BILINGUALISM (Diversity vs uniformity)

Survival of an Endangered Vernacular in a Minority Group

María Marta Michel

Abstract. This paper aims at examining why languages have different statuses in bilingual communities, and the consequence that follows; ie, preeminence of majority languages versus decline, even abandonment of minority ones. The case of Chorote in Salta is chosen both to illustrate the question and to suggest a course of action. It is concluded that promoting public awareness and subsequent action by individuals as well as private and governmental institutions could help minority languages from disappearing.

This reflection will bring together the problem of bilingual minority groups and the resurgence of an endangered vernacular language, namely Chorote, in the north of Salta, Argentina.

People’s view of language through history has undergone deep changes, especially in recent times. Language has always been considered peculiar to human beings, for no other species can communicate through such elaborate oral, written or signing systems. In general terms, there has been agreement upon the intrinsic ‘humanity’ of language. But wide discrepancies arise when the question is focused on how languages are seen by the people who actually speak them and by those who speak a different one.

In this respect, it is important to highlight the dialectical relation between language and power. As an illustration, for religious people language has been the channel chosen by the gods to communicate with them. It has been the vehicle for divine messages in the obscure words of pythoneses, shamans, priests and other initiated people who have the power to interpret what is utterly unintelligible to the rest of mortals. Words are magic; rituals to restore health, to harm enemies, to ensure good harvests are ‘said’ by those
few who know how to reach the gods. Further examples are holy books like the Coran or the Bible. According to religious tradition, they contain God’s word, which in the case of the Bible could only be interpreted by priests; again, only a few could communicate ‘the Word’. A brief digression; at present, rituals, black and white magic are still common in our society, though our rational Western mind impels us to ignore it. But this very same mind is easy prey to political propaganda and advertising, which make use of different incantation formulae to bring us under their power.

The biblical metaphor of Babel will be useful too to illustrate attitudes towards language. Babel was a punishment, but it could perhaps be seen in a different light. The story says that God ‘sabotaged the common language that enabled (people) to communicate’ (Mühlhäusler, 1994:16) because they tried to build a tower so high that it could reach Heaven. However, Babel was a blessing after all, because people are so different that a single language for all appears to be totally unnatural. Human variety seems to ‘demand’ language variety. But how is linguistic diversity viewed by its own beneficiaries? It is seen in radically different ways.

**Language Privilege**

When considering languages, it is often difficult to leave prejudices aside. There is a long tradition of privileging some languages over others - majority languages over minority ones. For the purposes of this work we will use the term ‘minority language’ to refer to that of small ethnic groups; it should be remembered that the language of women and other groups within society are also ‘minority languages’.

The biased view that some languages are better than others is far from being a thing of the past. Throughout history, the language of the conquerors was, in the majority of cases, held in more prestige than that of the peoples conquered and tended to be imposed on them. That was the case of Quechua, spread by the Incas over a vast region south of Peru before the
Spanish conquest. Today, the notion that Spanish, English, French or Arabic are richer and ‘say’ things better than creoles or indigenous languages, among others, is still deeply rooted in society. Incidentally, this is closely associated to the conviction that languages should remain pure of ‘contamination’ from other languages and change as little as possible, which, of course, contradicts the very essence of human interaction. The idea of purity goes far back in time, that is why it is so strong and that was what Academies were for; for instance, the aim of the Spanish Academy was to purify and fix the language. In countries where there was no Academy, the same aim was pursued by grammarians, stylists and other experts.

It was only in the 20th century that the idea of ‘primitive’ languages was strongly attacked by linguists; Sapir, among others. They showed how indigenous languages could express abstractions and the rich variety of human experience and emotions in the same way as ‘more complex’ languages. ‘Anthropologically speaking, the human race can be said to have evolved from primitive to civilized states, but there is no sign of language having gone through the same kind of evolution’ (Crystal, 1997:6). This aspect of language is studied by Sociolinguistics which focuses on ‘the relation between language and society, between the uses of the language and the social structures in which the users live’ (Spolsky, 1998:3). Although attitudes have changed greatly, there is still much to do. The proof is that languages are becoming extinct, very much as plants and animals are.

Language and Power

It has been mentioned before that languages are instruments of power and as such are imposed by the dominant group upon the minorities. The effect of such action is the shrinkage or extinction of the vernacular spoken by the minority groups. The magnitude of the loss, in case of extinction, can only be grasped when it is realized that ‘a language, like a species, when extinct...never reappears’ (Pinker, 1995:241). The idea is not new, in fact it is
Darwin’s, but it was further developed only during the last few decades.

Generally speaking, conflict between languages is almost inevitable due to the fact that ‘normal everyday life is now carried out in multicultural worlds’ (Agar, 1991:464). Furthermore, ‘monolingual speech communities are extremely rare; monolingual countries are even rarer’ (Spolsky, 1998:51); the exceptions being, according to Illich, highly improbable neolithic tribes and, less so, communities that have been discriminated against in exceptionally harsh ways or that have voluntarily isolated themselves from the surrounding culture/s. (The term ‘culture’ is a loose one and has been defined in many different forms. It is used here, loosely perhaps, as that which is common to a group of people, the invisible links that unite some individuals differentiating them from other groups: shared institutions, practices, behaviour and language).

Now, how does language conflict begin? It starts as the result, in modern times, of economic domination of one state over others and of the displacement of large numbers of people from one territory to another. This movement occurs either within the law (immigration accepted or favoured by state policies) or against it (migration) (Eco, 1998:123). However, there is still an older reason for language contact: conquests. The latter applies to the contact between Chorote and Spanish.

Minority Languages in the North of Salta

There are two important linguistic groups in the Chaco region of Salta, Mataco-mataguayo, and Chiriguano-chané. The Mataco-mataguayo peoples are Chulupí, Mataco (Wichí) and Chorote. None of these people had a writing system at the time of the conquest; consequently, we can only know about them through the biased discourse of one group, the foreigner’s. There are few vestiges of the voice of the Indians in some documents (Poderti, 1995:68). Poderti draws attention to the repeated image, in father Morillo’s travel journal, of Indians and expeditionaries each running away from the
other, a metaphor of the difficulty to translate different cultural codes, which was characteristic of the conquest. Poderti adds that the initial fear was replaced by barter. The ‘gifts’ given by the whites to the Indians reveal the transculturation process (1) that took place. These presents varied with successive expeditions, food, tobacco, tools and finally clothes which fostered the desire to imitate the ways of the dominant culture. In the eyes of the Spanish, the Indians were unquestionably inferior but their language was learned for practical reasons. They needed guides into the new territories as well as information about them, and they had to preach. Missionaries, especially Jesuits, preached in the native tongue, often providing it with a writing system, though it was not taught to the native people. When the Jesuits were expelled in 1767, most of their work was lost.

Once the conquest was completed, the vernacular became useless and, what is more, it became a menace. It has already been mentioned that language is power, it gives the group its identity, it lends cohesion to the vernacular culture and strengthens bonds among the community members. It should be pointed out, before going any further, that ‘language’ and ‘culture’ are indissolubly bonded concepts (disquieting implications can be derived from this fact). We might ask ourselves whether there was a planned political action against the many indigenous languages in Argentina or whether they were gradually weakened by the imposition of Spanish –the ‘new mother tongue’.

Although the Constitution does not establish Spanish as the official language, thus ‘promoting unilingualism through legislation’ as happened in France (Bourhis, 1982:308), Spanish has always been additive because it is the language taught and used by the State—a fact that facilitated its preeminence over all the vernaculars. The fast weakening of Chorote was also due to the fact that, according to Ferguson’s classification, it was W0, (not utilized in writing) (Haugen, 1966:347), because it lacked a written alphabet. This of course, made it look less ‘useful’ and ‘respectable’ in the
eyes of the new dominant group and, consequently, in those of the younger Chorote generations. Young speakers tend to show less ‘language loyalty’ (Spolsky, 1998:55) as a result both of migration in search of better opportunities and of deculturation; ie, the failure to fully identify with either culture. However, most of the community feel that, although the majority language has ‘overwhelming advantages’ it ‘symbolize(s)... oppression and convey(s) an alien culture’ (Haugen,1966:346); and that is the great paradox of the acculturation process undergone by many individuals (2) ‘I want to be part of what I resent’. It must be borne in mind that the once large indigenous communities were brutally reduced as a result of the conquest ; their land was confiscated and afterwards they were totally forgotten by the successive administrations. The outcome, impoverished groups systematically discriminated against, exploited and underrated, in cultural terms, by the dominant group.

Both Spanish and Chorote are in contact, then. The term ‘contact’; ie, ‘the temporo-spatial coexistence of two or more languages’ (i), became internationally used with Uriel Weinreich (Elizaincin, 1992:19). Contact between languages is the rule, not the exception and it is often conflictive. The result is diglossia (3) and bilingualism. Although interference is more likely to occur with similar contact languages , loans (4) are very frequent ; incidentally, Quechua has contributed many words and structures to the Spanish spoken in the north of our country.

Nonetheless, the attitude of the speakers is fundamental if a language is to be used or forgotten. There are cases in which parents do not want their children to learn their native tongue because it is discredited even in their own eyes and they do not want the children to suffer discrimination.

The Case of Chorote

Returning to Chorote, the language seemed doomed to extinction which could be related to the extinction of the group’s culture. However, a new
'development' of the language reversed this seemingly inevitable fate. An Anglican missionary, Mr Nicholas Drayson, a linguist and a translator, devoted himself to the task of giving Chorote a written code. Mr Drayson mentions that the Chorote requested that ‘somebody helped them write their language’ (i) because the Wichí had already had a written code for many years and had greatly benefited by this. He adds that the Chorote call themselves sa'am siukia si'lij (we, of our language), which proves how important their tongue is to them; consequently, contempt for their language by the dominant culture has a very negative impact on their self-esteem.

The arduous task of elaborating a phonetic system, prior to transferring the oral language to writing, was started in 1976. The Roman alphabet was used and a collection of stories on the life of Jesus was the first book published in Chorote in 1980. That was, of course, a transcendent step to the preservation of the culture, on the one hand, and to the resurgence of the language, on the other. The implications are many but probably the most important is the group’s feeling that Chorote is now on a one-to-one level with Spanish, at least in some respects. The representation that what is written is what matters is deeply rooted in the people. If Chorote is written, it matters, it is important. This naturally led the group to attach greater value to their own identity. Needless to say, the process is far more complex than it seems but it is exemplary: languages can and must be saved, people’s pride and self-respect are saved along with them.

Inevitably, as has always been the case, one language will dominate over the other, depending on people’s needs. If their concerns are outside the community, Spanish will prevail; if they are within, Chorote will. As regards Spanish and Chorote at present, the former is used for official purposes while Chorote is the community language. Obviously, the choice of language, even for the same individual, will vary with age or occupation, among other reasons.

It is interesting to point out that the Chorote lowúxua have a friendly,
positive attitude towards other people; intermarriage is a good example, as well as periodical visits to other villages, barter and the acceptance of other groups’ cultural practices. Another characteristic is that they have traditionally favoured trade over war, shrewdness over bravery. When they went to war they allied with the Toba or Chulupí, leaving both the latter groups to attack first; after the battle, the Chorote would sing the courage of their allies. That is why their Chiefs identify with the ahóusa (Polyborus plancus), a bird that steals food from true birds of prey as well as from vultures. According to their taxonomy, the ahóusa shares features of both types. (Siffredi, 1984:6).

It would also be interesting to examine the educational situation, and what the people expect of it. The Argentine Constitution, amended in 1994, guarantees the right of indigenous peoples to ‘a bilingual, intercultural education’ (section 75). It is worth highlighting the difference between bicultural and intercultural education. Bicultural education means that people have the right to an educational system that acknowledges and respects their cultural values, which is a big step in favour of ethnic minorities. The use of the vernacular is stimulated inside the community but children have to master Spanish to communicate in the world outside. The outcome is the reinforcement of the idea that the vernacular culture lacks scientific knowledge and that it is necessary to resort to the logical patterns and thinking categories of Western culture. Intercultural education, on the other hand, means promoting participation of the minorities in the educational process, not just to translate concepts from one language into the other or to teach the vernacular in the first grades as a way of making it easier to learn Spanish later on. It aims at incorporating the learners’ linguistic and sociocultural patterns and also the methodological and teaching practices used by their elders to teach the community children (Gerzenstein et al, 1998:123).

The incorporation of bilingual native assistant teachers is not new; however, the Chorote are very critical of the present situation. In the first place, the
assistants are rarely trained to teach and more often than not they are assigned cleaning duties in the school or, at best, serve as translators between the teacher and the children.

The Chorote people demand that native teachers be properly trained and respected as such and that adequate texts in their language be used at school for a fruitful bilingual intercultural education (Buliubasich et al, 1996). Although, the bilingual school system will have to be adjusted in the future, it is unquestionably a great step towards tolerant coexistence (as distinct from assimilation) in a vaster, more generous culture which is not the ‘addition of existing cultures (but) their metamorphosis’ (Malraux, 1945) achieved through mutual respect and cooperation.

I would like to borrow the words of the Venezuelan thinker J.M. Briceño, quoted by Savater, before going on to my final conclusions: ‘The western will for power seeks to universalise, to make *e pluribus unum*, to reduce the multiplicity of cultural worlds to the unity of its own world, to bring into its circle stars and songs, oceans and myths, birds and families, marigolds and children’s games; they want them to pass through their ring, to obey the crack of their intellectual whip, to dance to their music. I won’t be good at it. I want a varied, scattered, heterogeneous world...’ (i)

**Conclusions**

1. Languages, like animals and plants, can become extinct and disappear carrying with them rich worlds which are gone forever. It is our duty to look at minority languages from a different perpective. We should forget for a while that we belong to the dominant majority and imagine what it must feel like when one’s own culture, one’s own identity is threatened.

2. Languages can be saved, a good example is Chorote. However, governments should become actively involved and enforce serious policies to help preserve and disseminate indigenous languages in order to contribute to
a more tolerant society where subgroups -the term is not used derogatorily- are known and respected. Nevertheless, the fact that the State should take action, does not relieve individuals of their duty to fight against discrimination and intolerance.

3. The tendency to a highly globalised world should open our eyes to an urgent need to maintain our own identity and assist others in maintaining theirs. Difference is enriching; uniformity goes against our very nature.

NOTES
(1) Transculturation: infiltration of cultural features of a society into another.
(2) Acculturation: identification with the second language culture.
(3) Diglossia: alternate use of two clearly different varieties of the same language for different purposes; for example, the use of the standard variety for official purposes and the use of the other in the home and with friends.
(4) Loan: ‘borrowed’ word or structure; for example, ‘byte’ in Spanish.
   (i) My translation.

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Biographical note

María Marta Michel Torino holds a degree in Translating (Universidad Católica Argentina, Buenos Aires). She was Headmistress and English teacher at private institutes for fourteen years and Translation teacher at Universidad Católica de Salta. At present, she is Advanced Language teacher at Universidad Católica de Salta, University of Cambridge oral examiner and free-lance translator.

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