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Preserving and Promoting the Bats'ik'op (Tsotsil) Language and Culture through Quality Bilingual Education

Dr. Karla Del Carpio¹

¹ Department of World Languages and Cultures, University of Northern Colorado; karla.delcarpiovand@unco.edu.

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Address for Correspondence:

Dr. Karla Del Carpio, Department of World Languages and Cultures, University of Northern Colorado. (karla.delcarpiovand@unco.edu)

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Abstract

This work examines the social factors that have influenced the Tsotsil linguistic community to maintain their indigenous language even if there are factors that have worked against such maintenance. The Tsotsil language is an indigenous Mayan language with approximately 417 462 speakers (INEGI 2010) and is spoken in the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico. The closeness to cities, the lack of employment in this community, government programs and especially the establishment of “bilingual” schools where Spanish is more frequently used than Tsotsil, are some of the factors that have influenced Tsotsil people to use Spanish. Nonetheless, Tsotsil speakers identify with their indigenous language and culture so they are concerned with preserving it and transmitting it to younger generations. On the other hand, Tsotsil people realize that speaking Spanish is necessary so they can communicate with mestizo Mexicans and they can have different opportunities in life. Since Tsotsil speakers have historically been characterized by discrimination and oppression and by having their linguistic human rights violated, this work explores ways to preserve and promote the Tsotsil language and culture through quality bilingual education with the purpose of contributing to the defense of Tsotsil speakers’ human right to communicate and maintain their indigenous language and culture.

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1. Introduction

Mexico is a country with approximately 68 indigenous languages other than Spanish which is the dominant language of the nation. Nonetheless, some of these languages have become endangered due to external forces such as economic, political, cultural and educational subjugation and internal forces such as indigenous peoples' negative attitudes towards their own language and culture. Moreover, migration and rapid urbanization have also brought along the pressure to learn and speak Spanish as it is considered to be necessary to function in Mexico's *mestizo*'s society. In addition, Spanish is seen as the language of opportunities, that is, the language of economic advancement. For this reason, some indigenous communities have somehow abandoned their language in favour of Spanish, for example, Otomí speakers in Central Mexico and Totonac speakers in East Central Mexico. This has been due to the combination of social, economic, and political factors. For instance, one of the reasons for Otomí speakers to shift to Spanish is "the necessity of finding jobs outside the community" (Lastra, 2001, p. 152).

The same applies to the Mayan indigenous Tsotsil people in the state of Chiapas in southeast Mexico. This linguistic community needs to learn Spanish to look for better work opportunities outside their hometown where Spanish is mostly spoken. In addition, the closeness to cities and the establishment of bilingual schools where Spanish is more frequently used than Tsotsil are other examples of the factors that have influenced the Tsotsil community to use Spanish. However, in the specific case of this indigenous group, the factors stated before have not made them abandon their native language (more on this later).

It is important to remember that historically indigenous people in Mexico have been perceived negatively by the *mestizo* society since they are considered "ignorant" and "inferior" relative to *mestizos*. In general, these perceptions have had a great influence on the way indigenous people perceive themselves as well as their languages and cultures. Indigenous languages in Mexico have been "associated with low-prestige people and their socially disfavored identities that its own potential speakers prefer to distance themselves from it and adopt some other language" (Dorian, 1998, p. 3). Also, it should be stated that despite the fact that the Mexican Constitution recognizes the existence of indigenous groups in Mexico and supposedly protects them, most Mexican *mestizos* ignore and/or socially discriminate against these groups, which has affected indigenous groups' perception of themselves, their native language and culture (Lastra, 2001). Consequently, the abandonment of indigenous languages has been spreading in Mexico; many of these languages have vanished and others are about to become extinct. In this regard, Crawford (1996) argues that "often language death is the culmination of language shift, resulting from a complex of internal and external pressures that induce a speech community to adopt a language spoken by others" (p. 55) which is what has happened in the Mexican nation. This is one of the reasons why it is fundamental to find ways to prevent language loss, for example, through quality elementary bilingual education in indigenous languages and Spanish so that younger generations experience additive bilingualism in their indigenous language and Spanish which has been the case of many Tsotsil children in the State of Chiapas, Mexico; state and linguistic community that will be the focus of the rest of this manuscript.

Chiapas and the Tzotzil/Tsotsil Community

Chiapas is located in southern Mexico and it is wellknown for having a significant presence of "pueblos originarios" (indigenous peoples). For instance, in 2005 there were approximately 1,136,496 indigenous inhabitants in Chiapas, which constituted approximately 26% of the total population of 4,293,459 (INEGI 2005). Tsotsil people make up the largest indigenous group in Mexico's southernmost state of Chiapas. Their traditional territory of pine-covered mountains and steep valleys occupies the west central highlands of Chiapas to the north and northwest of the city of San Cristobal de las Casas. While Tsotsils' daily life has changed significantly throughout the years, it is also in many ways remarkably similar since many Tsotsils have worked diligently to maintain their language and culture. The language spoken by this indigenous community is also called Tsotsil or Bats'ik'op (*Tsotsil in the indigenous language*) which has six major varieties that belong to the Tzeltalan subdivision of the Mayan language family and is closely related to its linguistic cousin Tzeltal. The two languages began to diverge from their common ancestor around the year 1200 AD. (Ewell, 2005).

The Tzotzil name for themselves is "Batsil winikatik" – "true men." Although today Tzotzil people live in most of the 111 municipios in Chiapas, they are concentrated in ten municipios near San Cristobal. The traditional settlement pattern of the indigenous municipios is a central town or "centro" surrounded by small hamlets ("parajes") in the surrounding countryside. The "centro" is the location of the municipal government, schools, the principal church, a large periodic market, and small shops (Ewell, 2005, para. 2).

According to Arias (1985), many indigenous people including Tsotsils were monolingual speakers of only their native language in the past. Nowadays, due to the establishment of Spanish-language schooling, many young people can also speak Spanish which is mostly used at school whereas Tsotsil is used at home, at church, in the market, in the street and social gatherings. Because most Tsotsil people also speak Spanish or have some knowledge of it (e.g., elders who are not fluent in Spanish but speak it or are able to understand it to a limited degree), it is possible for Mexican *mestizos* to live in Tsotsil areas without speaking a word of Tsotsil.

The towns inhabited by Tsotsils are rich in high-altitude coffee, timber, sheep and cattle, corn, beans, and other vegetable crop production. However, these areas are poor in terms of health care, quality education and other resources that *mestizos* have in the cities they live such as consistent electricity, transportation, telephone services, etc. The disadvantageous situation in which many Tsotsil peoples live forces them to move to cities to find a job outside their community, for which Spanish is necessary. Their main destinations are Villahermosa, San Cristóbal, and Tuxtla Gutiérrez. According to the Peoples of the World Foundation: Indigenous Education, Knowledge and Science (2021):

The largest change in the entire history of the Tzotzil is happening today as they are abandoning their traditional lands. To some extent this is the same global trend that we see among rural peoples everywhere and is driven by economic necessity. But in the case of the Tzotzil this response is not always voluntary. Indigenous groups in this area of Mexico are having their lands taken away from them, by force, and with the consent and active participation of the Mexican government. It is ironic that this abandonment is their reaction to present-day occupation and possession of the very land that was first stolen from them, then "granted" to them and then later again stolen from them by Spanish invaders (para. 2).

Access to Indigenous communities

Nowadays, in general, it is easy to access some of the towns inhabited by Tsotsil peoples resulting in the increase contact between *mestizos* and Tsotsils. Consequently, the exposure of Tsotsil communities to Spanish has also increased and the use of the Tsotsil language has diminished to a degree. For example, when *mestizos* go to the towns where Tsotsil peoples live, they (Tsotsil peoples) use Spanish and not the indigenous language because indigenous communities are expected to speak the dominant language of the country. In addition, when Tsotsil people go to the city to sell their products, they know they must use Spanish. Otherwise, the possibilities for them to sell their products to *mestizos* are not very high because most *mestizos* in the city (and out of it) do not speak any Tsotsil as Spanish is considered to be the prestigious language of the country.

Focus on education

According to McCaa and Mills (1998), "native languages are under assault in Mexico. Education appears to be the "villain" and bilingualism its weapon. Paradoxically, if native languages are to thrive in the next millennium, their salvation likewise will be education and bilingualism their hope" (1). Therefore, it is important that there are opportunities for the Tsotsil language to be used at schools. By doing so, bilingualism would not be a weapon against an indigenous language, but a tool to promote its maintenance. However, "it has been found that even among the most ethnolinguistically conscious bilingual teachers, language attitudes are marked by conflicting ideas and ambiguity, driven by the mechanisms of cultural and linguistic denigration that operate at the institutional, community-wide and regional levels" (Chiodicited by Francis and Reyhner 2002, p. 62). It is important to state that traditionally bilingual teachers prefer to use the dominant language in the classroom, for example, for written language functions. This contributes to the idea that "indigenous language's oral "dialectically fragmented" condition is evidence of its inherent deficiency as a language for academic purposes, especially for reading and writing" (Francis & Reyhner 2002, p. 62). This might be one of the reasons for most instructors to mainly use Spanish in class. Although Tsotsil can be written, it might be perceived as not being a fully developed language, which could be a reason why bilingual schools do not teach Tsotsil children to read and write in the indigenous language.

The fact that some indigenous children have the opportunity to be literate can be considered a double-edged sword. Undoubtedly, it is important and beneficial for children to go to school; the issue is that regular schools and bilingual schools have instructors that come from cities or places where only Spanish or a different indigenous language is spoken. Thus, the probability of increasing the use of Spanish by these children is high. As a result, the more literate children are the more the probabilities decrease to use Tsotsil in formal contexts such as school.

The use of Spanish in school, a place they go to five days a week, might also influence the students' preference of language choice outside of class. There are Tsotsil children who prefer to speak Spanish because that is the language used at school. This might be the future reaction of other Tsotsil children who will go to school, which could decrease their use of Tsotsil not only at school, but in contexts where nowadays Tsotsil is used. This could lead to language shift in the future. As Grenoble and Whaley (1998) argue, "what these children might do in the future is to adapt themselves to use Spanish and maybe abandon their first language because it might be perceived as no longer advantageous to them" (p. 31). As Gellner points out (1983, cited by Grenoble & Whaley 1998), "literacy is essential to nationalism and language survival in the modern world" (32). On the other hand, others (Mulhausler 1990 cited by Grenoble & Whaley 1998) argue that literacy actually facilitates language loss and this is what has happened with different indigenous languages in Mexico. Thus, it is necessary to design real bilingual programs that assign functions to both the Spanish language and the Tsotsil language in certain situations. For example, Spanish could be used to teach a science lesson and Tsotsil to teach history or vice versa. By doing so, both languages would have the same possibilities of being spoken and indigenous languages would be maintained and might achieve similar status in school, even if there still might be social factors in the community that could keep Tsotsil in a disadvantageous position relative to Spanish. Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that Tsotsil people themselves have taken the initiative to create and implement their educational programs since they are aware that if they wait for the government to improve the type of education that is created for them, their native language and culture might end up disappearing. An example that shows indigenous people's efforts to improve the education system is the Zapatista Autonomous Rebelious Education System (SERAZ) which is an alternative to the national education system.

"Teachers" in schools run by SERAZ are volunteers and are more like facilitators of education than standard teachers. The curriculum is very similar to the national one except students are taught their indigenous language as well as aspects of their cultural history. Tzotzil students should have no difficulty relating to these cultural history lessons. They are surrounded by their living culture in their daily lives. When I visited a Tzotzil SERAZ school the students interrupted their lesson and insisted on giving a demonstration of traditional Tzotzil dancing that is part of youth courtship (paras. 5 & 6).

Focus on the community

It has been found that parents in other indigenous communities in Mexico avoid speaking their native language to their children because they think it is not advantageous for them. In contrast, many Tsotsil parents speak their indigenous language to their children at home and in different contexts such as the market, church, social gatherings, etc. Many Tsotsil parents are aware of the importance of transmitting Tsotsil from generation to generation. Therefore, "they are making a conscious decision to transmit the ancestral language to their children" (Dorian, 1998, p. 3). Most Tsotsil parents want their children to speak the indigenous language in addition to Spanish, so they try to speak Tsotsil as much as they can so the new generations can learn it as well. Also, Tsotsil parents see the home as the place to learn Tsotsil and school as the place to learn Spanish.

Interestingly, Tsotsil is spoken by the entire age spectrum, from small children to elders. Also, the amount of Spanish spoken by Tsotsil people is less when compared to the amount of Tsotsil they use in their daily life in their "pueblo" (town), for instance, when they talk to their customers at the store, their neighbors in the street and their children at home. Therefore, it is possible to say that the predominant language used in their "pueblo(s)" is Tsotsil. Many Tsotsil people in general are motivated to maintain their language and, accordingly, their culture, which is a crucial factor in preventing language loss. Such attitudes should be supported by different resources that can help the Tsotsil community preserve and promote their language. The media "can be used to create access for minority groups and can facilitate communication in the indigenous language" (Grenoble & Whaley, 1998, p. 53). In recent years, the government of Chiapas has promoted both the Tsotsil and the Tzeltal languages through local television channels where the news is given in these indigenous languages. There are also cultural television programs and social events where the traditions and the languages of the different ethnic groups from Chiapas are promoted. This has helped to increase the importance and respect of these communities.

Government Promotion of Indigenous Groups

The government of Chiapas has promoted books to value the indigenous populations. For this reason, such books are written in indigenous languages and in Spanish. They describe the indigenous groups' traditions as well as the locations where they live. In addition, they show pictures of indigenous people's typical clothing and dishes. The texts include explanations of the cultural and linguistic enrichment that indigenous communities offer (Arias, 1985). These

books are available at schools, public libraries and cultural events to both indigenous groups and *mestizos*. The purpose of these books is to promote the ethnic richness and diversity in the state of Chiapas. This positive reinforcement could make the Tsotsils feel proud of themselves. The books also inform *mestizo/a Chiapanecos/as* (people born and raised in Chiapas) about the existence of indigenous communities, even if their presence in *mestizos'* life is obvious, as well as make *Chiapanecos/as* aware of the importance of these groups and their culture and language(s). As a result, the government of Chiapas expects to create equality and respect between *mestizo/a Chiapanecos/as* and indigenous groups.

Reasons for Tsotsil Pride

In general, Tsotsil peoples in Chiapas, are very proud of their ethnicity. The reasons they usually give are related to their town characteristics and advancements and their traditions that they still preserve. These factors have made many Tsotsil peoples increase their affection for their community and feel proud of themselves. Such pride does not necessarily lead to maintenance of their native language; however, it could be one of the factors that has influenced their language choice. Most Tsotsil peoples declare that they learn Tsotsil at home because that is the language their parents use and, in some cases, it is the only language their parents and/or grandparents know or knew. Therefore, for some Tsotsil peoples the indigenous language represents the only way to orally communicate with older generations. Thus, Tsotsil still plays an important role in their lives.

According to Dorian (1998), "if members of a subordinate population have the opportunity to learn the language of the dominant group, some or all of them will usually do so. They will not necessarily give up their own ancestral language, however" (p. 5). This is what has happened with the Tsotsil community in Chiapas. In other words, most Tsotsil peoples have learned Spanish because they know it is advantageous for them; however, they have not abandoned their native language. In contrast, they are concerned with transmitting it to younger generations.

Religion

Since Catholicism and Evangelism are integral to the life of Tsotsil, they as well as priests use the indigenous language in religious ceremonies, but if *mestizos* are present priests use Spanish. The use of Tsotsil in a formal setting such as church has contributed to its maintenance. Also, priests tend to be respected members of the community, so if they are using Tsotsil, it raises the prestige of the language. It should be noted that Tsotsil is also used in some churches in cities, for example, in San Cristobal de las Casas where most of the inhabitants are *mestizos*. However, mass in some churches is given in Tsotsil because of the large number of Tsotsils living in San Cristóbal. For instance, some Catholic masses at noon on Sundays are given in Tsotsil and not in Spanish. This is important since the use of Tsotsil in a formal setting in a city could function as a symbolic asset that gives value to its speakers by bringing recognition to the use of Tsotsil.

Interestingly, the Bible, which is written in Spanish, has been translated into Tsotsil so that those Tsotsils who are literate can read their Bible in their first language. This also raises the prestige of Tsotsil by giving it a written form and not just an oral form.

Education

There are teachers who try to use Tsotsil at schools located in towns inhabited by Tsotsils, for example, there are first and second grade instructors who declare that speaking Tsotsil in the classroom is useful because it can help students learn the material taught in class more easily. Those instructors that are monolingual in Spanish have a difficult time to help their pupils because it is common that first graders go to school with no knowledge of Spanish. Therefore, instructors that know some Tsotsil try to use it in the classroom. In contrast, instructors that do not speak Tsotsil face more problems when teaching. However, students are expected to understand more Spanish by the third grade and that is when the use of Tsotsil is reduced by the instructors. This suggests that the more the students advance, the more they are expected to use Spanish.

Parents in indigenous communities can register their children in regular schools or in bilingual schools. The bilingual schools are directed by an agency of the ministry called *Dirección General de Educación Indígena* (DGEI). Unfortunately, this agency "has few resources, politics plays a large part in its appointments, and consequently it has not been very successful in maintaining indigenous languages" (Lastra, 2001, p. 153). Another problem is that some bilingual instructors that speak an indigenous language may be assigned to a community where a different indigenous language is spoken, while other instructors are not even bilingual but *mestizos* from the cities. As a result,

parents tend to choose schools that are close to their house even if they are not bilingual because they know that Spanish is used in both types of schools.

The use of Spanish at schools located in indigenous communities is significant. This does not necessarily imply a wholesale shift to Spanish outside of school as well. However, it has influenced some indigenous children who prefer to use Spanish outside of school rather than Tsotsil because most instructors use Spanish in class. Nevertheless, most of the instructors allow children to use Tsotsil because they know that is the children's first language. This is positive because it takes away some of the pressure to use Spanish. However, not all of the teachers allow their students to use Spanish. On the other hand, there are also teachers that ask parents to use more Spanish at home so that their children can familiarize themselves more with Spanish and they can better understand the lessons at school. However, some parents perceive this as not having to stop using Tsotsil, but by using both their native language and Spanish it would be easier for their children to understand their teachers.

It can be argued that both Tsotsil parents and children receive mixed messages from teachers. In terms of positive messages that could help preserve Tsotsil, there are some instructors who try to use Tsotsil and some books at school are in the indigenous language. Also, the establishment of more schools in the community means that children do not have to leave if they want to be literate; they can stay in their Tsotsil-speaking community. There are also negative aspects regarding Tsotsil preservation. For instance, classes are almost entirely taught in Spanish, especially from the third grade and on. Bilingual schools are not truly bilingual because Spanish is more frequently used than Tsotsil. Moreover, there are teachers who tell children and their parents to use more Spanish and due to school, there are children who prefer to use Spanish rather than Tsotsil. These positive and negative messages regarding language use emphasize the complexity of the issue. These statements show a positive attitude toward the Spanish language, but it does not imply that Tsotsils have a negative attitude toward their indigenous language. In general, Tsotsils do not perceive Spanish as an enemy that can extinguish their native language; rather they consider it is important to speak Spanish so that they can expand their social networks and have better opportunities in life. However, this does not make them abandon their first language. In contrast, they want to transmit it to younger generations so that the Tsotsil language can be preserved.

Transmission of Tsotsil to younger generations

It has been found that in many indigenous communities in Mexico, for example, the Otomí in Central Mexico, adults and older generations do not speak their native language (Otomí) to children (Lastra, 2001).

This is because the parents think that the Otomí language is not advantageous for their children. That is, parents think that Otomí does not offer their children better opportunities in life, in finding a job outside their community, for example, because only Spanish is spoken. Thus, parents prefer that their children speak Spanish. Also, parents have the mistaken view that bilingualism is difficult, and it is better to shift to Spanish only (Lastra, 2001). In contrast, most Tsotsils consider that it is important to transmit the Tsotsil language from older to younger generations. The attitudes that this indigenous community has towards their native language is different compared to other communities in Mexico where the speakers themselves are ashamed not only of their language, but of themselves, which is the case of Totonac speakers in Central Mexico. Indigenous communities have developed negative perceptions about themselves due to the discrimination they have suffered. Interestingly, Tsotsils have a different opinion about themselves. They are not ashamed, but rather proud of their origin.

Most Tsotsil children speak mostly in their native language when they are talking amongst themselves (Del Carpio, 2012). For example, when children play basketball in the main plaza, they use Tsotsil. The same can be said when children or teenagers play at a cultural centre. Also, most children speak Tsotsil with their parents. This has been observed when children talk to their parents at home, at the store, at the market and in the street. However, there are also a few children who use Spanish when talking to their parents (Del Carpio, 2012). In brief, it is possible to say that most Tsotsils are proud of their origin, and such sense of pride comes from the modernization they have experienced as well as the empowerment felt as a result of the uprising that took place in Chiapas in 1994 organized by indigenous people (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, EZLN) that made them feel supported by their own people by emphasizing their dignity and their rights.

Lack of Work Opportunities

Grenoble and Whaley (1998) point out that "economics ... may be the single strongest force influencing the fate of endangered languages" (p. 53). This has been one of the factors that have made Tsotsils use Spanish. Due to the lack

of employment in towns inhabited by Tsotsil peoples, many Tsotsils need to leave their hometown even if they enjoy their life there. However, most Tsotsils have mentioned that they want to stay in their hometown because they have their own lands, they run their own businesses, they grow their own products and/or because they know they can have temporary jobs in their community. In contrast, there are people who think it would be better to leave their hometown so they can improve their life conditions. The fact that Tsotsils have to leave their community increases the need for them to speak Spanish, especially if they move to cities where only Spanish is spoken.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Tsotsil language is still widely used in the areas inhabited by Tsotsils since they are proud of their origin, language, and culture. Therefore, most Tsotsil speakers try to teach the indigenous language to younger generations to preserve it. The establishment of monolingual schools, government programs (IEA), the lack of employment, proximity to cities and migration of Spanish speakers to Tsotsils' towns have been some of the factors that have increased the use of Spanish in this indigenous community. Many Tsotsil children use Spanish at school even when they are supposed to use both Tsotsil and Spanish. "It is an accident of history that the indigenous languages came to be excluded from the domains of schooling and literacy" (Francis & Reyhner, 2002, p. 188), so there is a need to integrate them and make them part of quality bilingual programs that support all the points of the "continuum of biliteracy" (Hornberger, 1998, p. 452).

However, it is apparent that schooling is not the only reason that makes Tsotsils speak Spanish. They also face economic pressures and have the need to communicate with Spanish monolinguals. For that reason, it is understandable that Tsotsils want to learn Spanish in addition to their native language and want their children to do so as well. Tsotsil speakers seem to be happy to be bilingual Spanish – Tsotsil. Therefore, it is important to support them to maintain their language to avoid a terminal shift to Spanish monolinguals, which is what has happened in other indigenous communities in Mexico. A way to promote bilingualism in this indigenous community could be that parents continue speaking Tsotsil to their children at home and in different contexts such as social gatherings, at the store, in the street, etc. In addition, parents could make their children aware of the importance of speaking their native language, which was already observed in some families. Although children might not do what their parents say due to the behavior of the child's peer group and their teachers' attitudes in school, it would be worthwhile trying to make them aware of the importance of their native language, starting at home. For example, parents could make their children aware that in some cases Tsotsil is the only language that can be used to communicate with their grandparents. Parents could tell their children the importance of speaking both Tsotsil and Spanish to reinforce that Tsotsil is as important as Spanish and vice versa. By doing so, future generations might not perceive Tsotsil as inferior and Spanish as superior. Also, they might perceive Spanish as a tool and not as an enemy that could destroy their native language.

Another way to promote additive bilingualism could be the use of both Spanish and Tsotsil in local advertisements, signs, propaganda and in the media, such as radio and television. By making the use of both languages visual and public, which raises the prestige of Tsotsil, this linguistic community might want to use both languages with the same frequency and literate children might familiarize themselves with both languages.

In conclusion, many Tsotsils in Chiapas seem to be content with being Tsotsil-Spanish bilingual speakers. This indigenous community seems to be fond of their native language and considers it important, so they want younger generations to learn it. Also, Tsotsils want their children to speak Spanish so that they may have a better quality of life. Therefore, it is important to continue to look for ways to support the Tsotsil community to maintain and promote their language and culture, for example, through quality Spanish-Tsotsil intercultural bilingual education. This type of education can help prevent assimilation of Tsotsil people into mainstream *mestizo* society. We all need to work together to support indigenous communities' and strengthen their work and efforts to preserve and promote their native language and culture. By doing so, their linguistic human rights would be validated, and the linguistic and cultural richness of our world would be also preserved.

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