

## THE ROLE OF GENDER IN THE CONSERVATION OF THE NGABERE LANGUAGE IN SITIO PRADO, INDIGENOUS AREA

### *EL ROL DEL GÉNERO EN LA CONSERVACIÓN DE LA LENGUA NGÄBERE EN SITIO PRADO, ÁREA COMARCAL*

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#### ABSTRACT

Language plays a significant role in our daily lives and is an essential part of our identity as human beings and members of society. It holds unique views, patterns, and beliefs distinct from its speakers; as Amery (2019) noted, when a minority group speaks a different language, they can choose to keep using it, become bilingual, or switch to the dominant language. The first option is language maintenance, where the community collectively chooses to keep using their traditional language(s) (Fasold, 1984). The second option is bilingualism, where individuals use both languages in different contexts for cognitive and social reasons, as Grosjean (2008) and García (2009) pointed out. Bilingualism is excellent for professional development and preserving heritage languages. Some Indian communities in America face language extinction, but some indigenous areas in Panama have successfully preserved their cultural heritage for centuries. A study was done to see if women in indigenous communities are less likely to use heritage languages than men. Participants took an oral and written exam and were asked which language they preferred for daily conversations. The study had support from a bilingual facilitator. The study was conducted with a sample of 120 people of legal age, including 60 men and 60 women, from the local area of Sitio Prado. Results showed that, as hypothesized, women are more conservative in the Ngäbere language than men by a small margin of difference of 3% in the preference level in using the Ngäbere language. It was also shown that both women and men are more conservative in their mother tongue between the ages of 24 and 29. Preserving the Ngäbere language is crucial for future generations and their cultural identity. It should be introduced into the formal education system.

**KEYWORDS:** Language, preservation, conservation, gender, and culture.

#### RESUMEN

La lengua desempeña un papel importante en nuestra vida cotidiana y es una parte esencial de nuestra identidad como seres humanos y miembros de la sociedad. Contiene puntos de vista, pautas y creencias únicos y distintos de los de sus hablantes; como señaló Amery (2019), cuando un grupo minoritario habla una lengua diferente, puede optar por seguir utilizándola, hacerse bilingüe o pasarse a la lengua dominante.

La primera opción es el mantenimiento de la lengua, en la que la comunidad elige colectivamente seguir utilizando su(s) lengua(s) tradicional(es) (Fasold, 1984). La segunda opción es el bilingüismo, en el que los individuos utilizan ambas lenguas en diferentes contextos por razones cognitivas y sociales, como



señalan Grosjean (2008) y García (2009). El bilingüismo es excelente para el desarrollo profesional y la conservación de las lenguas patrimoniales. Algunas comunidades indígenas de América se enfrentan a la extinción de sus lenguas, pero algunas zonas indígenas de Panamá han conseguido preservar su patrimonio cultural durante siglos. Se realizó un estudio para comprobar si las mujeres de las comunidades indígenas son menos propensas a utilizar las lenguas patrimoniales que los hombres. Los participantes hicieron un examen oral y escrito y se les preguntó qué lengua preferían para las conversaciones cotidianas. El estudio contó con el apoyo de un facilitador bilingüe. El estudio se realizó con una muestra de 120 personas mayores de edad, 60 hombres y 60 mujeres, de la localidad de Sitio Prado. Los resultados mostraron que, según la hipótesis, las mujeres son más conservadoras en la lengua Ngäbere que los hombres por un pequeño margen de diferencia del 3% en el nivel de preferencia en el uso de la lengua Ngäbere. También, se demostró que tanto las mujeres como los hombres son más conservadores en su lengua materna entre los 24 y los 29 años. Preservar la lengua Ngäbere es crucial para las generaciones futuras y su identidad cultural. Debería introducirse en el sistema educativo formal.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Lengua, preservación, conservación, género y cultura.

## INTRODUCTION

Language reflects people's identity and behavior in several ways; as Tahat et al., (2020) rightly say, "culture refers to a variety of human practices associated with people's values and attitudes that distinctly identify a specific society" (p. 12135). Therefore, preserving language as an essential part of the Ngäbe culture in Sitio Prado, Comarca Ngäbe, is challenging for new generations. Formal education has negatively impacted the preservation of culture at the Comarca, especially in terms of language, since most children and teenagers are being educated by teachers who are not from the community. According to Loizillon (2020), "the majority of teachers deployed in indigenous areas cannot speak the mother tongue of students, which creates a double penalty leading to poor learning outcomes and a depreciation of the language and culture" (p. 28).

Discrimination seems to be another factor that is interfering with younger indigenous people's willingness to speak Ngäbere. Sarsaned del Cid & Quintero (2018) found that Ngäbe parents do not teach the language to their kids, so they do not suffer at school. New kids may avoid speaking their native language, celebrating their festivals, or forgetting about their colorful dresses when they leave their hometown. They may feel discriminated against or different since they represent a minority group who rule themselves differently. Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson (2017) stated that most people who speak minority languages are discriminated against on the grounds of language. Consequently, those minority groups are not allowed to identify with their mother tongues.

In addition, it is relevant to mention that indigenous people immigrate a lot. Bort, & Young (2001) stated that because many indigenous people have to deal with land shortage and food scarcity problems, they have moved to the city to find a job and survive. Language and clothing are some of the most affected aspects due to immigration. The younger population needs help to maintain these customs. Most Indigenous emigrants living in the cities adopt a different lifestyle. They usually stop using their traditional dresses or speaking their native language. "Many migrants eventually abandon their traditional customs, lose their cultural identity, and adopt the ways of Panamanian society. They and their children become part of the Latino world" (Bort & Young, 2001, p. 133).

Unfortunately, transmitting several cultural practices to their kids is becoming increasingly difficult for many indigenous people. Brown (2003) as cited in Krieg (2016) stated, "cultural continuity refers to the capacity to conserve a culture's historical traditions and pass (them on to future generations. It is strongly associated with cultural identity". If older adults or parents in Sitio Prado stop transmitting their language to their kids and they start introducing Spanish words to their language or speaking Spanish, what will happen is that the Ngäbere language will disappear.

According to Krieg (2016), "Today, loss of culture means several Indigenous people do not acknowledge their Indigenous identities" (p.29). Many studies assure that women play a more significant role in maintaining culture since they spend most of their time raising children at their houses. The UNESCO (2001) stated that:

Women are central to the maintenance and vitality of cultural heritage and diversity worldwide. Their roles concerning intangible heritage are of particular significance, encompassing what may be described as fundamental domains and expressions of cultural heritage, which are often central to maintaining cultural identity. (p.2)

In addition, the International Labour Organization (2021) stated in one of its studies that indigenous women are the "custodians and transmitters of their peoples' cultures, pillars of their communities, traditional healers, guardians of the local environment, and primary caregivers and food suppliers for their families" (p.12). Women have a huge responsibility in terms of the conservation of their people cultural practices and traditions. According to Del Popolo, López, & Acuña, (2009), "women have always played a key role in the transmission of the language of their people. It is an enriching contribution that should be valued" (p.3). This study also explains that women continue to be monolingual in high percentages with and bilingual in smaller proportions than men in all age groups in countries like Paraguay, Guatemala, the República Bolivariana of Venezuela, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Mexico (Del Popolo et al., 2009). These are the countries that have more differences between women and men regarding indigenous monolingualism and bilingualism. Del Popolo et al (2009) emphasized that "Mexico is a striking case in this respect because although evidence of a low percentage of indigenous monolingualism, young women register a value that is twice that of men" (p.3).

In Sitio Prado, women usually stay home caring for children and households. However, no studies in this indigenous area prove that women are more conservative than men regarding Ngäbe language preservation. Considering this information, this study aims to determine which group, divided by gender, is more conservative of the Ngäbe Language in Sitio Prado, an indigenous area. Our project shall thoroughly investigate language usage in Sitio Prado. We shall meticulously examine and compare the frequency of Spanish words used by men and women, determine who uses Ngäbere more frequently, and analyze which age range preserves Ngäbere the best. This research shall provide invaluable insights into the cultural landscape of the region.

This research aims to explore the cultural practices of the indigenous community in Sitio Prado and determine if there are any differences between men and women. Our specific objectives include examining the use of Spanish words in spoken communication and the level of conservation of the Ngäbere language. We also want to see how age ranges may affect the community's language conservation efforts. We approach this study with an optimistic mindset, eager to understand Sitio Prado's unique cultural practices better. We are confident that our findings will provide valuable insights for future research.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The design for this study was descriptive research, which took place at Sitio Prado, an indigenous area. According to Gall & Borg (2007) as cited in Nassaji, (2015) "descriptive research aims to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics. This research concerns what rather than how or why something has happened. Therefore, observation and survey tools are often used to gather data" (p. 129). Nassaji, 2015 stated that to carry out descriptive research, "the data may be collected qualitatively. However, it is often analyzed quantitatively, using frequencies, percentages, averages, or other statistical analyses to determine relationships" (p.129). This kind of study allowed the researchers to collect data from a determined sample to answer the study's question based on accurate data collected and analyzed.

The population for this study was around 250 people from Sitio Prado, an indigenous area. They were between eighteen and thirty-five years old. The sample for this study was a group of

sixty women and sixty men between eighteen and thirty-five years old. The sample was randomly chosen, but gender and age were considered. The sample was chosen from students who attended classes during two weekends at Universidad de Panamá, Sitio Prado Branch. It is important to mention that formal education can affect language preservation at Sitio Prado, which is why this sample group was chosen for the study.

The instrument used to complete this study was an oral test. This test was applied with the help of an indigenous person who spoke Ngäbere, Spanish, and English fluently. The test was based on identifying pictures of common and uncommon words likely to be introduced to the Ngäbere language. Some examples of common words are Zapatos, estufa, and universidad. Some examples of uncommon words used in the test were cell phone and audífonos. The test evaluated whether these pictures of common and uncommon words were equivalent in the Ngäbere language. The idea was to determine if people in the Sitio Prado community preferred using Spanish or English words for those pictures. This part also evaluated if women or men would use the uncommon words in Spanish or English instead of giving an equivalent word in Ngäbere. In addition, the classification of the sample divided by gender and age was also made to determine if age influenced the results. The researchers interviewed some students to complete the test, and others preferred to take the test in a written way. This decision did not affect the test results in any possible way.

## RESULTS

This section analyzes the data gathered from the indigenous people in Sitio Prado Community concerning the research question and objectives. The conduct of this study entails a detailed account of those people's preferences in terms of borrowing foreign words to their language or their decision to preserve their repertoire by using an equivalent word in Ngäbere for each of those pictures that were shown on the test. Each participant was asked if they preferred to use a list of common and uncommon words illustrated by pictures in Spanish/English or if they preferred to use an equivalent word in Ngäbere for those pictures.

**Table 1.**

*Men's Language Preference for Common and Uncommon Words.*

	Spanish	Ngäbere
Common words	80%	20%
Uncommon words	89%	11%

In Table 1, we can see that men preferred to use Spanish in an average of 80% of the common words shown in the test. They only preferred to use Ngäbere in an average of 20% of these words. On the other hand, the results showed that men preferred to use Spanish in an average of 89% of the uncommon words used in the test, and they chose to use Ngäbere in an average of 11%.

**Table 2.**

*Women's Language Preference for Common and Uncommon Words.*

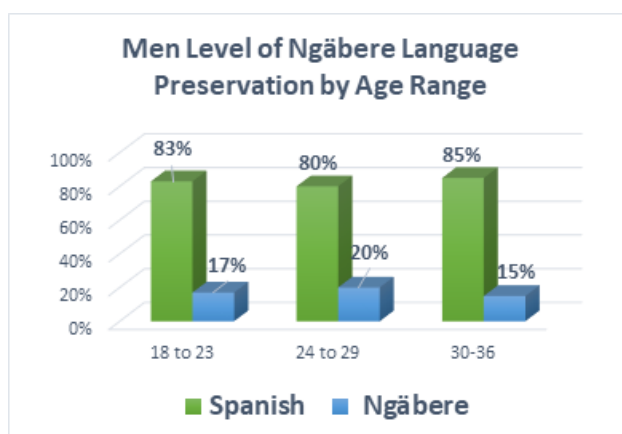
	Spanish	Ngäbere
Common words	77%	23%
Uncommon words	89%	11%

In contrast, Table 2 shows that women preferred to use Spanish in an average of 77% of the common words shown in the test. In addition, they preferred to use Ngäbere in an average of 20% of these words. On the other hand, the results showed that women preferred to use Spanish in an average of 89% of the uncommon words used in the test, and they chose to use Ngäbere in an average of 11%.

After analyzing Table 1 and Table 2, we found that women seem slightly more conservative of the Ngäbere language than men regarding the use of common words. According to Table 1, men preferred to use Ngäbere in an average of 20% of the common words presented on the test, while women preferred to use Ngäbere in an average of 23% of the items shown on the test, as reflected in Table 2. These results do not show a significant difference between men's and women's levels of language conservation. However, we cannot deny that there is still a slight difference of 3% of conservation in favor of females. As evidence shows, we must recognize that women in Sitio Prado, an indigenous area, are more conservative in their language than men, even when the difference is minimal. It seems that more men prefer to use Spanish or English in daily communication rather than an equivalent word in Ngäbere, as some women did in this study.

**Figure 1.**

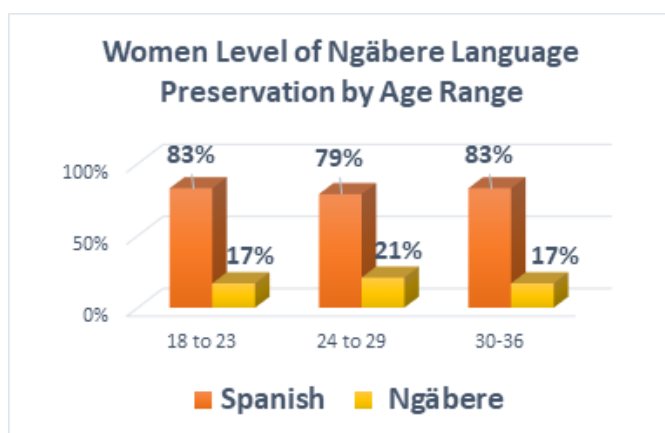
*Male Ngäbere Level of Language Preservation by Age Range*



In this part of the study, we wanted to find out in which age range male participants used Ngäbere instead of borrowing Spanish/English words in their regular speech. We analyzed the test results, and according to Figure 1, the results showed that men are more conservative of the Ngäbere Language from 24 to 29 years old. Male participants in this age range preferred to use Ngäbere in an average of 20% of the words presented in the test. On the other hand, men seem to be less conservative, from 30 to 36 years old. They chose to use Spanish in an average of 85% of the vocabulary found on the test.

**Figure 2.**

*Women Ngäbere Level of Conservation by Age Range.*



According to Figure 2, the results showed that women are more conservative of the Ngäbere Language from 24 to 29 years old. Female participants in this age range preferred to use Ngäbere in an average of 21% of the items presented in the test. Unfortunately, women seem less conservative, from 18 to 24 and 30 to 36 years old. Women from these age ranges chose to use Spanish in an average of 83% of the vocabulary found on the test.

## DISCUSSION

During the last decades, people at the Comarca Ngäbe have faced several difficulties conserving the Ngäbere Language. Because of this problem, a research project was conducted in Sitio Prado, an indigenous area. This study aimed to determine which group, divided by gender, is more conservative of the Ngäbere Language in Sitio Prado, an indigenous area. This study has agreed with several studies that assure that indigenous women are more conservative of the culture than men. The results of this study demonstrated that women are more conservative of the Ngäbere Language in Sitio Prado, an indigenous area.

Unfortunately, this study had some limitations. The study showed no significant difference between women and men regarding language usage or preference. It reflected slight percentage differences even though the results were analyzed in different categories. Another limitation was that few people were willing to participate in the study. They said they did not speak Ngäbere because they wanted to receive some economic benefit. Lastly, the test took too long to apply because it was an oral test, and we had only one person to help with it. Future research should be done to determine to which extent the Ngäbere language has been lost. In addition, it would be interesting to know why people prefer to use Spanish in their regular spoken communication instead of Ngäbere even when the words are equivalent in Ngäbere. After two weeks of continually applying the tests to 120 university students at Universidad de Panama, Sitio Prado Branch, results have been obtained, and some conclusions have been made based on these results.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study led the researchers to draw several conclusions about the purpose of the research. The researcher found that women were more conservative of the Ngäbere Language even though the findings did not show a significant difference. We created a

test based on standard and uncommon vocabulary, and the participants asked if they preferred to use that word in Spanish or Ngäbere through their choices. Some of the common words that participants used in Spanish were: zapatos, uñas, estufa, and some others. They said they preferred to use those words in Spanish when speaking Ngäbere. In other words, they mix those Spanish words while they speak in Ngäbere. Amazingly, the words that most participants preferred to use the most in Ngäbere were selfie (bä denkä), vestido de baño (dän jubakrä), carnaval (Nö kite jabta), universidad (ju jatötikaka), periódico (tärä kukwe biankä), and farmacia (kräkä jue). There were equivalents for each word; participants used them in daily communication in Ngäbere.

After two weekends of interaction with our sample, we could notice that there had been created equivalents for most of the ordinary and uncommon Spanish words we placed on the test. However, people prefer to combine Spanish words with Ngäbere instead of using the equivalents. These preferences affect the transmission of the Ngäbere language from one generation to another. In addition, the language is getting weaker and more challenging to teach. It is essential to mention that most study participants spoke Ngäbere but did not know how to write it, which is a huge disadvantage for people struggling to preserve the language. There was another exciting thing that we noticed about our participants. Some mention that people deny they speak Ngäbere because they feel ashamed or discriminated. The fact that these people do not feel proud of their language heritage is very disappointing because it seems they have not understood how rich their culture is.

Evidence suggests a need to implement Ngäbere Language in the formal education system truly. New generations must understand that if they lose their language, they lose an essential part of their identity or culture. In addition, university students who do not speak and write their language miss a great job opportunity with the Ministry of Education at the Comarca. For the Ministry of Education in Panama, speaking and writing Ngäbere is way more important than a master's degree in any area in order to work as a teacher in this indigenous area. However, lessons continue to be taught in Spanish in any school down there, and the results of this research have reflected that.

There is a need for interested advocates to become involved in teaching Ngäbere to new generations. Younger people must be encouraged to love their language as part of their identity. Ngäbe Cultural organizations should consider the results of this research and develop a strategic plan to help their fellows learn Ngäbere and transmit it to their kids. Teachers at school should also start developing their lessons in Ngäbere to avoid losing this language. People from Sitio Prado who know the language and teachers must work cooperatively with each other, and they should share their expertise in developing those language skills their kids and adolescents need. It is recommended that curriculum developers, whether teacher educators or classroom teachers use this information as a basis for evaluating and updating the curricular emphasis of existing programs according to this population's needs.

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