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Language Revalorization in Peruvian Amazonia, Through the Lens of Iquito

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Introduction

Amazonia is one of the most linguistically diverse regions in the world, home to approximately 300 languages from some 100 genealogically distinct stocks, including isolates (Epps and Michael, 2017). A significant proportion of these languages are endangered (Crevels 2012; Moore 2007), and in recent decades, a variety of language revitalization efforts have arisen across this vast region. We do not attempt to survey these efforts, which tend to be localized efforts of communities, linguists, and anthropologists (see, e.g., Valenzuela 2010; Vallejos 2014); instead, we focus on a particular language revitalization experience in which we, the authors, are involved: efforts to revitalize Iquito, a language of northern Peruvian Amazonia. Nevertheless, our own experiences in other Amazonian communities, together with what we have learned about the experiences of community members and colleagues in other parts of Amazonia, suggest that there many broad commonalities across these diverse settings, which derive from the small populations of many Amazonian groups; their political and economic marginalization, often exacerbated by their geographical distance from important urban political centers; and their lack of access to educational opportunities.

As of 2016, about 15 native speakers of Iquito[2] remain, the youngest of whom are in their late sixties, and most of whom live in the small settlement of San Antonio on the Pintuyacu River in the *departamento* (state) of Loreto, Peru (Figure 39.1). Colonial-era Jesuit chronicles suggest that prior to the arrival of Europeans in what is now Peruvian Amazonia in the 16th century, there were about 5000 Iquito people spread in small groups over a large area. Today, there are a few dozen families who acknowledge an Iquito heritage, most of whom live in or near San Antonio.

Iquito is a member of the Zaparoan family, and its three sister languages have experienced similar decimation. Arabela has about 30 remaining speakers (Buenaño 2011); Záparo (also Sápara) has a handful of rememberers, and Andoa (also: Katsakáti) has already fallen silent.[3]

In this chapter, we discuss efforts to revitalize Iquito that we joined in 2001, and which continue through the time of writing. In order to understand the Iquito situation on its own terms, we first describe the principal historical and social factors that led to the highly endangered status of the language and the perceived need for revitalization work, before discussing our

Figure 39.1 Location of Iquito village of San Antonio[4]

involvement with the Iquito people and language, with the aim of presenting our experiences—successes as well as failures—as resources for effective action in similar situations.

Most pointedly, and perhaps most useful in terms of language revitalization theory, we hope to contribute to a clearer understanding of why revitalization efforts may fail to produce new speakers, or even "understanders," of a language despite what seem to be suitable, or even excellent, conditions to achieve that outcome. We hope that our exploration of the fundamental differences between our original ideas of what language revitalization work is for, on the one hand, and the ideas evidenced by our collaborators in San Antonio,

on the other hand, will prove helpful to others who are developing language revitalization efforts in similar situations.

As the editors of this volume have made clear in their introduction, language revitalization as a field in itself presupposes a commitment to the health of languages whose survival has been imperiled as a result of radical changes in the lifeways of language communities. As they put it, language revitalization is "commonly understood as giving new life and vigor to a language that has been decreasing in use (or has ceased to be used altogether)." Ideally, revitalization activities that are carried out by outsiders are driven by close collaboration with community members, and are designed according to the explicit objectives of at least those community members and perhaps those of a, or the, community-at-large as well. Moreover, if revitalization activities are truly to be guided by the objectives of community members, this requires of outsider-participants that they make a sincere effort to understand and accept those objectives, even when, and especially when, those objectives do not align with their own.[5]

We argue here that in the case of Iquito, the fundamental goal of community participants has been to create ways in which they can strategically enact symbolic, revocable affiliations with the language in specific situations that they themselves assess in real time as both safe and advantageous. As a result, efforts to revitalize the language that are focused on developing communicative competence as typically understood by linguists are misplaced in San Antonio. In this view, the aim of Iquito revitalization and reclamation is not just to give "new life" but also a new *kind* of life to Iquito.

Historical Perspectives

When Iquito people first encountered Europeans in the late 17th century, they occupied a large territory between the Napo and Tigre Rivers, in what is now northwestern Peruvian Amazonia. By the 1920s, an original Iquito population of about 5000 was reduced to about 150 people—through introduced diseases, 18th-century Jesuit efforts to concentrate the dispersed Iquito population into mission settlements, and enslavement under the *patrón-peón* (Santos-Granero and Barclay 2000) system from the late 19th to mid-20th century.

Despite the staggering loss of Iquito lives that resulted from these grim chapters of Amazonian history, their language remained vital until the early 20th century, when the *patrón-peón* system that was imposed upon Iquito territories gave rise to outright violent suppression of Iquito language use. Another blow to Iquito language vitality was dealt during the mid-20th century by Peruvian government policies aimed at "peruvianizing" Indigenous peoples, which included enforced military conscription for Indigenous men and aggressive anti-Indigenous education policies. These crushing pressures led Iquito parents to stop passing on Iquito to their children, in the hope that they could thereby diminish the effects of overt anti-Indigenous racism. By the 1950s, children had stopped acquiring the language, and the number of Iquito speakers began to drop sharply.

Positive shifts in government policies towards Indigenous people and communities took place in the 1990s, including in the domain of education. Nonetheless, and despite the growth of Indigenous federations, anti-Indigenous ideologies persist across Peruvian Amazonia, and race-based oppression and exclusion remain widespread. In San Antonio in particular, a mestizo-dominated educational system ensures the steady presence of both anti-Indigenous and anti-rural attitudes, despite its intercultural and bilingual veneer. Similarly, the ongoing influx of outsiders into Iquito territories in pursuit of natural resources, including timber, game, gold, and oil, manifests a general disregard for the well-being, desires, and rights of its inhabitants.

Against this general hostility toward Indigenous identity and language, two developments stand out. The first was the work of Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) missionaries Robert and Elizabeth Eastman in the late 1950s and early 1960s, which valorized the Iquito language to a certain degree and introduced the ideas of bilingual education and Iquito literacy to San Antonio. Their presence proved short-lived, however, as the regional government and Catholic church, apparently spurred by the still-powerful family of the original *patrón* who had enslaved the Iquitos, actively opposed the SIL's presence.

The next major development dates to the 1990s, when regional mestizo political and educational leaders gave the Iquito people a central symbolic position in Loreto's pursuit of greater political and economic autonomy from the centralized national government. In particular, the Iquito people were identified as the founders of the city of Iquitos,[6] giving a uniquely Amazonian grounding to the newly imagined community[7] of "Loretanos." These regional actors expressed significant concern about the state of the language, which had only some 50 speakers by this time, and they sought to generate enthusiasm in San Antonio for cultural revalorization and language revitalization efforts.

Community members have described feeling considerable ambivalence towards this sudden mestizo enthusiasm for Iquito culture and language, but at least some powerful community members recognized the value of the symbolic capital this situation lent the community, and they sought to channel this enthusiasm in ways that would strengthen the community's own political and economic positions. These were the circumstances that led to our involvement.

Contemporary Perspectives: The ILDP

ILDP Phase 1: 2001 to 2006

We, the authors, became involved with the Iquito language and heritage community after hearing from non-governmental organization contacts in Lima that the Iquito community was actively seeking help with language documentation and revitalization. We visited San Antonio in 2001 to offer our support and services as linguists, and we received an enthusiastic reception from key members of the Iquito community.

During that visit, we worked with community members to design the Iquito Language Documentation Project (ILDP) as a multi-year, team-based collaborative documentation project with a core language revitalization component. We structured the ILDP to ensure that self-identified community members would have substantial control in guiding the project, both as community linguists, whom we trained in basic linguistics and language pedagogy, and in the form of a community steering committee. In addition, we recruited graduate students from the University of Texas at Austin and *bachillerato* (undergraduate) students from the *Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos* to participate in team-based language documentation and description activities.

We began work on the ILDP in the summer of 2002, building a small language center in San Antonio in order to have a dedicated space for our language-related activities. During Phase 1 of the ILDP, we led teams of students and community linguists each summer from 2002 through 2006, carrying out language documentation work (dictionary, collection of texts, and grammatical description), language revitalization activities, and various "consciousness-raising" activities. In addition, community linguists continued largely independent documentation and pedagogical activities during the non-summer months.

During Phase 1, our principal revitalization activities were providing regular language classes to children and adults in our center, producing pedagogical materials for use in our

center and in the community's school, and providing language materials and other material support for community-directed cultural and social events. Our language classes focused on speaking, interacting, and activity-based learning, with communicative competence as the long-term goal.

The ILDP began with considerable enthusiasm on all sides, but difficulties began to emerge as early as 2003, which escalated to a degree that effectively paralyzed language revitalization activities by 2005. These difficulties had three different sources, all ultimately rooted in the conflicted orientations that most community members had toward Indigenous and mestizo identities.

First, while there was general support for promoting the Indigenous status of the community as a whole, most community members were profoundly ambivalent about claiming an Indigenous identity for themselves or their children.[8] Indeed, the climactic breakdown of language revitalization activities in 2005 took place after the ILDP had arranged for community linguists and Elders to regularly teach Iquito in the nominally bilingual school in the community, and students were beginning to learn Iquito in the classroom. A backlash brewed among some prominent families in the community, who declared that they didn't want their children to be *indios*,[9] leading to the end of those teaching activities.

Second, many community members' enthusiasm for language revitalization had been linked to a belief that promoting an Iquito identity for the community would yield tangible economic benefits. As mentioned previously, this view had been actively encouraged by regional political actors, such as the then mayor of Iquitos, who identified the Iquito people as the "founders" of Iquitos and who were interested in maintaining a somewhat folkloricized and commodified Iquito people for political symbolic purposes. While we had carefully distanced the ILDP from this framing of the value of Iquito cultural and linguistic identity, when the eagerly anticipated economic benefits failed to materialize, the ILDP's activities were tarred with the same brush of disillusionment.

Finally, the ILDP ended up becoming an object in community-internal political contests between factions aligned with the descendants of the *patrones* who originally enslaved the Iquitos, families aligned with a rival *mestizo* family that arrived in San Antonio in the mid-20th century, and families who more closely identified with an Iquito Indigenous identity. Rancorous debates broke out over administrative details of the ILDP (e.g., the number of hours that members of each faction participated in ILDP-related activities per week), as one front in a broader contest to gain control over the political and economic capital associated with an Indigenous community identity, resulting in a particularly contentious working environment.

Phase 1 of the ILDP ended in December 2006 (when our ELDP grant ended), at which point we were ready to step back from the intensity of the political situation surrounding Iquito language and identity. We delivered final drafts of our documentation and revitalization materials to community leaders and made a public but open-ended commitment to the community to return for Phase 2 when we could pull together sufficient research time and funding.

ILDP Phase 2: 2014 to Present

Since restarting the ILDP in 2014, we have renewed our efforts to support positive visibility for the Iquito language. This has included offering language classes for community members, producing new pedagogical and promotional materials, and using the language ourselves in appropriate social spaces. The crucial difference is that we have shifted to evaluating the "success" of our efforts based on local social uptake and recognition rather than the diffusion of linguistic knowledge. We now prioritize the symbolic value and impact of our activities,

and repeat those that seem to have value for community members; activities that haven't been received well, such as offering trainings for local school teachers, we have just let go.

Our shift in strategy has had positive results. Most notably, language classes at our center have been well-received and well-attended overall, and community leaders are pleased to have new materials available. Best of all, our recent work has fueled little conflict in San Antonio.

Understanding the Iquito Case: Language Ideologies and Acts of Identity

Language Ideologies and Ideologies of Contempt

Language ideologies—durable yet malleable sets of conscious and unconscious ideas and beliefs that one holds about languages and their place in the social world (Schieffelin et al 1998)—are an ever-present influence on the choices and actions of the residents of San Antonio (as they are for all of us). In our view, Nancy Dorian's (1998) discussion of "Western ideologies of contempt" accurately characterizes many attitudes we have heard expressed about Iquito language and culture both in and beyond San Antonio (and Indigenous languages and cultures more generally in Peruvian Amazonia). Citing Grillo's (1989) work, she observes that "an integral feature of the system of linguistic stratification in Europe is an ideology of contempt: subordinate languages are despised languages" (Dorian 1998: 7). She further states that a language may become

> so exclusively associated with low-prestige people and their socially disfavored identities that its own potential speakers prefer to distance themselves from it and adopt some other language. Parents in these circumstances will make a conscious or unconscious decision not to transmit the ancestral language to their children and yet another language will be lost.
>
> *(Dorian 1998: 3)*

In the contemporary Iquito case, such "potential speakers" include both those who can speak fluently but opt not to do so and those who could learn to speak Iquito but opt not to do so; and the "socially disfavored identities" are associated with backwardness, poverty, and ignorance of mestizo culture and modernity. Such ideologies have become deeply internalized for our Iquito consultants, who have often commented that their forebears "lived like animals" and "knew nothing."[10]

Additionally, we end by bringing the issue of language ideology home, as it were. There is a language ideology held by many linguists, sometimes including ourselves, that the primary purpose of language, any language, is interpersonal communication, and that, fundamentally, the forms of language are deployed to generate (linguistic) meaning in interaction. In contrast, for most members of the Iquito community most of the time, the Iquito language is used (we perceive) as a means to enact membership in a particular social group at strategic moments for particular audiences, and the meanings contained in the forms of language are secondary. Coupled with community members' ambivalence about Iquito Indigenous identity and its link to Iquito linguistic competence, we see an orientation toward Iquito among most potential language learners that seeks to keep the language at a definite distance, while allowing access to it for brief instances of public symbolic performance.

In retrospect, we can now see that members of the Iquito heritage community had very different understandings and goals regarding the value of the language and its place in the future of the

community than those we assumed they had through the first years of the ILDP. In particular, our understanding that part of the purpose and responsibility of the ILDP was to create new speakers of Iquito reflected a non-local understanding of the goals of language revitalization.

Acts of Identity

In our view, also key to understanding the value of the Iquito language to some members of the contemporary Iquito community is the observation that individuals enact their membership in particular groups through the performance of actions (including both words and deeds) that are widely recognized as indexes of membership in that group, and that sometimes these enactments are overtly performative and volitional. In this view, the strategic use of Iquito (whether as fluent discourse or token words or phrases) is an act of identity (LePage and Tabouret-Keller 1985) that is performed for specific observer-hearers.

It is of course also true that individuals are assigned to groups by the actions (words and deeds) of others. But for present purposes, we highlight the volitional self-definitional angle, by which individuals enact and affirm their membership in an imagined Iquito community at strategic moments—such as in the opening moments of public events and meetings. The rest of the time, of course, they are enacting their membership in the (also imagined) community of Spanish-speaking Peruvians.

In our view, it is crucial to recognize the self-perceptions of marginalization, poverty, and deprivation that people have repeatedly expressed, in both private and public spaces, when they have talked about their lives, and especially their material lives as residents of San Antonio. By the time we began our collaboration with the body politic of San Antonio in 2001, this type of self-definition was widespread and much used. Within that frame, it makes sense that people in San Antonio often feel safer enacting an outward-looking Peruvian mestizo identity than (in their view) a backward-looking Iquito one.

Revitalization, Revalorization, Reclamation

In light of the constellation of features of the Iquito case that sets it apart from many better-known types of language revitalization efforts and yet which is not unique to it—and in fact seems to be fairly widespread in Amazonia—we advocate for a fundamental conceptual reframing of the goal of projects like this one as language "revalorization," in order to foreground local participants' desire to reclaim their heritage languages not for purposes of speaking but rather for purposes of carving out new, potentially beneficial social and political positions for themselves in what is largely still a hostile matrix society.

The domain in which this reframing has been most helpful for us is in our language teaching efforts. From the start of the ILDP, there was an explicit commitment between us and community leaders that we would teach, or facilitate the teaching of, Iquito language classes for community members, especially children, and that we would assist the existing school teachers in their ability to teach the language in their classrooms. However, we approached that commitment based on a model (ideology) of education that measures its own success according to the ability of students to cumulatively learn, absorb, reproduce, and ultimately own the material taught. In the case of teaching the Iquito language, our original model required a steadily increasing ability of students to first reproduce and then creatively produce the language as a means of expressing their own ideas. As described earlier, however, our adoption of this model failed to adequately take into account the nature of community members' desired relationship with the Iquito language and their own goals in reclaiming their heritage language.

Looking Toward the Future

The young Iquito parents who did not transmit their heritage language to their children were unambiguously (based on many local narratives we have heard) doing so out of a desire not only for the betterment but also the protection of their children in a deeply anti-Indigenous environment. Nancy Dorian observes that

> [t]he generation who do not transmit an ethnic language are usually actively in search of a social betterment that they believe they can only achieve by abandoning, among other identifying behaviors, a stigmatizing language. The first generation secure as to social position is often also the first generation to yearn after the lost language, which by their time is no longer regarded as particularly stigmatizing.
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> *(Dorian 1993: 576–577)*

In our view, the second sentence of Dorian's observation is as important as the first one in the Iquito case: even to the present day, Iquito parents do not see themselves in a secure social position, especially in terms of their own assessments of their economic position. Indigenous culture and language are still highly signifying markers in most social contexts—and usually stigmatizing. It is only under very special conditions that such markers might be construed as positive and beneficial. It is for this reason that we understand the occasional deployment of the Iquito language as deliberate and strategic, but crucially temporary, "acts of identity."

We have recognized that if we want to support the ethnic revival of a self-defining, locally imagined contemporary Iquito community, then we must set aside our own generalized, intellectualized definitions of indigeneity, mestizohood, community, and nationalism, as well as our culturally conditioned understandings of essentialism, truthfulness, and fairness. To be productive and happy, we must make peace between our own objectives and the objectives of our collaborators, as well as our own values and ethics and those of our collaborators. We must find our commonalities and work there. In the context of the ILDP, the commitment to revalorizing Iquito has emerged as one of those commonalities.

We hope to have demonstrated, through the Iquito case, the importance of understanding and respecting the objectives of local participants in order to support language revitalization when it is appropriate—or language revalorization when that is appropriate. We are optimistic that in most cases the interests, skills, and values of outsider-participants can be brought into alignment with those of community participants to the degree that all participants find success in their respective partially overlapping domains. If this involves ideological growing pains for the outsider-participants, we hope that such pains will be found worthwhile in the service of supporting the well-being and self-determination of Indigenous people.

Notes

1 We express our deep gratitude to Iquito language specialists †Hermenegildo Díaz Cuyasa, Ema Llona Yareja, †Ligia Inuma Inuma, and Jaime Pacaya Inuma, and to all the other members of the Iquito Language Documentation Project (ILDP) team over the years. The authors alone are responsible for the views presented here. Work on the ILDP has been funded by the Endangered Language Fund (2002 to 2003), the HRELP Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (MDP-0042; 2003 to 2006), NSF/NEH DEL Fellowships FN-230216 and FN-230217 (2015 to 2016), and Cabeceras Aid Project (2001 to present).

2 Iquito is an exonym dating from the 18th century, which has been adopted by Iquito speakers and nativized as *Ikíitu*.

3 Information on Záparo and Andoa language vitality derives from fieldwork by the authors in the relevant communities.
4 Details added by the authors to a base map originally produced by the Central Intelligence Agency and obtained courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin. www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas/peru_rel_06.jpg.
5 To put an even sharper point on it: we feel that if outsider-participants cannot accept insiders' objectives, then the onus is upon them to leave.
6 The status of the Iquito people as the founders of the city rests on the presence of Iquito people near the present-day location of the city before it began to grow into an important regional center in the mid-to-late 19th century. This small group of Iquitos, located far from their traditional territories in the upper Nanay River basin, were the descendants of Iquito people displaced by 18th-century Jesuit efforts to resettle them in *reducciones* (mission settlements) that were more easily accessible to missionaries (Uriarte [1776] 1986).
7 See Anderson (2006) for an insightful discussion of this concept.
8 Arguably one of the most important differences between the Iquito community and many other heritage language communities is the absence of local language activists. The absence of such individuals has meant that outsiders have ended up playing a prominent role in local revitalization efforts.
9 In Loreto, a derogatory and offensive term applied to Indigenous people.
10 Our consultants have said many positive things about their forebears too; such talk is always context-dependent.

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