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Making our language visible: Urban Indigenous migrants and the revitalization of their native languages

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Young urban migrants can be valuable actors in projects that aim to document and revitalize their Indigenous languages, especially when these efforts involve new technologies. Based on data from a Huastec (Tének) language documentation project in Mexico, this article describes the digital interactions of young migrants in the documentation and revitalization of Indigenous languages. To address this issue, we briefly review the migration of Huastec speakers in the context of language shift. We then examine how digital language activism can be linked to language documentation and explore how such digital projects can contribute to language maintenance and revitalization. Finally, we present the most salient factors that drive Indigenous migrants to participate in initiatives aimed at language revitalization through digital language activism: entertainment, affection, and being connected.

1. Introduction¹

Language documentation and revitalization efforts regularly involve projects in rural villages or home communities with elderly speakers who have retained the language. Despite recognizing that children and youth should become involved in these projects as they are the new generation of Indigenous knowledge holders, the role and agency of young people in these projects are often marginal, as purist ideologies tend to dismiss their mixed uses and knowledge of the Indigenous language (Flores Farfán & Ramallo 2010; Córdova-Hernández 2015). Likewise, the participation of speakers living outside these home communities is generally not considered, even though the migration and urbanization of Indigenous communities are increasing worldwide (IOM 2008).

Migratory movements are often mentioned among the key external factors in the process of language shift and language loss (e.g., Fishman 1991; Nettle & Romaine 2000; Muysken 2010). Out-migration from a language community creates a group of speakers who may face more pressure toward language shift than those in the traditional language area. Experiences involving stigmatization and racial discrimination of Indigenous persons are a daily-lived reality that can influence decisions on Indigenous language usage. Also, if people in migrant settings are not participating in sociolinguistic situations where this language is required, it seems understandable that they would choose to abandon it. Another type of pressure is particularly noticeable in cityward migration because today's language-based economy demands a wide range of sophisticated linguistic skills and discursive knowledge in the dominant language (Harbert 2011).

On the other hand, Indigenous language speakers who live in an urban setting may be better situated in terms of time and resources (e.g., financial means but also networks and motivations like nostalgia) to cultivate their attachment to their language (Holton 2011). In countries such as Mexico, more and more speakers are using digital technologies (e.g., Cru 2014; De León Pasquel 2018), and some are becoming *digital language activists* (a term coined by Díaz Robles & Ávila 2014) who use the new technologies to promote Indigenous languages (Llanes-Ortiz 2016; Cruz & Robles 2019; Lillehaugen 2019; De Korne 2021). These activists are often young, urban-based people. Even when it is true that Mexico's Indigenous languages face varying degrees of endangerment (INALI 2014),² the growing rates of Indigenous language speakers in the cities seem to challenge simple explanations of language shift and language loss.

A significant body of Mexico's Indigenous language speakers is made up of migrants who live in urban areas with over 15,000 residents. Their proportion has risen from 18.36% in 2000 (Meneses Monroy 2014) to 27% in 2010 (CDI 2014), most of them being first- or second-generation migrants. Today, more than one in four Indigenous language speakers in Mexico are city dwellers.³ An examination of the ties existing between migrants and their home regions may reveal some of the reasons why people do not want to give up on their language. The activities that migrants develop with people from their own cultural backgrounds help maintain traditions and feel connected. These activities take place in both the urban setting with fellow migrants and the rural villages when migrants go back to partake in celebrations and festivities. New technologies have paved the way to engage with people from home communities – wherever they live – without actually being together in the same place. Social networking and digital media are considered crucial for protecting linguistic diversity (Soria 2016) and in language revitalization processes (Belmar & Heyen 2021). It is the role of digital interaction in Indigenous language documentation and revitalization we want to discuss here.

Our case study discusses the situation of young migrants who are speakers of Huastec, or Tének (autonym), and participated in a language documentation project called Nenek.⁴ Huastec belongs to the Mayan language family and has at least 170,000 speakers (INEGI 2020), whose home villages lie in a subtropical region called Huasteca along the northern Gulf Coast. Huastec speakers live in two parts of this region: in Veracruz, where two varieties of Huastec are present,

¹ This work was supported by a grant from the Mexican National Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT CB-2012-180863). We thank Brenda Castellanos Calderón for coordinating the online collaborative task described in this article.

² In Mexico, all Indigenous languages face the risk of disappearance. According to official figures (INALI 2014), of the existing 364 language varieties, 64 are moribund (i.e., coping with extreme risk), 43 are seriously endangered (high risk), 72 are endangered (medium risk), and 185 are potentially endangered (no immediate risk).

³ The numbers vary from one official source to another. The available information on Indigenous language speakers reflects self-reporting of speakers ages five and up, not actual assessment. It does not regard the varying degrees of abilities and uses of the language.

⁴ In the Huastec language, *nenek* is an informal greeting ('hi, hello'). It is short for the conventional greeting *tajk'anek* ('good day, good morning').

and in San Luis Potosí. We worked mainly with speakers of the linguistic variety from San Luis Potosí. While this variety is the most widely spoken of the three (with at least 114,000 speakers), it is still considered vulnerable due to the interruption in intergenerational transmission, the downward trend in absolute and relative numbers of speakers, and the reduced number of communicative contexts (Embriz Osorio & Zamora Alarcón 2012). The national education system is not fit to help counter this situation. Roughly half of the children of Huastec households enroll in the Bilingual Intercultural Education program, which operates in preschool and elementary schools in “Indigenous regions” and some bigger cities with an Indigenous presence. Although the linguistic objectives of this educational model aspire to develop additive bilingualism in learners, the program is heavily criticized as it does not part from local epistemologies and does not consider the value of Indigenous languages in the construction of identities or the formation of knowledge systems (see, e.g., Cruz 2020; De León 2017; Hamel 2016).⁵

In this paper, we address the current migration of young, bilingual, Indigenous language speakers in Mexico, particularly those of our case study, and their relation to digital language activism aimed at documenting their language. First, we present our language documentation project and its main features, activities, and language resources. To discuss the involvement of Huastec migrants in our project, we include data such as general statistics and metrics of the Nenek project’s outputs. We show an example in which we worked on an online collaborative task: a recipe book on typical Huastec food. Then, we discuss how digital interactions can contribute to language maintenance and revitalization through strategies such as working with virtual communities (VCs), which are a type of social network on the internet whose users share a well-established common interest, a notion or sense of community, and online activities (Garber 2004). At the same time, we explore how urban Indigenous migrants can become invested in and contribute to language documentation.

2. The Nenek project

2.1 Self-documentation, digital language activism, and revitalization

In 2013, we started the Huastec language documentation project with a community-centered approach based on self-documentation (Quatra 2011). The idea of the Nenek project arose when a group of systems engineering students who are speakers of Huastec wanted to do “something” for their language. As they state in the mission of Nenek’s VC, “with Nenek, we want to generate a space to use the mother tongue Tének and discuss it during interactions on the internet, just like speakers of English and Spanish.”⁶ Other Huastec speakers and linguists from a local non-governmental organization joined the youth.

Community involvement is the single most important factor in determining the success of language maintenance and revitalization projects (e.g., England 1999; Grenoble & Whaley 2006; Thomason 2015). However, it is not always obvious which model for revitalization to implement. With Nenek, we designed a collaborative approach. Nenek approaches self-documentation through a strategy based on digital language activism.

The focus on self-documentation is part of what is known as “active documentation” or documentation oriented toward the community (Flores Farfán & Ramallo 2010).⁷ In self-documentation, the speakers are in charge of the documentation process of their language or linguistic variety. They are the researchers, compilers, and users of the documented materials, which are both oral and written and considered valuable and worthy of preserving. These materials have several formats (audio, video, text, images), deal with a range of different themes and social practices (e.g., oral traditions, village assemblies, ritual practices), and are made available through – often digital – archives.

Digital activism concerns how people collectively, consciously, and strategically use electronic tools, technology, and

⁵ The other half of Huastec children receive monolingual schooling in Spanish. The National Program for Learning Assessment (PLANEA for its acronym in Spanish) reports the lowest language and communication scores for Indigenous primary schools, with six times more poorly achieving students than in private institutions (INEE 2015). This situation is also visible in the local Huastec municipalities (PNUD 2013).

⁶ All translations of participants’ comments (made either in Tének or in Spanish) are ours.

⁷ Self-documentation projects are often led by researchers who are not part of the community in which the research takes place. For a critical reflection and revision of the position and experiences of Indigenous researchers in language documentation, see the volume edited by Cruz (2021).

digital media or online social networks to promote a cause or a cultural or social project. They do so within the legal practices and standard customs of their country. It was, therefore, quite clear to us that we wanted to engage young people in our project, as they are more likely to be or become digital activists (Grinevald & Bert 2011). Also, they are at a crucial age for motivation and language consolidation in which they develop their own identification with and version(s) of their language (Sallabank 2012, as cited in Cru 2014). While these youth have heterogeneous backgrounds with varying ideologies toward the language, we hoped their engagement in a project about their language and in their language might develop their identification with it and, subsequently, their willingness to use it more often.

We designed a web-based collaborative platform localized into Huastec, called Nenek (<http://www.nenek.uaslp.mx/nenekdev/>), and created specialized computer tools, starting with a lexicography tool to make e-dictionaries and an online spellchecker for the Huastec language. The platform provides speakers with a monolingual social networking site to share and discuss content such as texts, audios, images, and videos. Its features and linguistic tools enable speakers to collaborate in VCs and collectively create, document, archive, and mobilize language resources. Nenek organizes these contents in repositories and automatically returns the corpus to the speakers (van 't Hooft & González Compeán 2020). After designing the platform, we supplied it with resources in Huastec by digitizing existing manuscripts and publications. We also created a monolingual e-dictionary based on an already existing published source (Fernández Acosta 2013).

Our self-documentation project aims to create a lasting, multipurpose record of the language (Himmelman 2006) through the construction, annotation, and archiving of a comprehensive corpus of primary data of Huastec. It is also, and mainly, connected to language maintenance and revitalization efforts (Flores Farfán & Ramallo 2010; Austin & Sallabank 2011). Language revitalization aims to increase the relative number of speakers and extend the domains of language use (Grenoble & Whaley 2006), usually after a period of reduction in use (Hinton 2011). In its goal of reversing language loss, revitalization is always a political project intended to balance powers between researchers and the researched (Flores Farfán & Ramallo 2010). One of the issues discussed is how to promote a speaker-centered approach during fieldwork on endangered languages (Flores Farfán & Ramallo 2010; Quatra 2011). Another issue is the mobilization of results that seek to deliver products to help counter language endangerment (Nathan 2006). In Nenek, we attend to both issues with a collaborative approach in which speakers decide what to create as they are directly involved in all phases of the documentation process and share the created language resources among their social networks. Our goal was to promote the digital presence of Huastec and increase its visibility on the internet. The presence of the Huastec language on the internet would contribute to revitalization efforts, as it would expand the uses of this language to new domains (van 't Hooft & González Compeán 2020).

When a group of people promotes the native language, this has to do with an endorsement of their culture, language, and group identity. We wanted to reach and involve young adult speakers in both the home communities and the cities and encourage them to participate in online social networks, incorporate their production of language materials on the internet, and thus build a monolingual VC.

The inclusion of speakers in the cities was essential in our project. Some were interested in participating because they want to “learn, speak, hear, see and feel” their languages (Baloy 2011). This is an important fact, considering that Indigenous migration to urban centers is growing. Of these young city dwellers, access to higher education seems to be a relevant factor in their process of ethnic reappraisal and the construction of a more positive attitude toward the Indigenous language (Sordo 2019). Nenek participants mentioned a sense of belonging to a minority language group and linked their interest to their Indigenous roots:

[I participate] because I am Huastec and I don't want the language to become extinct. (a member of the VC, February 25, 2015)

I like this page... [Nenek Facebook] so that we don't forget where we come from. (a member of the VC, October 9, 2014)

2.2 Huastec migrants and their participation in Nenek

In 2015, San Luis Potosí ranked fifth on the list of states in Mexico that were losing most Indigenous peoples through migration (Granados Alcantar & Quezada Ramírez 2018).⁸ The metropolitan area of Monterrey in the state of Nuevo León is the main center of Huastec migration, together with other industrial cities along the border with the United States, such as Nuevo Laredo or Matamoros, both in the state of Tamaulipas (Granados Alcantar & Quezada Ramírez 2018). Ethnographic studies also refer to agroindustrial destinations in the state of Sinaloa (Hernández Cendejas 2007), where migrants work in farming fields and harvest sugarcane, cotton, tomato, okra, chili, and onion, among other crops. The migration of Huastec people to other rural areas is seasonal, and workers leave for a few months, after which they return to their home villages. Migration to the cities often occurs over a longer period of time or is permanent.

For our study, the migrants located in the metropolitan area of Monterrey in the state of Nuevo León are particularly relevant. In 2015, Nuevo León counted over 58,000 speakers of an Indigenous language. Almost four in ten migrants (39.8%) who had settled here over the preceding five years were originally from San Luis Potosí. Two-thirds of all Indigenous migrants of San Luis Potosí chose Nuevo León as their new residence. Huastec migrants' preference to settle here shows in the records: almost one of every four (23.4%) Indigenous language speakers in the metropolitan area of Monterrey, around 13,500 persons, is a speaker of Huastec (Granados Alcantar & Quezada Ramírez 2018).

In the metropolitan area of Monterrey, Huastec migrants are living dispersed over several municipalities according to the type and location of their jobs (Durin et al. 2007). This dispersal can be linked to language vitality (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages 2003): the fragmentation of speakers in the city may inhibit communication and organization as it produces fewer sociolinguistic situations in which people speak the Indigenous language. When comparing Huastec migrants in Monterrey to Huastec people in the home communities, there are proportionally fewer migrant speakers than non-migrant speakers.⁹

Metrics from the Facebook page and the Nenek platform show that the places where the VC members logged in¹⁰ are in keeping with the migration figures referred to above (see Table 1). The members of our VC are mostly (75%) people whose ages range from 18 to 34 years. These young people are, after all, part of the age group that is active online and engages in activities involving new technologies in their daily lives. Both sexes are almost equally present: 55% are women, and 44% are men.

⁸ Other figures mention San Luis Potosí as the second state, after Oaxaca, with the highest net deficit of Indigenous peoples due to migration (CDI 2015). Arias (2013) discusses the main characteristics of Mexico's rural economy that has led to migration processes, often of Indigenous peoples, and all these apply to the Huasteca Potosina, which is a rural and subtropical region in San Luis Potosí where most of its Indigenous population lives: there are now fewer farmers who have aged and earn less from land that has become more fragmented.

⁹ Official figures from 2015 confirm the existence of 22,530 individuals who self-identify as Huastec in the state of Nuevo León (INALI-INPI 2020); 60% of these migrants speak the Huastec language, and 40% do not. For that same year, the average number of Huastec speakers is higher in the home communities in San Luis Potosí, where roughly eight in ten residents speak the Indigenous language (INEGI 2015).

¹⁰ Almost 20% of the participants chose not to disclose their residence. Additionally, some claimed to live in a place that did not match the geographic location information collected by our software. Here, we consider only those locations that have been made public. Also, devices may be shared, for example, among family members who connect at different times or a group of people who interact together from the same device when using our networks. We have not gathered information about this collective use of our platform.

Table 1. Places of residence of the Nenek VC participants (2019)

City of residence outside the Huastec region	*Number of connections	Municipalities in the Huastec region in San Luis Potosí and Veracruz	*Number of connections
San Luis Potosí (capital city)	724	Ciudad Valles	540
Monterrey (Nuevo León)	667	Aquismón	52
Mexico City	186	Tamazunchale	30
Guadalajara (Jalisco)	97	Tanlajás	26
Reynosa (Tamaulipas)	96	Tamuín	25
Querétaro (capital city)	53	Ébano	24
Matamoros (Tamaulipas)	42	Tampamolón	15
Tampico (Tamaulipas)	40	Tancanhuitz	15
García (Nuevo León)	34	Tantoyuca (Ver.)	9
Zapopan (Jalisco)	30	Other places	34
Guadalupe (Nuevo León)	26		
Ciudad Victoria (Tamaulipas)	25		
Apodaca (Nuevo León)	22		
Nuevo Laredo (Tamaulipas)	21		
Houston (Texas)	19		
Dallas (Texas)	11		
Other locations in Mexico	122		
Other locations outside Mexico	19		
Total	2,234 (74.37%)	Total	770 (25.63%)

*A connection is an IP address from which one or more speakers participate.

In 2018, 3,642 members participated in the VC. Most users speak the western Huastec variety spoken in San Luis Potosí. Three in four Nenek participants do not live in the home communities but are urban-based. These participants have either migrated to other localities or are second-generation migrants. Their significant number is why we became interested in understanding their motivation to participate in our project.¹¹ Likewise, they are the ones whose collaborations during the project developed exclusively online. In the home communities, the language experts in our team (linguists and bilingual school teachers) worked on on-site collaborative tasks with speakers. The home communities were also our target while promoting the use of the platform among youth in secondary schools.

¹¹ Some of Nenek’s members are migrants living in the United States. Unfortunately, we do not have disaggregated information that shows their particular engagement and participation. A study of these speakers’ connection to their home community in their positions as trilingual speakers might shed light on how shifting power relations between languages influence their language attitudes and personal goals to participate in Indigenous language documentation and revitalization efforts.

The common interest of the Nenek social network is the affection toward the Indigenous living heritage of the participants. The speakers themselves express their interest in various ways:

[Nenek] is a very useful page for us who really love our customs and traditions. But above all, our identity. The Huastec language, Teenek. (a member of the VC, May 18, 2018)

It is nice not to lose the tradition of speaking the language because some people leave their village for the capital city and, upon returning, they do not even want to say ‘Nenek’ [to greet in Huastec] anymore. (a member of the VC, February 25, 2015)

2.3 Nenek’s features, activities, and language resources

On the Nenek platform, Huastec speakers can find an e-library containing books, articles, and other written materials in the Indigenous language; linguistic tools such as a searchable monolingual Huastec dictionary and a spellchecker; and a VC. This VC includes functionalities such as profiles, workgroups, and content management. It also has tools that allow the speakers to create web pages and blogs and contribute to the repository-building by sharing and discussing texts, audios, images, and videos. The documentation activities are carried out collaboratively and in a cyclic process that starts when the speakers propose a task for a workgroup and store their materials in one of the repositories. Then, either the speakers’ communication or materials returns to the VC after a categorization and consensus-polling procedure, which works as a validation process (van ’t Hooft & González Compeán 2020).

On our social networking sites (Facebook and Twitter), we launched a strategy to publicize the project and invited Huastec speakers to visit the Nenek platform. Two options exist to interact with the Nenek platform: either as a Nenek-User or Nenek-Collaborator. A Nenek-User has free access to all resources and tools, can participate in the VC, and holds a storage place for their materials. A Nenek-Collaborator enjoys all the former and can participate in one or more language documentation tasks. A person can become a Nenek-Collaborator when invited by another Nenek-Collaborator (González et al. 2017).

Nenek’s monolingual social networks exclude users who do not understand Huastec. However, participants show different language proficiency levels, and most express having little experience with the written expression of Huastec. The interactions among the participants address varying issues about their language and culture. They share information on upcoming events in the home communities and send photos of their visits back home to show their participation in the main celebrations. They discuss the spelling of some of the terms in their native language, comment on the qualities of their regional food, and publish memories of their former life in the village. Also, they regret not being literate in their mother tongue and say that they appreciate the VC as a safe and supportive place to ask for advice and attempt to start writing in Huastec:

Nenek ti yanel. Well, I can speak [Huastec] but don’t know how to write it. I would like you to add me to the community. (a member of the VC, May 13, 2016)

It is vital to speak the [Huastec] language and support its conservation. (a member of the VC, August 9, 2019)

Our research shows that Nenek operates as a regular VC, even when the transition to the internet poses a series of challenges that require a specific strategy to create successful VCs in Indigenous languages. Speakers’ engagement in the VC roughly follows the 90-9-1 principle for social networks, which states that, of all users, 90% are observers who are not actively involved, 9% contribute partially, and 1% are active members who create most of the content (Van Mierlo 2014). Thus, only 10% of the speakers interacting with the platform are Nenek-Collaborators. In Nenek, most users are content consumers, and a minority engages with an occasional “like” or with some comment. Only a few are actively creating language resources, but all users can access and discuss them in the VC (González et al. 2017).

Table 2 shows the types and number of resources produced by the VC. Some of these language resources connect to local oral traditions, such as written local stories, and others involve new genres, such as recipe books and comics. Both embody these young peoples’ contemporary, shifting, and changing linguistic practices. Nenek acknowledges the various forms of knowledge and expressions of the speakers. Participants choose whether the resources they have created are reserved for in-person use or shared in the VC. When shared, these materials are mobilized through the Nenek platform and can be accessed and used immediately by all speakers. This feature is not only part of a guiding principle that gives speakers access to their language resources; these web posts also help to keep the VC alive.¹²

Table 2. Resources produced by the Nenek VC

Lexical language resources	Language resources	Collections of resources*
2,002 entries to a bilingual digital glossary, with corresponding audio recordings	983 photos	9 collections of written texts
30 thematic glossaries	93 audio recordings	1 journal with 6 academic articles written in Huastec
1 spellchecker for Huastec, based on 33,000 unique terms	50 written texts	1 e-library with 149 publications written in Huastec
	33 videos	312 collections of phrases
		707 posters
		35 blogs

* Collections result from the combination of two or more existing language resources. These products, such as e-libraries, dictionaries, and photo galleries, are created in the VC.

2.4 Nenek’s online collaborative work

Our strategy to involve speakers in the language documentation process builds on online collaborative work that combines the creation of language resources with its annotation, management, and distribution on our platform. The following example of the Huastec recipe book was one of the first tasks to be entirely developed online and shows Nenek’s online collaborative work process. It illustrates how people can become engaged, how speakers participate in a collaborative task, and how the community receives the product of their collaboration. A member of the Nenek staff coordinated this collaborative task, keeping a record of the process as the activities developed, logging all the written interactions of the participants in a field diary, and retrieving their other on-screen activities as they sent images, texts, audios, and videos to the Nenek platform.

To decide on this collaborative task, we reviewed the interactions of the members of the VC and the themes they discussed. Many posts dealt with local festivities and local food. We decided to call on Huastec speakers to help put together a publication of typical Huastec food. Over two weeks, we published eight bilingual posts on Nenek’s Facebook page, each featuring a dish and an accompanying recipe. We accompanied these materials with general invitations to participate (see Figure 1).

¹² According to the life cycle theory of VCs (Garber 2004; Iriberry & Leroy 2009), after inception and creation, a community needs nurturing through the creation of content, for members will only join when the administrators have created enough content (i.e., information).



Figure 1. Example of the posts inviting Huastec speakers to participate as Nenek-Collaborators in making a recipe book on typical Huastec food

When this did not rally any volunteers, we sent personalized invitations on Facebook to the sixty people who “liked” these posts. Finally, eight speakers participated. They did not know each other, and none were Nenek-Users. It took time for these new collaborators to register on the Nenek platform: they felt attracted to the task at hand but not to the documentation project itself and mentioned that they would rather collaborate through their Facebook page and WhatsApp application than have to learn the technology of a new platform. The eight team members agreed on the product: the recipe book would be bilingual (Huastec and Spanish) and include images and text. They distributed the activities according to each of the participants’ preferences: some asked older family members for the recipe, others checked whether they had photos of the chosen dishes, and others offered to do translations. Since not all participants were fluent in Huastec, their online communication was in Spanish. Perhaps as a result, the recipes they sent in were written in Spanish and had to be translated into Huastec. Another explanation of this seemingly contradictory situation is the general lack of reading and writing habits in Indigenous languages since speakers have few or no opportunities to practice these skills. It signals, once again, the dominant position of Spanish in Mexican society (Hamel 2016; De León 2017; Cruz 2020).

After the collaborators handed in their parts, the Nenek staff put the language resource together. The coordinator assembled the first version of the recipe book. It included five local dishes with photo illustrations and a bilingual text, in which the Huastec text had a more prominent place over the Spanish. Then, a Huastec language specialist checked the spelling. A graphic designer worked on a proposal for the graphic design of the product. After proofreading, the team members accepted the final version of the recipe book.

As a new language resource, the recipe book went through a double validation process before its publication on the Nenek platform and social networks. The Nenek repositories contain written materials catalogued in six corpora: academic, legal, religious, oral traditions, educational, and “other.” The book on typical Huastec food was added to the “other” category. On the platform, this new language resource received eighty-four “likes” and was shared eighty-three times.

3. Discussion

Even if the situation of Huastec migrants in Monterrey suggests that they are losing their language, this is not the whole picture. Their involvement in projects like ours reveals an interest in being connected to their Indigenous roots. It shows a willingness to actively take part in the preservation and promotion of their language and culture.

We chose to employ new technologies to support our project not only as a communication tool with individuals who live in separate locations but also because the internet makes it possible for young speakers to connect and create networks to organize themselves (O’Carroll 2013; Gómez Mont 2015). These speakers use communication tools available on the internet and are open to collaborating while using their language. VCs are topic-related, user-restricted, and safe meeting spaces to interact away from dominant languages (Belmar & Heyen 2021). Participants feel a sense of comfort and security when the interface of the platform is localized in the home language (Moodley & Dlamini 2021). With these tools, young people open up new domains for their language, generating new discourses and promoting the development of plurilingual literacies. In this respect, it is crucial to recognize that technology alone will not necessarily contribute to (re)creating or supporting vital communities in which languages can perform their full social and cultural functions. There is a need for an integral model in which knowledge continues to live and thrive in the community (Maffi 2003). We believe that self-documentation can provide such a model.

The process of self-documentation involves discussions among the participants about several issues related to their language. They should establish a target public and assess their needs for materials. For example, they might agree on whether the project is aimed at monolingual children in educational centers – perhaps with a focus on learning the written language – or at bilingual migrants who want to discover more about the traditional culture. They have to decide on the themes and type of expressions that the corpus should comprise, and who are the authoritative figures in the community from whom to obtain these expressions. Furthermore, when there is no standardized writing system, the participants have to be aware of this and discuss whether they want to determine at least a working alphabet to transcribe the oral expressions. These and other considerations have to be negotiated among all participants and will lead to continuous dialogues about the situation and position of the Indigenous language and its communicative and symbolic value.

The persistence of the digital divide in Latin America (Freire et al. 2015) does not mean that people in the home communities are excluded from using new technologies. Youth especially are finding ways to “connect” at schools or internet cafes. Many own mobile phones and know where to receive “signal” (i.e., satellite internet access).¹³ In the cities, digital social networks (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp, and e-mail) allow young individuals to keep in touch with other migrants or those from home to exchange opinions, information, and memories. Nenek is one of several social networks they use to be entertained and informed by a peer group. At the same time, participation in these social networks can raise their linguistic awareness (Cru 2014).

Entertainment and affection are not merely frivolous and ephemeral things but fundamental tools to foster positive language attitudes. Linguists like Crystal (2013) underscore the positive effects of bringing emotions into play to motivate people to work for their language. Flores Farfán (2011) emphasizes the value of informal and creative activities for speakers and learners to engage with and in the Indigenous language, for example, through more playful genres like tongue-twisters.

New technologies can contribute to positive changes in language attitudes and beliefs (Eisenlohr 2004). The benefits of a particular software influence its acceptance and use; if this software promotes the use of Indigenous languages, it can also influence attitudes toward the use of these languages in digital environments (Moodley & Dlamini 2021), which makes them a powerful means to resist the negative impact of the low absolute and relative numbers of speakers in the cities. Attitudes and beliefs are individual appreciations of the value of a language (Spolsky 2011). They are related to language ideologies of the speech community (Woolard 1998) and deal with ideas about what language is as well as its structure, symbolic value, and communicative purposes. Nenek’s young migrant speakers are willing to work on their language and help keep it alive, and these positive attitudes are critical for the place of the Indigenous language in information and communications technology (Moodley & Dlamini 2021) and its successful revitalization (Grenoble &

¹³ In the Huastec home communities, less than 10% of households have internet access. In just over 50% of households, someone has a mobile phone (INEGI 2020).

Whaley 2006).

The diversity of speakers in a community (some more fluent than others) also result in a diversity of experiences and relationships associated with the language. Not everybody is equally interested in participating. Also, a lack of confidence in writing the language may influence language behavior in online social networks (Cunliffe et al. 2013). As in other parts of Mexico, Spanish literacy and Spanish-based literacy practices dominate in Indigenous contexts. In schools, the lack of critical awareness of the culture-bound nature of concepts such as reading and writing hinders the development of Indigenous literacy (Hornberger 2012; Menezes de Souza 2015) as a social practice.¹⁴

In revitalization efforts, Grinevald & Bert (2011) explain that the involvement of language activists is essential. They can take on a key role as go-betweens and facilitators, are likely to be better learners of new technologies, and are concerned about their language, even when they might not be fluent speakers. In Mexico, urban young people participate in digital language activism and projects like Nenek. Some of these digital activists, such as Victoriano Tepoxteco, a promoter of the Nahuatl language, work alone.¹⁵ Others have created collectives, such as Colmix¹⁶ or Lenguas Web,¹⁷ or are engaged in a Latin American network called Global Voices.¹⁸ In Mexico, digital language activism has been particularly relevant for Indigenous languages such as Mayat'aañ or Yucatec Maya (Cru 2014) and varieties of Zapotec (Lillehaugen 2019) and Nahuatl. Language choice on the internet becomes a way to position oneself as an Indigenous language speaker. Social networks can reinforce a sense of belonging to a minority language group and have become a tool that enables revitalization and empowerment of minoritized languages (see, e.g., Cocq 2015; de Graaf 2015).

Nenek participants do not always identify as activists. They use the platform as a VC to stay in touch with peers. However, language activism is a social project that aims to counter language-related inequalities in varied ways and levels and with different actors. As de Korne (2021) says, “there are also many actors who identify neither as activists nor as language professionals, yet it is useful to consider their imaginaries and actions as part of this broader social domain” (2). The number and diversity of materials created by Huastec speakers and their multiple interactions in the Indigenous language turn Nenek into a negotiated social project to work for, with, and in their minoritized language. The collective action of the participants makes Nenek a digital language activism project.

By using their language on the internet, speakers participate in extending their linguistic heritage into new domains and building a forum to discuss issues about their language and culture. This digital language activism is part of a wider aim around language reclamation with links to “issues of educational equity, Indigenous self-determination, and the (re)construction of community well-being via culturally distinctive worldviews, identities, and life orientations” (McCarty & Nicholas 2014: 107).

As one of the most effective methods to counter language loss, documentation projects have to design strategies to increase the visual and aural presence of the Indigenous language (Mithun 2013). By making Indigenous languages visible, speakers' attitudes might change, and they might become more conscious of their value and more motivated to use them. One of the activities we promote to make Huastec more visible on the internet is the generation and mobilization of new language resources through collaborative work among the members of the VC. While collectively creating Huastec language resources on the internet, speakers give a powerful message to society about their Indigenous language being equally suitable as the dominant language for this means of communication. At the same time, they express that the Indigenous language is an inherent part of their group identity (Sordo 2019). This way, the internet can become a

¹⁴ Experiences show that the imposed introduction of Indigenous literacy based on Western ideologies and practices can have disruptive effects on the language community (Flores Farfán 2011).

¹⁵ Based in the city of Guadalajara, Victoriano posts in Nahuatl on Twitter and Facebook. He produces videos and other materials and is a radio presenter with a show in Nahuatl. He also gives language courses and is a translator of literature into Nahuatl. Likewise, he uses the Storyweaver platform to create stories in his language and is an active editor of Huiquipedia, the Wikipedia site in Nahuatl.

¹⁶ *El Colegio Mixe*, or Colmix, is a collective of speakers of Ayuujk (in Spanish called *Mixe*) who promote their language and culture through digital language activism (e.g., <https://www.facebook.com/colmixe/>), language workshops and courses, and the development of language materials (<https://colmix.org/>).

¹⁷ Lenguas Web is a collective of speakers of several Indigenous languages in Mexico who aim to contribute to Indigenous language revitalization with language materials, language courses, and translation services (<https://lenguasweb.com/>).

¹⁸ Rising Voices is “an initiative to support and facilitate peer networks of Indigenous language digital activists in Latin America” (<https://rising.globalvoices.org/lenguas/>). This initiative organizes events and workshops for digital language activists and speakers who want to become activists.

strong ally in making Indigenous languages visible, both to speakers and wider society, and contribute to their maintenance and revitalization (Thomason 2015).

In the current context of language shift, self-documentation is perhaps more directly linked to attempts to make speakers think about their language, to have them acknowledge its value as a fundamental feature of group identity (Edwards 2003), and to involve them in activities to maintain or even expand its uses (Flores Farfán & Ramallo 2010). This approach can be successful as language becomes a visible and powerful indicator of group identity in the search to (re)assert a unique cultural identity against the modernizing and assimilatory effects of globalizing forces (Grenoble & Whaley 2006).

To the members of Nenek, contributing to a digital social network through participative action in the production of digital content is an entertaining opportunity to stay connected. They demonstrate affection for their language and culture through online activities that articulate, transmit, and discuss traditional knowledge and practices. Moreover, this participation makes the language and culture visible in a digital medium over the internet and counters inequalities at several different levels since, apart from the digital divide, there is a gap concerning the online presence of Indigenous languages and language technology support for (and in) these languages (Soria 2016). With almost no online content or services in the Indigenous languages, the digital use of these languages will not extend beyond the social domain (cf. Cunliffe et al. 2013). It is too early to know how the digital presence of Huastec will develop and how the digital practices of young speakers will relate to its conservation and revitalization. However, it is encouraging to see that the use of Huastec as a language of digital communication has become more accepted among Huastec youth, especially among those who do not live in their home communities anymore.

4. Conclusions

In Mexico, young speakers of Indigenous languages are leveraging new technologies to make their languages visible. On the internet, speakers find initiatives that allow and even vindicate the use of the language, and they open spaces for expression in their mother tongues. Some are young migrants who feel attached to and engage with their home communities through digital interactions and participation on social networks. Among the motivations to document their Indigenous language and become digital language activists, they mention the affective relationship with their language and culture, expressing the need to feel connected to this legacy and their people. The internet provides a modern, entertaining way to do so. Now, several speakers have adopted the Indigenous language as a vital attribute of their collective identity as Indigenous youth in the cities.

In projects like Nenek, young migrants are the principal actors showing their language and culture to the rest of the world via digital social media. It makes digital, collaborative work with migrants to document and revitalize their languages a promising development. To be effective, initiatives such as Nenek should have an integral design that gives leadership to the speakers. They should be accompanied by other efforts to document and preserve the languages (according to the sociolinguistic diagnosis of each speech community) and by appropriate linguistic policies to ensure and promote their autonomous development. Recording and analyzing this process is relevant since it shows how digital media and the internet contribute to the current repositioning of Indigenous languages against dominant languages. Its study also helps us understand the ways in which young people are enacting language activism in both traditional and evolving ways and how their practices influence the conservation and revitalization of their Indigenous languages.

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