

Preserving and Promoting Minority Languages: The Neapolitan and Tsotsil Linguistic Communities

As emphasized by the Summary Report on the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL) despite their immense value, languages around the world continue to disappear at alarming rates. The fact that many of those are indigenous languages, the indigenous cultures and knowledge systems to which those languages belong are also at risk. Because many speakers of indigenous languages also use one or more other languages, there is a heightened risk that the indigenous languages disappear since they become dispensable. In practical terms, there is the risk that parents and elders no longer transmit indigenous languages to their children and that indigenous languages fall out of daily use. Therefore, in the spirit of the **International Year of Indigenous Languages** and the next **Decade of Indigenous Languages**, we aim to impulse a concrete cooperation between different linguistic peoples such as the Neapolitan community in Naples, Italy and the Mayan indigenous Tsotsil group in Mexico. Also, we wish to motivate other endangered languages communities to join us.

The authors of this piece work for the mutual protection and exchange of useful practices overall to contrast the fact that indigenous communities, national minorities and *minoritized* groups suffer from discrimination and the loss of their languages. Unfortunately, although everyone has the right to speak in their first language, the violation of such a basic human right continues to take place on all continents. This is one of the reasons why we wish to strengthen and promote different linguistic and cultural communities based on what international Declarations and Conventions state with regards to the protection and promotion of linguistic and cultural diversities, social and cultural rights and how each individual should be respected and dignified without distinction as to religion, race, culture, gender and language. It is important to emphasize that although there are different international Declarations and Conventions that underline the relevance of preserving and promoting cultural and linguistic diversities and recognize the right to speak in your first language as a human right what has happened and continues to happen in practice is the opposite. In other words, speakers of minority languages have been discriminated against due to their language, culture and ethnicity. An example of this situation are the speakers of the Neapolitan language in Naples, Italy and the indigenous Tsotsil language in Chiapas, Mexico. While these two linguistic communities are in different continents and have their own unique characteristics, they have been assaulted by similar factors such as the educational-cultural system and mass media. Therefore, this manuscript compares both the reality lived by the Neapolitan and Tsotsil linguistic communities with what international documents declare with regards to the importance to recognize and validate the *human rights* of the speakers of these languages because now more than ever it is essential to work collaboratively to maintain and promote minority languages and defend language as a human right.

The Indigenous Tsotsil Language: Bats'ik'op



Figure 1. Representation of the Tsotsil language and culture (Google, s.f.) Figure 2. Map of Mexico emphasizing the State of Chiapas (Google, s.f.)

The Tsotsil language or Bats'i k'op is spoken in the State of Chiapas in southeast Mexico and it has approximately 417 462 speakers (INEGI, 2010). Tsotsil is an indigenous Mayan language and its speakers are also given the same name. Tsotsil people live in municipalities such as Chamula, Zinacantan and San Cristobal de las Casas. It is common that members of the Tsotsil community move to Tuxtla Gutierrez, the capital of Chiapas, or to other cities in Mexico due to the lack of resources in their own town. It is because of this situation that Tsotsil people have the need to learn Spanish since it is the dominant language of the nation. It should be noted that the Tsotsil community has been discriminated against and oppressed due to their ethnicity, language and traditions. In other words, their linguistic human rights have not been respected.

Neapolitan: language and heritage



Figure 3. Naples, in Italy (Google map, s.f.)

Figure 4. Naples World Heritage City. UNESCO plaque, Naples (Wikipedia, s.f.)



Figure 5. Enrico Caruso in 'O Sole mio, one of the most famous Neapolitan songs in the world (Google, s.f.)



Figure 6. A Neapolitan "Pizzaiuolo" (Google, s.f.)

About the Neapolitan language, it has been given the "ISO 639-3, nap" language code by UNESCO (Moseley, 2010) as a vulnerable language. Without considering the diaspora (emigrated communities to the northern Italy and abroad), Neapolitan is spoken by approximately 7.500.000 people in Campania, Lucania (Basilicata), Abruzzi (Abruzzo), Molise, northern Calabria, northern and central Apulia (Puglia), southern Lazio and Marche as well as easternmost Umbria regions. Neapolitan is a Romance language: it is not a deformation or a minor Italian language. Neapolitan neither a derivation of the written or classical Latin, but by vulgar (popular) Latin with pre-latin influences as Oscan (see for example the Pompeian inscriptions, attested in the IV book of "*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*") and Greek (vocalism, lexicon) today's present in the actual Neapolitan, and only after Latin, Norman, Provençal, Catalan, Valencian, Arabic, Hebrew, Spanish, Anglo-American.

Nevertheless, Neapolitan has influenced different material and immaterial cultural expressions that are inseparable from the city of Naples, and the culture of the whole world, for example with the art of *Neapolitan Pizzaiuolo*, as inserted into the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity of UNESCO (2017). "Pizzaiuolo" is a Neapolitan word not an Italian one. The Neapolitan language is widely spoken in its diatopic variations in the (continental) Southern Italy, but also abroad, among the thousands of immigrants or so called "Neapolitanphones" (Verde, 2018).

Agents against Neapolitan and Tsotsil

Interestingly, even though both Neapolitan and Tsotsil are geographically distant linguistic communities, they have both been attacked by similar factors such as ideological, economic, cultural, and political forces that have worked to oppress the speakers of these two languages. Neapolitan is transmitted as mother language at least for 70% of the population in Naples, Neapolitans are naturally Neapolitan-Italian bilinguals and in a large side of the so called “lower class” who is almost totally monolingual in Neapolitan. The Neapolitan language teaching is not foreseen in the Italian national school system. Moreover, in Italy Neapolitan is mostly considered to be a dialect of the Italian language; a negative, degraded or folklorist idiom, (or a sort of a corrupt Italian) which supports the Italian and negative stereotype about Naples and southern Italy. This is advertised by the Italian mass-media.

Interestingly, a strong commonality between the Tsotsil and Neapolitan speakers is that they have not been neither respected nor treated ethically. The educational system has played a key role in the achievement of such a goal.

Subtractive bilingual education and its impact

Tsotsil children have been instructed through subtractive bilingual education which has been characterized by having a transitional linguistic and cultural goal that uses the native language and culture of the student only to the extent necessary for the child to acquire the dominant language. Tsotsil students, have received transitional bilingual education that has favored the Spanish language and the culture of the dominant society which has led to Spanish monolingualism.

In the case of the Neapolitan language, it has a history of more than 7 centuries of written documents, it expresses the famous Neapolitan song (Neapolitan classic song and opera) such as poetry and theatre. Also, it is perhaps the most common spoken language in Italy, after Italian. Neapolitan is among the fifty most used languages in the world. On the other hand, Neapolitan is *constantly recreated* by writers, poets, artists, theatre authors, musicians and singers, both Neapolitan and foreigners (song, folklore, cinematography, culinary art, religious and popular rituals, etc.). Despite the value of Neapolitan, it has been taken away by the national educational programs in Italy because it is associated with degradation, ignorance, illiteracy, criminality or simply folklore: never as a teaching language. At the national level, introducing Neapolitan school teaching is considered to be absurd due to the negative attitudes and associations that have been created around it or just cause an Italian dialect. Also, it should be stated that Neapolitan has no form of legal protection in Italy. Neapolitan's mother-tongue children, for example, learn to identify their language and themselves in a negative way so a double prejudice is developed: the first one towards themselves and the second towards their cultural identity and language. As a result, these children are induced to discriminate and hate themselves and also and at the same time, they are discriminated against by the entire Italian community. Moreover, mothers are inducted by the educational and mass-media system to give away the Neapolitan language and accent from their children. In other words, an anthropological disaster is caused due to the types of discrimination that arise.

In the case of Tsotsil children, they simply do not see themselves on TV as mass media mostly shows the mestizo “face”, language and culture. This is one of the reasons why Tsotsil children feel as foreigners in their own home country (Del Carpio, 2012).

In the case of Italy, it is very common for Neapolitan (and its speakers) to be treated as something of folkloric, corrupt and degrading, that is, directly or with allusions, mainly to crime or connected to ignorance; a language spoken by illiterates or at least ridiculous/sympathetic ignorant peoples. Interestingly, often an evil combination of these ideas are transmitted to the public (also abroad) as some sort of "popular identity" also in the case of (alleged) "social complaints", without serious investigation about the reasons behind this situation. All this with an ignoble generalization of poorest contexts that are represented without hope or at least with the weight of one indelible stain, guilt, shame, always latent even on a (hypothetic) social "redemption".

Mass-media portrays a unilateral negative or very partial image of the Neapolitan speakers, their language and culture. It should be emphasized that this situation is particularly dramatic for Neapolitan mother-tongue children especially for those from the weakest areas.

In Italy, *the lack of legacy* for Neapolitan, such as in the public education, the unceasing and negative cultural-linguistic representation about Neapolitans and Neapolitan Language so the city of Naples (and of southern Italy, Naples in the Italian collective imagination is the emblem of the backward and ignorant south) continues to spread among Neapolitan children and the youth, in general, a subculture that change their Neapolitan accent, language and gestures in a violent way.

Contradictions

The situation described above conflicts with the spirit of the **Convention on the Rights of the Child** (Art.29 and 30 in particular), The **Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women** (see at the art.7 for example), the **International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discriminations** such as the principles of the three **Charter of the United Nations**, the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (Article 22) The **Charter of the United Nations** (Article 55 c); The **Resolution 61/266** adopted by the General Assembly on May 16th, 2007 focused on Multilingualism, The **Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions**, **The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**, **The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage**, **The UNESCO 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity**.

In order to respect the social dignity of Neapolitan mother-language children and mostly, the Neapolitan community, Dr. Massimiliano Verde created the "Accademia Napoletana", the only one group internationally recognized both to promote and teach Neapolitan Language and Culture. In 2017 Verde created the first CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) Course of Neapolitan Language and Culture - recognized by the Municipality of Naples – as well as a successful series of local and international initiatives, training and educational activities (podcasts, radio broadcasts, video-documentaries, publications, exhibitions, conferences, etc.). Recently (in 2019-2020), he created two teaching modules of the Neapolitan language, within the *European Social Fund* with a public school in Naples (I.C.72°Palasciano, Pianura).

Verde participated in many initiatives in the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages to represent the Neapolitan language. In this regard, Dr. Massimiliano Verde cooperates with academicians, lawyers, linguistic experts and educators from all over the world. In particular he gave a long interview to "VNY" an Italian-American online newspaper at the United Nations

Headquarters, International Press Corps, New York, in the occasion of a series of conferences he realized in the U.S.A. (April-May, 2019).

Both Dr. Karla Del Carpio and Dr. Massimiliano Verde believe that now more than ever it is important to work collaboratively to find ways to support minority linguistic communities. In fact, this article is written to enforce this kind of joint international work and it is desired that it will be the beginning of a strong cooperation that can encourage others to join. This is one of the reasons to write and share this note since it is important to work together to find ways to respect and validate linguistic as human rights. We need to cooperate in peace and defend diversities so that we can have a peaceful world for everyone especially for children from linguistic minorities. By doing so, we would also be contributing to improve social conditions.

In the following section we offer examples of some of the different joint international projects that we have developed to maintain and promote the linguistic human rights of the Neapolitan and Tsotsil communities.

International Academia Journals Conference in Puebla, Mexico

This publication considers the effect of the pandemic in minoritized socio-linguistic communities, such as the Neapolitan and Tzotsil ones, their solidary and democratic reaction, thanks and by their native tongue. The co-analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on Tsotsil and Neapolitan children, already marginalized and discriminated communities, empathises the importance of a co-work between nations and communities: our text wish to support the resistance of Neapolitan and Tzotzil people in front of this extraordinary situation and stimulate other linguistic groups at risk to cooperate.

Information on Publication:

- Del Carpio, K. & Verde, M. “*El impacto del COVID-19 en comunidades lingüísticas minorizadas en México e Italia*”, Proceeding of the International Academia Journals Conference, 12 (5), pp. 971-976, ISSN 1946-5351; Ebook: Investigación en la Educación Superior: Puebla 2020, ISBN 978-1-939982-551, August 13th-14th, 2020, Puebla, México

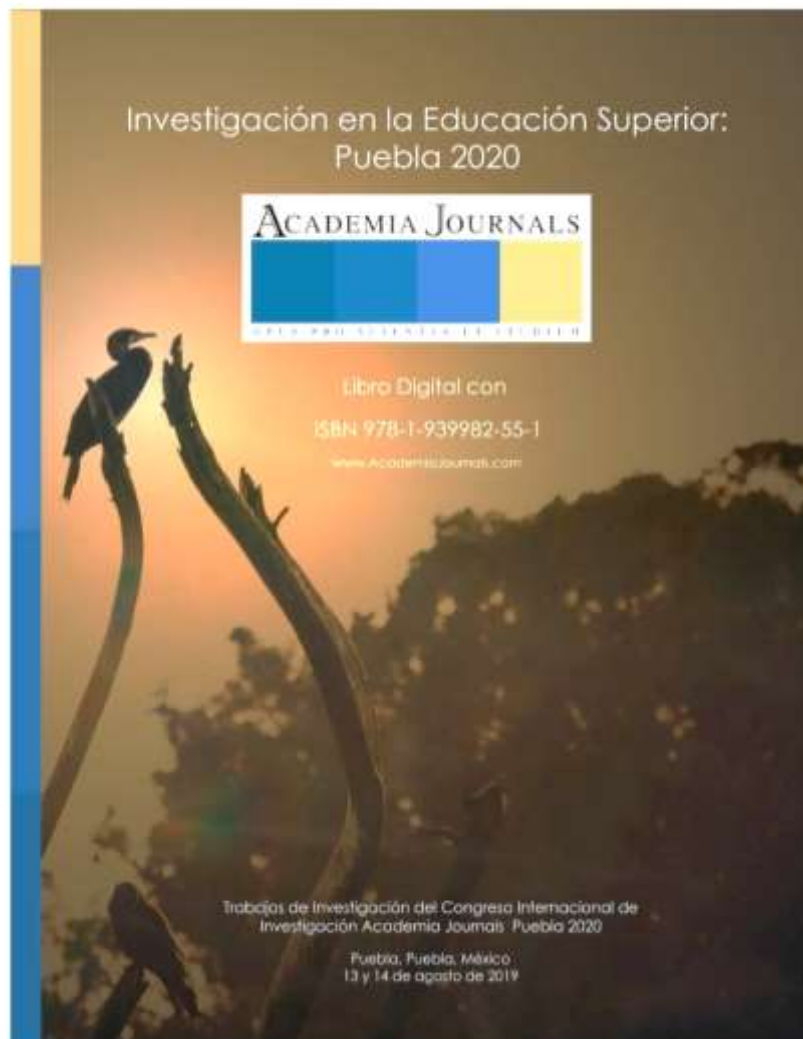


Figure 7. Investigación en la Educación Superior: Puebla 2020. Trabajos de Investigación en la Educación Superior del Congreso Internacional de Academia Journales. Puebla, México, 2020.



Figure 8. Poster on virtual presentation “*The importance of preserving and promoting minority languages: The case of the Neapolitan language*” by Dr. Verde, Spanish for Bilingual Education (SPAN 412), University of Northern Colorado (U.S.A.).



Figure 9. Virtual presentation, Dr. Verde talks about: “*The importance of preserving and promoting minority languages: The case of the Neapolitan language*”, Spanish for Bilingual Education (SPAN 412), University of Northern Colorado (U.S.A.).

Virtual presentation for college students in the United States

Inspired by UNESCO’s International Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL) 2019 and the importance and need to preserve and promote minority languages, Dr. Massimiliano Verde, President of the Neapolitan Academy in Naples, Italy and Dr. Karla Del Carpio, Associate Professor at the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) in the United States have developed a joint international academic cooperation to validate and promote the linguistic human rights of the Neapolitan community in Italy and the Indigenous Tsotsil group in Chiapas, Mexico.

As part of this international academic collaboration, different projects have been developed, for instance, peer-reviewed publications, international conference presentations and pedagogical talks to college students. Among the most recent works between Dr. Massimiliano Verde and Dr. Karla Del Carpio was the organization of the virtual presentation titled “*The importance of preserving and promoting minority languages: The case of the Neapolitan language*” to undergraduate students enrolled in the Spanish for Bilingual Education (SPAN 412) course at UNC. In this presentation, which took place on September 17th, 2020, Dr. Massimiliano Verde talked about the current situation of the Neapolitan language and the projects he has developed in order to find ways to maintain and promote the Neapolitan language and culture. For example, the creation of pedagogical materials written in Neapolitan, language lessons and his participation on different radio programs to teach and shows to raise awareness of the value of the Neapolitan language, and its speakers. Also, Dr. Massimiliano Verde pointed out the importance of being proud of your native language and culture since they are part of your identity. He also mentioned specific examples that show how the Neapolitan language and culture have contributed to the world’s linguistic and cultural richness through music, cuisine and traditions. He put ahead the value of the bilingualism as multiculturalism, such as reporting a lexicon in Neapolitan Language with Spanish influence.

The content of this presentation not only made students in SPAN 412 aware of the beauty and richness of the Neapolitan linguistic community, but also invited them to embrace their own “funds of knowledge” (De Jong, 2011), that is, their own history, language, culture, family, etc.

Dr. Del Carpio and her students in the SPAN 412 course feel honored for the opportunity they were given to learn about Dr. Massimiliano Verde’s academic work and the Neapolitan linguistic community and its richness. We thank Dr. Massimiliano Verde’s for his meaningful contributions to this class. Grazie assaje!

Warm Regards,

Karla Del Carpio

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