NEWS via NBCNews: With Migration, Indigenous Languages Going Extinct

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With Migration, Indigenous Languages Going Extinct

BY CARMEN SESÍN

HOMESTEAD, FL - Her name is Spanish in origin, but for Juana Sales, a migrant farm-worker from the Guatemalan high lands, it hardly reflects her cultural identity.

Ten years ago, when Sales arrived in Homestead, an agricultural area in South Florida, she only spoke Mam – a Mayan language that dates back to the year 500. The obscure tongue, which is mostly spoken in Guatemala and Mexico, is classified by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as vulnerable to becoming extinct.

Since then, Sales has learned a heavily accented, broken Spanish and a little English. She has 4 children who were born in the U.S., but none of them have shown interest in speaking their mother's tongue.

Salas is one of a growing number of U.S. Latinos who speak ancient Mesoamerican languages, some of which are considered critically endangered of becoming extinct. According to the 2010 census, over 685,000 Latinos in the U.S. identified themselves as American Indian, up from around 400,000 in 2000. Experts agree the number is much higher but many indigenous speakers don’t report to the census because of immigration status and stigmas.

Most of the indigenous speaking Latinos in the U.S. are from Mexico, Guatemala and other Central American countries, although hundreds of indigenous languages are spoken all over

Latin America. Through the centuries, languages have been lost for a number of reasons, primarily during the Spanish colonization period. These days, though, scholars cite cultural isolation and discrimination that comes with migration - in many cases from Spanish-speaking Hispanics - that is leading to the loss of languages that once reigned throughout Latin America.

According to Patricia Baquedano-Lopez, a professor of Social and Cultural Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, the loss of language starts as soon as indigenous Latin Americans migrate internally before coming to the U.S. For instance, the indigenous groups she has studied from Yucatan first migrate to Cancun and Merida before making their way to California and other parts of the U.S.

“Merida and Cancun act as training centers before coming to the U.S.,” said Baquedano-Lopez, who is of Maya ancestry.

In these cities, they already begin to lose their language because it’s no longer important – they need Spanish and later English in order to survive. “Any kind of contact brings in the possibility of losing home languages,” added Baquedano Lopez.

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Once they arrive in the U.S., their language becomes irrelevant in their new surroundings. Because many of them are undocumented they cannot travel home to see their families, making them culturally more isolated than your average Spanish-speaking Latino.

If the current migration patterns continue for years to come, they will have a serious negative impact on many languages, according to Pamela Munro, Professor of Linguistics at the University of California, Los Angeles.

“When they come here they don’t have many opportunities to speak the language and don’t speak it to their children, and all contributes to language loss,” Munro said.

Many of those who come to the U.S. make money and then return to their communities, but with children who don’t speak the native language. That tends to change the indigenous speaking population even more, according to Munro.

Otto Schumann-Galvez, a professor of Mayan languages at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, adds that many indigenous speakers are subjected to ridicule by Spanish speaking Latinos in the U.S. – something they constantly faced in their own countries.

In 2012, the California Oxnard school district banned the use of the racially charged word “Oaxaquita” –or little Oaxacan – a derogatory term that students were using to refer to those from Mexico’s Oaxaca state. Indigenous students were being teased and bullied by other Mexican students, leaving them embarrassed to speak their native tongue.

“We acquire self-hating mechanisms. It’s really dramatic,” said Baquedano-Lopez.

“Many children see what their parents have suffered for being indigenous and they don’t want the same for themselves,” said Schumann-Galvez.

Indigenous people, often viewed as a minority within a minority by the larger Latino community, face an enormous amount of challenges and obstacles.

Juan Hernandez, came from Oaxaca 30 years ago speaking Mixtec, which is considered “definitely endangered” by UNESCO. Only knowing a few words in Spanish, he says he had a difficult time adapting.

"People take advantage when they know you can’t come up with the words to defend yourself,” said Hernandez, who now speaks perfect Spanish.

As a farmworker picking seasonal vegetables, Hernandez said most of the people who discriminated against him were Spanish-speaking Latinos who held managerial positions and would have him do extra work, threatening that he would be fired otherwise.

In 2001, Hernandez brought the rest of his family to Homestead. His son Agustin, who was 13 years-old when he came, speaks Mixtec, Spanish, and English, but says he prefers Spanish.

“Honestly, I prefer Spanish. I express myself better in Spanish, I like Spanish, and I feel more comfortable in Spanish,” said the younger Hernandez.

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Like his parents, he works in agriculture and says he has seen plenty of discrimination - more so from Latinos than from Americans.

Levis Torres, who works for We Count!, a local organization in Homestead that helps immigrant farm-workers, says at least half of the people that walk through their doors seeking help speak little or no Spanish and few have had any formal schooling.

To help them integrate, We Count! teaches newly arrived immigrants the alphabet with Spanish classes, then English classes, and lastly computer classes. They also offer training in legal rights and how to avoid being exploited.

“These people are abused and lied to more … especially when it comes to their salary” said Torres.

Baquedano-Lopez was quick to point out there are successful, professional indigenous people in the U.S. – not everyone works in agriculture. Hernandez’s daughter is studying nursing and his son is looking to enroll in culinary school. Discrimination has not had an effect on how he perceives his culture. “I’m very proud of who I am, of my customs, and my languages.”