"That’s too much for children to learn”: Negotiating longevity & urgency in Isthmus Zapotec language standardisation

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Efforts to produce a written standard for Isthmus Zapotec, a language of Mexico, have been underway since the early 20th century, with a recognized norm established in 1956 by a collective of speakers and linguists. This paper draws on ethnographic research in education settings to examine some social consequences of the written norm, the alfabeto popular, as well as a current movement to adapt or ‘enrich’ it. In practice the alfabeto popular has been largely unpoliced, and stakeholder views of this standard range from an educational necessity and source of pride, to an elite practice and elusive goal for learners. Oral standardisation has not been a goal, however, and writing is expected to follow spoken variation. The recent initiative to introduce greater phonological detail into the alfabeto popular, spearheaded by linguists and the Mexican National Institute for Indigenous Languages, has created new discussions around the standard. While actors creating or adjusting language norms may aim to produce a neutral tool or technology– calibrated to meet the needs of a majority of users– when viewed from an educational perspective it is clear that standards also play a role in producing a certain kind of user, as learners are socialised into these norms. In the Isthmus, the movement to create a more detailed written standard orients towards imagined future users who will be fully biliterate in Zapotec and Spanish. Stakeholders who reject this movement orient towards the immediate necessities of classrooms, including respect for language variation and student’s changing language repertoires, among other contextual factors. The on-going discussions of standards illustrate a change in imagined future users and uses of Isthmus Zapotec. Although this future may be in line with a positive shift towards self-determination and pluralism, it remains starkly separate from current language practices, and from many immediate education goals.

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