Quechua as Instrument of Domination in the Southern Andes

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Abstract

Does speaking Quechua as a second language alleviate the hierarchy among first-language Quechua and Spanish speakers? In the southern Andes, bilingual speakers resort to Quechua to perpetuate forms of subordination that stereotype monolingual speakers as worthless. These processes are played out through categorizations that essentialize cultural differences that are mapped onto people. I would like to suggest that bilingualism—the ability to speak Quechua as a second language—does not reduce the production of hierarchical relations because such practices emerge in everyday interactions below the threshold of awareness of the participants, be they bilingual or monolingual. I draw examples from everyday interactions in public and private settings such as a health clinic and Quechua-speaking households.
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In my research I examine the processual and dynamic nature, spread, shift, and transformation of forms of discrimination and study how they persist across time dressed in new frames. These forms of discrimination legitimatize social hierarchies and justify the oppression of Native peoples and the maintenance of political-economic inequalities in the southern Andes. In this paper I would like to focus on the ideologies and politics of language(s) uses in real time interaction among bilingual and monolingual speakers of Quechua and Spanish in the Peruvian Southern Andes.

Over the last seventy-five years, most scholars working in the Andean republics—Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador—claim that language is connected to ethnicity. Many studies link Quechua or Aymara language with so-called “Indians” and Spanish with so-called “criollos.” If Indians learn and speak Spanish they are labeled as chulos or mestizos. This way of linking ethnicity to language is connected to an old idea, which is that under the pressure of “modernization, ethnicity is a gradient phenomenon, in which native people inexorably become modern by assimilation to the euro-westernized style of life practiced by elites. Such studies suggest that they inexorably give up their “Indianness” as they transition to the cholo category, and from there to the mestizo category. From mestizo they go to criollo monolingual Spanish. It is striking then, that the largest part of research on Native Andean languages is not on the native languages per se, but on the effects—linguistic and social—of linguistic assimilation; and on bilingualism; scholars rarely study monolingual Quechua villages and monolingual speakers.

The assimilationist framework is shared by many people who speak Spanish as a first language, particularly in Peru; not only scholars, but people such as bureaucratic employees, intellectuals, political and economic elites who share the idea that Indians need to change from their “backward” forms of life to modern ones, in which the inevitable outcome is mestizaje, or, as the anthropologist Helen Safa translated the word, “whitening.” One key feature of such whitening is the substitution of Quechua by Spanish (see Mannheim 1991). Quechua is an oppressed and stigmatized language, associated with stereotypes of backwardness and ignorance, in opposition to Spanish, the language of “knowledge and civilization.”

My main points in this paper are twofold, first, that the very idea of linguistic mestizaje or “whitening” unwittingly reinforces ideologies of the role of linguistic diversity in discrimination, with the implication that if Quechua-speaking people become fluent in Spanish they will no
longer be discriminated against; paradoxically even when they may become fluent in Spanish, they are identified as Indians and treated accordingly, so in reality there is no payoff. Consequently the scholarly emphasis on linguistic “whitening,” that is, the idea that by switching language, Indians can become *cholos*, unwittingly reinforces the domination of Quechua speakers by Spanish speakers. Second, empirically there are many bilingual speakers, especially in southern Peru.

By “bilinguals” I include first-language Quechua speakers who speak Spanish as a second language and first-language Spanish speakers who speak Quechua as a second language. But contrary to the hopes implicit in the “whitening” model, bilingualism has not encouraged either equal standing between the Quechua and Spanish languages nor more equal relations among the speakers of these languages. Rather bilingual social interactions contribute to discrimination and hierarchical relationships among the speakers. Indeed, code mixing informs the local social dominance in which speakers are embedded.

I argue instead that access to Spanish as the language of power, and access to Quechua as a second language may be instrumental to subordinate Quechua-speaking women, but at the same time they have enormous symbolic value. In discussing gender issues in Peru, it is critical to identify the symbolic value of these languages and to take into account the many vectors of diversity—class, culture, and language that divide women.

For the most part, when scholars speak generically of a larger category of speakers such as women, particularly in Peru, we exclude those who speak minority languages. For example, as the feminist scholar Maruja Barrig (2001) pointed out, people working on issues of women and equal rights in Peru often exclude women who speak Quechua and work as domestic servants inside their own houses, because such women are invisible to them purposely and invisible to their political purpose. This paradox is noteworthy because it informs the space and the social position in which Quechua-speaking women are placed within the Peruvian social hierarchy in which women in general are embedded.

Let me illustrate my two main points by showing how women who have access to both Spanish and Quechua distinguish themselves from Quechua-speaking women by using both codes, but do so by tacitly subordinating Quechua women in terms of reasoning capacity, language access, and hygiene. Such subordination is embedded in habitual forms of bilingual social interaction, forms that occur without conscious intervention by either side.
Let me do so by sharing some of my findings from two different settings in a Peruvian village called Uqhururu, located near the city of Cuzco. The two settings are a village clinic, run by government employees who speak Spanish as a first language, but frequently use Quechua in their interactions with villagers, and the domestic setting of a Quechua-speaking household.

Consider the example of the clinic. In the village clinic, villagers are ratified as interlocutors, though that doesn’t mean that they will be treated as sharing an equal footing with the medical staff. From here on I’ll refer to the staff as “representatives.” A representative in the examining room is filling out the patients’ registry book. A patient comes in and sits facing the representative. The representative asks:

41 R3: Niway este /:/ imawan CUIDAkunki qan (.) ah?\(^1\)
42 P3: Mana siñurita kuyrakuymanchu
43 R3: Por qué (?) Otro wawa kanka
44 P3: Umayman siñurita atakawan

R: Tell me this/:/ what [contraceptive method] will you be controlling with (.) ah?
P: Ms. I won’t use any method
R: Why? You will have another baby
P: It gives me terrible headaches

Confronted with the patient’s refusal to use a contraceptive method, the representative asserts that the patient didn’t want to take care of herself. Ignoring the patient’s headaches the representative says:

61 R3: Entonces no quieres cuidarte y quieres tener 10 ó 20 hijos (?) Aqnata munanki
62 P3: [becomes silent]

R3: So you don’t want to use any method, and you want to have 10 or 20 children (?) You want that.
P3: [becomes silent]

\(^1\) Quechua is in bold italic and Spanish is in italics.
The representative scolds the patient in both Spanish and Quechua, asserting that the patient purposely wants to have many children despite the availability of contraception. The patient becomes silent and begins to swing her feet while the representative, combining Quechua and Spanish adds:

R3: …mana wawata aqna animal hinachu kanan (.) solo waka (.) oveja tawa (.chunka (. pisqa (. comunlla (. qan humano kanki igual nuqa hina ¿no cierto?

R3: …babies cannot come into being like an animal (. only cows, sheep [have] four, five, ten offspring without any care (. you are human like me, right?

The representative’s utterance—despite her best intentions—reveal a stereotype about the patient; she is stereotyped as an animal, a judgment that is even more severe in Quechua than it would be in Spanish or English. Animal hinachu—denotes that women who deliver more than three children are like animals, resembling cows or sheep—they are not human. The classification of women who refuse to use a contraceptive method as animals—in contrast to humans, who know how to take care of their bodies and control their reproductive capacity, is a commonly accepted claim around the clinic. Uywa, animal in Spanish attributes irrational behavior to those who refuse to use contraception in contrast to those who do, thus showing that one example of rational behavior is having a “proper” number of children.

Quechua becomes useful only when it is used as an instrument to reproduce social hierarchy. What is more, the racist attitudes, displayed inside the clinic, reach even the privacy of Quechua-speaking households. Let me show you how with a last example. The municipality of which Uqhururu is part has an explicit policy of “modernizing” the village of Uqhururu by introducing urban domestic disciplines. The municipality sends a representative to visit each household to make sure that they are complying. Sasiku, the host, receives the visitor in her patio and greets her. She takes her shawl and lays it over a rock to invite the visitor to sit on. The representative (R4) sits down and pulls out a form to fill out and says:

R4: Mamita visita ah (.) visita domiciliara ña yachankichisña riki?

R4: Little mama visit (.) house visit; you are familiar with this already, right?
The visitor warns the host that the visit is to assess whether her household meets the municipal guidelines for “house hygiene,” by checking the organization of household utensils, kitchen hygiene, and bathroom. The Spanish word mamita alludes to the assumed lower position of the host who has to fulfill the guest’s demand. The demand is reinforced by visita ah and visita domiciliara; these phrases convey that the inspection is rightful. To avoid any doubts, the speaker, switching to Quechua, highlights that everybody in the village knows the program of “house visit.”

The host after hearing the Quechua phrase, signals her acceptance by uttering aha (yes). They go to the kitchen, and the representative asks questions about the water cleanliness, and personal hygiene. The host answers quickly with yes or no words. The representative goes on to inspect the hygiene of the washbasin, the faucet and the bathroom. She returns and fills out the form, and says,

80 R4: No deben de echar tierra al baño. Mana allpa kanachu!
81 P4: Mana, mana

R4: You shouldn’t put soil in the toilet, there shouldn’t be soil.
P4: No, no.

The representative scolds the host about the bathroom cleanliness first in Spanish and then in Quechua. She uses Quechua to make sure that the addressee understands the new rules of cleanliness. The supervision is invasive and it infringes on the host’s intimate life and the household’s sovereignty in the name of “hygiene habits.”

A standard way to describe the use of a subordinate language such as Quechua in bilingual interactions is to say that it is a way of creating a “solidarity” among the interactants as Mannheim (1991) and Gal (1987, 1988) suggest for the Andes and Eastern Europe respectively. But in these interactions, Quechua is being used to scold, to command, to give directions, and to assert that Quechua-speaking women are inferior beings in need of being patronized to behave “properly”, take care of their reproductive capacity, and run their households properly, according to the “standards” of those women who claim to be committed to helping other women.

In these interactions Quechua is used as an instrument of subordination and racialization in bilingual interactions in at least three different ways. First, Quechua is combined with
Spanish where Spanish words are inflected by Quechua suffixes as in line 41 and 67. Second, Quechua phrases incorporate Spanish lexicon as in line 41 and 67. And third, a set of Quechua phrases are used after a Spanish utterance to reinforce what has been said in Spanish as in line 43, 61, 79 and 80.

The Quechua coming out from the mouth of its native speakers is dismissed as in line 44. In all these cases, the patterns of mixing or switching between Quechua and Spanish reproduce hierarchical relations which are informed by racist ideologies. These interactions inform the distinctions made among women, stereotyping those as irrational and “lacking hygienic” habits who have no access to the language of power. Linguistic mestizaje is not a way station in a pattern of linguistic assimilation. Rather, it informs the nature of social dominance; at the same time such patterns are determined by the local social dominance in the southern Andes.

In conclusion, in these cases, I have illustrated how Quechua becomes instrumental in reproducing hierarchical relations among women, (and, I might add, men) in everyday interactions. In these interactions Quechua-speaking women are discriminated against and subordinated as social inferiors and as irrational. The standard stories of linguistic assimilation and mestizaje, on the one hand, and the persistence of Quechua on the other, disguise a much bleaker story in which even interactions among bilinguals index and reproduce patterns of social discrimination and subordination.
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