Dialectology meets heritage language research: Identifying appropriate baselines among P'urhepecha speakers

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Variation is inherent to all languages, but is claimed to be particularly prevalent in heritage languages, whose use is often restricted to unofficial domains (e.g. Polinsky, 2018). In order to know to what extent the variation and change observable in a heritage language is specific to that context, we must also understand the variation in the homeland variety (Flores & Rinke, 2020). However, in the case of most minority languages, the extent of this variation is still poorly understood, making comparisons with heritage varieties incomplete or misleading. P'urhepecha, a language isolate spoken by around 125,000 people in the state of Michoacán, Mexico (INEGI, 2010), is no exception. In this talk I will take P'urhepecha as a case study, arguing that variationist dialectological methods are necessary to help us to set the appropriate homeland baselines, which in turn enable us to better understand the variation observable in diaspora communities in the USA, such as in Chicago. These data will thus enable more fine-grained and geographically-specific comparisons to be drawn between homeland and, especially, first generation heritage language speakers. I will end with a call to staff and students for collaboration in this project, which will run until mid-2026 (https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/research/research-projects/humanities/language-variation-at-home-and-abroad-the-case-of-purhepecha-in-mexico-and-its-us-diaspora).

References

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