



“*Richin man nkäm ta qach’ab’äl: So that our language doesn’t die*”

What does it mean to say that a language is dead? Or that a language is dying? According to linguist David Crystal, “to say that a language is dead is like saying that a person is dead. It could be no other way—for languages have no existence without people. A language dies when nobody speaks it any more” (1). For Crystal, there are multiple stages that a language undergoes before completely dying; first, there is “immense pressure on the people to speak the dominant language” (78) which is then followed by “a period of emerging bilingualism, as people become increasingly efficient in their new language while still retaining competence in their old. Then, often quite quickly, this bilingualism starts to decline, with the old language giving way to the new;” finally, the language enters the third stage, which is usually, “for most languages, too late” (79). In this third and final stage before language death, “the younger generation becomes increasingly proficient in the new language, identifying more with it, and finding their first language less relevant to their new needs. This is often accompanied by a feeling of shame about using the old language, on the part of the parents as well as their children. Parents use the old language less and less to their children, or in front of their children” (79). To use Crystal’s formulation, language death depends in large part on children learning languages.[i]

In the case of Kaqchikel Maya, one of the twenty-four Indigenous languages spoken in Guatemala today, current use of the language is consistent with what Crystal describes as the second stage. However, it could be argued that it is in the third stage in some regions, given language shift and the predominance of bilingualism and code-switching (*xolon tzij*) among Kaqchikels. In the Guatemalan Highlands, Kaqchikel speakers also use expressions of language death in their

conceptualizations of these sociolinguistic phenomena: “nikam qach’ab’äl” (our language is dying). Because of the opportunities that knowing the dominant language (Spanish) offers, many parents opt to teach their children Spanish as opposed to Kaqchikel. Underscoring socioeconomic inequalities, Kaqchikel intellectual Waqi’ Q’anil Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil connects language loss to the poverty, and in some cases extreme poverty, that many Kaqchikel speakers face on a day-to-day basis (32).

The perceived and tangible benefits of knowing Spanish contribute to language shift and diminished usage of Kaqchikel (England 2003). For example, in San Juan Comalapa, a prominent Kaqchikel town in the Guatemalan highlands, anthropologist and linguist Susan Garzon has noted that “the trend toward teaching children Spanish as a first language is accelerating, at least among families who provide a secondary education for their children” (145). In many Maya communities in Guatemala, Indigenous languages are on the path to extinction; the linguistic and cultural influence of Spanish and its association with economic opportunity is palpable, and the traumatic consequences of the Guatemalan armed conflict (1960-1996) have left a lasting impact on these languages’ speakers. As Mixe linguist Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil (2021) so aptly argues, languages do not just die out. There are external forces that endanger these languages, causing harm to their speakers and, by extension, jeopardizing their continued existence.

There are limitations, however, in the linear model that Crystal proposes with his evolutionary conceptualization of language death. Namely, such a structural, Western approach does not recognize the potential for speakers to navigate complexities of language access, retention, and revitalization. Language loss does not necessarily have to progress on an inevitable continuum toward the language’s eventual death, nor does violence always produce silence. There is space for decolonial resistance to push back against language loss; notable examples include the annual initiatives—in Guatemala and abroad—held on February 21<sup>st</sup> in honor of the Día Internacional de la Lengua Materna (International Mother Language Day). Actively taking steps to sustain their language and fight back against language loss, Kaqchikel intellectuals have prioritized community work and have collaborated with the Ministerio de Educación to publish and create audio recordings of children’s poetry and songs. Drawing on my field research from 2010 to 2019, I have identified three songs that Kaqchikel parents and instructors have used with children and Maya language learners of all ages: “Jun ti sanik” (A little ant), “Xseqär nana” (Good morning, ma’am), and “Chila’ pa nujuyu” (Over on my hill); pedagogically, these songs target numbers, greetings, and imperative verbs (Miller 36).

As part of Pan-Maya activism, there is a particular push for Maya youth to know Maya languages, so that they are able to preserve them, and avoid language death. Ideally, children will be able to pass Kaqchikel on to future generations; they will contribute to Kaqchikel’s conservation and continuity as they navigate the multilingual sociolinguistic milieu in Guatemala, taking steps towards preserving and protecting this piece of the world’s linguistic and cultural diversity. If we do not act, language death is a real threat.

Featured Image by JohanSwanepoel via Deposit Photos.

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[i]. On the topic of language learning and the survival of languages, see also Grenoble and Whaley 2006, Hinton and Hale 2001, England 2003, and Hagège 2009.