Activism and research for the promotion of literacy in Chatino: Experiences and reflections from fieldwork

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Abstract

In this article, as an insider researcher, I explore my experiences during fieldwork. I discuss personal emotions related to linguistic discrimination and internalization of speakers' negative attitudes toward their language. Also, I discuss the local power relations in the community social network to which my family belongs, and the violence I experience as a woman. As a local researcher I unveil the realities and adversities that I face doing research and working on collaborative projects in my own community with speakers, educators, and local government. Despite drawbacks and limitations in my role as researcher and literacy advocate in the community, I showcase ongoing activities that foster literacy and revitalization of the Chatino language.

Key words:

Chatino, fieldwork, language ideologies, collaboration, literacy.

Introduction[1]

When a researcher does fieldwork in her own community, as I do, it is assumed that her relationship with the social environment there should be quite easy; but in reality this is not so. Problems of family, of town, and of local government have affected my emotional stability during fieldwork, as well as the progress of my research. In addition, the close interrelationship among the members of the community and the growing use of social media on the internet—including social media that facilitate the exchange of negative information—have come to complicate my life as a woman and researcher, to a point where I am led to (re)think the use of such media as tools in my research. I myself have come to consider collaborative work to be the perfect path to the beneficial development of one's research, above all, collaboration involving the direct inclusion and participation of speakers and linguists, teachers, and others, in reinforcing the language.

In this article I present my experiences as a Chatina[2] researcher working in my own community. I present both positive and negative experiences which I have confronted as a woman and as a Chatina researcher in the context of my community and of academia. The central themes are: 1) The internalization of negative ideas about their own language by Chatino speakers; 2) The policies of the municipal government toward Chatino; 3) Collaboration, and its limitations; 4) Gender violence; and 5) The achievements of all who participated in our collaborative projects.

In order to contextualize this article and to give a better picture of the advantages and the challenges that are described here, let me first say who I am and how I came to the study of linguistics. I am an Indigenous woman from a Chatino town called San Miguel Panixtlahuaca, located between the Sierra Sur and the south-facing Pacific Coast in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. In keeping with certain stereotypes in Mexico—framed by racism and diminished access to education for Indigenous people—it is believed that academia is not for everyone, and even less so for Indigenous women (Cruz 2019). In my case, I had the opportunity to complete my basic

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2   Translator's footnote: I follow the Spanish-language practice of analyzing the final o in *Chatino* (probably from Zacatepec Eastern Chatino [tʃătíɲǒ]) as the masculine singular thematic vowel, and then writing *Chatina* when the reference is to a woman.

and secondary education in my own community, and once I decided to go to college, I had to leave my community for the city.

I come from a family of subsistence farmers and migrant workers. My siblings and I grew up working in the fields, harvesting coffee, corn, and beans for our food. We are a big family with scanty economic resources. My mother was our economic support, and to give us stability, she undertook a small business selling seasonal fruit. Because of the lack of economic opportunity in the community, my father decided to go to the United States in search of better working conditions, but spent twenty years there without ever planning to return to Mexico.

My parents had no access to education. My mother told me that she had not wanted to go to school because she had been frightened by stories of violence suffered by other Indigenous children at the hands of teachers at the school. She told me that rural school teachers mistreated the children, and for that reason she decided to devote herself to working in the fields alongside her father. But even though she did not go to school herself, my mother always encouraged me to keep studying, and on my first day of classes she took me to school and then went right back to the fields to continue working to produce food for the house.

Being in school forced me to learn Spanish, because before that I had no need to try to understand the people who spoke it, given that at home and in the streets, people only spoke Chatino.[3] From preschool on through the first four years of primary school, my voice was silent, with no ability to express what I felt in the classroom, and with much of the things the teachers said having no meaning to me. The children who spoke up more were those few Spanish monolinguals who shared the classroom with us Chatinos. This little group were the children of the teachers who were working in the community and of the mestizos already established in Panixtlahuaca. The teachers thought of these monolingual children as smart because they understood everything they were told. This forced immersion in oral and written Spanish caused many difficulties for my learning. I had to attend remedial classes in the afternoons of my first two years due to the difficulties I had learning to read and write. In the fifth year of elementary school, in spite of having already learned to read and write, still, I was not quite able to speak confidently with the teachers and other Spanish speakers. The teachers constantly would correct our mistakes when

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3   Translator's footnote: As in the Spanish original of this article, the translations *Chatino* and *the Chatino language* may refer at several different levels. In this passage, *Chatino* refers to Panixtlahuaca Eastern Chatino, a highly distinctive variety of the Eastern Chatino language spoken only in Panixtlahuaca. At other times it may refer collectively to the 15 or so somewhat mutually-intelligible village varieties of Eastern Chatino; and at still others it may refer collectively to all three currently spoken, non-mutually intelligible Chatino languages: Eastern Chatino, Tataltepec Chatino, and Zenzontepec Chatino (see Campbell 2013).

we expressed ourselves in Spanish. For example, on one occasion my mother asked me to tell my brother's teacher that he would not be able to come to class because he had a fever. To do this, I took some time to think how to convey this information to the teacher. I decided to say, "Teacher, my brother is sick and can't come to class", but wasn't sure if I should use *enfermo* or *enferma*—that is, the masculine or the feminine singular form of 'sick' in Spanish. Finally I decided to use *enferma,* at which point the teacher immediately said "You say *enfermo*, girl, that is what studying is for!" The way they treated us when we made mistakes would just make us more unsure of ourselves in speaking and reading Spanish. I had this same insecurity when I went to high school and college in Mexico, especially when I had to give a presentation or write a paper. Some teachers and classmates just assumed I was supposed to speak and write Spanish as well as they did, and when they realized that that was not the case, they attributed it to a lack of intellectual inability on my part; then, whenever I did succeed in something, they figured it was just a matter of luck rather than a product of my own effort.

What the schools have done to our languages is really a kind of linguistic genocide, because from the time we are children, they force us to read and write only in Spanish, and as a result, negative linguistic ideologies arise that lead directly to the loss of our Chatino language (Cruz 2020; Ascencio 2009; Aguilar 2015). Likewise, according the report of an expert group convened by UNESCO (2011), "external pressures, including military economic, religious, cultural, and educational subjugation, lead in turn to internal pressures, including negative attitudes on the part of a community toward its own language, that then push the speakers to abandon their language to avoid discrimination." I remember the racism I experienced, and it very often drove me to deny who I am, a woman coming from an Indigenous community. It is not easy for a young Indigenous person to emigrate to the city to study, because there are linguistic and economic challenges and one encounters a lot of discrimination: that was my own experience.

I studied for a bachelor's degree in business administration at the Instituto Tecnológico de Pinotepa, located in the town of Pinotepa in the southwest corner of the state of Oaxaca. There were students there of various backgrounds, including Indigenous Chatinos and Mixtecs, Afro-Mexicans, and Mestizos. As one of the Indigenous students at the university, I was the victim of bullying by a classmate. Once I received a text message in Spanish via Messenger that said: "You're never going to get anywhere, you provincial *India.*"[4] That wasn't the only instance of harassment by classmates, because other Indigenous students at the university experienced this type of discrimination as well. Several friends told me that on the bus going to school, some

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4   Translator's footnote: *Indio/India* 'Indian' is used as a slur against Indigenous people in Mexican Spanish.

women from our own school shouted "uncivilized" at them for speaking in Chatino. In spite of the fact that in the university, the majority came from small communities, discrimination was a day-to-day presence.

Once I had earned my bachelor's degree I took a few months off in my town while I was looking for work. Panixtlahuaca is a very small community where no person's life passes unnoticed (Haviland 1977): anything that happens in the community is noticed, and once people became aware of my arrival they would ask me: "Will you be able to work in a bank now that you have finished your degree? How much are you going to earn? When are you going to have children?"

In those months in the village, I got interested in promoting the visibility and recognition of Chatino. So I got the idea of making posters, doing radio spots, and filling public spaces with messages, all in Chatino. Although at that time I did not know how to write Chatino, I tried to create messages like *Qa ^{A} tkwen ^{I} koa ^{C} qne ^{A} ten ^{I} chaq ^{F} ndykweq ^{G} chaq ^{F} tnya ^{A}* 'No one should forbid you from speaking Chatino'. It actually was a more difficult project than I had thought. Twice I went to the Municipal Hall to propose my ideas, but I had no success: they told me there were only limited resources for work on this type of project.

Just a few months later, the Panixtlahuaca municipal authorities directed me to a call by the (Oaxaca) State Institute for Adult Education (or IEEA, its initials in Spanish) looking for workers for a literacy project. This government program interested me because it focused on literacy in Chatino. However, once I was in this program, together with Chatino co-workers from other communities, we realized there were no trainers who knew how to read or write the languages and who could guide us in using the materials from the IEEA. So after a year of working without training, we received a call for participants in a tone workshop for speakers of Otomanguean languages:[5] they were looking for native speakers working with different languages from this large Central and Southern Mexican language family to which Chatino belongs. Through this workshop, I had my first exposure to linguistics, and was able to work with specialists like Emiliana Cruz, Hilaria Cruz, Anthony Woodbury, John Kingston, and others. From 2012 to 2014 I received training in the documentation of Chatino languages, and, above all, training in how to pass on what I had learned to interested native speakers. The contribution of these linguists to our training was in keeping with one of the four key obligations for linguistic research set forth by Nora England (1992:34), based on her experience in fieldwork and training with speakers of Mayan languages in Guatemala: "Contributing to the training of linguists who are

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5   This was the first Workshop on Tone for Speakers of Otomanguean Languages. It was organized by Dr. Emiliana Cruz with the support of the Alfredo Harp Helu Foundation and the (Mexican) National Institute for Indigenous Languages (or INALI, its initials in Spanish) in 2012, and held in the Foundation's facilities at the San Pablo Academic and Cultural Center in Oaxaca City, Mexico.

speakers of [politically] subordinate languages, at every level from empirical to the theoretical".

With this community-centered linguistic background, in 2016 I began my M.A. and Ph.D. studies in the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and was able to focus on the learning of literacy in tonal languages such as the Chatino languages. In my doctoral research, I explore the reading skills (Tankersley 2003) of Panixtlahuaca Eastern Chatino speakers in a writing system in which tone is represented. This has allowed me to collaborate in the teaching of Chatino reading and writing to speakers in my community.

1. The internalization of negative ideas about their own language by Chatino speakers

As a researcher who is also a member of a community, scholarly references to ourselves have a special importance whereas outside researchers are in a position that is quite different. A visiting researcher may leave and return to the community, or even not return at all. In contrast to this, the local researcher is known for her lifelong trajectory within the community, which can be used positively or negatively in relation to her work. Linda Tuhiwai describes it this way: "The issues for Indigenous researchers seeking to work within Indigenous contexts are framed somewhat differently . If they are 'insiders' they are frequently judged on insider criteria; their family background, status, politics, age, gender, religion, as well as on their perceived technical ability." (Tuhiwai 1999: 10). Being part of the town of Panixtlahuaca implies being observed and judged according to what I or my family might do. In my case, most of my life has been spent in my town; people know who my family is, and everyone knows about their participation in *fiestas*, events, and community assemblies — a different situation from that of a foreign researcher (Macaulay 2014). The community can get to know the private life of each one of its members, including the problems within their families and how they relate to other families. Given such a context, when I do research in Panixtlahuaca, I need to be careful not to let these issues get mixed up with my project. This is not always easy since being from the community means being involved in local conflicts. Social relationships have sometimes affected my work, because having a very large family whose members are linked into different facets of the community has led me to cross paths with the various activities in which they are involved. For example, being involved in workshops or in research with speakers or family members who have ties to a political party can lead to misunderstandings about the purpose of the work. The taint of such external factors as political parties can fuel distrust on the part of speakers towards any project that

is carried out within the community. Therefore, knowing this context, I try to stay on the sidelines of such situations. It is important for me to make it very clear what the objective of the investigation is I am trying to carry out, and why it is important for Chatino speakers to collaborate in spite of any ideological differences. Even so, in my early days as an activist and researcher, I think I was wrong to attribute rejections solely to external ideologies, because at the same time, certain negative attitudes about the language itself were strongly affecting the process of including speakers in collaborative research projects.

After finishing the literacy work at IEEA but before studying abroad, I thought that the best way to collaborate with the speakers of my community was to work independently, without any ties to the local, state, or federal government. I began teaching Chatino language literacy on a voluntary basis, together with other Chatino speakers who had received linguistic training in the Otomanguean language workshops. The first local literacy workshops that we organized were carried out in two groups, one on the local community radio station 90.1, *Radio qin*[E] *kchen*[A] ('Radio of the town'), and the other at the home of a Chatina colleague. We each started offering workshops to a group of children 8 to 12 years old, and although we did not know that much about teaching Chatino literacy, we were very motivated to give the children of the town the opportunity to read texts in their own language. This initiative was our own idea, arising because we wished to share and apply what we had learned. As such, there were no restrictions imposed by the municipal government or by the speakers on how to organize the workshops. So, using the announcements on the community loudspeaker system, we publicly invited any children who spoke the language, and managed to gather around 20 participants in each of two groups. Once the classes started and the days went by, my group dwindled to seven students whose parents motivated them to continue attending. Alongside teaching writing, I included discussions about the importance of maintaining this language that for generations has been passed down to us by our ancestors. However, the parents of the seven did not actually agree with my ideology about the Chatino language. I realized that even though they sent their children to our workshops, they had a rather more negative view of Chatino and did not fully accept that Chatino was something important.

My hypothesis is that they sent their children to learn literacy in Chatino because in the preschool and primary schools of Panixtlahuaca, the children are assigned Chatino writing as homework, and so sometimes it was left to the parents to collect stories, legends, poems, and riddles without actually knowing how to write the language; and likewise the children themselves never were taught Chatino literacy in their classes.

So, the motivation for sending their children to the workshops was related to the obligation to do homework, and was not because they were proud of the language, or were intent on preserving or revitalizing it. In light of that, I decided to investigate how my own family viewed the importance of the language. I started by saying how

I felt about Chatino, its importance, and the advantages of knowing more than one single language. But to my surprise, in my own family circle I had the same experience that I had with the fathers and mothers of the children, because my family too had a negative reaction to Chatino, including those family members who had an academic background, and even those who were primary school teachers. One of the arguments that they used was that Chatino was headed for extinction and nothing could be done about it because the only language used in schools and government offices was Spanish, and although it was nice to speak and write it, it was just not relevant in the workplace. These discussions helped me clarify my ideas on how to communicate with speakers about the importance of Chatino, because I could not be insistent and oppose their way of thinking when this stigmatization exists, in the end, due to violence exerted from outside.

In the town of Panixtlahuaca there are some people, professionals and non-professionals alike, that have negative attitudes about projects for the promotion and revitalization of Chatino. The community always sees professional people as people who know what is important, so their attitude reinforces these negative impressions of the language. These individuals occupy a position of power in Panixtlahuaca and their opinions have an impact. If they do not consider language projects to be a part of community identity, or as having importance for new generations, then those attitudes become the model for the other people in the village.

This negativity comes about when there is a preference for a dominant language such as English or Spanish, and that in turn affects the value placed on the writing workshops being offered in the community. Here I also share some things I noticed during my first year studying abroad. In my first summer back in Panixtlahuaca, I realized that people in my close circle would ask me more about my fluency in English than about the work that I have been carrying out on Chatino, and at the same time they praised those among their acquaintances who spoke Spanish or English. And in keeping with the view that these dominant languages are better, my work is also underestimated when I try to invite them to the workshops, so for example, I heard members of a family of professionals say, "My daughters understand Chatino and they try to speak it, but things go better for them in school because they speak Spanish. So, should you teach English, do let me know!" On the other hand, the disinterest and lack of response on the part of my family toward using the language also generates criticism of my work. Since Panixtlahuaca is a small community, everyone knows about the projects in which I'm involved. This closeness among people leads to different perspectives about language activism projects. In my case, those who know me as a linguist expect that my family and I would set an example to follow when it comes to matters of language.

Over these eight years teaching and raising consciousness about the use of Chatino in both its written and oral forms has led to comments about my lack of ability to convince even those close to me to keep the language going, and this is because

my first cousins are the last generation in the family to speak Chatino: their own children are monolingual in Spanish. So even while my project is centered on reading Chatino, and I generally work with speakers who are themselves actively evaluating reading skills, more than once I have heard commentaries like: "You want these children to speak Chatino and yet the children of your own family only speak Spanish." Usually these comments come from people not involved in the project, that is, from speakers who believe that I do not deserve to teach literacy because I cannot convince my first cousins to pass the language on to the next generation.

Certainly as researchers and activists we are not immune from such situations. A lack of consciousness can exist even among those close to us, and we cannot force anyone to teach the language to their children. After the experiences we went through with parents in the first workshops, we worked more with those in town who were interested in learning about and collaborating in various different projects benefiting the language. In the future, when proposing to work in a community-level revitalization project, it is necessary to involve more members of the community, such as parents, teachers, and municipal authorities; and in so doing, to arrive at an authentic reading of popular perceptions of language maintenance projects. Grenoble and Whaley (2006) indicate that to create a language program, it is necessary to evaluate the resources the community can rely on, one such resource being the status of the language itself, which affects the attitudes and interests of community members toward the project (Grenoble and Whaley 2006: 160-161). Learning about these negative attitudes and lack of enthusiasm will allow us to address the misinformation that feeds the stigmatization of Chatino. For example, one of the myths that remains in force is that Spanish-Chatino bilingualism weakens the ability of children to speak the dominant language, Spanish. Another myth is that children who are monolingual in Spanish will be better students than children who learn Spanish as a second language. These are two of the many beliefs permeating all sectors of the population, from speakers to educators and municipal authorities.

As far as educators are concerned, Panixtlahuaca is frequently cited for the number of bilingual teachers who work in its primary and preschools. The great majority of these teachers are Chatino speakers working in the bilingual system.[6] However, most, if not all, use Spanish as the language of instruction. The few teachers who know one of the Chatino writing systems, which will be discussed in detail later (see section 3), do not teach it in the classroom for a variety of reasons.

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6 Translator's footnote: In Oaxaca, schools in many Indigenous communities are designated (supposedly) as *Escuelas Bilingües* 'bilingual schools'; they form a system parallel to schools not designated as 'bilingual'.

In more pointed cases, they simply oppose the linguistic maintenance of Chatino. For example, while I was talking with a mother who I knew about the advantages of speaking more than one language, a local teacher told me to stop making comments to parents about what was best for their children, because they, the parents, should be the ones to decide what they want for their families. He added that I did not have the authority to speak about education because the only ones who know about it are the teachers who stand in the front of the classroom. At the end of the conversation the teacher commented that analyzing the sounds of a language is only useful for linguists, that linguistics does not contribute anything to the community, and he emphasized that the best way to help the children was by teaching them Spanish. After that incident, the mother took a very different position and went on to speak Spanish with her son, and each time I tried to take up the subject of Chatino with her, she was always on the defensive. It is clear that what a local teacher says has major repercussions and influence on language maintenance in an Indigenous community: the weight of his work as a teacher is stronger than the linguistic activism of an academic-in-training. Regardless of whether the teachers do or do not teach Chatino literacy or use Chatino as the language of instruction, the parents nevertheless value their work in teaching the hegemonic language.

This teacher later went on to assume an internship in education within the bilingual system. He went about doing fieldwork to collect stories and legends in Chatino. Unfortunately, cases like this can occur in either Indigenous or non-Indigenous schools, where the appearance of effort toward maintaining the language serves only to justify the notion that they are working on projects that are inclusive toward the children. Furthermore, they manufacture a kind of folklore around 'being Indigenous', for example it is common in the village preschools to see children costumed in traditional Chatino clothing, all while they are subject to *Castillianization* in their homes and classrooms (Cruz 2020).7 Most of the time, extracurricular activities are carried out in order to showcase pride in being Chatino, but this is merely symbolic (Cruz 2019). Thus the internalization of negative ideas towards our language is built directly into the bilingual system itself, and among the teachers who are supposed to be working to make the importance and use of Chatino something visible.

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7   Translator's footnote: Beginning in the 1930s, the Mexican federal government inaugurated a long-standing and concerted program of *Castilianización* of Indigenous children, intended to root out or folklorize indigeneity while replacing it with Spanish language and Iberian culture.

2. The policies of the municipal government toward Chatino

Projects about language do not have the same level of public visibility that infrastructure projects have. In the time that I have been living in Panixtlahuaca I have known of no actions to promote the language. There is a Department of Culture and Recreation[8] in the community, but the focus has always been on traditional dances, cuisine, crafts and the community museum. There has been talk of reinforcing the culture, but the Chatino language has been absent from any of the events that have been undertaken.

In celebration of International Day of the Mother Tongue, the municipal authorities hosted an event in conjunction with the various schools in the community for which the teachers prepared dances, poetry, songs, and parades. During this cultural event, the master of ceremonies conducted everything entirely in Spanish, and the children were asked to recite poetry and tell stories in Spanish, accompanied by translations into Chatino.

Many of these teachers still try to teach students about their Indigeneity through folklore, for example, having them dress in traditional Chatino clothing to sing the Mexican National Anthem in Chatino and salute the Mexican flag (Cruz 2020). Since this is an event whose purpose is entertainment, the municipal authorities participate and give support, whether monetary support or by participating directly in organizing the event. But this is not the case for a workshop to study Chatino: for that the authorities do not give support.

Based on my experience, the justification always given first is the lack of resources for hosting a workshop in the community. Even when few resources are needed to carry it out, the municipal authorities still refuse to offer space and furniture. To give a workshop using the facilities at the Municipal Hall is an involved process: there is a meeting with the members of the municipal government, and based on that they decide whether or not to give permission. So I, together with another person from the town, opted to give Chatino classes in our homes, because that way we would be able to determine our own content while not being under observation by the municipal authorities. To give an example, I describe my experiences organizing a workshop in my town. To be given permission to hold the workshop, the municipal council required that I meet certain conditions: they prohibited me from disseminating any publicity about the workshop, I was not allowed to say that I was going to

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8   The Municipal Plan for Sustainable Development (Ayuntamiento Constitucional San Miguel Panixtlahuaca, Juquila, Oaxaca, 2011-2013) establishes "the responsibility to safeguard and promote the traditions, beliefs, customs and all other ancestral roots of the community" (29).

give it, and I could not invite people belonging to a political faction other than that of the current authorities. These I call 'bureaucratic filters' (De los Santos 2019: 161). From my perspective, this resistance to my projects about our mother tongue can be interpreted in several ways:

a. In a context where it has mostly been men who have held the various municipal offices, it is difficult for them to take seriously a community project that is proposed by women. Even when women actively participate in community services, there are still limitations in taking their proposals into account; yet, the workshops offered by men have been promoted and supported by the municipal authorities, even if the workshop is offered by someone who does not belong to the community;

b. The Chatino reading and writing workshops are something different, especially given that they were proposed without financial, political, or religious goals in mind. But what we bring to the community is often misunderstood as seeking some political or religious benefit beyond the linguistic matters at hand. For example, one of the times that I went to the Panixtlahuaca municipal authorities to present to them information about the tonal system of our language, the first thing I was asked was whether this documentation project with which I was involved in the community was based in religion and affiliated with SIL-International/Wycliffe Bible Translators. Once made aware that the project was something independent, they showed a better attitude and from there, everything went unremarked by the members of the council, who did not ask further questions. However, when a new administration took office as the members of the municipal authority, the reaction was different: they were more interested in keeping us as organizers from promoting the workshop, and in that way wanted to direct all of the recognition to themselves as the organizers;

c. In following years, the projects have not been of much interest to most of the municipal councils that have taken office (each council holds office for three years), which is why there are no restrictions whatsoever when workshops are organized independently and privately.

Even though our experiences have not been favorable, the possibility always still remains of finding and working with a council interested in language projects. This depends on the attitude of each of the members of the council in turn, because at the end of the day they are speakers who also have a story to tell about their experience using the language in different contexts.

3. Collaboration, and its limitations

Ever since I started studying linguistics, I have been interested in working on topics that contribute to the revitalization of the Chatino language, like sociolinguistics, language documentation, language acquisition, bilingualism, literacy, and educational policy. The topics that I have begun to focus on are literacy and sociolinguistics, and in particular the exploration of the cognitive processes involved in the learning of reading skills, and its implications for a writing system in which tone is represented. At the same time, taking an ethnographic perspective, I also explore the use and the perception of Chatino speakers towards writing in general, as well as toward the specific writing systems being used for Chatino. From these two viewpoints, I invite the speakers of my community to learn to read and write in the Chatino language and at the same time to promote its use in different forums, including workshops, social media, printed text, and community radio.

The development of Chatino writing systems has resulted in different groups of speakers within the community adopting different ways of writing. The first of these systems was proposed by the linguists Kitty Pride and Leslie Pride of SIL-International/Wycliffe Bible Translators, in their Chatino-Spanish bilingual dictionary based on Panixtlahuaca Eastern Chatino (Pride & Pride 2010); the second was an orthography proposed for varieties of Eastern Chatino by bilingual education teachers belonging to the General Directorate for Indigenous Education (or DGEI, its acronym in Spanish); and finally a third was developed by linguists including Jeff Rasch (2002) for Yaitepec Eastern Chatino, Emiliana Cruz (2004; 2011) for San Juan Quiahije Eastern Chatino, and subsequently, the Chatino Language Documentation Project (CLDP) for Panixtlahuaca and other varieties of Eastern Chatino. It is to this third proposal that Chatino speakers from different communities have had the most access, due to the tone workshops for Otomanguean speakers and also the writing workshops organized by Chatino linguists Emiliana Cruz and Hilaria Cruz. In these workshops, the students also began to adapt the writing system to the Chatino languages and varieties spoken in our own communities and disseminate what we learned and discovered. There also were speakers who knew the writing systems proposed by the DGEI teachers or the Prides. However, most of these speakers do not write or read in Chatino; that is, they do not produce materials for themselves or for others. An exception is a speaker who has produced many written stories and legends, and has also completed a translation of the Bible collaboration with SIL-International/Wycliffe Bible Translators; however, these resources, although they do exist, have not been readily available to those looking for written material in Chatino. The use of the written language has been limited by the lack of forums to promote it and because young speakers interested in learning writing think that it is something very complex, and beyond their reach due to limited access to materials in Chatino. In Panixtlahuaca,

the only places where the written language is encountered are the entrance to the town and in the Municipal Hall; so for that reason, to make writing more visible, my collaborators and I began to promote Chatino literacy by regularly writing it in social media posts of various types, putting literacy videos on YouTube, and also posting Chatino translations of texts and short stories. Somehow we knew that the younger generations were seeking to write the language, just as in the beginning we ourselves had been. From these postings, many people in my community could actually see for themselves how we write Chatino; and on several occasions they asked me about the graphic representation of tones in our orthographic system, because that is a feature that does not exist in Spanish, nor has it been a part of other Chatino writing. The speakers were curious about the little superscript letters used in our system for representing the tone class of each word and wanted to know how they worked, as for example, in this sentence that I once posted on Facebook, *tqi^A nga^A qnya^H* 'I feel sore'. To some speakers it seemed remarkable, and to this day I receive messages asking me to give translations of words and short sentences written in Chatino this way.

In my community it was uncommon to see written Chatino in social media — a situation that has changed with time, so it is now increasingly common to see postings and comments in the language. Now, posting in Chatino makes sense to me, since most of my contacts are Chatino and yet previously the only communication tool in social media posts had been Spanish. Using Chatino as a means of communication in social media gives me comfort and security to express my ideas and feelings, preserving their original formulation in Chatino without having to transport them into a Spanish translation. And like me, other Chatinos share this same feeling about using the written language on social media. Once the use of tone in our writing system became evident, some Chatino teachers — ones who had always been passive about the use and teaching of the written language — began to show an attitude of rejection toward our language activism. This rejection little by little began to reveal jealousy and competition, even though those same speakers had never shown much interest in promoting the written language. On various occasions I was hearing comments like: "She doesn't write with the original Chatino writing, Chatino has to be written the way it sounds", or "The letters she uses are from English, and we have to avoid having letters imposed on us from foreign languages". At that time, these comments could be interpreted as a rejection of the Chatina linguists who had been academically trained abroad and who had contributed to the proposal for writing with tone. We as Chatino speakers, outside the teachers' system, did not consider it an imposition, on the contrary, we felt included in the project due to the open call for participation in the Otomanguean workshops and the opportunity to study our own language. The term "original writing" was being attributed to the writing system that the teachers had learned in their workshops for their work in Indigenous education, as well as a spelling that has greater similarity to the Spanish orthographic system (Faudree 2015).

In this context, my work as a linguist and activist has consisted of advising my Chatino students not to enter into discussions about which writing system is better or worse, because the important thing is constant use, and the effectiveness of the representations for fluent reading. A lot of the time the difficulty with dialoguing with bilingual education teachers about writing tone boils down to a lack of awareness that a writing system is a graphic representation (or drawing) of each sound. Therefore, they defend the orthographic system they know as if their system were the best to be used in the community, but do so without actually teaching it to the children. What follows next is an example of such a rejection, one that I experienced in the Chatino region even before entering academia.

In a workshop of the (Oaxaca) State Institute for Adult Education (or IEEA, its initials in Spanish) held in Santiago Yaitepec in 2012, taught by a teacher who had been working with Chatino languages and had also created materials for Zenzontepec Chatino (another one of the three Chatino languages as classified in Campbell (2013)), our teacher realized that my fellow language-trainers and I had been using tones in our writing, and a few days after the workshop he accused us of not complying with the guidelines governing the IEEA. One of these guidelines said that we were not authorized to use any writing system other than that used in the materials prescribed for Chatino adults, and this was conveyed to us in a letter from the head of the IEEA's Department of Educational Services. This imposition from the IEEA—supported by a professor from the Chatino region—made us realize the seriousness of the situation, even apart from the fact that they expected the trainers to learn in a single day to write using the teachers' system. All that we had done at that time was to disseminate what we had learned and discovered in the tone workshops to the speakers who were volunteering as trainers in the adult literacy program. They, in turn, had unfortunately not received any type of writing training at all from the IEEA.

This lack of agreement, and the problems of power among those of us who work with Chatino languages means that our goal is achieved only slowly, very different than if we could join forces and work together. The idea, "my writing system is better than yours" still remains, even when 'my system' is neither shared nor promoted.

Today, most bilingual education teachers follow this same tack, many of them taking for granted that people do not need to study in order to be able to write the language: "I write it as I want, the important thing is that I understand it," I was told by a teacher when I asked him if his students were able to read a text he had written. His comment made me understand that they only would try to write Chatino when they had to provide evidence to show they were working with a Chatino language. In the same way, another teacher who was opposed to the writing that I use with my students said: "Writing Chatino is easy, it is no big deal, and you just complicate it further by adding in the tones." According to her point of view, it is not important to represent the tones in a practical writing system, even though she neither knew nor used any of the writing systems that had been proposed. She simply did not

agree with the inclusion of the tone class superscript in the writing system because such a thing does not exist in Spanish writing and thus cannot be taught using the methods used for Spanish. The limited flexibility of the teachers to talk about the different systems that exist for Panixtlahuaca Eastern Chatino is related to the deeply rooted idea that the writing system of Chatino should be just like that of Spanish. Unfortunately, there is very little interest in working together, and only in very few cases do the teachers show any willingness to continue learning about Chatino and its grammar in order to apply it in the classrooms (Cruz, Soriano and De los Santos, 2020).

4. Gender violence

Being a woman and doing fieldwork in my community and in other Chatino communities means being exposed to experiencing gender violence, which puts both my mental and my physical stability in peril. The violence I have experienced has come in different forms, from text message to physical bullying. Well before my immersion in the linguistic world I knew that, if I visit another community, one way to protect myself is to present myself as married; in that way, anyone intending to approach me would know that there was someone who "protects me". But that does not always work. As a local researcher, what is most worrying is the personal information to which they have access, like where I live, who else lives in my house, and who my relatives are. Based on this information, some men claim to want to have a serious discussion with me and claim to show interest in my research and linguistic activism.

For example, in my community, a preschool teacher contacted me on Facebook. First he started with a casual conversation, telling me that he knew about me from the work I do with Chatino, and asking me about my brother and the rest of the family. Then he gives me his contact information so that I could "get to know" him.

Teacher: Very interesting
Author: I also make teaching materials
Teacher: One of these days maybe you could share with me one of those books of yours
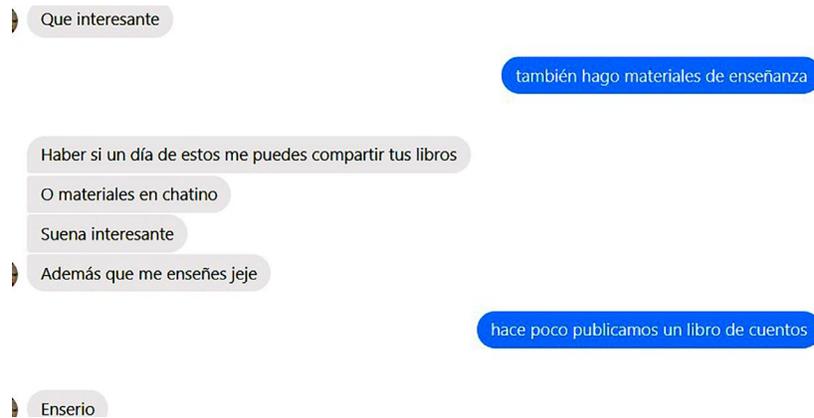Teacher: Or materials in Chatino
Teacher: Sounds interesting
Teacher: Or any other way that you could teach me, lol
Author: Just recently, we published a book of stories
Teacher: No kidding

FIGURE I

I thought that he really wanted to know more about my work on Chatino, so I told him that I was not present in the community, but if he wanted the material he could go by my mother's house to pick it up.

With my less-than-successful experience working with bilingual teachers in mind, I thought that maybe this teacher, who does not speak Chatino, had good intentions in inviting me to his place of work to tell stories to the children. At first I suggested that he invite speakers in town who know stories and legends in the language, but he showed no interest in that. When we exchanged contact information I gave him my phone number. So far, our discussions had just been about setting a date for a meeting at the school. Three days after that conversation I received a message from him saying that he wanted to talk to me on the phone, and, because I was busy, I proposed a time to talk. Then just when I realized I had missed the call, he wrote to me on the social media platform *Facebook Messenger:* "I phoned you. Are you busy? Or are you with your boyfriend? (Laugh). I ask so as not to bother you." I made it clear I was married and asked him what the purpose of his call was, but he did not respond. Then he contacted me again on *Messenger*, writing this:

Teacher: You don't like me
Teacher: You don't want to get to know me
Author:　　😮
Teacher: Just tell me no
Teacher: And never …
Teacher: Will I bother you again
Author: I thought that you were interested in the work that I do in linguistics
Teacher: What interests me is you
Teacher: But if you tell me
Teacher: That you never want to see me
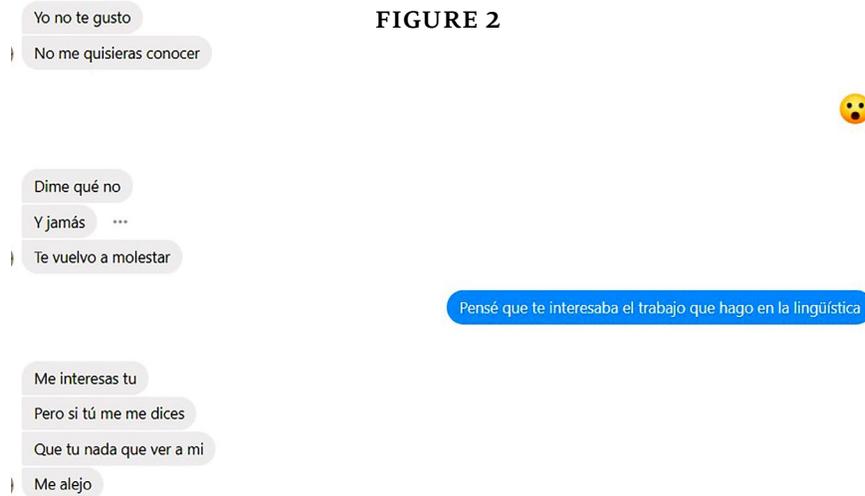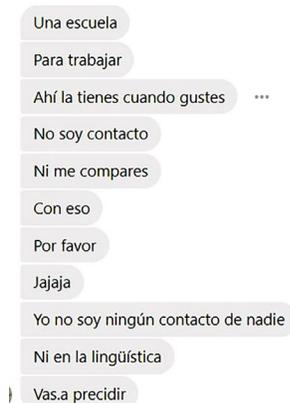Teacher: I'll back off

FIGURE 2

Yo no te gusto

No me quisieras conocer

😮

Dime qué no

Y jamás   •••

Te vuelvo a molestar

Pensé que te interesaba el trabajo que hago en la lingüística

Me interesas tu

Pero si tú me me dices

Que tu nada que ver a mi

Me alejo

Although I did not answer his messages, he continued to write to me every day. I had to remind him that my intention was to have a contact at the school and that I never expected him to harass me. His response was:

Teacher: A school
Teacher: For work
Teacher: It's there for you whenever you wish …
Teacher: I am not a contact
Teacher: Nor should you compare me
Teacher: With that
Teacher: Please
Teacher: LOL
Teacher: I'm not the contact of anyone in any way
Teacher: And in linguistics
Teacher: You're not going to succeed
26/11/18 19:48

FIGURE 3

Una escuela

Para trabajar

Ahí la tienes cuando gustes   •••

No soy contacto

Ni me compares

Con eso

Por favor

Jajaja

Yo no soy ningún contacto de nadie

Ni en la lingüística

Vas.a precidir

The psychological harassment to which he subjected me, with his posturing as a person sensitive to rejection, involved him passing from harasser to victim, at which point he tried to minimize my work. Days later he sent me messages as if nothing had happened, and when he did not get any response, he began to ask me for stories in Chatino with drawings for a digital library. This time I did not answer him again and I opted to remove him from my contact list. This is to cite just one case among many that I have experienced on social media for being a woman.

I have also received death threats. In the summer of 2019, I went to do fieldwork in my community. At the end of August, a relative warned me that on the social media platform *WhatsApp*, an audio clip was circulating with threats against my person. The message had been recorded in Chatino using an application called *My Tommy Talk*,[9] an application for altering the voice to sound like the voice of a cat. I asked a family member to share the audio clip with me. The *My Tommy Talk* clip was in Chatino, and it concerned my father, saying that if I did not resolve a debt of his, they would rape me. Listening to that audio clip affected me greatly. I did not know what to do, so I ended up trying to file a complaint with the Office of the Public Prosecutor of Santa Catarina Juquila. But it was not accepted, because, they said, a complaint of threat can only be brought if the person alleged to be responsible for the threat is known. Instead, the first option I was given was for the police to trace the origin of the audio clip by questioning the people who had received it; but for that to work, I had to be in constant communication with the Prosecutor's office. Somehow they knew that this option would be emotionally exhausting for me, as it meant constantly having to receive information about the situation. Those I spoke to began to make comments such as: "You don't have to worry, people just talk" and "We are in a place where this type of crime does not occur". In the end, only a record of fact was drawn up as background in case anything happened to me.

The experiences of women in the field are so difficult that many times we do not know how to face them, that is why we have to be prepared for any possible scenario. But despite how difficult it has been, I have also had good experiences. In what follows I will describe my collaborative work with young people, women, and children.

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9   https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.outfit7.mytalkingtomfree&hl=en

5. The achievements of all who participated in our collaborative projects

The collaborative projects that have been developed in the community of San Miguel Panixtlahuaca have been carried out outside of official institutional structures. This has made it possible to form a group of speakers interested in projects on writing and reading. Official disinterest has contributed to the freedom to write the language using the system that we consider most pertinent.

Right now, I collaborate with a group of 15 speakers from the community of Panixtlahuaca. Most are teens and young adults between the ages of 12 and 30. Although this group is small, all have an interest in contributing to the teaching and development of reading materials for children and adults. Of these speakers, nine are located in the community and every summer we organize writing and translation workshops. The other six are outside the community and we maintain communication using the internet platforms *Zoom* and *Skype*. Of the six, most are professionals who have the option of taking classes online.

As the group of speakers who use the written language grows, the visibility of Chatino in social media such as *Facebook* is more evident, and with this, more speakers are encouraged to join this movement. Those interested in learning how to represent Chatino languages orthographically have different motivations for doing so: some are committed to using it in translations of the Bible, others for writing stories, legends and informational texts from the community, and a very small group wants to use the written language in social media to distinguish themselves from others. So, to put the written language to use, and at the same time to create reading comprehension exercises, I post open questions on *Facebook* so that the speakers can answer them, and in the *Zoom* sessions we read the answers offered in the postings.

This type of activity has received a good response on *Facebook* because the majority of Chatinos use the platform. Previously, I used the social media platform *Twitter* to post in Chatino and connect with other speakers, but it is not widely used by Chatinos, and so my posts had little visibility. Despite this, I could see that speakers of other languages such as Zapotec, with the support of the project *Voces del Valle,*[10] were using the same strategy on *Twitter* with positive results. Happily, these venues are there to promote interaction and motivate speakers to write in their own language. Currently, all these speakers are participating in the research I am carrying

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10   Brook Danielle Lillehaugen indicates that "*Voces* del Valle is a project that encourages speakers of the Oaxacan languages, in particular Zapotec and Chatino, to write their language. The project uses Twitter as the medium for writing and as a means of support" (2016: 358).

FIGURE 4

out on the learning of literacy in Chatino, specifically when it involves the written representation of tone. Their participation has been very positive in my project, and in keeping with the principle of reciprocity that Austin (2019) articulates, namely that "the researcher must contribute to the community in some way, in exchange for the contributions that the members of the same community carry out the research project " (Austin 2019: 171).

The purpose of this research is to learn both the advantages and the disadvantages to learners and users of the present Chatino writing system, and then make proposals for reinforcing users' reading skills.

One way of learning about the effectiveness of writing in a language is by looking at people's use of texts: without texts, there is nothing for the speakers to actually read. Only work that is collaborative will allow for the quick production of texts. One of the projects these speakers are interested in is the translation of short stories for children, specifically on the *Storyweaver* platform; others have proposed to work on documenting the history of Panixtlahuaca. It is also worth mentioning that contests and prizes like the *Premios CaSa*[11] motivate Chatino speakers to write in their own language, though their broad scope and the fact that works written in Chatino can be

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11   *Premios CaSa* is a literary competition sponsored by the Oaxaca State government, aimed at speakers of eight Indigenous language groups the state: Chatino, Mazatec, Chinantec, Huave, Triqui, Mixtec, Mixe and Zapotec. The categories are: poetry, fiction (short story or novel), song, literature for children, and texts based on oral tradition.

taken into account and recognized. On the other hand, Gesche (2019) has argued that having an alphabet in a language without also having a written tradition does not ensure that speakers will use it in their daily lives, because there is no motivation to do so comparable to the motivation that they can find in the dominant language (Gesche 2019: 233). Consequently, reading and writing a language without a written tradition needs to be promoted explicitly by creating new domains for its use (Aguilar 2014), because every day, speakers of Indigenous languages are in contact with digital media and platforms that deal in written text. Putting Indigenous language text into these new forms makes it more visible and at the same time, permits speakers to interact using the written form of their own languages. The more speakers read and write their languages, the more materials are needed. This is what we propose for the Chatino writing classes: generating written materials from many different genres.

Conclusion

To conclude, let me highlight the main points raised in this work regarding the different situations that I have faced as an Indigenous woman and researcher doing fieldwork in my community of origin.

Because my focus has been the exploration of the learning of literacy while seeking to be part of the collaborative revitalization of the Eastern Chatino language, it is very important for me to work with different members of society, including speakers, teachers and municipal authorities. Each of these groups has had different responses to activities supporting the language that have been undertaken in the community. These responses are linked to their attitudes towards Chatino. Unfortunately, many myths and beliefs that stigmatize the language still persist, fueling this negative attitude. As stated by the UNESCO group of experts: "If the community sees its language as an obstacle to economic mobility and integration into the dominant society, it can develop negative attitudes towards it" (UNESCO 2011: 32). Educators, professionals and municipal authorities are not exempt from showing this attitude. This tells us that it is essential to work on the issue of linguistic ideology and consciousness when proposing a community language project.

On the other hand, as a researcher, criticism towards my work arises from my position as a known member of the community. People are aware of what is happening around them and have enough information to identify me in terms of my family and its problems as well as its participation in *fiestas* and community assemblies. Depending on the situation, this can be favorable or unfavorable for me as a member of a small community. People having access to my personal information can pose a threat to me as a woman. The misuse of social media like *WhatsApp* or *Facebook* can

lead to the dissemination of information linking me with matters that have arisen in my family, and that in turn can lead to violations of my person and my safety.

Furthermore, this availability of information can also be used to undermine the goals of my work. My research and community work go hand in hand, since they not only include teaching literacy but also promoting and raising consciousness about Chatino in the community. The speakers, realizing that my family members do not contribute to the vitality of the language, come to use that as an excuse for attacking my work. As already noted throughout this article, the negative attitude persists in every corner of the community. In the last eight years I have worked with many speakers who seem to have become convinced of the importance of transmitting the Chatino language to the next generation, but demonstrate quite the opposite by using only the dominant language with their children. The effort made to share information about the language is by itself not enough to reverse this situation. There is still a long way to go to make this work truly collaborative. Above all, it is important to keep involving those of the younger generations in language documentation workshops and projects. Finally, it should be mentioned that the use of available venues like social and other digital media also represent new ways of involving speakers and creating new spaces for the use of the written language.

Reflection on the translation
By Anthony C. Woodbury

It was my privilege to undertake this translation and to revise it with the help of the author, Isaura de los Santos. I have known Isaura since 2012, when she joined our Workshop on Tone for Speakers of Otomanguean Languages; and I've followed her work and career since then, through subsequent workshops and on to graduate school in the US; through visits with her to San Miguel Panixtlahuaca; from meeting and getting to know members of her family and community; and from getting an awareness of Panixtlahuaca Eastern Chatino. My acquaintance with Isaura and her community as an (albeit outsider) linguist gave me a degree of confidence for making this translation—many parts of the story I could picture, for some parts I was even present, and I knew some of the events. As a teacher—especially when, as here, teaching includes collaboration beyond the classroom—you can feel you know your students pretty well. So the full impact of Isaura's account took me by surprise; not so much specific events, but the power, persistence, and relentlessness of the obstacles she felt and faced; and her fortitude in pursuing her vision nonetheless. Going to her classes or meeting with local officials or visiting community members, I would sense brightness and positivity all round; but perhaps some of it she projected into situations through sheer force of personality, in spite of the obstacles and adversity. And so as a translator, what at first seemed easily familiar became a challenge to try to get right; and

as a teacher and fieldworker, it made me realize how important it is to be willing to let go of what you think you know.

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