The Study of Indigenous Languages in Latin America

by Nora C. England | University of Texas at Austin | nengland@mail.utexas.edu

Introduction

All Latin American indigenous languages are endangered. This means that they show signs of language shift in at least some communities, or they are so small that such a shift, were it to occur, could result in the rapid extinction of the language. The specific situations of Latin America's many languages differ greatly, in terms of numbers, from Quechua, with between 8.5 and 10 million speakers (Adelaar and Muysken 2004:168), down to languages such as Xinka, which has fewer than ten fluent speakers. They differ also in regard to percentages, from 100 percent of community members speaking the language to less than one percent. There are large languages, in terms of the raw population of speakers, that are highly endangered because no children are learning them, and small languages that all children within the linguistic group learn first and fluently. The reverse also obtains: there are large languages that a large enough number of children are still learning so that the level of endangerment is relatively low, and small populations where shift is almost complete. There are language communities where bilingualism is the norm and does not necessarily lead to language shift, and others where bilingualism typically signals a transition from one language to another. Most telling, perhaps, is that all the indicators of language loss and shift have increased over the last twenty years.

Linguists working on indigenous Latin American languages, as well as many native speakers, have become increasingly aware of the high level of endangerment of many languages. This awareness, in conjunction with continuing advances in the field of linguistics, has resulted in several developments that characterize the study of these languages in the last two decades.

In response to an enhanced awareness of the endangered nature of most indigenous languages in the world, basic description and documentation has been carried out on more and more Latin American languages. Advances in technology have improved the quality and availability of documentation.

Advances in linguistic typology and linguistic theory in general have had a profound effect on the quality of the descriptions that have been completed in this period.

As linguists have become aware of speakers and communities of speakers as important stakeholders in the study, description, and documentation of endangered languages, more materials are produced for and are available to speakers and communities.

More speakers of indigenous languages are contributing primary descriptive, documentary, and theoretical materials on their languages from a linguistically sophisticated perspective.

I will take up these points in turn.

Description and Documentation

One measure of the increase in documentation of Latin American languages is the establishment of an archive specifically for maintaining digital records of the languages. The Archive of Indigenous Languages of Latin America (AILLA) at the University of Texas began operations in 2001 and as of August 2011 had uploaded data from approximately 150 different languages. The data include, principally, audio files of spoken examples of the languages (anywhere from word lists to lengthy narrations), but also include videos, transcriptions (some annotated or analyzed), field notes, and other miscellaneous contributions. Some languages from each Latin American country are represented—except Uruguay, Suriname, and French Guiana. The largest numbers of deposits come from Brazil (28 languages) and Mexico (27), with significant numbers from Guatemala (20) and Bolivia (14) as well. Some of the collections are extensive; others are small. Almost all are publicly available, although some have restrictions that require a user to obtain a password from the depositor. The improvements in recording technology and the possibilities for preservation in a digital format have made this kind of archive possible, and the Internet has made it instantly usable all over the world. While Internet access is still not available in all indigenous communities, it is rapidly arriving in many.

Another measure of the growth in the documentation of Latin American indigenous languages is the increased share of publication of articles about these languages published in the *International Journal of American Linguistics*, the scholarly journal that is entirely devoted to American indigenous languages. In a count of the number of articles published on Latin American languages compared to North American languages (north of Mexico) in the decades 1982-1991 and 2002-2011, the increase has been remarkable. In the earlier decade 72 percent of the articles were devoted to North American indigenous languages, 19 percent to Mexican, Central American, and Panamanian languages, and only 9 percent to South American languages. In the most recent ten years, however, only 37 percent of the articles were written about North American languages, a modestly increased 24 percent on Mexican, Central American, and Panamanian languages, and a hugely increased 39 percent on South American languages. That is, articles on North

America decreased by half and articles on South America increased four-fold.

During the period under discussion the documentation of Mexican and Central American languages has reached an advanced level. Basic documentation is no longer needed in most cases, and some of the recent studies, especially by native speakers, have addressed complex issues in grammatical analysis. South America, especially the Amazon, is still one of the most linguistically diverse areas of the world, with large numbers of under-documented and under-studied languages. Of the close to 200 languages listed for the Brazilian Amazon by Moore (2007), for instance, approximately one-third are lacking any study at all. However, more and more Amazonian languages are currently being documented; it is one of the areas of dramatically increased attention as a result of the focus on language endangerment.

Descriptive Quality

A perusal of some of the grammars and grammatical works that have been produced for Latin American languages in the last two decades shows that they include topics that were generally not elaborated and often not even contemplated in grammars that were written in the previous periods, especially in syntax. Examples include much more detailed studies of complex clause structures, especially complement clauses; attention to various complex structures (at either the clause or predicate level) such as serial verb structures, secondary predicates, and auxiliary constructions; discussions of several alignment types that were rarely recognized before, such as agentive alignment and inverse structures; an expanded discussion of voice, especially including middles, antipassives, and applicatives; and an expanded discussion of discourse markers, such as evidentials, epistemological markers, and mirativity.

Attention to phonology has been less marked, unless the language includes something like complex tones that demand much greater attention to phonology. Even so, phonological research on Latin American languages has by and large been outstripped by research in morphology and syntax, and there has been an unfortunate tendency to pay little attention to phonology (often no more than a guide to pronunciation) in reference grammars, and to ignore certain kinds of distinctions such as tone or vowel length that have been either hard to hear or difficult to analyze. New and more sophisticated phonological research is just beginning to be produced for many languages.

Linguists and (Communities of) Speakers

The relationship between linguists and (communities of) speakers of the languages they study is complex and in constant flux as social science in general learns to pay more attention to people targeted by research. The Linguistic Society of America only recently (2009) established a code of ethics that covers responsibilities to research participants and communities. While such codes may not, in the end, be very effective in regulating or modifying the behavior of individual researchers, they signal a willingness on the part of the profession to engage with the issues. The past two decades have seen an increasing volume of discussions with regard to the responsibilities of linguists to endangered languages and endangered language communities (see, for instance, Hale et al. 1992, Newman 2003, Ameka 2006, Speas 2009, Grenoble 2009, Rice 2009). The emerging consensus seems to be that linguists have some responsibility to these languages and communities of speakers, but there is less agreement on exactly what that responsibility is and how to discharge it.

Some of the concrete results of linguists attempting to meet their responsibilities with regard to the communities where they work have taken the form of participating in the production of materials for educational and other applied purposes, in the design of materials to teach the language to second-language learners (either heritage or outside learners), in writing materials of general public interest about the language, and in writing grammars directed toward community members. Some linguists have worked with or been consultants for bilingual education programs. Several linguists have founded or participated in programs to teach linguistics or grammatical structure to community members, either through some established program such as the local university or in *ad hoc* programs set up specifically for that purpose.

Role of Speakers

A final result of the attempt by linguists to meet responsibilities to communities of speakers has been that more and more Latin Americans, including speakers of indigenous languages, have been trained in linguistics at first-rate universities abroad. This is beginning to have results in the strengthening of linguistics programs in several Latin American countries. In addition, there are unprecedented numbers of speakers of indigenous languages who are obtaining their doctorates in linguistics. Recent graduates include, for example: Eladio Mateo (speaker of Q'anjob'al, PhD 2008 University of Texas); Salomé

Gutiérrez (speaker of Sierra Popoluca, PhD 2008 University of California, Santa Barbara); Félix Julca (speaker of Quechua, PhD 2010 University of Texas); Pedro Mateo (speaker of Q'anjob'al, PhD 2010 University of Kansas); Emiliana Cruz (speaker of Chatino, PhD 2011 University of Texas); and Juan Vázquez (speaker of Chol, PhD 2011 University of Texas). The topics of the dissertations of these scholars are quite varied, and include a grammar (Vázquez 2011), an in-depth phonology (Cruz 2011), a study of language contact (Gutiérrez 2008), of dialect differentiation (Julca 2010), of acquisition (P. Mateo 2010), and of complex predicates (E. Mateo 2008). It can be noted that there are more indigenous people from Mexico and Guatemala in doctoral programs than from any other Latin American country; this is a result of demographics, educational opportunity, and specific local initiatives that have emphasized linguistic work rather than limiting themselves to bilingual education and the like.

It is clear that the trend for speakers of indigenous languages of Latin America to participate more and more in their analysis and description is positive. Some of the analysis thus produced is highly sophisticated. (For an evaluation of what speakers of Mayan languages have produced, for example, see England 2007). Furthermore, native speaker linguists are at the same time members of a minority language community and also linguists; they may have a greater ability to apply linguistics to practical problems related to language, communication, and education than would outsiders. Advanced study in linguistics gives them added authority with regard to language-related policy issues and also the real knowledge from which to make policy-related decisions. Finally, the prestige that accrues to the language itself when speakers become linguists is of real value in contributing to language maintenance.

Concluding Remarks

The study of Latin American indigenous languages is accelerating. Some of that study is purely academic but some of it is also dedicated to applications in language maintenance and language education. Speakers of indigenous languages are taking an increasingly active part in the study of their own languages. It is not yet clear whether this participation will result in the slowing down of language loss, but it is abundantly clear that it contributes to greater intellectual independence and greater equity in the scholarly arena.

References

Adelaar, Willem F.H. and Pieter C. Muysken.

2004. *The Languages of the Andes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

AILLA: http://www.ailla.utexas.org/site/welcome.html

Ameka, Felix K.

2006. "Real descriptions: Reflections on native speaker and non-native speaker descriptions of a language." In *Catching Language: The Standing Challenge of Grammar Writing*, edited by Felix K. Ameka, Alan Dench, and Nicholas Evans, 69-112. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Cruz, Emiliana.

2011. *Phonology, Tone and the Functions of Tone in San Juan Quiahije Chatino*. PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin.

England, Nora C.

2007. "The Influence of Mayan-speaking linguists on the state of Mayan linguistics." In *Linguistische Berichte* Sonderheft 14: 93-111. Special edition *Endangered Languages*, eds. Peter K. Austin and Andrew Simpson. Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag.

Grenoble, Lenore.

2009. :Linguistic cages and the limits of linguists." In *Indigenous Language Revitalization: Encouragement, Guidance, and Lessons Learned,* edited by Jon Reyhner and Louise Lockhard, 61-70. Flagstaff: Northern Arizona University. Available at <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/ILR>.

Gutiérrez Morales, Salomé.

2008. *Borrowing and Grammaticalization in Sierra Popoluca: The Influence of Nahuatl and Spanish*. PhD dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara.

Hale, Ken, Michael Krauss, Lucille J. Watahomigie, Akira Y. Yamamoto, Colette Craig, LaVerne Masayesva Jeanne, Nora C. England.

1992. "Endangered languages." *Language* 68, 1:1-42.

Julca Guerrero, Félix Claudio.

2010. *Variación Dialectal del Quechua en el Callejón de Huaylas desde la Perspectiva de la Lingüística y de los Hablantes*. PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin.

Mateo Toledo, Eladio.

2008. *The Family of Complex Predicates in Q'anjob'al (Maya); Their Syntax and Meaning*. PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin.

Mateo Pedro, Pedro.

2010. *The Acquisition of Verbal Inflection in Q'anjob'al Maya: A Longitudinal Study*. PhD dissertation, University of Kansas.

Moore, Denny.

2007. “Endangered Languages of Lowland Tropical South America.” In *Language Diversity Endangered*, edited by Matthias Brenzinger, 29-58. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Newman, Paul.

2003. “The endangered languages issue as a hopeless cause.” In *Language Death and Language Maintenance*, edited by Mark Janse and Sijmen Tols, 1-13. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Rice, Keren.

2009. “Must there be two solitudes? Language activists and linguists working together.” In *Indigenous Language Revitalization: Encouragement, Guidance, and Lessons Learned,* edited by Jon Reyhner and Louise Lockhard, 37-70. Flagstaff: Northern Arizona University. Available at: http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/ILR/.

Speas, Margaret.

2009. “Someone else’s language: on the role of linguists in language revitalization.” In *Indigenous Language Revitalization: Encouragement, Guidance, and Lessons Learned,* edited by Jon Reyhner and Louise Lockhard, 23-36. Flagstaff: Northern Arizona University. Available at: http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/ILR/.

Vázquez Álvarez, Juan Jesús.

2011. *A Grammar of Chol, a Mayan Language*. PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin. ■

ON THE PROFESSION

Pensar y hacer como mapuche

por Pablo Marimán Quemenado | Centro de Estudios y Documentación Mapuche Liwen
kuastro@yahoo.es

La labor de pensar ha sido una constante entre los mapuche de todos los tiempos y particularmente entre aquellos que hemos vivido en los siglos XX y XXI. En el presente artículo, deseo poner énfasis en el período reciente, no sólo porque es el que me ha tocado vivir sino porque en éste se dan fenómenos desgarradores para nuestra sociedad, como el del empobrecimiento, producto del despojo y el de la negación de una identidad presente y futura, distorsionándose nuestro pasado.1

El Centro Liwen

A finales de los ochenta se formó en Temuko el Centro de Estudios y Documentación Mapuche Liwen, cuyo nombre en voz mapuche significa *amanecer*. Como toda organización mapuche, este centro se sustentó en una familia, pero en él convergieron recursos humanos de distinta formación y extracción social-territorial. Debido a los influjos político-ideológicos que los contextualizaban y precedían, se propuso dotar al *movimiento mapuche* de una reflexión que permitiera precisar los argumentos por una autonomía política territorial, no exclusiva de los mapuches sino también para la población de la IX región en el sur de Chile.

Eran los años de la transición de una dictadura militar a una democracia protegida, continuadora del modelo neoliberal y del monopolio de la representación política a través de un sistema binominal. En el marco de nuestra propuesta política de autonomía y considerando la estrechez de posibilidades reales de participación y decisión en las materias indígenas para los mapuches en el contexto de la transición chilena, se fue precisando un diagnóstico y una praxis relativa a la labor intelectual que asumiría el Centro Liwen.

Más que la propuesta en sí sobre la autonomía, resultó de suma relevancia constatar la existencia de una situación colonial en las relaciones interétnicas existentes dentro de Chile. Esto marcaba un precedente y a la vez separaba aguas con otros análisis que adolecían de causalidades y que veían “lo indígena” como un tema de integración económico-social de “campesinos” o “migrantes.” Lo esencial en este diagnóstico era que la guerra de conquista que nos hizo el estado a finales del XIX nos transformó, de pueblo independiente, en una “minoría étnica” dominada y subordinada; despojada y expoliada económicamente y oprimida culturalmente.

Con nuevas claves analíticas, podíamos pensarnos y alcanzar el objetivo de esta labor: la gente. No se trataba de llegar tan sólo a las élites y academias, sino a nuestras comunidades, en el entendido que un acto de conciencia que *desaliena* colabora en la organización y en la transformación social. La difusión se hizo vía publicaciones (revistas), eventos (seminarios), investigaciones, así como a través de cursos y talleres.

Paradojas en la formación de una conciencia mapuche

En nuestro quehacer como Centro Liwen, no resultó fácil congeniar ámbitos de conocimiento con matrices diferentes. Por un lado, lo que elaborábamos en el Centro más tenía que ver con nuestras habilidades para sustraer información de las fuentes, sistematizarlas y organizarlas en función de un discurso político mapuche contemporáneo. Por otro lado, esto escapaba a las prácticas de conocimientos