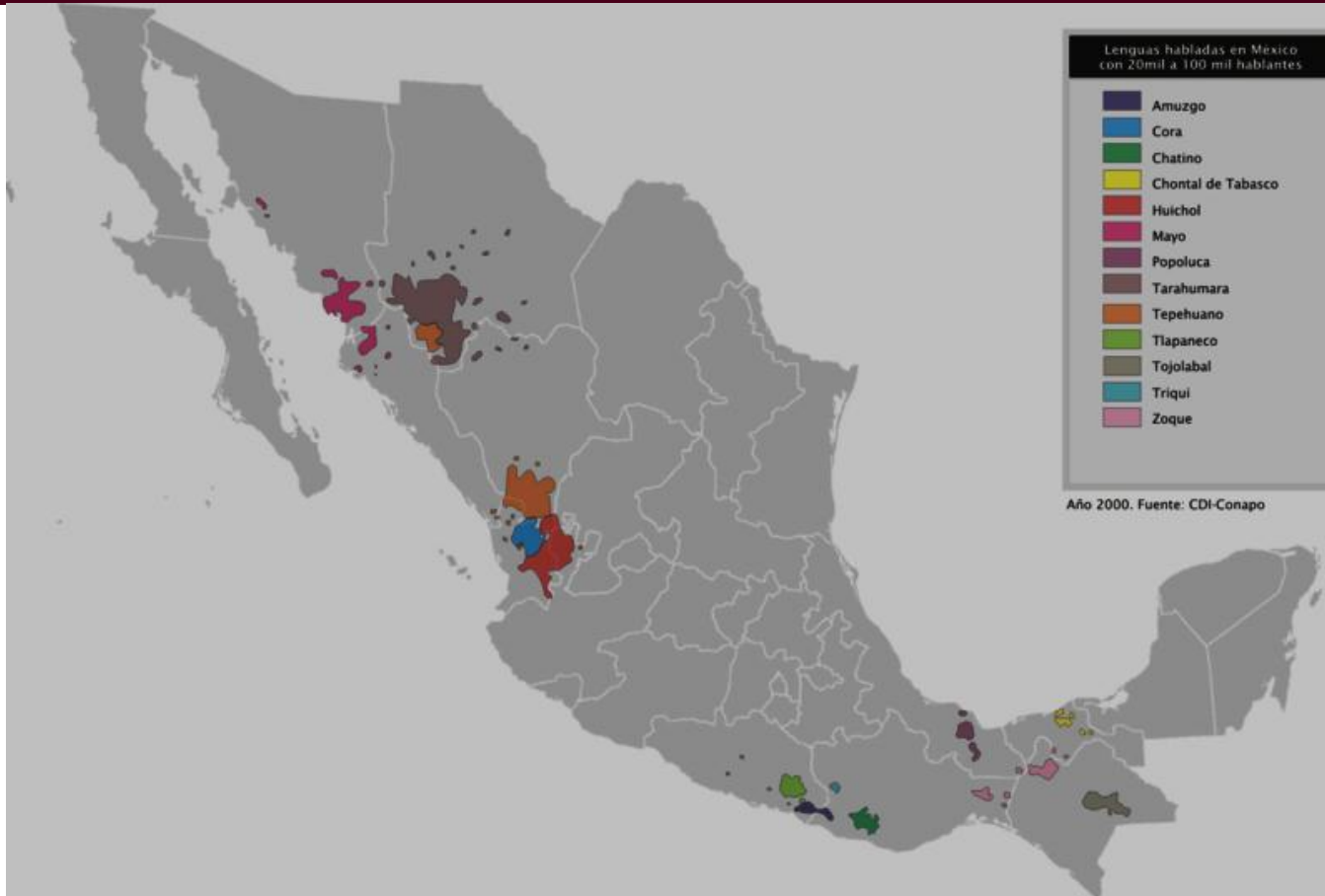


Sharing knowledge, Finding pathways: Developing pedagogical resources..
Department of Romances Languages
Harvard University. April 29th and 30th, 2011

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Languages with more than 20 000 and less than 100 000 Speakers



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Languages with less than 20 000 speakers

Endangered languages



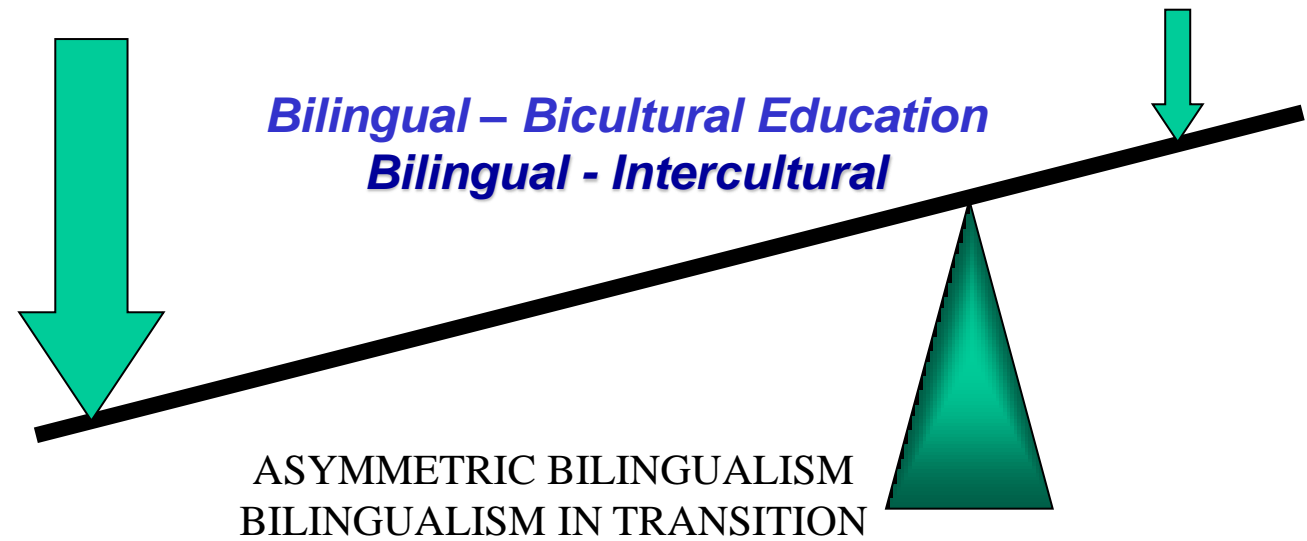
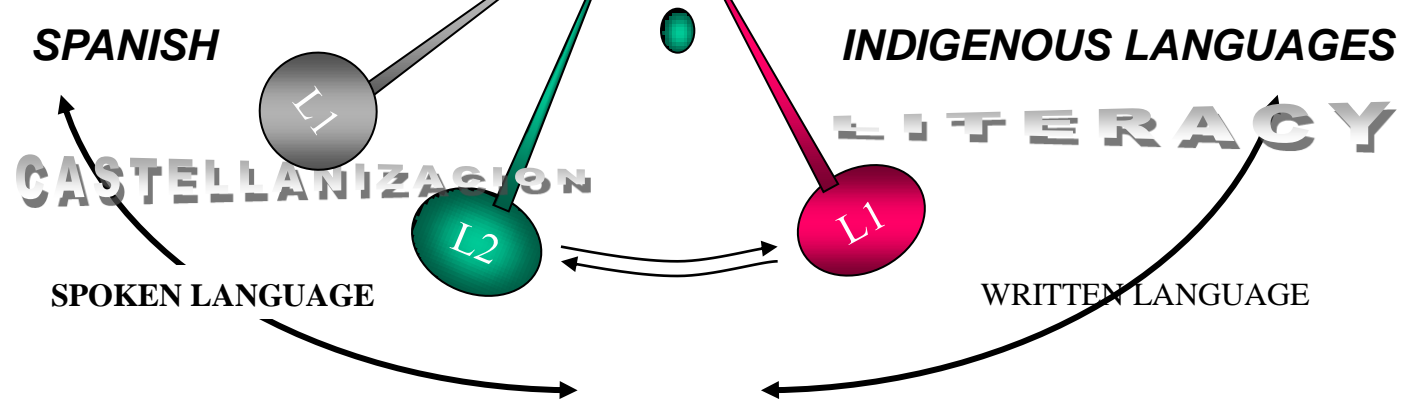
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MILESTONES IN MEXICAN HISTORY

COLONY- INDEPENDENCE – REVOLUTION – CARDENISMO - EZLN



***Time line:
Mexican
Language
Policies. A
pendular
movement***

Similarities and differences

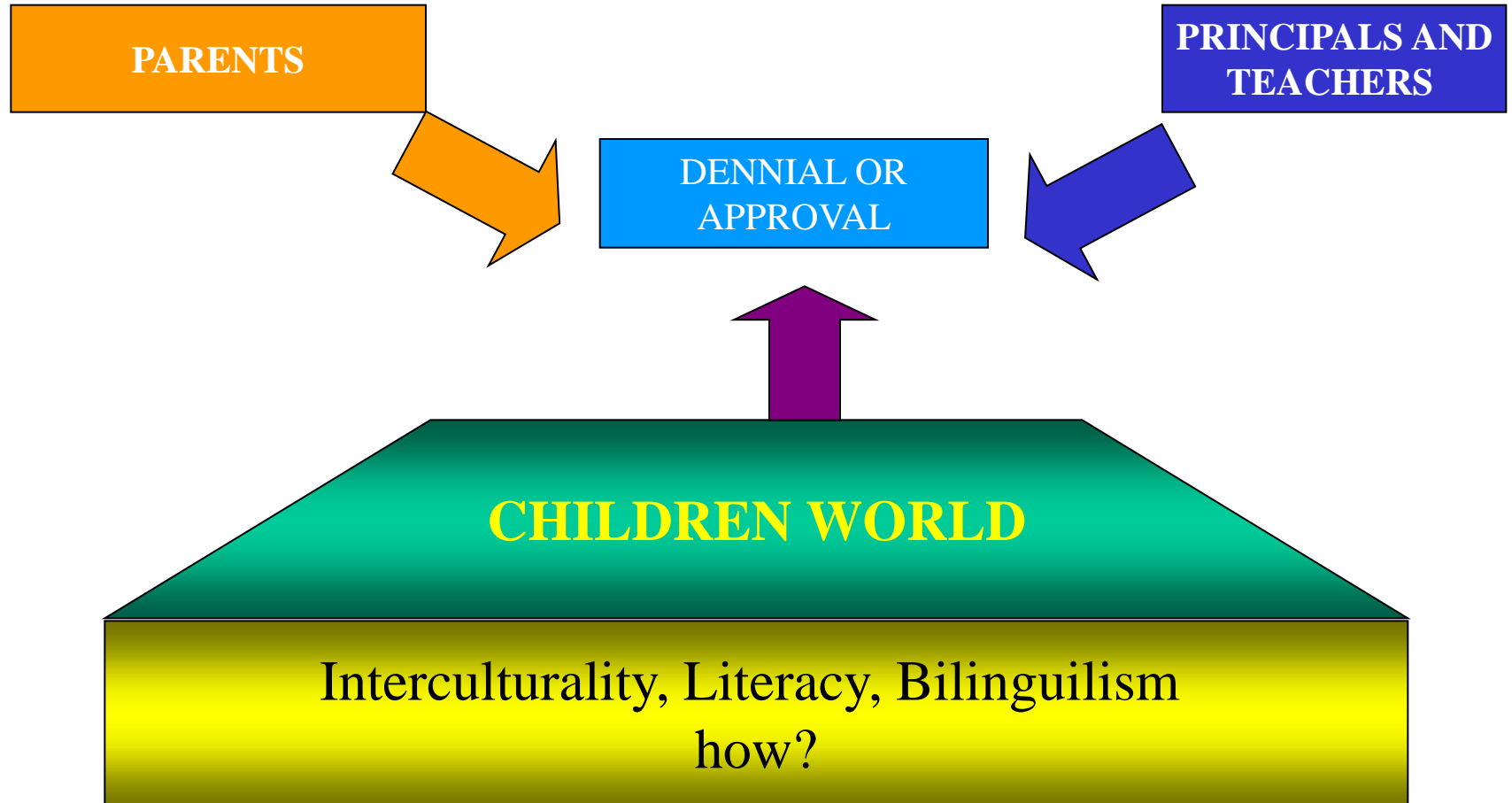
HERITAGE LANGUAGES		MEXICAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES
ENGLISH LANGUAGE DOMINATES MOTHER TONGUES	ENGLISH SPANISH	MOTHER TONGUE DOMINATES LANGUAGE WHEN CHILDREN OR NOT
DOMINATES	SCHOOLING	SCARCELY AND INCONSISTENT
EXISTS	ALPHABET	FOR TONAL AND MANY OTHER LANGUAGES DOES NOT EXIST
WRITTEN AND ORAL LANGUAGE	LITERACY	ORAL TRADITION

Objective

Based on my personal experience in urban schools with indigenous population, where I have been doing ethnographic research, my ultimate objective is to analyze the current situation of Mexican indigenous children in order to find possible academic solutions to their educational linguistic and social problems.

This analysis is based upon three axis:
Interculturality, Bilingualism and Literacy.

Actors and attitudes: a conflicting triad



Actors and attitudes: Indigenous, Mestizo Children and the Languages

Indigenous children:

Their presence is usually overlooked, but which becomes evident with their marked problems with written language.

- They are paradoxically, sedentary and migratory at the same time.
- They are often absent from school because their parents take them to their towns.
- They have ambiguous attitudes with their languages and they use them according with the situation: “I speak Mazateco, but I don’t like it because people make fun of me, they don’t understand.”

“I can tell you how to say tortilla, dog or corn in Nahuatl.”

“We do not speak Mazateco to my little brother anymore, my dad doesn’t want us to do that, he hits us if we do,”

“We’d rather speak in Spanish because everyone understands”

“I rather speak in otomi to make the stupid white girls, who won’t pay well for their bracelets, realize that they won’t be defeated.” “I would teach his language to his children so they could know more and not forget the words.”

Mestizo children:

- Their attitude towards their indigenous classmates is natural; There is no prejudice or discrimination but they note that:

“they speak differently”

“This one speaks another language!”

“He won’t tell you because he feels ashamed. He speaks funny.”

- They are apparently unaware that many different languages other than Spanish are spoken in Mexico, but they were aware of the prestige languages: English, German, French.

Actors and attitudes

Parents

- The expectations of this children`s parents on the school are enormous.
- The degree of literacy among indigenous children`s parents in these schools is alarming: Most of them are illiterate and monolingual.
- Those who are bilingual and literate have *a weak competence in Spanish, and a weaker competence in writing and reading.*
- Their concern is that their children “learn to read and write and forget their languages so that they won’t be mistreated or mocked.”
- They believe that Spanish is salvation, that is the remedy to all evils.
- They are convinced that learning Spanish provides them with plenty of benefits, and that they should forget they are Indians in order to have “better opportunities and a better future.”
- They agree with the ideas of most teachers and, unconsciously, endorse non-interculturality at school.* "No, miss," a woman would say, "I do not want Maria to go through the same as me, I don't understand anything."

Actors and attitudes Principals and Teachers

At some schools , I encountered a relentless denial, “No, we do not have indigenous children here, maybe their grandparents speak a *dialect*”. “No teacher, we do not have indigenous children in our schools,” “There are barely a few left,” “We have none,” “They have almost forgotten their *dialects*,” “They are from a town, but they no longer speak a *dialect*.”

Only one teacher dared to say that her students had a lot of problems with reading, and that in her classroom she had the type of students I was looking for. “You can identify them right away, *their skin is very dark, and they have a lot of problems in trying to understand because they do speak some dialect*”. “They are the ones who go to visit their towns pretty often.”

According to a school report that the principal provided me with, 30% of the school’s students were indigenous and belonged to one of the following groups: Mixes, Mazatecos, Zapotecos, Otomies, Nahuas, Yaquis, and Totonacos.

In the course of the five years I have been visiting the school, I have found children who speak languages that are not recorded in the registration forms, such as Matlatzincas, Mazahuas, and Mixtecos. “Oh teacher,” the assistant principal complains, “**it is hard with these children, since they deny being native and what can we do to know!**”

Intercultural Bilingual Education: A promissory policy

In the 90s, the Intercultural Bilingual Education in Mexico appears as a promising formula to undertake the transformation of the ancient process of denial and discrimination of indigenous languages into the exercise of equitable coexistence of cultures and languages.

The Public Education Ministry of Mexico states that:

Intercultural education shall be understood as the one which acknowledges and serves cultural and linguistic diversity, promotes respect for differences, and secures the construction of national unity, based on favoring the reinforcement of local, regional, and national identity, as well as the development of attitudes and practices oriented towards the search for freedom and justice for everyone.

From the intercultural standpoint, bilingual education shall be understood as that which fosters the acquisition, reinforcement, development, and consolidation of both Spanish and indigenous languages and eliminates one language over the other one.

What kind of bilingualism?

Bilingualism is defined as the mastery of two languages.

It is a complex procedure involving cognitive factors: psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and educational aspects.

Dynamic phenomenon, conflicting, paradoxical heterogeneous, with two faces.

THE BRIGHT SIDE OF BILINGUALISM:

IT IS ASSOCIATED WITH HIGHER DEGREE OF CULTURE.

INCREASES PERSONAL PRESTIGE \IT IS BETWEEN LANGUAGES STANDARDIZED AND WITH LITERARY TRADITION

WAKE COGNITIVE PROCESSES: METALINGUISTIC AWARENESS

THE DARK SIDE OF BILINGUALISM

IT IS ASSOCIATED WITH LOWER SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

CAUSES NEGATIVE ATTITUDE, LANGUAGE DISLOYALTY

THREATENS THE NATIONAL UNITY

THE MIGRANTS ARE VIEW AS INVASIVE

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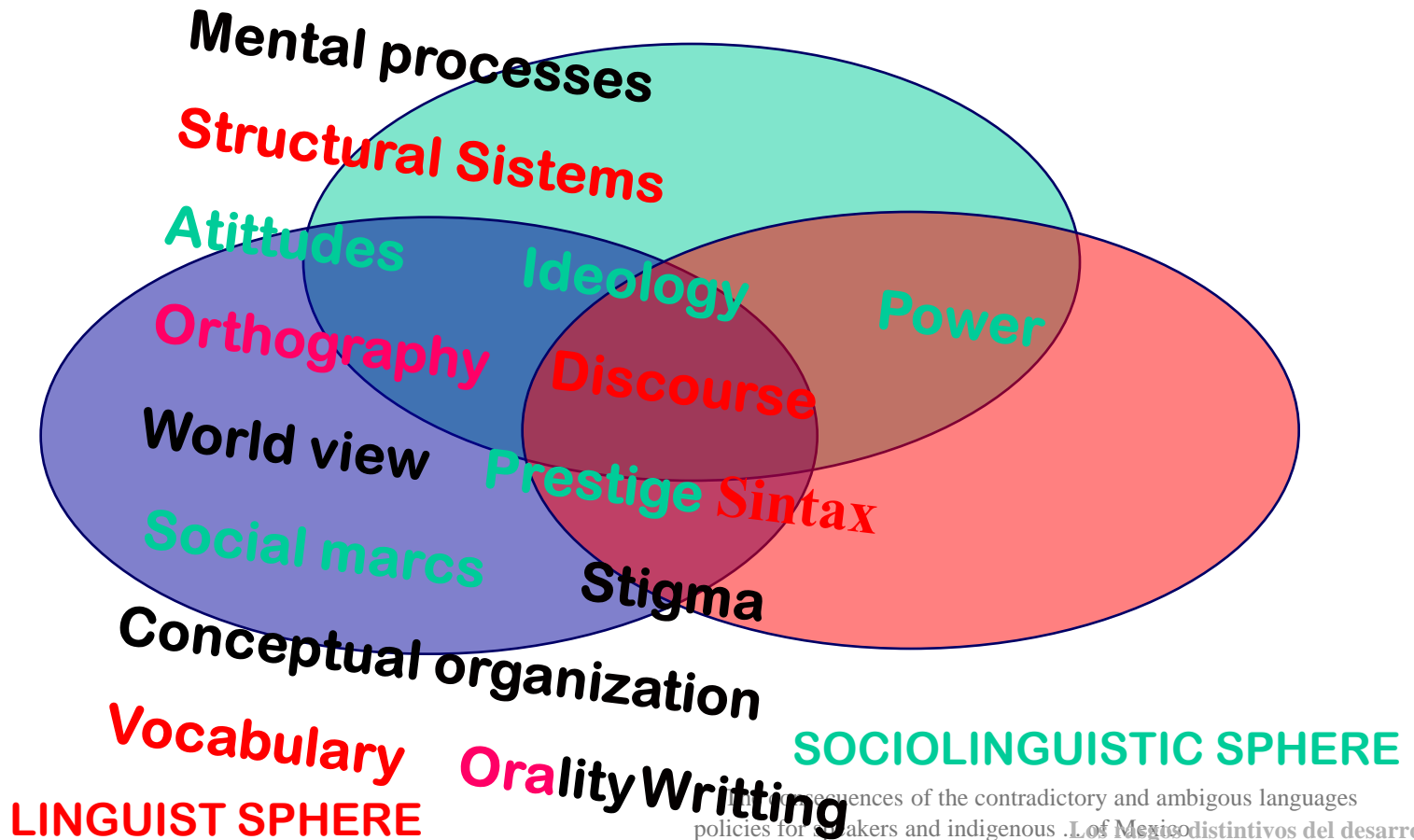
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Literacy

- *Educational Service Program for Migratory Indigenous Children*, fostered by the Ministry of Public Education, precisely within the *Intercultural Bilingual Education Program*, whose most significant guidelines include: Indigenous boys and girls must be given *intercultural bilingual* education.
- strong concentrations of migratory indigenous population from different Mexican states, such as Oaxaca (Mixtecan, Mazatecan, Zapotecan, and Mixean), Puebla (Nahua, Totonacan Otomian), Toluca (Otomian, Mazahuan, and Matlatzincan), Veracruz (Nahua and Totonacan), Guerrero (Nahua and Tlapanecan), who arrive at the city trying to escape from the misery, violence, and all the material and spiritual lacks they have to deal with in their native communities.
- *Most of this* schools share their Mission, which is expressed, in one way or another, as: “Improving the students' reading and writing skills”.
- No consistent and professional attention is paid to the specific needs for teaching indigenous children to read and write in the native tongues.

Literacy

COGNITIVE SPHERE



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Problems with Literacy

BILINGUALISM

Oral tradition
Written language



Mother tongue
(tzeltal, me' phaa, mixteco,
mixe, chinanteco)

Restricted use for some spheres:
Home, church, intimacy

Walking through written
language without standarization

SPANISH,
Second language?
Or a peculiar mother tongue

Prestige language
Standarized

Literacy

The most significant problems in the classroom are associated with written language:

- The difficulties of transiting from oral to written language are multiple:

The children are little or completely unfamiliar with writing, since their cultures of origin. There are no alphabets capable of reflecting their vowels and tones for writing and, thus, writing is useless.

The constant interference between their mother language and Spanish: The child is governed by the phonological, syntactical, and semantic patterns of their native language, which appear in their early formal contact with their written Spanish language, which is their second language.

- Indigenous children are skillful and express themselves easily; they have grasped Spanish structure and reflect it rather faithfully. However, writing is a walking upwards —accents, word segmentation, and punctuation follow, with no doubt, different phonological patterns.

- It is hard for children to read out loud and, therefore, it is confined to deciphering letters, first, and syllabification later on, as the most recurrent strategies.

- Reading comprehension varies widely if it is measured orally or by written means:

When the teacher asks oral questions about a reading material, children find it easy to answer; *their good memory and creativity make up for comprehension with memorized repetitions or creative inventions.*

When questions and answers are in writing, the exercise becomes time-consuming and tough for most kids.

Some bold conclusions

- Interculturality is still far away from reality in most educational environments in Mexico, whether indigenous, rural or urban.
- In the particular case of most of this type of urban schools, interculturality is narrowed to an ambiguous word whose referent is void of meaning.
- Interculturality is present, but overlooked: Indigenous are ignored because teachers are afraid to recognize their own lack of knowledge; they are conceived as a problem.
- Interculturality , bilingualism and literacy is not developed *per se*, but constructed on a fake foundation, driven by the urgent need of remaining within a status demanded by external factors.
- The intercultural-bilingual pair is always mutilated, since bilingualism is virtually inexistent in these schools: The Spanish language is preferred in every school activity.
- Monolingual Spanish teachers are not able at all to solve their students' linguistic diversity.

Some bold conclusions

- In most of urban schools with indigenous population, there is no academic support available for the children who speak their mother tongues, which is fundamental during the first portion of the elementary education **when written language is the crucial trigger for their linguistic and cognitive development.**
- Children acquire their knowledge in Spanish with **sociolinguistic** consequences: Lost of identity, displacement of the mother tongue and denial of their original cultural values. And **psycholinguistic** consequences: Implies the lack of comprehension of contents and the paralysis **derived from non-significant learning, which unavoidably leads children to abandon their education, to functional illiteracy and social resentment.**
- Lack of education planning that provides specific programs to face the challenge posed by interculturality, bilingualism and literacy in the classroom.

What is going up?

The linguistic
policies discourse

Self-determination
Respect
Harmony
Coexistence between languages and cultures

Hope space
Reverse the process of languages lost
Languages maintainance

Indigenous school
reality (specialy urban)

Indegenous language displacement
Lost identity and displacement language
Overlap cosmovisions
Imposed alphabet
Lack of didactic materials

What is it possible
to achieve?