

Desde las raíces: the intersection of indigeneity, language, and territorial belonging in the migration experience of a Tlapaneco immigrant in northeastern Kansas

by

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Abstract

Negotiation of Indigenous identity and multilingual practices occur dynamically in the context of migration to the United States. Although Latin American immigrants are often categorized under broad labels such as “Latino” or “Hispanic”, these classifications tend to obscure the unique experiences and linguistic repertoires of Indigenous communities. Drawing on a qualitative case study of a Tlapaneco immigrant from Guerrero, Mexico, currently residing in Northeastern Kansas, this research examines how Indigeneity, territorial attachment, and language intersect in the participant’s migration experience. Data collection methods include a semi-structured narrative interview and a picture-naming task designed to capture lexical choices across the participant’s linguistic repertoire. The results show that Tlapaneco identity is actively maintained through enduring connections to community and territory, while the participant strategically mobilizes his multilingual repertoire across domains: Tlapaneco functions as cultural and symbolic capital, whereas Spanish and English serve as economic, social, and institutional resources. The findings also highlight how institutional language hierarchies and racialized migration dynamics contribute to the marginalization and reclassification of Indigenous identities within broader Latino categories. Taken together, this study contributes to understanding the complex ways in which language, migration, and institutional structures shape Indigenous identity in diasporic contexts by centering the narrative of a Tlapaneco immigrant.

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Introduction

Migration from Latin America to the United States has significantly diversified the U.S. linguistic and cultural landscape, as immigrants bring with them a wide range of languages, traditions, and social practices (Khatua, Jurgens, & Weber, 2025). Research has shown that most immigrant communities often maintain aspects of their cultural and linguistic repertoires while simultaneously navigating broader ethnic classifications and processes of linguistic marginalization within dominant social and institutional structures of the United States (Jenkins, 2024). While these dynamics have been widely examined within studies of Latino migration, much of this scholarship has focused on Latin American immigrants whose primary and only language is Spanish. As a result, there is a significant gap in the existing literature regarding the experiences, identities, and languages of Indigenous immigrants, whose cultural and linguistic practices are often overlooked or subsumed under Latino, Hispanic or immigrant categories, leaving their distinct heritage and challenges underrepresented in research. The experiences of Indigenous immigrants challenge simplified understandings of migration and linguistic assimilation. Many Indigenous immigrants arrive in the United States speaking an Indigenous language as their primary language, with Spanish as a second language and English learned through migration (Stephen, 2007). In navigating complex linguistic hierarchies, Indigenous languages are often marginalized, Spanish serves as a broader communicative tool within Latino communities, and English holds dominant institutional power (Garcia & Wei, 2014). These dynamics shape both everyday language use and the constructions of Indigenous identities, which are dynamic processes influenced by territory, cultural practices, migration experiences, and social positioning (Norton, 2013).

Thus, this case study examines these dynamics through the experiences of a Tlapaneco speaker from Guerrero, Mexico currently residing in Northeastern Kansas. Tlapaneco (also known as Me'phaa) is an Indigenous language spoken primarily in the Mexican state of Guerrero. Although Tlapaneco-speaking communities maintain strong linguistic and cultural traditions from their region of origin, relatively little research has explored how speakers of this language navigate identity and multilingualism in migration contexts, particularly in the U.S. Midwest. By focusing on the narrative of a Tlapaneco immigrant, this study seeks to understand how Indigenous identity and multilingual practices are constructed, negotiated, and interpreted within the social environment of the United States. Specifically, this research explores how the participant's identity is shaped through the interaction of language, ethnicity, migration, and social context. It examines how Tlapaneco identity is maintained and transformed across geographical spaces, how different languages are mobilized for particular communicative purposes, and how institutional and racialized structures influence the visibility and legitimacy of Indigenous identity. Through qualitative analysis of an in-depth interview and related language tasks, the present case study highlights the ways in which multilingual practices function as both personal resources and socially structured phenomena. By addressing these inquiries, this study aims to contribute to sociolinguistic scholarship on language, identity, and migration by foregrounding the experiences of Indigenous immigrants whose linguistic realities extend beyond the Spanish-English bilingual framework. Furthermore, this study also shows how Indigenous languages continue to play meaningful roles in maintaining cultural identity while also revealing the structural constraints that limit their recognition in institutional spaces. Understanding these dynamics is important for expanding discussions of linguistic diversity

within migration studies and for recognizing the presence of Indigenous languages and identities within Latino communities in the United States.

Review of the Literature

An overview of immigration history

Immigration is a concept that is not foreign to the world, nor to the United States. Human mobility reflects a natural tendency to relocate in response to social, economic, or environmental conditions. Massive waves of immigration have shaped the world's history, having an enormous impact not only on the sociopolitical and economic spheres, but also on the linguistic and cultural dimensions (Haider, 2023).

As a first point, Manning (2020) explores immigration history by breaking it down into three periods: the Pleistocene, the Holocene, and the Anthropocene. One of the earliest large-scale migration events was that of the late Pleistocene epoch in which early humans and other hominins started migrating beyond Africa into Asia, Sahul (Australia & New Guinea), and Eurasia. During this time the idea of cross-community migration emerged as a phenomenon wherein young people left their birth community to join another, learning its language and customs, allowing genetic, cultural, and technological exchange. Moreover, in the Holocene epoch migration took on new dynamics, as humans transitioned from small forager communities to more complex societies. Migration in this era significantly shifted from primarily dispersing into new environments to balancing dispersion, consolidation, and hierarchy, leading to groups settling into fertile lands to practice agriculture and animal domestication, then consolidating stable communities to eventually create complex institutions such as states, kingdoms and empires. Significantly fostering trade, cultural exchange, and interconnected civilizations.

However, in the late Holocene (800-1800 CE), migration was impacted by encounters between societies that often-involved violence, conquest, epidemics, and forced displacement. Through empires expansions, growth of global commerce, religious and cultural conflicts,

several populations were forced to migrate into new territories. Such collisions deepened global connections but also introduced profound inequalities that still shape migration patterns today. The Anthropocene epoch began around 1800 with industrialization, during this era migration expanded drastically in scale and complexity. On one side, industrialization, capitalism and colonization formed vast networks of labor migration by locating workers across continents to fuel industries, plantations, and cities. As well as spreading scientific, technological and cultural innovations. On the other hand, this period introduced mass forced migrations, including colonized peoples, indentured laborers, and more recently, social and environmental refugees fleeing wars, poverty, and climate disasters. What truly makes this epoch different is that migration now operates in a truly global system, as movements in one region are tied to global markets, geopolitics, and ecological change; making migration both a force of global interconnection and a reflection of deep inequalities and environmental challenges embedded in nowadays society.

Having traced migration across the long *durée*, from the initial movements of humans in the Pleistocene and Holocene, to the intensified mobilities on the Anthropocene, it is crucial to situate the broad epochs within the specific historical moment of colonial expansion. While earlier migrations reflected adaptation to shifting climates, ecologies, and subsistence patterns, the colonial era introduced qualitatively different forms of movement shaped not only by environmental change alone but also by the violent imposition of imperial powers. Hence, it is essential to recognize that the history of immigration in the Americas cannot be disentangled from the long-standing displacement of Indigenous peoples. For instance, Precolonial Caribbean societies built networks of exchange that interconnected the islands and the mainland. These networks were flexible and inclusive, allowing the movement not only of people but also of

objects, practices, and cosmologies. With the imposition of colonial sociopolitical regimes, however, the intentionality of these movements was transformed and redirected either deliberately or coercively toward the service of imperial structures or agendas (Hofman, Valcárcel Rojas, & Ulloa Hung, 2020). Institutions such as the *encomienda*¹ and *repartimiento*² not only extracted labor but also required the physical relocation of Indigenous populations to facilitate extraction. Missionary-led *reducciones*³ in Peru and Mexico forcibly concentrated dispersed communities into new settlements, breaking ties with ancestral lands and reorganizing daily life around colonial authority (Lockhart & Schwartz 1983; Bakewell 2004). These practices marked the beginning of a structural pattern in which Indigenous mobility was not primarily voluntary but was instead shaped by external coercion and the dispossession of land.

In North America, similar dynamics unfolded under settler colonial regimes. English, French, and later U.S. expansion systematically displaced Native nations through treaties, warfare, and legislative acts such as the Indian Removal Act of 1830. The Cherokee Trail of Tears, along with forced relocation of Muscogee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole people, which exemplifies the transformation of Indigenous mobility into a state-enforced strategy of elimination, erasure and dispossession (Perdue & Green, 2007). These removals were not temporary relocations but deliberate reconfigurations of territorial sovereignty that sought to

¹ Colonial system that granted Spanish settlers the right to demand labor and tribute from Indigenous peoples in exchange for protection and Christian instruction.

² Colonial system that required Indigenous communities to provide rotating labor for colonial projects, aiming to regulate but ultimately perpetuating many of the abuses of the *encomienda*.

³ Settlements created by Spanish colonial authorities in the Americas during the 16th and 17th centuries to relocate and control Indigenous peoples.

clear land for European agricultural models, which altered the landscape of Indigenous presence in North America.

The end of colonial rule in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries marked the emergence of new republics across the Americas. However, Indigenous peoples remained subject to profound displacement and marginalization. Duve (2018) points out that following the independence movements of the 19th century, new constitutions and political reforms declared the formal equality of all citizens, though in practice such rights remained largely restricted and unevenly applied. Consequently, there was no space to acknowledge differences, and even less for those that new societies viewed as part of an uncivilized past. Moreover, state-building projects narrowed Indigenous people's autonomy. Yet, despite these pressures, Indigenous rights and practices endured, often preserved through customs, oral transmission, and daily social life.

The long history of Indigenous displacement in the Americas converges with new dynamics in the twentieth century, as migration from Latin America to the United States was conditioned by industrial agriculture, uneven development of the home country and political instability (Wohlgemuth, 2014). For Indigenous peoples from Mexico and Central America, these movements outside of their land were not simply searches for opportunity but responses to structural inequalities rooted in colonial legacies. For instance, the growth of export-oriented agribusiness in Mexico after the mid-twentieth century, along with the dismantling of communal land protections under policies such as Article 27 reforms in the 1990s, alienated many rural Indigenous communities into cycles of seasonal and transnational labor migration (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004; Stephen, 2007). Consequently, civil wars and counterinsurgency campaigns in Guatemala, El Salvador and southern Mexico displaced thousands of Indigenous people who sought refuge and economic prosperity in the U.S. (Steen 2003).

In the case of Mexico, the Bracero Program (1942-1964) formalized temporary labor migration through a binational agreement that allowed over 4.5 million Mexican men to work in the agricultural and railroad industries of the United States (Calavita, 2010; Garcia, 2018). Despite the program's temporality, it laid the foundations for permanent migratory networks as well as the institutionality of Mexican migrant labor in the U.S. economy. Recruiting Mexican Indigenous peoples such as the Purépechas, Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Nahuas who have settled mostly in urban and rural California and most recently in states such as Texas, Oregon, Florida, and New York. Fox & Rivera-Salgado (2005) state that Mexican Indigenous communities do not have fixed migratory patterns; therefore, it is not possible to predict their movements. However, it is known that causes of these migrations are linked to socioeconomic factors.

Until recently Mexico's two largest Indigenous ethnolinguistic groups, the Nahua and the Maya, did not tend to cross the border in large numbers. Even within the state of Oaxaca, there is no direct correlation between the lowest-income municipalities and those with the most out-migration. In contrast to the predominance of Oaxacans among migrants to Baja California and the United States, the groups with the largest presence in Mexico City are of Nahua and Hñahñu (Otomí) origin, representing approximately 27% and 17% respectively. However, as the economic and social dynamics that encourage migration spread more deeply throughout the Mexican countryside, Indigenous peoples who did not have a history of migration outside of their regions are coming to the United States. For example, Mayans from Yucatán and Chiapas are now working in California and Texas (pp. 103-104).

Subsequently, beginning in the 1980s the political and economic transformations of Latin America—including the external debt, imposition of neoliberal politics and armed conflicts in Central America — led to new migration waves. Hence, civil wars in El Salvador, Guatemala

and Nicaragua caused forced displacements, while incomplete agrarian reforms and the expansion of free trade in Mexico and other countries intensified rural precariousness (Menjívar, 2000). These structural conditions started to break apart the social imaginary of the temporary male immigrant, proving that immigration had transformed into a permanent and transnational phenomenon, in which immigrants maintain family, cultural and economic ties with their places of origin. To illustrate the cross-national extension of migration, Santiago (2013) examined how Indigenous youth maintain cultural ties with their home communities while developing a sense of belonging and engaging in civic participation in the United States. Using qualitative methods, including participant observation at cultural events and interviews with youth and community leaders, he found that cultural organizing spaces, such as traditional dance groups, festivals, and community organizations, serve as key sites for sustaining connections to Indigenous heritage while also fostering leadership skills and political awareness. Participation in these activities enables Indigenous youth to build social networks and strengthen a collective identity within transnational context. For example, involvement in dance groups and other cultural activities initiatives not only helps preserve traditions, norms, and cultural practices in a migratory setting but also encourages broader civic engagement within their communities. These findings demonstrate that immigration does not erase culture; rather, cultural identity is actively maintained and collectively constructed through community-based efforts.

On the other hand, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 regularized the immigration status of millions of migrants, which strengthened family and community networks by allowing families to reunite, stabilize their households and participate more in community life. Whereas other subsequent immigration laws promoted dispersion of Latinx communities to non-traditional states of the Midwest and the South like Kansas, Nebraska and

North Carolina. For instance, Cervantes & Menjivar (2020) labeled Kansas as an "emerging destination" on account of its sociodemographic inclinations and agricultural growth. They reflect such significant growth, considering that before 1990, the Hispanic population in Kansas was below 3% and grew to 7% by 2000. Similarly, in 2010, the Latino population reached 10.5%, which is significant, as 10% is a rate that denotes the population and linguistic growth in the area (Jenkins, 2018). More recently, The University of Kansas' Institute for Policy and Social Research indicated in their Kansas Statistical Abstract (2024) that the Hispanic or Latino population in the U.S. was around 20.0% in 2024, while in Kansas, this population represented around 14.2% of the state's residents. The census also highlights the presence of Mayan and Aztec people nationwide representing 0.1% and 0.2% of the total population. In Kansas, the Aztec community is estimated to be around 2,382, and the Mayan population is about 1,474. These immigration trends reflect a diverse settling tendency in immigrant communities from Mexico and Central America, reflecting not only economic opportunities and labor demands but also evolving transnational networks, and the search for more affordable and welcoming spaces in non-traditional destinations such as Kansas.

The complexities of Indigenous immigrants' identities

Historically, Hispanic and Latino immigrant populations have often been treated as homogeneous, which has obscured the ethnic diversity within these communities in the U.S (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2005). Nonetheless, more recent scholarship has revealed that a significant number of immigrants come from Indigenous communities, specifically from the south of Mexico (e.g., Oaxaca, Guerrero, Chiapas), as well as Guatemala, Ecuador and Peru. These Indigenous migrants are often rendered invisible in research studies and policy discussions, since

they are subsumed under wider categories such as *Latino* or *Mexicano*, obliterating their cultural and linguistic identities. Stephen (2007) indicates that Indigenous immigrants not only cross physical borders, but also cultural, ethnic and class boundaries, and therefore the conventional approach to Latin American migration fails to fully explore the identities of these communities. Simultaneously, previous studies suggest that Indigenous immigrants experience exclusion both as immigrants and as Indigenous peoples in their home countries and the United States (Asad & Hwang, 2019; Canedo, 2019; Krannich, 2022). This exclusion is evident in the economic sphere, where they are employed in labor-intensive occupations (i.e., farmwork, meatpacking, construction) often under exploitative and underpaid conditions. In the social sphere, they face different forms of discrimination and racist attitudes. For instance, in Mexico, racial processes rooted in Colonialism such as *mestizaje* created a social division between Indigenous vs. non-Indigenous communities, reproducing discriminatory and segregating ideologies that are still embedded in the cultural imaginary of *Indigenismo* (Ramos & Karin, 2019). Similarly, Arias Cubas (2022) surveyed Indigenous labor and mobility in the farmlands of "Oaxacalifornia", revealing that the integration of these migrants occurs through a process of differential inclusion, which relegates them to the most precarious levels of the labor hierarchy, with limited access to labor rights and greater exposure to risks. This double marginalization demonstrates that Indigenous identities are not fixed or merely cultural labels, but shape the migration experience itself in ways that differ from non-Indigenous populations. These identities affect the type of work they are able to access, their ability to obtain services, and the degree to which their presence and contributions are socially and institutionally recognized. However, these experiences also lead to processes of resilience, linguistic indexing, acculturation, and transnationalism, (i.e., using language features to signal aspects of identity, adapting or adopting

aspects of the host culture, and the maintenance of connections across national borders), which are sustained by the intricate interplay and intersection of multiple dimensions that shape Indigenous identities.

The growing visibility of Indigenous migrants within U.S. migration tendencies challenges long-standing assumptions about the homogeneity of the “Latino” category and exposes the analytical and critical constraints of traditional migration categorization (Stephen, 2015). When Indigenous peoples migrate, they bring with them distinct linguistic repertoires, collective histories and epistemologies that disrupt monolithic understanding of Latinidad. Their experiences illuminate how immigration cannot be reduced to merely economic or geographic movements, but also a process through which identity, belonging, and recognition are constantly negotiated. This emergent visibility calls for critical models that can account for the overlapping and intersecting dimensions of Indigeneity, such as ethnicity, territoriality, and language. Different facets of identity such as race, language, and territoriality shape not only how Indigenous migrants are perceived, but also how they understand and position themselves within broader diasporic contexts (Gómez Cervantes, 2023; Gardner & Warren, 2024).

With the purpose of addressing this gap in the research, engaging with frameworks such as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016), sociolinguistic theories of identity negotiation, indexicality and language ideologies (Silverstein, 1976; Ochs, 1990), as well as Critical Indigenous Studies (Smith, 2021) are deemed essential to fully grasp the evolving nature of identities of historically oppressed and racialized social groups. Together, these approaches provide a comprehensive lens to better understand how Indigenous identities are lived, performed, and transformed across borders, paying particular attention to facets of identity such as territoriality, ethnicity and language.

Identity and Intersectionality

To comprehend the dynamics of Indigenous migration and identity, it is first and foremost necessary to examine some key definitions. In sociological and sociolinguistic scholarship, identity refers to the ways individuals and groups self-identify and are defined by others through membership in social categories and affiliations. More broadly, Block (2007) highlights that researchers have noted the fluid and multidimensional nature of identity, as well as its ability to be socially constructed. Additionally, Norton (2013) interprets identity through temporal and spatial dimensions, noting that it is ‘how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future’ (p.45). This interpretation calls for a nuanced comprehension of identity as continuously constructed through experience, context, and reflection, linking the past, the present, and the future in a meaningful way.

Both authors (Block, 2007; Norton, 2013) effectively capture the complexity of the term, but more importantly, also underscore its inherent social characteristic by pointing out that identities are rarely singular or fixed; rather, they are multiple, layered, collective, and context dependent. Indigenous migrants, for example, may simultaneously identify with an ancestral Indigenous community & culture, a national identity, a linguistic group, and a gendered social role. Each facet carries different social meanings and valuations depending on the context. Recognizing this complexity requires theoretical frameworks that can account for intersecting dimensions of identity, such as ethnicity, language, gender, class, among others.

Given the particular intricacy of identity, an intersectional framework is deemed optimal for a throughout study of the overlapping dimensions that influence migrant’s identities and social positioning. First articulated by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality provides a

lens for understanding how social identities and systems of oppression are mutually constitutive. An intersectional analysis highlights that individual experiences cannot be understood by examining one axis of identity in isolation, since these dimensions interact in relation to each other, producing unique patterns of privilege, marginalization, and agency. In a study, Lafleur & Romero (2018) explore how Andean immigrant families manage healthcare and social protection across borders, between their home countries and host countries. Using ethnographic research with 48 individuals from 10 transnational family networks, the study shows that factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, social class, generation, and legal status shape which health strategies families can use. The authors identify two main approaches: sequential strategies, where care is planned and coordinated across borders, and sporadic strategies, which are more irregular or ad hoc. Families with more privileges (higher education, stronger legal status, or non-indigenous ethnicity) have access to more secure and effective health options, while those in disadvantaged positions rely on informal networks, remittances, or frequent mobility to meet health needs. More broadly, the study demonstrates that combining transnational and intersectional perspectives provides a richer understanding of inequalities in access to social protection for immigrant families. Additionally, Njeze, Bird-Naytowhow, Pearl, & Hatala (2020) looked at how multiple aspects of identity, community, and structural conditions interact to support well-being and resilience in a group of 28 Indigenous youngsters in Canada. The researchers worked over a year with the participants who lived in an inner-city urban setting in Canada, using interviews, group discussions, and creative activities like photography to learn about their experiences, and cultural meanings of resilience. Results found three main ways that participants build resilience: staying connected to their culture and family, participating in social groups, helping their community, and using arts and a positive mindset. The study shows how personal

strengths, social connections, and community support all work together to help Indigenous youth overcome challenges.

In addition to intersectionality, other frameworks such as Critical Indigenous Studies (CIS) offers a crucial perspective for examining Indigenous migration by emphasizing Indigenous epistemologies, knowledge systems, and sovereignty, challenging Western and colonial frameworks that often flatten Indigenous experiences into homogenized categories (Smith, 2021). By integrating these approaches alongside a transnational perspective (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007), researchers can better capture the multi-dimensional, and culturally grounded realities of Indigenous migrant identities.

Ethnicity & Indigeneity

When it comes to identity, the ethnic dimension plays a pivotal role in analyzing Latin American Indigenous migration to the United States. By reviewing how Indigenous migrants negotiate and reconstruct their ethnic identities in transnational contexts, we can comprehend the processes and strategies of intersectionality to navigate or challenge broader categories such as Latino and Hispanic. With the latter reflecting a colonial legacy that “celebrates a connection to White European heritage...” (García, 2020, p. 397) and ignores the efforts of Indigenous peoples to break free from the Spaniard’s yoke, starting with the ethnonym, which does not comprise their linguistic diversity (i.e., the term Hispanic only denotes connection with the Spanish language), nor their mixed-race heritage. Contrastingly, the term Latino highlights geographical space by focusing on families who come from Latin America and the Caribbean (Salinas, 2015), therefore, inscribing identity in the territory and reinforcing connections to land, community and heritage. However, while Latino foregrounds territory and provides a decolonial lens on ethnicity

and race, this study emphasizes the need to recognize individual and collective ethnic identities (e.g., Tlapaneco, Mixteco, Zapoteco, etc) both socially and structurally, instead of grouping them under broad umbrella categories.

Invisibilization, homogenization and the “Latino/Latina” category

A recurring theme in migration studies is that the “Latino/Latina” label tends to aggregate a wide range of ethnic identities (mestizo, Indigenous, Afro-Latino) under an overarching category, thereby obscuring the specificity of Indigenous Identity. For example, Reed-Sandoval (2020) examined Indigenous migration from Latin America to the U.S., arguing that the existing immigration categories and census classifications fail to capture the distinctiveness of Indigenous identities. The author showed that many Latin American Indigenous migrants in the U.S. face what she calls “hermeneutical marginalization”, as their Indigenous identity is neither recognized nor accommodated by dominant systems. Thus, Indigenous ethnicities are doubly marginalized by being experienced first, within the broad category of “Latino”, and second, in U.S. contexts where Indigenous Latin American migrants do not fit neatly into either the “Hispanic/Latino” or the “Native American” ethnonymy.

Community of origin, structural conditions, and Indigenous ethnicity

Another body of research examines how Indigenous ethnicity acts as a structural factor in migration, influencing access to resources, employment, and services (i.e., housing, healthcare, legal protection) through institutional and societal systems. For instance, Asad & Hwang (2019) analyzed the data corresponding to demographic and socioeconomic information of 143 Mexican communities, surveyed by the Mexican Migration Project (MMP). The study showed that while

being part of an Indigenous community in Mexico does not reduce the likelihood of migrating to the U.S., the limited economic and social resources in these communities shape the form of migration. This study concluded that Indigenous-dominated communities often face greater socioeconomic disadvantages and fewer legal migration pathways, thus shaping both the form of migration and the subsequent insertion in the destination country. Similarly, studies on “Latino Indigeneities” reveal that Indigenous identification in Latin America is increasingly fluid. Martínez, Telles & Torche (2025) show that although speaking an Indigenous language remains a strong marker of ethnicity, self-identification as Indigenous also depends on skin color, nation-state policy, and historical legacies of *mestizaje*. Such findings highlight that Indigenous ethnicity should be treated not only as a cultural attribute but as a socially and politically contingent process embedded in community, place, and history, all which pose a strong influence on who migrates, how they migrate, under what conditions, and how they insert themselves at their destination.

Indigenismo, Latinidad and Identity negotiation

Moreover, a third line of research explores how ideologies of *Indigenismo* (celebrating Indigenous heritage in national identity) and *mestizaje/Latinidad* frame the identities of migrant Indigenous people. For example, Padilla (2025) addresses how Latinx Indigenous writers resist reductive representations of both Latinidad and Indigeneity by centering agency and multiplicity in their work. In these contexts, Indigenous migrants must negotiate: (1) how to maintain or assert their Indigenous identity within a national framework that emphasizes *mestizaje* or Latinidad; (2) how to engage with or resist the “migrant Latino” label when it overshadows their Indigenous heritage; and (3) how to build diasporic practices that link community, culture and

place beyond national borders. Ethnicity, therefore, becomes an ongoing process of negotiation, not a static attribute.

Overall, the Indigenous ethnic dimension must be treated as situated and relational, not merely as a fixed attribute of the individual. Ethnicity is tied to the communities' place of origin, migration history and social structures. Conversely, the tension between Indigenismo, mestizaje and Latinidad underscores that Indigenous migrant identities are negotiated and contested, both within homeland contexts and in destination societies. Lastly, to fully grasp the complexity of Indigenous migrant experiences, ethnicity must be studied in conjunction with other identity axes such as territoriality and language.

Territoriality in Indigenous immigrants

A salient facet of Indigenous identity that profoundly shapes migration experiences is territoriality, which is conceived as the attachment to ancestral lands, culturally grounded senses of place, and ongoing social ties to the homeland as a space to inhabit. For Indigenous peoples, territory is not merely geographic; it is constituted through ritual life, kinship networks, ecological knowledge, and collective memory, all of which contribute to a place-based sense of self and social belonging; therefore, “The territory becomes, thus, more than anything, a territory of life for groups whose existence owes to that inseparable relationship with their lived spaces, breaking with a dichotomous vision between materiality and spirituality, nature and society” (Haesbaert & Mason-Deese, 2020, p. 262). In using the term “territory of life”, the authors suggest that land is a crucial factor in shaping identity, memory, and communal cohesion. This perspective is crucial for understanding how in the context of migration the relational and

cultural bonds with territory are maintained, reconfigured, and negotiated as immigrants navigate transnational fields spanning origin and destination contexts.

Territorial anchoring, identity negotiation, and transnational social field

Consequently, Indigenous migrants actively sustain territoriality through transnational practices that reproduce cultural continuity and social connectivity across borders. These include sending remittances, participating in hometown associations, organizing collective rituals, and linking community projects across countries, since such practices help in maintaining ties to their home territories (Fox, & Rivera-Salgado, 2004). Indigenous immigrants frequently use these networks to reinforce cultural values, participate in community decision-making from afar, and cultivate a sense of shared belonging through territoriality (Cruz-Manjarrez, 2013).

In many cases, immigrants express strong desires to return to their homelands, not purely for economic or political reasons, but because they maintain deep affective and symbolic ties to the landscapes, hometowns, and natural surroundings. Research on migration consistently shows that emotional bonds to the homeland can persist well beyond physical migration, shaping migrant's identity narratives and life projects. This persistence highlights how territoriality is an enduring axis of identity rather than an obstacle that mobility erases. Instead of losing place-based attachments, many immigrants engage in what Lewicka (2011) conceptualizes as place attachments, defined as the emotional and cognitive bonds individuals develop with their meaningful environments.

Overall, territoriality is a foundational facet of Indigenous identity that continuously shapes how migration is negotiated and how cultural and communal ties are preserved. Rather than dissolving attachments to place, migration often transforms them into transnational forms of

belonging in which immigrants remain socially, culturally, and emotionally embedded in their communities of origin while simultaneously navigating new sociocultural environments. For instance, Kearney (2000) examined how migration between Oaxaca, Mexico, and the United States has reshaped the identities of Mixtec and Zapotec Indigenous migrants. Drawing on ethnographic research, he argues that migration produces transnational social fields in which immigrants sustain ongoing social, cultural, and political ties with their communities of origin while establishing in the United States. The study also shows that Indigenous immigrants remain embedded in their hometowns through reciprocal obligations, communication networks, and community engagement, illustrating how migration can reconfigure territorial attachments, as immigrants negotiate belonging across multiple locations. In this sense, territoriality functions not only as a marker of origin but also as a dynamic axis of identity negotiation, influencing how Indigenous immigrants interpret their position within host societies and maintain continuity with collective histories and traditions. Understanding these place-based attachments therefore allows researchers to recognize that Indigenous migration is not simply a process of geographic relocation, but a complex reconfiguration of identity, belonging, and community across multiple spatial contexts.

Language

Similar to territoriality, language is a central component in the construction and negotiation of identity, particularly in migration contexts where speakers navigate between multiple linguistic repertoires. Scholars in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics have long emphasized that language is not simply a neutral tool of communication but a social practice that indexes belonging, power, and ideology (Silverstein, 1976; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). For

Indigenous migrants, language carries deep symbolic and affective value, as it mediates ties to ancestry, territory, and community, while also becoming a site of struggle, adaptation, and resistance in transnational settings.

Language as a marker of identity and belonging

Within Indigenous migration studies, language often operates as both a marker of ethnic distinctiveness and a means of inclusion or exclusion. For instance, Zentella's (1997) ethnography of bilingual Puerto Rican communities in New York, demonstrating that bilinguals shift languages depending on contexts, audience, and social goals. For example, children and adolescents would often speak English in school settings to align with dominant norms and authority figures but would switch to Spanish at home or in the neighborhood to express intimacy. Crucially, the author also identifies how linguistic hierarchies and ideologies shape identity negotiations. Children learned to navigate these hierarchies carefully, sometimes suppressing or altering aspects of their linguistic heritage to avoid discrimination, while simultaneously maintaining it as a marker of ethnic belonging. Similarly, for Indigenous migrants, the use of heritage languages such as Tlapaneco (also known as Me'phaa), Mixtec, Zapotec, or K'iche' serves as an act of cultural continuity and resistance against linguistic erasure (García & Wei, 2014; Flores Farfan, 2016). However, these same linguistic practices can also lead to stigmatization within both Anglo and Spanish-speaking communities, revealing how language becomes entangled with racialized hierarchies.

Studies in the United States have shown that Indigenous Mexican migrants often face discrimination from other Latino groups who perceive Indigenous languages as signs of backwardness or low social status (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004). These experiences highlight

the persistence of colonial ideologies that equate Spanish with modernity and Indigenous languages with marginality. As a result, many Indigenous migrants engage in complex forms of linguistic negotiations, balancing between the maintenance of their heritage language, the strategic use of Spanish, and the acquisition of English to gain access to labor and social mobility (Mendoza-Denton, 2008).

Language shift, maintenance, and transnational repertoires

The transnational dimension of Indigenous migration adds another layer of complexity to linguistic identity. Transnationalism implies not only physical mobility but also the circulation of linguistic practices, ideologies, and cultural meanings across borders (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). Within this framework, Indigenous migrants sustain multilingual repertoires that span their communities of origin and destination forming what Otheguy, Garcia, and Reid (2015) conceptualize as translanguaging spaces. In these spaces, speakers draw from their full linguistic resources rather than adhering to fixed language boundaries, blending Indigenous languages, Spanish, and English in fluid, context-dependent ways. For instance, such hybrid linguistic forms were observed among Indigenous youth in U.S. schools, who creatively combined Zapotec and Spanish, while also using their heritage language (Zapotec) as social capital. (Morales, 2016). Such practices demonstrate how language serves as a medium of identity performance and agency, rather than merely a site of loss.

Nevertheless, linguistic maintenance remains precarious. Intergenerational transmission of Indigenous languages is often interrupted by structural inequalities, limited institutional support, and the pressures of assimilation into the U.S. context. Even when migrants express strong attachment to their heritage language, socioeconomic constraints and linguistic

discrimination in schools and workplaces often lead to language shift, where younger generations favor English or Spanish (Hernández-Zamora, 2010).

Language, power and ideologies

Language also mediates migrants' experiences of power and inequality. As Irvine and Gal (2000) explain, linguistic ideologies shape how certain varieties become valorized while others are marginalized. In the case of Indigenous migrants, linguistic hierarchies intersect with race, class and legal status, producing what Urciuoli (1996) terms linguistic racialization. For instance, the accent or perceived "Indigenous" way of speaking Spanish can mark speakers as outsiders even within Latinx communities, reinforcing social stratification.

Moreover, linguistic invisibility (the erasure of Indigenous languages in census data, schools, or workplaces) contributes to the broader political marginalization of Indigenous migrants (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004). Yet, acts of linguistics resistance also emerge. This is the case of community radio programs, transnational cultural festival, and Indigenous language classes organized in migrant networks, which exemplify how language becomes a site of empowerment and cultural survival (Fox, 2013).

In conclusion, language functions as a dynamic and multidimensional component of Indigenous migrant identity, intertwined with ethnicity, gender and transnational belonging. It reflects historical processes of colonization and resistance, while also enabling new forms of self-expression and linguistic pride. Recognizing the role of language as both a site of oppression and a resource for agency is essential for understanding how Indigenous migrants navigate the complexities of belonging across linguistic, cultural, and national boundaries.

Methodology

This case study aims to contribute to the field of sociolinguistics by offering an in-depth analysis of how individual narratives reveal the ways in which language practices, ethnic identity and territoriality are shaped, regulated, and negotiated. To this end, a qualitative design was adopted to address the following research questions:

How does the participant discursively and dynamically construct and negotiate Tlapaneco Indigenous identity across territorial, linguistic, and migratory contexts?

How are the participant's multilingual practices mobilized to index cultural belonging, social positioning, and differential access to institutional and economic resources?

How do institutional language hierarchies and racialized migration dynamics shape the visibility, legitimacy, and validation of Tlapaneco identity in the participant's context?

Since the current study seeks to create a platform through which the participant's voice guides the researcher to establish whether and how identity, power, and language are interconnected and negotiated, a qualitative approach is adopted. This type of analysis is particularly appropriate for this study as it enables the observation of meaning-making based on life experiences within specific social, cultural, and linguistic contexts from the participant's perspective; thus, providing a contextually grounded analysis of identity construction and linguistic experience (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2007).

Furthermore, this qualitative research is situated within an intrinsic case study design, as its purpose is not representativeness but a deep understanding of the complexity of a particular case that is meaningful in its own study (Stake, 2005). This approach is especially relevant for research involving indigenous communities, whose life experiences and linguistic realities are frequently underrepresented or homogenized in broader scholarship (Smith, 2021). Moreover,

intrinsic case studies allow for the close examination of a single, bounded case in its real-life context (Yin, 2008), which aligns with the present study as the case is bounded by a specific participant, his sociocultural setting and background, and his set of linguistic practices.

Additionally, to complement the case study and foreground the participant's life experiences, this research employs a narrative inquiry approach, defined as both as a methodological orientation and a mode of analysis, which positions personal narratives as socially situated constructions rather than neutral recounting of events (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The emphasis on narration not only allows the participant to create meaning, reflect on linguistic practices, and reveal the subtleties of social positioning, but also grants them agency over how their experiences are represented and interpreted. For indigenous research contexts, narrative inquiry is also ethically and epistemologically significant, as it aligns with Indigenous traditions that value storytelling as a legitimate form of knowledge production (Smith, 2012). Similarly, narrative inquiry captures the ways in which participants negotiate belonging, construct identity, and navigate social hierarchies, highlighting connections between micro-level experiences and macro-level structures, while recognizing participants as co-constructors of knowledge rather than passive subjects.

Theoretical Framing

The methodological approach of this study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates intersectionality and glottopolitics. Together, these perspectives provide tools for analyzing how linguistic practices and identities are shaped by power relations operating at multiple levels. Subsequently, given the complexity of both concepts, each will be discussed in greater detail below:

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is used as an analytical lens to examine how language, ethnicity, and gender interact relationally within the participant's narratives. Originally articulated by Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality highlights how social categories are mutually constitutive rather than independent or additive. This framework has since been expanded to analyze how systems of power shape life experiences across multiple axes of identity (Collins & Bilge, 2016). In sociolinguistics, intersectionality has been instrumental in demonstrating how linguistic practices are embedded within racialized, gendered, and classed social structures (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). For instance, a Chicana student who speaks both English and Spanish at home may navigate school settings in ways that reflect the intersections of her ethnic identity, gender, and social expectations. Her decisions about when to use Spanish, when to switch to English, or when to code-switch may be shaped by classroom norms, peer interactions, and family expectations, illustrating how linguistic practices are deeply influenced by multiple, overlapping social categories embedded in our identities. Therefore, in this study, language is treated not merely as a communicative resource but as a central axis through which ethnic belonging and social legitimacy are negotiated.

Glottopolitical Perspective

A glottopolitical perspective informs the analysis by situating individual linguistic experiences within broader regimes of language ideology, policy, and power. Glottopolitics refers to the study of how language becomes an object of political intervention and ideological struggle (Del Valle, 2017). From this perspective, linguistic practices are never neutral; they are shaped by historical processes, institutional norms, and competing discourses of legitimacy, as

exemplified by Spanish-speaking students in U.S. schools who adjust their language use in response to educational policies and classroom practices that privilege English. Moreover, glottopolitical research has demonstrated how language policies and ideologies regulate access to social resources and construct hierarchies among language and speakers (San Martín, 2019).

In the case of Indigenous contexts, glottopolitics is particularly useful for examining how colonial histories and settler-state institutions have systematically “silenced knowledges”, linguistic practices, and cultural understandings of minoritized communities that persist despite being marginalized or ignored by official policies (Blanco, 2005, p.24). For example, in Colombia, Indigenous languages are recognized as co-official in their territories under the 1991 Constitution (Constitución Política de Colombia, 1991, art. 10); nonetheless, Indigenous communities continue to maintain their heritage language practices and oral traditions despite their languages being largely excluded from mainstream labor, social, political, and educational spheres. Therefore, by adopting a glottopolitical lens, this study connects the participant’s narratives to broader structures such as public institutions, and dominant monolingual ideologies in both the United States and the participant’s home country.

Research Context

This study is situated in a mid-sized city in northeastern Kansas with an estimated population of around 54,700 (U.S. Census, 2020). The city’s population is ethnically and culturally diverse, though predominantly White (77.9%). Approximately 8.4% of residents identify as Hispanic or Latino, and about 7.6% of the total population are foreign-born, reflecting a modest immigrant presence compared with larger urban areas (U.S. Census, 2020). Indigenous-

Latino identities are not captured explicitly in census data but are present within local immigrant communities.

English is the dominant language in public and institutional settings, with approximately 9.3% of Manhattan's population speaking a language other than English at home (U.S. Census, 2020-2024). Indigenous languages, including Me'phaa (Tlapaneco), are not reported in official statistics but are maintained in family and community networks among indigenous immigrants. This linguistic environment, combined with the city's immigrant and ethnically diverse population, provides a context in which individuals are more prompt to negotiate cultural belonging, language practices, and social identity. For instance, interactions between local residents, international students and immigrant communities may create spaces where individuals regularly shift between languages, index cultural or national belonging through linguistic practices, assimilate to the dominant culture, or negotiate their sense of belonging across academic, social, and community settings.

Participant

The participant that shared their narrative as part of this study was born in Mexico and belongs to the Me'phaa (Tlapaneco) indigenous community, primarily located in the state of Guerrero, Mexico. The Me'phaa speak an Oto-Manguean language and maintain distinct cultural and linguistic traditions. For instance, the participant explained that Tlapaneco cultural traditions differ from those of the mainstream, as his community maintains strong connections to nature, and similarly, they share a strong oral tradition. The participant migrated to Kansas eight years

ago, bringing a multilingual repertoire that includes Tlapaneco, Spanish, and knowledge of some Mixtec⁴ lexicon as shown in the data analysis section.

Data Collection

This study employed a multifaceted data collection approach, combining narrative interviews with a picture naming task. The narrative interview was designed to elicit detailed accounts of the participant's language use, ethnic and cultural background, as well as interactions in different social contexts. The picture naming task was included to document how the participant names objects or concepts in their available languages, providing insight into lexical access, language dominance, and the ways multilingual speakers draw on their linguistic repertoires in specific communicative contexts, including the potential influence of the interlocutor's limited knowledge of the indigenous language on the participant's lexical choices. Together, these methods provide complementary sources of information, capturing both narrative accounts and concrete linguistic practices, which serve as the basis for subsequent analysis of language use and identity.

Participant Recruitment and Enrollment

The participant reached out to the researcher to express their interest based on an invitation extended to the community via a flyer that was distributed in strategic points (e.g., Mexican stores, Mexican restaurants). The survey included an introduction to the study,

⁴ The Mixtecs are an Indigenous group whose traditional territories extend across the Mexican states of Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Puebla. The term Mixtec is likewise used as an umbrella designation for the linguistic varieties spoken by this population (Bax, 2020).

outlining its purpose and objectives, and asked questions about participants' country of birth, Indigenous-Latinx community ties, ethnic self-identification (e.g., Me'phaa, Latino, etc.), and the languages they speak or are culturally connected to. Following survey completion, the participant was enrolled in the study via phone call, during which the researcher provided a detailed explanation of the study's objectives and procedures. This process ensured that the participant provided informed consent and had an opportunity to ask questions before data collection began, while also clarifying that 1) the participant was compensated through funds allocated for this study via a fellowship, and 2) to inform the participant that he could withdraw from the study at any point if he wished.

Interview

Data were collected primarily through a semi-structured sociolinguistic interview conducted via Zoom, which allowed the participant to engage in a comfortable, flexible, and private conversation. The interview was designed to elicit personal narratives about how ethnicity, gender, and language shape identity, as well as possible experiences of marginalization, and strategies of resistance (e.g., involvement with local or social organizations, maintenance of the Tlapaneco). All questions were open-ended (see Appendix A for the full interview), allowing the participant to guide the conversation, share experiences in their own words, and respond in the language of their choice, whether it be Me'phaa, Spanish, English, or a combination of these. Notably, the lexical items included in the picture naming task were carefully identified via a multilingual online dictionary ([Me'phaa Náá Kansas](#)), given the researcher's limited knowledge of Tlapaneco. Moreover, the interview also explored the participant's language practices, including code-switching, and how these linguistic choices

reflect cultural identity and social positioning. The semi-structured format ensured that core topics were addressed while allowing for organic discussion and narrative elaboration.

Picture Naming Task

The picture naming task consisted of 15 images depicting everyday objects and culturally significant items. The participant was asked to name each image using the language they felt most comfortable with: Me'phaa, Spanish (nothing dialectal variation), or English. This task was designed to capture lexical-level language use and observe patterns of language choice, code-switching, and culturally informed naming strategies. The responses might provide insight into how the participant negotiates their multilingual repertoire, reflects their cultural identity, and employs translanguaging or bilingual strategies in practice; this task was therefore included to elicit observable examples of these processes within a controlled, yet contextually meaningful setting. The picture naming task complements the narrative interview by offering a concrete measure of communicative decisions in context, linking individual lexical choices to broader social and cultural identities.

Data analysis

The data set for this study will consist of verbatim transcripts from a narrative sociolinguistic interview and lexical data gathered from a picture naming task. Data analysis will be conducted as an iterative, inductive, and comparative process, beginning after data collection and proceeding through multiple analytical stages. This section outlines, step by step, how the data will be analyzed and how the frameworks guiding the study will be implemented during the analysis process.

The first stage of analysis will involve data preparation and familiarization. The interview will be transcribed verbatim, preserving pauses, emphasis, and instances of code-switching or translanguaging among Spanish, Me'phaa (Tlapaneco), and English (if present). As the interview was conducted in Spanish, and in the picture naming task both Spanish and Me'phaa (Tlapaneco) are present, all data analysis will be done in its original language, while the findings and supporting evidence will be provided in both the original language and English to facilitate the audience's comprehension of the information. The picture naming task will be transcribed and organized into a structured data set documenting each image, the lexical item produced, and the language used (also noting dialectal variation). It is also important to note that all translations presented in the Results Section were produced by the researcher, who is a competent language user of both Spanish and English; whereas the translation of Tlapaneco were informed by the participant and cross-checked using a multilingual online dictionary developed by Tlapaneco speakers and linguistic researchers (i.e. [Me'phaa Náá Kansas](#)).

The second stage of data analysis will consist of open line by-line coding of both the interview transcript and the picture naming task data. Coding will focus on identifying segments related to language use across contexts, expressions of ethnic belonging, migration experiences, and social positioning. References to gendered experiences, roles, or self-positioning will also be coded as an analytic category. At this stage, codes will remain descriptive and inductive, allowing analytic categories to emerge from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2007).

In the third stage, the codes will be examined through comparative analysis. Narrative segments will be systematically compared across different parts of the interview to identify recurring patterns, contrasts, and shifts in how the participant narrates instances of Tlapaneco identity and language use. Lexical choices from the picture naming task will be compared across

items and languages to examine consistency, variation, and alternation in language use. This comparative process will support the refinement of codes and the development of broader thematic groupings. The fourth stage will involve narrative and thematic analysis, focusing on how experiences are structured and constructed through discourse. Such analysis will examine how the participant constructs identity through storytelling, including sequencing of events, evaluative language, and positioning in relation to institutions and communities. Gender will be analyzed only insofar as it emerges in relation to language and ethnicity, reflecting both its inclusion in the interview design and the limitations of a single-participant case study.

Furthermore, the analysis of the themes will be grounded on intersectionality and glottopolitics. Intersectionality will be applied by identifying narrative moments where language, ethnicity, and territoriality co-occur within the same experiential context and examining how these dimensions mutually shape social positioning. Rather than treating identity categories as separate variables, the analysis will focus on their relational and contextual articulation within the participant's narratives. At the same time, a glottopolitical lens will orient the analysis toward how the participant's linguistic practices are shaped by broader regimes of language legitimacy and regulation. Language choices observed in both the interview and the picture naming task will be examined in relation to dominant language ideologies, institutional expectations, and hierarchical relations among languages. This lens will guide the interpretation of linguistic behavior as a socially and politically situated practice, linking individual experiences to larger structures of power.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations comprise a fundamental part of the research process, with particular attention to informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for the participant agency. In order to protect the participant's identity, the researcher requested oral consent as it would ensure that none of the participant's personal information could be linked to the study. Similarly, all identifying information will be removed from transcripts and analytic materials, and pseudonyms will be used throughout the paper. Specific place names and contextual details that could enable identification will be omitted or generalized when necessary. Overall, this study is conducted with an explicit commitment to ethical research practices involving indigenous participants. In line with decolonial and indigenous research ethics, the research design prioritizes respect for the participant's voice, narrative authority, and the right to self-identification (Smith, 2012). The narrative interview format allows the participant to guide the direction and depth of their responses, minimizing extractive research practices, and emphasizing relational accountability. Throughout the research process, care will be taken to represent the participant's experiences and linguistic practices accurately and respectfully, avoiding deficit-based or essentializing interpretations.

Results

This chapter presents the analysis of the participant's narrative and multilingual practices in relation to the three research questions guiding the scope of this study. The findings examine two main phenomena: a) intersectional indigenous identity formation, specifically how Tlapaneco indigenous identity is constructed, negotiated, and valued across migratory and institutional contexts in both Kansas and Mexico, and b) the dynamism of multilingual repertoires, by exploring discursive practices and situated language use.

Constructing Tlapaneco Identity Across Territory and Migration

The analysis of the interview suggests that identity is far from being a static concept; it is instead an ongoing process in which different facets of “who we are” remain in constant interaction. In the case of indigenous identities, these connections are constructed upon social, cultural, historical, and personal dimensions that are inseparable from land, language, and collective memory (To, Beltrán, Dunbar, Valdovinos, Pacheco, Barillas Chón, Hunte, Hulama, 2023). Such dynamism is evident in the participant narrative revealing that Tlapaneco identity is discursively produced through territorial and ecological anchoring, linguistically embodied belonging, and scalar re-positioning across migratory contexts. In this sense, identity emerges as a fluid construction constituted through personal characteristics and shaped by social and contextual conditions.

Central to the participant's narrative is the territorial grounding of identity. In this regard, when asked about his background, he responds: “*Soy de México, del estado de Guerrero... somos de la montaña.*” (I am from Mexico... from the state of Guerrero... we are from the mountains).

Although the participant first situates his place of origin to the nation-state, he quickly narrows it down to the regional and local, highlighting the *montaña* region of Guerrero as his and his community's meaningful site of identification. The shift from singular to plural in “*somos de la montaña*” (we are from the mountains) signals that belonging is collective rather than individual, revealing that collectiveness transcends territories and borders. In this regard, territory operates as more than geographic origin; it functions as a social anchor that legitimizes Indigeneity through spatial continuity, insofar as the ongoing relationship to ancestral land affirms historical rootedness, collective belonging, and intergenerational presence. Therefore, by foregrounding the region rather than the nation, the participant constructs Tlapaneco identity as territorially specific and locally rooted.

This territorial anchoring is reinforced affectively by the participant. Later in the interview, he states, “*Yo me siento más de Guerrero*” (I feel like I am more from Guerrero), privileging regional affiliation over national belonging. The comparative structure “*más de*” (more from) reveals a hierarchy of identification in which proximity to land and community outweighs broader national categories. Rather than positioning “Mexican” as the primary identity, the participant elevated the *montaña* of Guerrero as his site of authentic belonging. Furthermore, the participant also frames his identity as grounded in ecological relationality, highlighting an enduring connection to nature, as he explains, “*Nos conectamos con la naturaleza... mi cultura es más nativa porque tenemos una conexión con la naturaleza*” (We are connected to nature... my culture is more native because we have a connection with nature), he also adds: “*Los indígenas creemos o venimos de una cultura que esta mas conectada con la naturaleza*” (We, Indigenous peoples, believe or come from a culture that is more connected to nature). These statements position nature not merely as an external environment but as a

constitutive of cultural belonging. Through his narrative, the participant constructs his Indigeneity as relationally defined through ecological ties to the *montaña* region of Guerrero, thereby reinforcing identity as rooted in ongoing interactions with the land rather than as a static ethnic label. From an intersectional perspective, spatial attachment intersects with ethnicity in ways that render land and nature inseparable from Indigeneity. Identity is therefore territorialized and ecologically grounded, constructed through reference to place as both ancestral origin and an ongoing symbolic relational resource.

At the same time, the participant's narrative demonstrated that territory and ecological relationality alone do not define Tlapaneco identity. Language emerges as a central axis of ethnic embodiment throughout the interview. When asked how people identify themselves within their community, he explains: "*Nos identificamos mucho por la lengua que hablamos*" (We identify strongly with the language we speak). Highlighting an explicit link between linguistic practice and ethnic recognition, where language becomes intrinsically tied to cultural belonging, social identity, and the affirmation of Indigeneity. The use of "*nos*" (we) again emphasizes collective belonging, while the verb "*identificamos*" ([we] identify) frames identity as something actively performed and recognized through language, showing that language both enacts and legitimizes ethnic connection in everyday practice. In this sense, Tlapaneco is not described merely as a means of communication but as an identity marker.

The participant's metalinguistic awareness becomes even more explicit when he adds, "*El Tlapaneco nos representa mucho*" (Tlapaneco represents us a lot). Here, language is positioned as representational, denoting collective identity. Such framing reflects a language ideology in which the indigenous language embodies history, culture, and intergenerational continuity. Tlapaneco, then indexes cultural belonging as well as a medium through which territory is

carried beyond its geographic boundaries. Even in immigration, the concurrent usage of Tlapaneco shows how the participant sustains symbolic ties to the *montaña* by maintaining linguistic practices to reinforce cultural identity. The participant's narrative thus reveals how ethnicity and language are mutually reinforcing and dynamic dimensions of identity.

However, immigration introduces new scales of identification that reshape how Tlapaneco identity is articulated. When describing how he identifies in the United States, he notes:

“Formalmente nos conocemos como hispanos o como latinos porque descendemos de otro país y hablamos español. Somos de diferentes culturas [a la estadounidense], es por eso que ya dentro de una ciudad pues ya nos conocemos como hispanos o latinos, fuera de nuestro país” (Formally, we are known as Hispanic or Latino because we descend from another country and speak Spanish. We come from different cultures [from the American one], which is why, within a city, we identify as Hispanic or Latino, outside of our own country).

This shift illustrates a scalar re-positioning of identity categories, demonstrating how identities are not fixed but instead strategically performed or recognized depending on context. Locally, in the *montaña* region of Guerrero, “Tlapaneco” is the salient category. Nationally, “Mexican” may suffice. In the United States, however, “Hispano” and “Latino” become the socially legible label. These layered identifications do not erase Tlapaneco identity; rather, they demonstrate how identity is recalibrated according to sociopolitical context. Additionally, the adoption of broader labels reflects the racialized and institutional classifications available in the

U.S. context, where “Hispanic⁵” operates as a macro-category that compresses internal ethnic and indigenous distinctions into a homogenized identity. The participant’s use of this term signals strategic alignment with recognizable categories rather than abandonment of his indigenous identity. Through this shift, we observe how migration produces scalar identity negotiations, where it expands or contracts depending on audience, institutional setting, and social intelligibility. These scalar movements coexist rather than replace one another. As the participant continues to reference Guerrero and the *montaña* as core to his sense of self, even while acknowledging broader labels in the U.S. context, identity thus becomes layered rather than linear. The narrative demonstrates how indigeneity is maintained through linguistic and territorial attachment while simultaneously being repositioned within racialized transnational frameworks.

Overall, the analysis of the participant’s narrative demonstrates that Tlapaneco identity is constructed at the intersection of territory, language, and migration. Territorial anchoring provides cultural legitimacy and affective grounding; language functions as the embodied marker of ethnic belonging; and migration introduces scalar shifts that recalibrate identity categories within new sociopolitical environments. In direct response to the study’s first research question, these findings show that Tlapaneco indigeneity is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic, discursively negotiated process shaped by 1) spatial and ecological attachment, 2) linguistic affiliation, and 3) migratory experiences. Therefore, identity emerges as relational, layered, and

⁵ In the United States, the term ‘Hispanic’ functions as a governmental category used to classify people of Latin American descent. As noted by the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), this ethnic label refers to “a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” (p.2).

context-dependent, continuously produced through the interaction of place, language, and movement.

Language Repertoires and Linguistic Practices Across Contexts

Regarding the second research question, the data demonstrated that the participant's multilingual repertoire is mobilized according to domain, interlocutor, and anticipated outcome. In that sense, Tlapaneco, Spanish, and English are not used interchangeably; rather, each language fulfills distinct communicative and social functions (e.g., Tlapaneco to foreground indigenous identity, Spanish for socialization and economic opportunities, and English for interaction with healthcare and federal U.S. institutions). Additionally, the participant shows explicit awareness of how languages carry different forms of value and usefulness depending on context. His narrative reveals multilingualism as an adaptive resource through which he sustains cultural belonging, expands social networks, and navigates everyday responsibilities.

Foremost, throughout the interview, Tlapaneco consistently appears as the language of intimacy, cultural continuity, and affective belonging. When describing language use within the home, the participant explains, "*En mi casa pues hablamos más el Tlapaneco*" (In my household we speak more Tlapaneco), clearly situating indigenous language use in the domestic sphere. This distribution becomes even more pronounced and transcends physical borders when referring to his mother: "*Cuando me comunico con mi mamá en Tlapaneco siempre... nos entendemos más hablando Tlapaneco*" (When I talk to my mother, we always do so in Tlapaneco... we understand each other more talking Tlapaneco). The expression "*nos entendemos más*" (we understand each other better) suggests that Tlapaneco provides not only comprehension but deeper relational alignment, by enabling speakers to access shared cultural references and

pragmatic resources only available in Tlapaneco. In this context, Tlapaneco functions as symbolic and cultural capital: it sustains intergenerational bonds and reinforces shared identity.

This symbolic value extends beyond the home into moments of recognition. The participant recounts how costumers notice him speaking Tlapaneco and ask about it: “*Nos notan platicando... y nos preguntan: “¿qué es lo que hablan?” Entonces nosotros les explicamos*” (They notice us chatting... and they ask: “What is it that you are speaking?” So, we explain it to them). The participant also describes feeling surprised and proud when an American who had lived in Guerrero for a short period of time, uttered a few sentences in Tlapaneco to him: “*Qué bonito se siente que un americano aprenda mi lengua... y nosotros como que la estamos perdiendo.*” (It feels beautiful to see an American learn my language... while we ourselves seem to be losing it). This statement reveals a complex linguistic awareness, as the participant recognizes both the vulnerability and endangerment of Tlapaneco, and the social legitimization the language gains when it is valued and admired by outsiders. In that regard, pride emerges when Tlapaneco is acknowledged and learned by others, thus generating symbolic recognition and cultural affirmation even when it does not provide material advantage to the participant or his community in the U.S. context.

The participant’s discussion of intergenerational transmission further illustrates this orientation toward preservation. He explains that if he has children in Kansas, “*tengo que mezclarlo en mi cultura para que no se pierda eso [Tlapaneco]... para que siga vivo aquí en Kansas*” (I must integrate it into my culture so that it doesn’t get lost [Tlapaneco]... so that it can stay alive here in Kansas). Language here becomes a vehicle of continuity in the context of immigration. The goal is not economic mobility but cultural preservation. Similarly, the participant’s decision to name his food business in Tlapaneco demonstrates deliberate identity

inscription within a commercial space. To this effect, the participant uttered: "*significa unión entre dos ríos en mi lengua Tlapaneca*" (It means the unity of two rivers in my Tlapaneco language. Showing that even though English or Spanish might maximize immediate market accessibility, Tlapaneco is chosen to communicate origin and heritage. In this context, Tlapaneco operates primarily as cultural capital as it marks belonging, sustains memory, and generates pride.

In contrast, Spanish is associated with broader communicative reach and expanded social participation. The participant states: "*Ya fuera de casa, de donde estemos, hablamos más el español*" (Once we're outside the household, wherever we may be, we tend to speak more Spanish), marking a functional shift from home to public spaces. Continuity also shifts when it comes to Spanish, as it was and is learned through both formal and informal channels,

"En la escuela, con los amigos, porque en la escuela los maestros hablan más el español, pues ahí aprendes, en la escuela aprendes, con los amigos, uno, dos, tres amigos que hablan español pues ahí vas aprendiendo" (At school with friends, because at school the teachers spoke more Spanish, so that's where you learn... at school you learn. With friends [I had] one, two, or three friends who spoke Spanish... that's how you gradually learn."

This statement highlights how Spanish maintenance occurs beyond the home and community, supported and reinforced by schools and peer networks, in contrast to Tlapaneco, which remains largely confined to familial and local contexts. Moreover, beyond schooling Spanish becomes necessary for employment and everyday transactions. He explains:

"Si yo hablo mi lengua nadie me va a entender entonces tengo que practicar más el español para que yo pueda conseguir un empleo, poder comprar, poder salir, poder socializarme." (If I speak

my language, no one will understand me, so I must practice Spanish more so that I can get a job, be able to shop, go out, and socialize).

As observed by this declaration, Spanish becomes a prerequisite for employment, commerce, and social participation. Unlike Tlapaneco, which indexes belonging within a specific community, Spanish expands communicative networks and facilitates access to the broader national society. The participant explicitly explains that speaking Spanish leads to tangible benefits: “*Si hablo más español tengo más empleo, tengo más apoyo*” (If I speak more Spanish, I have more employment, and more support). Language choice is therefore directly linked to economic opportunity and social capital.

Conversely, English occupies an even more privileged position in the participant’s life. This is evident when he recounts his interactions with state institutions: “*Cuando voy a la corte, ahí no voy a hablar Tlapaneco, no voy a hablar español... me veo forzado a aprender [inglés].*” (In court, I cannot speak Tlapaneco or Spanish... I feel forced to learn [English]). Here, the phrase “*me veo forzado*” signals structural pressure, explaining that English is not adopted out of preference but necessity. It is the language required to “*resolver las cosas*” (to solve things), to pay fees, and to navigate legal and bureaucratic systems. The participant further states “*hablando inglés se te facilitan mucho las cosas, se te abren puertas*” (Speaking English facilitates things a lot and opens doors for you), clearly articulating the association between English and institutional access. At the same time, the participant acknowledges how limited English proficiency can produce vulnerability, he notes, “*Les digo no hablo el inglés... me buscan mi intérprete*” (Whenever I specify that I do not speak English, they provide an interpreter for me). English thus functions as a dominant institutional capital, that creates opportunities when mastered but functions as a barrier when proficiency is limited.

The participant's reflections also revealed how linguistic hierarchies affect everyday usage patterns, such as speaking Spanish about 60% of the time, as compared to the 30% usage of Tlapaneco, a percentage that has been decreasing as he feels he must put his native language aside in order to socialize with non-indigenous people, as well as to learn English for social mobility and economic advancement. Alternatively, this self-assessment demonstrates metalinguistic awareness of repertoire distribution and of the structural forces shaping it. Language shift is not framed as voluntary abandonment but as adaptation driven by migratory context. The need to improve his financial situation, pushes English to the forefront, even at the expense of L1 (Tlapaneco) language use. Multilingual practice is therefore deeply intertwined with economic survival and institutional navigation.

Moreover, Table 1 illustrates the fluidity of the participant's linguistic repertoire, demonstrating that his language practices are not compartmentalized into separate systems but dynamically integrated through code-switching, as observed in the following occurrences:

“Supongamos que digamos, por ejemplo: buenos días, ¿cómo estás? Es en español verdad, hola buenos días qué tal, ¿cómo estás? Y en tlapaneco Watsáa ló' Xíni xtáas bien? ... entonces ya estoy mezclando español y tlapaneco... Pero ya si lo hablo en español, Hola, buenos días, ó'nextáa? ... entonces ya mezclé el español y tlapaneco.” (Let's suppose for example I say: Good morning, how are you? It is Spanish, right? Hello, good morning, how are you, In Tlapaneco Watsáa ló' Xíni xtáas bien? ... there I am mixing Spanish and Tlapaneco... But if I say it in Spanish Hola, buenos dias, ó'nextáa?... In this instance, I have mixed Spanish and Tlapaneco).

This statement reveals instances of intra-sentential alternation where both Spanish and Tlapaneco co-occur within the same clause, revealing structural integration rather than simple juxtaposition. In the sentence *Watsáa ló' Xíni xtáas bien?* (Hello, good morning, how are you),

the addition of the Spanish adverb “*bien*” (good) functions as a lexical insertion within a Tlapaneco morphosyntactic frame, while the final -s appears to align the verb form with second-person singular agreement, reflecting a positive transfer in person and number marking. Instead of arbitrary shift, this code-switching practice reflects an effort to maintain grammatical coherence across systems. Similarly, in *Hola, buenos días, ó'nextáa?* (Hello, good morning, how are you?), the Spanish greeting is followed by the Tlapaneco *ó'nextáa*, which serves the interrogative function of “¿cómo estás?”. To fulfill such function, the Tlapaneco prefix *-ó'n* is attached to the base morpheme *xtáa*, marking the interrogative structure, while the insertion of the Spanish vowel ‘e’ operates as an epenthesis that facilitates phonological transition between segments. These phonological adjustments ease articulation across language boundaries and reflect morphophonemic accommodation rather than structural disruption.

Lastly, Table 1 exemplifies spontaneous code-switching at the lexical level through the hybrid word “*lengáa*” (language). Here, the initial syllable *len-* of the Spanish stem *lengu-* is inserted into the Tlapaneco suffix *-áa*, thereby resulting in the word “*lengáa*” (language), which encompasses both morphological and phonological traits of Spanish and Tlapaneco. Rather than a mere borrowing, this process reflects morphophonemic accommodation, resulting in a hybrid lexical item that demonstrates structural integration within a contact-induced bilingual repertoire.

Table 1. Code-switching items

Tlapaneco	Spanish	Code-switching
Watsáa ló' Xíni xtáa	Hola, buenos días, ¿cómo estás?	Watsáa ló' Xíni xtáas bien?
Watsáa ló' Xíni xtáa	Hola, buenos días, ¿cómo estás?	Hola, buenos días, ó'nextáa?
ajngáa	lengua	lengáa

Importantly, the participant acknowledges that this mixture “*ya no es Tlapaneco original*” (It is not original Tlapaneco), signaling metalinguistic awareness of linguistic blending and change. However, rather than framing his hybridity as linguist loss, he presents it as an expected and natural outcome of sustained language contact, positioning code-switching not as a linguistic deficiency but as an adaptive and agentic practice within a multilingual context. The participant also describes the active use of Spanish and Tlapaneco within his community, particularly among younger members or those who have sustained contact with Spanish-speaking contexts in both the U.S. and Mexico. In contrast, he notes that elderly members of the community “*continúan usando la lengua original, ellos no la mezclan con español*” ([Elderly members of the community] continue speaking the original language, they mix it with Spanish). This contrast suggest that code-switching emerges as a contact-induced practice shaped by transnational mobility and increased exposure to Spanish across institutional and social domains. While younger speakers navigate multilingual environments that encourage linguistic socialization, elders maintain more linguistically bounded practices, reflecting different histories of language contact and patterns of socialization. Thus, code-switching does not seem to be a universal norm in the Tlapaneco community, but a generationally and contextually mediated strategy influenced by cross-border linguistic interaction. Similarly, immigration introduces new patterns of language contact between Spanish dialects. For instance, the participant explains that interaction with other Spanish-speaking communities leads to the adoption of new expressions, describing this process as something that is naturally transmitted through social contact. Thereby, words and expressions such as “*la púchica*” (shoot!) and “*pajilla*” (straw) enter the participant’s repertoire through constant interaction with speakers of other Spanish dialects (i.e. El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua). In addition, by consciously recognizing these lexical items from his repertoire, the

participant reflects on semantic differences and acknowledges how meaning shifts across communities. These examples illustrate an expanded multilingual repertoire that grows through immigration and social engagement.

Moreover, Table 2 reflects how the participant navigates his multilingual repertoire primarily composed of Spanish and Tlapaneco, but still exhibiting lexical knowledge of Mixtec in ways that reflect both identity and the linguistic outcomes of language-contact. For example, terms like “*guma*” and “*ixtá*” highlight the rich linguistic environments the participant has been involved in, and how these contexts have shaped and informed his repertoire and lexical practices. Furthermore, the picture-naming task which was designed to assess lexical range, and examine patterns of language choice and code-mixing, as explained in the Methodology, reinforces the lexical flexibility that characterizes the participant’s repertoire. When prompted with culturally salient objects, including food items, domestic structures, and natural elements, the participant alternated between Tlapaneco and Spanish forms, sometimes providing both or reflecting on pronunciation and meaning. Items closely associated with home and cultural memory were more readily linked to Tlapaneco, while more generalized or widely circulated objects elicited Spanish. This pattern mirrors the participant’s reported language domains: Tlapaneco aligns with home and cultural continuity, and Spanish with broader communicative reach. This interplay shows how language choice is influenced by both personal and social factors. The participant may adjust word choice based on the interlocutor or the frequency with which certain terms are used. In other words, the order of mentioning the Tlapaneco term before Spanish could reflect an effort to center their linguistic identity while still making communication effective, showing a dynamic negotiation of identity through language use. Table

2 then captures a living, functional multilingualism where language choice order, and equivalence are all socially and culturally meaningful.

Table 2. Picture-naming task results

Image	Answers	Lexical choice	Language selection	Language dominance pattern
	1. tortilla 2. guma 3. ixtá (Tortilla)	Spanish/ Tlapaneco/ Mixtec	Spanish/ Tlapaneco/ Mixtec	Spanish as the dominant language
	1. gu'wá' 2. casa (House)	Tlapaneco/ Spanish	Tlapaneco/ Spanish	Tlapaneco as the dominant language
	1. ixé' (Tree)	Tlapaneco	Tlapaneco	Tlapaneco as the dominant language
	1. cometa (Kite)	Standard Spanish	Spanish	Spanish as the dominant language
	1. ndxáma 2. plátano (Plantain)	Tlapaneco Spanish	Tlapaneco Spanish	Tlapaneco as the dominant language
	1. tsuyaá' 2. ardilla (Squirrel)	Tlapaneco Spanish	Tlapaneco Spanish	Tlapaneco as the dominant language
	1. ño'on 2. pájaro (Bird)	Tlapaneco Spanish	Tlapaneco Spanish	Tlapaneco as the dominant language
	1. diin (Sugar cane)	Tlapaneco	Tlapaneco	Tlapaneco as the dominant language

	1. nana 2. mamá (Mother)	Tlapaneco Spanish	Tlapaneco Spanish	Tlapaneco as the dominant language
	1. akha' (Sun)	Tlapaneco	Tlapaneco	Tlapaneco as the dominant language
	1. duun (Chili pepper)	Tlapaneco	Tlapaneco	Tlapaneco as the dominant language
	1. ru'wa 2. la lluvia (Rain)	Tlapaneco Spanish	Tlapaneco Spanish	Tlapaneco as the dominant language
	1. flor 2. re'e (Flower)	Spanish Tlapaneco	Spanish Tlapaneco	Spanish as the dominant language
	1. gu'wa naa nagoma mujuun ri napholo 2. cocina (Kitchen)	Tlapaneco Spanish	Tlapaneco Spanish	Tlapaneco as the dominant language

Taken together, the analysis of both the interview and the picture-naming task demonstrates that each language in the participant repertoire performs distinct social functions. Tlapaneco operates primarily as symbolic and cultural capital, sustaining belonging and intergenerational continuity. While, Spanish functions as economic and social capital, facilitating employment, commerce, and expanded networks beyond the community. English is associated with practical access to additional communicative domain and enhanced opportunity. In that regard, code-switching and lexical flexibility allow the participant to navigate his linguistic

repertoire by mobilizing his languages dynamically without any boundaries or constraints. In direct response to the study's second research question, the findings show that language use is context-dependent and purposive. The participant demonstrates awareness that each language enables particular forms of participation while constraining others, as well as the ability of using language to index identity and cultural belonging; however, the participant does not treat languages as bounded systems. Instead, he strategically mobilizes his full linguistic repertoire, engaging in creative code-switching practices that transcend named-language constraints, to maximize communicative reach and social mobility across domains.

Institutional Language Hierarchies and Racialized Migration Dynamics

Pertaining to how the participant's Indigenous identity and multilingual repertoire are positioned within broader systems of power (i.e. health care institutions, law enforcement). In contrast to the previous section, where the analysis demonstrated how the participant strategically mobilizes his languages across domains, this section shifts the focus outward to examine how institutions and racialized migration dynamics regulate which languages are recognized, which identities are legible, and which forms of belonging are rendered invisible. The data revealed that Tlapaneco identity is frequently compressed into broader ethnic categories, that institutional spaces privilege dominant languages, and that racialized perceptions of "Hispanic" identity shape the participant's experiences in his current context.

One of the most salient patterns emerging from the narrative is the institutional invisibility of Tlapaneco. When describing formal interactions, the participant states, "*Cuando voy a la corte... pues ahí no voy a hablar tlapaneco, no voy a hablar español*" (When I go to

court, I won't speak Tlapaneco there, I won't speak Spanish either). This statement reveals that neither the participant's indigenous language nor Spanish is structurally accommodated in certain institutional contexts. Tlapaneco, in particular, is absent from official communicative frameworks, as it is not positioned as a language that can be used for bureaucratic procedures or legal transactions. Its exclusion is not framed as an individual choice but as a structural condition, since it is simply not an available option. Even in health care contexts, where the participant reports receiving an interpreter, the mediation occurs through Spanish rather than Tlapaneco: "*Les digo no hablo el inglés... me buscan mi intérprete de español... entonces pues así nos comunicamos*" (I tell them I don't speak English... They get me a Spanish interpreter... so that's how we communicate). The presence of a Spanish interpreter signals partial recognition of linguistic diversity; however, the indigenous language remains outside the institutional repertoire. In the United States, Tlapaneco is not institutionalized, standardized, or formally recognized as a language of public administration. Its legitimacy operates within community spaces but not within bureaucratic ones. In this sense, Indigenous multilingualism becomes filtered through dominant categories, with Spanish serving as a proxy for broader Hispanic and Latino identity.

This dynamic reflects a hierarchy in which English occupies the highest institutional position, Spanish holds intermediate recognition, and Tlapaneco remains structurally marginalized. When the participant states that he must "*dejar mi Tlapaneco*" (abandon my Tlapaneco) in order to prioritize English, he underscores how institutional demands shape his language use. Although this shift was discussed in the previous section as an adaptive practice, here it becomes evident that the adaptation is conditioned by systemic hierarchies, as the results suggest that English is the language through which one "*resuelve las cosas*" (solves things out)

in the dominant society, while Tlapaneco has no comparable institutional standing. This unequal validation of languages is therefore not merely social preference but embedded in administrative norms and expectations.

Regarding identity, institutional compression of identity is further reinforced through broader ethnic categorization. The participant notes that linguistic differences distinguish national groups: “*Nos distinguimos más como mexicanos por la forma de comunicarnos... los guatemaltecos tienen un tono diferente... los nicaragüenses tienen otro tono diferente*” (We distinguish ourselves more as Mexicans by the way we communicate... Guatemalans have a different tone... Nicaraguans have another distinctive tone). This observation reveals awareness of internal diversity within immigration groups from Latin America. However, in the U.S. context, such distinctions are often subsumed under the homogenizing label of “Hispanic”. The participant references being perceived simply as Hispanic, a category that flattens indigenous specificity into a pan-ethnic classification. In this sense, Tlapaneco identity becomes less visible when filtered through racialized ethnic labels that do not account for indigenous ethnicity and linguistic diversity.

Racialized dynamics further shape how identity is experienced in public spaces. The participant describes fear associated with being visibly identified as Hispanic:

“Si me miran caminando por ahí o me escuchan hablando, pues me miran y vámonos, esa es la barrera que nosotros enfrentamos... porque me da miedo salir o me da miedo, o me da miedo ir de compras o ir al parque, que tal me miran ahí, pues este es hispanos, vámonos, esa es la gran barrera que ahora enfrentamos... actualmente es así” (If they see me walking around out there or they hear me speaking... they look at me and say, let’s go, that’s the barrier we face... because I’m afraid to go out, or I’m afraid to go shopping or go to the park. What if they see me there and

say, he's Hispanic, let's take him, that's the big barrier we're facing right now... that's how it is currently).

Here, language and phenotype intersect to produce vulnerability. The fear described by the participant is tied to a racialized reading of his body as “Hispanic”. Thereby, indigenous identity becomes subsumed within racialized migration narratives that do not differentiate between national, ethnic, or linguistic backgrounds. The category “Hispanic” operates as a racialized marker that shapes mobility, risk, and exposure in everyday life.

Notably, these dynamics do not erase Tlapaneco identity and language entirely, but they do constrain its public visibility. Within communities and family spaces, Tlapaneco remains meaningful and legitimate. However, in institutional and racialized public contexts, it is either replaced by Spanish, subordinated to English, or absorbed into generalized ethnic categories. The participant's need to rely on Spanish interpreters and his prioritization of English for official matters illustrate how institutional language hierarchies structure communicative possibilities and access for individuals.

Overall, these patterns illustrate how Tlapaneco identity becomes unevenly visible across power structures in Northeastern Kansas. Within family and community spaces, Tlapaneco retains legitimacy and cultural authority. Nevertheless, once the participant enters institutional settings, its communicative value diminishes sharply. English operates as the primary language of governance and administration, while partial recognition is granted to Spanish through interpreters and translated forms; however, indigenous languages are largely excluded in formal domains as it is evident from the participant's narrative. Simultaneously, racialized migration dynamics compress indigenous specificity into broader “Hispanic” categories, shaping how the participant is perceived and how he navigates public space. Therefore, in direct response to the

study's third and final research question, the findings show that the visibility and legitimacy of Tlapaneco identity and language are structured by systems that regulate linguistic recognition and racial categorization. As a consequence, Tlapaneco identity and language then persist as a source of cultural continuity, but their public value is mediated through institutional norms and racialized frameworks that do not fully accommodate and recognize indigenous ethnic and linguistic diversity. In addition, it is important to denote that the findings in this study center in the experiences and interactions of one specific participant, which highlights the need for more comparable research studies in other regions of Kansas (e.g., places with more demographic diversity and with a higher percentage of Latinos), in order to determine whether the findings presented here are representative of the Latin American indigenous diaspora in the state.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest how indigenous identity, multilingual practices, and migration experiences intersect within broader social and institutional structures that shape belonging and recognition. The results addressing how the participant understands and expresses his indigenous identity support scholarship that conceptualizes identity as a dynamic and context-dependent process. The participant's narrative reflects the negotiation of identity across geographic and cultural spaces, which aligns with Norton's (2013) conceptualization of identity as a relationship to the world that develops across time and space. Therefore, the outcome of this case study suggests that migration reshapes this relationship by introducing new social environments that influence how identity is articulated and recognized. Simultaneously, the findings resonate with Fox's (2013) work showing that indigenous immigrants often maintain connections to their communities of origin while simultaneously constructing their lives in the United States. In this study, the participant's continued references to cultural belonging and linguistic practices associated with his community in Guerrero indicate how identity is sustained across borders rather than replaces through assimilation. At the same time, the participant's experiences reflect Stephen's (2007) argument that indigenous immigrants cross not only national borders but also cultural and social boundaries that conventional migration narratives fail to capture. The participant's identity cannot be fully represented through broad categories such as "Latino" or "Hispanic", illustrating limitations of dominant migration frameworks that overlook the diversity of indigenous identities within Latin American immigrant populations.

Moreover, the findings related to language use further illustrate how multilingual practices function as both communicative strategies and expressions of identity. The participant's selective use of Tlapaneco, Spanish, and English across different contexts reflects patterns

described in research on bilingual and multilingual communities. Zentella's (1997) work showcases how bilingual speakers shift languages depending on audience and social setting; a pattern also evident in the participant's narrative. The participant's linguistic choices show how languages acquire different social meanings depending on the contexts in which they are used. At the same time, the fluid movement between languages aligns with the concept of translanguaging proposed by Otheguy, Garcia, and Reid (2015), in which multilingual speakers draw on their entire linguistic repertoire rather than maintaining rigid boundaries between languages, which helps them communicate and express their ideas more freely, while gaining metalinguistic awareness regarding language use. For instance, similar patterns observed among indigenous youth in immigrant communities (Morales, 2016) support the interpretation that multilingual practices among indigenous immigrants represent dynamic strategies for navigating complex social environments. However, the participant's narrative also reflects the unequal valuation of languages described in the literature. As Irvine and Gal (2000) argue, linguistic ideologies shape which languages become socially legitimized and which remain marginalized. In this case study, English and Spanish function as languages associated with institutional participation, while Tlapaneco is largely confined to interpersonal and community contexts.

Finally, the participant's experiences highlight how broader social and institutional structures shape the visibility and recognition of indigenous identity in migration contexts. The results reflect patterns described by Reed-Sandoval (2020), who argues that indigenous immigrants frequently experience "hermeneutical marginalization" (i.e. invalidation of interpretations and knowledge-systems that deviate from those of the dominant society", since their identities do not fit within dominant institutional categories. Hence, the participant's experiences navigating classifications such as "Latino" or "Hispanic" illustrate how indigenous

identities can become obscured within broader ethnic labels. Similarly, Martinez et al. (2025) emphasize that indigenous ethnicity is shaped by social and political contexts rather than functioning solely as a fixed cultural attribute. The participant's narrative exhibits how the recognition of indigenous identity depends on the institutional and social environments in which it is expressed. These dynamics also resonate with Arias Cuba's (2022) argument that indigenous immigrants often experience forms of differential inclusion, where participation in social systems does not necessarily translate into full recognition of cultural and linguistic identities. At the same time, the continued use of Tlapaneco reflects practices of cultural persistence that align with scholarship highlighting the resilience of indigenous identities in migratory contexts (Fox, 2013; Flores Farfán, 2016). Together, these findings illustrate how indigenous immigrants navigate systems that both enable participation and simultaneously limit the visibility of their identities and languages.

Conclusion

The present study examined how an indigenous Tlapaneco immigrant living in Northeastern, Kansas understands and negotiates identity at the intersection of language, migration and ethnicity. The findings reflect that indigenous identity, and multilingual practices are shaped by both personal experiences and broader social structures that influence how language and identities are recognized and valued. Overall, the results showcase how the participant's indigenous identity is closely connected to cultural practices, territory, community belonging, and the continued use of Tlapaneco. Rather than representing a fixed category, identity emerges as a dynamic process shaped by immigration and by interactions across multiple social contexts. At the same time, the participant's multilingual repertoire illustrates how languages are used strategically depending on communicative needs and social environments. Additionally, the case study also reveals how institutional and social structures influence the visibility of indigenous identity in the United States by pigeonholing distinct ethnic and racial categories under umbrella terms such as "Latino" or "Hispanic". As a result, indigenous identities may remain largely invisible within institutional frameworks that prioritize national origin or pan-ethnic classifications.

On the whole, this study underscores the importance of recognizing the diversity of indigenous immigrant experiences within broader discussions of migration and language in the United States. Although its limitations include small pool of participants, lack of quantitative approaches, and the representation of only one Indigenous language and culture from one country (Mexico), the findings highlight the need for greater attention to the presence of indigenous languages and identities within immigrant communities. Future research could expand this work by examining the experiences of additional indigenous immigrants across

different regions, exploring how institutional contexts such as schools, workplaces, and community organizations influence the maintenance and visibility of indigenous languages. Greater recognition of indigenous linguistic and cultural diversity is essential for developing more inclusive understandings of migration, language maintenance, and for supporting the linguistic rights and identities of indigenous immigrant communities.

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Appendix A - Sociolinguistic Interview Questions

Appendix A.1. – Questions on Identity and Intersectionality

- How do you identify? (Latino/a, Mexican, Indigenous (name of community), Mexican-American, etc.) And why?
- Do you think your identity changes or varies depending on the context you find yourself in? That is, do you identify the same way in the United States as you do in Mexico, or does your identity vary depending on the context? And why?
- What does being Indigenous mean to you? What does being Latino/a mean to you? What do you think is the difference between being Indigenous and being Latino/a?
- In the context of the United States, have you felt that your identity changes depending on the location or situation (for example, at home, at church, at work, at school)? If so, are these changes voluntary or involuntary? If voluntary, why do you make them?
- How do you combine your Indigenous identity with your identity as a Latino/a or Mexican in Kansas? How do you feel these identities coexist in your life and in who you are?
- When do you feel recognized or valued for your identity? When do you feel invisible or discriminated against?
- In your daily life, how do you think the language you speak, the fact that you are a man/woman [*or your gender identity*], and the fact that you are Indigenous influence how other people treat you or the experiences you have here in Kansas?

Appendix A.2. – Questions on Gender Experiences

- Are there roles that a woman/man should fulfill within your community? Do you think these roles are different or similar to those of the dominant society in your country of origin? Do you think gender roles within your community are similar or different to those of Americans in Kansas? How do you account for these differences?
- How does being an Indigenous woman/Indigenous man influence your access to work, education, or medical services?

- What role do women and men play in transmitting your *[Indigenous]* language and culture in your family?
- In your experience as a man, what do you think people expect from you in your Indigenous community and also in the larger community here in Kansas? (e.g., responsibilities, way of speaking, working, or relating to others)

Appendix A.3. – Questions on Language(s) and linguistic practices

- What languages do you speak, write, or understand?
- What language(s) do you speak at home? What language(s) do you use outside the home? In what specific contexts do you use each language?
- What language did you learn first? How did you learn it?
- In what situations do you prefer to speak Spanish, English, or your Indigenous language? What motivates these preferences?
- When do you feel most proud of speaking your Indigenous language?
- Have you ever felt pressured not to use your language(s) *[Indigenous or Spanish]*. In what contexts? How did you react to this or what is your opinion?
- How do you feel when you speak English, Spanish, and your Indigenous language?
- How does using these languages *[Spanish and Indigenous language]* here in Kansas compared to your home country? Has the way you use these languages changed since you arrived in Kansas?
- For you, does your Indigenous language represent more than just words or a way of communicating (e.g., culture, family, roots)?
- What do you think is lost or gained when you don't speak/stop speaking an Indigenous language?
- When you speak with your family or friends, do you sometimes mix words from different languages (Spanish, English, Indigenous language)? When? Can you give me examples?
- What do you do when you can't find a word in a language? What strategies do you use to communicate your message?
- Do you often switch languages in the middle of a conversation? Could you give me an example?

- With whom do you tend to speak two or more languages at once? What do you think that means for you?
- Which language do you find easiest to use to express feelings or emotions?
- What do you think is the relationship between your Indigenous language and the traditions of your community?
- Do you remember songs, prayers, stories, or sayings in your Indigenous language? Have you ever said any of them in Spanish? Why did you do so?
- What role do you think language plays in keeping the culture of your Indigenous community alive here in Kansas?
- What do you think about the new generations? Would you like your children or grandchildren to learn your family's Indigenous language? Why?
- Since arriving in the United States, have you adopted any words or expressions from other Indigenous or Latino communities with which you have contact?

Appendix A.4. – Questions on Ethnicity and cultural identity

- What does it mean to you to belong to the *[name of Indigenous community]* community?
- How do you think other people see you? Have you experienced situations in which people outside your community make your indigenous identity invisible or look down on it?
- What kind of celebrations/holidays do you commemorate here in Kansas?
- What type of food do you cook?
- What type of music do you listen to?
- What is your religion or spiritual belief? How have you maintained your religious or worship practices here in Kansas? Have you faced any problems or difficulties in doing so?
- What role does culture (holidays, food, religion, music) play in your life in Kansas?
- How do you maintain your Indigenous identity here in Kansas while being part of the broader Latino community? For example, through the language you speak, the traditions you follow, the holidays you celebrate, or your family's customs.

- Have you ever felt that people treat you differently because of your Indigenous identity or the way you speak? How does this affect the way you speak or present yourself in different settings?

Appendix A.5. – Questions on Power, oppression, and resilience

- Have you ever experienced discrimination because of the languages you speak (your Indigenous language or Spanish), because of your accent, or your appearance? From what kind of people or situations did that discrimination come?
- How have your interactions been with institutions such as hospitals, schools, the police, and government offices?
- What barriers or difficulties do you feel you face in your daily life due to your identity, language, and gender?
- What strategies do you or your family use to address these barriers?
- What do you think gives you strength or resilience in your life here?

Appendix A.6. – Questions on Transnational identities and connections to the mainland

- How do you maintain ties with your community or homeland in Mexico/Guatemala/etc.?
- What traditions or customs have you brought with you and practice here? Have you modified them in any way?
- Have you traveled back? What was that experience like? If not, what do you miss about your mainland?
- How do you communicate with family members who are in your country of origin? What language do you use to communicate with them?
- What does it mean to you to "belong" both to your mainland and to Kansas?
- In your community, how is Indigenous culture and language passed on to the children who grow up here? How do you teach them that connection to the mainland while being far away?