

# Responsible linguistics and observer's paradox: fieldwork experience from Nahuatl communities in Huasteca Potosina, Mexico

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- Principles of ethical, responsible linguistic fieldwork
- 'Observer's paradox' and other factors influencing language documentation and revitalization work
- Experience from Huasteca Potosina, Mexico (Nahuatl)
- Conclusions and implications

# Ethical principles of documentation and observer's paradox

- Inform consultants about all possible uses of the data (obtain informed consent)
- The research relationship must involve continuous negotiation and respect of collaborator's trust
- Recompensation with products of the documentation (eg. pedagogical materials) and other work (advice, work with or for the community)
- Involvement with the speech community

# Prior ideological clarification

- Prior ideological clarification (Fishman 1991) - honest **assessment of attitudes towards the language** - how people feel about using it and preserving it
- Need for **impartial assessment of language vitality**
- "**Rhetoric gap**" (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1998: 75): perception and conceptualization of "the culture" differ widely from actual patterns of behavior
- These need to be addressed before any meaningful action can be taken

# Observer's paradox: Labov (1972)

Labov (1972: 209)

‘the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain these data by systematic observation.’

**"Observer's paradox"**: the effect of the fieldworker in which awareness of being observed causes speakers to alter their behavior from the "natural" way that they would otherwise speak

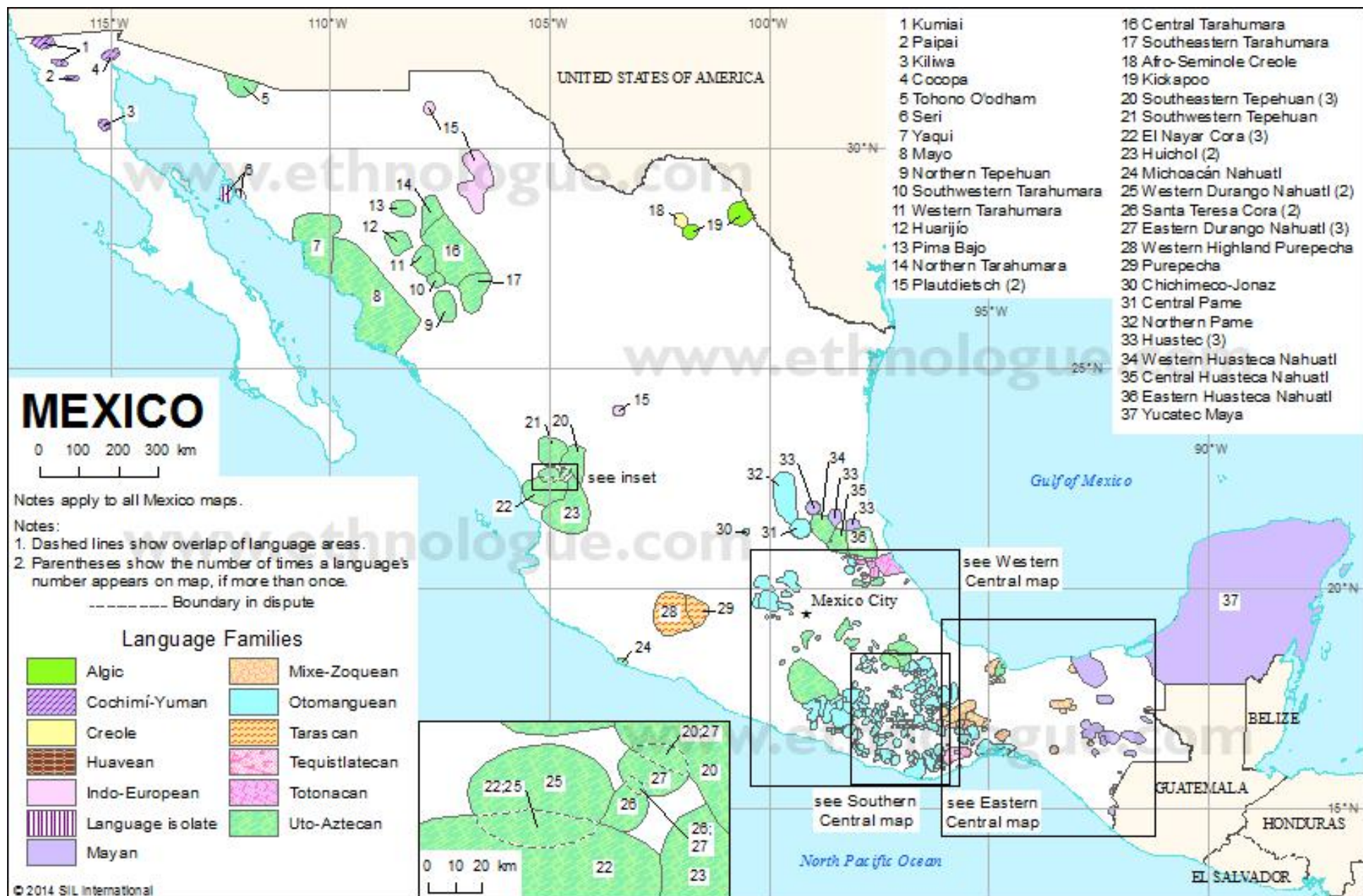
- **Solution**: find interview contexts in which the amount of attention informants pay to their speech is decreased, increase attention paid to content and diminish attention paid to form

# Other factors influencing fieldwork

- Characteristics of the interviewer (e.g. gender, age, experience, social background, and race)
- Characteristics of the interview itself (e.g. relationship between interviewer and consultant, methodology used to gather data, the role of the fieldworker in the interview situation)
- Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994):
  - Effects of interviewer race on vernacular usage in interviews by African American and white field-workers with an African American Vernacular English-speaking teenager; **more reliable data come from interviews with same-race field-workers**
- Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994), Cukor-Avila and Bailey (2000)
  - Suggest that **any effects of race of the interviewer can be reduced by other factors such as familiarity, the amount of time spent in the community**
- Montgomery (1998: 117)
  - Effects of fieldworker's gender: "both men and women are more sensitive to the face of women they are speaking with than to that of men. In other words, they are more polite" with women

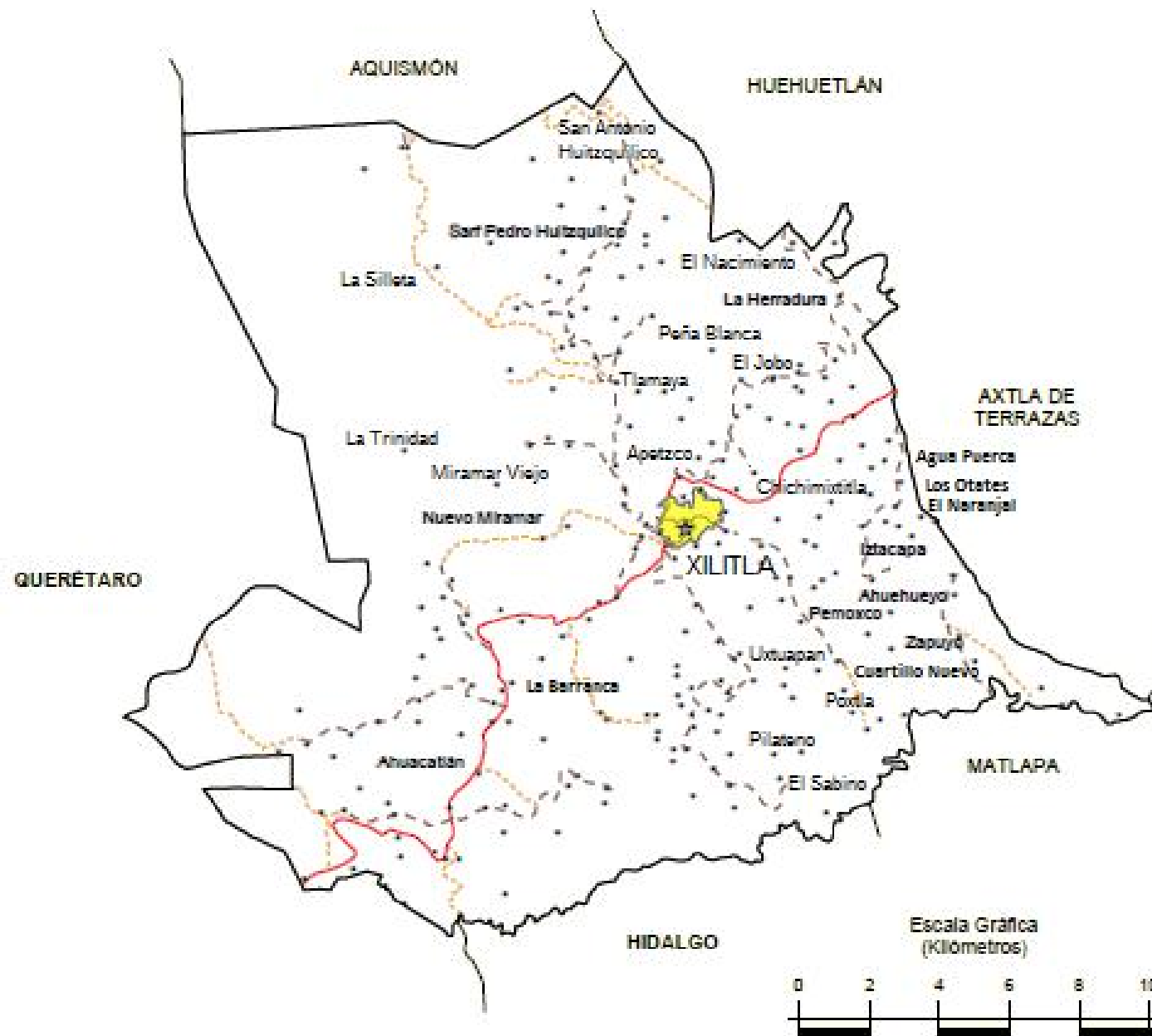
# Fieldworker within community's social networks

- Milroy (1987: 2)
  - Necessity of studying language in context, **social networks** of speakers being studied and the **location of the fieldworker within those social networks**
- Wertheim (2006)
  - The simultaneous insider and outsider status of the fieldworker, whose social status may change over time, may allow access to a wide range of speech styles over the course of extended fieldwork



Source: <http://www.ethnologue.com>





Source: INEGI arco Geoestadístico Municipal 2005, versión 3.1.

# Huasteca Potosina - Linguistic situation

- Xilitla, population: 52,000 (INEGI, 2015)
- 45% speaks an indigenous language, mostly Nahuatl
- language policy & reality
- racism and discrimination
- bilingual education (kindergarten, primary school) and intercultural universities - symbolic value (anthem, cardboard books etc.)
- intergenerational transmission interrupted
- linguistic landscape
- dynamics in different villages
- migration, social mobility
- language ideology
- influence of Spanish on Nahuatl lexicon and morphosyntax
- previous research on Nahuatl in the region



Photo: Elwira Sobkowiak

# Reseracher's academic needs

- PhD dissertation: Language contact and change (Nahuatl and Tének and Spanish induced changes in both indigenous languages):
  - lexical and morphosyntactic change,
  - code mixing,
  - factors in language change (gender, age, social mobility, migration, education etc)
- Documentation of oral tradition (Foundation for Endangered Languages 2015 grant)
- Documentation projects at the University of Warsaw
- Methodology:
  - participant observation, elicitation, sociolinguistic interviews, written texts, recording of audio and video, social media
- Researchers' profile:
  - beginner linguist, unmarried woman, white European, privileged, potentially with resources for collaboration

# Researcher and the Nahua community

- Language revitalization:
  - talks at schools about cultural and linguistic heritage, applying Nahuatl in future work, orthography workshops
- Length of stay in Xilitla
- Level of fluency in Nahuatl
- Networking
- Engagement with the local community



Photo: Hilario Sánchez



# Presence of researcher and attitudes towards work with Nahuatl

**Statement of purpose** - in the Huasteca to learn and study Nahuatl and culture - **met with surprise**

Attitudes of the speech community:

'Foreigners give us an example to follow'

'Our language is spoken by a foreigner, it must be important then'

Attitudes of the mainstream culture representatives and officials:

'Face of Nahuatl'

Fundraising for revitalization projects made easy(ier)?

Racism and collaboration with local government

'They listen to you, and they don't listen to us'



Photo: David Cayetano

# Study of language change

- Spanish used in interviews - often increased use of Spanish in responses (code mixing or wish to be understood?)
- Use of recording equipment: increased code-mixing or stress of the consultants? (also at schools)
- Speaking better Nahuatl: 'I would have prepared myself if I had known I had to speak in Nahuatl'
- Work in Xilitla (municipality capital), some mestizo villages and in remote villages (different results depending on geographical location)
  - Shyness of people not used to working with foreigners but once more confidence gained better data collected

# Work at schools

- Work at primary and secondary schools - language identity workshops, interviews with students
- White woman speaking Spanish with a foreign accent - gaining trust with students essential (requires time, patience, adequate methodology of work)
- Nahuatl story contests: 'sensitive' or controversial stories
- Shyness and Nahuatl:
  - Some students speak less than others (although their Nahuatl may be their first language), girls tend to be shyer than boys
  - Boys visibly use more Nahuatl than girls, secret language of communication so teachers cannot understand them
- Results of interviews with students

## Interview with AAT, 13 years old, TS Peña Blanca (file: DM650208)

- Background: Student AAT Speaks Spanish with his parents, but Nahuatl with grandparents, parents speak Spanish with each other
- ES (Elwira Sobkowiak): 'Que piensan tus papás sobre náhuatl?'
- **AAT: 'Que es una lengua que todos deben saber'**
- ES: '¿En qué idioma vas a hablar con tus hijos?'
- **AAT: 'No sé, en náhuatl a lo mejor, porque aquí se ocupa este idioma más'**
- ES: '¿Porque?'
- **AAT: 'Porque toda la gente va aprendiendo en esa lengua'**
- ES: '¿Español tambien es util?'
- **AAT: 'Sí'**
- ES: '¿Eres religioso? ¿Hablas con dios? En qué lengua hablas con dios?'
- **AAT: 'En español'**
- ES: 'Piesas que deberian introducir clases en náhuatl en la escuela? Por ejemplo dar las materias en náhuatl en las telesecundarias, o es mejor en español?'
- **AAT: 'Yo creo que sí. De los dos, a lo mejor'**



# Course of Nahuatl

- From high to low attendance
- My involvement, my absence and its consequences: 'they stopped coming because you were not there'



# Observations, lessons learned

- If people know your agenda they answers in interviews may be biased (language attitudes); both speakers and mestizo authorities
- Work with children and their attitudes (biased after revitalization workshops)
- A foreigner speaking the language (and/or investigating it) raises the prestige of the language
- Language speakers want you to learn the purest possible variant of Nahuatl
- If you don't speak the language interlocutors may use more Spanish so you can understand them (not necessarily code mixing!)

# Implications

- Essential: prior investigation about language and language community, their customs and culture
- Learn the language:
  - 'Speaking local languages in the field is often advocated as a method for linguists and anthropologists to obtain better quality data. But it has another beneficial effect: it indicates to the local interlocutors that outsiders not only have things to say to them but that they are also capable of listening to them' (Dobrin 2008: 318)
- Work in several communities, understand your field
- Work with consultants from different age groups, genders
- Use varied reliable methodology to collect data but natural data in particular
- Work towards other people trusting you and feeling relaxed, better data
- No longer engaged in a quest for the 'true' vernacular
- Take your time in the field to understand the culture better, greater emphasis on ethnographic methods (in sociolinguistics)
- Engage in community life
- Be aware of your impact in community and on the language

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