

Indigenous authenticity as a goal of language documentation and revitalization: addressing the motivations in the Xinkan community

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1. Introduction

The four Xinkan languages (ISO codes: xin, qco, qda, qhq, qsd)¹ were once spoken widely throughout southeastern Guatemala, and possibly beyond (Campbell 1972, 1979, 1997; COPXIG 2004; Sachse 2010; and Rogers 2010). However, language transmission declined early during European colonization and ceased entirely in the middle of the 20th century due to the extreme social and political atmosphere in Guatemala. This has resulted in a complete shift away from the use of these languages to the use of the national language, Spanish. There is currently only one ‘speaker’ of any of the Xinkan languages: he is able to understand audio recordings of past fluent speakers of Xinkan well, but has difficulty producing novel utterances without significant practice - he has commented that he is more comfortable with the Guazacapán Xinka audio than the other varieties (see below). There are also a few men and women who have varying abilities in understanding one of the Xinkan languages or who have self-identified as remembering when Xinkan languages were spoken more widely – they often produce idiomatic expressions of varying accuracy to validate their claims. All of these individuals are over the age of 75.

Interestingly, in response to the general trend of cultural reaffirmation in Guatemala, there is a strong presence of heritage Xinkan community members interested in these languages. These individuals range in age from 16-40 years old, and do not have memories of ever hearing Xinkan spoken beyond isolated phrases and words by their grandparents (if they knew them). In their lifetime there have been no spaces preserved for the use of the Xinkan languages. They consequently approach the Xinkan language once spoken closest to the towns where they reside, as a foreign language. Nevertheless, despite having never acquired Xinkan, these community members use one of the varieties as a symbolic marker of intercommunity and personal identity. For example, community members from the town of Chiquimulilla take special interest in Chiquimulilla Xinka as a representation of their cultural heritage. It is interesting that this developing identity is focused around language rather than more tangible cultural practices (e.g., clothing). However, this group of community members is not concerned with either revitalization or preservation of the Xinkan languages, because they lack the resources, infrastructure, and a speaker base (see the discussion of similar situations in the contributions by O’Meara and Guadarrama, Rosales et al, and Balna, Benedicto and Shettle in this volume). For this community, scientific language documentation is more valuable than the applied outcomes of that documentation. Language documentation is viewed as a means to an end: a way of claiming and creating an authentic indigenous identity. This identity, in turn, provides them with access to social and political resources. Their motivation to document their languages is consequently different than the one typically assumed by the community of academics concerned with sustaining the world’s linguistic diversity. A more in depth discussion of the characteristics of the Xinkan community is presented below, in Section 3.

¹ Until recently (within the last five years) the Xinkan languages were classified as a single language in the academic literature under the iso-code [xin]. However, current practice is to be more precise by providing an iso-code for each of the four known languages. Information on the Xinkan languages can be found under any of the five iso-codes listed above.

For many academic scholars interested in and committed to language documentation and revitalization, efforts are begun and sustained for a variety of reasons. Often these reasons are based on a system of assumptions about the central significance of language to humans, such as: the value of linguistic diversity, human rights violations, or the scientific value of each language (see Rogers and Campbell 2011 for references to these assumptions). However, in the Xinkan community language documentation and revitalization are not motivated by these same assumptions, but by more pragmatic requirements to develop a unique cultural and social identity. This difference in motivations creates a useful context for appreciating the Xinkan community and for highlighting how an outsider academic linguist can and should be involved in the language planning activities of the community.

This chapter discusses the motivations of the Xinkan community to participate in language documentation against the background of accepted motivations and outcomes in the larger academic community. This paper attempts to contribute to the discussion about the difference between community motivation and academic motivation in choosing to be involved with language documentation and revitalization; the general goal being to improve the way language revitalization and documentation are practiced (see Pérez-Báez, this volume for similar discussions about community and linguist motivation). In order to properly contextualize this claim, a brief overview of the accepted motivations suggested in published, academic sources is provided first, in Section 2. In Section 3, I then explain the sociolinguistic context of the Xinkan community, highlighting three specific conflicts of identity in appreciating Xinkan motivation, all of which have to do with language: (1) a conflict between the Spanish speaking population and the Xinkan community; (2) a conflict between a Spanish speaking community with historical ties to native communities and the Xinkan community; and (3) a conflict between other native language communities and the Xinkan community. In Section 4, I discuss some of the linguistic peculiarities of the Xinkan languages which are being used to resolve these conflicts in favor of the Xinkan community identity. Lastly, in Section 5, I conclude with comments about how the Xinkan community's motivation might inform ideas and thinking about language documentation and revitalization methodology and planning.

2. Endangered languages, language documentation and language revitalization

Over the last few decades the realities of the world's linguistic diversity has been made apparent (e.g., Fishman 1991; Krauss 1992; Crystal 2000; Nettle and Romaine 2000; and Brenzinger 2007). Languages, and their inextricably related cultures, are being replaced (sometimes forcibly) as their speakers face the demands of globalization and conformity. This has led linguists to suggest that large numbers of the world's languages will become "extinct" in the next 100 years (e.g., Krauss 1992; Romaine 2007; and Crystal 2000). More tangible estimates report that 34% of the approximately 7,000 languages in the world are threatened and another larger percentage are already extinct or about to become so (Lewis, Simons and Fenning 2014). Similarly, UNESCO reports that based on the reports of individuals worldwide 43% of the world's languages are "endangered" and will be lost by the end of this century (Moseley 2010). Most recently, the Catalogue of Endangered Languages confirms the UNESCO findings that 43% of the world's languages are endangered (Campbell, Lee, Okura, Simpson and Ueki 2013). As a result of this situation, the global community in general, and the speakers of these languages in specific, experience a loss of identity, diversity, humanity, culture, and knowledge.

Guided by concrete assumptions about the importance of linguistic diversity to many areas of human culture and development, language endangerment is met by specific actions and activities which aim to stabilize and increase the number of languages spoken around the world. Consequently, it does not come as a surprise that, in response to these real and projected losses, documentation and revitalization of native languages and cultures has gained new importance and urgency among scholars and language communities around the world (e.g., Grenoble and Whaley 1998, 2006; Hinton and Hale 2001; Harrison, Rood and Dwyer 2008; Grenoble and Furbee 2010, and Austin and Sallabank 2011). As twin heads in a global effort to respond to the crisis of endangered languages and to conserve the world's intangible linguistic heritage, language documentation and revitalization result in: (1) the preservation of and access to linguistic records, and (2) increasing the social profile and use of these languages.

Focused on these scholarly activities and ideals, significant advances have been made in establishing necessary best practices and methods for language documentation and revitalization activities (Fishman 1991; Grenoble and Whaley 1998; Hinton and Hale 2001; Errington 2003; Gippert, Himmelmann and Mosel 2006; Moseley 2010; Whaley 2011; and Crippen and Robinson 2013 among others). However, much of this discussion on best practices has been, and continues to be, developed from the perspective of North American, European, Australian, or New Zealand scholarship. There is nothing inherently wrong with this emphasis, but often these best practices are transferred 'in theory' to other areas around the world, but in practice are difficult to follow. In fact this volume provides evidence that for many scholars and community members the suggested best practices do not always seem straight forwardly applicable. One example of this difference between suggested best practices and the needs of practicing field linguists and language communities is the fact that outside of the scholarly published materials on language endangerment (cited above), the motivation to engage in revitalization and documentation is not always about preserving or increasing linguistic diversity or its value to human culture and development. Consequently, the expectation that the 'correct' response to language endangerment results in increased numbers of speakers of a language may not always be appropriate. This difference in expectations and motivations means that what is valued as a response to the loss of linguistic diversity is dependent on a specific community context.

Collectively, the work cited above suggests specific motivations for participation in language endangerment, language documentation, and language revitalization. Crystal (2000: 27-67) is a good summary of these motivations: "because we need diversity", "because language expresses identity", "because language are repositories of history", "because languages contribute to the sum of human knowledge", and "because languages are interesting in themselves". However, in many communities around the world the motivation to engage in language documentation and revitalization comes from different sources, such as their desire for individual and community recognition or the opportunity to make a political statement (both of which contribute to the motivations in the Xinkan community). These are not identical to the accepted responses cited by scholars and academics in the literature mentioned above. Members of these communities around the world value their linguistic and cultural heritage but belong to communities that have been marginalized, or completely ignored, by their local and national governments. Cultural marginalization can occur for many reasons, such as, the number of speakers in a community, political inequality (with the marginalized community being dominated), low levels of education, poverty, or civil rights infractions such as racial prejudice, among others. In light of the cultural and linguistic reaffirmation in various places throughout the

world this marginalization and the desire to end it motivates involvement with language documentation and revitalization.

Occasionally, specific legislation is created to support these marginalized communities in these efforts. This has been the case in Guatemala and is discussed in great detail in the next section. However, this legislation (which often comes from various national and international sources) is a double-edged sword. It creates protection for and support of human and linguistic rights, but it also has motivated, required, or demanded that individuals claim an indigenous heritage in order to receive the benefits. This has the potential of motivating interest in language only as it provides the equity and rights needed; marginalized communities are consequently required to claim linguistic identity and legitimate authenticity in an environment of extreme competition for social, political, economic and cultural resources (see Jancewicz, MacKenzie, Guanish, and Nabinicaboo 2002; Harrison, Rood and Dwyer 2008; MacCaluim 2007; and Warren 1998 for some specific examples).

Communities which can be characterized this way potentially find motivation for language documentation and revitalization in political or social activism – rather than the preservation of linguistic diversity. Many communities throughout Latin America fall within this categorization. Members of the Xinkan community, for example, have commented to me that they are not interested in language revitalization programs, but in opportunities to create political and social legislation which would benefit individuals or their local communities (*personal communication*).

3. The sociolinguistic context of Xinkan identity

In many ways the Xinkan community is a contemporary construct. There has never been a community of individuals united linguistically, geographically, or politically called Xinkan until after 1995 (see the discussion about the *Acuerdo sobre Identidad y Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas* below). Even now, in fact, only people active in community building refer to a “Xinkan community”, most refer to themselves as *Pipil* (a Uto-Aztec language spoken in the geographical region where the Xinkan languages were used). A group of non-Mayan speaking individuals has been mentioned in the general regions occupied by the current Xinkan community since the earliest records of European colonialization. However, these references do not refer to the term “Xinka” until the late 18th century (Maldonado 1770; Calderón 1908; Lehmann 1920; Termer 1948; Sachse 2010). This label does not appear to be a term with any specific meaning in the language (though see Rogers 2010 for speculation about its etymology)² and it seems to have come into use by some individuals only after years of colonial policies of grouping and characterizing groups of people for administrative needs. Similarly, historical records and personal narratives indicate a group of loosely connected, independent communities in terms of cultural and social organization (Calderón 1908; Schumann 1967; Feldman 1974, Dary 2003; Sachse 2010). Consequently, throughout the recorded history of the Xinkan languages, speakers represented a high level of variation in a relatively small geographic area. As the term ‘xinka’ has come into use, published sources would refer to their variety by the town, or in some cases the neighborhood, where it was used (Maldonado 1770; Calderón 1908; Lehmann 1920; Schumann 1967; Campbell 1972, 1979, 1997; Kaufman 1977; COPXIG 2004; Sachse 2010; Rogers 2010). The four known languages are labeled now as “Guazacapán Xinka”,

² Anything suggested about the etymology of the term “xinka” is purely speculative, as far as is known it holds no meaning in any of the Xinkan languages. It was used in the earliest known record of the Xinkan languages (Maldonado 1770), as *szinca*. Spelling for this term has fluctuated since then as *sinca*, *sinka*, *xinka*, or *xinca*.

“Chiquimulilla Xinka”, “Jumaytepeque Xinka”, and “Yupiltepeque Xinka”; other noted varieties about which little or no information is known include: Sinacantán Xinka, Jutiapa Xinka, and North Chiquimulilla Xinka (Lehman 1920; Calderón 1908). These Xinkan towns are all in the department of Santa Rosa in Guatemala, and consequently this can be considered the contemporary geographical region of the Xinkan community.

Linguistically, the last fully fluent speakers of any of the Xinkan varieties claimed the four general varieties were mutually unintelligible. This has been corroborated by linguistic evidence, which clearly shows separate (though similar) grammatical systems (see Rogers 2010). The last speaker of Xinkan mentioned in the introduction (above) self-identifies as a Guazacapán Xinka user, while the self-identified remembers come from a variety of communities and consequently recall different language varieties. Linguistically, the term “Xinkan” is used to refer to these language varieties as a group.

Culturally, the term “Xinkan” has come to symbolize more than a shared cultural and linguistic past, it identifies a group of communities as being cohesive and united on the national and international stage. Membership in this community is a matter of political or social self-identification rather than linguistic or cultural identity. Individuals belonging to the Xinkan community do not speak a Xinkan variety, nor do they have the opportunity of learning Xinkan because of the absence of a speaker base. Similarly, individuals belonging to the Xinkan community do not practice a single set of cultural behaviors beyond the dominant Spanish speaking national culture; elements of a historical “Xinkan culture” are unclear (at best) and have long since been eroded in favor of the national culture (Feldman 1974; Warren 1998; Adams and Bastos 2003).

Instead, community membership is claimed within the context of native identities in Guatemala as a way of joining the current national (and international) discussion of and support for cultural and linguistic diversity and reaffirmation. Nationally, Guatemala officially recognizes “Xinkan” as one of their native communities and consequently grants it certain rights under law (see below). However, without a spoken language or distinctive culture, community members struggle to highlight their uniqueness and separateness from either the dominant Spanish-speaking culture or the various Mayan speaking communities in Guatemala. This uniqueness and separateness is essential in taking advantage of the privileges granted to the Xinkan community, and community members are motivated to participate in language documentation and revitalization activities by this potential outcome; these activities are means to an end, rather than community goals themselves.

3.1 The Xinkan community in Guatemala

It is widely known that Guatemala’s social and political history is checkered with opposition, oppression, conflict, and prejudice which have resulted in the loss of and shift away from the behaviors and practices of native communities – including language use. This has resulted in civil and political unrest throughout the country for centuries (Muñoz 1993-1999). Relatively recently, however, a number of communities have begun to recuperate cultural and linguistic losses through the reaffirmation of their cultural and linguistic heritages. These efforts have been aided by key legislations and policies which seek to acknowledge the value of and need for cultural and linguistic diversity in Guatemala. In 1995, after years of civil war, the *Acuerdo sobre Identidad y Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas*, ‘Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples’, was signed, which for the first time officially recognized Guatemala’s native Mayan, Xinkan and Garifuna communities. This legislation specifically

recognizes the “discrimination, exploitation and injustice” practiced on and in the native communities of Guatemala and that this has affected individual rights and national and political participation. In response to this history the *Agreement* specifies the value of each community’s language, culture and identity.

This is a favorable piece of legislation in Guatemala. However, the discussion of indigenous peoples throughout the *Agreement* centers on languages descending from “a common Mayan root” and their surrounding cultures and communities (*Acuerdo sobre identidad, 1997*). Mention is made of the Xinkan community as being distinct from these linguistic and cultural sources, but little is said beyond that. This is most likely because little was (and is) known about the Xinkan languages, communities, and culture. Their identity is officially recognized but not defined, and for many Guatemalans this recognition is considered a lip service only (Smith 1990: 3; Warren 1998; Adams and Bastos 2003; Muñoz 1993-1999). Nevertheless the descendants of the Xinkan speakers also want (and deserve) the opportunities specified for their Mayan speaking neighbors. This creates the need to define the *Xinkan identity*, and following the wording in the *Agreement*, this is done through the use of language, culture and community. Xinkan community members are consequently very interested in using these parameters as a way of carving out a social and political space for their community: one that is different than the national Spanish-speaking culture; different than the Mayan-speaking culture; and different than the Spanish-speaking descendants of native language speaking people (called *ladinos* in Guatemala). This is a challenging task since on the surface all self-identified Xinkan community members speak only Spanish, participate only in the national culture, and belong to a group of non-indigenous communities. The Xinkan community must claim native ancestry (i.e., that they are the descendants of previous generations of native Guatemalan individuals) while showing they are distinct from the Mayan languages and cultures, and the Spanish-speaking majority.

The *Agreement* established the fact that Xinkan community members do have native ancestry, but for many Guatemalans Xinkans are *ladinos* and are not considered to form a culture or community different from the national culture (Warren 1998: 9). From the perspective of the Xinkan community, this implies a need to differentiate Xinkan-ness from the ladino culture – to reaffirm their indigenous identity. The *Agreement* also recognized indigenous communities in need of protection, but does so in terms of Mayan linguistic and cultural history. Indigenous practices, communities, and opportunities are specified throughout the *Agreement* in terms of Mayan-ness; in fact, for many, the Mayan community is *the* indigenous population of Guatemala. From the perspective of the Xinkan community this implies the need to differentiate Xinkan-ness from Mayan-ness. The challenge for the Xinkas is in showing that the *Agreement* is not just political lip service, but that Xinkans are authentically unique and indigenous in Guatemala. They must show that the Xinkan community has different goals and motivations from the Mayans and the Ladinos.

3.2 Defining Xinkan identity

Relatively recently (within the last seven to ten years) many individuals - men and women who self-identify as *Xinkan* - have organized themselves to meet the needs of authenticity and uniqueness inherent in the wording of the *Agreement*. As a result two governance organizations have been formed: the *Consejo del Pueblo Xinka de Guatemala*, ‘Council of the Xinkan People of Guatemala’ (COPXIG) and the *Parlamento del Pueblo Xinkan de Guatemala*, ‘Parliament of the Xinkan People of Guatemala’ (PAPXIG). Both of these organizations have been officially recognized by the national Guatemalan government, and they

work in tandem in expressing interest in the Xinkan languages as a means of defining Xinkan identity. It is important to note that members of each of these organizations do not always agree on the necessary scope of the efforts and activities they are engaged in. In order to avoid taking sides on specific issues, I have agreed with both organizations to not mention individuals by name or to quote their comments to me (beyond the general comments about the community) in published sources outside of the community (Hansen et al, this volume, also discuss the negotiation of micro-politics in a language community).

Both COPXIG and PAPXIG recognize the need to identify what it means to be Xinkan (as evidenced by their interest in creating activities and policies which create a single community identity - see below) and the obvious lack of linguistic and native cultural resources. Since community members approach their Xinkan identity as basically a foreign culture and language, activities seem to focus on highlighting the uniqueness of Xinkan in relation to both ladinos and members of Mayan-speaking communities. As the published documents about the Xinkan languages (cited above) are the most tangible and accessible aspect of Xinkan culture, all of these activities revolve around aspects of Xinkan grammar. This means community leaders are very interested in language documentation efforts as a source of new information on Xinkan identity. However, prolonged documentation is not valued as no new information is likely to emerge. This is perhaps not surprising, since there are really no speakers of any of the Xinkan languages, prolonged documentation is simply not possible. In this vein, community leaders realize that creating a new speaker population is unrealistic and unimportant. However, in my association with community members I was often asked to “explain” the grammatical principles of the Xinkan languages; my role being a linguistic teacher and/or source of information. Importantly, because prolonged documentation is not possible, collaboration in this community is limited to these roles.

Four activities stand out as being especially important in creating a Xinkan identity: (1) weekly Sunday gatherings; (2) Youth scholarships; (3) the creation of folk etymologies and histories; and (4) an elementary school module. The following are brief descriptions of these activities as I have observed them, or as they have been discussed with me by community members. The importance of language documentation in these activities is specifically noted below.

3.2.1 Sunday gatherings about cultural and linguistic revalorization

The Xinkan community leaders from both COPXIG and PAPXIG hold a meeting each Sunday afternoon to encourage their youth to learn about and to appreciate their heritage. Participants in these gatherings are usually between the ages of 15 and 22. Activities in these gatherings do not usually follow a specific agenda, but often revolve around discussing interesting aspects of Xinkan grammar, chatting about possible word meanings, sharing pictures of local places of interest, eating, and enjoying the company of others. These gatherings are open to everyone interested in participating, whether they are a descendant of a Xinkan speaker, are a Mayan speaker, are a Spanish speaker, or are a foreign linguist. I spent time in the community regularly during the summer months between 2007 and 2010, and visit more sporadically now. I came ready to help in whatever way the community asked; consistently, my role was to teach and lead discussions about aspects of the grammars of the Xinkan languages.

3.2.2 Community youth scholarships

Soon after the organization of PAPXIG and COPXIG, the community leaders offered “scholarships” for high-school aged individuals to “work with a Xinkan speaker”. The scholarships covered the cost of travel to the home of one of the self-identified ‘speakers’ of the languages mentioned above (called “Elders” by the community organizations and given the respectful title “Tío” or “Tía”). These young people (often in groups) are asked to spend an afternoon with the community elders and try to learn about the Xinkan past. They focus on discussing the time when the Xinkan elders recalled the languages being spoken more widely and openly, and on learning Xinkan expressions the elders could produce.

This program was originally funded by donations and grants from NGOs and community members. However, since starting this program, funding has been revoked because of internal conflict between PAPXIG and COPXIG. These scholarships are no longer being offered; though young people are encouraged to perform these activities as volunteers. Some of the Xinkan elders have also lost interest in participating in this type of program, though each has commented about the importance they place on Xinkan culture and identity (*personal communication*).

3.2.3 Folk etymologies and histories

Individuals active in building the Xinkan community and identity make it a point to inform others (from the community and beyond) about the history of words and of the Xinkan culture. This is done in person in community gatherings (mentioned above) or through social media, such as Facebook. Since both the Xinkan languages and cultural characteristics (what is known of it) are unique in Guatemala, the dissemination of this information provides community members with a uniqueness to be proud of. This helps create community identity and define *Xinkan-ness*.

The information community members share is often based on the information in the linguistic descriptions of one of the languages, though no effort is made to corroborate the details. It is simply accepted as a part of Xinkan identity. For example, one community member is fond of showing morphological derivations of Xinkan words, and then concludes with a statement along the lines of “the Mayan languages don’t have evidence of this”. These morphological derivations do not always follow actual Xinkan grammar, but they serve a unifying function for the community. One example of the types of information community members value is the Xinkan word for ‘town’ *atpet* (borrowed from Nahuatl). As expected, this word is not morphologically complex in Xinkan. Even though community members have been told it is not a native Xinkan word, they insist that it is, and that it has the following grammatical components *at* ‘penis’ *tepet* ‘unknown’. Community members then point out that it is probably the case that historical Xinkan culture and ideology defined a village by where men and women were supposed to reproduce, and that this is very different than the Spanish-speaking or Mayan-speaking conceptualization of a town.

While inaccurate, this type of information dissemination creates a unique bond among community members, one that is different than the Spanish-speaking or Mayan-speaking communities around them.

3.2.4 Elementary School Module

Over the last few years an elementary school module has been developed and implemented in a few public schools within the Xinkan geographical territory. This program is extra-curricular and focuses on teaching the children of self-identified Xinkan community members about Xinkan culture and languages. The goal is not for children to learn any of the

Xinkan languages or for them to gain culturally specific skills, but to appreciate the difference and cultural value of these languages compared to those which surround them. The information used in this program is occasionally taken from published grammatical sources, but most often from the information gathered from the other community activities discussed above.

While not all schools use this module, and it is rarely consistent in achieving its goals, it is an aid in defining the Xinkan community and identity. The children who participate in this program are the children of individuals who are active in the Xinkan community, and so learn about the ideals and claimed identities of their parents. These adults, in turn, discuss this program in community gatherings or in meetings with representatives from other indigenous communities or political organizations; often community leaders use the elementary school program as a point of comparison with efforts in Mayan-speaking communities. In this light the attitude observed and communicated to me is “now the Xinkan community is at least as organized as the Mayan-speaking communities, we deserve at least the same amount of recognition” (*personal communication*).

These community activities are focused on linguistic ideas (as they are accepted by the community), but serve a specific agenda for community members and leaders. When in political arenas community leaders are able to point to the uniqueness of Xinkan and its authentic identity as a community. This often creates opportunities for community members to gain access to the social, political, and economic resources which the *Agreement* guarantees for them.

Outside the agenda to prove indigenous authenticity, these activities also help community members gain a new respect for their unique heritage. After years of social inequality, they are learning to revalue their languages and culture, and they are accepting them as part of their individual identities. However, interest in language documentation and revitalization is short-lived. Community members approach their language as a foreign language, and quickly lose motivation to learn anything about it, because there are few (if any) opportunities to put in to practice the information they acquire. Learning a new language can be difficult for anyone, and if the identity of your heritage does not require in-depth knowledge about this language, interest wanes quickly. In fact, in my involvement with the community activities above (specifically in the Sunday gatherings), community members show interest in gaining a practical understanding of those aspects of Xinkan grammar that stand out as ‘different’, but not in acquiring these aspects.

4. Five linguistic traits that are important to the Xinkan community motivation

As a result of the specific needs of the Xinkan community, community members consider language documentation to be the most valuable language-related activity (rather than revitalization, for example). Language documentation provides evidence for their unique and specific claim to indigenoussness, it provides authentication of their claims for community identity and treatment, and it unites the community through the strongest connection available to their ancestral past. However, it is also true that not all outcomes, conclusions, or discoveries of empirical language description (such as grammatical descriptions, dictionaries or transcribed tales) are of equal importance to the community. It is not general traits and properties of languages that are of particular interest here, but those elements of the language(s) that highlight, support and authenticate the creation of their identity. As a means of illustration, I highlight those aspects of language descriptions (such as Rogers 2010; COPXIG 2004; and Sachse 2010) that community members have shown particular interest in, or about which community members have placed particular emphasis in commenting about and developing their collective identity.

Rogers (2010) describes the grammatical elements of the languages in detail, compares them across the family, and reconstructs a common ancestral language, Proto-Xinkan. Xinkan grammatical descriptions contain scientifically and linguistically interesting typological descriptions and characteristics. For example, Xinkan languages belong to the Mesoamerican Linguistic Area and (as a group), are said to have a lexically specified restriction on vowel occurrence (often referred to as vowel harmony), a large number of glottalized consonants (ejective obstruents and glottalized sonorants) in the phonological inventory, the use of glottalized consonants as a grammatical mechanism to distinguish verbal aspect, a prominence of grammatical/verbal aspect over tense or mood, semantic verb alignment, a unique marking of verb categorization, VOS word order, and agglutinating morphology. Furthermore, descriptions of the languages clearly show that, despite being spoken in a relatively small geographic area, these languages were independent languages (among themselves) and isolates - they do not form a historical/genetic group with any other known language or languages (see Sachse 2010 and Rogers 2008, 2009, 2010, 2014 for references to Xinkan research).

As a professional linguist, trained in the tradition of North American linguistics, I find each of these elements of value and worthy of additional study. However, in my interactions with the community, only a small subset of these characteristics has garnered any particular interest. The specific elements community members mention and comment on are:

1. Linguistic Isolate
2. Word Formation and Morphological Typology
3. Vowel Harmony
4. Glottalized Consonants
5. Peripheral status within the Mesoamerican Linguistic Area

Community members show little, or no, interest in any other grammatical properties of any of the Xinkan languages. As examples will show below, each of these five elements distinguish “Xinkan” from other languages, and consequently they also distinguish the developing Xinkan community from all other cultural and linguistic communities. Each of the five characteristics are discussed in turn.

4.1. Linguistic Isolate

By definition, a linguistic isolate stands in contrast to all other languages in the world. It is a language that is not grouped with, descended from, or related to any other known language in the world, in terms of historical change. Xinkan languages are related among themselves but are unrelated to all other languages - and of particular importance here, from Spanish or any of the Mayan languages. Xinkan languages are consequently typologically and genetically not similar to the languages spoken in the community.

As two examples of this typological and genetic difference between the Xinkan languages and the languages spoken in the Xinkan community, I give examples of both the vowel co-occurrence restrictions and semantic verb alignment (see Rogers 2010 for details). Over the years of sporadic documentation of Xinkan languages, however, some linguistic connections have been suggested (Brinton 1885; Calderón 1908; Lehmann 1920; Campbell 1972, 1979). Nevertheless, each of these suggestions has been discredited based on scientific principles and methodology (Campbell 1978; Rogers 2010). It is not uncommon for community members to know and understand the implications of these conclusions, and comments about the

Xinkan identity in public spaces (such as social media, or in political gatherings) mention them. For example, I have often heard community members involved with PAPXIG and COPXIG make comments or display attitudes like: ‘Xinkan is an isolate. That means we are different than the Mayan groups, and that we were here [in Guatemala] before the Spanish [Europeans] arrived; Xinkans have always been a separate [cultural] group.’ The general attitude about being a linguistic isolate is that even though the majority of Guatemalan indigenous populations and towns are Mayan speaking, the fact that Xinkan is an isolate automatically distinguishes the community from all others, and gives legitimacy to claims of cultural affirmation and community creation.

4.2 Word formation and morphological typology

Morphological typology is linguistically not very interesting, because it seeks to characterize languages in terms of holistic properties rather than typological parameters (Shibatani and Bynon 1995). Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for language descriptions to mention the general properties of morphological derivation and inflection, for the purpose of surface comparisons between languages. In this vein languages are characterized in a number of different ways in relation to the number of allowable morphemes per word and meanings per morpheme. These characterizations result in labels such as *analytic (or isolating)*, *fusional*, *agglutinating*, or *polysynthetic*.³ Xinkan languages are mildly agglutinating, occasionally having more than one morpheme per word. However, the maximum is three morphemes in a single word making the languages appear, in general, to be more isolating or fusional than other languages. As an example of comparison Xinkan languages display patterns of word formation similar to English or Spanish, but quite distinct from Mayan languages; of course, the actual content of morphological meaning is different in every language. As a means of comparison, (1) gives a sentence in Guazacapán Xinka and (2) gives a sentence in Kaqchikel Mayan.⁴

(1) Xinkan word formation⁵

<i>xuk'a-y</i>	<i>tumuki' tenuwa</i>	<i>Hwan</i>
eat.COMPL-3SG.TR all	zapote	Juan

‘Juan ate all the zapote.’

(2) Kaqchikel word formation

<i>A Xwan x-u-tij</i>	<i>r-onojel</i>	<i>ri kinäq</i>
CLF Juan COMPL-3SG.ERG-eat	3SG.ERG-all	the bean

‘Juan ate all the beans.’

³ Of course, many different labels have been suggested since the early days of the Comparative Linguists in the 1800s for these ideas and properties. In using the labels above, my intention is not to take a particular theoretical stance but to use them as general descriptive terms.

⁴ Kaqchikel Mayan is often mentioned by community members as a point of comparison to the Xinkan languages. There are a number of Mayan languages spoken around the Xinkan geographical area, but this language has a unique connection to the community. A local linguist, a speaker of Kaqchikel, acts as an advisor for community development activities, including language documentation. The community finds great pride in showing that Xinkan languages are different than the language spoken by this linguist. I have used Kaqchikel as a point of comparison here for this reason.

⁵ The abbreviations in this paper are: COMPL = completive aspect, 3SG = third-person singular, TR = transitive verb, CLF = classifier, and ERG = ergative marker

While not drastically different, the differences are apparent. This is especially true for the Xinkan community members, who if they choose to learn a Xinkan language or a Mayan language, approach them as a foreign language. These surface differences are often mentioned in conversation about the uniqueness of Xinkan languages. The general attitude of the community reflects pride in and understanding of the surface differences between the different languages in Guatemala. However, as a functional communicative tool, community members see Xinkan with indifference (and skepticism).

4.3 Vowel harmony

Emphasis on the uniqueness of the Xinkan languages and community often revolves around more concrete linguistic facts also. For example, Xinkan vowel harmony is a point of pride for some community members. Xinkan languages have six vowels as shown in Table 1 with long and short contrasts.

Table 1. Xinkan vowel inventory

	Front	Central	Back
High	i	ɨ	u
Mid	e		o
Low		a	

Phonologically, vowels are grouped according to harmonic groups based on the height and the periphery of the vowels in the vowel space. Only vowels in the same group can ever co-occur in a word; the low vowel is neutral and occurs with all other groups. The groups are:

High peripheral vowels	[i, u]
High central vowel	[ɨ]
Mid vowels	[e, o]
Low vowel (neutral)	[a]

The vowel group for each word is determined in the lexicon. In some ways this is different than other vowel harmony type systems, since the grouping and organization does not belong to the phonological component of the grammar (i.e., there are no phonological alternations which correspond to vowel co-occurrence). This type of lexical restriction is unique cross-linguistically because of this absence of phonological variation expected in vowel harmony systems, and the uniqueness of the behavior of the high central vowel compared to the other high vowels (see Rogers 2008, 2009, and 2010 for the details). Throughout the world vowel co-occurrence restrictions are not uncommon, but in Mesoamerica this is a unique and unusual pattern. It clearly distinguishes the languages from Spanish or any of the Mayan languages.

Occasionally, it is my privilege to be asked to participate in a Sunday afternoon gathering in the community. On one such occasion, individuals asked me to help them understand some of the intricacies of Xinkan grammar. At the time I was professionally very interested in Xinkan vowel harmony (in fact, I still am), so I spent some time explaining what I then knew about this phenomenon. I was excited to share this part of their heritage languages with them, but unsure if the community would find it relevant or interesting. Afterward, I asked participants if they felt there was any value in learning about these vowel restrictions. I did not record any responses at

the time, but wrote down the following comment in my field notes after talking to one of the more active community members a few days later.

“Yes, it is very interesting. I don’t think I understand it all or why my language is like that, but it clearly is different than languages like Kaqchikel or Spanish. This is important to help the community understand that it is unique; that we are Xinkans.”

As this quote shows, this community member clearly felt that linguistic facts are important for the definition of the Xinkan community and identity, because it distinguished them from either Spanish or Mayan languages.

4.4 Glottalized Consonants

Similarly, in speaking to community members about the linguistic properties of the Xinkan languages, and knowing that they approach them like a foreign language, I frequently ask what aspects of the grammar they find especially difficult. The presence of glottalized consonants is prominent in their responses. The Xinkan consonant inventory is largely symmetrical and uses glottalization as a source of phonemic contrast. The consonant inventory of Guazacapán Xinka is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Xinkan consonant inventory

		Labial	Alveolar	Alveo-palatal	Retro-Flex	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stops	Voiceless	p	t				k	
	Ejective	p'	t'				k'	ʔ
Fricatives	Voiceless		s		ʃ			h
Affricates	Voiceless			tʃ				
	Ejective		ts'	tʃ'				
Nasal	Plain	m	n					
	Glottalized	m'	n'					
Liquid	lateral	Plain		l				
		Glottalized		l'				
		Voiceless		ɬ				
	rhotic	Plain		r				
		Glottalized		r'				
	glides	Plain	w				y	
Glottalized		w'				y'		

Crosslinguistically, this inventory is interesting because of the considerable number of glottalized consonants and the presence of a number of glottalized sonorants. However, of

particular interest to the discussion about community identity is the following response I have written down from another community member, about the difficulty of the Xinkan grammar:

“Well, it [the language] is all a bit strange, but for me it is the glottalized sounds. I’ve learned that Xinkan had these consonants that are called “glottalized” and that they require a constriction in your throat. I can’t make these sounds without choking myself, so I don’t do it. I like that this is a way to show that Xinkan is different than other groups, but it is too difficult to produce.”

This quote shows that for this community member, the usefulness of the languages is doubtful as a tool of communication. The community member cited above is not unwilling to learn to produce the glottalized sounds, and in general community members are interested in practicing and producing them, but they are considered quite foreign when compared to their native language (Spanish). Even though these sounds are produced with varying accuracy they are often mentioned as one unique quality of the Xinkan languages; the linguistic properties they exhibit are highly valued as a means of community identity. Mayan languages, in fact, do have glottalized consonants (such as the voiced bilabial implosive [ɓ]), but not nearly as many as the Xinkan languages - a point which community members are aware of and which strengthens their claims of authenticity.

4.5 Peripheral status within the Mesoamerican Linguistic Area

Lastly, within the community, Xinkan languages are constantly being discussed in terms of being on the periphery of the Mesoamerican Linguistic Area. The Xinkan community, culture and languages do not exist in a bubble, nor have they ever. In fact, it is well known among scholars and community members that Xinkan languages are linguistically part of the Mesoamerican Linguistic Area (see Campbell, Kaufman, and Smith-Stark 1986). This means that, despite being genetically isolated, the languages have been influenced by many other languages, including: Spanish, many Mayan languages, a few Uto-Aztecan languages, Tol, Misumulpan, possibly Chibchan languages, and most likely others. Linguistically, there is evidence of this influence through language borrowing in many aspects of each of the Xinkan languages (though to varying degrees for each language). Vocabulary has been added, morphemes have been altered, word order has been affected, and other syntactic structures have been changed. Nobody would ever doubt that the Xinkan languages are and were spoken in Mesoamerica. The Mesoamerican Linguistic Area is defined based on the following five core criteria as cited in Campbell, Kaufman, and Smith-Stark (1986: 555):

1. A specific type of nominal possession (e.g., his-dog the man = ‘the man’s dog’)
2. Relational Nouns
3. Vigesimal numeral systems
4. Non-verb-final basic word order
5. A series of specific semantic calques

Other properties of this area also exist, but are considered non-core, or non-essential, in defining this language area.

For the community, Xinkan languages are thought of as being on the periphery because, while they appear to exhibit all of the core (definitional) properties of the linguistic area

mentioned above, many of the non-core properties are not true for Xinkan. In terms of the scholarship about linguistic areas, this does little to alter the place of Xinkan as a member of the Mesoamerican Linguistic Area. For the community, however, it is evidence that the borrowing and contact inherent in a language area was different for speakers of the Xinkan languages. They claim that this is evidence that something that can be called the ‘Xinkan community’ has always been present in Guatemala, and that this community has been culturally and linguistically distinct from the rest of the country for thousands of years.

A more in-depth discussion of the Xinkan languages in relation to the Mesoamerican Linguistic Area or in terms of typological traits is outside the scope of this paper,⁶ as the goal here is to discuss the community motivations in being involved with language documentation and revitalization. Community members often concentrate on learning about grammatical aspects of the languages in their Sunday gatherings. However, since there is no speaker base, all linguistic information about Xinkan comes from past efforts in documenting them. Consequently, language documentation is highly valued among community members, as long as it serves their needs and desires as discussed above. Community members value the unique identity that language documentation brings, but not necessarily the languages as a part of that identity. Grammatical descriptions of the Xinkan languages clearly underscore that they are unlike any of the other languages surrounding them and these linguistic differences are used by community members as a reason to separate themselves from the Mayans (and the Mayan linguistic agenda), from the ladinos, and from the non-indigenous Spanish speakers.

5. Motivation, language documentation, and revitalization

The world’s linguistic diversity is seen as a valuable commodity by many scholars, activists, and language community members around the world. Often the concern over the loss of this diversity is gathered under one terminological umbrella “language endangerment”. However, the classification of any language as “endangered” is necessarily a secondary classification - the endangered status of a language is dependent on a number of primary classifications and descriptions. For example, for many linguists, an endangered language is a secondary classification of: (1) language demographics; (2) language and cultural shift; (3) intergenerational transmission; (4) amount of descriptive documentation; or (5) human rights violations affecting its speakers. In practice, a language can be empirically classified as endangered for any single one of these factors or a combination of more than one of them.

Nevertheless, discussions about language endangerment are beneficial as they codify needs and motivations for and by communities and linguists. Based on specific assumptions (mentioned above) the vitality of a language can be quantified and a specific set of outcomes can be developed which will help reach the community's and/or linguist's goals. Diagnostics of language endangerment (and the concomitant needs and motivations) are often used by linguists and local communities to set goals and expected outcomes for language related projects. Generally, the terms *language documentation*, *language revitalization*, *language conservation*, or *language preservation* (as examples) are used to talk about and understand these planned outcomes. However, specifically, the types (and names) of activities which are related to endangered languages are not homogenous, and the differences are important. Each of the activities and expectations are appropriate only for a specific community context. For example,

⁶ In fact, aside from Campbell, Kaufman and Smith-Stark (1986), no specific published research exists on the place of the Xinkan languages within the Mesoamerican Linguistic Area. This would be an advantageous area of future work. Rogers (2010) and Sachse (2010) provide the data necessary for this type of work.

language revitalization in the Xinkan community should not be considered a focus for language activities, research and/or projects; community identity creation is more appropriate.

In speaking about the marginalized communities around the world (and in Latin America in specific) the twin heads *language documentation and revitalization* do not seem appropriate. Language documentation is a broadly defined activity covering descriptive and empirical work with/on a language. Language revitalization involves strengthening an already existing language whose communicative function is diminishing. However, as the Xinkan community indicates, revitalization is not always appropriate or desirable. An emphasis on revitalizing Xinkan would be difficult and in some ways might weaken the growing community identity.

A better way of describing language-related activities, research, and/or projects in this type of community is *language documentation and community creation*. Community creation is required in situations where an indigenous community has been identified (and defined in political terms) but where there is no cultural or linguistic heritage unifying this community. For these communities *recognition* among community members, between other indigenous groups, and national cultures is among the highest priorities. A community cannot act towards language maintenance if they do not have a unique language or unique cultural identity. These communities struggle for the linguistic and sociopolitical recognition that is assumed in discussions of language revitalization and documentation.

For the Xinkan community in Guatemala this is precisely the issue. Language documentation and the ensuing discussions give authenticity to their claims of cultural otherness. This is also true for many other communities throughout Latin America (and probably beyond). These language communities represent a very significant implication for our understanding of the best practices of language documentation and revitalization. Language diversity and linguistic rights are imperative, but often these are secondary concerns. Establishing the right to join in the discussion of these topics as an independent cultural group is fundamental.

A language community is not a fixed homogenous organization and neither should our response to and expectations for the loss of the world's linguistic diversity. The current organization of the Xinkan community is one way of developing cultural identity, and this identity and organization will likely change as time goes by and this identity is developed more. At this stage of community development, language-related activities have a very specific task, to prove every community member's authentic indigenous identity.

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