Quechua: An oppressed language of an oppressed people

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Language and culture are intrinsically linked within one’s identity; the oppression of one’s language is the oppression of one’s culture. The oppression of language is historically produced through colonialism, yet the process continues through current trends of globalization. Languages become oppressed when the dominant forces of society favor one language at the expense of another; the acquisition of the dominant language of society is essential for social mobility. Societies with the ability to combat the marginalization of their language while keeping their culture intact empower their cultural identity. The Quechua language of the Andes exemplifies the persistence of a culture despite the persecution of their native language. The dichotomy between the colonial language of Spanish and the indigenous language of Quechua within Andean society is an ongoing battle that has persisted since the invasion of the Spanish in 1532. The oppression of the indigenous people of the Andes is a remnant of colonialism and has perseveres today’s society through the stigmatization of Quechua. The negative sentiments associated with the use of Quechua is evident through Quechua speakers’ rejection of bilingual education in rural communities who view Spanish as social mobility.

Prior to the formation of the Incan Empire, Quechua was one of many native languages of the indigenous people of the Andes. The establishment of the Incan Empire adopted the Southern Peruvian dialect of Quechua as the lingua franca, yet the language was not named until the Spanish invasion (Heggarty 2007, 331). Quechua was referred to as runa simi, human speech, and was spread throughout the Incan Empire through the necessity of trade (Mannheim 1991, 7). Despite the brevity of the Incan rule, the Southern Peruvian dialect of Quechua became the language of the empire because every culture had their own vernacular of runa simi. The formation of the lingua franca and the unification of the diverse indigenous groups by the
Incas facilitated the Spanish conquest. The Spanish defeat of the capital of the empire, Cusco, transformed the vast lands of the Incas to the Spanish crown. The cultural differences between the conquistadores and the indigenous people of Latin America are innumerable; one of the most obvious differences being language. The Spanish followed the Incan promotion of the Southern Peruvian Quechua as the lingua franca allowing the division between the language of the conquered and the colonists to become entrenched within the colonial society.

The Spanish invasion of Latin America transformed the connotation of the indigenous way of life and consequently, the Quechua language. Language is a crucial aspect of one’s cultural identity; speaking the same language bonds individuals and gives them cultural pride. The Spanish viewed the imposition of their language as right of conquest and felt an obligation to educate the indigenous people the ways of the developed world (Mannheim 1991, 68). Religious conversion dominated many early colonial policies, for the Spanish wanted to eradicate the pagan religious practices of the conquered land. The Spanish forced the indigenous people to destroy their magnificent Incan temples to construct Catholic churches, hoping the destruction of their holy sites would abolish their native religions; they were mistaken. Language proved to be the hardest obstacle to overcome in the catholicization of Andean countries. The Spanish blamed the difficulty in religious conversion on Quechua’s lack of terminology for Catholic concepts like the Holy Trinity and penitence. Mannheim (1991) argues that the problem of religious conversion in the Spanish Empire was not caused by the lack of Quechua vocabulary, but rather the presence of the Quechua language. Spanish does not have proper vocabulary for the indigenous religions; the destruction of the Quechua would have eradicated indigenous religions of the region. The Council of Lima in 1551 tried to encourage a civilized Spanish lifestyle on the native people and banned sleeping on the ground, not eating at a table,
and chewing coca leaves (Mannheim 1991, 71). The banishment of these cultural practices did not transform the conquered people into civilized Spaniards; it only intensified the hatred that they felt toward the Spanish. After the failed rebellion of Tupac Amaru in 1572, the Spanish realized the animosity of the native population and declared a new policy that forbade the use of Quechua, yet the policy was never enforced due to the influence of internal colonialism within the colonial society.

The Spanish monarchy realized the importance of language acquisition in their territories, for the preservation of one’s native language facilitates the preservation of one’s cultural identity. Language was viewed as an essential aspect of Spanish loyalty and conversely, Quechua was viewed as the antithesis of that loyalty. Although the abolition of Quechua was in the best interest of the Spanish empire, it was not in the best interest of the colonists living in the conquered regions. Howard-Malverde (1995) explains the internal colonialism model which states “that a long-time depth of language maintenance shows it to be a function of convenience afforded economic exploitation and political control,” (292). By ignoring the Spanish decree of the abrogation of Quechua, the colonists were able to control and exploit the native populations. This act of defiance created a strict social hierarchy within the colonial society as the dominant members of society, those who spoke Spanish, were granted social privilege at the expense of the non-Spanish speakers. Spanish became the formal language of the society and Spanish was used in the government as well as court. Because the majority of the population could not speak or understand Spanish, the government and court dealings were highly biased in favor of the Spanish speaking minority. There are abundant records of property sales made in the colonial language which prevented the natives to protest the sale because they could not read the documents (Mannheim 1991, 76). The Spanish promoted ‘Castilianization’ by demanding
mandatory education of the youth in Spanish, but these programs were costly and threatened the
profit made from taxation (Mannheim 1991, 75). The language obstacle was an instrument of
social control used by the colonists that produced an ethnically reinforced social hierarchy that
persists in modern Andean countries.

Social hierarchy dominates South American societies. The subjugation of the indigenous
populations during colonial times through language policies continues today because it is a
mechanism of social domination. Language is power; the oppression of one's language renders
one powerless within the society. Mannheim (1991) explains the dynamics of current Andean
countries, “Spanish is the language of the dominant sector, and Quechua the language of the
subjugated sector,” (61). There are five primary social classes in Andean society: *alta sociedad*
(upper class), *decentes* (respectable people), *mestizo* (mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage),
*cholos* (indigenous city dwellers), and *indios* (indigenous) (Lefebvre 1979, 396). Although both
European and indigenous heritage is a strong indicator of social class, the most notable
difference between classes is the use of Spanish of Quechua.

The higher one’s position in society correlates with their advanced knowledge in Spanish
and minimal use of Quechua. The *alta sociedad* are the former hacienda owners of colonial times
and are monolingual Spanish. People who belong to the upper class in Andean society usually
have more than one house and live luxurious lifestyles that rival the wealth of first world
inhabitants. The only interactions between the upper class and Quechua speakers are through the
employer-employee relationship and even in those circumstances, the Quechua speaker prefer to
use their limited Spanish to show their intelligence. The class below the *alta sociedad*, the
*decentes*, are the ‘decent’ people of society and consist of army officials, business owners, and
professional people. This class learns Spanish as their first language but acquire proficiency in
Quechua to varying degrees based on the necessity in their profession. The *mestizos* are people with mixed indigenous and Spanish blood and are bilingual Spanish and Quechua, acquiring both languages during their youth. *Mestizos* include shopkeepers, policemen, and taxi drivers and these people only use Quechua while in their homes or with their families. Below the *mestizos*, reside the *cholos* who are monolingual Quechua speakers that live in cities in search of work. This social class knows Spanish to varying degree, yet Quechua is used at home and in their neighborhoods. *Cholos* realize the importance of even basic knowledge of Spanish and therefore insist that their children attend Spanish schools. The lowest tier of society, the *indios*, are indigenous monolingual Quechua speakers living in poverty in rural areas. *Indios* who migrate to the cities become *cholos* (Lefebvre 1979, 396). The juxtaposition between the social structure of the colonial era and of modern times reflects the slight contrast between the two societies. The only difference between the colonial social hierarchies is the inclusion of *esclavos* (slaves) who were brought to the Americas for manual labor and occupied the class below the *indios*. The colonial legacy of a rigid social hierarchy has produced extreme differences in wealth between the *alta sociedad* and the rest of the population; the minority live in extreme wealth as a result of the impoverishment of the rest of the populations. The unequal distribution of wealth has prevented Andean countries transformation into first world nations because they lack a prominent middle class.

Mannheim (1991) describes the two dominant policies toward language that have persisted since colonial times. The first model, ‘soft assimilation,’ occurred during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and consists of liberal policies toward language and the promotion of Quechua literacy. The second model which is prominent today and throughout the majority of colonial rule is ‘hard assimilation.’ The latter model reflects the predominant
ideology of language policies and requires language unification at the expense of the marginalization of Quechua and other indigenous languages. The similarities between language policies of colonial and contemporary times is exemplified in the analogous language employed. During colonial times, the population’s knowledge of Spanish was crucial for the success of the empire; today the population’s knowledge of Spanish is crucial for the success of the Andean nation-states. The Spanish colonists justified the oppression of Quechua because it lacked vocabulary for religious concepts; today Spanish speakers in the Andean countries argue that Quechua lacks terminology for technology (Mannheim 1991, 63). Because of the long history of linguistic and cultural oppression, Quechua speakers are well aware of the stigmatization associated with their native language as well as the necessity of basic Spanish in order to improve their social standing in society. Native speakers of Quechua are faced with a difficult decision to make: learn Spanish and denounce their Quechuan heritage or refuse to learn Spanish and continue to live in squalor. For the majority of Quechua speakers who are forced to choose between the Quechuan lifestyle and a life of more opportunities, they chose the latter. Quechua speakers rationalize their choice by describing the different realms of Spanish and Quechua; Spanish is the language of the public sector of society while Quechua remains the language of private settings. Knowledge of Spanish is not viewed as a denouncement of the Quechua society; it is viewed as a mechanism for social mobility.

There are many intersecting factors that contribute to a person’s decision to use Spanish or Quechua. Howard-Malverde (1995) writes that the employment of either Quechua or Spanish is situation dependent and varies based on gender, age, ethnicity, class, level of education, and kinship. The general rule for language usage in Andean society is Spanish is the language of the public domain and Quechua is the language of the private domain, yet this rule is dependent on
the individual’s level of Spanish and Quechua. The public domain consists of formal settings like meetings, church and the school. The house and the neighborhood are considered informal, intimate settings and therefore Quechua is the favored language. Hornberger (1987) writes that although schools are located within rural communities where only Quechua is spoken, Quechua speakers consider schools as a separate entity from the community belonging to the public domain. Because knowledge of Spanish is equated in Andean culture to higher intelligence, Quechua speakers prefer to speak in broken Spanish than in their native tongue while in a public domain (Weber 1994, 90). Lefebvre (1979) describes the Quechua speakers’ preference to use Quechua when telling jokes or reciting poetry because they view their native language as more expressive than Spanish. For native Spanish speakers, the use of Quechua reflects their mestizo heritage and is only used when speaking to monolingual Quechua speakers. The prevalence of code-switching within all sectors of society reflects the flexibility in the dichotomy between the public and private domains.

There are roughly two million speakers of the Southern Peruvian dialect of Quechua who are marginalized because of their mother tongue language (Mannheim 1991, 113). Overcoming the stigmas associated with the Quechua identity can only be accomplished on the individual basis. The denunciation of one’s Quechua identity in exchange for social mobility legitimizes the stigmatization because the Quechua speaker’s success is dependent on the acquisition of the colonial language (Mannheim 1991, 61). The language dichotomy within Andean society is a phenomenon that bilingual Spanish and Quechua speakers cannot escape, for it pervades every aspect of daily life. The choice of language is a conscious decision made by the individual and through their selection of language they reinforce the stereotypes of both Spanish and Quechua. Although Spanish is the language of the dominant sector of society, monolingual Spanish
speakers are also marginalized because of their lack of knowledge of the language of the majority of the population. The Quechua speaker’s stigmatization is exemplified in the Quechuan child’s silence in the Spanish classroom; the Spanish speaker feels similar feelings of exclusion when Quechuan insults are yelled at him or her in a public setting (Mannheim 1991, 81). Despite Quechua speakers’ negative connotations associated with Spanish, the number of bilingual Spanish speakers has drastically increased over the past half century. Howard-Malverde (1995) shows the increasing prevalence in Spanish language acquisition by comparing a Bolivian census from 1976 and 1992. The census showed a 24.9% increase in Spanish monolingualism and a 35.7% decrease in Quechua monolingualism. Howard-Malverde describes the data as reflective of the current demands of the education system and work force which increasingly favor Spanish. He also notes that the acquisition of Spanish is not a guarantee of an improved lifestyle, yet without knowledge of Spanish, social mobility is impossible.

The 1970s and 1980s marked an important transformation in the political configuration of Latin American governments; the oppressive dictatorships were replaced with democratic governments. The fledgling democracies were not without flaws, yet the new governments provided a venue for the subjugated members of society to voice their concerns. Hornberger (1987) writes that the implementation of democratic governments in Andean societies was polemic because political participation was based on the knowledge of Spanish. Although Quechua was made an official language of Peru in 1975, government proceedings were only held in Spanish (Hornberger 1994, 83). As a result of the lack of political participation of paired with high illiteracy rates, the Peruvian government implemented various language policies hoping to increase the Spanish speaking population. Hornberger (1987) explains three prevalent ideologies that are the basis of language policies: language as a problem, language as a right, and language
as a resource. Policies reflecting language as a problem were common during colonial times; this ideology views languages other than the dominant language of society (Spanish), as problematic to society as well as speakers of the subjugated language. Because language is a problem, these policies usually require the institution of a monolingual society and the oppression of language. Language as a right describes the injustice of language oppression because the use of one’s mother tongue language is an inalienable right; the officialization of Quechua as a national language is a reflection of language as a right. Language as a resource views the benefits that language can provide for a nation, yet not all languages are equal. The institution of mandatory bilingual education in 1976 demonstrates language as a resource because the acquisition of both Spanish and Quechua is advantageous for as sectors of society (Hornberger 1987, 206). The majority of language policies are geared towards education, but conflicting views towards bilingual education make the implementation of policies that reflect language as a resource or a right difficult to enforce.

The inefficiency of the Andean education system is evident in the majority of students’ failure to complete elementary school. The lack of education in rural communities reinforces the stereotypes that Quechua speakers are genetically inferior and lack the capacity to become literate (Weber 1994, 91). Weber (1994) disputes the stereotypes placed on Quechua speakers and describes other sociological factors that contribute to the high illiteracy rates in rural areas. The first of these factors is that the most students entering school have little knowledge of life outside their communities and therefore have limited Spanish. When indigenous students are thrust into a foreign environment where they do not understand the language they are not encouraged to learn. Rural teachers are another contributing factor to the lack of success Quechuan students have in school because the teachers lack the motivation to encourage their
students to learn. The majority of teachers are one generation removed from their Quechua ancestry and therefore carry negative connotations towards the Quechuan culture which is a product of the social dynamics within Andean society. Due to the bias that teachers have against Quechua, Quechuan students are discouraged and view Spanish as a denunciation of their culture. Many students are overwhelmed at the prospect of learning a second language and lack the needed support at school from their prejudice teachers and at home because their parents are monolingual Quechua. Because of the failure of the current education system, the Peruvian government implemented bilingual education programs in various communities in hopes that literacy in Quechua would bring literacy in Spanish.

The benefits of mother tongue education are innumerable. An African educator, Matshazi wrote, “Learning to talk in your mother tongue is an arduous task. Learning to read and write in that language is even more difficult, but learning to read in write in a language other than your own is an experience that requires an enormous capacity for endurance,” (Weber 1994, 91). The National Bilingual Education Policy of 1972 implemented in Peru requires the use of Quechua in all classes for the first six years of schooling (Hornberger 1987, 206). The implementation of mother tongue education has been called an ‘inalienable right’ and the liberal policies towards Quechua promote the inclusion of Quechuan culture within Andean society. The physiological benefits of Quechuan education are evident in the Quechuan student’s increased perception of their self-worth. The negative sentiments toward Quechua in schools and in society in general have depreciated the Quechua speaker’s self-esteem for they are constantly reminded that their culture is inferior. By teaching in Quechuan’s native language they are assured the importance of their cultural identity and encouraged to participate. The bilingual education program improved the learning capabilities of Quechuan students; the acquisition of Quechuan literacy facilitated
Spanish literacy (Weber 1994, 93). Hornberger (1987) describes the common misconception about source of shyness of indigenous children in school. Many argue that the lack of participation in the classroom is a result of their indigenous heritage, yet Hornberger argues that indigenous children’s failure to participate in class is a result of the usage of a language foreign to these students. Teachers noticed a remarkable increase in student participation and reading comprehension after the institution of bilingual education, yet the program proved to be a policy failure.

The National Bilingual Education Policy was unsuccessful for several reasons. The first of these reasons is economic; faced with extreme foreign debt, Andean governments lacked funding for the costly education programs (Weber 1994, 95). Because there are many dialects of Quechua, it was impossible to implement a uniform education plan and the lack of foresight by policy makers to realize the differences in Quechua dialects reflects the separation between Spanish and Quechua speakers (Weber 1994, 94). Because knowledge of Spanish is crucial to social mobility, there was heavy opposition from the teachers and the communities. Teachers held strong to their beliefs that the Quechuan education was ineffective and a waste of their time; these negative feelings created a hostile atmosphere in the classroom and many teachers protested the policy’s implementation. Community resistance was the strongest factor contributing to the failure of the bilingual education program. The communities selected to administer the new policy were inappropriate for two reasons. The first reason being that many school selected were too urban and many students were already bilingual in Spanish and Quechua. The second reason was that the schools were selected randomly and communities that were chosen felt that they were the ‘guinea pig’ and preferred a Spanish only education (Hornberger 1987, 222). The bilingual education policy was doomed to fail because of the
negative connotation of Quechua that is deeply rooted within Andean society. Indigenous parents view Spanish as essential for their children’s success and although a Quechuan education may prove to be beneficial in the end, these parents did not care. For five hundred years Quechua speakers have been marginalized and exploited because of their native tongue and they were not quick to trust the sudden reversal of sentiments toward their language.

The Quechua speakers’ rejection of the bilingual education policy is not a rejection of the Quechuan culture; they view the proper language of school as Spanish, not Quechua. The indigenous people of the Andes have been persecuted against because of their failure to speak the colonial language for hundreds of years; the perseverance of the language despite the marginalization proves the endurance of the Quechuan language and culture. *Ama qilla, ama llulla, ama suwa*- Do not lie, cheat, or be lazy (Hornberger 1994, 27). These three principles have been the basis of Quechua society since the Incan Empire and are ingrained in the minds of every Quechua speaker. The acquisition of Spanish does not change the cultural identity of the Quechuan speaker; it only increases their productivity within society. In most cases, the marginalization of a language will eventually lead to the loss of the language and consequently to the loss of the culture that speaks the language. Quechua speakers are confident that their culture and language will never be forgotten because Quechua will always remain the language of their people.
Bibliography


