Mayan Languages in Northeastern Mississippi

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This presentation provides an overview of language use among speakers of Mayan languages in northeastern Mississippi. The multilingual space they inhabit includes English, Spanish, and several Mayan languages, primarily Chuj and Mam, creating a hotbed of language mixture in a rural region of the Deep South. Via preliminary data from sociolinguistic interviews and community observation in four counties, exemplified by a case study of a Chuj-speaking participant, some initial results of ongoing sociolinguistic research are provided, shedding light on multilingual practices within these communities. While Mayan speakerhood can represent an advantage provided one is fluent in Spanish, some Mayan speakers in Mississippi must navigate complex social environments stemming from their variable proficiency in Spanish and English. This study demonstrates how speakers navigate not only institutional facets of their lives in a multilingual Mayan/Spanish/English space but also how use of these languages intersects with their sense of identity as simultaneously Maya, Latin American, and members of Mississippi communities. This research, seeking to address a gap in our sociolinguistic understanding of the state of Mississippi, aims to: (1) provide the first sociolinguistic account of the use of Mayan languages in Mississippi, and (2) visibilize the presence of Latin American indigenous languages in the Deep South, combating the essentialized Spanish-monolingual depiction of communities from Mexico and Central America in the US.