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## Building Coalitions to Support Indigenous Language Speakers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Building Coalitions to Support Indigenous Language Speakers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

### Cover Page Footnote

We thank the Red de Intérpretes y Promotores Interculturales and the Rural Women's Health Project, especially Robin Lewy, for their collaborations throughout this project.

## Building Coalitions to Support Indigenous Language Speakers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

While the work of language access is ongoing and has been taking place for a long time in various contexts, language access efforts often ignore Indigenous communities. As such, more interventions are needed to recognize how health-related messaging needs to be adapted not only across languages, but across worldviews. In this article, a technical communication scholar and Spanish-English translator and a Chinateco-Spanish translator, interpreter, and activist from the Municipio de San Pedro Yolox discuss their work to foster language access during the COVID-19 pandemic for and with Indigenous language speakers in Oaxaca de Juárez, Mexico, and Gainesville, Florida, USA. Through their reflective examples, the authors argue that in order to work toward language access through a social justice orientation during the COVID-19 pandemic, technical communication researchers and health justice activists should collaborate with and amplify the work of Indigenous language speakers, particularly by learning about, embracing, and centralizing Indigenous frameworks and understandings of language.

**Keywords:** Indigenous languages; community engagement; language access; coalitions

## Introduction

*“Buenas tardes. Mi nombre es \_\_\_\_\_. Le hablo para preguntar si usted conoce alguien que nos pueda ayudar con una traducción sobre el virus COVID-19.”*

*“Good afternoon. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I’m calling to ask if you might know someone who can help us with a translation related to the COVID-19 virus.”*

As the world continues experiencing the multi-layered tragedies associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, translators, interpreters, and language activists across the world have been coming together in various capacities, uttering different versions of our opening lines, “Do you know someone who can help us with a translation related to COVID-19?” In other words, “do you know anyone who can help save lives?”

Indeed, many organizations serving minoritized communities during and before the pandemic point to the importance of language access—of providing information to community members in a language that they are comfortable speaking (García, 2021; Getahun, 2021; United Nations, 2020). For example, the report, “COVID-19 and Indigenous Peoples,” produced by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020), notes that

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic poses a grave health threat to Indigenous peoples around the world. Indigenous communities already experience poor access to healthcare, significantly higher rates of communicable and non-communicable diseases, lack of access to essential services, sanitation, and other key preventive measures, such as clean water, soap, disinfectant, etc. Likewise, most nearby local medical facilities, if and when there are any, are often under-equipped and under-staffed. Even when Indigenous peoples are able to access healthcare services, they can face stigma and discrimination. A key factor is to ensure these services and facilities are provided in indigenous languages, and as appropriate to the specific situation of Indigenous peoples (n. pag.).

As this report makes clear, Indigenous language speakers are often not provided with adequate information related to COVID-19 prevention and treatment in their own languages, and already experience racism and discrimination based on other factors. Thus, the lack of language access forms an added layer of oppression that makes Indigenous communities more vulnerable to the disease than other communities. These disparities in terms of health and information access, as the United Nations report emphasizes, are not unique to the United States, but are also present in global contexts. Thus, across the world, Indigenous communities are building networks, often through immaterial labor, to support and sustain each other by providing and sharing critical information in Indigenous languages.

In technical communication research, language access is becoming increasingly important, as scholars begin to recognize that processes like translation and localization are central to effective technical communication in contemporary global contexts (Agboka, 2013; Batova, 2018). While technical communication as a field acknowledges the value of globalization and the importance of translation in fostering global reach, the expertise of translators and language activists could be further highlighted within technical communication scholarship, particularly during global crises. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, as is the case with all health crises, issues of language accessibility are impacting marginalized communities at alarming rates, particularly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) who rely on accessible information to attain services and healthcare in already-oppressive systems (Ding, 2020; Ding, Li, & Haigler, 2015). For this

reason, it is imperative that technical communicators and translators collaborate to mitigate misinformation and structural oppressions during the pandemic. As Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) argue, “to engage in the work of justice, we need theories of power imbued with understandings of oppression, theories that centralize the experiences of multiply marginalized people, who are in the best position to see those oppressive structures that block empowerment” (p. 108). In other words, oppression (i.e., the unequal treatment and violence inflicted upon a specific group of people) is systemic and is embedded in all aspects of our society (Walton, Moore, & Jones, 2019), and those who consistently experience oppression are the best equipped to speak on its impacts. Similarly, individuals with experience navigating linguistic oppression (e.g., translators and interpreters who know what it feels like to not be able to access information in one’s own language) have important perspectives regarding the definitions and value of language access. These perspectives can provide insights for technical communicators who work toward social justice. In this special issue on using immaterial labor to promote social justice in a pandemic, recognizing the immaterial, collaborative work of Indigenous language speakers can provide technical communicators with strategies for building coalitions and expanding the impact of language access.

### Language Access for Indigenous Language Speakers During COVID-19

One of the reasons Indigenous language speakers across the world are at a disadvantage when it comes to language access is because Indigenous communities and Indigenous languages are consistently erased and ignored by colonial governments. For example, Zapotec activist Abigail Castellanos García (2021) explains that in Mexico, “la pandemia por la COVID-19 llegó a México y llegó no solo a desestabilizar nuestra vida cotidiana, sino también a revelar las desigualdades estructurales existentes en el país” (the COVID-19 pandemic reached Mexico and managed to not only destabilize our daily lives, but also to reveal the structural inequities already existing across the country” (n. pag.). Indeed, in Mexico, Indigenous communities make up 19.4% of the general population and speak over 68 different Indigenous languages. Yet, throughout the pandemic, the Mexican government has been publishing COVID-19 related information in Spanish alone, leaving Indigenous activists and organizations to translate, localize, and share information in multiple Indigenous languages. For example, throughout the pandemic, the organization that Castellanos García (2021) works in has been revising information produced by the Mexican government to better reflect Indigenous values, languages, and orientations to health. This immaterial labor is often unrecognized and uncompensated. If technical communicators working in colonial organizations were to collaborate with Indigenous language speakers during the information design process, rather than waiting until after information is written, designed, and shared before incorporating Indigenous experiences, we could better honor the labor and expertise of Indigenous language speakers as we work collectively toward social justice.

Linguistic discrimination toward Indigenous language speakers is also prevalent in the US, where several sources point to the negative impacts that the pandemic continues having on Indigenous language speakers, many of whom are migrant farmworkers living in California, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas, and Washington (Archury, Estrada, & Quandt, 2010). As sources document, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated language access issues for Indigenous language speakers in the United States, particularly those who come from Latin American countries, and who are then assumed to speak Spanish based solely on their nationality (Gutahun, 2021; United Nations, 2020). For example, in North Central Florida, community organizations such as the Rural Women’s Health Project, the only health justice organization in the region, have noted the increasing presence of Indigenous language speakers

in the area, and outlined the need to provide adequate language access to Indigenous language speakers from Latin American who are often assumed to speak Spanish (Gonzales et al., 2022).

Since governments and local agencies don't always take the time to research the language preferences and skills of the people they serve, Indigenous language speakers are often erased from the written cultural record of various institutions, including on documents like the census. Since many Indigenous language speakers in the US are migrant farmworkers with varying documentation status who may not feel comfortable completing the census or being involved in local events, many institutions ignore the presence of Indigenous language speakers and the need to provide language access in Indigenous languages. Through this erasure, Indigenous language speakers continue facing linguistic oppression during the pandemic through the erasure of their languages, which then perpetuates other oppressions such as lack of healthcare. As Hannah Getahun (2021) reported, California, to name just one example, is home to 350,000 Indigenous Oaxacans who speak Indigenous languages and work as migrant farmworkers (n. pag.). As Getahun (2012) continues, "often unvaccinated, with limited access to information about the vaccines, many of these immigrants are farmworkers who live in poverty, with low wages, less access to health care and crowded housing. Combined with the language barriers that allow pandemic misinformation to spread, they are particularly vulnerable to infection and serious illness" (n. pag.). These oppressions and discrimination are especially prevalent in rural parts of the United States, including rural parts of Florida, where many Indigenous language speakers who work as migrant farmworkers provide nourishment and support for the community at large, during and beyond the pandemic.

Providing language access for Indigenous language speakers, both in the US and Mexico, requires much more than translating information from one language to another. Due to the cultural values and principles, as well as the work and living conditions of Indigenous communities in both countries, COVID protocols such as social distancing are difficult to comply with and perhaps antithetical to a particular group whose values are community-driven rather than individualistic. In this case, translating information into Indigenous languages is just one aspect of language access, as localization (the adaptation of information for a particular cultural context) and transcreation (rewriting or redesigning information for specific contexts during the process of translation) are often necessary to ensure that health messaging during the pandemic is both understood and actionable (García, 2021). Furthermore, digital distribution and literacy levels also influence language accessibility for Indigenous language speakers, as "la brecha digital y el poco acceso a servicios de telecomunicaciones que no permite el acceso pleno a la información y aun más a información con pertinencia cultural y lingüística, se hizo más evidente y remarcó las desigualdades que existen aún en nuestro país para los hablantes de lenguas indígenas" (the digital divide and limited access to telecommunication services that does not allow full access to information, and even more so to culturally and linguistically accessible information, become more evident and highlighted the inequities that continue to exist in our country for Indigenous language speakers" (García, 2021, n. pag.). As Ding (2020) further elaborates, "Numerous publications call attention to a number of factors that contribute to blocked or inadequate access to information and communication technologies (ICT) as well as Internet. These include socioeconomic status, connectivity, affordability, power, motivation, usage, social resources and relationships, community and institutional infrastructure, and literacy and skills" (p. 147). Thus, language access, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, is not only a translation issue, but also a technical communication problem that requires attunement to digital distribution, immaterial labor, project management, localization, collaboration, and much more.

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## Translation as a Social Justice in Technical Communication Issue

In the United States, language access is a human right protected by Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and other regulations, including Executive Order 13166, which requires that any agency receiving federal funding provide vital information to individuals who speak languages other than English in the US in a language that they can understand. While these policies have been in place for decades, different agencies and organizations have multiple, and sometimes problematic, interpretations of language access. For example, while some organizations may claim to provide language access by having some phone interpretation services available, organizations don't always publicize their language services, train staff to work with multilingual clients, or ensure that speakers of languages other than English feel welcomed or encouraged to participate within the organization. For this reason, several organizations and entities differentiate between language access, or the availability of information in languages other than English, and language justice, which can be defined as "recognizing the social and political dimensions of language and language access, while working to dismantle language barriers, equalize power dynamics, and build strong communities for social and racial justice" (Communities Creating Healthy Environments, 2011, p. 2). In other words, the components of language justice go beyond the translation of information to consider how organizations can be more holistically inclusive in their work.

Justice-driven orientations to language access are particularly important when working toward language access for and with Indigenous language speakers, whose perceptions and understandings of language do not align with colonial values often embraced by Western institutions. For example, Gonzales (2022) explains "as Indigenous language researchers and activists have long argued, decolonial approaches to language diversity must, 'visibilizar cómo el elemento cultural 'lengua' es un concepto polisémico que en este campo refiere más a sistemas de representación social y de organización del pensamiento que un sistema de sonidos y/o palabras' (make visible how the cultural element known as 'language' is a polysemic concept that [in the field of Indigenous language studies] refers more to a system of social representation and organization of thought than to a system of only sounds and/or words) (Córdova Hernández, 2019, p. 19)" (p. 6). Thus, considering language access from an Indigenous perspective requires more than translating information from one language to another. Instead, language access for Indigenous language speakers encompasses the transformation of ideologies and worldviews away from Western ideals (Córdova Hernández, 2019). This type of transformation cannot be achieved without close collaboration and coalition-building with Indigenous language speakers.

In technical communication, multiple scholars define and embrace the social justice turn in the field, which signals a "shifting from critical analysis to critical action" (Walton, 2016, p. 411), and a need to "shift out of neutral" (Shelton, 2020, p. 20) in technical communication practices, methodologies, and pedagogies. While tools, technologies, and technical information have never been neutral (Jones, 2016; Jones & Williams, 2018), social justice in technical communication scholars emphasize the importance of highlighting power structures embedded into technical tools and technologies to intervene in oppression (Walton, Moore, and Jones, 2019). As part of this work, several scholars have pointed to issues of language diversity as important aspects of social justice in technical communication that should be considered when working with communities in both national and transnational contexts (Dorpenyo, 2019; Rivera, 2021; Rose & Racadio, 2017; Verzella, 2017). As Verzella (2017) explains, "what makes international technical communication particularly challenging is the fact that rhetorical expectations shift across social groups and cultural traditions" (p. 56). As such, "translators are always involved in collaborative networks that bring together document initiators,



authors, translation initiators, target audiences, and other translators in a process of negotiation” (Verzella, 2017, p. 55). Writing directly about Indigenous translation and interpretation, Nora K. Rivera (2021) explains that “historiographies of Indigenous rhetorics and their influences on contemporary practices remain rare, abnormal sub-topics of dominant Western academic traditions that persist on regarding Indigenous worldviews and practices unreliable, especially in matters of technology and technical and professional communication. In places where Indigenous language translation and interpretation are greatly needed, Indigenous translators and interpreters face the lack of adequate systems to professionalize their field, withstanding public sector policies that do not align with the cosmovision of their cultures” (p. 3).

During global pandemics and crises, language accessibility becomes part of a broader network of interactions that are necessary to combat misinformation and other structural oppressions. These interactions are often immaterial, intangible, and yet critical to the survival of marginalized communities. As Ding (2020) explains, “combatting global epidemics requires careful attention to complicated challenges posed by transnational research and multinational intervention” (p. 144). These complicated challenges are prevalent in the work of Indigenous language activists, who must advocate not only for the importance of Indigenous language translation, but also for the recognition and visibility of Indigenous communities across the world.

As we demonstrate in this article, providing language access, and working toward language justice for and with Indigenous language speakers during a pandemic requires globally distributed partnerships committed to social justice (Ding, 2020). Due to the vast number of Indigenous languages and Indigenous language variants spoken throughout the world, finding local translators and interpreters in a particular US region may be difficult or impossible. Furthermore, local governments and organizations, both within and beyond the US, are not always trained to work with Indigenous language translators and Indigenous communities. With the rapidly changing recommendations and circumstances related to COVID-19, Indigenous language speakers, activists, researchers, translators, and activists continue coming together to design, localize, translate, and share information, often through informal networks like WhatsApp messaging and social media. As technical communication researchers continue working with organizations to facilitate these transnational collaborations, we argue that it’s important to pay closer attention to what Indigenous activists are doing in their local contexts to better serve Indigenous language speakers. As Itchuaqiyaq (2021) argues, “those who wish to develop ‘Indigenist’ research paradigms need a framework that challenges default dominant-culture perspectives” (p. 34). Thus, rather than imposing Western frameworks onto Indigenous frameworks, working toward social justice in technical communication requires an attunement to listening and learning from multiply-marginalized communities (Walton, Moore, & Jones, 2019), in this case, Indigenous language speakers.

### **Context and Purpose: Collaborating with Indigenous Language Speakers to Strengthen Language Access**

This article is written by a technical translator and technical communication researcher living in Gainesville, Florida, as well as an Indigenous language translator, interpreter, and activist from the Municipio de San Pedro Yolo, speaker of Chinateco, who also works as the coordinator of the “Red de Intérpretes y Promotores Interculturales” (Network of Intercultural Interpreters and Promoters) in Oaxaca de Juárez, Oaxaca, Mexico. Throughout the pandemic, authors 1 and 2 have been collaborating with Indigenous language translators and interpreters as well as with nonprofit and governmental organizations in Florida and Oaxaca to help coordinate, translate, edit, and share COVID-19 related information with Indigenous language speakers in both the



US and Mexico. These collaborations entail providing over the phone interpretation services to Indigenous language speakers at two vaccination events, consulting on the development of print, audio, and video materials about COVID-19, and providing feedback on translations, all while conducting research on best practices for building coalitions with and for Indigenous language speakers in both the US and Mexico. Thus, as we demonstrate throughout this article, the process of collaboration for and with Indigenous language speakers can provide an example of the role that immaterial labor plays in promoting social justice during the pandemic.

Together, Authors 1 and 2 and their collaborators in Gainesville and Oaxaca have co-produced over 40 audio, video, and written pieces documenting COVID-19 treatment and prevention for speakers of over 9 Indigenous languages. Throughout this process, Authors 1 and 2 and their teams reflected on how technical communicators can collaborate with Indigenous language speakers to create, translate, and share multilingual technical documents that can contribute to social justice efforts by enhancing language access (Gonzales et al., 2022). Rather than focusing on the products of translation alone (i.e., the translated material), we also traced the process of translation, noting the immaterial labor that goes into not only translating, but also designing, revising, localizing, and transcreating across languages during a pandemic. The goal of tracing this process of collaboration was to be able to identify practical takeaways for other technical communication researchers seeking to build coalitions with Indigenous language speakers to support language access work in community contexts. For two years, we met virtually and wrote together as we also co-developed materials to be shared with our communities through our partnering organizations. Since the conditions of the pandemic continue changing quickly (as new variants develop, new research emerges, and vaccine rollouts differ in the US, Mexico, and in other areas of the world), we didn't have the luxury of waiting for finalized study results before sharing and adapting information. Instead, as we developed, tested, shared, and assessed materials, we met regularly to discuss potential issues as well as successes. In these discussions, we noted lessons learned from the work we were developing together. For example, after providing interpretation for a vaccination event, we met and discussed what went well and what didn't go well in those interactions, and we used these reflections both to improve future events and to continue tracking our coalition-building process.

The collaborative work that we introduce in this article is grounded in reflexive research about coalitional work in technical communication (Walton, Moore, Jones, 2019). As Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) explain in their discussion of social justice coalitions in technical communication, "technical communicators can and should build coalitions...and through intersectional, coalitional approaches to technical and professional communication (TPC) we can address issues of inequality and oppression" (p. 133). At the same time, Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) clarify that "we need practical strategies and tactics for getting this work done" (p. 133). Thus, based on our reflexive work advocating for language access for Indigenous language speakers during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we share recommendations and strategies for other technical communicators seeking to build coalitions in their local contexts to advocate alongside Indigenous language speakers, both in the US, in Mexico, and worldwide.

The primary argument we make in this article is that in order to work toward language access through a social justice orientation during the COVID-19 pandemic, technical communication researchers and health justice activists should collaborate with and amplify the (often immaterial) work of Indigenous language speakers, particularly by learning about, embracing, and centralizing Indigenous approaches to language access.

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Rather than presenting findings from a traditional study, we describe the collaborative elements of our language access efforts during the pandemic, bringing specific attention to the work that Author 1 has been doing to promote Indigenous language justice in both Mexico and the US.

To this end, in the section that follows, Author 1 introduces the “Red de Intérpretes y Promotores Interculturales” (Network of Intercultural Interpreters and Promoters), which she coordinates in Oaxaca de Juárez, Mexico. As Author 1 explains, this organization is led by Indigenous language speakers and has worked throughout the pandemic to address linguistic justice and its ties to multiple systemic oppressions through a multifaceted approach that extends beyond translation. Following Author 1’s discussion, Author 2 will explain how learning from Author 1’s organization has impacted Author 2’s work as a translation and technical communication researcher. We both then present implications for other technical communication projects working toward social justice for and with Indigenous language speakers during the pandemic. To make visible the immaterial labor of translation that took place in writing and conceptualizing this discussion, we present the next section in its original language, Spanish, and we then provide a translation as a footnote. This practice of highlighting languages other than English in US-based academic publications aligns with research on the importance of disrupting definitions of academic literacy as literacy centered on standard white English (Alvarez, 2018). Furthermore, this multilingual representation is important in a special issue on immaterial labor and social justice published in an international technical communication journal.

### Learning from Indigenous Activists: Introducing the Red de Intérpretes y Promotores Interculturales (Network of Intercultural Interpreters and Promoters)

La Red de Intérpretes y Promotores Interculturales somos un grupo interdisciplinario de jóvenes indígenas, estudiantes y egresados en distintas áreas del conocimiento, como Derecho, Administración Pública, Biología, Medicina, entre otras, que se forma en el 2018, a raíz de la publicación del informe “El acceso a la justicia de las personas indígenas privadas de libertad: caso Oaxaca”, donde varias organizaciones identificaron que los procesos judiciales de más de mil personas indígenas en los centros de reinserción social en Oaxaca estaban detenidos porque no contaban con un intérprete que les pudiera explicar, en términos claros y adecuados a su cultura, la situación jurídica en la que se encontraban y las medidas que se podían tomar para continuar sus procesos. Por ello, inicialmente nuestro objetivo se centró en garantizar los derechos de las personas indígenas en el ámbito de la justicia.

Una vez conformado el colectivo, se identificaron diversas problemáticas alrededor de las personas privadas de libertad, como la falta de información sobre los derechos humanos que les asisten, la falta de apoyo inmediato de intérpretes y/o traductores en su lengua durante el procedimiento penal que se les instruye, la falta de sensibilización sobre las circunstancias particulares de las personas indígenas e insuficientes oportunidades para el desarrollo de las actividades laborales encaminadas a su reinserción social.

A lo largo de nuestro camino, a la par de las problemáticas anteriores, entendimos que, si queríamos generar un cambio en el sistema de Justicia, también debíamos trabajar en la preservación de las culturas indígenas de nuestro estado. Por eso, en la actualidad trabajamos para realizar acciones que garanticen el acceso a la justicia a las personas indígenas y que visibilicen, promuevan y preserven la cultura e identidades indígena, mismas que se podrán encontrar en el expediente correspondiente.

Los 120 jóvenes que conformamos esta Red estamos en procesos de formación continua para adquirir y mejorar las habilidades como intérpretes en el ámbito de la procuración y administración de la justicia, así como en el desarrollo, planeación y ejecución de proyectos culturales, lo que nos permite ayudar a preservar más de 80 variantes lingüísticas, de las 177 existentes en el estado.

Nos constituimos legalmente como asociación civil en enero de 2022, sin embargo, desde el 2018, como colectivo, hemos tenido la oportunidad de colaborar con instituciones académicas, gubernamentales y de la sociedad civil, lo que nos da la experiencia para diseñar y ejecutar acciones de impacto en nuestras comunidades. CIELO A.C., la Secretaría de los Pueblos Indígenas, Defensoría Pública del Estado de Oaxaca, el Municipio de Oaxaca de Juárez y la Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca son algunas de las instituciones que nos han ayudado en estas tareas. Finalmente, para reconciliar la deuda histórica con las comunidades indígenas, nuestro trabajo seguirá la ruta de transmitir el espíritu intercultural de este maravilloso estado, buscando encontrar al menos un intérprete y promotor intercultural de cada una de las 177 variantes lingüísticas, y, posteriormente, trascender al ámbito regional y nacional.

A continuación, enumeramos algunas de las actividades desarrolladas por la Red de Intérpretes y Promotores Interculturales que construyen acciones para que la sociedad pueda ejercer sus derechos.

- 1) Conocer para defender: es una campaña en lenguas indígenas para que las personas conozcan sus derechos en caso de ser detenidas por la policía, desde el derecho a contar con un defensor, hasta recibir visitas y solo permanecer 48 horas en el primer recinto policial y fue trabajada con la Defensoría Pública del Oaxaca:
- 2) Protege tu trabajo artesanal: es una campaña en lenguas que trabajamos en coordinación con el Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Artesanías para que las y los artesanos oaxaqueños conozcan sus derechos y sepan qué hacer al momento de llegar a acuerdos con intermediarios, esta campaña surge debido a un fraude del que fueron víctimas mujeres artesanas monolingües. Se llevaron a cabo 2 acciones para proteger el trabajo de nuestras artesanas y artesanos:
  - a. Producción de videos en lengua para que conozcan sus derechos y los servicios gratuitos de dichas instituciones. Actualmente hemos publicado 9 videos, los que se han hecho llegar a los Municipios para su difusión, 55 están en proceso de grabación.
  - b. Ser el puente de comunicación entre la Defensoría Pública y los artesanos, donde se brindó asesoría jurídica en temas de acuerdos y convenios con intermediarios.
- 3) Cuidémonos entre todos: es una iniciativa que se creó a raíz de la pandemia, por iniciativa de la actriz Yalitza Aparicio, donde se realizó un video con la participación de algunos intérpretes para enviar mensajes de aliento a nuestras comunidades, con el fin de afrontarla y tomar las medidas necesarias para cuidarnos.
- 4) Si te cuidas tú, nos cuidas a todos: es una campaña para nuestras comunidades, donde se explica qué es el Covid19 y las medidas que se necesitan tomar para disminuir el riesgo de contagio. Se realizaron 25 videos en diferentes lenguas
- 5) Quédate en casa: es una campaña realizada de la mano de la Defensoría Pública del Estado

de Oaxaca, en la que, a través de una imagen, se solicitaba a las comunidades quedarse en casa.

- 6) **Habla tu lengua:** Es una actividad que consiste en motivar el rescate, la preservación y el uso de las lenguas indígenas, a través de imágenes pintadas en lugares públicos, donde transita la población. Los mensajes hacen alusión a elementos de la cultura donde se pintan, para que exista un interés por parte de la población en leer y usar su lengua. Es decir, sentirse orgulloso de su identidad.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Network of Intercultural Interpreters and Promoters is an interdisciplinary group of Indigenous youth, students, and graduates from different areas of specialization, including law, public administration, biology, medicine, and more. The group was established in 2018 following the publication of the report, "Access to Justice for Indigenous People Deprived of their Liberty: the Case of Oaxaca," where various organizations explained that the judicial processes of more than one thousand Indigenous people at social reintegration centers in Oaxaca were being stalled because they did not have interpreters who could explain, in clear and culturally-adequate terms, the legal situation that they were in and the actions they could take to continue with their processes. Due to this, initially our goal was to guarantee Indigenous people's rights in the legal field.

Once the collective was established, we identified several challenges faced by people being denied their freedom, such as the lack of information regarding their human rights, the lack of immediate assistance by interpreters and/or translators who speak their language during legal proceedings, the lack of cultural sensitivity about the circumstances faced by Indigenous people, and the lacking opportunities for the development of social and work-related activities that can support social reintegration.

Throughout this long journey, in addition to the previously mentioned challenges, we understood that if we want to generate change in the justice system, we also have to work to preserve Indigenous cultures of our state. For this reason, we are currently working on projects that strive to guarantee access to justice for Indigenous people and that also make visible, promote, and preserve Indigenous cultures and identities, which we further describe here.

The 120 youth who make up this network are enrolled in continuing education to acquire and improve our capacities as interpreters in the delivery and administration of justice, as well as in the development, planning, and execution of cultural projects. This allows us to help preserve more than 80 linguistic variants of the 177 variants that exist in our state.

It's important to note that we are not yet a legally recognized institution. However, as a collective, we've been able to collaborate with academic institutions, government entities, and social services, which has granted us the experience to design and execute impactful projects in our community. Some of the organizations that have supported us in these endeavors include: CIELO A.C., the Secretary of Indigenous Peoples, the Public Defender's Office in the State of Oaxaca, the Municipality of Oaxaca de Juárez and the Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca.

Finally, to reconcile historical debts to Indigenous communities, our work will continue to promote the intercultural spirit of this wonderful state, looking to find at least one interpreter and promoter for each of the 177 language variants of the state, and later, to extend to regional and national realms.

In the following paragraphs, we outline some of the activities developed by the Network of Intercultural Interpreters and Promoters, which make up actions to help our society to exercise their rights.

- 1) **Know to Defend:** This is a campaign in Indigenous languages intended so that people understand their rights if they are detained by the police, from the right to a public defender to visitation rights, to the fact that you can only be detained for 48 hours when first arrested. This project was executed in collaboration with the Public Defender's Office in Oaxaca.
- 2) **Protect Your Artisanal Labor:** This is a public campaign in Indigenous languages that we worked on with the Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Artesanías (Oaxacan Institute for Handicrafts) so that Oaxacan artisans learned about their rights and understand what to do when negotiating with intermediaries. This campaign arose due to fraud experienced by monolingual Indigenous women artisans. Two projects were conducted to protect the rights of our artisans:
  - a. Production of videos in Indigenous languages so that artisans can know their rights and the free legal services provided by some institutions. As of now we have published 9 videos that have been delivered to various municipalities for distribution. 55 videos are still being recorded.
  - b. Being the communication channel between the Public Defender's office and the artisans, where we provide legal counsel on various agreements and arrangements with intermediaries.
- 3) **Let's Take Care of Each Other:** This is an initiative that arose during the pandemic through the work of the actress Yalitza Aparicio, where we created a video with some interpreters to share encouraging messages to our communities, with the goal

All of the materials produced by La Red de Intérpretes y Promotores Interculturales are open-access and shared widely through the organization's social media channels. For example, [this video](#) (see Figure 1) illustrates the "Know to Defend" campaign, where Indigenous language speakers provide information in Indigenous languages about how to protect themselves and their rights when they have interactions with the police. Figure 1 presents a screenshot of Indigenous artisan, Nayeli Osorio, speaker of Zapoteco of San Vicente, who is describing the importance of protecting artisanal labor as part of the "Protect your Artisanal Labor" campaign.



Figure 1. Nayeli Osorio discusses artisanal labor.

Finally, Figure 2 is a visual created as part of the "Stay at Home" campaign, which asked community members to stay home during the pandemic as a way of protecting their community, their elders, and therefore, their Indigenous languages. As evidenced in these examples, all of the materials developed by La Red de Intérpretes y Promotores Interculturales were developed in coalition with other organizations, and required the negotiation of multiple languages, technologies, and methods of design and sharing. In this way, La Red de Intérpretes y Promotores Interculturales is an Indigenous-led organization that can provide important perspectives regarding coalition-building with Indigenous language speakers.

of facing the pandemic and taking the necessary precautions.

- 4) If You Take Care of Yourself, You Take Care of All of Us: This is a campaign for our communities where we explain what COVID-19 is and where we discuss the measures that must be taken in order to decrease the risk of contagion. 25 videos were created in various Indigenous languages.
- 5) Stay at Home: This is a campaign supported by the Public Defender's Office of Oaxaca, where, through an image, we asked community members to stay at home.
- 6) Speak Your Language: This project is intended to help rescue, preserve, and encourage the use Indigenous languages through images painted in public places with a lot of foot traffic. The messages resemble cultural elements that will entice Indigenous community members to read and use their language. In other words, this project is intended to help Indigenous language speakers be proud of their identity.





**Na kitaun, nyii maaun  
tsitsi ve'un**

Mixteco, San Juan Colorado  
Traductor: Oziel B. M.

**Bian talidla**

Zapoteco de San Vicente Coatlán  
Traductora: Azucena J. A.

**Quédate en casa**



**Tnia nei't jâu kia'**

Chatino Oriental  
Traductora: Lucia S.

**Tnia nei't jâu kia'**

Chinanteco de San Felipe Usila.  
Traductora: Italy M.R.

**Bian ruaidxilu**

Zapoteco de San Baltazar Chichicapam  
Traductora: Tania S. H.

Figure 2. Image from Stay at Home campaign.

## Transnational Networks for Indigenous Language Accessibility: Experiences from North Central Florida

Author 1's expertise, and La Red de Intérpretes y Promotores Interculturales have significantly influenced the work that Author 2 coordinates in Gainesville, Florida, a rural part of Florida that is home to Indigenous language speakers from multiple parts of Mexico and Guatemala. Prior to the start of the pandemic, Author 2 and Author 1 met in Oaxaca as part of a different project on Indigenous language activism. At the start of the pandemic, Author 2 was contacted by a local organization in Gainesville to help facilitate COVID prevention and treatment information from



Spanish into languages like different variants of Mixteco and Zapoteco. That's when Author 2 reached out to Author 1 to help coordinate translation, and, perhaps more importantly, to discuss how COVID-19 related information could be adapted for Indigenous language speakers in Gainesville.

One of the biggest challenges that local organizations in Gainesville face while attempting to translate COVID-19 related information into Indigenous languages is deciding which variants of specific languages to translate into. As Author 1 explained, in Oaxaca de Juárez, for instance, there are over 177 Indigenous language variants, each of which is unique and is connected to a specific community. In Gainesville, and in many parts of the US, agencies and organizations don't always take the time to learn which variants their community members speak, which can lead to incomplete and inaccurate translations. Languages like Mixteco and Zapoteco, for example, have multiple different variants, many of which are completely different from each other. Thus, as Author 2 worked with organizations to facilitate translation, it was important to first research the specific locations in Oaxaca that communities came from, and to then decide which variants would be most appropriate for translation.

Connections to land and community are critical in understanding the language variants of a specific Indigenous language. For instance, the closer that two communities are to each other physically, the more recognizable the language variants will be to one another. A person who speaks one variant of Zapoteco is more likely to understand another variant from a community nearby, rather than being able to understand a variant spoken by a community further away. For this reason, an effective strategy for agencies seeking to identify the language variants spoken by Indigenous language speakers in their community is to survey where the community members are from in their home country. It's important to get as specific of a location as possible. Once possible home communities are identified, agencies can work with Indigenous language translators and interpreters to develop a list of potential variants to use in translations. It's critical to test the translations in specific variants with community members, to verify that the variants selected are recognizable to members of the target community. Ultimately, in the North Central Florida community, materials were initially translated into two specific variants, Zapoteco de Villa Alta and Mixteco de San Juan Mixtepec (sometimes known as *Mixteco Alto*), corresponding with the communities who we believed at the time have the highest number of community members in rural Florida. As the pandemic progressed and we learned more about our community, we expanded and adapted the number of languages into which we translated documents.

In addition to the importance of understanding and recognizing language variants, learning from the work of Author 1 also helped Author 2 understand the important connections between language accessibility and language preservation. Initially, when working with local organizations in the US, Author 2 was focused on providing information to Indigenous language speakers who do not speak Spanish at all. Thus, much of the work was focused on translating information verbatim from Spanish to Indigenous languages only for those who did not speak Spanish. However, upon learning about the multiple levels of language competency that Indigenous language speakers might have both in Spanish and in their first languages, the purpose of the translations became not only to provide information for Indigenous language speakers, but also to demonstrate to Indigenous communities in the US that they were being accounted for and cared for in their local community. This visibility and recognition were critical in engaging Indigenous communities in Florida with COVID-19 related information, even if Indigenous community members spoke Spanish. We recommend that other agencies and researchers seeking to build coalitions with Indigenous language speakers also recognize the importance of engaging with Indigenous

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communities and contributing to the goals of those communities' efforts, even if those efforts don't seem to correlate directly to language access. Through Indigenous frameworks, language encompasses many factors beyond the transformation of words from one language to another. Thus, building coalitions with Indigenous language speakers means recognizing the connections between language, culture, and identity in the lives of Indigenous communities, and working to connect with Indigenous communities by supporting and recognizing their languages.

For example, during two vaccination events, Author 1 and her team provided over phone interpretation services for Indigenous language speakers in attendance. Furthermore, Author 1 and her team helped to transform flyers about COVID into both written translations and audio files that were shared through Whatsapp groups by a local organization. When Indigenous language speakers heard the audios, saw the flyers, and were provided with interpretation services at the vaccination event, they commented that they felt not only informed, but also heard and understood. For some Indigenous language speakers, their interaction with the audio files in their Indigenous languages was the first time that they had heard their Indigenous language spoken in the US. As several Indigenous language speakers whom Author 2 interacted with are in the US as undocumented temporary residents who have not been able to return home for some time, hearing their Indigenous language spoken in a US context provided a sense of comfort and community during a time of pandemic isolation and fear.

In addition to helping contextualize the impact and importance of language access for Indigenous language speakers, Author 1 and her network also helped Author 2 make local recommendations for localizing COVID-related information for Indigenous communities in Florida. Messaging such as "stay home" and "keep a safe distance," which were often shared by US-based organizations and translated into Spanish, were difficult to practice for Indigenous communities in the US, many of whom left their communities to help take care of their families and community members by working in the US. For this reason, for many Indigenous language speakers living in the US, "taking care of your family" meant going to work and providing income for family back home. As the whole world experienced the pandemic, migrant farmworkers' families, for instance, were also in great need of resources. Furthermore, many Indigenous language speakers who are migrant farmworkers in the US live in multiple-family homes, where social distancing is nearly impossible. Thus, through conversations with Author 1, Author 2 was able to make recommendations to local agencies to adjust health messaging to better fit with the lives of Indigenous language speakers in the US, including migrant farmworkers. Messaging related to social distancing was adapted to encourage community members to isolate from each other when someone is sick (since staying completely away from each other is impossible) and to wear masks even indoors whenever possible. In this way, the work of language access for Indigenous language speakers in the US was influenced by Author 1's recommendations as well as the work of her organization. Coalition building with Indigenous language speakers means advocating for the localization of health-related messaging during a pandemic, to account for the lived realities and experiences of Indigenous language speakers. It's also important to note that Author 1's labor in making these recommendations was also compensated by Author 2 and by partnering agencies in the US. This type of compensation is critical when building coalitions with marginalized communities, and Indigenous communities specifically, during global health crises.

### **Coalitions Among Language Activists to Centralize Indigenous Language Speakers**

Based on our work together, we recommend increased coalition building among translators, Indigenous language speakers, and technical communicators, all of whom can play an important

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role in redressing linguistic oppression during and beyond health crises. To build these coalitions, it's critical to establish relationships and trust between technical communicators and Indigenous language speakers. One way in which technical communicators can work to establish these relationships is by contributing to the language activism goals that Indigenous communities are already pursuing, such as language preservation and education. It's also important to ensure that Indigenous language speakers are compensated for their work, and that they are included in all parts of the design process, rather than only being consulted after something has already been designed and shared with the broader community. In this way, coalitions with Indigenous language speakers can focus on redressing oppression, minimizing harm, and leveraging the strengths and experiences of Indigenous communities. As we hope this paper makes clear, for Indigenous people, language is much more than just words—language is community, life, and land, as Indigenous languages are always connected to the communities and environments in which they are practiced.

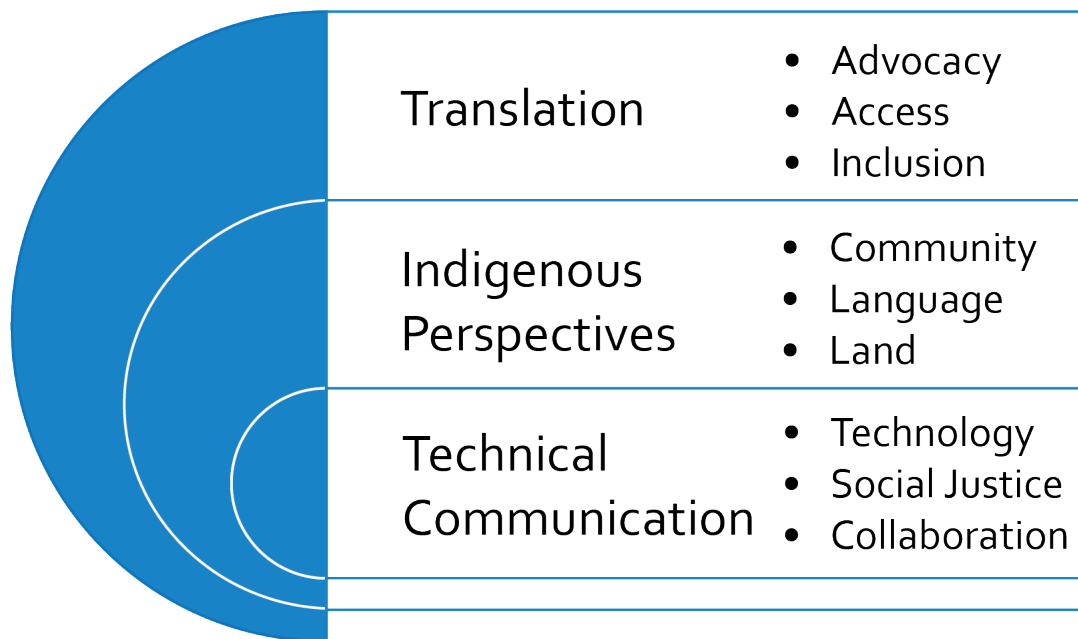


Figure 3. Building coalitions for Indigenous language access.

Figure 3 provides three elements that we deem as essential to building coalitions for Indigenous language access: translation, which includes advocating for access and inclusion in multiple languages, Indigenous perspectives, which encompasses a recognition of community values, of language as a living element, and of the land and the environment as critical to communal survival. Finally, technical communication, particularly its focus on collaboration, social justice, and leveraging technologies for access, is incorporated into this model for coalitional action, centralizing the importance of designing tools and technologies that are accessible not only on a linguistic level, but also on a cultural level that incorporates Indigenous worldviews.

As we introduce this model for coalition-building, we recognize that “decolonial frameworks must begin with an Indigenist paradigm (Wilson, 2003, 2007, 2008), an enactment of value-laden beliefs that are based upon restoring and respecting the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, lands,

knowledges, supporting community-developed aspirations, and supporting the changing and improving of unjust conditions” (Itchuaqiyaq, 2021, p. 36). While Indigenous language access, preservation, and revitalization can be part of decolonization, we are not claiming that all coalitions toward Indigenous language access are decolonial. Instead, we are suggesting that technical communicators, through their training in coalition-building, communication, and collaboration, can work to foster coalitions among translators and Indigenous language speakers. When these coalitions are built with Indigenous perspectives at the center, as demonstrated by Figure 1, they can work toward enhancing language access and visibility for Indigenous language speakers.

### Expanding Language Access through Indigenous Frameworks

While the work that we present in this article can be filed under the umbrella of “language access,” we also learned that language access for Indigenous language speakers must expand beyond the mere translation of written content or interpretation of verbal content. Language access also encompasses the immaterial labor of cultural negotiation, adaptation, and collaboration. As demonstrated by the Red de Intérpretes y Promotores Interculturales, advocating for Indigenous language rights can span beyond the transformation of words to include the preservation of cultural knowledge, representation of Indigenous values in court proceedings and other systems, and even advocacy for adequate compensation for Indigenous artists. While some of these elements may seem outside the “scope” of language access, through Indigenous frameworks that centralize relationality, language access encompasses translation and interpretation in addition to community knowledge and collaboration, as depicted in Figure 4.

One of the biggest lessons that Author 1 and her work with the Red de Intérpretes y Promotores Interculturales continues teaching is the importance of recognizing language as part of a broader constellation of cultural elements that are critical to survival. To communicate health-related information during a pandemic, it’s not enough to just translate information that is being written in Western languages; instead, it’s important to consider how health-related information

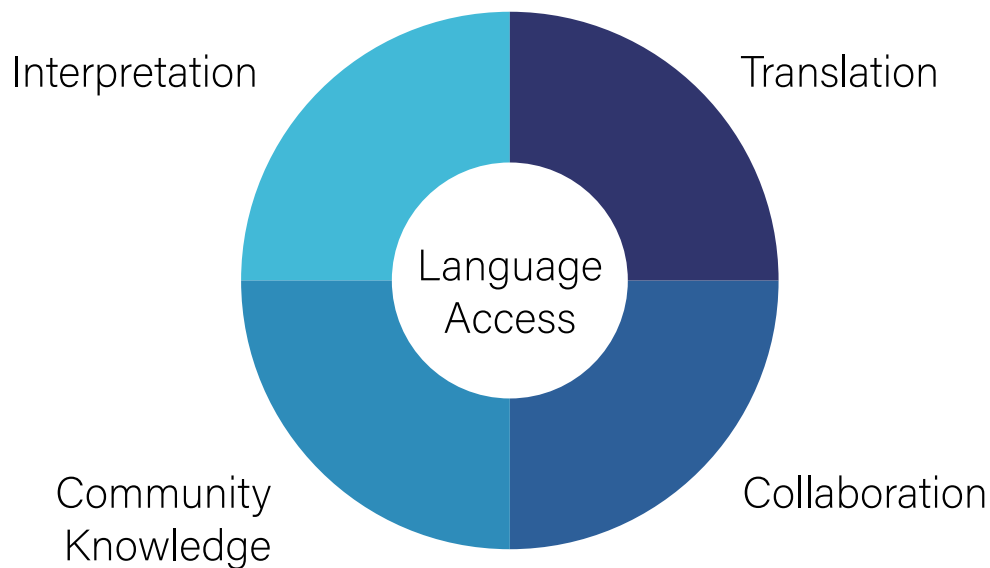


Figure 4. Expanding language access for Indigenous language speakers.

will be perceived and understood by Indigenous language speakers who are consistently undermined and excluded in healthcare. Telling an Indigenous language speaker to seek medical attention may also mean encouraging that person's exposure to racism and discrimination. Thus, when designing health-related messaging during (and beyond) a pandemic, translators should collaborate with technical communicators who have expertise in areas such as user-experience and usability, as well as with Indigenous language speakers and advocates, who can help to ensure that information is not only accurately translated, but also effective and helpful rather than harmful. Through these interactions, technical communicators should seek feedback from Indigenous language speakers at each stage of the design process, and should incorporate Indigenous language speakers as co-designers and co-researchers on projects related to Indigenous language access. As Rose and Racadio (2017) explain, "User experience researchers and practitioners can be invaluable in supporting transnational users, however we must approach the task with humility and care. We need to leverage cultural and linguistic expertise to adapt usability methods to meet user's diverse needs" (p. 22). Likewise, we argue that working toward language access for and with Indigenous language speakers requires an adaptation of traditional translation and interpretation processes to account for Indigenous perspectives. This can only be successfully achieved by collaborating with Indigenous language speakers not just as participants in a usability study, but as designers, researchers, and technical communicators who have the knowledge and expertise needed to make information accessible during (and beyond) a pandemic.

## Conclusion

In her discussion of crowdsourcing processes during a pandemic, Ding (2020) outlines crowdsourcing efforts as approaches to tackling global epidemics through the strengths of local, national, and transnational interventions among different stakeholders, including the following:

1. Seekers, namely, organizations with problems to be tackled,
2. Innovation intermediaries such as solution seekers, or organizations that broadcast technology needs of seekers to their networks of external experts via online platforms,
3. Individual or team solvers from crowds of external actors. (p. 145)

In reflecting on the work that Indigenous language translators, activists, and allies are doing to facilitate language access during a pandemic, we also find crowdsourcing efforts to be critical, especially due to the vast number of different Indigenous languages and language variants spoken across the world, and due to the lack of institutionalized support for Indigenous language speakers provided by governments in multiple parts of the world. These crowdsourcing and collaborative activities require an attunement to relationality and connections over production. As such, collaborating with Indigenous language speakers, translators, and activists requires a recognition of the immaterial labor embedded in language access. As part of this collective work, Indigenous language translators function as seekers, intermediaries, and solvers of pandemic issues, including access to information, healthcare advocacy, and representation. As technical communicators continue working to foster social justice initiatives in their work, we encourage them to build coalitions with Indigenous language translators and activists, and to expand crowdsourcing and other collaborative efforts to further centralize Indigenous epistemologies. While the work of language access is ongoing and has been taking place for a long time in various contexts, language access efforts often ignore Indigenous communities. As such, more interventions are needed to recognize how health-related messaging needs to be adapted not only across



languages, but across worldviews entirely. This type of coalitional change is necessary in a pandemic that is already disproportionately affecting Indigenous communities worldwide.

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