Towards a Conceptualization of an Indigenous/ Post-Colonial Bilingualism: Examples from Central Mexico

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1. Introduction

This paper suggests a problematization of the notion of "bilingual," and of "diglossia" – at the societal level – categories created within the sociolinguistic context of European languages, categories which I believe are limited in their application to indigenous, post-colonial contexts such as the Nahuatl-speaking region of Tlaxcala, Mexico where I have conducted ethnographic research.

The concepts of semi-speaker (Dorian 1972) and quasi-speaker (Flores Farfán 1999) have helped advance our descriptions of the language skills of speakers of indigenous languages, and lead us to question a monolithic category of *bilingualism*. This research follows the lead of other scholars (cf. Fernández and Mackey 1993) in pointing out limitations to the usefulness of traditional Fergusonian *diglossia* (cf. Ferguson 1959). Fishman (1967) first expanded the notion of diglossia as potentially involving more than two similar codes, and several Catalan sociolinguists, including Aracil (1973), Vallverdu (1980), Ninyoles (1972) and (Pujolar 2001) have further problematized our notion of *bilingualism* in a way that allows for linguistic mulitiplicity and heteroglossia (cf. Hill 1993), or polyglossia. This paper offers ethnographic examples from a Nahuatl region of central Mexico in support of this move away from a static conceptualization of bilingualism, and will advance a theoretical position of a particular type of indigenous bilingualism in which two codes exist simultaneously in very distinct ways – ways that are generalizable to other indigenous languages in the Americas.

As the Catalan sociolinguist Lluís Aracil (1973) pointed out in his landmark paper entitled "Bilingualism as a Myth:"

(1)

> It so happens that the distribution of Catalan and Castilian in our society is such that it obtrusively underscores social inequalities – And that is, of course, where the shoe pinches. No doubt, the distribution is very complex –as complex as our society.
> (pg. 526)
> […]
> Ambivalences are unavoidable because they are built in the very structure of inequality.
> (pg. 527)
> […]
> The only trouble is that bilingualists overshoot the mark. Their version of the story is too tidy to be true. Reality is not nearly so simple as they would have us believe. (1973: 531)

The two languages in Valencia – Catalan and Castilian – are on unequal footing, as are Nahuatl and Spanish in Tlaxcala, and, as are indigenous languages and their official colonial counterparts throughout the Americas. The importance that I see in Aracil's work, which for some reason is not often read in the U.S. by students of diglossia, is that it asks us to consider: What is the nature of bilingualism? And, is it the same everywhere that there are speakers who grow up being socialized in more than one language? Aracil has pointed to the fluid and dynamic nature of bilingualism (much as Rosaldo and others have for the concept of culture in anthropology).

Regarding societal bilingualism, several researchers have recently reconceptualized Ferguson's (1959) original notion of diglossia, as involving more than two functional codes, thus allowing for a

sociolinguistic recognition of linguistic multiplicity and hetero-glossia (or poly-glossia) (cf. Catalan sociolinguists writing on this topic, including Aracil 1986, Ninyoles 1972, Pujolar 2001, Valverdu 1987, 1988). Part of this is a movement away from static concepts of diglossia, bilingualism itself and towards a position that *expects* heteroglossia (Hill 1993) and linguistic ideological diversity (Philips 1998). I agree with Hill who, drawing on Bakhtinian ideas, suggests that "we should assume that speakers confront 'heteroglossia,' which is not necessarily sorted out into a clearly delineated system of codes" (Hill 1993:69).

This analysis is part of a larger ethnographic study of language shift and bilingual schooling in the Malintsi region, in which I focused on ideological multiplicity surfacing in transcribed discourse. More specifically, I analyze three discourses of language, identity, and progress that I have identified, which are related to practices of speaking Nahuatl and Spanish in central Mexico (Messing 2002, 2003). Sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted over several stages in two Tlaxcalan communities and their bilingual schools provides insight into the linguistic and ideological multiplicity, which is the hallmark of this sociolinguistic situation.

Nahuatl, part of the Uto-Aztecan language family and known locally as *Mexicano*, has roughly one million speakers who live in various parts of central and southern Mexico. There is evidence that serious language shift and loss is occurring in this region (Garza Cuarón and Lastra 1991, Hill and Hill 1986). In the town of San Bernardino Contla, Mexicano has been largely replaced by Spanish, while in my second site of San Isidro Buensuceso children are fluent Mexicano speakers. These Mexicano towns are on the skirts of the Malintsi volcano.

In their landmark ethnolinguistic study, Hill & Hill (1986) point out regarding the patterns among the uses of Mexicano and Spanish, "There are many ambivalences and complexities of this differentiation" (1986:104). Jane Hill (personal communication) has told me that she doesn't think that there is diglossia at all in this region.

Hill and Hill (1986) make the point that speakers in the Malintsi region have survived years of cultural and political infiltrations by integrating elements of Spanish into their Mexicano speech. They describe Mexicano as syncretic speech (which is an alternative to some views of "mixed languages") reflecting and honoring the linguistic purism the researchers found in these communities. The syncretic Mexicano includes Spanish loan words and grammatical constructions - most often these are prepositions and conjunctions, for instance *de* (of, from) and *que* (that), but also includes numbers, and various lexical items in a Spanish that has been adapted to Mexicano grammar. Consider the following example from a Mexicano narrative:

(2) Syncretic speech

amo ca mas este posibilidad para para ti-vivir-oz-queh, amo ca sino que, de lo contrario, pues
there is not much more possibility for us to live, there is not but on the contrary, well

Ti-sufriro-ah amo de nin ca, in tlaxcal ca, nada más salir para ce factoria para ce 0-calaquiz
We suffered not from this [*gesture*-eating], tortilla there is, only to go out to a factory for one to enter

2. Findings

In my research, I found that among the younger residents of Contla there is a stigma attached to speaking Mexicano. Unless people knew me, there was laughter and embarrassed, sidelong glances when Mexicano is spoken or if it is mentioned during a conversation otherwise in Spanish. Many Malintsi residents appear to be insecure about speaking Mexicano. Flores Farfán (1999) has pointed out that many Mexicano speakers in the state of Guerrero, today think of themselves as *cuatreros*, speakers that make mistakes, an idea echoed by my interviewees who mostly see themselves as "half-speaking" (*medio hablar*). As one speaker figuratively put it, many local speakers *medio lo mastican,* they "sort of half chew it [Mexicano]." Countless times I have heard people, mostly under forty-five, tell me: "*lo entiendo pero no lo puedo pronunciar*" (I understand it but I can't pronounce it).

My observations showed a great disparity between *perceived* communicative competence in Mexicano and actual ability, for instance, when children or adults laugh at the punch line of a joke that someone has just told in Mexicano. Because of this linguistic insecurity, and a widespread

stigmatization of speaking Mexicano in the Contla county, I found that the actual degree of use of Mexicano, and of language shift is very hard to ascertain. In addition to the problems inherent in discerning actual language ability when the use of the language is stigmatized to some extent by its speakers, the challenge of *describing* and *quantifying* speakers' linguistic knowledge is a large one; Fishman's (1991, 2001) eight-part GIDS (Graded Inter-generational Disruption Scale) scale, which attempts to measure the degree of language shift that has taken place, can be of some use here – in the Malintsi I encountered Mexicano speakers at every level of his continuum. However, part of addressing this difficult question must involve a problematization of the notion of *bilingual*, which is denotationally limited for use in describing these indigenous, post-colonial contexts, where the languages are not on equal footing.

The concepts of semi-speaker (Dorian 1977) and quasi-speaker (Flores Farfán 1999) are helpful here, as we seek to find qualitative ways of describing the linguistic knowledge of speakers in relational terms (relational among speakers) rather than trying to attempt to quantify linguistic knowledge that is so situational, context-bound, that I don't believe it is statistically measurable.

As Hill & Hill (1986) have pointed out, the sociolinguistic situation and functional distribution of codes in the Malintsi region is a complex one. These factors problematize the description of diglossia as a use of two codes (one being high, and the other low), because the languages are each associated with a different identity, and they both co-exist within syncretic Mexicano, which includes elements of Spanish grammar in addition to lexical items. There are a multitude of local ideologies of identity - indigenous and mestizo- and of socio-economic betterment, which for Tlaxcalans are inextricably linked to issues of language, and these form the ideological multiplicity which emerges in local discourses (Messing 2003). My research also might provide a context through which a new concept of an indigenous/post-colonial bilingualism can be described.

Part of my findings included describing the most salient factors predicting the *learning* of Mexicano in Contla. The three main factors include: 1) the age of the person – among older residents, sixty and above, the likelihood is greater that they will understand or speak Mexicano in certain contexts; 2) the family a person comes from and their communicative competence (i.e. the presence of a parent from another state often means an interruption in transmission of Mexicano to the younger generation); 3) the individual speaker's linguistic identity orientation (some families have a great degree of variation between children who seek to learn the language- from a grandparent for instance – and others who partially, or completely reject the language as an icon of indigenous-ness).

The primary factors influencing the *use* of Mexicano in the Mexicano region in day to day speech are variable and dependent on the context. A summary of factors influencing the use of Mexicano includes: 1) there is a greater likelihood that one will hear Mexicano in private contexts, rather than public ones – exceptions include occasional symbolic events; 2) the relative linguistic security the speaker feels in speaking Mexicano with the given interlocutors; 3) the context must be one of *confianza* (mutual trust), and may be one of habit (where certain speakers have the custom of speaking together in Mexicano); 4) the speaker must be certain that his/her interlocutor understands Mexicano (this is a very individual and subjective decision); 5) there is a great tendency for speakers to be of the same generation, and it is quite notable that cross-generational communication in Mexicano takes place in very restricted contexts (i.e. usually a Mexicano dominant grandparent with a younger relative) (Messing 2003).

In addition to the requirement that the communicative context be one of *confianza* (mutual trust), it is also a question of habit where certain speakers have the custom of speaking together in Mexicano. A speaker must be certain that his/her interlocutor understands Mexicano, which is a very individual and subjective decision. There is a great tendency for speakers to be of the same generation; It is quite notable that cross-generational communication in Mexicano takes place in very restricted contexts, for instance, usually a Mexicano dominant grandparent with a younger relative.

Finally, the ideological stance or orientation to which an individual or family may subscribe, whether it is *pro-indígena* or *menosprecio*, or a combination of the two affects language use. You can see the influence of the *menosprecio*, or denigration here.

2.1 Menosprecio discourse

(4) Menosprecio discourse[1] (underlined)

Pero ellos también no tienen la culpa, ellos tienen una idea que, que se les ha sembrado a través de los años, nuestros padres, que también están equivocados al al hecho <u>de decir que, que todo lo indígena pues no sirve. Nuestros maestros, que cuando fuimos alguna ocasión nos dijeron, que: no habláramos la lengua indígena, porque si no, nos reprobaban. Nuestra sociedad que critica que critica todo lo indígena.</u>

But it also isn't their fault, they have an idea that, that has been planted in them over the years, our parents, that also are mistaken upon upon saying that, <u>that that which is indigenous well it is useless. Our teachers, that when we went on some occasion, said to us, that... that we shouldn't speak [among ourselves] the indigenous language, because if not, they would fail us. Our society that criticizes that criticizes everything indigenous.</u>

The retreat of Mexicano to certain spaces and times in Contla daily life are a direct result of years of discrimination which have been internalized, and which surface in the discourse of *Menosprecio*, the denigration of anything indigenous. Speaking an Indian language in Mexico is the primary marker of an indigenous identity, (marked as different from a Mexican-mestizo identity). Twentieth century shifts in the social identities and languages of Mexican indigenous peoples need to be taken in the larger context of the fifteenth century conquest of the "new world" indigenous peoples, a colonial situation that placed native peoples and languages in a subordinate, often sub-human position. The notion of "backwardness," surfaces in the discourse of *menosprecio*, which is locally opposed to "modernity." This is one of the three discourses I have identified.

3. Ideological multiplicity: discourses of language, identity, modernity

In my work I suggest that the sociolinguistic situation in the Malintsi region is characterized by an ideological multiplicity in which language is related to identity and socio-economic progress, which surfaces in a discourse of *salir adelante* – of forging ahead to improve one's socioeconomic position. We need to take into account the ideological dimension of social situations, which affects language use and produces certain types of sociolinguistic situations in where there is more ambiguity than the diglossia model presupposes. Philips (1998a:8) has shown that "ideologies are constituted and enacted in social practices" such as discourse, and that ideological diversity can be studied through analysis of discourse that is "socially ordered by various kinds of power struggles between dominant and subordinate social forces" (Ibid.).

I think that sociolinguistic categories such as "bilingual" and "diglossic societies" could benefit from research that pays attention to the ideological dimension of discourse in indigenous communities that are part of post-colonial nation-states (see Urban & Sherzer 1991). This research can help us understand the dynamic and multi-faceted nature of multilingualism in societies where certain languages and dialects –as the old adage goes – where certain languages and dialects do indeed have Armies and Navies, while speakers of socially subordinate languages and dialects denigrate their communicative codes, which eventually may lead to language shift. We should take people's communicative codes as part of the communicative endeavor of real human speakers, rather than assigning arbitrary codes to functional categories. If a language comes to stand for its people – becomes an icon for their identity – then the language is likely to be denigrated if the people's local identity is denigrated and afforded power as a symbol of its people. In an indigenous language/

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[1] The ideological multiplicity in the Malintsi surfaces in everyday situations, through the local, regional and national discourses that I have identified as: (1) *salir adelante* [forging ahead], improving one's socioeconomic position; (2) *menosprecio* [under-appreciation], denigration of indigenous identity, too often stigmatized; and (3) *Pro-Indígena* [pro-indigenous], promoting a positive attitude towards indigenous people.

colonial language multilingual situation, there will likely be a discourse of *menosprecio*, of denigration towards the native language – and a *pro-indigena* pro-indigenous discourse as well.

Indigenous/post-colonial bilingualism is one in which speakers have some level of linguistic and communicative competence in an indigenous language, *and* in the dominant colonial language of the nation-state. This understanding can in turn help us to move towards creating sociolinguistic descriptive categories that are able to adequately represent the inequality in dimensions of power between languages, dialects, and their speakers.

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