

Implementing community involvement in collaborative language documentation: The Iquito case

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1 Introduction

- This talk describes and evaluates the specific strategies used by the Iquito Language Documentation Project (ILDP) to involve community members in the documentation and revitalization of Iquito.
- As a multi-year, team-based, community-participatory project, the ILDP was designed around a central goal: to involve members of the heritage language community in both documentation and revitalization work on Iquito.
- The ILDP was designed to meet three broad objectives: documentation, revitalization, and revalorization of Iquito, which the project's directors conceived of as related but distinct objectives.
 - Documentation: producing as many materials in and on the language as possible.
 - Revitalization: promoting and facilitating language learning by as many people as possible.
 - Revalorization: raising the social and political status of the language in as many domains as possible.
- In this talk, I'll first describe some of the specific strategies used by the ILDP to meet this goal and these objectives, and then I will evaluate these strategies, in terms of both their degree of success in the specific context of the ILDP and in terms of their potential replicability in other language documentation contexts.

2 Background on the Iquito language, the Iquito people, and the ILDP

2.1 The Iquito language

- Iquito [ikítu] is currently highly endangered. There are about 25 remaining fluent native speakers, all over 60 years of age; and about 25 passive or partial speakers, all over 30.
- Iquito is one of the three or four surviving languages of the Zaparoan family: Záparo (1-3 speakers), Arabela (≈ 75 speakers), and Andoa (1-3?); currently, Andoa, Aushiri, Cahuarano, Omurano are considered extinct.
- The majority of the remaining speakers of Iquito live in the community of San Antonio on the Pintuyacu River in the department of Loreto in Peru; a few live further upriver in Atalaya on the Chambira River.

2.2 The Iquito people

- Most of the 200 or so residents of San Antonio are of Iquito descent, but many residents are *mestizos* (Peruvians who don't identify themselves as indigenous). Most community members are subsistence farmers; Spanish is the dominant language.
- Atalaya, with 150 or so residents, is roughly half ethnic Iquito and half Quichua; both Spanish and Quichua are actively spoken there.
- San Antonio is about 100 kilometers due west of Iquitos, the largest city in Peruvian Amazonia; it is widely believed that the city's founders took its name (along with the land!) from the Iquito people previously living at the site.
- Like many Amazonian groups, the Iquito population was displaced and decimated in the course of contact with conquering outsiders. Now numbering fewer than 500 individuals, it is estimated there were as many as 10,000 Iquito people at the time of the arrival of Europeans in Amazonia.
- The Iquito language is endangered as a result of intense pressure – including physical violence – on its speakers to stop speaking their native language and start speaking Spanish. In Amazonia, this is a centuries-old strategy to erase indigenous groups' social, economic, and political independence. As a result, the roots of racism in the Iquito case – imposed as well as internalized – run extremely deep.
- Current efforts to revalorize the Iquito language are tightly linked to the unique intellectual and political currents found in the department of Loreto, Peru. Concretely, Loreto has increasingly turned to its Amazonian indigenous history as a mark of distinction from the rest of Peru, linked to its desire for greater autonomy from Peru's Lima-based central government. This has made room for greater recognition of local diversity.

2.3 The Iquito Language Documentation Project

- The ILDP was launched in 2001, in response to a general request sent out by the leaders of San Antonio for help with their language revitalization efforts. In brief, my colleague Lev Michael and I, in our capacity as fieldworkers for the NGO Cabeceras Aid Project, learned about the Iquito situation through regional connections and decided to go visit and offer our services and assistance; they accepted.
- The ILDP is a collaborative effort among the Iquito community of San Antonio de Pintuyacu; the Center for Indigenous Languages of Latin America (CILLA) at the University of Texas at Austin; Cabeceras Aid Project; CILA at the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos in Lima; and individual researchers, most of whom have been linguistics graduate students from UT-Austin or San Marcos.
- Linguistic fieldwork began in 2002; from 2003 to 2006, the ILDP received funding from the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Programme (Grant #MDP0042, PI Nora England, co-PIs Lev Michael and Christine Beier, all based at UT-Austin at the time); it has also received financial support from the Endangered Language Fund, Cabeceras Aid Project, and individual grants to participating researchers.
- From 2003 to 2006, the ILDP had local team members working part-time year-round on language documentation. Then, for the two months of the North American academic summer (mid-June to mid-August), the local team worked intensively, six to seven days a week, with a group of visiting linguists, including Lev and me as co-coordinators. By design, the ILDP was active in the summer months only, before and after that time period.
- By its conclusion, the IDLP will have produced the following materials: an Iquito/Spanish dictionary, a descriptive grammar of Iquito, an extensive collection of audio, video, and written texts encompassing a wide variety of textual styles, and a set of pedagogical materials for use in and by the community, particularly in their 'bilingual' school.

- The project’s coordinators take the following statements as axiomatic:
 - Speakers, as well as members of the heritage language community more generally, *can* and *should* be directly involved in documentary and descriptive linguistic work on their language, working in close collaboration with any visiting specialists.
 - Language documentation and description *can* and *should* be firmly linked to the stated desires of the heritage language community – including responding promptly to requests for the kinds of products and materials they want.
 - Much higher quality linguistic description and documentation result from attending closely to local knowledge systems lived by and embodied in members of the heritage language community.

3 Strategies for community involvement in the ILDP

- The ILDP was structured to involve community members at two levels: as individual participants, and as a ‘community at large’ (that is, as a social and political entity).
- In concrete terms, the ILDP involved community members in four quite different kinds of social spaces:
 - On the team: community members participating as paid members of the linguistic research team.
 - At the center: ‘spoken Iquito’ classes offered at the Iquito language center, for both adults and children.
 - In the school: both teaching support and pedagogical materials provided for the classrooms of the existing ‘bilingual’ school.
 - In the village: accountability for the project’s activities to the community assemblies, as well as ILDP participation in communal events, meetings, celebrations, etc.

3.1 Strategies for involving the community of San Antonio at large

- In 2001, after careful negotiations with the community at large, Lev and I (on behalf of Cabeceras) and San Antonio’s leaders signed a formal agreement governing a multi-year ‘recuperation’¹ project. The agreement foregrounded community involvement in various ways:
 - It placed us visiting participants in a supporting role to the community’s revalorization efforts and served as the ILDP’s guiding document throughout its development and evolution.
 - It established a supervisory committee of community members for the project, whose members were chosen in a public meeting in 2002; similarly, the community members who became research team participants were initially selected by vote in a public meeting in 2002.
 - It committed the ILDP’s coordinators to making regular reports on project activities and advances to the community’s assemblies.
 - It stipulated that the ILDP’s products would include pedagogical and textual materials tailored for local use, particularly by primary school students.
- In 2002, the project constructed the solar-powered Iquito language center and began offering spoken Iquito lessons for adults and children there; classes were well-attended in the early years of the project. Instruction was also offered to (but not accepted by) the ethnic Iquito school teachers working in the ‘bilingual’ school.
- Between 2004 and 2006, the community linguists and language specialists regularly provided assistance in teaching the Iquito language in the classrooms of the school.

¹The community chose the Spanish word *recuperación* for this project, which encompasses the notions of both ‘revalorization’ and ‘revitalization’ in English.

3.2 Strategies for involving individual members of the Iquito community

- A significant challenge that the ILDP faced initially was the fact that no speakers of Iquito are literate and no literate members of the ethnic Iquito community are native speakers of Iquito.
- The ILDP addressed this fact by incorporating literate adults as *community linguists* and fluent native speakers of Iquito as *language specialists*. The project had three, then two, community linguists and four language specialists.
- These two local groups worked as close collaborators throughout the project; in particular, they worked in pairs and trios from the project's very first days, in order to develop camaraderie, stability, and expertise within the local team.
- All of the community participants were paid a respectable hourly wage for their work. This arrangement both increased their prestige in the community and provided a tangible motivation for keeping a consistent work schedule.
- The longer-term goal of this two-part local structure was to create a group of independent local experts who could serve the Iquito heritage language community beyond the life of the ILDP.

3.2.1 Community linguists

- In 2002 and 2003, the ILDP's visiting linguists (from UT-Austin) trained the community linguists in the basics of linguistic description (including aspects of orthography design, phonology, morphology, and syntax); text transcription and translation (for example, recording protocols, interlinearization, and structured consultation with the text's author); and lexicography for dictionary work.
- The community linguists were active participants in the research process, suggesting topics, themes, and strategies for the team's documentation work.
- The community linguists were an important link between the visiting linguists and the community at large. They made concrete decisions about orthography and other aspects of language policy and played an active role in language teaching and the design of pedagogical materials.

3.2.2 Language specialists

- The language specialists chosen by the community have been publically acknowledged as the primary experts on the Iquito language.
- The language specialists have received 'on the job' training from visiting linguists, who have cultivated the specialists' individual talents and skills relative to the various types of documentary and descriptive tasks of the project.
- The language specialists have guided the rest of the team in selecting and producing content for textual and pedagogical materials.
- The language specialists have worked with both community and visiting linguists in master/apprentice contexts (see Hinton 2002²) so that the linguists themselves would participate in the revitalization of Iquito as a spoken language.

4 Evaluating the ILDP's strategies

4.1 Unexpected challenges encountered by the ILDP's strategies

- Unexpectedly, the greatest challenge was maintaining participants' long-term commitments to documentation and revitalization outside the context of the ILDP itself. As the work became more difficult

²Hinton, Leanne. 2002. *How to Keep Your Language Alive: A Commonsense Approach to One-on-One Language Learning*. Berkeley: Heydey Publishing.

and the project's funding decreased, community-level interest waned. The reasons behind this are complex, involving economic, cultural, and political factors, so I won't elaborate on them here.

- The project's supervisory committee as such did not work; the diffusion of responsibility among a large group conflicted with the community's pre-existing habits of governance by a few leaders. As a result, the project's structure was modified to rely on a single supervisor who was accountable to the community assemblies.
- Year-round self-governance by the local team was not in accord with the expectations that the team as a whole agreed upon at the outset; a fixed weekly work schedule did not fit well with community linguists' and language specialists' pre-existing daily, weekly, and monthly activity cycles and schedules.
- The low level of literacy that the community linguists brought to the ILDP became a serious obstacle as the difficulty of their work increased. Likewise, the level of analytical skills they brought to the project were much lower than we anticipated when planning their training program. As a result, much of their detailed documentation work had to be closely edited and in some cases even redone.

4.2 Concrete successes of the ILDP's strategies

- Combining the talents and skills of the community linguists and language specialists was immensely fruitful. They made significant contributions to the project based on their deep local knowledge – contributions that visiting team members never could have made. This is especially evident in the breadth and depth of contents of the dictionary, which is more like a cultural encyclopedia than a dictionary.
- The year-round work of the local team had a startling positive impact on the fluency and artistry of the language specialists' use of their once little-used native language – for several decades, Iquito was rarely heard in public spaces, but as part of the ILDP it is spoken daily. Similarly, the frequency and kinds of use of Iquito in San Antonio have increased overall due to the specialists' social influence.
- Because of the highly explicit nature of the original signed agreement, overall expectations and participants' responsibilities were relatively clear throughout the life of the project. Relying on this document guided and simplified points of re-negotiation – for example, when project governance shifted at the community's request from a supervisory committee to a single supervisor in 2004.
- Having community members work year-round on language documentation helped to maintain the vitality of the project both socially and politically over the years. Similarly, many aspects of the ILDP, including its elaborate structure and governing documents; the Iquito language center and its specialized equipment; the steady wages earned by local participants; and the central importance of the language specialists to an 'international' project all elevated the prestige of the Iquito language and its speakers.
- Not surprisingly, the year-round work of the local team made a substantial contribution to the number, size, and kinds of texts in the collection that the ILDP is producing.
- The presence of the Iquito language in the classrooms of the community's school both increased and improved as a result of the activities of ILDP team members between 2003 and 2006. This was key in a shift in the valence of knowing some Iquito from negative to positive among many ethnic Iquito children.

5 Recommendations for implementing similar strategies in other contexts

- Clearly, many aspects of the ILDP were and are uniquely context-dependent, inseparably bound to the project's specific participants and circumstances. Nonetheless, many of these strategies could be tailored to fit language documentation efforts in a variety of places and contexts. Lev and I ourselves plan to implement many aspects of this model in our next language documentation project. In that spirit, I offer a few pointed recommendations.

- Take the time to negotiate a mutually satisfactory, relatively binding agreement with the community at large at the outset of the project. Take especial care to enumerate community goals and visiting researchers' goals as related but distinct sets. An initial formal agreement will allow for consistent measures of the successes of your project, while providing crucial guidance for all involved parties when mid-course corrections to project structures and activities are needed.
- Produce as many guiding and governing documents as necessary, written in locally-appropriate language and directed to community members, in order to make the project's structures, expectations, and commitments of all parties clear. Then check in with these documents periodically, as the project's participants' experience, understandings, and expectations evolve over the life of the project.
- Study and understand well the interests and skill sets of local participants, so that you can play up their strengths and address their weaknesses. For example, next time we will increase both the quantity and the duration of the training community participants receive over the life of the project. In addition, we will rely more heavily on apprenticeship relationships between participants with different levels of training. Likewise, we will establish project governance structures more like those *already functioning* in the community.
- Incorporate 'visiting' coordinators or supervisors at regular intervals during year-round phases of the project. This would provide some major advantages over the ILDP model, by providing an element of political neutrality in resolving local difficulties, and providing additional checks and evaluations on the project's incremental progress toward meeting overall goals.
- Bring to the project as many templates for your projected materials as you possibly can – particularly for pedagogical materials and dictionary production. Basic materials design is very time-consuming and a frustrating waste of field time.
- Present materials of some kind to the community at large at the end of *every* field season, including the first one, even if the materials are of modest size or in draft form. Doing so provides a tangible demonstration of the visiting team's commitment to language revitalization and revalorization in the heritage language community.

6 Final observations

- Centuries old processes of language assassination are a formidable opponent in language revitalization work. None the less, even under such conditions, community-participatory language documentation can be done, and lasting language revalorization is possible to some degree, especially in the hearts of the remaining speakers themselves.
- Recognizing community goals and visiting linguists' or language activists' goals as overlapping but *distinct* sets is crucial in measuring the successes of a project like the ILDP. This is key to establishing reasonable expectations among participants.
- Prioritizing the involvement of community members in language *description* is not the best method for obtaining clean linguistic data quickly. But community members' active participation does provide unparalleled richness and depth in language documentation and description, while at the same time making a substantial and concrete contribution toward revalorizing the language in both social and political terms.
- For information on other aspects of the ILDP's team-based structure, attend Lev Michael's talk tomorrow, Friday March 13, at 10:20am.
- For more information on the ILDP, as well as access to some of the project's organizing documents (mostly in Spanish) and products, please visit www.cabeceras.org