

Language Situation in Mexico in the Era of Globalization

Radoslav Hlúšek

Radoslav Hlúšek

University of SS Cyril and Methodius, Trnava, Slovakia

E-mail: radoslav.hlusek@ucm.sk

Abstract

The essay deals with the language situation in Mexico in the era of globalization. It is not focused, however, only on the present day situation and does not discuss only last couple of decades during which globalization has become an indivisible part of all societies in the world, but it also discusses the language situation in Mexico during different periods of its history. Based on this historical perspective the contribution intends to analyze the impact of globalization on Mexican native languages and to explain their current position in the Spanish speaking environment. The essay also takes into consideration the influence of English as a universal tongue of globalization and explains why the position of this language as a tool of globalization is weak in Mexico in comparison with Spanish.

Key words: Language, Mexico, globalization, English, history

Mexico is a country well known for its rich and impressive indigenous past as well as the present. The existence of dozens of native groups signifies the existence of dozens of cultures and also languages which have been spoken there since the pre-Hispanic period. It is, however, not possible to say exactly how many Indian tongues there are in the country. Some linguists consider one language to be a variant of another and some of them see it as an independent tongue. On the other side, some major native languages (as for instance Nahuatl) are geographically (and historically as well) so dispersed that in reality they are very different and speakers of them almost do not understand each other. That is the reason why some linguists consider these languages not to be one independent language but several languages instead. As a consequence, we can find estimates ranging from 60 native languages (Andrade 2000: page missing) to more than 300 (Hingarová 2101: 267).

It is not the goal of this contribution to analyze the number of native languages in present day Mexico; rather we would like to discuss their situation and position in the time of globalization. Even though we can observe this process especially in economy, it also has very visible impacts on social and cultural dimensions of all societies in the world, including minorities and their languages. As it was mentioned already we can count several dozens of native tongues in Mexico, however, all of them belong to the group of minority languages and their most visible common characteristic is that all of them are endangered²¹, even those with most speakers (Nahuatl, Yucatec Maya, Mixteco, etc.).

²¹ Apart from Guaraní in Paraguay all of the native languages in both Americas are endangered as a result of insufficient support from the national governments. There is only one official language (of European origin) in these states which predominates in TV and radio broadcasting, literature, education and, of course, labor market. All of that lead speakers of native tongues to feel inferior to the mainstream society and to see their languages inferior and useless. And even though this has changed during the last two decades, it seems to be too late. The revitalization of native languages organized mostly by native educated elites is not very successful.

This situation is the result language policy of independent Mexico which has been creating a united Mexican nation in a united country for the last 200 years by force of Spanish as the only official language of the country. The idea of a united nation lead Mexican politicians to use various strategies in order to integrate minority native groups into the majoritarian Mexican society as we can observe in different parts of Mexican history (Spanish colony, Mexican republic before and after Mexican revolution and contemporary Mexico). The relatively liberal policy of the Spanish crown was substituted by the effort of independent Mexico to create a united Mexican nation by force of an official national ideology and language (Spanish) and by the suppression of indigenous languages. This policy has changed since the end of 1970s and even more since the beginning of 1990 when the constitution (1992) declared Mexico to be a multicultural and multilingual nation. But almost 200 years of intensive hispanization²² has rooted Spanish so deeply in native Mexican societies that in general we can say that there is almost no Indian in contemporary Mexico who does not speak Spanish²³. Therefore the declaration of Mexico as a multicultural and especially multilingual nation/state²⁴ looks like empty gesture in a situation when the process of hispanization seems to be irreversible.

The legacy of building the Mexican nation is not the only threat for Mexican native languages (and native groups and cultures, as well). That is to say, in the era of globalization it is not necessary to make direct (or indirect) political pressure to use only one official language. Instead, the economic and cultural opening of the country to the outside world makes native people (but not only them) use that language which enables them to find better paid jobs because their communities stopped being self-sufficient. That is the reason why they migrate to towns where they cannot speak other language but Spanish.

The presence of a powerful neighbor to the north (the USA where labor migration is also directed) has also brought about a new language situation. Instead of the revitalization of their mother languages native people in Mexico desire to learn English as a means of escaping poverty and reaching prosperity. The situation in the country, however, is different and English has not gained the position of the dominant language of globalization as it could be expected. This role belongs to Spanish and in spite of lot of English language schools and migration to the USA Mexican people (both Mestizo and Indians) do not master English. The opening of Mexico to the world by the neoliberal governments of the last two decades, of course, brought a strong influence of globalization (especially the USA) in Mexico but because of several reasons which we will discuss later the position of English as the principal global and most extended language is very weak in Mexico and the position of Spanish within Mexico is analogical to the position of English in the global context²⁵. But before we analyze the influence of globalization on the language situation in Mexico we consider important to explain the relationship between Mexican native tongues and Spanish since the conquest until the present.

²² We use the term hispanization (the term castilianisation can also be used) in a limited sense of imposing Spanish as a tool of communication instead of mexicanization which we also use but in a wider meaning including hispanization as well as acculturation and integration of native people to the modern and united Mexican nation.

²³ Of course, we still can find them. But most of them are advanced in age (more than 70 years old), younger generations are bilingual or they master only Spanish.

²⁴ In this case we use these terms as synonyms because the ideal of nation and state (that means national state) has been mixed together and speaking about the state in Mexico means speaking about the nation and vice versa.

²⁵ Apart from Brazil, of course, where this position belongs to Portuguese, and some countries in the Caribbean area where English, French and Dutch are spoken.

Spanish and native languages during the colonial era²⁶

Even though the conquest caused a cultural shock and a demographic disaster (mostly because of epidemics)²⁷, the colonial period of Mexican history does not represent a twilight of native cultures and languages. On the contrary, the Spanish Crown considered native Mexicans to be subjects of the king and as such they were supposed to pay taxes. We do not want to say that they were equal to the Spaniards living in the colony²⁸ but they were protected by the so called Laws of the Indies (*Leyes de Indias*) which defined their rights and duties. This attitude can be clearly visible in the language policy of the Crown which was strongly influenced by members of monastic orders²⁹ who were in charge of missionary work among the Indians and their conversion to the Roman Catholic faith. Friars understood the situation in Mexico correctly and they persuaded the king to allow evangelism in Indian languages, especially in the major ones such as Yucatec Maya, Mixteco but especially Nahuatl which the friars extended geographically more than it was in Aztec times and it turned into a lingua franca of Mexico. That is to say it was much easier for friars, who could not be very numerous³⁰ to learn native tongues than to teach the Indians Spanish³¹. Thus the friars started to study these tongues and the result of their effort can be seen in the form of numerous grammars and dictionaries of native languages, as well as in the form of chronicles which are indispensable in the study of Mexican pre-Hispanic and colonial history and anthropology. In addition, Nahuatl and other major languages were taught at the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico in Mexico City. The division of the colonial society into the so-called Republic of Indians and Republic of Spaniards with clergymen and native nobility as mediators between native communities and colonial authorities also helped to isolate the natives and to preserve their languages and cultures, even though heavily influenced by their European/Spanish counterparts.

Relatively liberal language policy of Spanish monarchs changed in the second half of the 18th century. The reforms of the Bourbon dynasty forbade the use native languages for missionary purposes and only Spanish was allowed. Of course, it was not easy to implement this intention but the changed language policy was adopted by the Creole elites after the War of Independence.

Spanish and native languages in the 19th century³²

One of the main goals of the liberal governments of independent Mexico was to build a modern and united Mexican nation in accordance with European model of the epoch of

²⁶ The conventional date of the beginning of the colonial period is the year 1521 when Hernán Cortés conquered the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan. There were, of course, a lot of areas which were taken much later, some of them even in the 19th century (like Apache land in north-western Mexico), that is, long after the end of the colony in 1821 when Mexico gained its independence from Spain.

²⁷ It is assumed that there were about 25 million people living in Mesoamerica just before the conquest (Todorov 1996: 157). Fifty years later there were only 3 million of them (Hlúšek 2007: 30).

²⁸ The case of native elites was quite different because they became a part of colonial nobility with a special position in the colonial society and they were the first who accepted European customs (and Spanish language, as well).

^{29,29} Dominicans, Augustinians and later Jesuits but mainly Franciscans left a deep imprint on the Mexican church and especially during the first three decades after the conquest it was Franciscans who dominated the spiritual life of the colony.

³⁰ The approximate number of clergymen in the country can be derived from the Franciscan chronicler Toribio de Benavente Motolinía who writes about 60 Franciscans in Mexico in 1536 (Benavente Motolinía 1995: 85). Since there were fewer Dominicans and Augustinians than Franciscans, it is probable that the total number of ecclesiastics exceeded one hundred only slightly.

³¹ We also should keep in mind one of the conclusions of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) which permitted the evangelism of pagans in their mother languages.

³² We are referring to the period between 1821 and the Mexican revolution (1910-1917).

national revival. But meanwhile the creation of national states in Europe was accompanied by the oppression of national minorities and the exaltation of the state-forming nation, in Mexico the process was characterized by the effort to integrate native inhabitants of the country into the newly born nation represented mostly by its Creole elites and Mestizo people. Liberal egalitarianism led to the abolition of special Indian laws and to the dissolution of the communal ownership of land. The language policy elevated Spanish to the position of the national and only official language of the republic. Tongues of native Mexicans were branded dialects (*dialectos*)³³ and relegated to a secondary and inferior position vis-a-vis Spanish (*lengua*).

The Mexican constitution recognized only one nation (the Mexican) and one language (Spanish) and native peoples were to be integrated within it. Native languages stopped to receive any protection and Indians were to learn Spanish in order to become real Mexicans. Indian children were to be educated in Spanish and thereby become mexicanized. The problem lied in the monolingual character of this kind of education. Teachers sent from the center to native communities were monolingual (in Spanish) as well as their pupils (in their mother languages) and they could not understand each other. This approached inevitably failed and caused the exact opposite to what was originally intended - native communities started to be isolated and marginalized much more than ever before. And on the contrary, thanks to it the Indians have preserved their languages and unique cultures until now. Economic but also social and cultural marginalization, however, deepened their inferior position and to be Indian became synonymous with being backward, uneducated, poor and monolingual, as well³⁴.

Spanish and native languages in post-revolutionary Mexico

Post-revolutionary governments were aware of the failure of the integration efforts and therefore they changed the official policy towards native people. And although the idea of a united Mexican nation was not abandoned at all, the means to this goal were changed. The exclusion of indigenous communities was substituted by their inclusion into the mainstraem society through large investments in infrastructure and educational policy (especially bilingual education). Trained teachers mastering native languages started to teach Indian children in their mother tongues in order to teach them Spanish and thus to familiarize them with the culture and ideology of the Mexican nation. This approach was much more successful also because Mexican anthropologists and linguists were involved in it. As the employees of the newly founded National Indigenist Institute (Instituto Nacional Indigenista – INI, 1948) they worked in the service of mexicanization by researching the native cultures and languages. In the course of time the majority of native people stopped to be monolingual and they became bilingual. And even though Mexican authorities glorified the pre-Hispanic past, they did not abandon the idea of a united nation and Indian presence was considered to be a relic of the past which should be mexicanized in the name of progress. The result of this policy is visible in the creation of bilingual native generations slowly replaced by Spanish monolinguals.

³³ The identification of Indian languages as dialects began just after the conquest when Spaniards (including some friars) considered them to be so complicated that Spaniards thought they did not have any grammar structure and so they could not be real languages. They were, of course, mistaken which was proven very quickly by the linguistic work of the friars. To call these languages dialects was, however, adopted by modern Mexicans but with the shifted meaning of their inferiority towards Spanish. Two hundred years of their marginalization caused that even Indians look at their mother languages as inferior dialects.

³⁴ Our fieldwork in the Nahua communities in Puebla and Morelos shows a similar situation. To read more about this topic we recommend the excellent work of Judith Friedlander *Being Indian in Hueyapan* (1976, revised edition 2006).

Spanish and native languages in contemporary Mexico

Since the end of the 1970s but mostly since the beginning of the 1990s we can observe a slow shift in the official policy towards Indian people. The new concept became multiculturalism³⁵. The idea of a united Mexican nation became obscured by a multicultural rhetoric. Mexico as a multicultural and multilingual nation was declared in the constitution in 1992 and the change of language policy was crowned in 2003 by passing a law called General Law of Language Rights of Indian Nations (*Ley general de los pueblos indígenas*). The newly created National Institute of Indian Languages³⁶ (*Instituto Nacional de lenguas indígenas – INALI*, 2004) started to research indigenous languages in Mexico³⁷, to publish dictionaries, grammars and textbooks in them and for instance in 2010 it published the Mexican constitution in Nahuatl. The question is for whom. Even though we can observe strong efforts to revitalize native Mexican cultures and languages, bilingual education (which still prevails) caused that almost all of the Mexican Indians speak and use Spanish, even those who grew up in native language environments. This effort mostly comes from native intellectuals supported by government or non-government organizations who have never lived a rural life of their ancestors or familiars and who have lost contacts with the living native culture. Indians living in the countryside care about different things (like livelihood) and for example they do not see any reason to read the constitution in Nahuatl. So it seems to be too late to support Indian languages in a situation when all the country speaks Spanish.

The influence of globalization on the language situation in Mexico

Globalization is most visible in economy and Mexico is not any exception. The signature and ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 opened Mexico to imports from Canada and the USA. Cheap agricultural products (often genetically modified) from US farms flooded the Mexican market and local peasants were not able to compete. Most of the maize, as a staple food of all Mexicans, is imported from the USA and rural people whose subsistence is based on maize cultivation are forced to look for another work. Together with the cancellation of the Agrarian reform in 1992 which distributed millions of hectares among landless peasants since the Mexican revolution, NAFTA caused far-reaching changes in the Mexican countryside, including native communities. Although labor migration to towns where only Spanish can be used has always been present in Indian villages, it has reached unprecedented levels. Labor migration to the north influenced social and language situation on both sides of the frontier. Mostly illegal immigrants founded Hispanic communities in the USA which do not speak English and do not become assimilated in the English speaking US environment³⁸. Mexican people brought with themselves their customs, culture and religion and even after ten years many of them are not able to communicate in English. Globalized economic but also social environment strongly influenced the language situation in Mexico, as well, because of English as a dominant language of the globalization process in the world. But the situation in Mexico is different and it can be analyzed at three, mutually connected levels.

The first level is the relationship between Spanish and native languages. Because of historical connections discussed above Spanish represents the dominant language not only in Mexico but in most of Latin America in general. Native languages, even though supported by Mexican governments for purposes to present Mexico as multicultural state, are endangered

³⁵ It is necessary to keep in mind that multiculturalism has always gone hand in hand with globalization.

³⁶ INI was dissolved in 2002 and substituted by the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous people (*Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas*)

³⁷ It counted 364 of them (INALI 2008:38)

³⁸ And what is more, because of that it is possible to hear Mexican native languages from Los Angeles to New York. We will not exaggerate if we say that every Mexican, including Indians, has somebody in the USA.

more than in any era before. Searching for a job outside of the communities, native people stop speaking their mother languages and, of course, they do not teach their children born already in the towns to speak them because they consider it to be useless. From this point of view the result of a kind of virtual competition between Spanish and Indian languages is not surprising.

The second level is represented by the relationship between native languages and English. Indian parents prefer their children to learn English instead of their native tongue because of rational reasons. Even though many of them are proud to be Indians in these days³⁹, they do not consider the languages of their ancestors to be useful because, as they say, they need to speak English. That is to say, all of them count that they themselves or their children will cross the northern border one day to find a job in the USA and to support their families.⁴⁰ That is why they prefer English, although they do not reject their native language. But they mostly do not master it, only Spanish, and to learn it is not only difficult but not needed any more. So to continue in our virtual competition the result on this level talks for English even though the reality is not so unambiguous.

The last level is represented by the relationship between Spanish and English and we can openly say that the winner of this virtual competition is Spanish. This situation has several reasons. First of all we must mention the traditionally strong position of this tongue because of the colonial past. Spanish conquests created a vast space from the south of the USA to Tierra del Fuego which is, apart from Brazil and the Guyanas, united by language. From this point of view Latin America represents a global, Spanish speaking market which must be respected even by economy. That is the reason why Spanish as a universal language of Latin America became the language of globalization in this part of the world. English is simply not enough. For example in Mexico it is almost impossible to find inscriptions in English (except for tourist centers) and in spite of plenty language schools even many academically educated people do not speak English well. And it is not any surprise that rural people looking for a job do not have time to study English in the schools. In addition, they do not have money to pay for good teachers and the level of education in native villages is often insufficient. Therefore the expansion of English to Mexico is just an illusion and on the contrary expansion of Spanish to the USA is the reality. As we can see, linguistic globalization in Mexico has strengthened the position of Spanish instead of English and weakened the position of native languages. So if we wanted to conclude this virtual competition among discussed languages, we would have to announce the victory of Spanish.

Conclusion

The impact of globalization on the language situation of contemporary Mexico which we outlined in this paper has, of course, much wider consequences. Historical reasons caused the unequivocal predominance of Spanish and the decline of native languages. To speak about English as a universal language is not relevant in the case of Mexico and Latin America. The economic and social situation forces native people to leave their communities for the towns or even the USA where they must speak Spanish (even in the USA because living in Hispanic communities they do not need to learn English). It is not our purpose to predict what will happen in the future with Mexican native languages but the current situation points out that the use of native tongues is decreasing more than we could observe in any historical period before.

³⁹ There are special subsidies for indigenous communities which has lead to a paradoxical situation when Mestizo villages declare themselves Indian.

⁴⁰ Money earned and sent from the USA represents the second largest source of hard currency of the Mexican economy. The first one is the oil.

References

Benavente Motolinía, T. 1995. *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España*. México: Editorial Porrúa.

Friedlander, J. 2006. *Being Indian in Hueyapan*. A revised and Updated Edition. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Hingarová, V. 2010. Indiánské jazyky v Mexiku. In: Hingarová, V., Květinová, S. and Eichlová, G., eds. *Mexiko – 200 let nezávislosti*. Praha: Pavel Mervart. pp. 261-284.

Hlúšek, R. 2007. The Native Mexicans Status in the Process of Time. *KIAS Papers*: 25-42.

Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas. 2008. Catálogo de las Lenguas Indígenas Nacionales. Variantes Lingüísticas de México con sus autodenominaciones y referencias geoestadísticas (http://www.inali.gob.mx/pdf/CLIN_completo.pdf).

Nieto, A. R. 2000. The Challenge of Literacy and Multiculturalism. *Childhood Education* 76/6: paging missing (<http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/dob>).

Todorov, T. 1996. *Dobytí Ameriky. Problém druhého*. Praha: Mladá fronta.