Revitalization of Endangered Languages: Quechua in the Andes

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According to contemporary linguistic research, currently there are nearly seven thousand languages in the world; it is believed that more than half of these will disappear in the next century. These languages are called «endangered languages», «sleeping languages», «tongues in agony», «moribund languages», etc. The vast majority of languages that fall into these categories are the indigenous languages. Therefore, it is essential to revitalize and document them to prevent their extinction, and to safeguard the cultural and linguistic diversity of our planet. Documentation and revitalization are two faces of the same coin because they inform each other substantially, so they need to be carried out hand in hand.

Language revitalization involves the restoration or strengthening of a particular language in regions where they prevailed before being displaced by other, more powerful and prestigious languages. Overall, language revitalization has much to do with languages that are no longer used in everyday communication, as well as with those that are restricted to use only in certain contexts (Hinton, 2001). Language revitalization can involve teaching, developing, cultivating, strengthening, and disseminating a language to make it a vital instrument of communication in daily life; in other words, restoring and strengthening its pragmatic functions in various spheres of society.

On the other hand, language revitalization is also related to language policy and planning and their respective categories: status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning. Therefore, this process must be approached from multiple fronts, taking into account the social networks that intertwine home, school, and community (cf. Fishman, 1991, 1996, 1999, and 2001). It also involves restoring language use and reversing language shift. According to Fishman (1991), reversing language shift refers to changing
in the opposite direction the displacement process of a language in order to restore it as a means of communication in daily life. Fishman emphasizes the importance of the intergenerational transmission of a mother tongue to ensure the success of language reversal, and highlights the fact that the community of speakers who want to preserve their language may need outside help in the planning and implementation process. The lack of language transmission from generation to generation is, according to Fishman, a significant contributing factor to the loss of that language, since lack of transmission leads to «fewer and fewer speakers each generation»(1991).

4 It would be simplistic to say that the users of indigenous languages are the only true responsible parties for transmitting their languages from generation to generation, whether these languages are employed in the various contexts of everyday life or expanded into new functional domains of society. The intergenerational transmission process is closely linked to a number of historical, social, political, economic, and sociolinguistic factors that constitute serious barriers that work to the detriment of indigenous languages.

5 To achieve the goals of language recovery and revitalization, it is necessary to take draconian measures at all levels. It is also fundamental to strengthen, unite, articulate, and multiply efforts. For instance, robust language and technology planning, and innovative educational reform are needed in order to allow indigenous languages occupy the place that truly belongs to them in society. All this can be carried out with the active participation of indigenous peoples, as well as other sectors of society. Teaching, learning, and acquisition of indigenous languages pose great challenges because of their diglossic and multiglossic reality. This situation is illustrated by the absence of educational resources, and the lack of application of contemporary theories and methodologies to the development of educational materials in indigenous languages. Therefore, it is necessary to turn to linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, applied linguistics, educational linguistics, linguistic anthropology, semiotics, semantics, and pragmatics for investigational and pedagogical purposes, and for the development of educational materials. In fact, there are over thirty language-teaching methodologies, many of which can be used as a basis for an eclectic approach, to create a fusion of language teaching methods and their corresponding implementation in a comprehensive and holistic way. These theories and methodologies could be applied according to the context and characteristics of each language, and according to the needs of a diverse student population. In addition to this, the inclusion of local practices and knowledge in pedagogy is essential.

6 Another issue that deserves more attention is that in teaching, learning, and language acquisition processes, there is a tendency to focus too much only on the theories of L1 and L2 acquisition. However, seldom is there mention of the vital importance of C1 (first culture) and C2 (second culture) acquisition. As we know, language and culture are inseparable because they work together, and to ignore that connection in our theoretical and pedagogical practices is, without doubt, a monumental mistake.

7 Teaching, learning, and acquisition of indigenous languages and cultures in multicultural, multilingual, and multiethnic locations around the world are in strong need of language development, revitalization, promotion, and dissemination. At the same time, all these tasks contribute to an inalienable right according to a series of official documents, including language laws, education laws, the constitutions of numerous countries, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (online), the Universal
Declaration of Human Rights (online), and the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (online). Thus teaching, learning, and acquisition of indigenous languages and cultures should be included in the implementation of top-down and bottom-up educational and linguistic policies as well as in any language planning initiative.

As noted above, school, home, and society play a key role in language revitalization. The private and public spaces are breeding grounds for the exercise of linguistic rights and for the restoration of the functional domains of a given language. Together with the intergenerational transmission of language and culture, school also plays a pivotal role in the process of language revitalization and language reversal. Unfortunately, asymmetrical power relations, negative language attitudes, competing language ideologies, language discrimination, linguistic shame, competing social, linguistic, and cultural capitals, social condemnation, and even worse, linguistic self-condemnation have been constants in many cultures, at the expense of indigenous languages and cultures across time and space. These sociolinguistic and sociocultural phenomena have contributed significantly to keeping indigenous languages in a diglossic and even multiglossic situation. In addition to all this, historical, social, political, economic, educational, and technological factors continue to condemn indigenous-language speakers to linguistic displacement; that is, to abandoning one’s linguistic and cultural practices in order to assimilate into mainstream society. For example, the various models of bilingual education in Latin America are homogenizing forces of assimilation and transculturation since they do not go beyond elementary education. Any bilingual education program that does not include indigenous languages at all levels of the educational system should simply be called Transitional Bilingual Education, which, as its name implies, only contributes to the rapid transition to the dominant language and culture. That is to say, it leads to linguistic displacement and cultural erasure.

However, a true Maintenance Bilingual Education is a major challenge in terms of planning, implementation, and evaluation. It is important to have sufficient economic, human, and pedagogical resources. This process requires innovation in the educational system, and language policies from holistic and inclusive perspectives. It also raises the need for the reengineering of language planning (status, corpus, and acquisition) at local, regional, national, international, and transnational levels. For example, the need is urgent to create laws to establish the teaching, learning, acquisition, promotion, and documentation of indigenous languages and cultures nationally and internationally. Moreover, these laws should protect linguistic diversity and indigenous languages, giving them the status they deserve in society, so that speakers of these languages continue to transmit them from generation to generation with full conviction, and also to make sure the indigenous languages are used in different domains of society. National governments should also promote literacy in indigenous languages, and develop multimodal pedagogical materials in indigenous languages (in printed and digital formats), and make available mass media (in printed and digital modes) as well.

Last but not least, it is fundamental to develop all kinds of pedagogical resources and materials for different educational levels (preschool, kindergarten, elementary and secondary school, and college if possible). Also, it is imperative that bilingual teachers be trained; these will be the agents of language maintenance and revitalization in the educational domain. The issue is not only the implementation of educational programs in indigenous languages for their community of speakers; rather, these programs should also include the speakers of dominant languages, so they can develop linguistic and
cultural awareness and learn to appreciate a wide range of invaluable knowledge and skills the indigenous languages bring with them. More importantly, the community of speakers of endangered languages needs all sorts of support from different sectors and vectors of society to make sure that the intergenerational transmission of language and culture, which is a cornerstone in any linguistic and cultural revitalization effort, continues vibrantly in the years to come.

Quechua in the Andes

Quechua, also known as Quichua or Kichwa, is one of the most widely spoken languages in South America, which originates from Proto-Quechua. According to contemporary linguistic research, Quechua is divided into two main linguistic branches called Central Quechua (QI) and Southern and Northern (QII), each of which consists of several dialects (Parker, 1963; Torero, 1964 and 1974; Cerrón-Palomino, 1987). Like many minority languages, Quechua exists in a multiglossic situation in which the high language is so powerful that it is essentially forcing the low language slowly into extinction. In this case, Spanish is the prestige language, while Quechua and other indigenous languages in Latin America are, generally speaking, the devalued languages. However, one significant difference that Quechua has from other endangered languages is that it currently boasts an estimated eight to twelve million speakers (Hornberger and King, 2001: 166; Hornberger and Coronel-Molina, 2004: 10), scattered across six South American countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. However, it is considered an endangered language due to its polydialectal nature. Statistics on the speakers themselves can provide a starting point for a discussion of contemporary language use. To that end, I have compiled some statistical information on Quechua language use, gathered where possible from the national censuses of the respective countries on the assumption that they contain the most officially recognized information, although I recognize that they are not necessarily the most accurate.

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<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>40.091.359</td>
<td>9.947.418</td>
<td>15.116.435</td>
<td>44.725.543</td>
<td>15.007.343</td>
<td>29.248.943</td>
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<td>Quechua speakers</td>
<td>300.000</td>
<td>2.530.985</td>
<td>6.175</td>
<td>19.079</td>
<td>499.292</td>
<td>3.262.100</td>
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<td>Total population of Quechua speakers</td>
<td>6.617.639</td>
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Table 1. Number of Quechua speakers according to recent sources²

As Table 1 shows, Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador maintain the highest concentrations of Quechua speakers. It is notable that the figures in Table 1 do not even closely approximate the eight to twelve million speakers mentioned above. This could be due to a number of factors, be they political, ideological, economic, attitudinal, or due to lack of human resources, lack of appropriate training, etc. In addition, I have not addressed the issue of monolingual vs. bilingual or even multilingual speakers, given the difficulty of locating reliable data. It is conceivable that the fact of the monolingualism or multilingualism of an
interviewee could also somehow be influencing the information collected in the censuses. It is estimated that there are more than one and half million monolingual Quechua speakers in Peru.

This consideration is relevant because according to census data and estimates by diverse researchers, there are indeed still populations of monolingual Quechua speakers. These populations can be explained by the continued existence of some geographically isolated regions, generally found high in the Andes or in lowland areas where it remains difficult for outsiders to penetrate and exert much linguistic influence. The highest concentration of monolinguals is in the rural highlands of Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador. Most of the Quechua speakers are bilinguals, and some of them multilinguals. There are Quechua speakers across the Andean territory and the Amazon basin. Historically, Southern and Northern Quechua (QII), which extends from the QI regions as far north as southeastern Colombia and as far as north as northern Chile and Argentina, has received the most attention from linguists and language planners, largely because its dialects are much more widely spoken than those of QI, especially in the pre-Hispanic centers of power and those areas first colonized by the Spanish. (Hornberger & Coronel-Molina, 2004: 11).

Thus these areas of QII speech gained early attention from the priests who acted as early linguists. Unfortunately, Central Quechua (QI), found in the central and northeastern areas of Peru (Ancash, Huánuco, Pasco, Junín and Lima), is also the branch with the dialects most in danger of dying out, given the small size of the populations speaking these varieties (Cerrón-Palomino, 1997: 62), and so researchers may not have the opportunity to study some of them for much longer, unless serious language revitalization and language documentation are carried out. Quechua speakers can be found in rural and urban contexts (small and isolated communities and in the metropolitan areas of South America). QI has the largest number of speakers in the highlands, such as Huancavelica, Apurimac, Ayacucho, Cuzco, Puno, and across Bolivia and Ecuador. Due to all types of migration (national as well as international), thousands of Quechua speakers can be found in transnational contexts as well.

One might wonder how a language with so many speakers could be considered endangered. It is important to understand not only the historical situation of contact that Quechua has suffered for more than 500 years, but also the linguistic diversity within the language, which is disguised by the use of one name to refer to multiple varieties. «Aside from social, cultural, economic, and political factors which are often cited by researchers to explain the status of an endangered status of a language» (Hornberger and Coronel-Molina, 2004: 10), Quechua also contends with linguistic, ideological and cultural differences, due to the many, often purportedly mutually unintelligible, varieties of which it consists.

Because different varieties are spoken across a large numbers of diverse communities and every Quechua community exists within its own particular local, regional and national [and transnational] context[s], each variety presents unique challenges for language planners. And although there are some sociolinguistic commonalities across regions, the diverse mosaic of sociocultural experiences and experiences make it difficult to generalize regarding a single, monolithic «Quechua nation» (Hornberger and Coronel-Molina, 2004: 10).

In this sense, language policy and planning, and language revitalization and documentation are crucial for the survival and development of the Quechua language, working from the assumption that language is indeed a fundamental element of ethnic
identities for many Quechua speakers in the Andes, although I recognize that it is not the only identity marker, and for some speech communities, certainly not the most important one.

At the most fundamental level, constitutional recognition of the validity of Quechua lays the groundwork for other top-down efforts to improve the language’s status throughout the Andean countries. Unfortunately, such constitutional recognition varies widely across the region. The 1994 constitution of Argentina does not include specific information about indigenous peoples and languages and cultures. Bolivia’s 1994 constitution (Articles 1, 2, and 3), on the other hand, recognizes all kinds of pluralisms and protects the sociocultural, sociohistorical, economic and linguistic rights, traditions and institutions of the multiethnic, plurilingual, and multicultural indigenous communities. Article 5 specifies the official status of Spanish and the languages of the indigenous peoples of Bolivia. The Constitution even makes special mention of intercultural bilingual education in the indigenous languages. For instance, Chapter 6 of the constitution is devoted to education, interculturality, and cultural rights, and Article 78: 2 specifies that education be intracultural, intercultural, and plurilingual in the educational system across the entire nation. Colombia’s constitution of 1991, for its part, recognizes and protects ethnic and cultural diversity in Article 7. Article 10 establishes Spanish as the official language of the nation, while the languages and dialects of the various ethnic groups are official in their respective zones. Education is mandated to be bilingual in Spanish and the local languages. In Ecuador’s 2008 constitution, Article 2 recognizes Spanish as the official language of the country, and Spanish, Kichwa and Shuar are considered official languages of intercultural relations. The other ancestral languages are official languages for the use of indigenous people in the territories where they are spoken in accordance with the law. The State will respect and encourage its preservation and use. In Chapter 4, Article 14 states that it is within the rights of the communities, peoples, and nationalities to develop and strengthen the intercultural bilingual education system from the elementary through the higher education levels, to promote cultural diversity and the preservation of identities. Finally, Peru’s 1993 constitution grants all citizens the right to exercise their ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identity, and Article 2, paragraph 19 recognizes and protects ethnic and cultural plurality. In the last paragraph of Article 17, bilingual intercultural education is established, «according to the characteristics of each zone». Article 48 establishes Spanish as the official language, with Quechua and Aymara and all other indigenous languages being official in the areas where they predominate (Constitutions of the Americas [online]).

Apart from the constitutions of the Andean countries, there are several national and international laws that protect the rights of the Indigenous Peoples around the world such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the Convention of the Rights of the Child; the Convention Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (ILO No. 169); among others. For detailed information on these rights, see Study Guide: The Rights of Indigenous People (online). Peru also has several laws that establish the development, promotion, inclusion, and protection of indigenous languages through education. The most important ones are the General Law on Education in Peru of 2003, No. 28044; the Ley del Fondo Nacional de Desarrollo de la Educación Peruana (FONDEP) No. 28332, August, 2004; the Ley para la Educación Bilingüe Intercultural, No. 27818 of August, 2002; the Ley de los Derechos de Participación y Control Ciudadanos, No. 26300 of May 1994; the Ley Nacional de Lenguas, 2005; and the
Law for the Preservation and Use of the Original Language of Peru, June 2010, Law No. 29735 (Educaciónred.com (online)).

It is obvious that endangered languages around the world are receiving considerable attention at the present time within the various fields with an interest in linguistics, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics, including anthropology, history, the social sciences, and language pedagogy. In particular, many investigators, language planners, language activists, educators, and experts from different fields of study, indigenous scholars and practitioners, leaders of indigenous organizations, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and even academic and religious institutions are interested in multiple means of maintaining, developing, revitalizing, and documenting endangered languages—of which Quechua is one.

As the geographical distribution data show, Quechua is still widely spoken across a significant portion of the Andean countries and even in transnational and geopolitical contexts, despite a very long history of repression, oppression, and even outright attempts at linguicide, ethnocide, and cultural erasure. There is reason to feel optimistic that there is a future for the Quechua language, at least for the most vital Quechua varieties. However, its future is not something that can be left to chance; without deliberate intervention and planning to counteract the long history of attempts to wipe it out it could go the way of many other indigenous languages, which are still fighting for survival, but against very high odds, and many think it is already a losing battle for them.

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APPENDIXES

Annexes

NOTES

1. Some examples of digital mass media are films, documentaries, e-newspapers, e-magazines, and e-newsletters, among others. In addition to this, the New Information and Communication Technologies (NICTs) such as web radio, satellite and web-TVs, the Internet in general such as Mozilla, Google search engines, websites, blogs, Facebook sites, chats, e-mails, Twitters, YouTube, ATM machines, and technological tools such as computers (One Lap Top Per Child) and transient technology such as cell phones, iPhones, iPads, CD-Roms and DVDs; 3-D virtual world such as Second Life, and software such as spell-checking, video games, Rosetta Stone, machine translations, Windows and Office, AbiWord, Intrans.php, Hunspell and GNOME, can all be powerful allies in language preservation, documentation, promotion, and revitalization.

2. The data for Argentina comes from Alderetes et al. (1999) and the numbers for Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador come from the Atlas Sociolinguistico de Pueblos Indígenas de America Latina, Tomo 2 (2009). It is obvious that the estimated populations of total Quechua speakers provided above differ from the figures in Table 1. Unfortunately, national census data and any attempt to report on Quechua speakers are not accurate enough because they are not carried out in a systematic way. What is needed is to carry out a linguistic census to come up with the exact number of Quechua speakers; such an initiative would require considerable effort, planning, and human and economic resources.

3. For information on Quechua language policy and planning, and revitalization efforts in the vast Andean region, see King, 2001; Hornberger and Coronel-Molina, 2004; and Coronel-Molina, 2005. For other cases in the United States, see Hinton and Hale, 2001; Lomawaima and McCarty, 2006; McCarty, 2005; McCarty and Zepeda, 2006; Reyhner and Lockard, 2009; Teaching Indigenous Languages Website [online]. For other cases around the world, see Wright, 1997; Hornberger, 1997; Fishman, 2001; Williams, 2000; and Austin and Sallabank, 2011, among others.

4. The indigenous languages listed as official languages in the 1994 Bolivian Constitution are Aymara, Araona, Baure, Bésiro, Canichana, Cavineño, Cayubaba, Chácobo, Chimán, Ese Eja, Guaraní, Guarašu’we, Guarayu, Itonama, Leco, Machajuyaikallawaya, Machineri, Maropa, Mojeño-Trinitario, Mojeño-Ignaciano, Moré, Mosetén, Movima, Pacawara, Puquina, Quechua, Sirionó, Tacana, Tapiete, Toromona, Uru-Chipaya, Weenhayek, Yaminawa, Yuki, Yuracaré and Zamuco.