

Minority Languages in Networks of Overlapping, Hierarchical Communities in Colombia

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Abstract

The fates of endangered languages are closely linked to conceptions of what value they provide to their communities. We examine how minority (particularly indigenous) communities in Colombia have understood themselves over time, as well as how the state as viewed them, and how definitions of communities and their relationships have historically been framed within hierarchical networks framed in terms of power and hegemony. More recently, national legislation has made considerable strides in recognizing and supporting Colombia's fundamentally multicultural character, opening the way to increased recognition and autonomy for minority language communities, especially in the areas of education. However, there has been a disappointing lack of accompanying action or real change; the attitudes on all sides that inform actions often remain mired in the past. In a rapidly globalizing world, greater communication and collaboration between all actors are necessary if endangered languages are to be strengthened. We make particular recommendations aimed to generate a more collaborative relationship between minority and mainstream communities, in the understanding that the whole of humanity is enriched (or impoverished) by the survival (or loss) of its languages and cultures.

Introduction

In Colombia, as elsewhere, the fates of endangered languages are closely linked to conceptions of what value they provide to their communities. How the various actors involved understand these concepts has a strong influence on outcomes for those languages. Any given individual can be understood as participating within multiple interacting communities where different values come into play. In Colombia, these overlapping communities have historically been framed within hierarchical networks framed in terms of power and hegemony. More recently, national legislation has made considerable strides in recognizing and supporting Colombia's fundamentally multicultural character, yet the attitudes that inform actions often remain mired in the past. In a rapidly globalizing world, greater cooperation and collaboration between all actors are necessary if endangered languages are to be strengthened.

That being able to use, retain, and indeed strengthen a language offers various benefits to its users is well documented. For example, it has been shown that minority languages maintenance provides speakers with physical and mental health benefits (Hallett, Chandler, & Lalonde, 2007; McIvor, Napoleon, & Dickie, 2009; Sánchez, 2014). Moreover, many members of minority communities are multilingual; in Colombia, the additional language is most commonly Spanish, but in many cases other minority languages are also known (de Mejía, 2006; Trillos Amaya, 1997), and recent research has revealed multilingual persons exhibit certain cognitive

advantages (Bialystok & Craik, 2010; Luk, Green, Abutalebi, & Grady, 2012). Nevertheless, the mere existence of such benefits does not imply they are *valued* (or even recognized). There has been an increasing amount of work on how economic value can be derived from minority languages and cultures, with a particular focus on tourism and environmental knowledge (Butler & Hinch, 2007; Coria & Calfucura, 2012; Mauro & Hardison, 2000; Ryan & Aiken, 2010). In Colombia, these have not (yet) become major issues, though existing experiences have not been wholly positive (Verner, 2009). Ostensibly, such endeavors should benefit the minority communities themselves, but there many complications and risks mediated through on the very different value systems that can be held by different communities involved. Indeed, the very terms *value* and *community* are often used as if they are well understood and agreed upon, though this is often far from the case.

Value

The concept of *value* has been variously addressed by among philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, and economists (of course), and even linguists, yet no real consensus on an underlying "theory of value" has been achieved (Graeber, 2001, 2005). For the purposes of this paper, it is understood that people assign *value* through the operation of a "symbolic system that defines the world in terms of what is important, meaningful, desirable or worthwhile in it ... containing conceptions of what the cosmos is

ultimately about and what is worth pursuing in it” (Graeber, 2005: 439, 444). For many who work with language, language itself holds an unassailable place amongst what is worth pursuing in the cosmos. “It is ... an enormous human impoverishment when a language, with all its collective wisdom, beauty, and richness, falls silent” (McCarty, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Magga, 2010: 298). Yet not everyone shares such values—otherwise no individual would ever give up one or more of their languages, and no language would ever die.

Community

Community, too, is not a readily defined concept. Hillery (1955) identified 94 definitions of *community* whose sole unifying factor was that they “deal with people” (p. 117). *Community* has often been defined in contrast with (modern) *society* (Barrett, 2010; Stråth, 2001), and for much of the twentieth century, *community* was often equated with “village”, while at the other end of the size scale, Anderson (2006) discussed the nation-state as a *community*. Communities can also be comprehended dialogically (Pallí, 2003; Sampson, 1993), in terms of how both insiders and outsiders perceive who is (or is not) a community member and how communities view and relate to each other.

Language researchers may most naturally think about *community* in terms of the *speech community*, although even this is a more challenging concept than is often appreciated (Eckert, 2008; Gumperz, 2009; Hanks, 1996). Nevertheless, if the “essential criterion for ‘community’ is that some significant dimension of experience be shared”, then it might be agreed that “for ‘speech community’ that ... shared dimension [should] be related to ways in which members of the group use, value, or interpret language” (Saville-Troike, 2003: 15). Admitting language as a factor in determining community membership further complicates questions of who is a member of a community, and the complications become even greater when additional communities are involved—as in the case of minority communities’ relationships with the larger nation-states that encompass them.

Ethnic and supra-ethnic communities

The Spanish conquest of what is now Colombia in the sixteenth century effectively created the concept of an *indigenous* identity that implicitly united quite diverse native ethnic groups simply by defining them in opposition to people with a European-derived identity. During the colonial period, this new supra-ethnic identity in fact offered certain advantages, in that “Indianness was ... a juridical and political position within the Spanish monarchy which opened avenues of collective political and judicial activity” (Saether, 2005: 58).

However, in the wake of independence, Colombia’s post-colonial government promoted the consolidation of a culturally homogenous nation-state (and so, in a sense, itself a supra-ethnic imagined community), including an aggressive de-indigenization policy (de Mejía, 2004; Ortíz Ricaurte, 2004; Trillos Amaya, 1996; Zuluaga, 1996). Accordingly, “Indianness became a less potent instrument and was abandoned by many communities” (Saether, 2005: 58). Through the mid-twentieth century, persons pertaining to Colombian indigenous groups tended to claim membership in their specific ethnic group but resisted generalization as *indios* (“Indians”) (Jackson, 2011).

The state was content to leave the mission of “civilizing” indigenous peoples largely in the hands of the Catholic Church until the 1960s, when the first governmental agency concerned with indigenous affairs, the *División de Asuntos Indígenas* (DAI), was established. Though the DAI performed poorly in its mission to promote indigenous interests (Triana Antorvez, 1978), it nevertheless marked the start of an increasingly progressive governmental attitude towards ethnic minorities in which academic criticism of existing government indigenous policies played a significant role (Correa, 2006). The process was not without conflict and setbacks (Jackson, 2011), but it culminated in the new Constitution of 1991 that effectively reversed previous homogenist policies by recognizing both the nation’s inherent multiculturalism and the state’s responsibility to protect this (Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, 1991; Rodríguez & El Gazi, 2007).

Between the establishment of the DAI and the Constitution of 1991, a number of new supra-ethnic indigenous movements emerged out of earlier rural movements focused on issues of land rights and reform (Jackson, 2011). This was accompanied by a process re-indigenization (Chaves & Zambrano, 2006) in which an increasing number of people, some of whom might even have previously disassociated themselves from an indigenous heritage, began to claim supra-ethnic membership in an imagined community consisting of all Colombian indigenous peoples alongside membership in a specific ethnic group. This reassertion of a common indigenous identity was fuelled partially by awareness of other indigenous movements worldwide but also by the state’s increasingly progressive policies on indigenous land rights—taking advantage of which required individuals or groups to present an indigenous identity that could be recognized by the national authorities (Jackson, 2011), much as had been the case in the pre-colonial period.

What are the communities, and who is in them?

In practice, just what is required for formal recognition of an indigenous group is not easily pinned down,

though it generally requires demonstrating possession of “culturally distinct customary practices and traditions” (Jackson, 2011: 104). This is not always easy after centuries of acculturation, though use of a living language serves as something of a trump card. This motivates groups who have lost their language to seek some means of recuperating it, though it also leads to wrangling over who is, or is not, “indigenous”.

Many Colombians have been affected by internal migration and displacement, not least the nation’s ethnic minorities, for whom language loss and community fragmentation are amongst the many negative effects. For example, there are descendants of migrants from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta to the La Guajira peninsula who consider themselves ethnically Wiwa but whose communities have lost the Damana language still spoken by their relatives in the Sierra Nevada. There is tension not only within “Guajiro Wiwa” communities about whether re-indigenization might be desirable, but also tension with Wiwa communities in the Sierra Nevada, amongst whom there is likewise debate about whether it is possible to be genuinely Wiwa without speaking Damana to begin with (Pérez Tejedor, 2010). In another example, an Embera family that moved from their ancestral territory in Chocó to Caquetá subsequently split into urban and rural communities, though the rural group no longer considers their urban relatives to be “indigenous” (Piñeros, Rosselli, & Calderon, 1998). Such situations create added problems for well-intentioned linguists and government officials, who can hardly do anything without violating *someone’s* beliefs about “the community”.

Possession of a distinct language likewise plays a critical role in state recognition for Colombia’s non-indigenous minority groups. Here, academic linguists have played critical roles in the formal recognition of the Afro-Iberian Palenquero creole and the Afro-English San Andres-Providence Creole as languages, rather than just “bad Spanish/English” (Bartens, 2013; Lipski, 2012).

Ethno-education

Another significant state concession to recognized minority groups in the wake of the Constitution of 1991 is a degree of autonomy in educational policy and practice, identified as *ethno-education* (Aguirre Licht, 2004; de Mejía, 2006; Liddicoat & Curnow, 2007; see also individual papers in Trillos Amaya, 1998). A number of Colombian universities now offer programs both on and through ethno-educational practices, and some universities (for example, the Universidad Indígena Intercultural de Colombia Jacinto Ortiz, and the Universidad Autónoma Indígena e Intercultural) have been established with specifically indigenous orientations (Moreno Rodríguez, 2011).

Some notable successes in ethno-education have been achieved. For example, between 1995 and 2009, the

Cofán people (or A’i) of south-western Colombia, moved from the first linguistic description of their language (in a Master’s thesis developed by a member of their community in a Colombian university) in 1995 to the development of a complete primary and secondary school curriculum that teaches Cofán language (A’inge) and culture alongside Spanish and the Colombian national curriculum, with teachers trained and qualified in both tracks and an considerable selection of specialized printed and digital materials (Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia, 2009; Quenamá Queta, Queta Quintero, & Lucitante, 2011; Quenamá Queta, 2007, 2011).

However, the Cofán experience is something of an exception to the rule. Implementation of ethno-education policies has more generally been plagued with troubles, not least a shortage of appropriately trained teachers. The situation is exacerbated by segregation of ethno-education from mainstream education, with responsibility shared between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture. Moreover, the historical use of education as a tool for acculturation has hardly been forgotten. These factors likely contribute to the suspicion with which any kind of state-mediated education, including ethno-education, is viewed by many ethnic minorities (Kværndal, 2013; Ortíz Ricaurte, 2004; Trillos Amaya, 1996).

Recommendations

Historically, it is precisely the isolation and separation of minority communities that has most favored the preservation of their languages. Yet the evolution of transportation and communication technologies and infrastructures continue to bring more people into increased contact. It is questionable how much longer relative isolation will be able to provide much safety. This demands a hard look from all sides at how the various Colombian communities involved with minority languages—which, we would argue, is *all of them*—define and relate to themselves, each other, and indeed the wider international world. Accelerating processes of globalization demand new attitudes founded on historically unprecedented levels of cooperation—and thus trust—between all the actors involved.

Although Colombia has seen great advances in legislation and policy that support minority languages, there has been a disappointing lack of accompanying action or real change. To an extent, this is no surprise: the strength of governments is often more in the creation of policy than its implementation. Moreover, it is a truism that real success in language revitalization is achievable only when the communities themselves own the process. Yet Colombia’s minority language communities often remain too isolated, fragmented, and poorly equipped with the knowledge needed to navigate the increasingly complex realities they face.

Ethno-education policies represent positive steps, but Colombian academia must do more to more close the gap between the state and minority language communities by offering knowledge, services, and training that can assist communities with their implementations of legislative policies. Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has famously questioned the participation of non-indigenous researchers within indigenous contexts, emphasizing the need for indigenous researchers working within their own knowledge traditions as agents for social justice. These are important points that deserve greater attention and appreciation, though in cooperation between indigenous and Western researchers, Western knowledge traditions can serve as a bridge between those of the particular indigenous community and the many varying traditions and experiences of other minority communities worldwide. This must not be a process of “academic imperialism”; the various knowledge traditions of minority communities should be in dialogue with and indeed inform those of the Western academic community. There is a very great need—in Colombia, and elsewhere—for improved understandings of how to manage this relationship. Nevertheless, partnerships between minority language communities and academia elsewhere have proven fruitful (Hinton, 2011; McAlpin, 2008; McCarty, 2008, 2013; Weinberg, De Korne, & Depaul, 2013), and the experience of the Cofán has shown that they can be effective in Colombia as well.

We would also argue that it is desirable to encourage mainstream (Spanish monolingual) Colombians to develop their own senses of collaborative responsibility for minority languages. This may be viewed as an inherently provocative suggestion, as there are many minority language groups who would resist (for various reasons) the notion that “outsiders” should have any relationship with their language. But we contend that endangered languages need friends—particularly amongst the communities that neighbor them and in which many of their own members share membership. Accordingly, we would recommend that policies and materials appropriate to improving awareness about minority languages and cultures be developed for use in mainstream schools. Similarly, policies and tools should be developed to help non-minority Colombians working in minority language contexts (such as doctors, social workers, law enforcement officials) use those languages appropriately and effectively where possible.

Moreover, though mass media can help bring endangered languages into new domains where intercultural and multilingual negotiations take place, catering to both existing minority language users and minority community members who have shifted to the majority language. There are also as yet unrealized opportunities for using ICTs to connect members of (often dispersed) communities with each other (via language-using platforms) to share experiences and

knowledge and with potentially useful external actors (the state, and perhaps particularly academia).

Conclusions

Of course, the beliefs and preferences of any minority language community—and the right to self-determination—must be respected. Yet it can hardly be denied that majority language speakers already play an indisputable role in the fate of minority languages—and likewise stand to gain or lose (if less obviously so) from their eventual fate. Indeed, the whole of humanity is enriched (or impoverished) by the survival (or loss) of its languages and cultures. The integrated, overlapping nature of these various communities has often been obscured by their historical hierarchically mediated relationships. This is a difficult legacy to overcome. Though the way is no doubt fraught with challenges, we argue that approaches based on communication, cooperation, and collaboration—with accommodation, but not acculturation—amongst minority and majority communities represent the best chances for greater valuation of and chances of strengthening endangered languages.

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