

Only 2 speakers left of language

Wire services

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Octogenarians Manuel and Isidro are the last two fluent speakers of Ayapaneco, an Indian language from Tabasco that is on a path toward oblivion along with some two dozen others in the country.

Along with the pair, four others in their community have a very limited knowledge of the language, of which little academic research has been conducted.

According to studies by the National Institute of Indigenous Languages, Mexico is home to around 150 Indian languages, nearly 100 more than originally thought, the institute's director, Fernando Nava, said.

The reason for the higher figure is that the recent studies showed that what were previously considered individual "languages" - such as Zapotec, Mixtec and Nahuatl - are more like language families that group several tongues that should be considered languages in and of themselves.

OFFICIAL FIGURES

Official figures indicate that 13.2 million of Mexico's roughly 106 million inhabitants - or about one in eight - are Indians, many of whom preserve their customs and traditions.

Yet, despite their large numbers, 25 Indian languages are on the verge of extinction as the number of native speakers dwindles each year. Among the tongues gradually dying out are Lacandón, spoken by 635 people in Chiapas; Seri, by 458 in Sonora; and Paipai and Kiliwa, by 201 and 52 individuals, respectively, in Baja California.

Nava said it was regrettable that the Spanish conquistadors and Franciscan missionaries who colonized Mexico did not show more sensitivity to the indigenous tongues, although he acknowledged that 16th century projects were carried out to produce written rules of grammar for Mixtec and Nahuatl.

"We know that during the colonial period there were departments for the study of Otomi and Nahuatl at the national university, but around the start of the 19th century Creoles (Mexicans of European descent demanding independence from Spain) lost interest in" or opposed the study of indigenous languages, he said.

The waning support for Indian languages was even more pronounced during the late 19th, early 20th century reign of dictator Porfirio Díaz, who, despite being partially Mixtec, had a taste for European culture and styles and launched an educational campaign to Hispanicize the Indian population, Nava said.

SPANISH DOMINATES

Even today, "some teachers unfortunately continue to promote Spanish with little regard for (Indians') native language and culture," he said, noting the need to reject the assumption that the Spanish language and Spanish speakers are superior.

In 1950, the Chiapaneco language was considered officially extinct and between 1965 and 1968 the last remaining speakers of Cuitlateco died. That language, formerly spoken in the southern state of Guerrero and of which there is a sparse written record, is considered the last Mexican language to fall into total disuse.