Filming languages: implications of indigenous video production for language maintenance in Mexico

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1. Introduction[1]

1.1 Indigenous filmmaking and 'native' languages

The following quotation is from the website of the leading ethnographic film organisation, Documentary Educational Resources (DER) in 2007:

> This animated short from Chile tells the tale of creation based on *Popul Vuh: the Ancient Stories of the Quiché*, written by the indigenous Maya Quiché people after the Spanish Conquest. The vibrant illustrations are taken from Mayan codices, paintings found on vessels, and stones carved with scenes from the 'Popul Vuh' between the years 300-900 A.D. Accompanying the narrator is original music performed with pre-Columbian and other ethnographic instruments from the Americas. The text relates solely to the creation of the world and humankind, and gives the viewer a unique look into Mayan culture and history. The story is told in its native Spanish language, with English subtitles.

I begin with this quotation to draw attention to the fact that although the summary is rich with details of the film's ethnic 'authenticity' — "pre-Columbian and other ethnographic instruments", "illustrations taken from Mayan codices" — it nonetheless contains the glaring linguistic incongruity that the story is "told in its native Spanish language". Although Spanish may be considered 'native' to many ethnic Mayans in Central America today, the suggestion, by a highly respected anthropological organisation, that Spanish

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rather than Quiché[2] is the native language of the *Popul Vuh*, illustrates a lack of awareness in film scholarship of the importance of the language spoken in films[3], even ethnographic ones.

'Traditional' ethnographic films — those made by outside observers — are increasingly being joined by films made by members of indigenous communities, a trend reflected in the recent catalogue of DER films and many other media organisations and projects. Such films might be expected to more accurately reflect the 'native language' of these communities, and yet the issue is not clear cut, with production and reception contexts affecting the choice of language: in the case of Mexican films, a choice typically between Spanish and each community's indigenous language(s).

This paper is an intervention into film studies from the point of view of language maintenance and revitalisation, to highlight the presence of indigenous languages in 'subject-generated' films. 'Subject-generated' is a term used by the visual anthropologist Ruby (2000) to identify films made by the 'subjects' of traditional ethnographic film. In Mexico, a similar meaning is conveyed by *video indígena* 'indigenous video', the term most often used in the present paper. Mexico is home to a vast number of indigenous languages[4], several grassroots indigenous filmmaking organisations, and a government with an official policy of intercultural education and media[5]. Here the focus will be on the recent history and current situation of indigenous language community filmmaking in Mexico, though relevant examples from other parts of the world will also be included.

A greater awareness of the language dimension in films would avoid misrepresentations such as the one on the DER website; but, more importantly, dialogue between relevant fields such as language documentation, visual anthropology, and language revitalisation will help indicate how scholarship can best support film and video production taking place among minority language speakers throughout the world. I therefore

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[2] Classical Quiché, related to present day Central K'ich'e of Guatemala (Gordon 2005).

[3] 'Filmmaking' and 'films' are used in this paper as generic terms for the production process and end-products, respectively, of audiovisual work — short films, features or documentaries — regardless of whether the format is celluloid or video, or whether the mode of exhibition is through broadcast, cinema, DVD or tape circulation.

[4] 298 languages, from numerous language families, are spoken in Mexico (Gordon 2005).

[5] The San Andrés Accords, signed in 1996 by the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) and the Mexican government, committed the government to providing Mexican indigenous peoples with "intercultural bilingual education" (EIB) and the right to control their own media.

adopt a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, drawing upon research from several academic traditions and geographical areas, as well as on the films themselves and interviews with their producers.

1.2. The nature of the medium

The nature of audiovisual technologies and production processes makes them well suited for use in language maintenance. Film and video can be highly multilingual because of 'internal' features such as voiceover, subtitles and dubbing, as well as the 'external' factors of production and exhibition contexts. They are therefore well placed to accommodate certain challenges which endangered languages face: for example, subtitled films enable speakers of minority languages to communicate to their own speech communities and the wider world simultaneously. And though media is traditionally the province of dominant cultures (Crystal 2000: 130), the way in which films can include creativity in more than one language at a time allows the relative dominance of languages to shift.

Not only are audiovisual media well suited to promoting minority language survival, they are also, perhaps, necessary: it is difficult to imagine any culture being wholly immune to their influence, unless the direction of change alters radically. Television in the home is seen as particularly threatening to endangered languages, since home is the traditional locus of use for these languages. Eric Michaels, commissioned to assess the potential impact of satellite television on remote Aboriginal Australian communities in the 1980s, noted among community members "a motivated, articulate, and general concern about the possible unwanted consequences of television", with "the absence of local Aboriginal languages from any proposed service" highlighted as a major concern (Michaels 1987: 11). Mexico has a multitude of television channels[6] which are likely to be increasingly available in remote communities, along with growing access to online media; it is timely, then, to study productions which use or promote indigenous languages, to act as a counterbalance to Spanish language media and perhaps slow indigenous language decline in the future.

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[6] For a detailed account of broadcasting in Mexico, see Orozco 2005.

Figure 1: Map of Mexico. States referred to in this paper are highlighted[7].

2. Endangered languages and indigenous video

2.1. Language documentation, visual anthropology, and the video revolution

Endangered languages scholars and activists have certainly recognised the importance of video, both as a method of language documentation for the purposes of linguistic and/or ethnographic science (see Ashmore 2006, 2008) and as a resource or 'end product' for use in language maintenance (see for example Flores Farfán 2004). We might distinguish a third perspective, related to these other two: indigenous language speakers' own involvement in film and video production, the 'practice' of filmmaking rather than the 'provision' of films. Richard Bauman's work on emergent culture regarded performance as "the nexus of tradition, practice, and emergence in verbal art"

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[7]　All maps created by Brendan Nelson from a copyright-free source file by Carlos María Soto, retrieved from Wikimedia Commons (http://commons.wikimedia.org) on 14th September 2008. Locations were identified and verified with Google Maps (http://maps.google.com).

(Bauman 2001: 184): following this notion, the process of filmmaking can be seen as a performance genre in its own right, an activity whose undertaking provides a contemporary, viable domain of use for minority languages. The present paper concentrates on this third perspective.

The academic field of visual anthropology has registered and indeed promoted the sea-change from traditional ethnographic film to 'subject-generated' films mentioned in section 1.1. Many technical and theoretical lessons that language documentation can take from visual anthropology are explored by Ashmore (2006, 2008), and such lessons are increasingly relevant not only to the academic community but also to language communities wishing to document their own languages and cultures. It is easy to see the parallel concerns of Ruby's formulation "speaking for, speaking about, speaking with, or speaking alongside" (1991: 50) and the changing models of linguistic fieldwork 'on', 'for', 'with' and 'by' the language community (Grinevald 2003).

Despite this shift to more autonomous community activity, collaborative outsiders often still have a useful part to play. In fact, the uses of media to "document traditional activities and to teach young people literacy in their own languages" are pinpointed by Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin (2002:10) as important sites where outside activists can engage with community members. Yamada's (2007) language documentation project illustrates beautifully the interplay between language documentation, indigenous filmmaking, and language maintenance: members of the Kari'nja community in Suriname made films which documented important cultural practices and also served as elicitation for further linguistic work. The very practice of filmmaking then became a cultural activity, the films providing a forum for elders to narrate stories and processes. Importantly, community members continued to make films in the linguist's absence. This type of linguistic documentation project is becoming more common (see also Franchetto 2006), and it is therefore worth reviewing some milestones in film and video history that are particularly pertinent to endangered languages documentation and maintenance.

2.1.1. The impact of synchronised sound

The issue of language is closely tied to one of the major developments in film technology: the arrival of synchronised sound, which allowed 'subjects' to 'speak for themselves', as in the 1960s films of Marshall and Asch. This moment in ethnographic film history revolutionised indigenous involvement, and coincided with the start of a strong tradition of community-centred and political filmmaking in Latin America: the 'New Latin American Cinema' was a cinema of poverty, "with an idea in the head and a camera in the hand"

(Glauber Rocha cited in King 2004:294). One of its exponents, the Bolivian Jorge Sanjinés, founded the film cooperative *Ukamau* in the 1960s to make films in Quechua and Aymara, demonstrating an early recognition of the importance of language in indigenous filmmaking. Despite notable exceptions such as these, however, even with the advances that synchronised sound made possible, films made in indigenous communities in the 1960s and 1970s still tended to be documentaries by outsiders about the communities, narrated in a majority language. Mexican ethnographic films made in this mode include *Brujo* and *Tajimoltik* (both 1978, Payrastre and Viallon).

2.1.2 Indigenous responses to ethnographic film

The beginnings of a move towards 'subject-generated' films can be seen as early as the groundbreaking work of Navajo filmmakers using 16mm film in the 1960s (Worth and Adair 1970). However, since the 1980s, cheap video technology has made it increasingly viable for members of economically disadvantaged communities to portray themselves. This has gone some way to undermining the hegemonic practice of old, where filmmakers and journalists came from outside to portray these communities, often transforming them on screen "into aesthetic creations, topics of scholarly interest, news items, and objects of pity and concern" (Ruby 2000:199). As videomaking equipment becomes increasingly user-friendly and inexpensive, so communities themselves, rather than outsiders, can decide what is important to film, and in which language.

This shift in focus from traditional ethnographic film to indigenous responses has been hailed as a "rethinking of visual anthropology" (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002:4), and indigenous video has become the subject of much study and commentary. Notable examples are the *Video in the Villages* project in Brazil (Turner 1990); Aboriginal Australians' Ernabella Video Television and Warlpiri Media Association (Ginsburg 1994); and First Nations North American filmmaking (Ginsburg 2003, Prins 2002). Mexico has also, in recent years, become an important centre of indigenous video: Jeff Arak's (2008) *Los con voz*[8] documents video production by indigenous peoples of Chiapas and Oaxaca. Arak has also been involved in setting up community media projects in Oaxaca, which will be discussed in section 3.

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[8] 'Those with voice'

2.1.3. Indigenous filmmakers and their collaborators

Those from outside who work with indigenous communities are inevitably placed "in complex relations to their objects of study: usually engaged, sometimes complicit, rarely neutral" (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002: 21). Such engagement may be manifested as skills transfer, provision of materials, or awareness-raising in the wider world. From the point of view of language maintenance, however, there is a clear risk that the need for a *lingua franca* (Spanish or even English) when collaborating with outside researchers or filmmakers may influence the choice of language for indigenous-made films away from the indigenous. For this reason, linguistic specialists or activists from outside could play an important role, if welcomed by the community, in promoting the idea of using the indigenous language in filmmaking, as well as supporting projects by pinpointing relevant grants and helping produce subtitled materials.

2.2. Minority language media studies

Many works in the literature of indigenous filmmaking mention the issue of language, but few of these tackle language as a key subject for analysis. Two notable exceptions are Browne's 1994 work on ethnic minority media, which has a section dedicated to "Preserving, safeguarding, and extending the mother tongue" (1994: 160), and the 2001 Foundation for Endangered Languages conference publication *Endangered languages and the media* (Moseley, Ostler and Ouzzate 2001). However, indigenous filmmakers themselves often explicitly cite preservation of their language as a central motivating factor for working on the films. A clear example is in the statement of aims of the First Nations Film and Video Makers World Alliance, founded in September 1992 at the Dreamspeakers Festival in Canada, where one of the eight points listed is "to ensure that traditional lands, language, and culture are protected" (Ginsburg 1994:377).

The majority of studies which do approach minority language media production from a primarily linguistic angle have dealt with European minority languages. This bias is underlined by Riggins' (1992:5) distinction between minorities of indigenous people with "traditional values", such as Aboriginal Australians and the Mapuches of Chile, and indigenous peoples with"'modern values", for example the Welsh and Basques, noting that "[l]anguage retention rather than cultural values tends to be the main concern of activists in this area".[9] A related reason for the imbalance is that minority

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[9] The book does not cover any Mexican case studies; presumably Mexican indigenous peoples would fall into the former category, although this is far from clear.

language groups in, eg. Mexico, generally have more cause than their European counterparts to address land rights and serious human rights violations: this accounts for directing scholarship, as well as media attention, towards these issues, rather than towards language. A third factor is that provision for minority language media is institutionalised within the European Union (see Cormack and Hourigan 2007:3); associated research thus has a reasonably secure place within academic structures.
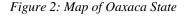
European minority media studies have covered a wide range of language issues: broadcasting and Celtic culture (Howell 1992); minority language media policy (Piulats 2007); translation and subtitling (O'Connell 2007); and minority language feature films (Williams 2002). While taking care not to carelessly apply conclusions drawn from such work to a very different context, these studies may still offer us interesting leads for thinking about filmmaking practice and research in Mexico.
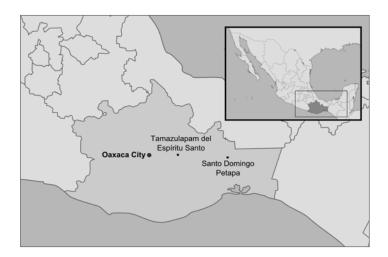
3. Indigenous community videomaking

3.1. Language issues in Mexican indigenous filmmaking

Indigenous filmmaking at the local level has flourished in Mexico over recent years. Grassroots and volunteer-run community media organisations and projects have sprung up around the country. Here we look at a number of these: Ojo de Agua Comunicación in Oaxaca City; Radio y Video Tamix in Tamazulapam del Espíritu Santo, Oaxaca (see Figure 2); Chiapas Media Project (CMP) in Chiapas and Guerrero; and the video project initiated by Jeff Arak in Santo Domingo Petapa, Oaxaca.

In June 2004, the journal *American Anthropologist* devoted a section to Latin American indigenous video, featuring interviews with salient figures such as Juan José García (director of Ojo de Agua Comunicación) and articles charting the history of indigenous-produced film and video in Mexico and Bolivia. This journal issue marked a milestone for international academic interest in such work. Although the issue of language is present in these and other such articles, it is not the focus of attention as it is in the context of European minority languages, or indeed, as it is in educational indigenous media resources in Mexico like those of Flores Farfán (2001, 2004). This, in fact, reflects the videos themselves: a holistic understanding of culture generally informs indigenous producers' perceptions of how video maintains community identity. Language is firmly situated in a broader cultural context, since the promotion of endangered indigenous languages is not always the principal aim of these films; it may be a 'by-product', or even counter-productive, to the communities' aims.

Figure 2: Map of Oaxaca State

There are a number of reasons why producing films in native languages may conflict with the producers' aims. Browne (2005: 159) identifies "retaining and strengthening minority languages [...] within mainstream societies" and "promoting greater mutual understanding" as two key reasons for using media in minority language communities. However, these goals are potentially contradictory: a video may promote greater mutual understanding if it is in a majority language or *lingua franca* (in Mexico's case, Spanish) rather than the minority language. Note, however, that this conflict will not always be relevant: indigenous communities may not have any desire to seek greater mutual understanding through their videos, rather remaining wary of productions being consumed and commercialised by outsiders (see section 3.2).

Some of the main issues facing the uptake of minority languages in Mexican *video indígena*[10] could be characterised as:

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[10] 'Indigenous video'. This is a specific term initially used by non-indigenous Mexicans and is associated with the launch of INI's video program (TMA) to train indigenous people in video production, initially in the period 1990-1994 (Cusi Wortham 2004: 363-4). It has since gained more common currency, but the connotation of its being a state initiative remains.

- conflict between tradition and the desire to use the linguistic and technological tools of the majority culture;
- the necessity of communication between different language communities and the challenge of linguistic diversity; and
- the use of video for activism and awareness-raising in the wider world.

The following subsections examine how some indigenous films and filmmakers have dealt with these issues.

3.1.1. Tradition, language, media

Indigenous media is generally recognised as a response to the increased prevalence of mass media in indigenous people's everyday life, an assimilation of external technologies for their own language and culture. For example, Bolivian indigenous videomakers situate their movement "as a response to the heightened proliferation of commercial mass media that accompanied the neoliberal policies of the 1980s" and a rapid increase in new television broadcast channels (Himpele 2004:355). However, the relationship of this type of media with mainstream television is not always a reaction against it: Juan José García recognises that "probably the biggest influence on my work would be my contact with television" (cited in Brígido-Corachán 2004:372).

A crucial debate in minority language media is to what extent the active use of film technologies can aid language vitality in a community, and to what extent it threatens vitality, by, for instance, providing community members with skills enabling them to work in majority language media. This resonates with wider concerns in media studies such as the suspicion that media offers "seductive conduits for imposing the values and language of the dominant culture on minoritized people" (Ginsburg 2002:51), as well as endangered languages research looking at modernisation and cultural assimilation of linguistic minorities.

Himpele (2004:361), alongside the indigenous producers with whom he works, suggests that purism in indigenous video is unhealthy; as an example he points to the usefulness of appropriating Spanish to communicate a message. He rightfully takes the position that attempts to protect indigenous peoples from the influences of 'dominant' cultures are patronising and unrealistic. The implications of such a position for endangered languages are particularly salient when one speaks of media and technology because of the entrenched, structural relationship between mass communication, modernity, and major world languages. We can see how the issue plays out in the Oaxacan media organization *Radio y Video Tamix*, run by Genaro Rojas, his

younger brother Hermenegildo and cousin Efrain Rojas. While for Genaro "indigenous video should be in native language exclusively", and its content reflect traditional culture, the younger Hermenegildo and Efrain "defend the use of Spanish language and rock music in their television programs" (Cusi Wortham 2004:366). It is not only that Spanish is useful, then, but also that it forms part of the community's modern cultural identity. Attempts to enforce restrictions that limit the language of production to, in Tamix's case, Mixe, risk alienating younger members of the community.

Despite filmmaking's association with modernity and mass communication, it can also be used to serve local, traditional purposes. Tamix produce both videos and local television broadcasts. While the videos are criticised by some for leaving the community and thus commercialising its culture for outsiders, the television broadcasts "seem to function like a *recuerdo*, or memory, for many residents, and older folks particularly appreciate the programs in Mixe language" (Cusi Wortham 2004:366). Appreciation by older generations is extremely important if we consider that it is the younger generation who tend to be the filmmakers, and that "[a]ppropriate RLS[11]-status planning can only occur if the societal link between generations is constantly kept in mind" (Fishman 1990:16).

In Jeff Arak's project among indigenous videomakers in Santo Domingo Petapa (see Figure 2), many younger community members did not speak Zapotec, so films made in the indigenous language required collaboration between generations. One video involved an interview with an elder in Zapotec; while Arak recognises that filmmaking cannot hope to maintain language vitality by itself, he asserts that the process could be one occasion "where you see this kind of interaction between young people and old people happening" (Arak pers. comm. 2008a). More generally, it is important to monitor and encourage participation of "the 'larger' minority community" in "selecting goals and priorities" for media projects (Browne 2005:14). For indigenous video projects which aim to contribute to indigenous language vitality, there is a clear benefit in considering the needs and preferences of those members of the community who are not directly involved in filmmaking, especially older community members in situations where there is decline in intergenerational transmission of the language.

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[11] 'Reversing Language Shift'

3.1.2. Linguistic diversity and 'frameworks of cooperation'

Using Mexico's official language, Spanish, is the most direct way to communicate with the government and the Spanish-speaking majority. But Himpele (2004:361) highlights another reason for using Spanish in film productions: as a *lingua franca* "to communicate among people who speak thirty different languages". Michaels (1986:6), discussing the similarly linguistically diverse Australian context, sees the problem as structural, "residing in the very 'massness' of the medium", and suggests that television broadcasts can only support a very few Aboriginal Australian languages.

This argument would only fully hold for our purposes if we accepted that audiovisual media are by their very nature 'mass' media. This is clearly not the case when we consider that certain types of films, 'home videos', generally have very restricted distribution (see also section 3.3). However, video's ability to be broadcast across large distances, as well as easily duplicated in a variety of formats, still makes it highly relevant to address the issue of linguistic diversity here. It is an issue not just with entirely different indigenous languages, but also with related varieties of similar languages. Jeff Arak has considered starting a language preservation initiative as part of his work in Santo Domingo Petapa (Arak pers. comm. 2008b). Such an initiative would be likely to use the variety spoken there, Petapa Zapotec; but this is just one of 58 separate varieties of Zapotec listed by *Ethnologue* (Gordon 2005). Media has been linked to language standardisation within nations (Browne 2005:160); to hypothesise briefly, a thriving Zapotec film and video culture, broadcast or distributed across the region, might contribute to standardisation of the many varieties. Standardisation brings its own problems, notably resentment from communities whose language variety is not chosen as the standard. A detailed discussion of standardisation problems would be out of place here, but it has been covered elsewhere (for example, Rice and Saxon 2002).

Genetic relatedness between languages, however, could also be a basis for collaboration, as it has been for Celtic media movements, which have access to such frameworks of cooperation as The Celtic League and pan-Celtic festivals (Hourigan 2007:71). There is similar solidarity among Mayan peoples: since the 1980s there has been activity among Guatemalan Maya, focused on language, in what is generally known as the 'Maya movement' (England 2003:733-4). England (2003:742) suggests that "the reaction to language loss on the part of Mayas owes something at least to the increased communication and connectedness that globalization has brought to all communities". Increased awareness of developments in communities felt to be related may serve as an impetus for common action. A sense of relatedness does not necessarily need to be founded on linguistic families: the pan-Latin American Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Cine y Comunicación de los

Pueblos Indígenas (CLACPI)[12] builds connections, through support for indigenous video, between many different language groups.

Such cooperation is a type of social movement network where individual organisations "benefit from the knowledge and experience gained by other groups of activists campaigning on similar issues in different political contexts" (Hourigan 2007:70). In these frameworks of cooperation, indigenous movements learn from one another by combining their forces, and can also attract greater attention from outside their communities, helping raise awareness and support for their indigenous languages.

3.1.3. Activism and indigenous language films

Indigenous media is often associated with activism, both political (Downing 2001) and cultural (Ginsburg 1994). It is a powerful tool in "creating and sustaining beliefs in collective goals" (Riggins 1992:12), as well as quickly communicating human rights abuses to a wider audience. The visibility of *video indígena* undoubtedly owes something to the heightened awareness of indigenous rights and issues in the wake of the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, as well as subsequent Zapatista activities and indigenous movements elsewhere in the country[13]. Consideration of 'awareness raising' in the wider world is crucial for understanding how and when endangered languages may be used in indigenous filmmaking. The use of Spanish is perhaps perceived as more forceful, even inevitable, in political situations of emergency such as the Oaxacan popular takeover of TV and radio stations during the 2006 protests, where Spanish was and remains the preferred language of communication[14].

Alex Halkin, founder of CMP, originally went to Chiapas when she was commissioned to make a documentary for the US-based ecumenical organisation *Pastors for Peace*, in solidarity with the Zapatista insurgents (Halkin pers. comm. 2008). Brysk (2000) sees such transnational alliances as characteristic of many Latin American indigenous movements. While Brysk's argument has been criticised for not crediting indigenous peoples with enough autonomy (Dunbar-Ortiz 2001), in the case of CMP, transnational

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[12] 'Latin American Coordinating Committee of Indigenous Peoples' Filmmaking and Communication'

[13] For a discussion of the Zapatista movement and its publicity methods, as well as the impact it had on rural and indigenous rights throughout the country, see Holloway and Peláez 1998.

[14] The website of the organisation coordinating the protests is www.asambleapopulardeoaxaca.com/appo/ Accessed 13/09/08.

relationships are one extremely important aspect of their work, especially with regard to awareness-raising and activism.

The implications for language maintenance of an activist agenda are well illustrated by the 2006 CMP film *Letters for our words*. Ginsburg (1994:366) claims all indigenous media productions are "inherently complex cultural objects, as they cross multiple cultural boundaries in their production, distribution, and consumption". *Letters for our words* is just such a production. The English version has English subtitles and sleevenotes, and is promoted on the CMP website in English and Spanish. Both Tzeltal and Spanish are spoken in the film, and the very subject of the film is Tzeltal-medium education and the benefits it brings. In the footage of the school lessons, we hear and see the teacher and pupils developing Tzeltal literacy, but when one of the teachers is interviewed directly for the camera she switches to Spanish. Spanish, then, is the language used to address the camera/audience, while Tzeltal is the language which is 'observed', in the vocabulary of ethnographic documentary.

However, Tzeltal is not there for mere display: the spoken Spanish and English subtitles are employed to raise support for Tzeltal language maintenance through education. The text at the end of the video makes this explicit: "The development of many projects, like the printing of these schoolbooks, depends on the generosity of national and international solidarity". When the use of the indigenous language is itself a political issue, it can seem paradoxical that a majority language is used in indigenous filmmaking. It is nonetheless important for those involved in language revitalisation to remain open to mixed or indirect uses of filmmaking to promote endangered languages.

3.2. Video indígena and 'embedded aesthetics'

Although a lot of CMP's work is political, Halkin points to *Song of the Earth* (2002) as a good example of how video has been taken up for the purpose of cultural preservation (Halkin pers. comm. 2008). This 16-minute documentary, spoken in Tzotzil, is a portrait of *Grupo Tradicional de Yat Vitz*[15], a traditional music group from Chiapas. One of the musicians interviewed says that "the wisdom in the hearts and minds of our ancestors [...] continues to live through us in our music, dance and language". The loss of traditional music is spoken of in terms similar to those language activists used to speak of the loss of language. Music may in fact be a good way to promote language in film, partly because of its popularity — "[b]y far the

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[15] 'Yat Vitz Traditional Group'

most common and seemingly most popular form of entertainment available through ethnic minority media is music" (Browne 2005:155) — and partly because it is intimately connected to language and identity. The sentiment "we're going to have to work hard to save our life and our culture from dying out", expressed by another musician in the documentary, shows that the indigenous movement is concerned with cultural and linguistic rights as well as more tangible rights such as those of land, healthcare and education.

Mexican indigenous production can be analysed in terms of Ginsburg's concept of 'embedded aesthetics': the "tendency to evaluate work in terms of social action" where "questions of narrative or visual form are not primary issues for discussion per se, despite the obvious concern for it in individual works" (Ginsburg 1994:368). For many Australian Aboriginal producers, Ginsburg (1994:368) suggests, "the quality of work is judged by its capacity to embody, sustain, and even revive or create certain social relations". A thorough assessment of the extent to which work is conceived in this way in Mexican indigenous contexts is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper, though linguistic or ethnographic fieldwork of this would be an invaluable area for further study. Nonetheless, we can pick up traces of this way of thinking in Juan José García's interview. *Video indígena*, he says, "is loaded with symbols, codes; it is loaded with what we up there in the sierra call *comunalidad*" (in Brígido-Corachán 2004:365). He cites language as one of *video indígena*'s principal elements, along with collectivity, facial features and intimacy. We thus get the sense that, as well as being a practical communication tool, the use of the indigenous language in the videos is conceived as verbal art.

García (in Brígido-Corachán 2004:371) also emphasises the place of the community's "oral, natural and cultural patrimony" in the videos, so they become "documents that incorporate a collective knowledge." Through this incorporation of collective knowledge in video, García sees filmmakers as performing an important social function:

> We can be keepers of memory, perhaps not for a long time, but we can at least make our youth listen, 25 years from now, to the elders that died 25 years before. Then it will be their own decision — if they like film, or video — to recreate that story. Perhaps they can also apply it to educational purposes, or they can simply learn from it and continue to transmit it by oral means (García in Brígido-Corachán 2004:370).

This aim resonates with Bauman's description of "performance in a perfunctory key" whereby performance forms are preserved "for later

reinvigoration and restoration to the level of full performance" (Bauman 2001:175). There are potential problems with storytelling on video: it may break "the essential bond between the tellers and their live audiences" (Browne 2005:146). In terms of language revitalisation, however, this aim of documenting performances on video is particularly pertinent: it often takes two generations for the loss of a heritage language to be felt keenly (Crystal 2000:106), and with such valuable documentation, there is at least the chance for later generations to revitalise the language (see also Nathan and Fang, this volume, on the use of performance in language teaching).

3.3. Who are the videos made for?

Although this paper is focused on the practice of filmmaking, the process is inevitably affected by the intended contexts of its products' exhibition: who the films are made for, and for what purpose. Low circulation and poor distribution are cited as problems for ethnic media survival (Riggins 1992:14-15), and research into potential audiences and how to promote the videos effectively could contribute to indigenous language media organisations' longevity and success. Moreover, the videos' intended audience affects the way in which they can be expected to support language vitality.

A discrepancy in the literature concerns the analysis of minority language campaigners in Europe as "not overtly concerned about how the majority language community perceives them" (Hourigan 2003: 46), in contrast to in other contexts, such as Mexico, where they are said to be principally concerned with visibility in the wider world. However, this is directly contradicted by the distribution patterns in Mexican indigenous video: many productions never leave the community. Halkin (pers. comm. 2008) and Arak (pers. comm. 2008a) relate that this is the case for the vast majority of video production in the communities they work with; they are films by and for the community alone, who watch them on DVD or VHS players. Indeed, Schiwy attributes Latin American film criticism's lack of interest in indigenous video partly to the fact that it is difficult for outsiders to access these videos, which are principally distributed through rural indigenous networks (Schiwy 2008).

For films which do leave the community, there are a wide variety of exhibition modes available, including film festivals, human rights forums, court hearings and broadcasts (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002:8-9), as well as DVD and video circulation. García expresses an extremely flexible attitude towards exhibition: "we would take advantage of any medium and the invitation was permanently open to anyone that came to ask for materials" (in Brígido-Corachán 2004:371). *Ojo de Agua*'s videos are shown at inter-community travelling shows, communal gatherings at traditional festivals, exhibits in Oaxaca City, as well as festivals inside and outside Mexico. At

forums such as these, multilingual presentation — with subtitles, titles, packaging and promotion in targeted languages — allows videos in little-spoken languages to reach very wide audiences.

The past decade has seen an explosion in film festivals screening such videos. The main festival in Latin America is organised annually by CLACPI: the *Encuentro Internacional de Cine y Comunicación de los Pueblos Indígenas*[16]. The 2006 festival was in Oaxaca and indigenous Mexican films are numerous at each of these festivals[17]. Outside Latin America, indigenous productions have been shown in Europe (Expo 2000), Canada (Montreal) and the US (New York, Taos). The bilingually titled *Video México Indígena/Video Indigenous Mexico Tour* in 2003 was organized by the Film and Video Center of the National Museum of the American Indian in cooperation with *Ojo de Agua*. The tour visited 15 US locations, and many languages were represented in the films on show: Spanish, P'urhepecha, Mixe, Zapotec, Tzeltal and Mixtec, with English subtitles. There are clear benefits of international exhibition for local language films: increased global awareness and status for the language used, and the potential for financial returns. It is the revenue CMP obtains from international sales of their DVDs, as well as screenings organised in academic institutions, which enables the continuation of the project as one stable domain for indigenous language use in the modern world.

4. Conclusions

4.1. The filmmaking process: a viable domain for indigenous language use?

In many cases, filmmaking can successfully provide a contemporary platform for indigenous language use. At the local level, indigenous videos are used to address issues of importance within communities, which can include maintenance of the local language and culture. Although video is a modern technology, it can be put to the service of traditional activities, and perhaps most importantly promote collaboration between generations, as we saw in Oaxaca with the work of Jeff Arak and *Radio y Video Támix*. This evidence might be noted by linguists and language activists interested in language maintenance and revitalisation, since work with filmmakers in such intergenerational projects may be of great value. Indigenous filmmaking can

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[16] 'International festival of indigenous peoples' film and communication'

[17] For a full list, see http://www.clacpi.org/ (Accessed 2008-08-03)

often benefit from having a *lingua franca*, because of what is learnt and gained through mutually supportive networks. However, subtitling and versioning of films allow the minority language and *lingua franca* to co-exist, so use of the indigenous language is not precluded in these contexts.

4.2. The economics of indigenous language film production

The ability of videomakers to negotiate economic viability is undoubtedly an important factor in indigenous language video production: CMP videos are successfully sold worldwide to ensure the stability of their project. On the other hand, this does not mean that projects which are unlikely to be profitable should not be supported. Many projects will have valuable gains which cannot, and perhaps should not, be commercialised, such as creating a semi-domestic domain — locally distributed video — for indigenous language use.

Juan José García of *Ojo de Agua* highlights the fact that videomakers negotiate marketplaces outside their own movements: "we continuously live off work that we did for other institutions [...] these extra sources of income are used to finance projects that have no funding" (cited in Brígido-Corachán 2004:369). This attitude suggests a flexibility which allows accommodation of the majority language in order to make a living and fund projects in his own community, to which he remains dedicated. This kind of attitude is prevalent among language activists, who often devote their time for free in order to maintain a local language.

4.3. The future of indigenous language media

It will be fascinating to see in what directions indigenous language filmmaking develops in Mexico, and whether the interventions of linguists, language activists and indigenous culture enthusiasts contribute to an increased presence of indigenous languages in Mexican films. Looking to the future, the fact that video is increasingly inexpensive and immediately available may mean that video's function in language activity becomes more integrated into everyday life, without relying on the still relatively structured filmmaking projects of today.

On the other hand, indigenous videomakers may become increasingly professional: according to Alex Halkin (pers. comm. 2008), CMP is now a completely different project from when it started, since the filmmakers have been producing media for over ten years, and have thus developed advanced skills. Perhaps CMP or a similar organisation will produce an indigenous language feature film with wide distribution. However, international reception could well be less important to indigenous language maintenance than the

activities of film production and consumption within the communities themselves, since it is "demonstrable transmissability across the intergenerational link" and not "the most fashionable technologies or the most glamorous institutions" (Fishman 1990:18) which assures continued linguistic vitality.

4.4 Suggestions for further research

While this paper has been able to suggest tentatively how and why language maintenance can be aided by indigenous video production, it has not been able to present concrete evidence of filmmaking contributing to language vitality in Mexican indigenous communities. Further research would involve surveys of videomakers, to discover more of their motivations, and to see how much priority they give to issues of language maintenance and revitalisation. Most useful, perhaps, would be long-term participatory fieldwork among community media projects and indigenous language film productions, which would achieve clearer insights into why and how indigenous language speakers use film and video technologies, and what effects they have on their language practices.

Abbreviations

CLACPI   Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Cine y Comunicación de los Pueblos Indígenas 'Latin American Indigenous Peoples' Cinema and Communication Coordinator'

CMP   Chiapas Media Project

DER   Documentary Educational Resources

INI   Insituto Nacional Indigenista (National Indigenist Institute)

NGO   Non-Governmental Organisation

RLS   Reversing Language Shift

TMA   Transferencia de Medios Audiovisuales a Comunidades y Organizaciones Indígenas (Transference of Audiovisual Media to Indigenous Communities and Organisations)

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