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### **Abstract**

Speaking Isthmus Zapotec has represented different forms of material and symbolic capital at different times and places throughout the pre-Hispanic, colonial and post-colonial history of Mexico. This chapter explores the shifting and contrasting discourses of value around the language in the current era of neoliberal multiculturalism drawing on an ethnographic study of the use of Isthmus Zapotec in educational contexts in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The effects of educational politics across historical eras and into the present have largely devalued Isthmus Zapotec use and contributed to the material inequalities experienced by Isthmus Zapotec speakers. The social capital associated with Isthmus Zapotec remains subject to negotiation, however, as local actors continue to revalue Isthmus Zapotec through communal, genealogical and place-based discourses, as well as individualist, ahistorical and mobile discourses. This case illustrates the influence of both politico-economic trends and local agency in the negotiation of linguistic capital, and argues the importance of attending to local counter-discourses.

# “A treasure” and “a legacy”: Individual and Communal (Re)valuing of Isthmus Zapotec in Multilingual Mexico

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Speaking Isthmus Zapotec has represented different forms of material and symbolic capital at different times and places throughout the pre-Hispanic, colonial and post-colonial history of Mexico. This chapter explores the shifting and contrasting discourses of value around the language in the current era of neoliberal multiculturalism drawing on an ethnographic study of the use of Isthmus Zapotec in educational contexts in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The effects of educational politics across historical eras and into the present have largely devalued Isthmus Zapotec use and contributed to the material inequalities experienced by Isthmus Zapotec speakers. The social capital associated with Isthmus Zapotec remains subject to negotiation, however, as local actors continue to revalue Isthmus Zapotec through communal, genealogical and place-based discourses, as well as individualist, ahistorical and mobile discourses. This case illustrates the influence of both politico-economic trends and local agency in the negotiation of linguistic capital, and argues the importance of attending to local counter-discourses.

Before the sun rises the public market in *Juchitán de Zaragoza* is already full of activity. In this city in the center of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, along the Pacific coastal plain of Oaxaca in the south of Mexico, the temperatures are high year-round and some people are happy to buy and sell before the intense sun is fully in the sky. The market remains active all day and into the night as well; when the early-morning fish vendors are gone (selling the catch from the nearby gulf of Tehuantepec) they are replaced by vendors of fruit, vegetables, hand-made tortillas, clothing, kitchenware, and many other things besides. When dusk falls, new vendors arrive to sell bread, locally-made cheeses, tamales, and *bupu* (a corn-cacao-cane sugar-plumeria flower drink). Both locally grown or prepared products and products brought in from elsewhere in Mexico and the world can be purchased in the market. In the noisy, lively atmosphere most vendors will happily sell their wares in *Diidxazá*, the local language, or in Spanish—although some vendors come from outside of the region and speak only Spanish, or Spanish and another Indigenous language, most commonly *Ombeayuits* (Huave). While transactions among adults and elders commonly occur in *Diidxazá*, most people speak only Spanish to children or adolescents who come to shop for their families or to stand outside the building and sell their mothers' *gueta suqui* (oven-made tortillas) out of baskets carried over their arms. Many youth are able to understand the *Diidxazá* use around them, but interact mainly or only in Spanish. When a

*huada* (foreign woman), such as myself, addresses the adult vendors in Diidxazá to make a purchase, some simply carry out the transaction as normal with no visible reaction, while others break out into a grin or a look of surprise, commenting to their neighbors that this foreigner speaks Diidxazá. They often go on to provide compliments and encouragement, saying that it's good to speak Diidxazá, it's a beautiful language.<sup>1</sup>

Language practices in the marketplace, as in other social spaces of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, are influenced by numerous social and historical factors. In this paper, I explore changes in the use and valuation of Diidxazá (an Indigenous language of Mesoamerica also called Isthmus Zapotec)<sup>2</sup> in education and other social spaces. Beginning with a historical analysis of the status of IZ across four different political and economic eras, I then focus on discourses and counter-discourses about the symbolic capital of IZ in the contemporary context. By tracing how the educational use of Isthmus Zapotec has been valued under different political and economic systems, from before the waves of European invasion, through the eras of colonization, nationalism, and under current neoliberal, internationally-oriented politics, I argue the need to recognize different discourses of value across time and among social groups. On one hand, it is clear that changes in political and economic conditions have had a significant impact on discourses and practices relating to Diidxazá education and use. On the other hand, this case illustrates how the perceived value of Diidxazá is subject to on-going negotiation; as in the public market of Juchitán described above, the linguistic marketplace where Diidxazá is evaluated and exchanged is characterized by many voices and local forms of organization, which remain impactful alongside the influences of global politico-economic structures.

The following section describes the methodology, context and conceptual framing of the paper. I then turn to shifts in the value of Diidxazá across different eras and among different social actors, concluding with discussion of the multiple forms of value present in the current linguistic market.

### Language and Value in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec

My analysis of this context draws on a larger study which employed ethnographic monitoring (De Korne & Hornberger, in press; Hornberger, 2013; Van der Aa & Blommaert, 2011) to examine the use of Isthmus Zapotec in a variety of formal and non-formal education settings (De Korne, 2016). This study spanned 2013 to 2015, during which time I resided in the Isthmus for 17 months and made several shorter follow-up visits. In this paper, I draw on fieldnotes, interviews, document collection and linguistic landscape documentation collected during this time, as well as secondary sources which situate this ethnographic data historically. I triangulate the above sources of data in order to analyze discourses and practices of valuing Diidxazá manifested by a range of actors in formal education, including parents and caregivers, primary school teachers and administrators, and higher education teachers and students. This sample is

<sup>1</sup> This vignette summarizes numerous fieldnotes collected during my 17-month ethnographic study, as discussed further in the introduction; e.g. fieldnotes 130408, 131224, 141122 (Fieldnote and interview notation lists the code of the interviewee and the year, month, day. All names of people are pseudonyms.)

<sup>2</sup> I use Diidxazá, Isthmus Zapotec, and the abbreviation IZ interchangeably.

certainly not fully representative of the practices and perspectives of all Diidxazá speakers, learners and educators; however, through a longitudinal, ethnographic perspective I hope to offer a contextualized understanding of the multiple, often over-lapping discourses at play.

The territory that is now Mexico has been inhabited by numerous sociolinguistic groups, who have come into contact and conflict over many centuries, making it an apt context within which to consider changes in language valuation, educational practice and social well-being. Of the five Indigenous languages present in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Isthmus Zapotec is by far the most numerically dominant today with an estimated 85,000 speakers.<sup>3</sup> As described in the opening vignette, Diidxazá is currently an integral part of communication practices in Juchitán and several other municipalities in the Isthmus, including social domains from local commerce to social gatherings and the home. There is an active Diidxazá literary movement dating at least to the early 20th century, including poetry, narrative, traditional music and hip-hop. An un-marked alphabet was established in 1956 (La Sociedad Pro-Planeación del Istmo, 1956) and is used in formal written production, but the majority of speakers have not learned it.

The vast majority of residents of the Isthmus also speak Spanish, and an increasing number are monolingual or dominant in Spanish, especially among younger generations. The dominance of Spanish has been and continues to be promoted through the education system, as discussed further in historical perspective in the following sections. The majority of youth attend Spanish-only schools, while a minority attend nominally bilingual schools where IZ is taught one hour per week at the primary level, and not at all in higher levels. Spanish occupies the most prestigious social spaces outside of education as well, such as government offices and banks.

In the Isthmus, as elsewhere in the world, schooling and wider politico-economic conditions play crucial roles in establishing the value of certain language practices, and devaluing others (Bourdieu, 1991; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Levinson, Foley, & Holland, 1996). Bourdieu's (1977) *market of linguistic exchanges* provides a framework for understanding how the perceived value or *symbolic capital* associated with Diidxazá use in school and society translates into political hierarchies and material inequalities. Formal education holds a key role in the linguistic market as an "instrument of the reproduction of linguistic capital" (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 651–652). Schools often serve to validate power hierarchies and reinforce marginalization through both discursive or symbolic and physical forms of exclusion (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Fairclough, 1989; Illich, 1970). In Mexico there is a high value placed on Spanish (and increasingly on English) in schooling, while Isthmus Zapotec and other Indigenous languages have historically been considered to have little or no value, giving their speakers little or no social capital.

The *relations of symbolic power* that influence communication practices and control the linguistic market are context-specific, as Bourdieu (1977) states:

<sup>3</sup> Isthmus Zapotec is one of approximately 62 varieties that make up the Zapotec branch of the Otomanguean language family (Pérez Báez, 2011). After Nahuatl and Yucatan Maya, Zapotec is considered the Indigenous language with most speakers in Mexico (441,769 according to the Ethnologue, Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2015), although these figures overlook the internal diversity and lack of intelligibility between varieties of Zapotec.

Linguistic competence (like any other cultural competence) functions as linguistic capital in relationship with a certain market. This is demonstrated by generalized linguistic devaluations, which may occur suddenly (as a result of political revolution), or gradually (as a result of a slow transformation of material and symbolic power relations, e.g. the steady devaluation of French on the world market relative to English). (p. 651)

This context-specific understanding of linguistic capital is crucial to an analysis of the changes that have taken place—and are on-going—in relation to the values associated with Diidxazá. The competencies that constitute capital in education and society today are inevitably different from those valued in the past. In order to understand the current workings of the linguistic market, it is necessary to consider the material and symbolic power relations within which language practices occur. This study of Isthmus Zapotec education illustrates the ways that educational institutions have policed social capital through language under colonial, national, and most recently, neoliberal regimes of governance.

One of the marked features of power relations in Mexico in recent decades has been the trend towards privatization of services and resources, and increasing integration in international economic markets (Overmyer-Velázquez, 2010; Stavenhagen, 2015). Commonly referred to as the neoliberal or late liberal era, these political and economic trends have been accompanied by an increase in policies of cultural recognition and human rights in Mexico, and elsewhere in Latin America (Garcia, 2005; Hale, 2005; Muehlmann, 2009). These structural changes may influence the practices and discourses of both language and education in a variety of ways, from impacting how public education is designed and implemented (Levinson, 2005; Sayer, 2015), to creating new discourses about language use (Muehlmann, 2008; Yoshioka, 2010). Under the influence of neoliberal politics, language education may become focused on the production of a skill or commodity which facilitates global trade in the free market economy (Flores, 2013). Additionally, there is an emphasis on the recognition of cultural and linguistic diversity; however, this rhetorical recognition does little or nothing to change material inequalities (Hale, 2005; Overmyer-Velázquez, 2010). In recognition of this, scholars have warned that neoliberal politics of respect for multiculturalism or multilingualism can function to control and assimilate cultural difference, rather than promote it (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009; Garcia, 2005; Speed, 2005). In this paper I sketch some of the influences that policies and discourses of recognition for Indigenous languages in Mexico and abroad are having on the linguistic market in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, where Isthmus Zapotec is taking on new forms of value relative to its status on local, national, and global markets.

As influential as economic and political structures can be, scholars of social change and inequality, including Bourdieu, also recognize the role of agency amidst systemic and structural power imbalances. They attend to the *counterpublics*, or “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1992, p. 123). Povinelli (2011) examines such *spaces of otherwise* and their endurance amidst the dominating ideological and material conditions of the late liberal era in which she writes, despite attempts to bracket or erase them. Such spaces and endurance have arguably been present in



all historical eras and all formations of social inequality. As Bourdieu (1977) puts it, “Discourse is a compromise formation, emerging from the negotiation between the expressive interest and the censorship inherent in particular linguistic production relations [...] which is imposed on a speaker” (p. 651). In this paper, I aim to attend to these forms of compromise and negotiation in conjunction with wider structural factors and politico-economic processes, bringing attention to the agents who may be overlooked by generalizing structural analyses. As such, I begin by considering changes in the linguistic market upon which Diidxazá has been valued at different times, and then turn to an analysis of the multiple, negotiated interpretations of symbolic capital associated with Diidxazá use by education actors in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec today. While for some people Isthmus Zapotec is considered to represent different kinds of value on different markets, for others it holds no exchange value on the linguistic markets in which they operate.

### Shame and Silence Through Schooling: The Price of Colonialism and Nationalism

This section traces how Diidxazá has been valued during different political and economic eras up to the present day. The geographical spread and large number of speakers of Diidxazá today relative to other Indigenous groups in the Isthmus is an echo of the presence and power of the Zapotec empire in pre-colonial Mesoamerica. Zapotecs developed a hierarchical empire, governing much of what is now Oaxaca from around 500 BCE to 900 CE, and subsequently maintaining smaller centers of power in regional city-states. They developed pictographic and semi-phonemic writing systems which were taught to the social elite, as well as sophisticated vigesimal (base 20) mathematics, astronomy and architecture (de la Cruz, 2008; Romero Frizzi, 2003; Urcid, 2005). Zapotecs from the valley city-state of Zaachila migrated down to the Isthmus around 1400 CE as the Aztec influence was creeping in to the region. The Zapotecs who settled in the Isthmus displaced and occasionally clashed with other Indigenous groups over land (Miano Borruso, 2002). These struggles amidst Mesoamerican powers took an unpredictable turn a century later with the beginning of the Spanish invasion in 1519.

Although records of everyday Zapotec life under colonial rule are not numerous, it was generally a time of hardship, including heavy tolls from new diseases, forced labor in *haciendas*<sup>4</sup> and struggles to pay the tributes required by the colonial government. In 1521, there were 24,000 Indigenous residents of the Isthmus recorded as paying tribute; in 1550, there were 6,000, and only 60 years after the invasion in 1580 the population paying tribute had dropped over 80% to 4,000 (Acuña, 1984, as cited in Barabas & Bartolomé, 1999, p. 71), indicating that the population as a whole was also in sharp decline. There were rebellions against Spanish exploitation throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, with the most famous being the 1660 rebellion of Tehuantepec, where the Isthmus Zapotecs succeeded in governing the city of Tehuantepec for one year before the colonial government retook the city, gruesomely punishing the local leaders (Miano Borruso, 2002). Despite the Spanish confiscation of most material resources, such as arable land and the prized salt flats along the Pacific coast, an alternative *commercial circuit* of

<sup>4</sup> Lands ceded to Spanish owners, including the Indigenous people who lived on them, and used for cattle and agricultural production.

economic exchanges was maintained among the Indigenous communities of the region during the colonial era (Acosta Márquez, 2007, p. 14).

In addition to severe material and physical exploitation, the symbolic devaluing of Indigenous peoples and languages was firmly established under Spanish colonial rule, enhanced by the introduction of formal education and alphabetic literacy (Maldonado Alvarado, 2002). The Zapotec writing systems, previously restricted to a minority, were not transmitted and subsequently lost; the Indigenous population was considered illiterate, and their languages termed *dialectos*, lesser forms of communication. Indigenous forms of linguistic and cultural expression were accorded no social value, and Indigenous people were positioned at the bottom of the colonial social hierarchy. As Robles (1977) comments, “[u]na organización predominantemente feudal colocaba a la gran mayoría de aborígenes en posición explotada y marginada de los favores del gran desarrollo de los servicios educativos de entonces” (p. 17).<sup>5</sup>

Following independence from Spain in 1821, a nation-building ideology prevailed in Mexico, with political leaders no longer ignoring the Indigenous population, but instead attempting to include and assimilate them (Heath, 1972). The Mexican revolution in 1910–1920 resulted in a further centralist, assimilationist political environment, which the national *Secretaría de Educación Pública*<sup>6</sup> supported, following its founding in 1921 (Martínez Vásquez, 2004). The first regional teacher training college in the Isthmus, the *Escuela Normal Regional de Juchitán*,<sup>7</sup> opened in 1926, and an increasing number of primary and secondary schools followed (Ruíz Martínez, 2013). It was as a result of this aggressive national campaign for school construction and Spanish-language literacy that use of Spanish began to become more common among the general population in Oaxaca in the 1940s (Hamel, 2008b; Sicoli, 2011).

In summary, the era of mandatory public schooling in Mexico—officially beginning with the 1867 *Ley de Instrucción Pública*,<sup>8</sup> although not becoming truly established until the founding and subsequent expansion of the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* in 1920 (Robles, 1977)—has perpetuated social inequalities and largely been a space that excludes Indigenous languages and sociocultural practices. López Gopar (2007) discusses the dominance of a Eurocentric and autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1984), which excludes past and present Indigenous multimodal literacies in favor of an alphabet-centric view of language development. Rebolledo (2008) describes the “national monolingual educational model imposed on bilingual students” as characterized by “a series of conventional teaching patterns and the curricular rigidity of basic education: school has been designed for a culturally homogenous population, within which Indian characteristics do not fit” (p. 104).

Although use of Diidxazá continues among adult generations and in specific social domains, as described above, widespread educational ideologies and practices that devalue Isthmus Zapotec have resulted in the association of shame

<sup>5</sup> A predominantly feudal organization placed the vast majority of Indigenous people in an exploited position, marginalized from the favors of the great development of educational services of the time. (all translations mine)

<sup>6</sup> Secretary of Public Education

<sup>7</sup> Regional Normal School of Juchitán

<sup>8</sup> Law of Public Instruction



and prejudice with the language. There is an increasing practice of raising children primarily through Spanish, in particular in middle and upper-class neighborhoods (Augsburger, 2004; Cata, 2003; McComsey, 2015). I was told time and again that Diidxazá is not being passed on because many people continue to think that it is a *dialecto* (qualitatively different than a language like Spanish or English) and that if children grow up speaking it they will not speak Spanish well, or will have a hard time learning Spanish. As one mother commented,

LV-4: *Mis hijos, la niña de 12 años y el niño de 9, no hablan el zapoteco. Ya hace como 10 años que los niños que vienen naciendo, a partir de diez años atrás, ya no están hablando, ya no están aprendiendo el zapoteco, ya nosotros los papás como que les hablamos más en el español, para no confundirlos con el zapoteco. Porque a veces cuando nosotros, en mi caso no, que desde niña hablé el zapoteco, y aprender el español sí fue un poco complicado, [...] la mezcla del español y zapoteco, era muy difícil. Pues la gente que según esto ya sabía mucho, se le parecía como naco, pues hablar así, sí, sí daba un poco de vergüenza.* (LV-4 131113)<sup>9</sup>

As in many parts of the world, schooling played a significant role in placing Diidxazá and other local languages at the bottom of the linguistic hierarchy in Mexico (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009; Tollefson, 1991). A nominally bilingual (Indigenous language-Spanish) education system has existed under different titles and formats since the 1960s, but has generally functioned to transition students to use of Spanish without developing bilingual or biliterate capacities (Coronado Suzán, 1992; Hamel, 2008a, 2008b; Rebolledo, 2010) and without significantly raising the symbolic capital of the language. While many people with whom I spoke felt that there was more prejudice towards use of Diidxazá in the past, others noted that it carries on in the present. A young woman in her early twenties was one of many people who discussed the legacy of school-based discrimination, describing her small town primary school in an interview:

H: Cuándo estuviste en la escuela en [un pueblo pequeño] no había nada de zapoteco en la escuela?

LV-2: *Nada. Ahí tenía varios compañeros que sí hablaban el zapoteco y para eso deben estar callados toda la clase porque no se les permitía hablar el zapoteco. Entonces se quedaban sin recreo si hablaban, una palabra y se quedaban; entonces ahí fue donde ya se fue perdiendo poco a poco y dice mi mamá que desde que ella estaba, cuando ella empezó ir a la primaria le hicieron lo mismo que ya prohibían desde ese entonces que aprendieran que hablaran el zapoteco dentro del salón, dentro de la escuela más bien. Desde ahí ya como que ya se fue perdiendo.* (LV-2 131107)<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> LV-4: My children, the 12-year-old girl and 9-year-old boy, don't speak Zapotec. Now for about 10 years the children who are being born, since 10 years ago, now they're not speaking, now they're not learning Zapotec, now we, the parents, it's like we speak to them more in Spanish, so as not to confuse them with Zapotec. Because sometimes when we, in my case, that since childhood I spoke Zapotec and learning Spanish was a bit complicated, [...] the mix of Spanish and Zapotec, it was really difficult. Well the people who apparently already knew a lot, it appeared to them like *naco* [[uncouth, low class]], to speak like that, yes, yes it gave some shame.

<sup>10</sup> H: When you were in the [primary] school in [a town] there was no Zapotec in the school?

LV-2: None. There I had several classmates that spoke Zapotec and because of that they have to be silent for the whole class because they weren't permitted to speak in Zapotec. So they stayed without recess if they spoke, one word and they stayed; so that was where it went being lost bit by bit and my

Silence and the exclusion of Diidxazá have thus been part of the common educational experience of several generations of children in the Isthmus, contributing to the internalized prejudices that are widespread today. The devaluing of the symbolic capital of Diidxazá and other Indigenous languages during the colonial era, followed by the attribution of capital primarily to Spanish (and in particular to Spanish monolingualism) during the nation-building era, has had a clear and lasting effect on the linguistic market in the Isthmus, as elsewhere in Mexico and the post-colonial world.

### **Rights and Recognition: Negotiating the Neoliberal Multicultural Market**

Mexico has shifted to an official policy of *pluriculturalism* with the recognition of the presence of Indigenous peoples in Mexico's constitution in 1992 (article 2), the San Andrés Accords in 1996, and the Law on the Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2003 (*Ley general de derechos lingüísticos de los pueblos indígenas*, 2003; López Gopar, 2007; Overmyer-Velázquez, 2010). Numerous scholars have critiqued the "politics of recognition" that appear increasingly popular in post-colonial, liberal states, noting that they objectify and ultimately control the social difference represented by Indigenous languages and cultures, without substantially altering material disadvantages experienced by minority communities (Brown, 2006; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009; Coulthard, 2007; Povinelli, 2011), resulting in "folkloric poverty" (Overmyer-Velázquez, 2010). Hale (2005) argues that a focus on cultural rights and recognition is a hallmark of current trends of neoliberal political and economic reforms, describing how "neoliberal multiculturalism" in Latin America has involved "restructur[ing] the arena of political contention, driving a wedge between cultural rights and the assertion of the control over resources necessary for those rights to be realized" (p. 13).

The advancement of privatization and internationalization policies in Mexico<sup>11</sup> is a prime example; the same year that Mexico changed the constitution to recognize Indigenous languages, they also changed the constitution to privatize land that had been communally held, a policy which has had dire consequences for subsistence farmers, among which Indigenous people are highly represented (Appendini, 2012). The 1994 North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement, including the restructuring of agriculture and resource management towards export crops and extraction, is another manifestation of neoliberal policy which has had a negative material impact on Indigenous Mexican communities (López Bárcenas, 2009), causing migration and demographic shifts which weaken cultural and linguistic ties (Pérez Báez, 2013; Yoshioka, 2010). As a result, apparent gains in struggles for social equality often remain at the rhetorical level; meanwhile "[t]he nightmare settles in as indigenous organizations win important battles of cultural rights only to find themselves mired in the painstaking, technical, administrative, and highly inequitable negotiations for resources and political power that follow" (Hale, 2005, p. 13).

While forms of colonial and national assimilatory governance continue to be reflected in language education discourses in Mexico as discussed in the previous

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mom says that since when she was there, when she began to go to primary school they did the same to her, that they already forbid back then that people would learn, would speak Zapotec inside the classroom, inside the school rather. From there already, like that's how it's been getting lost.

<sup>11</sup> A topic well beyond the scope of this paper. See Appendini (2012), Guillén Romo (2005), Overmyer-Velázquez (2010), among others.

section, neoliberal and multicultural recognition politics also have an emerging influence. On the national level recent efforts to make *interculturalism* part of public schooling are an example of superficial neoliberal multiculturalism, characterized by celebrating cultural difference without considering the hierarchies and power dynamics among groups (Velasco Cruz, 2010; Walsh, 2010). On the regional level, many teachers and school directors in the Isthmus have adopted a rhetorical alignment with Indigenous language promotion, even if their practices (and perhaps more significantly the centralized curricula and exams that police their practices) have not changed significantly. For example, the current director of the small town primary school attended by the young woman quoted above, who had worked there since before the time when she was a student, expressed regret that students in the school are now largely unable to speak Diidxazá:

*E-4: Quién sabe cuál es la idea de que... este... que le diga a los niños: mira, no hables el zapoteco. Porque muchas veces... o... así pasa, ¿no? Te prohíben decirlo porque supuestamente es un dialecto que no está reconocido. En cambio, fuera el inglés, el francés, el alemán, bueno, ya es otra cosa. Pero el zapoteco como que lo prohíbe la gente aquí. Quién sabe por qué, ¿no? (E-4 140318)<sup>12</sup>*

These comments made in a semi-structured interview with me, a foreign researcher known to be interested in Isthmus Zapotec, exemplify what I observed to be a common stance in favor of the equality of local languages. The director notes that people forbid their children from speaking Isthmus Zapotec due to the misconception that it is an unrecognized dialect—implying that if they were aware of its official recognition, perhaps they would view it in the same light as English, French or German, where it technically belongs. His egalitarian stance does not translate into active practices, however, as the school remains a space largely dedicated to Spanish monolingualism. Comments such as this and many others are indicative of a changing ideological climate surrounding language education in the Isthmus, in which the symbolic capital of Diidxazá has risen in value. The fact that not everyone is part of this discourse of revaluing limits the degree to which schools put the discourse into practice; the opposition of parents to the use of Diidxazá is noted by several school directors as a key factor in their choices (Interviews E-3 140114; E-8 140513).

A positive valuation of local culture, and to a lesser extent language, is also evident among education actors that do not regularly interact with Diidxazá-speaking families, as these school directors do. One example (see Figure 1) comes from an advertisement for the *Centro Escolar Bilingüe Pestalozzi*, a private school located in an urban part of the Isthmus where there is very little Diidxazá use, and whose “bilingual” title refers to English and Spanish. The advertisement shows a woman on a beach in a dress and headpiece worn for regional festivals and ceremonies, and invites the public in Spanish to “be part of our customs and traditions” through attending an exposition of student work, followed by a slogan in English “Isthmus, where culture flourishes (sic)”. While in the past so-called bilingual schools were associated with under-funded public schools for

<sup>12</sup> E-4: Who knows what the idea is that...um...that they say to the children: Look, don't speak Zapotec. Because many times...or... that happens, right? You're forbidden to speak it because supposedly it's a dialect that's not recognized. In contrast, if it were English, French, German, well, then it's another thing. But Zapotec, like people here forbid it. Who knows why, right?

Indigenous children, there are an increasing number of private Spanish-English bilingual schools, some affiliating with European names and pedagogies (such as Montessori, or Pestalozzi as in the case of this school). Interestingly this school aligns with Isthmus “culture” (Figure 1, line 13) through visible indexes like clothing and geography, but through the use of an English slogan, they do not explicitly affiliate with local language.



Figure 1. Photograph of flyer advertising a school event, posted in Tehuantepec, 2015, March 21.<sup>13</sup>

Many people in the Isthmus are interested in learning English, and especially in having their children learn it, seeing it as an important skill for success in schooling and employment in the future (e.g. Fieldnotes 140801; Interviews IP 140915; LV-3 131113). Nonetheless most children in the Isthmus would not be able to attend an English bilingual school like this which charges tuition fees. Josefa, a grandmother who cares for two bilingual (Diidxazá-Spanish) grandchildren explained in an interview how she (like many female caregivers in the region) makes just enough to sustain her family through the painstaking embroidery of the kind of garments shown in the private school’s flyer. She is uncritically grateful for the education provided to her grandchildren in their urban monolingual primary school, and impressed upon them the importance of studying hard in order to succeed. She also joked that I should take them with me in my suitcase, so they can learn English (Interview J-4 141112).

<sup>13</sup> The full text reads: Bilingual School Center/Pestalozzi/Expo-Cultural-Presentation/We invite you to be part of our customs and traditions through expositions of work made by the students, on the 19th and 20th of March starting at 5:00 PM in the municipal plaza, don’t miss it!!/Isthmus, where culture flourishes



The commodification of culture and language through neoliberal multicultural discourses would appear to be of little benefit to people like Josefa and her grandchildren, who continue to lack basic material resources at the bottom of the economic hierarchy, despite being rich in the kinds of symbolic capital celebrated by the politics of recognition. At the same time internationally-oriented institutions capitalize off of the positive association with local culture, making their affiliation with local culture visible and mobile through publicity such as the school's flyer. It is clear that the benefits of recognizing local culture and language as symbolic capital in recent decades have not been universally distributed by the linguistic market in Mexico.

The national-level politics of multiculturalism in Mexico may be superficial and mask ongoing inequities in many ways, yet it is misleading to view them as a unilateral product of neoliberal trends. Mobilizations of Indigenous communities at local, regional, and national levels have played an important role in shifting policies and most importantly in negotiating what results they have locally—beyond the high-profile work of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, responsible for the 1996 San Andrés Accords and to a large extent the 2003 Law of Linguistic Rights (López Bárcenas, 2009; Rebolledo, 2010), there are numerous local self-defining political and cultural initiatives in Indigenous communities across Mexico. In the Isthmus the municipality of Juchitán is known for the election of the independent, left-wing COCEI (*Coalición Obrero-Campesino-Estudiantil del Istmo*)<sup>14</sup> party in 1981 at a time when the rest of the country was run by the PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*), a political movement which incorporated Diidxazá poetry and artwork as an important part of its public displays (Campbell, 1989, 1994; Rubin, 1994).

Through even the briefest contextualization of the struggles over language and culture recognition in Mexico, it becomes clear that there are multiple agents negotiating symbolic power. For example, the urban public school attended by Josefa's bilingual grandchildren, although officially a monolingual school, has facilitated several projects related to Diidxazá as part of a larger effort to improve the social cohesion of students and participation of parents in the school. They hope that by validating local cultural and linguistic practices they will help to counteract the effects of domestic violence, poverty and drugs that have increasingly appeared in the school (Interviews E-9 141717; E-10 140917). They were supported in this initiative by a branch of the state-level teachers union which is promoting participatory education and the revaluing of local knowledge through a proposed state-level reform, the *Plan para la transformación de la educación de Oaxaca*<sup>15</sup> (IEEPO, SNTE, & CNTE, 2013). As a result of these state-level and school-level actors, the two bilingual children performed at the top of their respective classes during Diidxazá activities, visibly proud of the capital that their ability to speak Isthmus Zapotec suddenly represented and eagerly taking up the challenge to write it (Fieldnotes 140602, 140715).

In this example the revaluing of Diidxazá goes beyond the rhetorical level (such as displaying traditional clothing in an advertisement) to influence communicative practices in the classroom. While these practices are not highly visible or mobile, such as the private school's public expo and flyer, they improved the educational

<sup>14</sup> Laborer-peasant-student coalition of the Isthmus

<sup>15</sup> Plan for the transformation of education in Oaxaca

experience and confidence of students who might otherwise feel excluded by formal schooling. Additionally, the teachers' aim was not to promote language or culture in an objectified way, but rather to improve the well-being of the school community, and revaluing local language was one strategy they identified. While the politics of neoliberal multiculturalism may be helping to create a discursive environment in which projects like this are more readily accepted by educational authorities, it is clear that they are not responsible for generating or determining such educational initiatives. Povinelli also argues that the influences of dominant political discourses are always partial, noting: "It is vital [...] that although it can police the potential eruptions of political events, the politics of cultural recognition in late liberalism cannot saturate social worlds in such a way that no potentiality remains within the actual world" (2011, p. 72). In other words, the story of language and education practices in the Isthmus did not begin—nor does it end—within the tidy framework provided by the politics of neoliberal multiculturalism.

### Revaluing Diidxazá: Negotiating Symbolic Capital on Multiple Markets

The public market of Juchitán offers a range of products from local to global points of origin; images of the *Virgen de Guadalupe* that were made in China, apples from the cooler state of Chiapas, duck eggs and nopal cactus from the *Ikoots* (Huave) zone near the coast, and many local products, from tomatoes the size of blueberries to white-skinned cucumbers, leather sandals and the distinctive embroidered clothing. Similarly, the linguistic market trades in discourses and forms of symbolic capital that can be sourced to different places and politico-economic conditions, resulting in the overlap of discourses which devalue Diidxazá as a *dialecto* alongside those which grant symbolic value to Indigenous language and culture, and those which incorporate Diidxazá use as part of wider educational goals.

There are multiple voices currently raising the value of Diidxazá in some respect, from school directors who recognize the official status of Indigenous languages, to teachers and students who actively engage in Diidxazá practices. Actors who engage in Isthmus Zapotec education today are producing and negotiating discourses which value the language as capital for mobile individuals as well as capital for communal, place-specific ways of being. While the former is an interesting trend which can easily be linked to neoliberal multiculturalism, it is important not to ignore the counter-discourses that are not oriented to personal accumulation, but rather to social coexistence, or *convivencia*. Below I briefly outline how these discourses of value are manifest by participants in formal education.

### Diidxazá as Symbolic Capital on Local Markets

Diidxazá has value in the social life of the Isthmus, and is seen by many as an important part of an Istmeño ontology, or a place-based, descent-based way of living in the Isthmus. People who adopt this social or group orientation do not describe Isthmus Zapotec as a resource which can be exported or superficially acquired. When discussing why they value Isthmus Zapotec, or are engaged in teaching or using it in some way, the most common response is related to family, social ties, and place. A young teacher-in-training, when asked to define Zapotec, said:



X-1: *Yo siempre defino la palabra zapoteco como ese palabra sicarú que significa hermoso, bonito, porque al fin y al cabo es hermoso hablar zapoteco, convivir con otras personas. (X-1 131115)*<sup>16</sup>

Being able to *convivir*—live with, interact, and communicate—with people of all generations in the Isthmus, as monolingual Spanish speakers are not able to do, is valuable for him. Other people of younger generations commented that they use Diidxazá most when speaking with grandparents, and that they enjoy this interaction (LV-3 131113; UT-4 150705).

Social interactions are also at the heart of the motivations of several of the young adults who participate in weekend Isthmus Zapotec classes at a university, as expressed by Reyna, a student:

U-6: *Ahorita lo que me interesa es poder hablarlo, no importa cómo pero hablarlo, y poderme comunicar con la gente, ir al mercado y poder hablar solo el zapoteco. Por el momento no me interesa ser muy científica y saber todas las reglas y todo eso, lo que me interesa ahorita es poder comunicarme. (U-6 131022)*<sup>17</sup>

Although she turned to a formal education institution to learn more Isthmus Zapotec, her motivation is not to use it in a formal setting but to communicate in the markets and social spaces. She went on to comment:

U-6: *Bueno pues el zapoteco así en palabras coloquiales pues es la lengua de mi abuelita, la lengua de mi madre y con el hecho de ser la lengua de las personas que me dieron la vida, por las que yo estoy aquí, se vuelve un legado y una herencia muy importante. (U-6 131022)*<sup>18</sup>

Reyna's valuation of Diidxazá and desire to develop beyond her passive bilingual abilities is rooted in her sense of family and place, and contrasts to the ideology that caused her parents to discourage her from learning Diidxazá as a child. It is also distinct from neoliberal discourses, through which the value of Diidxazá is determined on an international market.

Another student, Rosalinda, who grew up outside of the Diidxazá-speaking zone described how she was initially motivated to study it because of the social atmosphere of her university campus:

U-10: *[...]cuando empecé a estudiar acá en la facultad pues ya empecé a interactuar con personas que hablaban zapoteco, y pues me empezó a [gustar]—*

H: *[Personas] de tu edad.*

U-10: *Sí, de mi edad. Entonces—y que me hablaban fluido. Era su primera lengua el zapoteco. Entonces... me interesó mucho y los escuchaba hablar, y quería yo*

<sup>16</sup> X-1: I always define the word Zapotec like that word sicaru that means beautiful, pretty, because ultimately it's beautiful to speak Zapotec, interact/ socialize with other people.

<sup>17</sup> U-6: Right now what I'm interested in is to be able to speak it, it doesn't matter how [well], but to speak it, and to be able to communicate with people, go to the market and be able to speak only Zapotec. For the moment I'm not interested in being really scientific and knowing all the rules and all that, what interests me right now is being able to communicate.

<sup>18</sup> Well Zapotec in everyday words well it's the language of my granny, the language of my mother and with the fact of being the language of the people who gave me life, because of who I am here, it becomes a very important legacy and an inheritance.

*entender lo que decían. [...] Entonces sí quería aprenderlo. Me gustó mucho, sí. Y ya cuando me empecé a meter en esos cursos, a integrarme a esos cursos, convivir más con personas que hablan el zapoteco, todo lo demás, este... empecé a platicar con mi familia, con mi papá. Entonces me dijo mi papá que sí, mis ancestros, eh mis familiares míos, abuelitas, mis abuelitas y todos ellos, ellas sí eran de acá del Istmo de Tehuantepec. Entonces ellos sí hablaban zapoteco. Mi bisabuelita hablaba zapoteco... y mi tatarabuelita era de Tehuantepec. Entonces quizá por eso también me emociona aprender zapoteco– (U-10 140513)<sup>19</sup>*

Both using Diidxazá and some of the motivations for teaching or learning it are thus closely tied to the daily life of people in the Isthmus. These discourses of value orient towards the importance of communication and cohesion in today's social environments, as well as the awareness of language as a capital that is related to descent. Orienting towards the "genealogical society" (Povinelli, 2011) can be seen as a form of resistance or a counter-discourse in an era where individual mobility (or in Povinelli's words the *autological subject*) is promoted by dominant politico-economic systems.

### Diidxazá as Mobile Capital and Opportunities

In contrast to the speakers and learners who orient towards local ties when discussing Diidxazá, some people orient towards Diidxazá as a source of capital in relation to domains outside of the Isthmus. While not mutually exclusive of the local/community discourse described above, this discourse often takes on a more individualist tone, identifying opportunities for scholarships or other positions specific to speakers of Indigenous languages, and the interest of outsiders (such as myself) in Isthmus Zapotec as motivations for valuing the language or learning to speak it.

The director of a semi-urban primary school where Diidxazá is taught one hour per week and occasionally promoted through other activities, commented:

E-8: [...] *la lengua diidxazá es un tesoro, es un valor importante para nosotros. [Así-]*

H: [Sí.]

E-8: *Así lo veo, Haley, yo así lo veo. Pero si niego mi tierra, niego... mi lengua por ejemplo, o dijera idiomas cualesquiera... ¡No! no, para nada. Nuestro zapoteco ha caminado muchos lugares. De veras, ha caminado mucho, ha alcanzado lugares, espacio más allá en otros, en otros países donde ha llegado. Sus costumbres han ido a Alemania igual, ¿no? Este pues... sus bailes, ¿no? Y esa es una ventaja del zapoteco porque pues... está creciendo. Y nosotros los que estamos acá, no le estamos dando importancia. (E-8 140513)<sup>20</sup>*

<sup>19</sup> U-10: [...]when I started to study here in the university well then I started to interact with people who spoke Zapotec. And well I started to like [it]–

H: [People] your age.

U-10: Yes, my age. So– and that spoke to me fluently. Zapotec was their first language. So... I was really interested and I listened to them speak and I wanted to learn it. I liked it a lot, yes. And then when I started going to those classes, integrating myself [participating] in those classes, socializing more with people who speak Zapotec, everything else, um... I started to talk with my family, with my Dad. So he told me that yes, my ancestors, uh my relations, grannies, my grannies and all of them, they were from here from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. So they did speak Zapotec. My great-grandmother spoke Zapotec... and my great-great grandmother was from Tehuantepec. So maybe for that also I am excited to learn Zapotec–

<sup>20</sup> E-8:...the Diidxazá language is a treasure, it's an important value for us. [So-]

H: [Yes]

This director links the value of Isthmus Zapotec to its presence in international spaces, evaluating the disinterest of people in the region in comparison with the interest of people from outside the region. Additionally, he commodifies the language itself as a “treasure” which has great value. These comments stand out in contrast to his acknowledgement in other moments of the interview that it is not of great interest to all of his teaching staff nor to many of the parents of his students, and contrast as well with my observations of the minimal use of Diidxazá within the school (Fieldnotes 131218; 140714).

This discourse of valuing Diidxazá on linguistic markets controlled from the outside appears especially common among younger, educated, or socially mobile people. A university student told me that although her parents hadn’t wanted her to learn Diidxazá, she paid attention and learned it, and now she argues that they need to teach her younger brother because of the scholarships and jobs available to speakers of Indigenous languages. Her greatest motivation is to travel and get out of her town, and she sees Isthmus Zapotec as a possible resource that she has to achieve that goal (Interview UT-1 140717). Another university student who was not able to speak Diidxazá and had not (yet) traveled outside the Isthmus, began to attend classes, commenting to me that speaking a “lengua materna” (mother tongue) could be useful for him outside of the region (Fieldnotes 130415). Both mobile and would-be mobile young adults are thus seeing Isthmus Zapotec as possible capital in spaces outside the region where it is actually spoken.

The message that Indigenous languages are assets that the outside world is interested in has thus been taken up by a significant number of educational actors in the Isthmus. This discourse does not negate other forms (or lack) of capital associated with the language however. As previously discussed most school directors acknowledge the equality of Isthmus Zapotec, but do not give it equal educational time. Likewise, people who recognize the communal value of Diidxazá locally may also negotiate it as capital on external markets. For example, Rosalinda, the student who was motivated to study Diidxazá after hearing her fellow students speak it and learning her own heritage, also explained to me that her interest in Isthmus Zapotec was one of the things she included in an application for a coveted scholarship to study in the US for one year, which she felt may have helped its success:

*U-10: Al momento de estar rellenando la solicitud de la universidad [...] te piden ciertas cosas [...]. Y una de esas era la forma en que tú ibas a, a enseñar el español. Inclusive también te... te piden tus intereses, que describas lo que a ti te gusta. Lo que te interesa, cursos... cosas que has hecho. Entonces, ahí me eché unas cosas de zapoteco. Y en el español pues también. Pues dije que lo voy a enseñar de una manera que pueda sacarlos más o menos. Eh... cosas que se puedan apegar al contexto real. Y también retomando un poco lo que es la cultura istmeña y obviamente zapoteca... (U-10 140513)<sup>21</sup>*

E-8: That’s how I see it Haley, I see it like that. But if I deny my homeland, I deny... my language for example, or say whatever languages... No! No, definitely not. Our Zapotec has walked many places. Truly, it has walked a lot, it has reached places, space beyond in other, in other countries where it has arrived. Its customs have gone to Germany too, right? Um so... its dances, right? And that is an advantage of Zapotec because well... it’s growing. And those of us who are here, we’re not giving it importance.

<sup>21</sup> U-10: When you are filling out the application for the university [...] they ask you for certain things [...]. And one of those was the form in which you would teach Spanish. Also they ask for your interests, that you describe what you like. What interests you, classes... things that you have done. So

Whether as a form of symbolic capital that increases access to scholarships or a skill for obtaining work in the new climate of official language recognition, there are numerous people who participate in individualist and external-oriented ways of valuing Diidxazá. They have found use of, or affiliation with, Diidxazá to be a resource for them that may increase their material well-being inside and outside of the Isthmus.

### Conclusion

Over time Mexican educational politics have institutionalized norms which largely devalue Diidxazá use and ultimately contribute to the material inequalities experienced by Diidxazá speakers, despite a shift towards policies of pluricultural recognition. The values associated with Isthmus Zapotec remain subject to negotiation however, as local actors continue to revalue Isthmus Zapotec use within place-based systems of interaction and exchange, and to find ways to benefit from the shifting linguistic market in which they find themselves. Although there is potential for “a commodification of language in service of transnational corporations” and a homogenizing neoliberal agenda (Flores, 2013, p. 515) to be pursued through some of the ways that Isthmus Zapotec is being included in education today, this is only part of the story. The histories and ongoing movements of Indigenous communities demand a less generalized interpretation, one which recognizes local social and symbolic capital.

Local discourses and negotiations of symbolic capital are by nature less mobile and less visible than those produced by actors holding more prominent positions in politico-economic structures, yet these alternative markets through which languages like Diidxazá maintain symbolic capital on their own terms represent significant counter-discourses. From a theoretical standpoint it is important to attend to the *multiple modernities* (Taylor, 2004) being imagined and negotiated, and multiple *spaces of otherwise* which endure despite neoliberal governance (Povinelli, 2011). The discourse of language as a legacy—a form of capital to be sure, but one that comes from somewhere, and is bound up in histories and in the mouths of ancestors who spoke it—stands out starkly against the discourse of language as a commodity, a treasure whose worth is determined by exchange value on international markets, and which can be cut free of a place and time.

From an educational standpoint, it is heartening to observe how people engaging in communally-oriented forms of Diidxazá education are benefiting from the affirmation of their social ties and family histories, both of which are in danger of being erased through on-going politico-economic inequalities. As such the valuing of Isthmus Zapotec in education remains a key site of symbolic struggle, open to multiple discourses and compromises.

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there I threw in a few things about Zapotec. And in Spanish well also. Well I said that I will teach in a way that could get them out [ahead] more or less. Um... things that they could attach to the real context. And also taking up again a bit of what is the Istmeño culture, and obviously Zapotec [[culture]]...

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