Alison Root
LING 377

Quechua: A state of rapid decline

1. Introduction

How can a language spoken by nine million people be in danger of extinction? Quechua, indigenous to the Andean mountain region in South America, is in an interesting, and concerning, minority language context. The common understanding of Quechua as being just one language is inaccurate – Quechua is actually a language family (or macrolanguage) containing approximately 45 languages spoken throughout the Andes. These languages, variously called Quechua, Quichua, Kichwa, Qhichwa Simi, or Runa Simi, are in various states of language shift, depending largely on their number of speakers and their countries' respective government policies. The seemingly high number of Quechua speakers mask the very precarious situations of Quechua languages, which are likely to continue being lost without strong preventative measures.

The number of Quechua speakers dropped rapidly at the time of colonization, partially due to a coinciding civil war within the Inca Empire, and partially due to colonial wars, famine, and disease, such as smallpox, originally brought from Europe, which spread from Central America down into the Andes (Heggarty, 2006a). After a brief period in which Quechua was used as a lingua franca to facilitate communication between the colonizers and the indigenous peoples, Spanish quickly took over as the dominant language throughout the region. Since then, Quechuan languages have been highly stigmatized in South America, and have been in slow decline, with Spanish now used as the high-status language in government, education, and the media. Today, numbers of Quechuan speakers are estimated at between five and fifteen million (Heggarty, 2006a), with Ethnologue listing an estimated 8,912,820 speakers of all Quechuan languages (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2015). Despite a high birth rate in remote Quechua-

speaking regions, which tend to have high rates of intergenerational transmission – factors that should contribute to an increase in the number of Quechua speakers – overall, Quechua is declining due to urbanization, tourism, Spanish-language education, and the low social status of Quechua, which contributes to the poverty of Quechua speakers, and the low levels of intergenerational transmission, since Spanish is perceived as a more valuable language for children to learn (Heggarty, 2006b).

Quechua communities were divided by colonially-imposed boundaries, and the region where Quechua is spoken now spreads through the modern nations of Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Chile, and Argentina, splitting up Quechua communities so as to be linguistic minorities in every country where Quechua is spoken. Along with Quechua's minority status, Quechua is an official language in only one country (Huhsunqu, 2008), and government policies contain very little protection for Quechua in domains such as education. Partially in response to Quechua's lack of utility in these domains, many parents are choosing not to teach their children Quechua, believing that knowledge of the language will cause educational setbacks. Additionally, Quechua speakers who move to cities are rapidly abandoning their native language in favour of Spanish. Finally, the range of sizes of Quechuan languages creates a situation in which language maintenance and revitalization programs favour the larger Quechua languages, while smaller languages are in much greater risk of extinction. Taken together, these factors paint a picture of continued language decline to the point of likely extinction in many cases.

2. History

Quechua was the language used by the Inca Empire, which arose in the 13th century, although Quechua was likely spoken even before that (Heggarty, 2006a). Even at the time of the Incas, there were numerous dialects or variations of Quechua spoken throughout the empire. In

the 16th century, Spanish conquistadores arrived in South America and began a series of wars that eventually led to the downfall of the Inca. The newly created colonial map of South America ignored ethnic divides, and drew borders that divide the Quechua speaking Andean region between six contemporary countries (Huhsunqu, 2008). In the words of Paul Heggarty, a Senior Scientist in the Department of Linguistics at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology and an expert on Quechua grammar, who runs a personal website devoted to describing the Quechua language in both grammatical and sociolinguistic terms, "modern political frontiers haven't been kind to Quechua" (Heggarty, 2006b). Separated into different countries, Quechua communities have fewer opportunities to work together for language maintenance. The dividing of Quechua communities by political boundaries creates a situation in which Quechua speakers are in the minority in every country in which Quechua is spoken, and as such, governments have less of an incentive to create policies to preserve Quechuan languages.

3. Policies

The government policies that have been created have not seen much success – for example, Peru's Ministry of Education introduced a "bilingual and bicultural" education program with the stated goals of instructing in the Quechua language and maintaining the Quechua culture (Saroli, 2001). However, this program simply bridges Quechua-speaking children into the mainstream, Spanish-language school system. This program has been largely ineffective, as teachers are struggling with a lack of resources and funding in order to instruct in Quechua, and parents tend to be distrustful of the program, worrying that the government is intentionally trying to 'keep children ignorant' (Saroli, 2001). Although governments may make small efforts to protect Quechua, overall these programs are not effective in reversing the language shift to Spanish, as education and the media are still largely conducted in Spanish.

4. Individuals

As is the case in many parts of the world, Quechua is undergoing rapid urbanization, with individuals from rural communities moving to cities for the economic opportunities available there. In the Andes, Quechua speakers are moving to urban centres, where Quechua is highly stigmatized (Gleich, 2004). Due to this stigmatization, and the fact that business tends to be conducted entirely in Spanish in cities, Quechua speakers tend to transition to using Spanish.

Perhaps the most significant issue facing Quechua is the lack of intergenerational transmission, as many parents are not passing the languages to their children. This is happening at alarming rates in urban centres, where parents are aware of the stigmatization of the language, and are fearful that having their children speak Quechua will cause them to be disadvantaged in school and future work contexts (Coronel-Molina, 2011). For this reason, Quechua is declining most rapidly in urban centres, while in rural areas there is less pressure for Quechua speakers to transition to Spanish (Heggarty, 2006b). However, a counterexample can be seen in the city of Cochabamba, Bolivia, where Quechua is thriving and widely spoken in the city (Gleich, 2004). Intergenerational transmission is still occurring, and a large proportion of younger generations are completely bilingual in Quechua and Spanish. Heggarty (2006b) suggests that the significant Spanish influences that have been incorporated into South Bolivian Quechua are a sign of its vitality and ability to stay modern, flexibly incorporating elements from the dominant language to stay current.

5. State of preservation

Because Quechua as a macrolanguage is actually made up of 45 languages, statistics of the total number of speakers are misleading. Quechuan languages range in their vitality, with large languages such as Cuzco Quechua having much stronger language revitalization programs

and considerably more academic interest paid them than smaller languages (Heggarty, 2006b). A number of smaller Quechuan languages are on the brink of extinction, with little to no linguistic material collected or published about them. As these languages continue to decline, they become increasingly marginalized and reduced to more remote areas, which isolates them from each other and reduces their likelihood of being preserved.

Although some effective revitalization efforts have been made for some of the larger Quechuan languages, for example in Cuzco, where media is being produced in the Quechua language (Manley, 2008), some attempts at language documentation have been wholly unhelpful for Quechua communities. For example, in the 1980s in Peru there was a significant debate over a proposed new standardized Roman orthography to aid in language maintenance and revitalization efforts, since Quechua is traditionally an oral language without a writing system (Hornberger & King, 1998). This debate involved a tension between unification – the orthographic, lexical, and grammatical standardization of a language – and authenticity – the maintenance of the form (arbitrarily) determined to be the most 'authentic' variety of the language. While two academic parties debated issues of linguistic authority, language preservation and documentation efforts were put on hold, impacting language maintenance programs (Hornberger & King, 1998). Another example of less than effective language revitalization is seen in Cuzco, where the High Academy of the Quechua Language, which has the goal of preserving the Quechua language, takes an arguably overly class-conscious approach that tends to alienate the Quechua speakers whose language it seeks to preserve (Coronel-Molina, 2008). It is important for future language revitalization programs to be more aware of the needs of actual language speakers, rather than to operate for the sole purpose of advancing knowledge about the languages.

6. Conclusion

While the fact that Quechua is spoken by nine million people throughout the Andes suggests that the language should be in a rather safe and secure position, a more in-depth analysis of the specific minority language contexts of Quechua speakers demonstrates that many Quechuan languages are in real danger of becoming extinct. Due to the history of colonization and current stigmatization of Quechua, the numbers of Quechua speakers have declined rapidly over the centuries since Spanish conquest. This situation is exacerbated by a lack of government protection, urbanization, and a lack of intergenerational transmission. Smaller Quechuan languages are in the most danger of dying, due to their isolated nature and the lack of academic interest provided them. In order to reverse South America's overwhelming shift to Spanish, the social status of Quechua needs to be improved, and government policies must be created to address the need for preservation, including support for Quechua-language media, improved literacy education, and the creation of true bilingual education programs. Otherwise, we will almost certainly witness the rapid dwindling of Quechua's nine million speakers to the point of extinction.

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