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Editor: Nancy C. Dorian

THE STRAW THAT BROKE THE LANGUAGE'S BACK: LANGUAGE SHIFT IN THE UPPER NECAXA VALLEY OF MEXICO*

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Abstract

This article examines the factors that have led to a shift to Spanish in the Upper Necaxa Totonac communities of east-central Mexico. Despite the fact that Spanish and Totonac have been in contact since before the eighteenth century, the shift to the majority language has only occurred in the past four decades. I will show that this shift resulted from the combination of long-standing negative attitudes towards indigenous cultures with new social and economic conditions, namely the establishment of Spanish-language schooling and a shift to a cash-based economy. The proximate cause of the linguistic "tip" to Spanish was not so much the desire to speak the majority language as the increased opportunities to do so.

1. Introduction

One of the key factors that can lead members of a speech community to abandon their language is the existence of unfavourable attitudes towards that language and its speakers (cf. Sasse 1992). In Mexico, for example, the long-standing negative perceptions of *indios* 'Indians' have undoubtedly done much to promote the replacement of indigenous languages by Spanish, the majority language. However, the inferior social status of indigenous Mexicans has been a fact of life for hundreds of years, since the time of the Spanish conquest, and if negative attitudes were in and of themselves sufficient to cause language shift, the indigenous peoples of Mexico would have abandoned their languages centuries ago. Yet it is merely within the last one hundred years that the use of many indigenous languages has begun to decrease; for example, in the case of the Upper Necaxa Totonac of east-central Mexico, only the last forty years have seen large numbers of speakers adopting Spanish as their primary language of communication. Dorian (1981: 51; 1986) characterises this type

0165–2516/09/0195–000219

Int'l. J. Soc. Lang. 195 (2009), pp. 219–233
DOI 10.1515/IJSL.2009.012

of situation as a linguistic "tip", when factors that have been eating away at a language come to a head, resulting in speakers suddenly abandoning their original language and opting for the exclusive use of another language. In this article, I will show that the shift to Spanish by the Upper Necaxa Totonac stems from new social and economic conditions that have greatly increased the opportunities for them to use the majority language both with outsiders to the community and, more significantly, with their children in their own homes. As a result, parents have begun to raise their children only in Spanish, thereby ceasing the transmission of their language to a replacement generation of speakers.

2. Background

The Upper Necaxa Totonac language belongs to the isolate Totonac-Tepehua family, which has approximately 215,000 speakers in the Mexican states of Puebla, Veracruz, and Hidalgo (Beck 2004; INEGI 2005). Upper Necaxa Totonac itself is spoken by some 3,400 people living in four rural communities — Chicontla, Patla, Cacahuatlán, and San Pedro Tlaolantongo — located along the Necaxa River in the mountains of the north-eastern region of Puebla state (Beck 2004; Beck and Lam forthcoming). They are bordered by small communities of Nahuatl speakers to the north and south, and by speakers of other Totonacan varieties to the east and west. However, Spanish is the language of the closest urban centres — Xicotepec de Juárez and Huauchinango — as well as of the nearby town of La Unión, which has historically had a strong economic influence on the Upper Necaxa Valley. The largest of the four Totonac communities is Chicontla, the regional centre, with an estimated population of 3,700 people, 45% of whom are Totonac speakers (INEGI 2005). In Patla, with a population of 1,800 people, and in Cacahuatlán, with a population of 250 people, 86% and 93% of the residents, respectively, also speak Totonac, while only 28% of the 1,000 inhabitants of San Pedro are speakers of that language. The overwhelming majority of Totonac speakers are bilinguals, with fewer than 5% being monolingual in Totonac. Moreover, most fluent speakers of Totonac are already in their forties or older, and increasingly few children are learning Totonac as their mother tongue.

The Upper Necaxa Totonac have no written or oral history, so little is known about their past. It is uncertain as to when the Spanish first came to the Upper Necaxa Valley; given that the oldest Catholic church in the region, the one in San Pedro, was built in the mid-eighteenth century, we

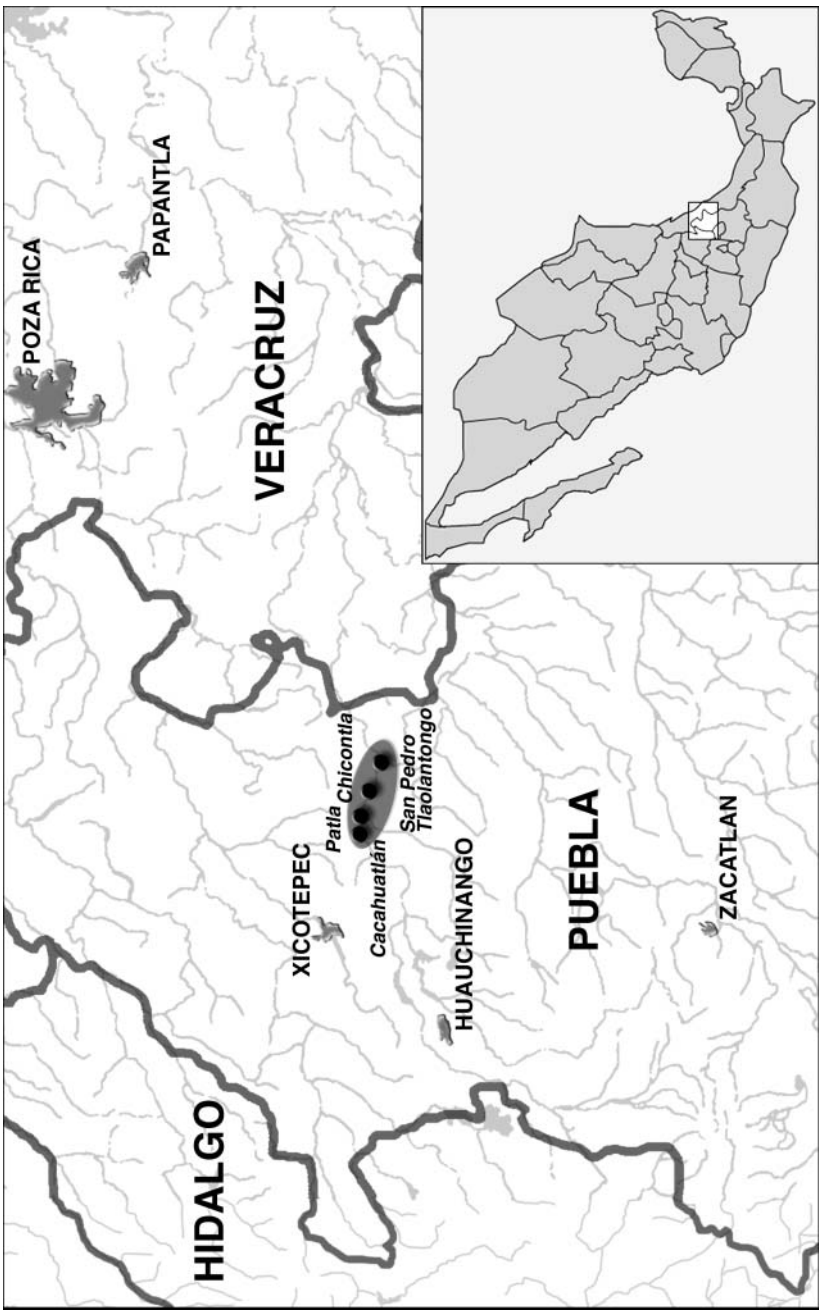

Figure 1. *The Upper Necaxa Totonac communities*

can surmise that the first sustained outside contact with Spanish dates back to that time, when missionaries arrived in the region. Later contact between Totonac and Spanish speakers took place when priests, merchants, government officials, and teachers visited the valley, and when the Totonac left their communities for business or personal reasons. The relative isolation of the Upper Necaxa Valley and the lack of proper roads before the 1980s meant that such contact was probably infrequent and irregular until recently.

Until the 1960s, when the Mexican government instituted regular schooling, basic education was not available in the Totonac communities; once in a while, a teacher would appear and hold some classes, but rarely for long. Even with the establishment of schools in the valley, many children initially did not stay beyond primary school because their parents were not convinced of the benefits of schooling or could not afford the money for uniforms, stationery, and extracurricular activities. Schooling was — and still is — conducted entirely in Spanish, as the majority of teachers are not from the communities; there have been few efforts to provide education in Totonac, and even the two newer bilingual schools in Patla and San Pedro function largely in Spanish. The 2005 national census estimates that one-quarter of the current adult population in the Totonac communities has never gone to school at all, and the average education level is only between four and five years, with the illiteracy rate around 30% (INEGI 2005). However, parents have now begun to recognise the importance of receiving an education, and consequently fewer than 5% of the current school-age children do not attend school (INEGI 2005).

The Totonac economy has traditionally been based on the subsistence farming of corn, beans, and chillies. Coffee was introduced into the region in the first half of the twentieth century by large *mestizo* (mixed indigenous and European) landowners, and many people began to work as day-labourers on the plantations for supplementary income. The Mexican government started subsidizing the production of coffee in the 1950s, but it was not until the value of coffee increased in the 1980s that small-scale producers were able to abandon the cultivation of food crops and dedicate their land to coffee production for sale outside the community. As a result of this economic shift from subsistence farming to cash crops, there was an influx of money and people into the valley which brought about improvements in the standard of living, including running water, electric power lines, and, as of 2004, landline telephones. The change to a cash economy also meant that the Totonac can now purchase goods that were not previously accessible, such as gas stoves, hot water boilers, cars, and urban clothing, as well as electronic equipment like radios, tele-

visions, and, more recently, computers. The latter items have been especially influential on the linguistic situation because Spanish is the language of communication in the regional and national media. The rise in the value of coffee also resulted in the construction of roads fit for vehicles; these greatly facilitated mobility in and out of the Upper Necaxa Valley and allowed for the establishment of regular transportation.

Unfortunately, the economic upturn did not last: the price of coffee plummeted in the 1990s, and many people lost their land or found themselves unable to pay off debts. A return to subsistence farming was no longer an option since the communities now functioned completely on a cash-based economy. As a result, many people have abandoned their land and moved to Mexico City or the United States in search of paid work. The official figures for out-migration remain unclear as families are hesitant to report the income, but Beck and Lam (forthcoming) estimate from their personal observations that about 10% of the population, mostly men, are in the United States as illegal workers. In recent years, some of the remaining coffee growers have switched to cattle ranching or to other cash crops, such as vanilla. Unfortunately, most small-scale producers are not in a position to make the initial investment required for such a switch and thus are forced to rely on the meagre income provided by coffee and by small local jobs. The current attitude among the Totonac is that there is no money to be made in their communities; to earn cash, one must leave and find work elsewhere.

3. Factors leading to language shift

In order to determine the causes of language shift in the Upper Necaxa Valley, I recorded individual conversations with fifteen native Totonac speakers from Chicontla and Patla who had learned Spanish as a second language. The participants spoke, in Spanish, about their childhood, their families, their work, and the history of their village. In particular, I was interested in the language(s) they used at home, where the continued transmission of Totonac would be crucial for its survival (Fishman 1990). To that effect, the participants were asked specifically to describe how they learned Spanish, which language(s) they speak with their family, whether they want their children to know Totonac, and whether they have observed any changes in language use in the community. Their comments, which I have translated into English, form the basis for the discussion below.

In Table 1, where the participants' linguistic behaviour is summarised, it is clear that the shift to Spanish is already well under way: most parents

Table 1. *Intergenerational transmission of the Totonac language*

Speaker(s)	Age(s)	Gender	Hometown	Children	Grandchildren
LCT	88	M	C	T	S
LVN	68	F	C	S	S
LMS	68	F	P	T	T and S
LBS	67	M	C	T	S
GAM	54	M	C	S	S
RMM, AVV	54, 47	M, F	P	S	S
LCV, EMR	52, 50	M, F	C	S	S
JCL	49	F	C	S	S
PSM, GMM	46, 36	M, F	P	S	(n/a)
SCV	45	F	C	S	S
CFM	44	F	P	S and T	(n/a)
AFM	36	F	P	S and T	(n/a)

F = female, M = male, P = Patla, C = Chicontla, S = Spanish, T = Totonac.
Married couples are listed as one entry.
CFM and SCV do not have children of their own but are caretakers of nieces and nephews.

have all but abandoned the use of Totonac with their children, even though it is the parents' native language and they function most comfortably in it. Only three of the oldest participants — LCT, LBS, and LMS, all over the age of 65 — spoke Totonac to their children, while few parents under the age of 65 use Totonac as the language of child-rearing anymore, especially in Chicontla, which has the larger *mestizo* population. Even in Patla, where the indigenous language is still being spoken to a few children, it is not used exclusively, but in combination with Spanish. As for the grandchild generation, given that their parents are either Spanish monolinguals or Spanish-dominant bilinguals, Spanish is the only language that is being transmitted to them. Even many of the grandparents, who are fluent native speakers of Totonac, have ceased to use that language with the grandchildren because the children do not understand Totonac well; only those few grandparents who cannot or will not speak Spanish at all use Totonac with the grandchildren.

We can thus observe from Table 1 that there is a noticeable break in the intergenerational transmission of Totonac between the parent generation and the child generation. The parent generation are all Totonac-dominant bilinguals, whereas the child generation — the replacement generation of speakers — are largely Spanish monolinguals, with only a few of the oldest being bilingual but still Spanish-dominant. The subsequent generation of grandchildren are virtually all Spanish monolinguals. As a consequence, once the current parent generation is gone, there will essentially be no fully fluent speakers of Totonac left.

This wholesale shift to Spanish is relatively recent as the oldest participants in my sample, with the exception of LVN, still speak Totonac with their children, and a minority of the younger parents continue to transmit it in combination with Spanish. The question thus arises as to why the shift has accelerated so dramatically in the last forty years. In the following sections, I will discuss how the establishment of Spanish-language schools and the shift to a cash-based economy have made it possible to lead much of one's daily life in Spanish, which, in combination with the deep-rooted social stigma of being indigenous, has resulted in the imminent demise of Totonac.

3.1. *Negative perceptions of indigenous cultures*

Despite official rhetoric about multiculturalism, indigenous peoples in Mexico are perceived negatively, and the term *indio* 'Indian' carries strong derogatory connotations in Mexican Spanish (cf. Garzón 1992: 55). The Totonac seem to have assimilated as their own these negative attitudes of the non-indigenous (i.e., *mestizo*) Mexicans (cf. Lambert et al. 1960). For example, the Totonac frequently refer to their language as a *dialecto* 'dialect', a substandard way of speaking, rather than as a language. More telling is the phrase *gente de razón* 'rational people' (lit. 'people of reason') which the Totonac use to describe non-indigenous Mexicans, while they call themselves *gente de calzón* 'people of indigenous dress', even though only the eldest members nowadays still wear *calzones* (the traditional pants) and *enaguas* (the traditional skirt). Such terms — part of the everyday vocabulary of the Totonac — speak volumes about how the Totonac view their place in society: non-indigenous Mexicans are intellectually and socially superior, while the Totonac are ignorant and primitive. These negative self-perceptions are reinforced by the fact that most of the non-indigenous Mexicans in the Totonac communities occupy positions of social prestige — large landowners, teachers, doctors, priests, and large-scale merchants — while the majority of the Totonac are simple farmers or labourers.

Because of the social inferiority of indigenous peoples, the inability to speak Spanish leads to them being singled out and marginalised. For example, in my conversation with LBS, he recalls how he was treated as ignorant because he could not understand what some non-indigenous Mexicans were saying to him in Spanish:

[. . .] some collectors came and I began to give them my service, and they sent me there to notify someone: "Go there to notify them." But no, no, I didn't even

know what they were talking to me about, so they scolded me, and no, so I came back and "Yes, he's going to come," I tell them even though I didn't go to notify them [...] (LBS: 09/08/03)

As a result of such treatment, the Totonac feel ashamed if they cannot speak Spanish, as RMM remembers:

[...] before no, I couldn't greet them, like, "good day!" or "what are you doing?" or "how are you?", no, no, I couldn't say anything, right, I didn't know anything, right, but now I understand well now [...] before, no, I was ashamed to get together with the, the rational people eating over there [...] (RMM: 26/07/03)

It comes as no surprise, then, that Totonacs who can speak Spanish often deny knowing their own language, especially in the presence of non-indigenous Mexicans, as GAM notes:

[...] a lot of people are ashamed to speak Totonac, they're ashamed, they say, "I don't want to show that I speak it because that person is a person of society." He doesn't want to show his face, he doesn't want them to see his face because he speaks Totonac, he's ashamed, that's what happens. (GAM: 19/07/03)

Some Totonacs even make a point of speaking Spanish to other Totonacs in public to show off their knowledge, despite the unnaturalness of such behaviour, as CFM explains:

[...] yes it bothers me, because if you know that she can speak Totonac and, and um, if she's answering you in Spanish, well, that really, um, that feels really strange [...] I don't know, why, why they speak to each other, um, they speak Spanish to each other and they know Totonac [...] Well, they, um, they feel that they know more, they feel, like, proud, and they feel proud because, because, because, um, because they know how to speak Spanish, as if they don't want to speak Totonac anymore. (CFM: 16/07/03)

This type of public behaviour underscores the strong stigma associated with being seen as indigenous. In another example, PSM recounts his surprise at being addressed in Totonac by the local school principal whom he ran into in Mexico City:

[...] I was surprised that he was, that he was recognising me where there were a lot of people, and he comes directly over to where I was and he says to me, um: "What's up? Hi, how's it going?" um, and after a bit he begins to speak to me in Totonac [...] he was going around like this with a suit, with a tie, well, well um, well-dressed, everyone was amazed, eh, they were amazed at him: "What, what is he saying?" and um, and chatting away like that in Totonac [...] (PSM: 18/07/03)

The expected behaviour would have been for the principal, a man of social standing, to deny any acquaintance with the indigenous farmer, much less speak to him in his own language, especially in front of other people in a large urban setting. The astonishment that PSM feels about that situation indicates the degree of social marginalisation that the Totonac see themselves in.

Thus, there is strong social pressure from both non-indigenous Mexicans and — more notably — from the Totonac themselves to communicate in Spanish, especially in public. As a result, parents naturally want their children to be as proficient in that language as possible. In particular, parents do not want their children to speak with a non-native accent since that would only highlight their indigenous origin. As GAM explains, this means using Spanish with children from a young age:

[. . .] if you didn't speak it from the time you were little, you speak it as an adult, you don't, don't have, you don't have the right pronunciation [. . .] (GAM: 19/07/03)

Moreover, from their own experiences, parents recognise the general difficulty of learning a second language as an adult, thus providing further incentive to expose children to Spanish from birth in order to ensure that they will speak it well, as GMM notes:

[. . .] I thought, better this way because, so they're not like me, I learned as an adult but my children, I don't, I don't want them to be that way, my children, I want them to speak Spanish. [. . .] it's better that they learn Totonac as adults than, than Spanish. Because it's [more] difficult to learn Spanish as an adult than as a child. (GMM: 23/07/03)

Although using Spanish with children at a young age certainly does not entail withholding exposure to Totonac, many parents have done so under the mistaken assumption that knowing Totonac will affect the child's fluency in Spanish, as LVN explains:

[. . .] and this is causing the, the language to break down because, you no longer explain the same way in Spanish because you speak Totonac and you speak Spanish, you speak more Totonac than Spanish, so it's no longer, no longer, I can't explain well in Spanish because you speak too much Totonac [. . .] (LVN: 06/07/06)

Teachers have done nothing to disabuse parents of their beliefs: in fact, parents in Cacahuatlán report being told explicitly by the teacher to avoid speaking Totonac with their children so as not to confuse them (Beck,

personal communication). Given the higher social status of teachers, Totonac parents have not thought to question the advice to adopt Spanish monolingualism over Totonac–Spanish bilingualism. Though misguided, parents are simply acting in what they feel is their children's best interests: to sound like native speakers of Spanish.

3.2. *Establishment of Spanish-language schools*

While important, the deeply ingrained negative self-perceptions of the Totonac do not explain why the shift to Spanish only happened in the last four decades. Previously, the Totonac lived in relative isolation, and contact with Spanish speakers would have been infrequent given the difficulty in accessing the communities. Thus, while the desire not to be seen as indigenous undoubtedly existed, there were few opportunities to learn Spanish, and most parents were not proficient enough to use Spanish in the home. This changed with the establishment of Spanish-language schools in the 1960s. Many of the elders, such as LBS, point to the schools as a major cause of the shift to Spanish, as most teachers are not from the Totonac communities and can only speak Spanish:

> [. . .] little by little [the teachers] began to teach the kids to speak Spanish and that's where they began to abandon Totonac, they no longer, they no longer spoke in, well, in Totonac, at school there they spoke to you only in Spanish [. . .] (LBS: 09/08/03)

Although many of the Totonac did not initially attend school beyond a few years, this was nonetheless where they entered into regular contact with Spanish. Thus, for the first time, there was a generation of children in the community who had some knowledge of Spanish that they could then share with siblings, thereby eroding the use of Totonac in the home. For example, in LBS's family, there is a gradual decrease in Totonac proficiency among the eight siblings, with the oldest child (age 45) being fluent in Totonac but the youngest child (age 24) unable to speak it well, despite the fact that both parents use Totonac exclusively with all eight. These same children — now the parent generation — also have enough knowledge of Spanish to use it as the language of child-rearing. The noticeable break in the transmission of Totonac shown in Table 1 is tied to the institution of regular schooling: the parents who continued to use Totonac for child-rearing would have been too old to attend school, and thus would have been less able to speak Spanish with their children, while their younger counterparts were proficient enough in Spanish at a young

age to use it later with their own children. Even though the parents from this latter group are by no means native-like speakers of Spanish, and some willingly admit that their Spanish is lacking, the perceived importance of knowing Spanish has persuaded them to raise their children with the Spanish they have managed to learn.

Along with offering the opportunity to learn Spanish, schools have had a second effect on the community in that teachers have actively discouraged the use of Totonac, even insulting children who speak it, as GMM remembers:

> [. . .] me, when I was in school, well only Totonac, we spoke only Totonac until the teacher scolded us and, and what are we going to do about it if it's our dialect? Because there are also some [kids] who can't speak Spanish and so they talk in Totonac and so, until [the teachers] told us: "Be quiet! You are like parakeets, I don't understand you at all." (GMM: 23/07/03)

By marginalising children who use Totonac, teachers simply reinforce the already existing belief that speaking Totonac is a social disadvantage.

Moreover, parents feel that children who do not understand Spanish are doomed to academic failure, as AFM explains:

> [. . .] it's a pity, the children who don't learn Spanish, because there they sit, they don't know what the teachers tell them, there they sit, but no, or they don't listen or they do listen but they don't understand, right, so it's better to speak to them in Spanish so that in school they don't have problems, so that they understand everything the teacher explains to them, yes. (AFM: 03/08/04)

Success in school has become all the more important in recent years as parents recognise the importance of a good education, thus further hastening the shift to Spanish.

3.3. *Shift to a cash-based economy*

While the establishment of Spanish-language schools offered the opportunity to learn Spanish, there would not originally have been many situations in the communities that required it. The shift to a cash-based economy in the 1980s changed these conditions by greatly intensifying contact with Spanish speakers. The increased value of coffee and the subsequent construction of roads fit for vehicles have attracted many more non-indigenous Mexicans to the region in order to do business. Of greater significance, though, are those who decided to settle in the Upper Necaxa

Valley, thereby increasing the proportion of Spanish speakers to Totonac speakers. No longer were these communities homogeneously Totonac; it is not unusual now to see inhabitants of the valley who are not originally from there. The result is a decrease in the number of domains where only Totonac can be used: whereas in the past there was little communicative need for Spanish, now there are daily opportunities to use it, not only with visitors but also with one's neighbours (cf. Garzón 1992: 55). For this reason, parents want to ensure that their children know Spanish well, as AVV explains:

> [...] because many people who came don't know Totonac, and if you don't know [Spanish], how will you talk to a person if he doesn't know [Totonac]? No, so I liked it better that [the children] learned Spanish rather than Totonac. (AVV: 07/08/03)

The Totonac have also become sensitive to the constant presence of outsiders in their communities because the Totonac feel that it is impolite to speak their language in front of someone who does not understand. In GMM's case below, even though her children are bilingual in Totonac and Spanish because of their grandparents, she refuses to speak Totonac to her children in the presence of others:

> So, like me, when my visitors come if, if my children speak to me I answer them in Spanish even though they speak to me in Totonac, and I answer them in Spanish so that the person, the one who's there with me, so he knows what they're saying to me. (GMM: 23/07/03)

On top of bringing more people into the valley, the construction of the roads has resulted in greater possibilities for travel, so those who cannot speak Spanish find it difficult to leave the community, as PSM comments:

> [...] so that if, when they want to leave, um, to chat with a friend who is, who, who doesn't understand Totonac, they can, um, communicate with each other [...] so that they know how to stand up for themselves, when they arrive in a place where they only speak Spanish but that they will also know how to manage, have a conversation or, um, have a job [...] because if they are only going to learn Totonac then I think that, um, it's not right, when they want to leave to work [...] (PSM: 18/07/03)

The increased ability to go to other parts of Mexico has become all the more important since the collapse of coffee prices in the 1990s: in order to maintain the flow of cash necessary for participation in the new economy, people are leaving the valley not just to visit friends but also to find

work, as PSM indicates. Consequently, parents want their children to be proficient in Spanish so that they can find well-paying jobs elsewhere and not be limited to the meagre income from farming in the valley.

In addition, the greater contact with non-indigenous Mexicans has made all the more salient the differences between the traditional Totonac lifestyle and the modern Mexican way of life, as LVN explains:

> [. . .] but in recent years came, came the road, and cars began to arrive [. . .] they began to, to open their eyes, to see what, what people do, what, what, what they come to say, the people from outside [. . .] (LVN: 06/07/06)

This increased contact with non-indigenous Mexicans underlined the shame that the Totonac already felt about their socially inferior lifestyle and hastened their desire to discard their traditions, as RMM comments:

> [. . .] well, it's nice how they lived long ago. I saw it when I was still young, no, but [. . .] now they don't do it that way anymore, it's changed now, they're ashamed because many cars come, and they don't do it anymore and there's nothing [left] of what they did before, a long time ago when I was growing up. (RMM: 15/01/03, personal communication from Beck, his translation of the original Totonac)

While adopting a modern way of life does not require a wholesale language shift to Spanish, the Totonac have been unable to separate their language from an antiquated lifestyle (cf. Lastra 2001: 146). For this reason, the abandonment of their traditional subsistence economy has also resulted in the abandonment of their language.

4. Conclusion

The pressures on the Upper Necaxa Totonac to use Spanish have existed for many decades: the negative perceptions that non-indigenous Mexicans have of their indigenous countrymen are deeply rooted, even in the words that the Totonac use to describe themselves. However, much as the Totonac may have wanted to assimilate to the majority culture, there were previously few opportunities to learn Spanish and to use it within the communities. The proximate cause of the shift to Spanish — the straw that broke the Totonac language's back — are the new social and economic conditions in the last forty years that have greatly increased access to and the communicative need for the majority language. What has changed is not the desire to speak Spanish but the opportunity to do so

(cf. Dorian 1998; Grenoble and Whaley 1998: 53). With the establishment of schools, children are able to learn enough Spanish to be able to use it with other siblings and later with their own children, while the disparaging attitudes of teachers towards Totonac and the growing importance of education only intensify the need for Spanish. The shift from subsistence farming to a cash-based economy has increased the contact between the Totonac and the Spanish-speaking majority both outside and inside the Upper Necaxa Valley. Moreover, the economic change has reinforced the link between the Totonac language and an outdated way of life: the elders who cannot speak Spanish well have no option but to continue as traditional farmers, while the younger Totonac who are more proficient in Spanish are able to participate in the modern economy.

Thus, desire and opportunity have come together in the Upper Necaxa Valley to bring about a linguistic tip from Totonac monolingualism to Spanish monolingualism. Certainly, a wholesale shift to the majority language is not the inevitable outcome of increased contact — communities around the world have managed to maintain their language simultaneously with another language, often for reasons of ethnic identity, rather than bow to social and economic pressures (cf. Dorian 1986). However, for the Totonac, these pressures, in combination with their perception that bilingualism is harmful, have led them to consider Spanish as the one and only language that matters, and they were simply waiting for the opportunity to turn these beliefs into reality.

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Note

* I would like to thank the Totonac speakers for sharing their experiences; Lilian Pintos for her help in transcribing; and David Beck, Elena Benedicto, Jennie Dailey-O'Cain, Nancy Dorian, and the participants of the First International Conference on Totonac-Tepehua Languages for their insightful comments.

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