INTRODUCTION TO THE MONOGRAPHIC SECTION "2019: INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES"

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Abstract

This monographic section aims to bring together experts in linguistic standardization, both theoretical and practical, with different experiences in the codification and elaboration of standard varieties of Amerindian languages. The main purpose is to reflect on Western linguistic conceptualization when establishing written standards in communities of primarily oral tradition.

Keywords: indigenous languages; Amerindian languages; language standarditzation; language planning and policy.

PRESENTACIÓ DE LA SECCIÓ MONOGRÀFICA "2019: ANY INTERNACIONAL DE LES LLENGÜES INDÍGENES"

Resum

Aquesta secció monogràfica té com a objectiu reunir els experts en estandardització lingüística, tant de la vessant teòrica com pràctica, que han dut a terme diferents experiències en la codificació i l'elaboració de varietats estàndards de les llengües ameríndies. La finalitat és reflexionar sobre com influeix la conceptualització lingüística occidental a l'hora de codificar estàndards escrits en comunitats amb una tradició predominantment oral.

Paraules clau: llengües indígenes; llengües ameríndies; estandardització lingüística; política i planificació lingüístiques.

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The United Nations has declared 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages, an initiative that has rightly been received enthusiastically by the scientific community and indigenous peoples alike, as it increases the visibility of indigenous languages, cultures and traditions while highlighting the importance of maintaining them for the planet's ecolinguistic balance and to achieve more equality and social justice. After the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, a legislative process was initiated to recognise the human rights of indigenous peoples and the maintenance of their linguistic and cultural traits (Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966; the International Labour Organization's Convention 169 relating to independent indigenous peoples, 1989; the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, 1996; the proclamation of 21 February as International Mother Language Day, 1999; the General Law on Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2003; the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007, etc.).

These are well-meaning initiatives and measures that are needed to promote linguistic peace and social coexistence between peoples, boost multilingualism and draw attention to the need to revert the processes that lead to the disappearance and death of languages, which are happening very fast due to the homogenising effect of globalisation (Crystal, 2000; Krauss, 1992; Nettle and Romaine, 2000). Clearly, the situation is extremely serious, as 75% of indigenous languages are spoken by less than 10,000 people (Banco Internacional de Reconstrucción y Fomento, 2014: 26). Language disappearance for many reasons, including natural catastrophes, genocides, colonialism or policies of linguistic and cultural subordination and assimilation (cf. Austin and Sallabank, 2011). One key factor in the disappearance and vulnerability of indigenous languages is the language change of speakers towards a dominant language with more linguistic capital that can give speakers more opportunities for economic advancement and social well-being (Bourdieu, 1991). In many cases, these factors explain the interruption in intergenerational transmission of the indigenous language (Fishman, 2001).

Therefore, many linguists, anthropologists and activists are sceptical about the impact of *de jure* statements in the implementation of real policies that *de facto* put an end to processes of language minoritisation and substitution, and the privilege of a few Western languages. The linguistic discrimination that indigenous communities still suffer cannot be separated from the political measures that must be adopted to achieve real equal rights and autonomy for indigenous peoples in the exercise of their language rights, as well as their political and social rights in the administration of the territory, the management of natural resources, access to property, etc.

From the 1990s, political and social movements of indigenous communities began to gather more strength, and many called for the standardisation of their languages and their use in public spaces such as the government, education or the media. Currently, digital activism plays a significant role in processes of language revitalisation (Llanes Ortiz, 2016), that is, the use of information and communication technologies to increase the visibility of indigenous languages and populations and combat the stigma of indigenous languages as lacking or unsuitable for the modern era. It is precisely in this area that considerable attention should be paid to vernacular writing self-generated from the bottom-up by the speakers, who may aim to question the codified standard and defend writing in their language in non-standardised forms (Cru, 2015). This topic is in line with the focus of this thematic section: the linguistic management of language ecologies other than the Western standard language cultures (Milroy, 2001) and the relationship between the dimensions of orality and the written word in indigenous communities. This issue is dedicated particularly to the indigenous languages of Latin America, where language planning has been conditioned on most occasions by a Western conceptualisation of language. This is a region that, since independence processes, has overlooked indigenous peoples and their respective languages in the various projects of constructing a nation. The main aim is therefore to investigate the processes of language regulation in indigenous Amerindian societies and analyse the ambiguous attitudes towards writing and its appropriation in the various ethnolinguistic communities, and in the controversial processes of language standardisation that have been implemented. Indeed, it is not surprising that the creation of a standard variety, a concept with Western roots that is strongly associated with the written and codified form of a language (Joseph, 1987), would be problematic in societies that have a mainly oral tradition. Therefore, with analysis and critical reflection on various experiences of the transcription into writing, coding and creation of standard varieties

of Amerindian languages, the aim is to contribute to the debate about language standardisation and in which conditions and under which premises it can promote the revitalisation of languages.

According to the *Atlas sociolingüístico de pueblos indígenas en América Latina* (Sociolinguistic Atlas of Indigenous Peoples in Latin America, Sichra, 2009), the Amazon is the region with the highest index of linguistic diversity with over 300 ethnolinguistic communities out of a total of 533,[1] followed by the Mesoamerican area. Mexico, Guatemala, Peru and Bolivia are the countries with the highest number of indigenous peoples (over 75%) and the languages with the highest numbers of speakers, reaching the millions, are, in decreasing order, Kichwa, Nahuatl, Aymara, Yucatec Maya and Ki'che'. The first of the articles in the thematic section, **"Estandarización y revitalización de lenguas amerindias. Funciones comunicativas e ideológicas, expectativas ilusorias y condiciones de la aceptación" (The standardisation and revitalisation of Amerindian languages: communicative and ideological functions, unrealistic expectations and conditions for acceptance)**, by professor Klaus Zimmermann, examines the ideology that leads to language standardisation both in the history of Europe and its transfer to the Latin American environment. The author analyses the functions of standard varieties of Amerindian languages as well as the conditions of acceptance by their users in situations of language contact with the dominant languages of Spanish and Portuguese.

The second contribution, **"Divided we stand, unified we fall? The impact of standardisation on oral language varieties: a case study of Amazonian Kichwa"** is by Drs. Grzech, Ennis and Schwarz. The Kichwa language family is agglutinating and cross-border, and is mainly spoken in seven countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Peru and Brazil) by speakers that number 8 to 12 million (cf. Coronel-Molina and McCarthy, 2016). Kichwa is recognised by the Ecuadorian Constitution[2] of 2008 as an official language for intercultural relations and is taught in the Ecuadorian Amazon in bilingual schools in territories where most of the population are bilingual in Kichwa and Spanish.

Through an ethnographic study undertaken in the Napo Valley (Ecuador), Grzech, Ennis and Schwarz analyse the impact of implementing the standard, unified variety of Kichwa, drawn up in the 1980s from Andean varieties, on the attitudes and language habits of speakers of Amazon Kichwa. They stress that the promotion of this standard variety is having adverse effects on the vitality of non-standard regional varieties of Kichwa, which are mainly oral, in the provinces of Napo, Pastaza or Orellana (cf. Hornberger and King, 1996; Hornberger and Coronel-Molina, 2004).

Professor Sagi-Vela's article **"El mixe escrito y el espejismo del buen alfabeto" (Written Mixe and the mirage of the good alphabet)** addresses the problem of acceptance amongst speakers of a specific graphic system for representing their language, as well as the ideological dimension that this process involves. The Mixe or Ayuhk language belongs to the Mixe-Zoquean family and has around 90,000 speakers. The situation of Mixe in the state of Oaxaca (Mexico) is the focus of Dr. Sagi-Vela's study. In this province, the language is also vulnerable, but less than in other areas such as the Gulf of Mexico, because it has greater vitality and is transmitted intergenerationally (Díaz Couder, 2009: 843). The work analyses the difficulties that were found in the 1970s to agree on a unified alphabet that would enable potential standardisation of the Mixe language. Dr. Sagi-Vela highlights discrepancies in the choice of graphics and the power struggles of the various Mixe communities in the process of appropriation or systematisation of writing.

The last contribution to the thematic section, **"Policy diversity in communicative spaces of legal translation and interpreting of indigenous languages"** by Schrader-Kniffki, was also based in Oaxaca, which is notable as the Mexican state with the most indigenous languages (Zapotec, Mixtec, Mazatec, Mixe, Amuzgo, Chatino, Chinantec, Figa, Contal, Cuicatec, Huave, Ixcatec, Nahuatl, Popoloca, Triqui and Zoque) (Barabas, 2004) and in which the percentage of the indigenous population is the highest in relation to the total population (Canedo Vásquez, 2008: 403). Since the approval of the General Law on Linguistic

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1 As is often the case with language surveys, it is difficult to obtain faithful, uniform data on the number of peoples and indigenous languages. Some of the obstacles include difficulty in establishing a clear distinction between independent languages or varieties of the same diasystems, glottonymic diversity or lack of knowledge of the language situation in certain areas, the difference in criteria for delimiting ethnicity of speakers of indigenous languages, the lack of availability of national census data, and the identification of indigenous people, an issue that requires much more attention than we can give it here.

2 For an overview of official recognition of the indigenous languages of Latin America, see Zajicová (2017).

Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2003, the practices of translating the indigenous languages in Mexico gained official status and the work of Dr. Schrader-Kniffki highlights what these processes of translation and interpretation are like in a plurilingual society such as that of Oaxaca, and how translation practices are carried out by the indigenous population.

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