

# Fractal Recursivity in Ideologies of Language, Identity and Modernity in Tlaxcala, Mexico

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## 1. Introduction

This paper examines an ethnographic example of the semiotic process identified by Irvine & Gal (2000) as *fractal recursivity*, through which “people construct ideological representations of linguistic differences” (37). A focus on the linguistic ways that users of Mexicano and Spanish in Tlaxcala, Mexico construct difference ideologically sheds light on how these ideologies of difference may contribute to language shift there. Because, as Philips (1998) points out, “ideologies are constituted and enacted in social practices” such as discourse, ideological multiplicity can be studied through analysis of discourse that is “socially ordered by various kinds of power struggles between dominant and subordinate social forces” (8), in this case national homogenizing forces that are recursively reproduced in a local indigenous community experiencing language shift.

Mexicano has been largely replaced by Spanish in the younger generations in Contla, a large county part of the Mexicano community along the skirts of the Malinche volcano (known as *Malintsi* locally) (cf. Hill & Hill, 1986). Nahuatl, known by its speakers as Mexicano, has roughly one million speakers who live in various parts of central and southern Mexico. There is evidence that serious language shift and loss is occurring in this region (Garza Cuarón & Lastra, 1991), although there are many semi- and quasi-speakers (Dorian, 1977; Flores Farfán, 1999) who have a passive communicative competence. I take Gal and Kulick’s view that language shift must be viewed as a fundamentally *social* process in which individuals react to social changes that in turn affect their linguistic ideologies and social identities, and ultimately their language use (Gal, 1979; Kulick, 1992; cf. Kroskrity, 1993).

During sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in the state of Tlaxcala during several phases of research, I collected eighty hours of socially-occurring speech and interview data to inform my dissertation on linguistic ideology and shift, in two communities and in two bilingual-intercultural primary schools. As both community *and* nation-state institutions, bilingual, indigenous schools in Tlaxcala are a nexus for the emergence and local reformulation of ideologies (cf. Rockwell, 1996) of language,

identity, modernity, and the nation. My dissertation attempts an untangling of these multiple and conflicting ideologies, produced in and through Tlaxcalan discourses in these communities and their attempts at bilingual schooling. I suggest that these ideologies are organized through the production of three discourses that have local, regional, and national expressions: the discourse of *salir adelante*, or forging ahead, and improving one's socioeconomic position; *menosprecio*, the denigration of indigenous identity; and third, the *pro-indígena* or pro-indigenous discourse that promotes a positive attitude towards indigenous people (Messing, in preparation). In this paper, I focus on a semiotic expression of this ideological diversity, through examples of *fractal recursivity* in Mexicano and Spanish from this corpus, to highlight ways that Tlaxcalans construct multiple local ideologies of language, identity and progress through talk, as they seek to define "the self as against some imagined 'Other'" (Ibid:39).<sup>1</sup>

## **2. "Monte es una palabra que encierra la discriminación:" Recursivity and local reproductions of discrimination**

In this paper, I will analyze narrative and interview discourse from four people who live in different parts of the county of San Bernardino Contla. *Fractal recursivity* "involves the projection of an opposition" from one level to another (Irvine & Gal, 2000:38). As Don Luis, a resident of a geographically marginalized town in Contla says in his narrative (lines 4-5), Mexicano speakers are on the fringes: "*ti..pueblerinos ti..ti-cateh, orillas*" (we [are] small town folk, we are on the fringes). In this example, the opposition consists of an unequal relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous people in Tlaxcala and Mexico, which here is reproduced in Contla in the way that local identities are iconically mapped onto certain towns and sections of the county. The projection of the opposition here is the discrimination felt by indigenous Tlaxcalans from outside communities, which is reproduced within the county studied. The concept of fractal recursivity invites us to consider oppositions that can be reproduced in multiple social contexts.

San Bernardino Contla's dozen county sections consist of both official neighborhoods and politically incorporated towns which offer rich opportunities for comparison. The speakers whose voices we hear in this paper are from the towns of San José Aztatla, San Felipe Cuahutenco, and Contla, the center of the county, known as the county *cabecera* (or head town). There is an association here between people and the land on which they and their families live and/or cultivate; there is a connection between geography, identity and language, the main distinction being between *centro* (Contla) and *monte* (the mountain/mount) (Nutini, 1968). There is an ideology that being from the towns in the higher elevations of the county ("*Ser del monte*") implies indigenosity, marked by greater use of Mexicano and greater poverty. An informant explained that the term *monte* "*es una palabra que encierra la discriminación*" (is a term that encloses discrimination); it indexes a local identity "subordinate" to the "dominant" one of the *centro*. Local ideologies work semiotically as people map dominant and subordinate identities onto these local regions.

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The political and socioeconomic subordination experienced by indigenous communities in Mexico (cf. Bonfil Batalla, [1987]1994; Collier, 1994; García Canclini, 1993) is indexed by the discrimination mentioned by this resident of Contla, and is coupled with a widespread ignorance about indigenous languages; I heard from a medical doctor in a Tlaxcala city that her maid, who was from a rural town, did not speak any Nahuatl, but “*ella ya habla normal*” (she already speaks normal). Such examples of linguistic ignorance are bound up with discrimination that is a part of the discourse of *menosprecio*<sup>2</sup> that is recursively reproduced in Contla, usually by those who hold economic and political power, to differentiate themselves from those who are markedly indigenous. The Mexican language is an icon of local indigenous identity of which many Contla county residents are proud, while others try to distance themselves from marking themselves as *indígena*, indigenous.

### 3. Recursivity in discourses of language, identity and progress: Four voices

As the following examples will show, this differentiation is recursively reproduced throughout the county, and concentrated around the distinctions residents map out between, and onto *centro* and *monte*. As part of a national ideology concerned with developing Mexico into a “modern,” “first world” nation, the discourse of *salir adelante* (which has national, regional and local expressions) is produced locally by those seeking economic betterment. Contla has seen the industrialization of its artisan-based textile industry, and a desire for “modern” goods has accompanied the surge of factory-based employment. To achieve desired personal and economic progress, many indigenous people in Tlaxcala believe that the past must be shed in order to embrace a new order. Speaking an Indian language in Mexico is considered the primary marker of an indigenous identity. One mother told me that her daughter wanted to buy an expensive brand of shoes for her graduation because she did not want to “look Indian.” In this example, the symbolic resources employed by this eleven year old girl show that local residents sometimes attempt to orient away from a marked indigenous identity.

[I am sorry. What do Four Voices in the section subtitle refer to? The four people interviewed in the following sections?]

### 4. Don Luis

The data analyzed here were chosen because the quotes are representative of a variety of opinions from residents of different parts of Contla. The first speaker, Don Luis,<sup>3</sup> is a Mexicano-dominant man in his mid-seventies, who talks about the difficulty of life in the

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<sup>2</sup> The discourses of *menosprecio* and *salir adelante* have been named according to local usage of these terms.

<sup>3</sup> This name and all others in this paper are pseudonyms.

past compared to today. As he says in the first line, he considers his family to be small town folk, who live on the socioeconomic and geographic fringes of Contla.<sup>4</sup>

(1) Don Luis

- 1 *pos itech in nican ca tlahtec, ca miec este pos, bueno de nican to:ntziliz*
- 2 well here in this place[room], I will tell you that, well, well, from here from our...
- 3
- 4 *ti... puebleri:nos ti ti... ticateh, este orillas bueno*
- 5 we are small town folk, we we are on the fringes well
- 6
- 7 *amo ca mas este posibilidad para para tivivirozqueh amo ca sino que, de lo*
- 8 *contrario, pues*
- 9 here is not much more possibility for us to live, there is not but on the contrary, well
- 10
- 11 *este. tisufriroah amo de nin ca, in tlaxcal ca, nada más salir para ce factoria para ce*
- 12 *calaquiz*
- 13 um. we suffered not from this [eating], tortilla there is, only to go out to a factory for
- 14 one to enter
- 15
- 16 *ce yeca yocalaquito huan ce q'pia posibilidad, pos amo solamente hasta ic Santa Ana*
- 17 *yahweh*
- 18 one already went has [work] possibilities, well no only all the way to Santa Ana do
- 19 they go
- 20
- 21 *..naxan actualmente yen coco:neh ye quitemoa ninvida, ye quitemoa ninvida, ah*
- 22 now the youth look for their livelihood, they look for their livelihood
- 23
- 24 *itech fábricas tanto fabricas yeca, ompa tequiti-tihue para ye... yequipia mas*
- 25 *cecentavo*
- 26 in factories so many factories there are today there they go to work to [finally] have a
- 27 cent
- 28
- 29 *pero anteriormente <! amo !>*
- 30 but before <! no !> .

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<sup>4</sup> TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS: *Italics* are used to indicate text in Mexicano or Spanish; **:** is a long vowel marker; **Boldface** is used for emphasis; [ ] brackets enclose additional information; and <! !> encloses utterances said with emphasis.

Don Luis's narrative, excerpted here, shows the difficulty of *salir adelante*, of forging ahead and eking out a living in San Jose Aztatla, a town on the upper slopes of the county.<sup>5</sup> The factory work he mentions in line 11 is part of a century old textile industry that has increasingly shifted from informal work in households (weaving blankets on large wooden looms) to factory shift labor, consisting mainly of production of yarn from raw materials. As he explains, as a charcoal maker (*hornero*) and *pulque* producer Don Luis is on the economic fringes. His is the life of rural poverty that younger generations hope to improve upon, surfacing in discourses of *salir adelante*, forging ahead. Recursive oppositions between old and new, and between indigenous identities within Contla are a part of these discourses.

## 5. Doña Paulina

The following three examples of recursivity are excerpts from interviews done towards the end of my fieldwork, after many conversations had taken place with these interlocutors. The questions I asked them here were to remind them of discussions we had previously had on a more informal basis. In the following interview excerpt, the discourse of *menosprecio*, of denigration, surfaces in relation to the distinction between *centro* and *monte*.

The Spanish deictics *aquí/acá* (here), *allí* (there), and *allá* (over there farther) that the speakers use in these interviews mark their location on the mountain in terms of the center/mountain distinction, which highlights their identity as a member of a community in a particular location in the Malintsi area. *Aquí* or *acá* is used by the speaker to indicate his/her place on the mountain, referring to the others as *allí* or *allá* (there and over there). To highlight this usage, which shows the local relation of language and identity to place, I have marked these words in boldface.

In example two, this interview took place in San Felipe Cuahutenco (on the upper slopes of the Malintsi), with Doña Paulina, a bilingual woman in her late fifties, who is the grandmother of a student in the Contla school which I was observing. The goal was to capture an anecdote about discrimination that she had told me in one of several earlier informal conversations, about women from the *monte* who went to the river down the mountain to wash clothing. Here she responds to my question.

(2) Doña Paulina

- 1 J: Una vez lo platicamos de que en el monte es diferente que más para abajo del
- 2 monte. Yo no sé si es porque se habla más Mexicano, a veces acá. Y que a veces ha
- 3 habido discriminación entre personas [mhmm] que son, o con personas que son del
- 4 monte. Mas antes, [mhmm] antes cuando las señoras iban al río a lavar, y a...

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<sup>5</sup> A preliminary analysis of this narrative was presented at the 2000 meetings of the Linguistic Association of the Southwest, in Puebla, Mexico (Messing & Nava Nava 2000). The transcription and translations of the entire narrative, excerpted here, was a collaborative project between Refugio Nava Nava and myself, with detailed feedback from Jane Hill.

- 5 J: Once we talked about that on the mountain it's different than more below the  
6 mountain.  
7 I don't know if it's because more Mexicano is spoken sometimes here. And that  
8 sometimes there has been discrimination between people [mhhmm] who are, or with  
9 people who are from the mountain. Before, earlier [mhhmm] when the women went  
10 to the river to wash, and to...  
11  
12 P: *sí, mucho. Eso sí, la verdad, hasta hoy y luego algunos, así de los que me llevo sí*  
13 *los reprocho.*  
14 P: Yes, a lot. That's right, truly, up until today since then some, with those I get  
15 along with I reproach them.  
16  
17 J: *ah, ¿del centro?*  
18 J: Ah, from the center [of town]?  
19  
20 P: *sí*  
21 P: Yes  
22  
23 J: *los con quién Ud. ...*  
24 J: those with whom you...  
25  
26 P: *sí*  
27 P: yes  
28  
29 J: *ah, ¿y de qué los reprocha?*  
30 J: ah, and what do you reproach them for?  
31  
32 P: *Porque este, antes nos discriminaban, mucho. Por... lo que so., como salvajes,*  
33 *así mal nos trataban. Nos dicen... como animales salvajes, como, bueno [mmhmm].*  
34 *Pero yo creo anteriormente a lo mejor sí, era más diferente ellos que nosotros.*  
35 P: Because um, it's that before they discriminated [against] us in, a lot. Because...  
36 what [?], ..., like savages, that badly they treated us. They call us... savage animals,  
37 like, well [mmhmm]. But I think before, yes, they were more different than we.  
38  
39 J: *aah*  
40  
41 P: *Por el motivo de que ellos lo hablaban más en Español, y nosotros no. Entonces,*  
42 *pues, más todavía teníamos distinción **aquí**, para ellos, y más que nada pues **allí**...*  
43 *mpezaron, según, ya estaban progresando de antes. **Allí** empezaron a trabajar la*  
44 *cobija de telar, entonces según ellos estaban de progreso, y **aquí** no, porque **aquí***  
45 *siempre hay que vender leña, hay q' acarriar agua de **allá**, entonces por ese por ese*  
46 *istinción nos distinguían así, discriminaciones para nosotros.*  
47 P: Because of the motive that they would speak more in Spanish, and we didn't.  
48 Therefore, well, we even more [in relation to them] had [a] difference **here** for them,  
49 and more than anything, well **there** they began, supposedly, they were already  
50 progressing since earlier. **There** they began to labor blankets from the loom, then  
51 according to them they were in progress, and **here** no, because **here** we always need  
52 to sell firewood, one has to carry water from **over there**, so because of that difference  
53 they distinguished us this way, discriminations for us.  
54  
55 J: *mmhmm, bien duro, que duro.*

- 56 J: mhhmm, very hard, how hard.  
 57  
 58 P: *sí, es mucho*  
 59 P: yes, it's a lot  
 60  
 61 J: *y ya....*  
 62 J: and now...  
 63  
 64 P: *no, pues ahora ya no, ya..., por lo que, este..., luego me dice [son's name] como,*  
 65 *como son. Tal vez **aquí** hasta ya mejoró, mejor **aquí** que **allá**. Porque..., este...,*  
 66 *[mmhmm] pues **aquí** ya tiene, ya tiene más que nada, lo indispensable es el agua y*  
 67 *servicio, [mmhmm] las calles pues más o menos están todos arreglados. Este, los que*  
 68 *es terracería, a fuerza los mantiene, los repara y **allá** no.*  
 69 P: no, well now not anymore, now, for what, um, [son's name] tells me how, how are  
 70 those from **over there**. Maybe it's even improved already, better **here** than **over**  
 71 **there**. Because um, [mmhmm] well **here** there is already, there already is more than  
 72 anything, the minimum is water and utilities, [mmhmm] the roads well are more or  
 73 less fixed up. Um, the ones that are dirt roads, of course they maintain them, repair  
 74 them and **over there** no.

The discourse of *menosprecio* is explicit as Doña Paulina describes the terrible mistreatment of Cuahutenco residents by other residents of their county from the center, who at the time, forty years ago, were all speakers of Mexicano as well. The discrimination felt by indigenous people, from people outside the Contla county is recursively reproduced in these local ideologies of identity and place, and marked by the consistent use of deictic terms in Spanish for “here” and “there,” such as in lines 42-45 and 65-68. While things have improved to the point that Doña Paulina can now talk to *centro* residents about their prejudices, the oppositions between “here” and “there” are still clearly marked in her discourse. For Paulina, progress is measured in terms of access to wage labor, roads, transportation, water and other services, and connected to the greater and lesser degree of speaking Mexicano.

## 6. Maestro Eustalio

In the third example, Maestro Eustalio is a bilingual speaker in his mid-forties also from Cuahutenco. He is a teacher. In his interview Eustalio explained that for the most part, to this day few people from the center married into families in his town, and that certain *centro/ monte* differences were still observable, including use of Mexicano. On lines 5 and 6 he says: “*Tienen ese complejo los de **acá** de Contla, quién sabe porque. Pero este, todavía no sienten como, no sé, como algo menos que ellos, los de por **ahí** arriba, los del monte*” (They have this complex those from **here** from Contla, who knows why. But um, they don't still feel as if, I don't know, like something less than them, those from **over there** above, those from the mountain.) In the following interview excerpt he elaborates his perspective on these differences.

### (3) Maestro Eustalio

- 1 J: *Luego otras personas me empezaron a platicar de la diferencia entre como lo*  
 2 *pusieron ellos el monte y más abajo. Así lo ve usted todavía?*  
 3 J: Then other people began to talk to me about the difference between, the way they  
 4 put it was the mountain and below. Do you see it that way still?

- 5  
 6 *E: Sí todavía. Tienen ese complejo los de acá de Contla, quién sabe porque. Pero*  
 7 *este, todavía no sienten como, no sé, como algo menos que ellos, los de por ahí*  
 8 *arriba,*  
 9 *los del monte. [...]*  
 10 E: Yes still. They have this complex those from **here** from Contla, who knows why.  
 11 But um, they don't still feel as if I don't know like something less than them, those  
 12 from **over there** above, those from the mountain.  
 13 *J: ¿Y cree usted que sí se conserve el idioma mejor en la zona de arriba más que en*  
 14 *la de abajo?*  
 15 J: And do you think that the language is better conserved in the higher zone more  
 16 than in the lower area?  
 17  
 18 *E: Pues, yo creo que sí, Bueno todavía se sigue hablando más allá arriba que aquí*  
 19 *abajo.[...]*  
 20 *Pero aquí en Contla ya no quieren. Yo creo que es una de las situaciones y también,*  
 21 *nosotros nos ven de esa manera, porque pues todavía usamos el idioma, y a veces*  
 22 *viene gente de allá, vienen en carro y se vienen platicando en Nahuatl. Y nomás que*  
 23 *vienen, que hacen así.*  
 24 E: Well, I think so, well it's still being spoken more **over there** above than **here**  
 25 **elow**. [...] But **here** in Contla they don't want to anymore. I think that it's one of my  
 26 situations on the **way to we**. They see us in this way because we still use the  
 27 language and sometimes people come from **there**, they come by car and they come  
 28 **hatting** in Nahuatl. And only they come, who do in this way.

For Don Eustalio, the centro/monte distinction is a “complex” that the people in the center of town have. It is interesting to note that this interview was done in the lower part of the mountain, rather than in the teacher's town; thus Eustalio's deictic references are from the vantage point of the center of town. Therefore, when he says in lines 21 and 22 “*a veces viene gente de allá, vienen en carro y se vienen platicando en Nahuatl*,” “sometimes people come from there, [meaning from his town to here, referring to where we were talking, further down the mountain], they come by car and they come speaking Nahuatl.” He also emphasizes the fact that today many Cuahutenco residents are now able to own cars, and they *drive* down the mountain to the center, at the same time that they are speaking in Mexicano. Eustalio in this example makes the explicit point that one can maintain elements of indigenosity, such as speaking Mexicano, and also own a car – a local symbol of progress, of *salir adelante*.<sup>6</sup>

## 7. Maestra Rosa

In my last example, Rosa is a teacher who lives in the center of Contla; she is a semi-speaker of Mexicano, in her late thirties. This interview marked the culmination of many prior conversations over a year about language, local ideologies, and education in Tlaxcala. I was curious how she would recapitulate aspects of these conversations while

<sup>6</sup> The importance of the speaker's emphasis of driving a car down the mountain from the *monte* to the *centro* is particularly strong when considered in light of many stories I heard about life in Contla a decade ago, before the main roads were paved, and before there was public transportation. Prior to this, most people walked the two hours down the mountain and back, relying on *burros* to carry their loads. To own a car is a prime symbol of progress in the discourse of *salir adelante*.



being recorded. Rosa's family is from the *centro*, but she is very dedicated to the teaching of Mexicano; Rosa suggested that the discrimination by those in the center of Contla had as much to do with local land struggles as with language, thereby suggesting another layer of complexity to the recursivity of the *centro/monte* distinction.

(4) Maestra Rosa

1 *J: Entonces ¿cómo ves tú las diferencias dentro del propio municipio de Contla en*  
 2 *cuánto a dónde se hablaba más, o... pero también en cuanto a, a, bueno al*  
 3 *menosprecio y como....?*

4 *J: Then how do you see the differences within the county of Contla proper in term of*  
 5 *where more [Mexicano] is spoken, or... but also in terms of, of well menosprecio and*  
 6 *how...?*

7  
 8 *M: Sí, era un menosprecio, eso sí es indiscutible. Eh, Por ejemplo a los de*  
 9 *Cuahutenco les decían que eran, eran este... la gente más humilde pero decían más*  
 10 *atrasada, más... eh, inculta pues, por el hecho de hablar Náhuatl.*

11 *M: Yes, it was a menosprecio, that indeed is unarguable. For example for those from*  
 12 *Cuahutenco people would say they were um... the most... eh, humble people but*  
 13 *people would say more backward, more... uncouth[uneducated] well, because of the*  
 14 *fact of speaking Nahuatl.*

15  
 16 *Cuando llegaban acá [centro] pues había un rechazo, pero aparte de solamente la*  
 17 *cuestión cultural era un rechazo por cuestiones de tipo político. Porque se vivió un*  
 18 *problema político muy como fuerte en años anteriores, después de la revolución con*  
 19 *las tierras comunales, y entonces Cuahutenco, este, se le llamaron a los a los de*  
 20 *Cuahutenco se le llamaron los traidores por un problema de tierras comunales que se*  
 21 *dieron a otro municipio. Entonces fue un pleito político también y eso hacía que,*  
 22 *este, utilizaran a la lengua Nahuatl o a su lengua Nahuatl como objeto de burla, para*  
 23 *burlarse de ellos. Porque no se querían, no solo por el idioma sino era una situación*  
 24 *de tipo político.*

25 *When they would arrive here [centro] well there was a rejection, but apart from only*  
 26 *the cultural question was a rejection because of issues of a political nature, because a*  
 27 *very like strong political problem occurred in earlier years, after the revolution with*  
 28 *the communal lands, and then Cuahutenco, um, they called those those from*  
 29 *Cuahutenco they called them the traitors because of a problem with communal lands*  
 30 *that were given to another county. Then there was a political fight also and that*  
 31 *caused that, um they would use the language or their Nahuatl language as an object of*  
 32 *ridicule, to make fun of them. Because they didn't like each other not only because of*  
 33 *the language but because it was a situation of a political nature.*

The discourse of *menosprecio* is apparent through Rosa's description of how *centro* residents viewed people from the *monte*, years earlier, and explains that the discrimination was limited to language use. Rosa also tells us of local political struggles that took place in the 1940's, creating tensions that exist still today, that further highlight perceived differences in local identities as dominant and subordinate. Local residents of Contla today live and work together, but are still marked by the memory of discriminations, and of struggles such as this one over control of land between Cuahutenco and the head town of Contla. In the year 2000, the first municipal mayor in Contla history from the mountain region was elected; this mayor was from Cuahutenco, and this election was seen as a symbolic victory for many residents of the mountain towns.

## 8. Conclusions

The focus on the semiotic ways that Tlaxcalans construct difference ideologically through their discourses helps to shed light on the social processes of change that have affected language shift in this region. Struggles between various ways of conceptualizing local identities, such as the monte/centro contrast, and concepts of “otherness” are recursively reproduced within the county of Contla, and are belied by residues of past and present discriminations that are part of the consciousness of these citizens of Mexico. These speakers reproduce the contrast, as they comment on it as well as negate it, showing that these oppositions are not binary, but rather, complex. *Recursivity* provides a highly productive means for understanding the semiotic resources speakers employ as they orient towards and against particular identities through discourses they create and tap into. Thinking comparatively and cross-culturally about the identities involved in *recursivities* will be highly beneficial to our understanding of how the relationships between indigenous peoples, the nation, and processes of modernization are involved in language shift.

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