Challenges to working with speakers of critically endangered languages

Jhonnatan Rangel

Agenda

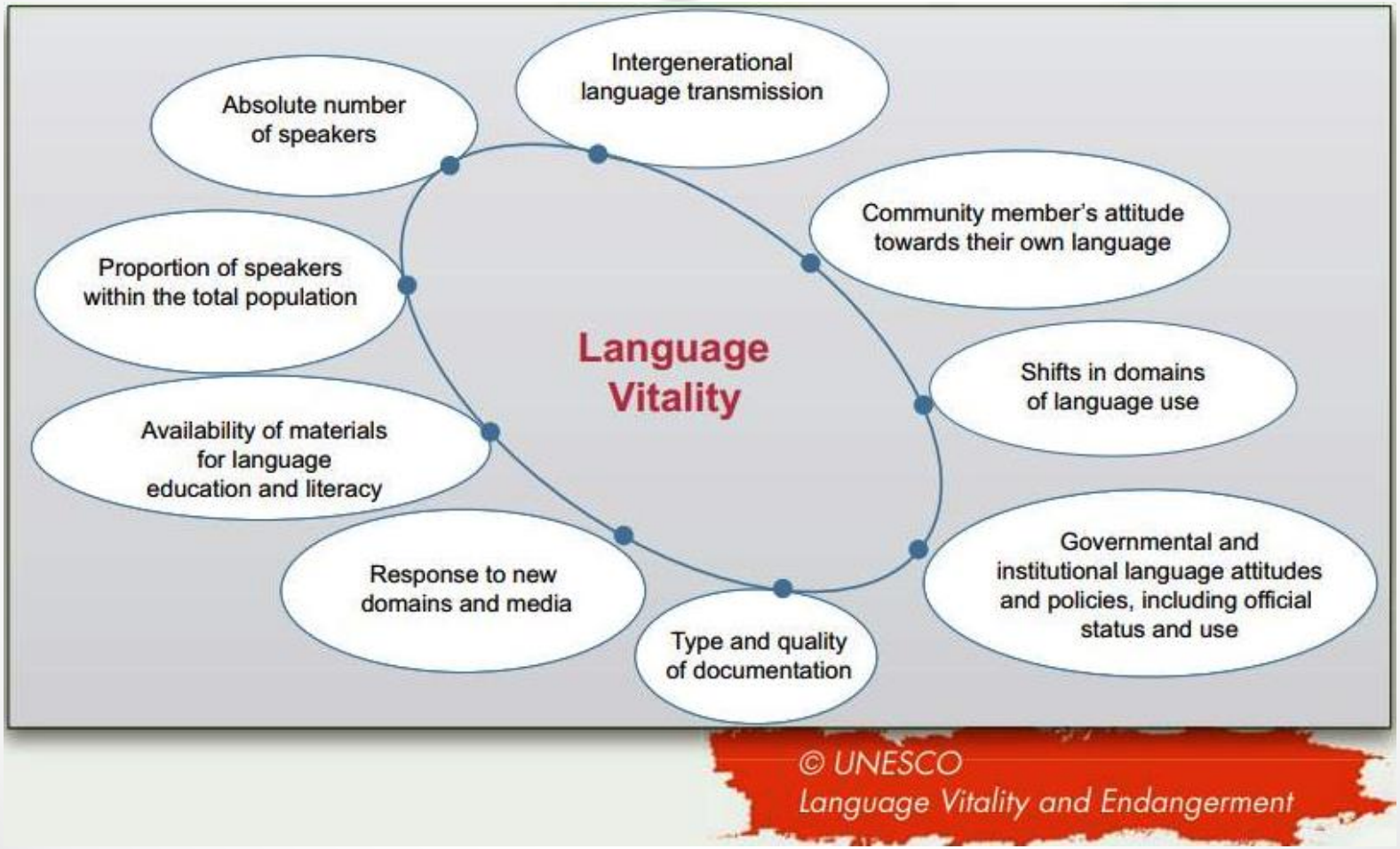
- Endangered languages
- Speakers
- Field site
- Data collection methods
- Take home message

Endangered languages …

What are endangered languages?

- Unless current trends are reversed, likely to become extinct within the next century
- Many are no longer being learned by new generations of children or by new adult speakers
- Will become extinct when their last speaker dies. They *will no longer be spoken, or known, by anyone*

Language Vitality and Endangerment



Language Vitality Scale

The Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS)

Purple = Institutional (EGIDS 0-4) — The language has been developed to the point that it is used and sustained by institutions beyond the home and community.

Blue = Developing (EGIDS 5) — The language is in vigorous use, with literature in a standardized form being used by some though this is not yet widespread or sustainable.

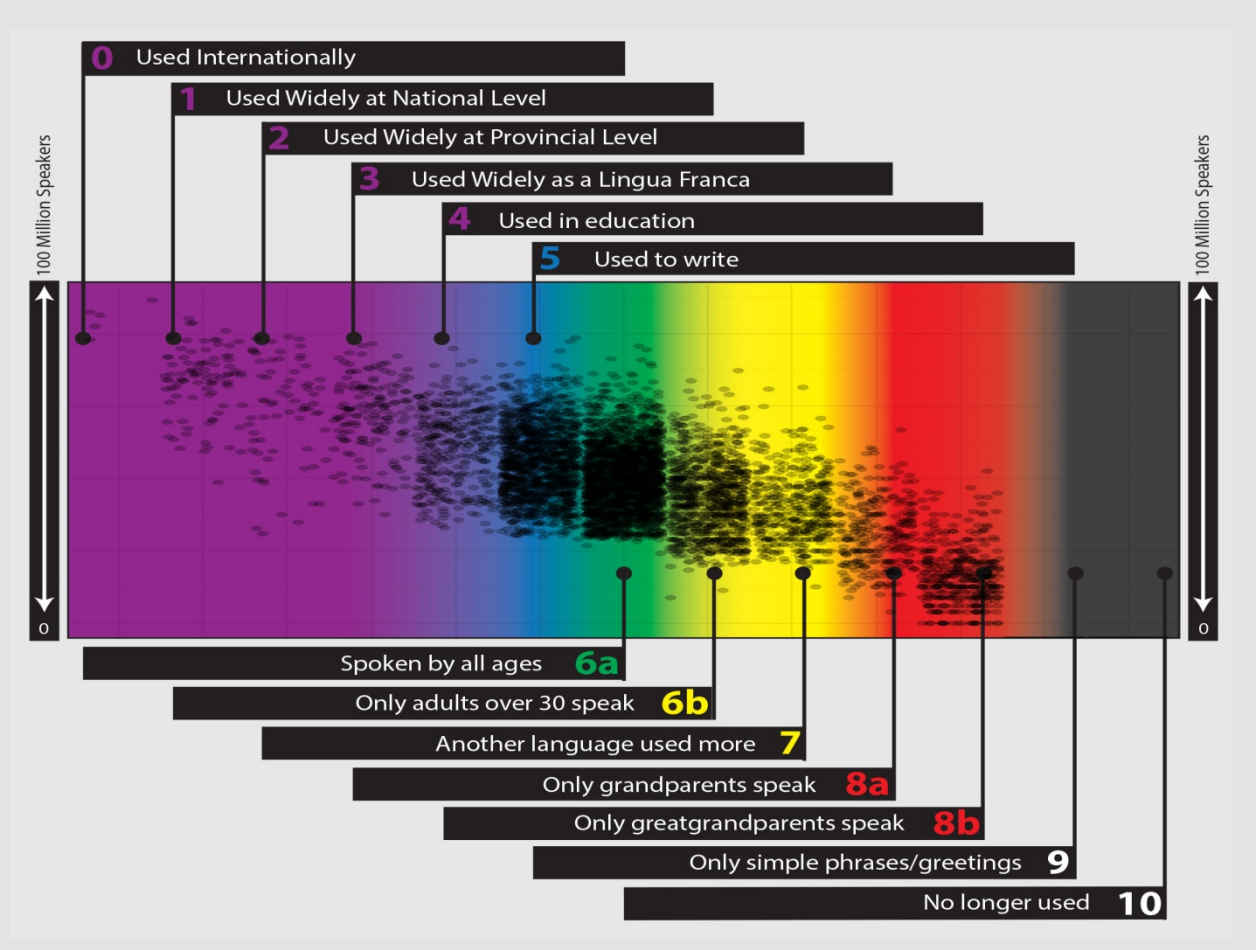
Green = Vigorous (EGIDS 6a) — The language is unstandardized and in vigorous use among all generations.

Yellow = In trouble (EGIDS 6b-7) — Intergenerational transmission is in the process of being broken, but the child-bearing generation can still use the language so it is possible that revitalization efforts could restore transmission of the language in the home.

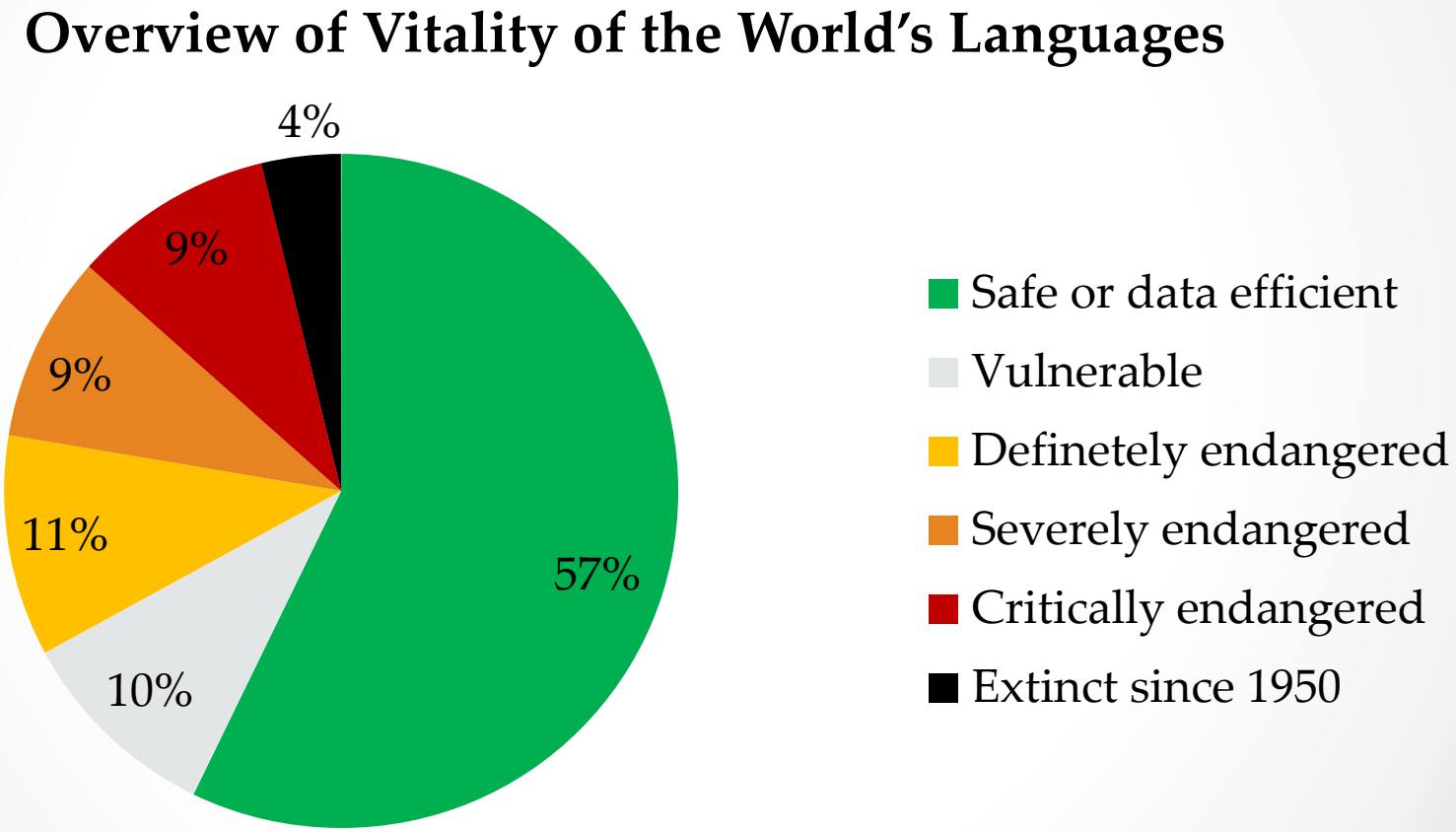
Red = Dying (EGIDS 8a-9) — The only fluent users (if any) are older than child-bearing age, so it is too late to restore natural intergenerational transmission through the home; a mechanism outside the home would need to be developed.

Black = Extinct (EGIDS 10) — The language has fallen completely out of use and no one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language.

Language Vitality Scale



Language endangerment in the world



Critically endangered languages: Key characteristics

- Only grandparents or great-grandparents are speakers of the language (elders)
- Intergenerational transmission interrupted decades ago
- Extremely low ratio of speakers to total population
- Sporadic use of language
- Language use reduced to private domains

Critically endangered languages in the world

Speakers

Finding speakers of a critically endangered language

Dr. Evil is right, it might be "complicated"

…

"…speakers are often neither readily identifiable nor easily accounted for…(they) might be very isolated and not even known to be speakers." (Grinevald & Bert 2011)

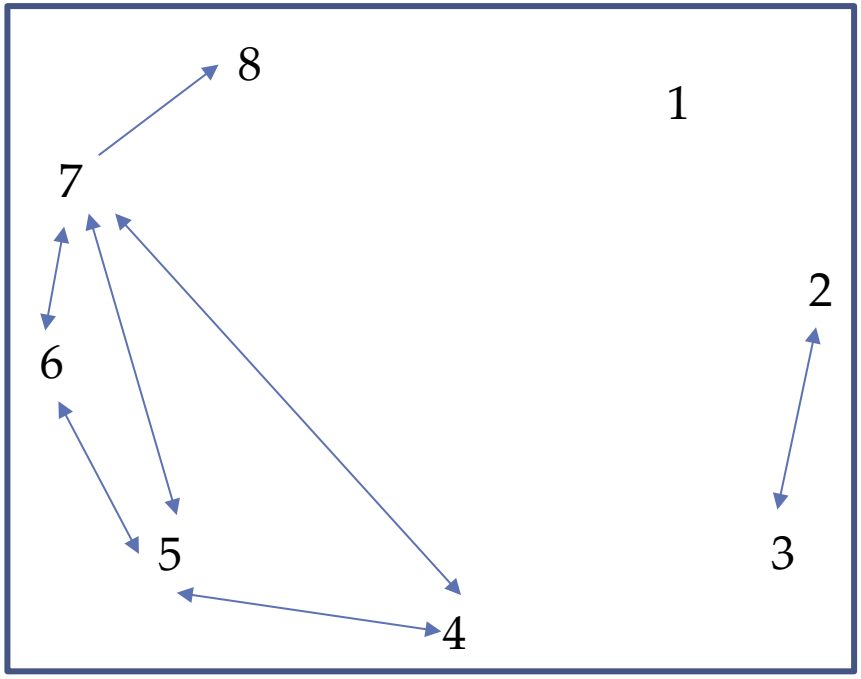
Complications

- Language is rarely spoken in public places and it is not used for everyday communication
- Larger community might not be aware of the existence of endangered language
- Few individuals might be able to direct you to "speakers"
- Contradicting answers when asking directly "do you speak X language?"
- Complex attitudes of speakers (and their relatives) towards their language (Grinevald 2003)

First warning

As researchers, our own definitions (such as “language,” “speaker” or “speech community”) may not correspond to those of the community we work with

Speech community



« …dans le cas des locuteurs d'une langue très menacée, il est difficile de parler encore de communauté linguistique. Il s'agit plutôt d'un ensemble de sous-réseaux sans liens entre eux » (Bert 2010)

Affiliation

"…affiliation to language is primarily a matter of social group membership rather than actual competence"

Affiliation vs performance

Language-owner

- Perceived right to be speaker
- Ownership
- Membership & affiliation

Language-speaker

- Actual linguistic performance
- User

Second warning

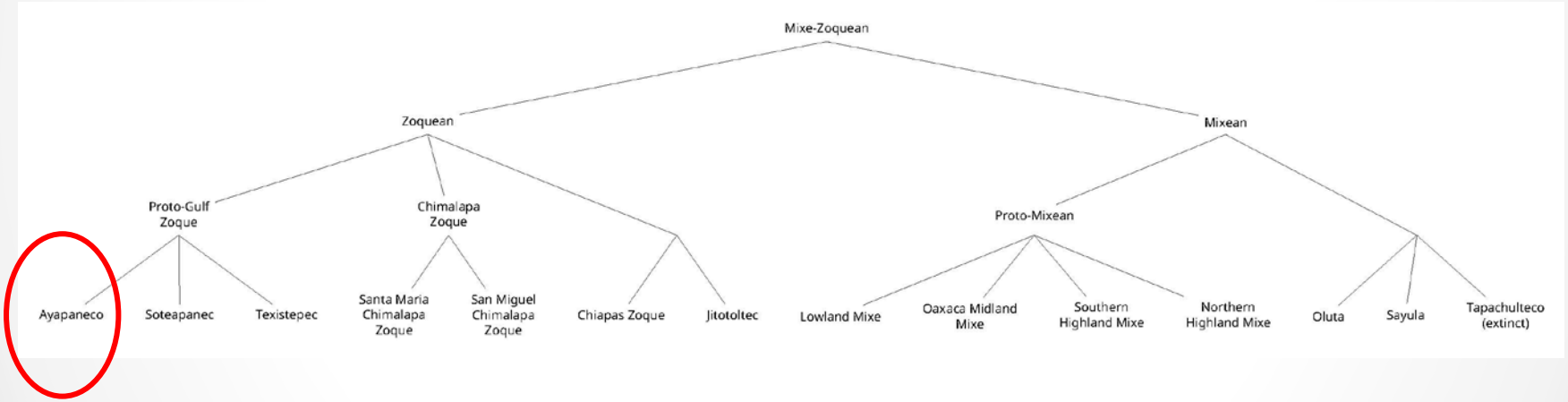
"…the phenomenon of language loss gives rise to some types of speakers that are specific to those circumstances, not so much in terms of their level of knowledge of the language, but more in terms of sociopsychological traits that create unexpected interactions" (Grinevald & Bert 2011).

Variety of profiles

- A) Fluent speakers
  - Fluent speakers who are monolinguals or bilinguals with great fluency and mastery of the language
- B) Semi-speakers
  - Bilinguals whose dominant language is not the endangered language with varying levels of productive skills
- C) Terminal speakers
  - Speakers of the dominant language who may know some phrases, or simply some words of the endangered language
- D) Rememberers
  - Used to have a better knowledge of the language, but who, for some reason, have lost much of that knowledge
- E)Ghost speakers
  - They deny any knowledge of the language despite they have shown some level of competence
- F) Neo-speakers
  - Learners of endangered language in the context of revitalization projects

Field site

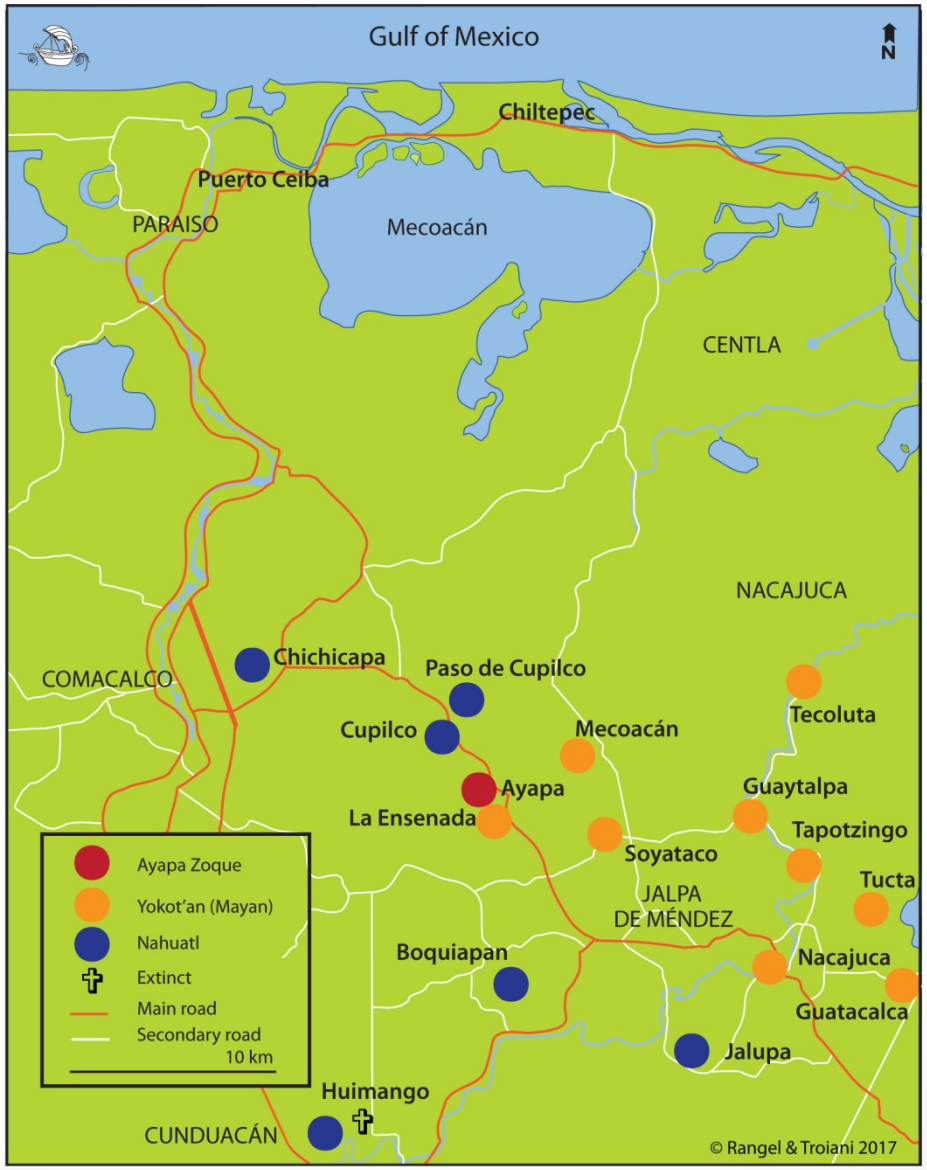
Mixe-Zoque family



- Wichmann 1995, Zavala 2012

Mixe-zoque family

Ayapaneco


Gulf of Mexico
N
Chiltepec
Puerto Ceiba
PARAISO
Mecoacán
CENTLA
NACAJUCA
COMACALCO
Chichicapa
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Cupilco
Mecoacán
Tecoluta
Ayapa
Guaytalpa
La Ensenada
Tapotzingo
Soyataco
Tucta
JALPA
DE MÉNDEZ
Boquiapan
Nacajuca
Guatacalca
Jalupa
Huimango
CUNDUACÁN
Ayapa Zoque
Yokot'an (Mayan)
Nahuatl
Extinct
Main road
Secondary road
10 km
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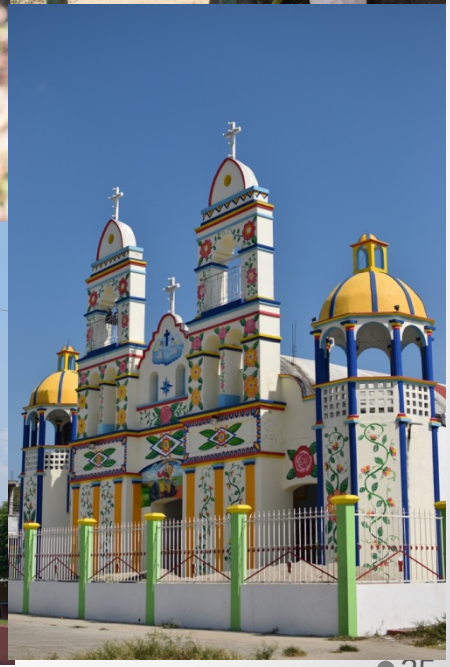
COCO
a 3 Pesos

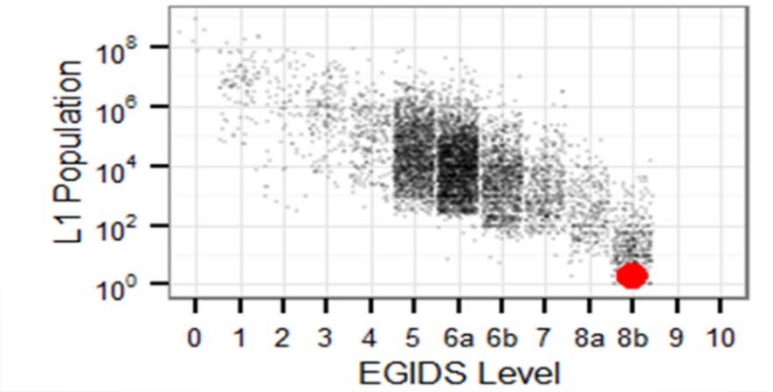



Sociolinguistic background

- "Discovered" in 1966. Approximately 150 to 500 Ayapaneco speakers out of a total population of 2,000 people.
- Today Ayapa is a locality of 5,500 inhabitants in the state of Tabasco, Mexico.
- Proximity of 2 indigenous languages from 2 different language families: Yokot'an (Mayan) & Nahuatl (Utu-Aztecan).
- All interactions among the local population are conducted in Spanish, which remains the language of media, formal education, religion, socialization and local economy.

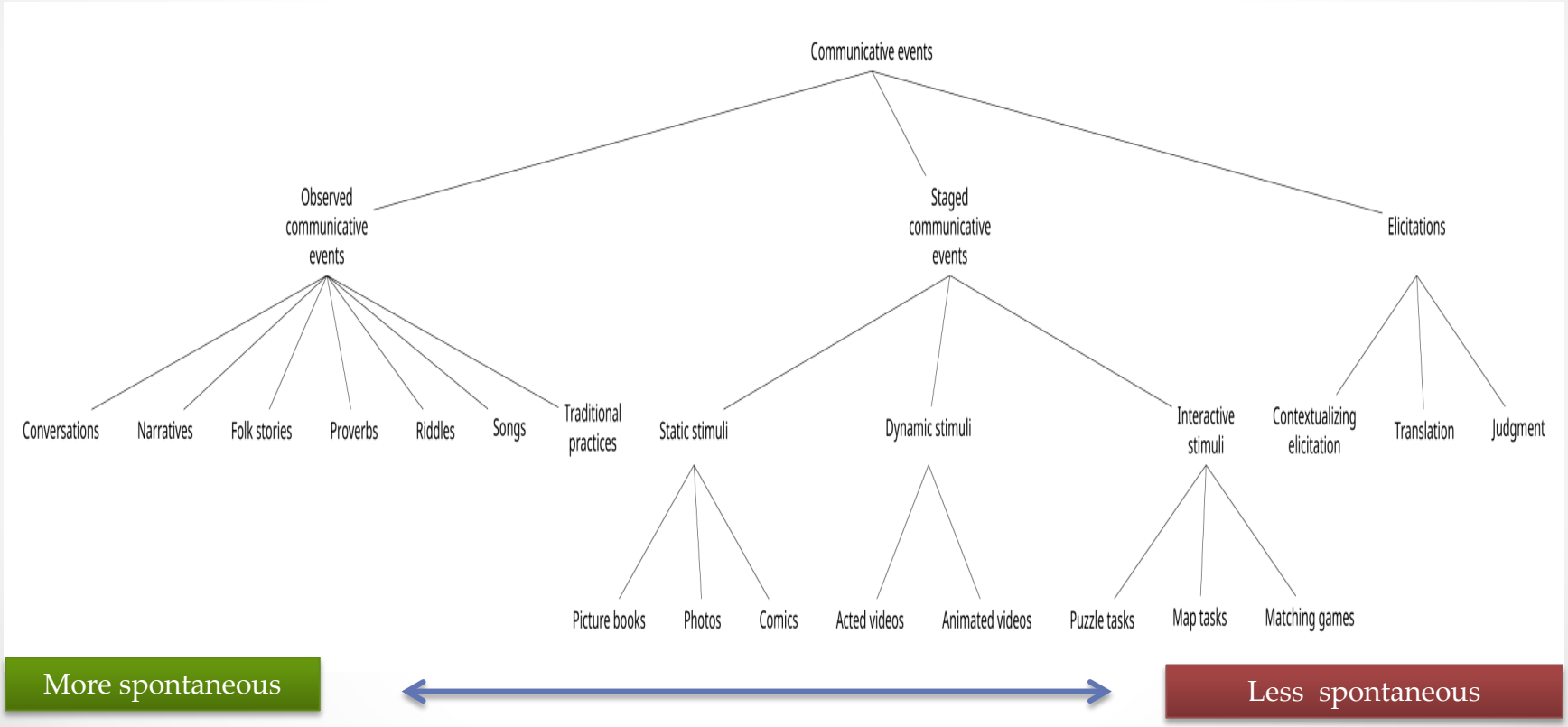
Ayapaneco: a critically endangered language

- 15 speakers between the ages of 68 and 90 years old. All of them bilinguals in Ayapaneco and Spanish.
- 0.3% of total population
- Language rarely used in daily life
- Disconnected "pockets" of speakers
- The traditional transmission of the language stopped approximately 60 years ago.



Data collection methods

Methods for collecting communicative events



Himmelmann 1998

Varied sample of communicative events

- Ideally, we want to collect a varied sample of communicative events, but when working with populations of critically endangered languages we might face some unexpected drawbacks!
- Let's illustrate some of these drawbacks with Ayapaneco

Observed communicative events

- Given the low number of speakers and their limited use of Ayapaneco in everyday life, the opportunities for collecting this type of communicative events are rare
- This means we have to spend more time in field site to collect these communicative events

Staged communicative events

- Since they are elders, Ayapaneco speakers have hearing and visual impairments
- Available stimuli sets (static, dynamic & interactive) are not designed to take into consideration age-related impairments

Elicitations

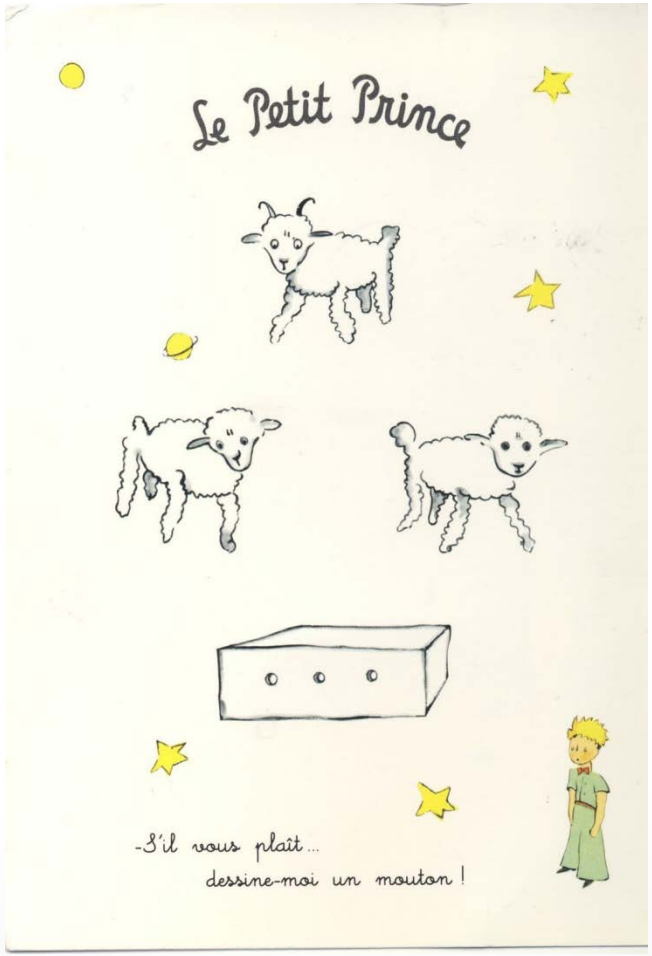
- Collaborators tire quickly due to age-related physical conditions
- I could only do 40 minutes to an hour of elicitation a day, every other day, with them!
- Think twice about your 600-item paradigm list to cover in one work session!

Personal preferences

- I soon noticed collaborators prefer some types of communicative events over others
  - You don't want to force anyone to do anything they don't like to do!
- These preferences translated into different language performances shown in my data
- Variation in performance could correlate to profile of speaker
- It takes time to identify these preferences
- Once identified, the quality of your data will be improved

The Little Prince syndrome

Please draw me a sheep!



Ayapaneco preferences

Staged communicative events

Type	C1	C2	C3	C4
Elicitation	✓			✓
Transcription & translation			✓	✓
Judgment (metalinguistic)			✓	
Stimuli (static, dynamic, interactive)		✓	✓	✓
Texts (narratives, folk stories)	✓	✓	✓	
Conversations			✓	✓

Observed communicative events

Language partners

- Just because 2 people speak the same language or are family members, it doesn't mean they have something in common to talk about
- If you force language partnerships, your data will suffer
- Social dynamics among speakers are as important as data collection methods, especially when you have only 4 speakers

Take home message

- Language endangerment is multidimensional and dynamic
- Be ready to find speaker profiles that you might not expect
- Challenge your own linguistic definitions
  - Especially what it means to speak X language and what constitutes a speaker
- Time and patience. You need a lot of both!
- Building strong personal relationships with speakers and larger community is a must
  - If you feel uncomfortable "getting too close" to community members, reconsider working in critically endangered language communities

Take home message

- Identify personal preferences in communicative events
  - Participants are individuals, not a mass-produced type of speaker
- The Little Prince syndrome
- Knowing and acknowledging social dynamics among speakers is as important as data collection methods
- Adapt your methods
- Think outside of the box

Thank you! Des questions?

Parroquia de San Miguel Arcángel,
Ayapa Tabasco

Stay in touch

Jhonnatan.rangelmurueta@inalco.fr

Academia.edu
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http://inalco.academia.edu/jhonnatanrangel

twitter
@jhonnrangel