

Identifying Indigenous Languages and Language Varieties from Mexico and Guatemala

Farmworkers & Language Diversity in the U.S.

In the United States, almost one in five people speak a language other than English at home, and 8.6% of individuals are limited English proficient.¹ Recent farmworker assessments in the U.S. have found that almost one in three farmworkers self-identify as Indigenous, either racially or linguistically, and 11% speak more than 20 different Indigenous languages, a small representation of the true language diversity among all U.S. farmworkers.² Most of these documented Indigenous languages are languages or language families spoken in Mexico and Guatemala, such as Tsotsil, Purépecha, Nahuatl, Mixteco, and Tzeltal.² Indigenous farmworkers may also speak Spanish or English but often are better able to understand and share information in their native language. The growing diversity of the farmworker communities who live in the U.S. indicates the need for more inclusive services that are culturally and linguistically appropriate to serve this population.



This tool offers strategies to help community-based organizations, researchers, health centers, and public health officials identify the Indigenous languages and the language varieties spoken by Indigenous farmworkers from Mexico and Guatemala in a given community to coordinate interpretation services needed and make available translated educational resources that will enhance their access to information and various services. This tool is also useful for organizations, researchers, or others collecting information from farmworkers and other communities in the U.S. The following recommendations are based on a review of publications about identifying Indigenous languages, resources from Indigenous interpretation agencies, the National Center for Farmworker Health's experiences working with farmworkers who identify as Indigenous, and the expert review of four Indigenous language interpreters and language experts.

Indigenous Languages from Mexico and Guatemala

Mexico and Guatemala are home to many diverse Indigenous groups, rich in culture, traditions, and languages. For example, in Guatemala, there are 25 official languages spoken, 22 of which are Mayan; in Mexico, there are 68 Indigenous languages and approximately 364 language varieties. Other Central American countries, such as El Salvador and Honduras have a smaller number of Indigenous peoples but were not included in this document since they are rarely found among farmworker communities. The language varieties are further discussed in the next section.

What are Language Varieties?

Many Indigenous languages spoken in Mexico and Guatemala have multiple language varieties, also known as variants, which are distinctive forms of a language and can have similar language systems (such as similar grammatical structure) or be completely different from one another. For example, Mixteco has approximately 81 language varieties, and Nahuatl has approximately 30 language varieties. Even though the language varieties are related, they have different degrees of mutual intelligibility, meaning they may not be mutually understood. Some varieties of Nahuatl, for example, are as different from each other as Spanish and Portuguese.^{7, 8}

Language varieties are usually place-based. Some people groups identify their language based on the name of the region or town they come from rather than the English or Spanish label of the language. For example, Triqui speakers from the town of San Juan Copala will speak Triqui of the San Juan Copala variety.

Identifying the language variety is necessary when looking for an interpreter for a specified Indigenous language to ensure that the individual or group will understand the language variety the interpreter speaks.



How to Identify Indigenous Languages and Language Varieties spoken by Individuals in a Community?

A language and language variety spoken by a group of individuals in a community for research, survey or various group services planned for an entire community can be determined in the following ways:

1. Identify the geographic area or community you are working with. You may access [NCFH's Language Map](#) to view languages reportedly spoken by farmworkers in selected geographic areas in the U.S.
2. Speak with community members, individuals, or [local organizations](#) that may work with the indigenous population you need to reach, such as community leaders, employers, community-based organizations, or churches. They may have information available or good knowledge about the community.
3. If no local organizations or individuals working with the community are located, you will need to build rapport with community members before identifying the languages spoken in the community. This process will involve developing relationships, connections, and trust with community members who speak Indigenous languages to be able to share your role and the purpose of your interest in learning more about the community. The following link includes [tips to build trust in communities](#). Once you have established sound relationships with Indigenous community members, you can ask them:
 - The name of the “estado” or “departamento” (state) and “municipio” or “pueblo” (town), or region, or community townspeople are from and which language(s) they prefer to speak. Knowing the regions or towns will be fundamental to identify the language variety.
4. If you have identified the languages but need further assistance in identifying the language variety, share the information you have gathered with Indigenous Languages experts, including Indigenous advocacy organizations, Indigenous interpretation/translation organizations, or linguists or anthropologists familiar with these languages to identify the correct language variety. See the Additional Resources section below if you would like recommendations for interpreter and translation organizations in the U.S.



How to Identify Indigenous Languages and Language Varieties spoken by Individuals in a Community?

A language and language variety spoken by an individual at a health center or clinic setting, or individual outreach can be determined in the following ways:

1. Ask the individual the name of their preferred language, the name of the “estado” or “departamento” (state) and “municipio” or “pueblo” (town), or region, or community they are from, or information about how they identify their language. See the resources section below if you are unfamiliar with the correct spelling of languages and states or departments.
2. Set up a language match call with an organization that provides interpretation services for Indigenous languages (see Additional Resources section). To arrange a language match call, respectfully ask the community member who speaks an Indigenous or unknown language if they would be willing to talk on the phone with an interpreter to find the correct interpreter match.
3. If the previous step is not feasible, you can ask a community member to listen to a recording in the specific language variety based on their hometown information from a resource such as [SIL México, Glottolog \(Mexico, Guatemala, and other countries\)](#) or [Phalarope \(Guatemala\)](#).

Identify Qualified Interpreters and Translators:

It is important to hire trained professionals or companies who can provide accurate interpretations and translations for community members. You can access a directory of organizations that provide interpretation and translation into Indigenous languages here: [Translation/Interpretation Directory](#).

Additional Resources

- To familiarize yourself with major Indigenous languages from Mexico and Guatemala and their correct spelling, follow this link: [Indigenous Languages from Mexico and Guatemala](#).
- To see a map of Indigenous languages spoken by farmworkers in selected geographic areas in the U.S., follow this link: [NCFH Language Map](#).
- To see a list of interpreter and translation organizations that could support defining the language and language varieties, follow this link: [Translation/Interpretation Directory](#).
- to see examples of health education materials produced in various Indigenous languages from Mexico and Central America, follow these links:
 - [National Center for Farmworker Health](#)
 - [Rural Women’s Health Project](#)
 - [Comunidades Indígenas en Liderazgo - CIELO](#)
 - [Farmworker Justice](#)

References

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