

Iconization, Fractal Recursivity, and Erasure: Linguistic Ideologies and Standardization in Quichua-Speaking Ecuador

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This paper will formally address and elucidate some of the more salient sociolinguistic and ideological aspects of linguistic differentiation in Quichua-speaking Ecuador, with particular emphasis on the ways in which the context of the extant ideologies has influenced the standardization process and the perceptions of Quichua Unificado 'Unified Quichua'. The semiotic processes of iconization, fractal recursivity, and erasure as proposed by Irvine and Gal (2000), provide a solid basis for this analysis. While these semiotic properties can be observed in essentially all linguistic communities to varying degrees, they shed necessary light on languages such as Quichua, which, although it has a designated and singular minority language status, encompasses a decidedly heterogeneous population of speakers.

1. Introduction

Over 2 million indigenous people throughout Ecuador speak Quichua, or *Runa Shimi* (lit., “people’s tongue”). It is generally regarded as being part of the Quechua II, Quechua A, or Peripheral Quechua language family along with some dialects of Northern Peru and Ingano in Southern Colombia (Cerrón-Palomino, 1987; Mannheim, 1991). It should also be noted that within Ecuador, while there is one major dialectal division of Highland and Lowland, there is also considerable variation among the (sub)sub-dialects of those two groups. While many of these differences are purely lexical, many grammatical differences can also be found. Language ideologies generally being a reflection of the pervasive sociocultural ideologies, an ideology that negatively values the Quichua language stems from the pre-existing negative valuation of its speakers by the non-indigenous portion of society. There is furthermore a considerable division amongst the (sometimes vastly) different Quichua-speaking communities with regards to the standardized form of the language, *Quichua Unificado*, or ‘Unified Quichua.’ While some communities have been “revitalized” as a result, others have been alienated, citing the fact that the standard is such a marked departure from their own dialect. Thus, as there are prejudices that exist between the

indigenous and non-indigenous portions of Ecuadorian society, they also exist between different Quichua-speaking groups in Ecuador. This creates two separate oppositions: one between the non-indigenous and the Quichua population as a whole and another between the Quichua and other Quichua. This paper aims to address and elucidate some of the more salient sociolinguistic aspects of linguistic differentiation in Quichua-speaking Ecuador. In particular, the emphasis will be on the ways in which the larger context of the extant (indigenous and non-indigenous) ideologies has influenced both the standardization process and the subsequent perceptions of *Quichua Unificado*.

2. Iconization, Fractal Recursivity, and Erasure

The semiotic processes of *iconization*, *fractal recursivity*, and *erasure*, as discussed by Irvine and Gal (2000), provide a solid basis for the mapping out of these ideologies.

Iconization: This process involves “the attribution of cause and immediate necessity to a connection (between linguistic and social groups) that may only be historical, contingent, or conventional” (p. 37). These linguistic features are then made to be (and are subsequently interpreted as being) iconic of the identities of the speakers.

Fractal Recursivity: The notion refers to the fact that the differences which are made to be iconic are used in the creation of an “other.” Integral to the idea of fractal recursivity is that the same oppositions that distinguish given groups from one another on larger scales can also be found within those groups. Operating on various levels, fractal recursivity can both create an identity for a given group and further divide it. Within each group or subgroup, then, there is a schismogenesis (or creation of differences), whereby speakers can be divided further according to those same principles.

Erasure: It is the process by which these distinctions are created and maintained. Erasure is integrally intertwined with both iconization and recursivity, as it is the erasure of any differentiation which is, according to the given ideology, inconsequential. Ideological outliers, then, are either discounted as being anomalous or disregarded altogether and ignored. Erasure therefore determines what can become iconized and also what then becomes recursive within a given group.

3. Examining Quichua in the Non-Indigenous, Majority Context

With Spanish being both the official and the dominant language of the country, Quichua is a proportionately large minority language¹ and is generally viewed by many (within the majority non-indigenous culture) as being spoken by the “low prestige,” “backwards,” or “peasant” portions of society. (Spanish was, in former years, equated with “speaking Christian” or, more generally, “being civilized.”) The word *runa* (‘person’ in Quichua) has even been lexicalized as a (Spanish) verb form which translates roughly as ‘mess up,’ which is a further indication of some of the attitudes regarding the Runa (Quichua) people. Similarly, these sorts of ideas have been extended to the language itself,

¹ Other minority languages include A’i (Cofan), Shuar, and Huaorani, but are spoken in far fewer numbers. As a further aside, many speakers of these languages have shifted to Quichua, for various reasons.

also being considered “not good for anything” (de la Torre Amaguaña, personal communication, 2002). In addition, many people expressed their reaction to someone having an “indigenous sounding ‘r’” in their Spanish² as being “uneducated” or “from the countryside,” or just “not speaking good Spanish.”

Examples of some other negative statements made regarding the Quichua in Ecuador:³

- (1) *El Quichua es diferente. No se utiliza la “o.”*
Quichua is different. It doesn’t utilize the (letter) “o.”
- (2) *El quichua es un dialecto sin gramática.*
Quichua is a dialect without grammar. (Haboud 1998, p. 197)
- (3) *Ya no hay indios. No tienen cultura... ni hablan Quichua. Son campesinos, no más.*
There aren’t any indians anymore. They don’t have a culture... nor do they speak Quichua. They’re just peasants.

Perhaps the most extreme instantiation of erasure, the statement contained in example (3) marginalizes the Quichua people (and language) into complete non-existence. In example (1), the statement relegates all of the different characteristics of Quichua to the fact that it does not have a certain vowel, thus erasing via non-acknowledgement all of the other complexities of the language. Example (2) also speaks to the ideology that Quichua is “simple”; first by placing it on the level of dialect rather than language, and second by characterizing it as not having any grammatical structure. These statements all involve the iconization of certain forms (or of an entire linguistic code) as being marginal: either “uneducated,” “backwards,” or without structure. This type of iconization (and erasure) is pervasive in linguistic ideologies that reflect the marginalization of “other.” The linguistic ideologies of Serbian speakers with respect to Macedonians is an analogous example, where Serbian speakers iconize the simpler nominal morphology of Macedonian to represent their being “uncultivated country bumpkins” (2000, p. 69). Irvine and Gal further explain:

Through such iconization, the perception that Macedonian “had no grammar” apparently contributed to legitimating far-reaching political tactics... Ironically, such characterizations of Macedonians as “simple” could only be sustained by focusing on the language’s relatively few nominal inflections, and ignoring, thus erasing, the complexities of its verbal system. (2000, p. 69)

Choi (2002) has also identified some of the same features with respect to ideologies regarding the K’iche Mayan language (and its speakers) in Guatemala, as the following metalinguistic discourses exemplify.

² The Quichua *r* (in some regions of Ecuador) is a somewhat retroflexed fricative.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all data and observations were collected by the author during the course of language coursework (through Arizona State University) and independent fieldwork in Ecuador in the summers of 2001 and 2002.

- (4) I heard that to speak (K'iche), you need to use your mouth, nose, and throat. (trying to articulate glottal stops) I wonder how they can do that (laughter). (2002, p. 330)
- (5) Now there are no true Maya in Guatemala. There used to be, but now they are different, and more modern. They don't use their language any longer, they don't wear traditional costume, and Mayan shamans don't use it when they pray, but they are involved with more 'evil.' (2002, p. 332)

Statements such as those above demonstrate the ways in which the ideologies regarding language reflect directly and help to maintain those ideologies about the "other" as a people. The forms of the language (and frequently, the entire code) are iconized as being low prestige. Furthermore, the process of erasure is at work in that the ideology "in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible" (Irvine & Gal, 2000, p. 38).

4. The Quichua Context

The Ecuadorian indigenous movement began in the Andean highlands in the late 1970's, with one of its primary tenets being linguistic unification, with the hope of it also bringing social and political unification.⁴ Prior to the indigenous movement and the linguistic and educational movements that came along with it, the education of indigenous people was characterized by high drop-out rates and low comprehension of course material and was geared primarily towards "assimilation" (Calapucha, lecture & personal communication, 2001).⁵ As stated by Chuquín, an indigenous highlander and a linguist, "under the ideology of national unification, educational programs have been ones of Hispanicization and acculturation" (1986, p. 3). This provided further impetus for the creation of a unified form of Quichua, which could be used across provinces in educational programs that stressed both Quichua language and culture. A standard orthography was devised, in addition to some substantial lexical reforms and grammatical generalizations.⁶

This standardized form, *Quichua Unificado* 'Unified Quichua,' was implemented as a language of instruction in the (then) new national bilingual education program, where it is still employed. Generally speaking, while it bears more of a resemblance to certain highland dialects with respect to its morphology, it was, at its inception, spoken by nobody as a native language.⁷ Linguistic standardization itself being a highly ideological process, this has in turn lead to many other ideologically-based claims, such as, the more Spanish forms present

⁴ Also see Mannheim (1998, 1991) for a more general description and analysis of the linguistic history and hegemony of the post-conquest Andes. For a more detailed discussion of political unification and linguistic standardization, see Bourdieu (1991, chapter 1).

⁵ At the *Dirección Bilingüe* in Tena, Napo Province, Ecuador.

⁶ Some of these reforms included privileging certain forms and morphological constructions that were in use in higher numbers, creating neologisms to replace Spanish loan words (thus 'purifying' the language) and, in some cases, reconstructing proto-Quichua forms (as in the term *mashi*, 'friend').

⁷ It is unclear as to whether or not there are presently any native speakers of *Quichua Unificado*; the data seem to suggest that there are not.

in one's Quichua, the less "authentic" one is.⁸ While some communities have seemingly been "revitalized" (or, at least, "revalorized") as a result of this national initiative, others have been alienated, citing that the standard is such a marked departure from their own dialect.

- (6) *Aca en Amazonía, particularmente aquí en Napo, hubo un poco de... Hay mucha gente que no aceptan la Quichua Unificada... Porque? Porque - como se dice - porque meten terminos serranos, y nosotros no hablamos así. Dicen "mashi," "ali tutta," "ali punzha," "kaya kama." Esas cosas, no. (laughs) Esas son terminos serranos.*

Here in Amazonia, particularly here in the Napo (Province), there was a little bit of... There are a lot of people who don't accept Unified Quichua. Why? Because - how would you say it - because they put in highlander terms, and we don't talk like that. They say *mashi* ('friend'), *ali tutta* ('good night'), *ali punzha* ('good day'), *kaya kama* ('until later')... Those things, no. (laughs) Those are highlander terms.

Example (6) illustrates some of the perceived differences between the speakers of the Napo (including the Amazon, in general) and the speakers from the highlands. That is, forms such as those mentioned are iconized as being strictly "highlander," as opposed to what "we" (emphatic) use. While most evidence points to the fact that none of those particular terms were in use in the highlands before the linguistic standardization movement began, through the process of erasure, it is deemed as being unimportant. They are frequently cited as being exemplars of the differences between the Amazonian Quichua and the Highlander Quichua, as is also the case in (7).

- (7) *... "mashi" dicen en la ciudad, y aca decimos "amigo." En Archidona dicen "aruya," y nosotros decimos "yura" al arbol. Entonces nosotros aqui decimos "yahua," en Pastaza dicen "rahuay" a la sangre. Entonces, así, variantes, diferencias. Pero en el fondo, somos el mismo pueblo, la misma cultura. Entonces, hemos querido unificar. Que hablemos un solo lengua, y todos nos entendemos! Es que lo llamamos Quichua Unificado.*

...*mashi* ('friend,' Qu.), they say in the city, and here we say *amigo* ('friend,' Sp.). In Archidona, they say *aruya* and we say *yura* for "tree." So, we here say *yahua*, and in Pastaza they say *rahuay* for "blood." So, like this, (there are) variations, differences. But in the end, we are the same community, the same culture. So then, we've wanted to unify. That we would speak only one language, and everyone understands each other! That's what we call "Unified Quichua."

Example (7) is furthermore interesting, because it equates the highlands (and again, the form) with the city. From the perspective of the ideology of many Amazonian Quichuas, then, this is an iconization of highland Quichuas (and thus, their associated linguistic forms)

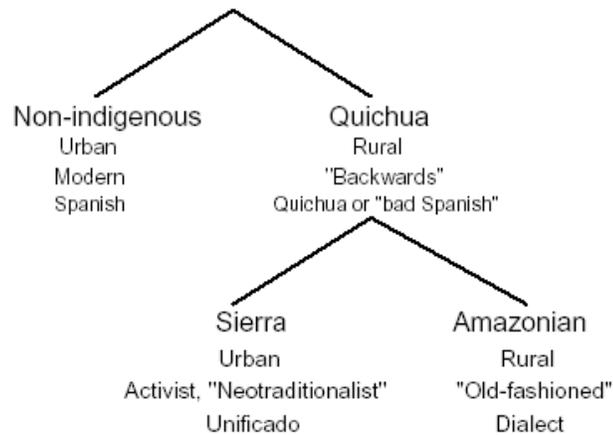
⁸ For a more detailed discussion of *Media Lengua*, a "mixed" language of Quichua and Spanish, see Muysken, (1996) and Andronis (2002).

as being “urban,” even though the speaker in (7) both lives and works in a city (albeit in an Amazonian province). While the speaker’s use of the term *amigo* (‘friend,’ in Spanish) is considered “more indigenous,” and a marker of authenticity in much of the Amazonian region, it might be seen as being “less indigenous” in the highlands. It should also be noted that the other two places named explicitly in (7) are both within the Amazon, as the speaker is, and the forms cited are not so disparate from one another as are *mashi* and *amigo*.

5. Concluding Remarks

The diagrammatic representation in Figure 1 perhaps best explicates the imposed dichotomous relationships between the non-indigenous and the Quichua, on one hand, and the Sierra Quichua and the Amazonian Quichua, on the other. The same ideological dichotomies that are found in the larger context of non-indigenous society in Ecuador are mapped onto the indigenous communities. These attributed differences are expressed and maintained (and, in some cases, created) through the pervasive ideologies of both the majority and the minority (indigenous) populations of Ecuador. The ways in which the linguistic ideologies reflect this can be readily observed in everyday metalinguistic discourse.

(8) Figure 1. Fractal recursivity



Through the process of iconization, the linguistic forms or features of a language are made to be iconic of the social identities of the speakers themselves. This furthermore creates or allows for the existence of the “other” (or, conversely, for the existence of “one”) in both indigenous and non-indigenous contexts. Within the indigenous context, while a speaker of Unified Quichua may be seen by other speakers of Unified Quichua as an educated or powerful individual for using the lexemes and structures particular to that variety, she may be seen by speakers of dialectal Quichua as a “neotraditionalist,” or as someone who is not *really* indigenous. On the other hand, speakers who utilize or emphasize dialect features in their speech are in some communities thought to be “more authentic” or “more indigenous” than other speakers. How these features are iconized (and to what degree)

is dependent solely upon the prevailing ideologies of the given community. While these semiotic properties can be observed in essentially all linguistic communities to varying degrees, they shed necessary light on languages such as Quichua. Although it has a designated and singular minority language status, and despite the movement towards standardization, it encompasses a decidedly heterogeneous population of speakers and dialects, which is in turn reflected in the pervasive ideologies.

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