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Vernacular Literacy in Nonmainstream Communities

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Vernacular Literacy in Nonmainstream Communities

Edited by LUDO VERHOEVEN

School of Education
University of Nijmegen
Montessorilaan 3
6525 *HR Nijmegen*
The Netherlands

General Editor JOSHUA A. FISHMAN

Ferkauf Graduate School of Psychology
Yeshiva University
1300 Morris Park Avenue
Mazer Building, 5thfloor
Bronx, New York 10461

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The inroads of literacy in the Hñähñú communities in central Mexico[1]

RAINER ENRIQUE HAMEL

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Abstract

The present article goes into the literacy practices of the Hñähñú communities in Mexico. In the process of colonization, literacy has meant both a threat and a challenge for indigenous groups in Latin America. For many of the surviving indigenous communities in Mexico, written languages have been designed over the past century. However, these writing systems have not been generally adopted. In the present article the attempts to develop and foster mother-tongue literacy in the Hñähñú communities in the central part of Mexico are dealt with. Based upon ethnographic research, the use of written language in four key community speech events is demonstrated. An attempt is made to show how new communicative needs in the traditionally nonliterate culture of the Hñähñú lead to specific literacy practices.

Introduction

The process through which literacy penetrates a traditionally nonliterate indigenous society and is incorporated into its members' communicative repertoire constitutes a topic that offers important new insights. On the one hand, it sheds new light on the general debate about the nature and historical development of literacy (Olson and Torrance 1991; Feldman 1991; Street 1993a, 1993b; Kulick and Stroud 1993), a debate that has until recently been dominated by arguments drawn almost exclusively from the experience of Western societies. On the other hand, it opens a pivotal perspective to understand the global language relations and the processes of maintenance and shift that characterize the sociolinguistic conditions of many native ethnolinguistic minorities.

In this article I will address two specific aspects of these more general questions, which are discussed controversially at present: (1) the ways and mechanisms by which literacy permeates a native indigenous society,

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and the extent to which this process alters its universe of discourse; and (2) the consequences and choices of the new literacy for the survival of indigenous societies as distinct ethnolinguistic groups. Focusing on the interplay between literacy and orality in the Hñähñú (Otomí) universe of discourse, one of Mexico's 56 indigenous peoples, I will analyze the difficulties and strategies that emerge in the Indians' attempt to adapt their ways of living to the new demands of a rapidly changing society, and at the same time to maintain their ethnolinguistic identity.

The analysis of the first topic will show us that the incorporation of literacy consists of a new distribution of functions between orality and literacy (Olson and Torrance 1991), which in many cases leads to new balances, tensions, and conflicts in the society's universe of discourse. In line with a shift of perspectives in recent studies in non- Western societies (Hornberger 1989b; Street 1993b), which question certain claims about unique forms of consciousness and genres related to literacy, I focus on the multiple internal relationships and mixes between literacy and orality, rather than on a supposedly clear-cut, fundamental opposition between them, as suggested by the "great divide hypothesis" in earlier studies (Havelock 1963, 1976; Goody and Watt 1963; Goody 1977; McLuhan 1962; Ong 1982). Literary events are understood as communicative units revolving around the production or use of written texts (Baynham 1993), which assign a specific role to orality (Heath 1983; Schlieben-Lange 1983). As we shall see in the case of Hñahñú, complex procedures embedding literacy playa crucial role for its introduction and functioning in a process where new literacy practices not only affect the traditional universe of discourse but are at the same time reshaped by the users.

The relationship between literacy and the processes of minority language maintenance and shift, our second topic, has to be seen in the context of the debate about the consequences of literacy spread to illiterate societies. Until recently the almost universally dominant view inspired by the "great divide hypothesis" stressed the overall gains of literacy and formal education, even at the price of linguistic and cultural assimilation. The opposite position, which advocates maintenance-oriented literacy programs in the native languages (Skutnabb-Kangas 1984; Street 1988; Cummins 1984, 1989, 1994), shares with its opponents the high esteem of individual and societal literacy. Both arguments, the one that expands the Western regard for literacy to other societies, and the one that links literacy in L1 or L2 perhaps too mechanically to either maintenance or shift, will have to be discussed in the light of the Mexican indigenous experience reported in this text.

Certainly a narrow, technocratic view of literacy as decontextualized cognitive and linguistic skills, which dominated in earlier research, will

be of litt1e use to analyze these topics. Rather, a broad sociocultural approach of socially constructed literacy practices embedded in power relations, of diversity and multiple literacies defined as the competence to participate in a literate society (Cook-Gumperz 1976; Bloome and Green 1992; Walsh 1991; Street 1993a), is called for to understand the complex process that incorporates literacy into the Hñähñú universe.

The study stems from two sequential research projects (1979-1984, 1990-1993) carried out in the Valle del Mezquital, located in the central highlands of Mexico, only one hundred miles to the northeast of Mexico City. Key community speech events such as assemblies, committee meetings, and conciliations will be analyzed with a multilayer type of discourse analysis. I will show how new communicative needs arise that require specific literate skills and practices (both oral and written) typical for institutional discourse. Different from many historical studies that acknowledge the introduction of literacy retrospectively (Olson et al. 1985; Olson and Torrance 1991), I will focus on the incorporation of literacy into the traditionally nonliterate culture of the Hñähñú *in actu*, that is, in the process of interactive construction of social reality itself. We shall see that the use of and reference to literacy practices is an integral part of conflicting discourse strategies and power relations. The diglossic asymmetry that relates literacy almost exclusively to Spanish as the dominant language is reproduced in multiple ways. Native language literacy turns out to be a difficult, if anything nascent, option.

Sociocultural change and the communicative repertoire

In the central highlands of Mexico, the Valle del Mezquital hosts some 80,000 members of the Hñähñú (or Otomí)[2] people, who live predominantly in communities of between 400 and 1,500 inhabitants. Over 90 percent of the population in the higher, arid areas of the valley is indigenous; 70 percent of that portion is considered to be bilingual; some 25 percent of the rest is monolingual in the native language. From a macrosociolinguistic perspective, the language situation in the Mezquital Valley can be described as the relationship between two conflicting historical tendencies of language change. The presently dominant tendency is characterized by *substitutive diglossia* (in the sense of Catalan sociolinguistics; see Vallverdù 1973; Boyer 1991), that is, a conflicting, nonstable relationship between Spanish as the dominant and Hñähñú as the subordinate language. Spanish is making inroads in the vemacular's geographical extension, its functional domains, and its lexical and grammatical structure. On the other hand, our ethnographic observation reveals a signifi-

cant potential of cultural and linguistic resistance 1ocated in the close network structures of traditional kinship and farming, everyday communication, and in part in the traditional *cargo* system of local organization. The presently subordinate tendency groups all these elements of linguistic maintenance (Hamel 1984, 1988a; Hamel and Muñoz Cruz 1988).

On the whole, literacy is not yet generally established as a pervasive practice in community activities. Since the beginning of Spanish colonization the contact with the regional administration was limited to a few community representatives who acquired the necessary Spanish and some literacy skills. The spread of the Catholic religion did not alter this ratio significantly. Few households except for teachers' families possess a significant quantity of written texts that are actually used by their members. Different from other native American peoples like the Navajos, who developed certain vernacular literacy functions such as letter writing in home settings (McLaughlin 1989), or the Canadian Crees (Darnell 1984; Bennett and Berry 1991) and Inuits with their own syllabic writing system (Stairs 1988, 1990), no significant native literacy functions have as yet been developed and socially established in Hñähñú.[3]

The primary school, now present in every village, has definitely found its place as an institution of prestige that nourishes the expectations of social mobility and integration through the transmission of Spanish and other skills of mainstream society. Most schools belong to the Bureau of Indigenous Education, set up in 1967 as a subsystem of elementary education (grades K-6). The most important difference from the regular Spanish system consists in the fact that all primary school teachers are indigenous and bilingual (see Hamel 1984; Francis and Hamel 1992). In classroom interaction, however, the vernacular serves a subordinate function as a language of instruction only as long as necessary. Depending on the general language distribution patterns and specific proficiency in Spanish in each group, instruction in L1 may cease almost completely by grade 4 or 5, and students are transitioned into Spanish. Literacy is taught and used exclusively in Spanish, although initially it appears contextualized in Hñähñú. Given increasing attendance over the past decades and the high value placed on formal education, probably at least 60 percent of the male and 40 percent of the female population under 40 years of age have had some schooling experience, which may range between one and six years. Although efforts have been made on several occasions to introduce some native literacy, none of the proposals has been carried out in a consistent way; some teachers, though, take an initiative to teach basic reading and writing skills in Hñähñú for one

lesson per week. Most of the teachers themselves have líttle or no training and practice in native literacy.

The elementary school is today a prime institution of Spanish literacy spread, both through formal teaching and by creating the trust and ideologies that establish literacy and formal education at a high level of social esteem. As we shall see, however, it has not yet contributed signify-cantly to teach the literacy practices that acquire increasing relevance in the communities. In sum, the distribution between orality and literacy by and large fits the general pattern of a classic diglossia: all writing and reading, including that in Hñähñú-dominated events, is carried out in Spanish. The speakers' general attitudes and linguistic consciousness reproduce the diglossic pattern imposed during centuries of colonization: Spanish occupies the place of a prestigious language, whereas Hñähñú is considered a "dialect" with no grammar and writing system (Muñoz Cruz 1983, 1987; Hamel and Muñoz Cruz 1982, 1988). Thus, literacy is only conceived of in Spanish on a metalinguistic and metapragmatic level.

Over the past 30 years native communities in this area have undergone a process of socioeconomic change more radical than perhaps ever before in their history. Induced by outside pressure, a growing number of households gave up their traditional settlement patterns, based on scattered hamlets, and built villages of brick houses around a central plaza, where a new primary school with its basketball court has by and large replaced the church as community center. Only through such a process of urbanization was it possible to connect the villages via a new infrastructure of dirt roads, electricity, and water supplies. Precarious subsistence farming forced a growing number of young men and women to seek employment as migrant workers in the regional centers, in Mexico City, or in the USA. Since they generally maintain close network ties with their communities and fulfill their obligations as village citizens, a constant flow of money, new patterns of consumption, and other cultural practices find their way into the villages along with the Spanish language. No doubt radio broadcasting and incipient television reception playa significant role in cultural change.

Our ethnographic observation suggests that these recent changes in settlement patterns, migrant work, and political organization have led to a significant increase and a qualitative transformation of certain kinds of speech events. More everyday communication takes place, due to people living closer together. More and more governmental and private institutions interfere with community life. Whereas in the past a single traditional authority or *cacique* used to take many decisions individually, today almost all important resolutions are established collectively. Thus new and more types of committees, cooperatives, *cargos* [posts], and

electoral procedures have emerged over time, which have transformed many kinds of meetings into key ethnographic events for community organization. As we shall see, in many of them literacy practices playa crucial role. New literacy needs have thus emerged within the local societies' predominantly oral, vernacular culture that affect the communities' communicative repertoire and are at the same time reshaped by their communicative practices. Both the monolingual-bilingual and the oral–literate dimensions interplay in these literacy events, which can be defined as sequences in which the production and/or comprehension of print plays a role (Anderson et al. 1980; Baynham 1993).

The four cases I analyze here are taken from a corpus of institutional speech events on the local level of the communities. They are ordered from the most intraethnic, least literacy-dominated event carried out entirely in Hñähñú to a type of interethnic, cross-cultural encounter where a whole assembly is dominated by a series of juridical documents and where Spanish is the only legitimate language. First, I will present fragments from a conciliation (dispute settlement), a small intraethnic meeting with few participants. Then, a general community assembly will be analyzed as a more formal, intraethnic, and larger event with over 100 participants, where Hñähñú is the predominant language. Then, the settlement of a damage claim appears, an interethnic, relatively smaIl meeting with one nonindigenous participant, which is governed by a cooperative attitude and low social tension. Spanish dominates, but the native language is not excluded. The final case is an interethnic assembly where one external participant imposes Spanish as the exclusive language in a highly tense, conflictive event dominated by the use of official documents. In each case the analysis will show how the polar dimensions of Hñähñú versus Spanish and orality versus literacy interfere in varying combinations.

Conciliation

Our previous analyses (Hamel 1988a, Sierra 1992) have shown that the local, intraethnic *conciliations* play a major role in the reproduction of ethnolinguistic cohesion as an instance of customary dispute resolution chaired by the highest authority of the community. Although by no means free of conflict or self-contained (see Sierra 1993), they represent an event that is based on native traditions of mutual respect, on patient argumentation and persuasion; in most cases the vernacular is the legitimate language. Nevertheless, participants' referrals to written proof of

certain claims, to documents, or to the need to establish an agreement in writing appear in our corpus.

Transcript 1: Conciliation (Hñähñú in italics)[4]

1 **P** bueno *xi manga xi manga hongi tsi nara hemi de ra de tera tera paa cinbí dí*
well, look, we'll, we'll make a paper {document} where we'll say that we are
2 *mha he va* que jamás d*a tsensi ya batsi ni ha ra luga nehe ha* jamás *do [maní]*
here and that never will your children come to my house also and that who [stands]
3 J [bueno]
[well]
4 *nuga. nuga* hasta ahorita *nuga otho na ra* autorización de *petsi pa go hoca na ra_*
me until now I don't have an authorization to make a paper where
hemí jabu mdo ntsení ya ja í *nuga* al contrario quiero que se visiten como les
it says people shouldn't visit each other **I,** on the contrary, I want that they visit each other as I
6 digo se visiten, pero con respeto (..) y de día.
tell you, they visit each other but respectfully (..) and by daylight.

This example contains a short sequence from a dispute between the plaintiff (P) and the judge (J) about the visiting rules that were violated; here the judge answers an exaggerated claim to prohibit visits altogether. Though the reference may often be rhetorical or strategic (in Goffman's sense), as in this case, it reflects the crucial role that literacy practices increasingly play in the form of written documents. As long as the conflict remains inside the community, oral agreements constitute the common form of resolution. Whenever it transcends the community boundaries, however, a written, official document *(oficio)* such as a claim or transferal is usually requested. The judge's discourse style of authority uses unassimilated loans from Spanish and shifts altogether to Spanish at the decisive, emphatic point of synthesis (lines 5-6), which nowadays is the marker of a formal discourse style within the Hñähñú universe.

The judge's report to the assembly

Community assemblies constitute another speech event that has become central to the local organization over the past decades. I have argued elsewhere (Hamel 1988a, 1995) that detailed discourse analysis can show to what extent these events were only recently constituted and are not yet fully integrated into the communities' repertoire in their actual structure. In the following example, at a general assembly in the village Decá, all citizens (i.e. some 100 family heads, mainly peasants, Cl-Cx) are summoned to participate in the annual ritual of handing over the judge's office to the new office-bearer, elected in a previous assembly. The judge

is at the same time the mayor, that is, the highest authority in the community. The most active participants are the outgoing judge, a teacher (OJ), the secretary, the new judge, a peasant, and the chairperson, a peasant too. Previous to the act itself, the outgoing judge renders an activity report, which has to be discussed and approved. Then the judge's office is handed over, among other topics on the agenda. Hñähñú is maintained as the legitimate language, although Spanish breaks in through side sequences and transfers in specific episodes (report, etc.).

The speech event comprises three key episodes: the debate about the nomination of a chair (for the first time in this village), the report of activities presented by the outgoing judge, and the transfer of office. These activities and their corresponding discourse patterns have been "imported" and adapted from the dominant society and are related to literacy practices. The report constitutes a transitional, semi oral text type located between orality and literacy. The judge delivers it in the dec1amatory, ceremonious discourse style of Mexican public speeches; he elaborates it step by step as a formal oral monologue in Hñähñú, based on written notes in Spanish. The transcript contains the introductory address and the beginning.

Transcript 2: The judge's report to the assembly (Hñähñú in italics)

Segment 1

1 **OJ** bueno este(.)*vecinhu* quizás(.)*nubie ra paya ra tet-a ma gohо ma pa de ra zana*
well then, neighbors maybe, today is the day that is the 14th day of the month
2 *da ra* enero *ra jeya da ra* ochenta y cuatro(.) *nde nuguegui padihu-xa uadi.*
of January of the year eighty four, well you know that now it is finished don't you
3 *hangue ha de nu ra* confianza *ga petsi hu de nuna* periodo *bi thogui y ma ga*
for your confidence that you have shown during my period, well that is over now. I will
4 informa *he hangu ra entrada hangu bi zo da cobrahu y hangu bi goti* en deuda(..)
inform you now how much income there was, how much we could cash and how much we owe.
5 entonce (.) *ra ra* mil novecientos ochenta *da cobrahu* treinta y cinco faltas *jo ma ná* then.
the the [in] nineteen eight five we charged thirty five absences for over
6 de a veinte pesos casa uno (.) asciende la cantidad de siete cientos pesos
20 pesos each. {this} sums up to the amount of seven hundred pesos
7 más una cooperación de sesenta pesos (.) ...
plus a contribution of sixty pesos.

Segment 2

8 **OJ** *Ra* nada[más] en cooperaciones (...) ochenta y tres (..) y cien pesos (...) es
the on[ly] in contributions (...) eighty three (..) and a hundred pesos (…) is
9 **C6** [porqueee]
[whyyy]
10 **OJ** cien pesos (..) es catorce mil quinientos pesos
a hundred pesos (...) is fourteen thousand five hundred pesos

11 C10 *nde pe sa ya uadi gatho-ya*
but did everyone finish paying their
12 *coopera mu?*
contributions?
13 S ((NOISE, MURMERING)) [quiniento (.) quiniento]
[five hundred(.) five hundrerd]
14 C5 [pero para que sea en orden] en orden que sea toda
[but so that everything is orderly,] everything shou1d be done
15 faena ver [dad?]
through community work, [ok?]
16 C9 [si pero] ahí está puesto en cooperaciones
[yes but] there it is put under contributions
17 C8 ((VARIOUS TALK AT THE TIME)) póngan1e en salidas
put it under expenses

In tune with the previous speaker, the judge starts his introduction in a slow, medium low-key manner with the pausing-formulating dynamics of Hñähñú ethnic discourse (line 1). He then starts to compose the current date step by step, using elements from Hñähñú *(ra jeya* 'the year of', line 2) and from Spanish (the number 84). Here we encounter a first element in his speech that functions as constitutive of this type of institutional speech event, an element that can be found in a range of similar situations including the beginning of a school day. Then he produces a gear element *(nde),* a hesitation signal *(nugue),* and a contextualizing phrase that carries over to the next activity and incorporates the audience. Next, he refers to the end of his period in office (line 2), followed by a tag *(hange ha,* line 3) which focuses on the summit of the sequence: the acknowledgement of the *confianza,* the trust he received during his office. A thematic announcement refers to the report (lines 3-5). A brief pause and a subsequent loud gear element *(entonce,* line 5) close the previous introductory sequence and mark the transition to the main sequence.

From this point on (line 5) the mood changes significantly; speed, pitch, and articulatory precision rise and lead to the characteristic discourse style of formal speeches in the dominant culture. The judge formulates his report while reading from his notes. Throughout this unit a code-shifting process is initiated, through the accumulation of numbers and technical terms, which produces a quantitative dominance of Spanish; the shift then extends to verb phrases and other syntactic units. This process occurs repeatedly until the end of the event.

Segment 2 happens approximately five minutes later. It depicts the transition from the report to one of the multiple interruptions that increase toward the end of the report. Different from the introduction, where focused attention and silence predominated, loud voices, interjections, and side conversations can be heard in the assembly, which overlap

with the report. Many apparent turn-transitional points for comments and interruptions occur in the long pauses produced by the fact that the judge sums up long columns of figures during his speech to render the totals. These activities constantly interrupt the report schema of an extended monologue and thus destabilize the discourse pattern of the assembly.

Yet another type of organizational phenomenon points to the fact that the event as such and the activity of reporting are not yet fully incorporated and proficiently enacted in the community. Striking intersections occur between certain steps in the underlying verbal action structure (report, debate, approval, handing over the office) and the sequential, chronological structure on the surface. The report is interrupted several times by activities belonging to other steps of the action structure, which violate their sequential logic. The judge reinitiates the report after he started handing over the office. As a matter of fact, the report continues even *after* the official transfer of office has concluded, at a time when the outgoing judge is formally no longer in office.

The problems we encounter in this assembly can be explained in terms of conflicts between several levels of discourse constitution: (1) the overall discourse structure of the event and its interactive order are continuously at risk because its patterns are not yet well established and the community members have not yet fully acquired the necessary discourse skills to function in this kind of literacy practice with its formal, institutional structure. (2) Additional difficulties arise in the intersection of the monolingual–bilingual, the formal–informal, and the oral–literate dimensions. On the bilingual–monolingual dimension, the judge and other participants make an effort to maintain a continuous performance in Hñähñú, the assembly's only legitimate language. This endeavor is hampered on the one hand, because the participants attempt to remain within the oral–literate opposition of diglossic boundaries, neither using the vernacular in writing (the report's notes) nor switching over to oral Spanish altogether when delivering a formal speech. (3) The required discursive formality of the event conflicts with the use of the vernacular, which has not, perhaps not yet, undergone the necessary linguistic elaboration (in the sense of *Sprachausbau;* cf. Kloss 1967) to be able to function appropriately in the new speech events. Both the formal-informal and the oral–literate polarities act as conflicting tensions, which explain the constant shift into Spanish, away from the event's legitimate language. In sum, the linguistic, discursive, and cultural conflict of which literacy is a central piece is carried right into an intraethnic event where all the participants are themselves native Hñähñú.

Damage settlement

In the next situation an employee from the state-owned rural bank (RB) participates in a peasant council meeting in Pozuelos with about a dozen peasants (A, B, C, ...); one of them is also a primary school teacher (K). They discuss the settlement of damages for a harvest that was lost due to the lack of rain. Since it was insured, a damage settlement was claimed. As a condition for settlement the peasants had to have sown between two preestablished dates (in this case July 1st and 8th). Harvest insurance is a new procedure for the indigenous peasants in Pozuelos. The year before they lost indemnities because they ignored the appropriate procedure. This year the rural bank granted a loan for the seeds, which can only be recovered if the insurance company settles damages satisfactorily. The bank employee, whose bank is of course interested in a damage settlement, calls for this meeting to help the peasants prepare the damage claim, just a week before an insurance agent is to visit the village to investigate the situation. In sum, a potential conflict of interest between two institutions belonging to the dominant society (the insurance company and the bank) is at stake, a setting altogether alien to the peasants' experience and culture.

After a short opening the bank employee pulls out a list with each peasant's name, the loan, and the size of the sown field. He takes the chair by calling on one peasant after the other to analyze each case. The example illustrates one of 11 individual interviews with slight variations.

Transcript 3: Damage settlement (Hñähñú in italics)

1	RB	por ahí ¡Teotonio Angeles Hernández!	son dos
		there now, (NAME)	there are 2
2	C		¡presente!
			here
3	RB	hectáreas, nos reportó una	una no está sembrada,
		hectares, you reported one	one hasn't been sowed,
4	C	*haha*	
		yes	
	RB	si está sembrada es despúes del 15	
		if it has been sowed it was after the 15th	
6	C	sí..el 15	
		yes.. the 15th	
7	RB	así es.. y sembró del primero al ocho de julio	
		very well..and you sowed between the 1st and the 8th of July	
8	C	sí	
		yes	
9	B	¿se acuerda?	del primero al ocho de julio, no la
		remember?	from the 1st to the 8th of July, you
10	C	sí	
		yes	

11	RB	vayan a regar, cuando la rieguen, todo esto se va
		won't mess it up, if you do, {it'll all come down on you},
12		abajo, eh?
		ok?
13	C	sí
		yes
14	K	*oxqui punfri nu ra* fecha *porgue nu b-u*
		don't forget the date, 'cause otherwise
15		ya con con que-*a hinda recibi*
		with with they won't accept it
16	C	*haha*
		yes

The segment represents more or less the standard procedure. RB instructs the peasant (C) very bluntly what to report at the meeting with the insurance agent (lines 5, 7, 9). He then goes on with an exhortation, shaped in the form of a frame expansion, that is intended to develop a shared perspective of the issue (lines 9-12). On the level of the constitution of action RB defines the situation as a counseling event simply by producing this utterance; from the perspective of social relations the turn pro poses a relationship of complicity, which is ratified by the peasant (C) (lines 13, 16). A second expansion consists in a frame reinforcement uttered by the peasant teacher (K), who acts as a cultural broker and repeats the instructions in Hñähñú. He focuses on the decisive question of the sowing date. At this point the peasants' general insecurity becomes evident, as is shown by hesitation phenomena and other cues; it seems that they find it extremely difficult to interpret the technical relations between sowing dates and damage claims, and to decipher the discourse frame structure as such.

Different from many other interethnic encounters, though, all participants are making an obvious effort to build up cross-cultural cooperation and to keep the objective and subjective tension (Bourdieu 1980) as low as possible. Although the bank employee maintains control during the whole session, no conversational sanctions against the indigenous speakers can be observed. Language choice and distribution fit neatly into the picture of cooperation. Spanish dominates throughout the event, but Hñähñú is never excluded. Participant-oriented language choice obliges the Indians to use Spanish in their interactions with the monolingual employee. In spite of their obviously limited competence, there are no signs of stigmatization vis-à-vis their ethnic Spanish dialect or the Indian language they use among themselves. The competent bilingual teacher intervenes as an interpreter and cultural broker when communication is at risk.

Three levels of cross-cultural conflict can be distinguished analytically. First, the level of *linguistic codes:* undoubtedly, most of the peasants

involved exhibit a low proficiency in Spanish. Second, they show a limited competence in the appropriate *discourse structures* in this literacy-dominated event. Third, they do not share the *cultural model* the event is based upon since its patterns do not correspond to the peasants' cultural models of farming experience. According to their own cultural base, sowing and harvesting are determined by a different time logic related to the climate, to rain and drought, not to fixed calendar dates, which belong to a literacy-based model. Both discourse patterns and the underlying cultural model of agricultural production pertain to literate societies and are not comprehensible outside this context. We thus observe a rupture between the peasants' historically accumulated experience (the cultural model) of farming and its discursive and linguistic appropriation, given the new linguistic codes and discourse patterns that are imposed upon them.

Literacy determines the whole event. Written agreements had to be filled out and signed previously to obtain the insurance and the loan. And the debtors' list plays a central role as an agenda and checking list in the event itself. The peasants have to participate in the semiliterate (or semioral) discourse pattern of a damage claim, which involves text and talk about text. Interestingly enough, no actual reading or writing skills are required from the peasants; it is the bank employee who takes charge of this part in a collaborative, interactive event. The peasants, however, even fail to perform the oral components of the discourse pattern appropriately. In the end the bank employee has to rehearse and have the peasants memorize the corresponding sewing dates for the later presentation of the damage claim.

In sum, this example illustrates on the micro level of a communicative event how competence in a literate society entails more than just an individual capacity to read and write. The Hñähñú peasants fall short and fail to produce their oral part of this literacy practice satisfactorily because they do not participate in the literate society it belongs to. Conversely, illiterates in literate societies may well function in many literacy-dominated activities, because they have acquired all the appropriate skills except reading and writing and are often able to compensate or conceal their limitations.

The ejido *assembly*

Our last example shows how the literacy mode could be used in a quite different way as a violent strategy to reproduce asymmetric power relations in the community. A general assembly of the village's *ejido,* a

specific agrarian organizational structure, was convened to formally install the new secretariat's members (president, secretary, and treasurer) in their offices. This is enacted by a bureaucrat from the Ministry of Agrarian Reform. Previously a conflict broke out over a corruption affair in the *ejido's* hen coop. The former secretariat, which discovered the irregularities that had occurred in connivance with at least some officers in the ministry, was removed and a new secretariat was more or less imposed through a formal election. Therefore, the real purpose for the ministry and its local allies is to restore the power relations and the control over a peasants' organization that had implicitly questioned the ministry's authority. The climate before and during the assembly is tense, since the conflicts are still present.

The representative (R) arrives several hours late to the meetingplace in the community. Without any explanation of his delay he takes over the chair and quickly opens the session by reading the citation that establishes the agenda. He takes up almost a quarter of the whole session by calling upon each of the participants from a members' list in order to establish the quorum for the meeting. Many important community members including the new deputy secretary are absent, which annoys the official. He then leads to the principal point on the agenda, the installation of the new secretariat, which includes the handing over of the new credentials. The installment is enacted by reading the *oficio,* the official document for each of the office-bearers in which the ministry certifies that the removal of the former and the election of the new official have been carried out in compliance with the corresponding rules and regulations. After a short speech in which he stresses the importance and obligations of the office-bearers, an even shorter address by the new *ejido* president, and a brief debate that does not allow the fundamental topics in conflict to be raised, the representative opens up the session's closing by asking the participants to sign a document he has brought with him to testify to the orderly accomplishment of the meeting. He becomes extremely annoyed when he learns that the new deputy secretary is not only absent but has also withheld the *ejido* seal, with which it is necessary to stamp the minutes to render them "official." He then quickly closes the session and rushes back to the state capital. The following example is taken from the opening of the session.

Transcript 4: The *ejido* assembly

1	R	> > sii (.) por primera convocatoria/ no asiste la mayoría de ejidatarios (.) que es el
		if upon the first citation the majority of *ejido* members does not assist . which is
2		caso en El Sauz, verdad? (.) se aplica (UC) con posterioridad.' una segunda
		the case here in El Sauz, isn't it? a second citation is applied subsequently

convocatoria. (..) aa (.) después ((MOVES PAPER)) el día que escribieron esta
huhu then the day they wrote this
convocatoria con los que se presenten'(.) se secuela la asamblea< <
citation with those {members} who are present the assembly is held.
.((READING STOPS)) (..) este/ las convocatorias se fijaron oportunamente. (..) ||
huuhu. the citations were issued appropriately {in time}
R vamos a ver el orden de día. (..) ((MOVING PAPERS)) dice aquí ||
let us see the agenda here it says
> > > Secretaría de la Reforma Agraria del Estado de Hidalgo primera
Ministry of the Agrarian Reform of the State of Hidalgo first
convocatoria a la asamblea extraordinaria. (.) de conformidad con los artículos
convocation to the extraordinary assembly . in accordance with the articles
veintisiete veintinueve treintaiuno treintaidós y treintaitrés realtivos a la Ley
27 29 31 32 and 33 relative to the General
General de Reforma Agraria / se convoca a los ejidatarios con derecho a ello
Law of Agrarian Reform the *ejido* members entitled to it and duly
debidamente reconocidos de El Sauz, Municipio del Cardonal del Estado de
acknowledged from El Sauz, County of Cardonal, State of
Hidalgo/ para que acudan puntualmente a la Asamblea Extraordinaria' (.) Hidalgo to
attend punctually the Extraordinary Assembly
que tendrá legislativo el día quince de Mayo de (1980). A los comisariados
that will {be held} on the 15th day of May of 1980. To the *ejido*
ejidales ||. . || conforme a la Secretaria de Reforma Agraria < < <
commissioners ||. . || In conforrnity with the Ministry of Agrarian Reform
bajo la siguiente del día. Lista de asistencia./ ((READING STOPS))
under the following agenda. Participants' list
vamos a pasar lista de asistencia. (.)
Let's call the roll

The official initiates the meeting without being introduced by the local authorities and without any introduction, greeting, or welcoming opening of his own, violating the habitual procedure in such meetings. Through his first long turn he controls the opening and the first steps of the meeting's discourse pattern, such as the assertion that the opening conditions are given, the formal opening, and the initiation of the first topics of the agenda. He produces the first unit (lines 1-5) in the pitch, tone of voice, and rhythm of the typical formal discourse style of administration and law in Mexico. In the last unit of his turn (lines 7-16) he starts reading the *oficios* in the fastest imaginable staccato. The intonation contour, an indistinct articulation, deletions, and phonetic liaisons create a reading-aloud style that does not reveal the slightest attempt to enhance comprehension through oratorical techniques that usually bridge the gap between written text and aural comprehension. No explanatory side sequences or comments appear. Consequently, the content of the documents is bound to remain incomprehensible for most if not all of the indigenous peasants. The official's performance and discourse style pro-

duce a striking contrast to the Hñähñús' traditional ethnic style of interaction in such meetings.

In this case the language and cultural conflict emerges much more clearly than in the previous examples on the three levels mentioned before. First, the sole use of Spanish excludes many of the participants with limited Spanish proficiency. Second, the technical terms and syntax of the juridical discourse reduce the Indians' intervention even further. Third, the event belongs to a cultural model of bureaucratic administration and formality that is alien to the peasants' traditions of organization and production, although this new style increasingly penetrates their ways of living. Again, a written text dominates the event. Many of its parts, such as the resolutions, constitute institutional speech acts whose execution is enacted by its utterance, that is, the reading aloud in front of its addressees. According to rule, the government official is obliged to read out the whole document to produce the legal consequences of its content (naming office-bearers, etc.). Presumably established originally to protect the addressees' rights by explicitly referring to the legal base of any administrative act, the extensive citation of articles, paragraphs, and laws causes a contrary effect in this context. Since the participants are virtually excluded from semantic and textual comprehension and do not know the legal instruments referred to, the reading of the text can only produce the acoustic effect of a ritual imposed upon the community, a literacy practice that places a segregating use of written text in the center of a dominant, bureaucratic discourse strategy aimed at the reproduction of existing power relations. Nevertheless, the peasants engage in resistance strategies that are generally not carried out in the field of the opponent, that is, the structure of administrative discourse. Here they are evident, first of all, through the absence of a very important part of the community's formal and informal authorities, a fact that the bureaucrat and the new officials comment upon extensively. Second, silence turns out to be an effective sign of opposition. On several occasions the new president, whose authority should be legitimized through this event, urges his fellow-villagers to speak up and make their statements.

Certainly not all events show the indigenous participants in such a subordinate position. Some community members display a highly proficient competence in technical genres, including the use and production of written texts in meetings of local or regional committees organizing water resources or the building of community facilities. Technical topics and the handling of written documents may induce the use of Spanish for most of the interaction, depending on the linguistic proficiency of the participants. And the use of literacy is certainly not limited to activities that maintain external dominance. Many communities adopt and incor-

porate the instruments of the dominant society, such as contracts and the use of legal resources, to the best of their ability to defend their economic, social, and ethnic interests. But written text is always produced in Spanish, although its use may be contextualized in the vernacular. Proficiency in these activities, including literacy practices, is generally limited to teachers and to emigrants who have spent long periods of their lives in urban areas. And so far there have been few signs of an emerging native-language literacy in the key events that organize the life of the communities.

Literacy practices, accommodation, and assimilation

As we have seen, literacy not only gains weight in the communities' external relations with the regional and national society; literacy practices increasingly permeate intraethnic, vernacular-dominated events and activeities too, as part and parcel of growing integration. Two relevant issues emerge from the study of literacy development in the Hñähñú communities: first, the characteristics of the process of transition into literacy itself with its components, its oral contextualization, and the multiple uses developed for literacy; second, the consequences of literacy for ethnolinguistic survival, that is, the relationship between the incorporation of literacy and the process of language maintenance and shift. The second topic implies a discussion of the choices and alternatives in the Hñähñú's perspectives to preserve domains of ethnic resistance and to reproduce their ethnic alternity while incorporating and reshaping cultural features such as literacy from the dominant society; the question is, then, to what extent a process of accommodation without assimilation (cf. Gibson 1988) is viable and actually practiced.

Transition to literacy: a changing relationship between orality and literacy

The process of transition into literacy reveals a complex relationship between orality and literacy. A series of features that appear in the analyzed events allow us to reconstruct the path of the process itself. I had argued that the inroad of literacy practices into the intraethnic communicative repertoire depicts a relatively new process. Two sources sustain this hypothesis. On the one hand, detailed discourse analysis of key speech events exhibits a striking intensity and quality of interactive work developed by the participants to permanently contextualize, refocus, and repair activities that take place in certain institutional events. Such

performances typically reveal the degree to which a procedure is new and has to be tried out, rehearsed, and adapted. Sometimes participants explicitly verbalize and focus on these processes, as in some of our examples. The second source stems from ethnography, which documents the emergence and transformation of speech events related to the changed settlement patterns, the creation of a new communicational infrastructure, and new institutions of social organization. Literacy seems to be part of the innovations. As a matter of fact, the communities hardly possess any documentation or archives older than some 20 to 30 years. It is only since the indigenous teachers have gradually started to replace the traditional leaders that an administration based on documentation is slowly emerging. Three features can be singled out in this transition: a component of discourse *formalization,* the intervention of powerful *agents* and beneficiaries of literacy, and the existence of a marked *diglossic ideology.*

Ethnographic observation and discourse analysis reveal that the incorporation of literacy advances alongside a growing formalization of the linguistic structures, discourse patterns, and procedures of institutional events and activities. New organizational structures appear, such as the nomination of chairpersons, steering committees, and voting procedures; increasingly references to "the law" can be heard in local disputes. Even in oral intraethnic events where Hñähñú is mandatory (conciliations, etc.), a new "high" register appears, which connotes the Spanish discourse universe through a significant amount of nonassimilated loan words, short transfers into the national language, and a formalized, ritual discourse structure. The formalizing discourse style both creates the preparatory conditions for a transition to the use of written texts (cf. Ehlich 1983; Heath 1982; Olson 1991; Olson and Torrance 1991) in oral intraethnic events and, at the same time, contextualizes written text in situations where it has already been introduced. These discourse patterns and strategies aim at developing the necessary competencies to participate in literate societies and form an integral part of the literacy practices themselves. As our examples reveal, literacy competence encompasses knowledge and skills on the levels of linguistic structures and vocabulary, discourse patterns and strategies, and cultural models. The indigenous teachers, together with long-term work migrants who have returned to their villages, playa key role as agents of sociocultural transformation and promote innovations related to formalization, literacy, and the use of Spanish. The teachers have developed a professional and new leadership *habitus* (Bourdieu 1980) based on the symbolic capital of Spanish, literacy, and their competence as cultural brokers. As already stated earlier, they have displaced the traditional leaders over the past two or three decades and since the 1980s hold most offices as mayors, justices

of the peace, and committee presidents. Teachers dominate in the institutional meetings and the schools, two orally contextualized domains that function as the main gates through which 1iteracy practices and skills are incorporated into the communities' communicative repertoire. A detailed comparison of two communities (Sierra 1992) revealed that the formalization of procedures and the use of documents are closely re1ated to the influence and number of teachers living in a community. Thus, the adoption of new, formal procedures has progressed much more in one community with more than 40 resident teachers than in another with none. Interestingly, the formalized procedures are carried out in Hñähñú as the legitimate language in the first community (see my second example), whereas the less formalized procedures occur in Spanish in the other, given a different historical pattern of language distribution. In many aspects the teachers have already undergone a transformation of their linguistic and cultural patterns of orientation as a professional group, a change that creates a conflict with their ethnic loyalty.

To a large extent the specific ways in which literacy is conceptualized and incorporated into the Hñähñú universe of discourse can be explained in terms of the predominant linguistic and discursive ideologies. Our research project (Muñoz 1983) revealed that the asymmetric relationship between Spanish and Hñähñú is generally reproduced as diglossic ideology (cf. Gardy and Lafont 1981) on the level of linguistic consciousness. Spanish benefits from a high prestige both as a codified, written language with a grammar and as the language of wider communication; Hñähñú in turn is considered to be a "dialect," not a language, with no written code and no grammar. The functional opposition between the languages – which appears much more c1ear-cut on the level of linguistic ideologies than in the discursive practices themselves – elucidates why the development of a native-language literacy has so far not been concepttualized as a viable option. In the beliefs about the two languages, schooling, and language learning, only Spanish is associated with literacy. Therefore, most indigenous citizens define the acquisition of written Spanish as a social goal of high priority, at least for the next generation. This fact explains why the hybrid curriculum at school, which attempts to teach Spanish as a second language *through* the medium of literacy, has widespread support, in spite of the pedagogical difficulties it implies: it is ultimately congruent with the general ideology about language attributes impelled by the teachers and more and more accepted by the communities.

Given the multiple changes in process it is not easy to assess the present impact of literacy in the communities and the extent to which the Hñähñú are able to create conditions to intervene actively as agents and reshape

literacy for their purposes. The sociocultural and ideological context of literacy here differs from that prevailing in several cases reported and analyzed in the perspective of how people affect and reshape literacy (Street 1993b), where literacy and socioeconomic integration played a rather peripheral role. In the Hñähñú communities, by contrast, there seems to be less space for the creative reshaping of literacy practices, since literacy appears as a central feature in a model of social organization that is being adopted. On the one hand, literacy cannot be considered yet as a pervasive medium and practice (Moll 1992: 223) nor as a well-established practice (in this case in the native language) as it is depicted for the Cree (Darnell 1984; Bennet and Bery 1991), the Navajo (McLaughlin 1989), or the Inuit (Briggs 1983; Lowe 1984; Stairs 1988, 1990) in very specific domains. On the other hand, the role of literacy is not only growing rapidly in the communities' political, economic, and social activities related to the "external world," the county, the region, the institutions, commerce, and banks. At present literacy practices are increasingly penetrating intraethnic, vernacular-dominated situations and activities in a process that can be directly observed in specific communicative events.

In sum, literacy has already been accepted as a new and highly valued medium. Its implementation and the acquisition of the corresponding skills, however, as well as the development of discourse structures and the reshaping of cultural models, are still under way. The transition into literacy creates a new relationship between discourse functions and discourse types. Given the context of conflict and the fact that orality and literacy coincide with the diglossic boundaries between Hñähñú and Spanish, the relationship between orality and literacy looks more like a polarity in opposition than a continuum (Hornberger 1989b). The concept of a continuum itself is a theoretical construct that posits a continuous, steady transition from one mode or code to the other where no clear boundaries are distinguishable (cf. Besnier 1988). By implication, however, it blurs the contrasts and very often hides the underlying conflicts. Here, as, probably, in many other cases, orality and literacy appear as both complementary *and* contrasting, conflicting resources; and, whereas there may be mixing and switching in discourse practices, the speakers usually establish relatively clear boundaries on the level of linguistic consciousness (Hamel and Muñoz 1988; Wald 1986; Mannesy and Wald 1985) and metapragmatics. As we have seen, literacy practices come about through certain discursive formalizations that constitute literacy practices in themselves and prepare the ground for the use of written texts; they need powerful agents such as the teachers to promote them and to create the generalized trust in literacy; and they are enhanced

through diglossic ideologies that focus on Spanish as the privileged medium for literacy.

Literacy and the process of language maintenance and shift

The central question is, then, how the native group will accommodate to occurring societal changes and adopt innovations such as literacy without assimilating completely to the dominant society and without giving up their ethnolinguistic distinctness. In the debate about the consequences of literacy spread to nonliterate societies, most perspectives identify literacy in the dominant language as a factor of language shift, whereas native-language literacy is considered to contribute to language maintenance. This equation is certainly too simple and has been challenged as a general rule from different perspectives.[5] Nevertheless it is probably fair to say that in many cases where a process of minority integration or assimilation is already advanced and literacy practices are generally present, as in Mexico, the development of literacy in one or the other language may have an important impact on language maintenance and shift. I will therefore discuss the options and choices available in the Hñähñú case and in some other Mexican native experiences.

Although most features favor Spanish literacy and sociolinguistic assimilation in the Hñähñú case, there are at least a few signs of possible alternatives. Of central relevance for the development of native literacy would be an effort to "break down" the general ideology about the superiority of Spanish *per se* and the impossibility of using Hñähñú for writing purposes. In our own more recent research on literacy development in the schools, we applied a series of pre- and posttests, including some in Hñähñú reading and writing skills (Francis and Hamel 1992). Much to the teachers' and students' surprise, students from grade 4 to 6 were by and large able to read and to produce written narratives in Hñähñú. Considering that they had never been taught these skills in their native language, their tests exhibited an unexpected level of proficiency, which was largely due to their capacity to transfer skills from Spanish to Hñähñú. Several indigenous teachers who helped us to apply the tests went through a similar experience. While at first they exhibited considerable difficulties in reading aloud a text in Hñähñú, they rapidly developed the necessary skills and were soon able to perform the task proficiently.

Certainly, isolated experiences will by themselves not change the dominant literacy pattern. The practical demonstration, however, that reading and writing *could* actually happen in Hñähñú and that it is capable of serving certain purposes may constitute a first step to challenge the

dominant literacy ideology. At the same time it could break the vicious circle by which the lack of reading materials in the vernacular justifies the unwillingness to teach native literacy skills and vice versa. This effort has been made over the past ten years by the "Academia de la Cultura Hñähñú," a small unit in the regional Department of Indigenous Education where a dozen native linguists and teachers collect and rewrite traditional tales, develop reading materials, and teach reading courses in Hñähñú.

In contrast with the Hñähñú experience, the Zapotecs, Mexico's fourth largest indigenous people, located in the state of Oaxaca with approximately 403,000 speakers, can look back on a century of native literacy tradition. The Zapotecs are regarded as having one of the highest degrees of ethnolinguistic vitality among Mexico's Indian peoples. Between 1899 and 1982, a sequence of nine alphabets have been elaborated by individual activists and researchers, some of them Zapotecs, in the region surrounding Juchitán, the Istmo Zapotec capital. During this time a significant number of publications have been issued, although in limited editions: novels, poems, textbooks, grammars, and more recently several journals and some scientific treatises. According to Saynes (1992), general diffusion and knowledge of native literature exists in Juchitán, along with visible signs in public life.

The question arises how the transition from orality to native-language literacy is conceived of, and actually carried out. In Juchitán the literacy production and circulation, although limited, have created a basic independence of literacy from orality, which includes the evolution of an incipient oral metalanguage (Olson 1991) about the alphabets and other textual characteristics. This is not yet the case in many other more recent indigenous movements that promote native literacy in Mexico as a response to perceived language shift. Very often literacy is misinterpreted as the transcription of orality. Local narratives and autobiographical accounts are compiled and transcribed, often by computer and with sophisticated special word processors (Salinas Pedraza and González Ventura 1990). According to critics (Cerrón-Palomino and López 1990), however, they often remain on a transcriptionist level because they fail to acknowledge the complex historical process and the intermediate steps that have to be developed. One expression of this early stage of literacy consciousness may be found in the debates on the alphabet. Given rich dialectal diversity and a linguistic tradition of descriptive phonetic alphabets induced from outside (SIL, etc.), in most languages it has been extremely difficult to arrive at an agreement about a common alphabet, since every dialect group wants to see their dialect features reflected in the alphabet. No doubt the debates express power struggles between the

groups. But they al so reveal a linguistic consciousness that confuses orality and literacy (transcription with alphabet) since it does *not* recognize that the alphabet of any language constitutes an abstraction that cannot represent orality exactly *or* include all of its linguistic features.

These arguments take us back *to* the controversy about the possible consequences of native-language literacy. We recall that the widespread assumption about the vernacular literacy fostering ethnolinguistic maintenance had been questioned for specific cases on the grounds of its possibly disruptive consequences for the native culture. In my view, such negative effects may occur with small ethnolinguistic peoples that (1) have had little contact with Western literate societies (e.g. the Yanomami in the Amazonian basin); (2) possess a very clear diglossic separation of language functions and forms like the Guaraní in Brazil; and/or (3) exhibit a low esteem and necessity for literacy altogether. Some of them may maintain a level of reduced external L2 literacy for contact purposes but will choose to keep literacy out of their languages and cultures.

In most Mexican native cases, however, none of these conditions prevails, and the process of integration is already well advanced. Here we encounter the opposite case, where the development of native literacy is sometimes overestimated as a remedy *for* language shift. Thus, the indigenous movements of language maintenance and revival that came into being in Juchitán and elsewhere in Oaxaca defined the development of native literacy and its spread as their main strategy of struggle, since literacy was conceived of as the single most important mechanism of se1f-assertion, revalorization, and development of the native languages (Saynes 1992; Pardo 1993). The emerging counter-e1ite (Cooper 1989) based its strategy on the analysis that the exclusive use of Spanish to access the domains of economic, political, and judicial control functioned as yet another instrument of domination, as we have seen in detail in the Hñähñú case. Among other observers Pardo maintains, however, that the possibilities of native literacy *to* reverse language shift have been grossly overestimated, and in many cases this kind of literacy is impelled without paying the necessary attention *to* the conservation and development of vernacular orality and self-esteem, as well as to the socioeconomic basis of ethnic resistance. In Juchitán the spread of native literacy came about as a result of ethnolinguistic vitality, *not* vice versa (Pardo 1993:122), since Zapotec played an important role in ethnic and political cohesion when a progressive coalition of peasants, workers, and students strongly opposed to the reactionary state party (PRI) won the local elections and took office in the county in 1981. The overestimation of literacy is seen as a diglossic ideology imposed through the experience with Spanish literacy, which managed to extend the graphocentric be1ief

system to the indigenous peoples. Accordingly, this position implicitly assumes the diglossic attributes of the vernaculars as deficient, illiterate, lacking an alphabet and hence a grammar, and therefore not being apt for the "higher" societal functions, a situation that calls for remedy of status through functional extension.

The Zapotec case reveals a basic dilemma of a language policy that fosters vernacular literacy: its adoption implies the risk of further assimilation through a series of inevitable side effects, some of them of a perverse nature (cf. Laponce 1989). At the same time, however, native literacy may be an inevitable resource for ethnolinguistic maintenance in a graphocentric society where the centuries of intercultural contact have already imposed many of the dominant values and a return to a *status quo ante* seems unrealistic. For the Hñähñú, the Zapotecs, and most Mexican Indian peoples the question is not whether literacy should be introduced or not. Given a generalized language conflict and processes of shift it appears equally ahistoric to attempt to reestablish a diglossia in its classical sense where language forms and functions are strictly kept separate. The question is rather whether a native literacy could emerge that both competes with Spanish literacy use in certain domains and develops its own uses in order to create a biliterate communicative repertoire. The deeply rooted graphocentrism that the Hñähñú and Zapotecs share with most other Mexican Indian peoples plays a crucial role in this process. It explains the roots of a possible overestimation of literacy. Further research will have to be carried out on the historical dimension of this linguistic ideology.

For the indigenous strategies the question is how accommodation through literacy development may contribute — not to preserve a petrified nonliterate identity — but to maintain and reinforce the group's capacity to reproduce alternity, that is, the permanent process of differenttiation from the dominant society. The strategy envisaged by the movements in Oaxaca and elsewhere attempts to appropriate the new medium under the group's own cultural control and reshape it according to its needs, as demonstrated by the Zapotecs in Juchitán, who have developed considerable political power over time. Such a process would imply that the literacy movements have overcome their present stage and conceptualization of literacy limited to transcribing oral texts or translating political, legal, or literary texts from the dominant language. The actual practice may only preserve native literacy as a specialized cultural artifact incapable of acting as a cultural bridge between native oral tradition and literacy in the dominant language, as other cases have shown (cf. Burnaby 1984; Stairs 1990). Instead, native-language literacy would have to penetrate the areas where literacy is actually used and replace the use of Spanish

wherever possible. At the same time, the process of developing a full-fledged literacy implies the creation of written texts that are independent from orality and reflect a linguistic consciousness of literacy and its properties; and it will probably have to include the creation of multiple literacies, in both languages, of diverse natures that will serve different purposes.

At present, the exclusive use of Spanish literacy in intraethnic events, as happens in the Hñähñú case, seems to contribute to language shift. Whether the creation and spread of native literacy will promote language resistance in Oaxaca will probably depend on its overall sociolinguistic and political contextualization. Other experiences have shown that a decisive domain for language maintenance is the oral, everyday interaction on the local network level, together with primary socialization (cf. Fishman 1989, 1991). Native literacy will be effective on the basis of such language preservation, not in its place. And the general socioeconomic basis of the ethnic groups will have to be preserved. According to many observers the indigenous rebellion that broke out in Chiapas (southeast Mexico) in January, 1994, may contribute in the long run to improving certain contextual and legal conditions for language and sociocultural maintenance. Thus, the reivindication of regional autonomy and the creation of indigenous regions with native rule (cf. Díaz-Polanco 1991) no longer reflect remote, utopian demands, but concrete claims on the agenda of the negotiation with the state, as they are in the most advanced areas of indigenous movements in Latin America.

Universidad Autónoma
Metropolitana,
Mexico City

Notes

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2. The Hñähñú are better known as Otomí, meaning 'bird arrow' or 'bird hunter', a Nahuatl name imposed during Aztec domination before Spanish colonization. Today the group is recovering its name, Hñähñú in its own language, meaning 'sons of the people hñú'. "Hñä'hñú" has now become the official name of the sixth largest indigenous people in Mexico, with some 280,000 members according to the 1990 census.

3. The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL, Wycliff Bible Society), which maintained an important center in the area from the thirties to the eighties, published a series of religious texts and two dictionaries in Hñähñú. On the whole, however, their activities

have not contributed significantly to the establishment of social uses and the autonomous spread of vemacular literacy. The result is certainly related to the predominantly proselytising objectives of this religious congregation; yet more important, in my view, is the SIL's cultural and linguistic theory which limits its efforts to producing alphabets and does not conceptualize the complex relationship between orality and literacy, nor does it conceive of literacy as a broad, socialcultural activity.

4. Transcription conventions:

[ ]	overlapping
( ), (( ))	transcriber's and analyst's cornments
{ }	free translation
I I	border of discourse unit
aaa	lengthened pronunciation
?	final rising intonation
’	listening intonation (more is expected)
.	final falling intonation
(.)	micropause
(..)	medium pause
(...)	longer pause
I GO	stressed pronunciation
> yes <	rapidly spoken

5. The supporters of maintenance oriented bilingual curricula elaborated powerful sociopolitical and psycholinguistic arguments in favor of first language literacy both for academic achievement and as a tool of ethnolinguistic resistance (Skutnabb-Kangas 1984; Cummins 1984, 1989). What has in fact been challenged is an overgeneralization of the argument, i.e., the assumption that native language literacy will in any case contribute to ethnolinguistic maintenance or, conversely, that the rejection of native literacy necessarily reflects language shift (Spolsky and Irvine 1982; Stairs 1990) The rejection of vemacular literacy at school by minority groups as observed in Peru (Homberger 1989a), Mexico, Brazil (Hamel 1994a), or elsewhere, should not automatically be interpreted as an orientation towards language shift.

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