# QUECHUA IN THE 21ST CENTURY: FROM AN ENDANGERED LANGUAGE TO A REVITALIZATION

Eritka Valdivia-Flores
Baruch College (CUNY)

My family is from Cuzco, Peru, the former capital of the Inca Empire, which encompassed the territories of Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, parts of Colombia, northern Chile and Argentina. Although, the Incas did not forbid the local languages and dialects, they imposed the Quechua language as the lingua franca throughout the land as a tool for managing and controlling the vast resources of the territories they had conquered.

By 1532 the Spaniards had arrived and invaded the *Tahuantinsuyo* as the Empire was called in Quechua (the four regions). The Spaniard conquerors and later the colonial settlers established the same feudal system that had existed in Spain. The native population was subjected to long exploitation and abuse under the "encomienda" system, a system of tribute, work and debt inheritance in exchange for conversion to Christianity. The remnants of that cultural heritage have had their effects even to the present time. By the 1800's most of the South American countries had obtained their independence from Spain. Despite the promises of inclusion and freedom in exchange for native support in the wars of independence, the new republics did not end the marginalization of the Indians. The hacienda system prevailed and the same exploitation and abuse were perpetuated by a triumvirate of power, basically, the church, the judicial authorities and the *latifundistas* (large landowners) as the literature of the 19th century reflects in the protest novel written by the writer, Cuzco born and Quechua speaker Clorinda Matto de Turner and her opus magnum *Aves sin nido* (*Birds without a nest*) published in 1889.

Today, the native populations that speak Quechua are small communities in Chile and Argentina; however, in Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador, there are larger groups who speak Quechua in their everyday activities and social interactions.

It is important to note that the indigenous people refer to Quechua as "*Runa Simi*" (the language of man) and not to Quechua. According to Willem Adelaar, the name Quechua probably originated from a native term referring to a temperate altitude zone above sea level (between 7, 500 and 10,500 feet) and to its inhabitants, making it a demonym; however, at present the name of the language is no longer associated with the climatic term (179). Other scholars such as Rodolfo Cerrón-Palomino (*Unidad y diferenciación lingüística en el mundo andino*), Bruce Mannheim (*The Language of the Inka since the European Invasion*) and Alfredo Torero (*El Quechua y la historia social andina*) offer different explanations of the origin of the names for the word Quechua. They state that until the arrival of the Europeans, the language had no "name". Quechua speakers referred to it as "*runa simi*", but in a generic sense rather than as the name of the language. The Spaniards called it "lengua general del Ynga" and by the mid-sixteenth century the word Quechua was already being used as indicated by its appearance in the *Lexicon* and *Grammatica* of Domingo de Santo Tomás (both published in 1560). Other scholars maintain the similarities and connections between Quechua and Aymara, another indigenous language, and

argue about which was first or which influenced the other. In what they all seem to agree is that Quechua was spoken in the Inca Empire alongside the local languages.

One might think that by referring to the Quechua language we refer to a unified, homogeneous tongue, but that is not the case. Quechua varies according to groups located in different areas. In this regard, some scholars have found out that the variation of Quechua is connected to a geographical area rather to particular indigenous groups. As Willem Adelaar points out in his book *Language in the Andes*:

> Most other dialects are referred to in the linguistic literature by means of a geographic epithet, such as the name of a town, a province or a country (Cuzco Quechua, Ancash Quechua, Bolivian Quechua etc.). In the present-day Andean society it is a common practice to refer to speakers of the different Quechua dialects as if they were all speakers of the same language (180).

That practice does not honor the different groups of Quechua speakers nor the variations of Quechua dialects.

To problematize this supposed "homogeneity," Aldelaar argues that there is a "traditionist indigenista" ideology promoted by the Cuzco Language Academy (Academia de la Lengua Quechua) which considers the Cuzco variety of Quechua as "the pure and legitimate heir of the Inca language (*Quechua legítimo*)" while the other Quechua varieties are thought to be "degenerate" because they are "mixed with Spanish" (185).

This kind of statement is corroborated by the anthropological study carried out by Lise Bouchard in which she stated that a large majority of the Quechua speaking interviewees in Ecuador (81 percent) are aware that the Quechua language is changing. "Interviewees do not like it and they perceive the change as a slow transformation towards Spanish. 'Now we speak half Quichua, half Spanish! We mix both languages together!' they say. 'Before, our grandparents spoke better! They spoke pure Quichua!' In fact, they perceive that they speak a language that is a mixture of Quichua and Spanish" (Bouchard, 44). No wonder then that the Cuzqueños insist on their claim about the purity of the language being the domain of Cuzco. Moreover, this view dates back to the colonial period and has been perpetuated because Cuzco is considered the home of former Inca nobility and its descendants which, to the people in Cuzco, is an element of cohesion for indigenous people. Cuzco, the Inca capital, was viewed as the locus of Inca tradition in contrast to the Spanish cultural influence originating in coastal Lima. As Aldelaar states "Cuzco Quechua gradually became a symbol of Andean identity, as the Quechua standard language or *lengua general* fell into disuse" (182). However, Aldelaar argues that the alleged superiority of Cuzco Quechua is one of the factors that seriously hampered the identification of the Quechua homeland (182).

This study supports the fact that unity is not possible when one has populations divided by linguistic competence in an ancestral language that should be a tool to bring them together as a nation. The same holds true for the rest of monolingual Peruvians who speak only Spanish and disdain the use of Quechua. To retort the Cuzco claim of language purity, the vernacular use of Quechua in Cuzco does incorporate some Spanish words; examples are: *niñachay* (little girl), *pachamama* (mother earth) and *jurami* (I swear).

Quechua has remained for the most part a spoken language of the indigenous communities of South America. Incan language in printed form is basically a transcription of the vernacular language. There are written variations in the Latin-based alphabet due to the efforts of the first Catholic missionaries who as part of the evangelization process had to reach the indigenous population in their native tongue. At the beginning they resorted to interpreters and eventually they learned the language themselves as part of their missionary efforts. According to Bruce Mannheim, "an important landmark in the history of Quechua was the Third Lima Council (*Tercer Concilio Limense*) of 1583, where participants decided to translate the religious text referred to as *Doctrina christiana y catecismo para instrucción de los indios* ('Christian doctrine and catechism for the instruction of the Indians') into Quechua and Aymara" (141). This situation would drastically change after the rebellion of Tupac Amaru II in 1781, as a result of which the language was prohibited because it was considered a tool for cohesion for the native population against the Spaniards.

The revitalization of the Quechua language started in the 1970's as part of the reforms initiated by the military government of General Juan Velasco Alvarado. Since then, linguistic scholars in the past decades have tried to create a corpus of Quechua literary productions as well as a bilingual Quechua-Spanish dictionary.

According to Nancy Hornberger in her ethnographic and sociolinguistic study of bilingual education in Peru, "four Peruvian policies of the 1970's set the stage for a Bilingual Education Project mainly in the rural areas of Puno, Peru. The Education Reform *(Compendio* ... 1975), the National Bilingual Education Policy (Ministerio de Educación 1972), the Officialization of Quechua *(Comercio* 1975; Comisión ... 1975), and the Constitution of 1979 *(Constitución política del Perú* 1980.)" Hornberger adds that each of these revealed certain orientations toward language, in particular toward Quechua which was considered a language of the minority groups in Peru. (205-206)

On July 10, 2015 an article appeared in *El Comercio*, one of the most prestigious newspapers in Peru. The article's heading read whether the teaching of Quechua should be obligatory in schools. Arguing in favor of the teaching of Quechua and social inclusion was Hugo Carrillo, a Peruvian congressman. The argument against the teaching of the language was embraced by Isabel García Ponce, an educator.

Having a bilingual mother, Spanish and Quechua speaking, and not having learned the language myself yet, I was influenced by this debate that manifests the Peruvian divide still existing regarding attitudes about language, culture and social groups.

The opinion article published by *El Comercio* refer us to three different orientations as argued by Hornberger in her quoting of Richard Ruiz's work *Orientations in language planning* (1984). According to Ruiz, the first orientation "language-as-problem" sees languages of minority groups within a national society as problems for both the speakers of the languages and the nation as a whole. This is precisely the argument against the teaching of Quechua in schools espoused by the educator Isabel García Ponce and different factions of Peruvian society. According to García, a person must be motivated by a positive valorization of the language and the culture to which it belongs. She adds that the imposition of the teaching of Quechua in Peruvian schools, far

from responding to an identitarian necessity and contributing to the valorization of our culture, can produce an opposite effect.

A second orientation, namely the "language-as-right" orientation, views minority languages as a right to which their speakers are entitled. Finally a third orientation, "language-as-resource," sees the minority languages as potential resources for the whole nation. These two orientations lead us to consider the argument of Peruvian congressman Hugo Carrillo who sees the teaching of Quechua as an identity reinforcement and recognition of the minority population. Furthermore, Carrillo coincides with the language-as- resource idea in the sense that Peruvians can learn and benefit from the knowledge of the native population such as “the domestication of thousands of plants for food and health purposes, irrigation techniques, aqueducts constructions, the preservation of food, the construction of miles of kilometers in the roughest of territories (*El Comercio*, 3). To this effect Carrillo is embracing the Education Reform of 1970 which called for “a transformation of pedagogical principles, attitudes and practice within the school system” by including bilingual education in the Peruvian school system (Hornberger, 201). Carrillo acknowledges the fact that it is a complex and long term task which will require the training of thousands of school teachers in order for them to use Quechua in their teaching, and the development of a methodology to reinforce Quechua learning in the process (*El Comercio*, 2). According to Hornberger, the Reform called for the inclusion of the indigenous groups into the Peruvian mainstream, respecting their language and culture. She indicates that “attention was given to the languages as cultural resources for the nation, but the emphasis was on the rights of indigenous people to participate (Hornberger, 201).

This is clearly due to the Decree Law 21156 of May 27, 1975 which recognized Quechua as an official language of Peru together with Spanish. As Hornberger (207) states:

> It represented a language-as-resource orientation in language status and corpus planning. Attention was given to issues of preservation, development, and management of the several Peruvian varieties of the Quechua language, and to bilingual development for the nation. It called for the obligatory teaching of Quechua at all levels of education, beginning in 1976, and the use of Quechua in all court actions involving Quechua speakers, beginning in 1977.

Personally, I can attest to the effects of these new developments because I am the product of the education reforms implemented by the military government during the 1970’s. I remember that in my primary school in Callao, the most urban of cities in the coastal strip of Peru, the teachers made us pledge the oath to the Peruvian Flag in Quechua and we had to respond “*Ari, jurami*” (yes, I swear). Radio stations and television channels would introduce Quechua words as part of their broadcasting, and many children of my generation felt a special pride in learning a little bit of the language of the Incas, and of our first independence hero Tupac Amaru II. We would memorize phrases such as “*Tawa canal Limamanta Pacha*” (Channel Four from Lima), *manan* (no), *imansutiki* (what is your name?), *puririsum* (let’s walk).

Unfortunately, the reforms of the 1970’s in regard to the teaching of Quechua in all the schools of Peru were short lasting. As Hornberger (207) states, the Constitution of 1979 represented a retreat in language-as-a resource orientation in favor of a language-as a right orientation as stated in Article 83: “Spanish is the official language of the Republic. Quechua and Aymara are also in official use in the zones and form which the Law establishes." In other words,

it recognized the right of Quechua speakers to speak and use Quechua, but it did not consider the possibility to extend the Quechua language to other zones and speakers. These kinds of statements from the Constitution would lead to the abandonment of this language teaching initiative. Furthermore, it contributed to the isolation of the Quechua communities and the coastal people perceptions about *serranos* and Indians. What are the perceptions that the coast of Peru, especially the people of the capital Lima hold about the *serrano* culture and particularly the Indian?

On the coast, the *criollo* perception of the serrano and the Indian is that these are peripheral groups, uneducated, uncultured, illiterate, and poor; therefore, Quechua being a language of the indigenous people and *serranos* is associated with these attributes. According to Marisol de la Cadena (p. 2) in her work *Indigenous Mestizos* "race is not biological but cultural, so Peruvians think they are not racist." This became apparent when my mother emigrated from highland Cuzco to coastal Lima, although being fair skinned, she confronted the reality of linguistic discrimination. We, her children, never learned Quechua as we were born and raised in Callao and Lima because it was considered the "*serrano*" language and by extension the Indian language. It transcended the race boundary because the color of the skin did not matter but the overall perception that it was the language of the subjugated other, the Indian, as it was considered during the colonial period and even now. Ironically, when it comes to glorify the Inca past and the people's achievements, very few consider that it was precisely Quechua, the dismissed language, the lingua franca of the Inca empire, that proved so significant.

Conversely the perception of the sierra inhabitants is that Spanish is the language of education and mobility. However, this perception is not free of prejudices against the inhabitants of the coast either. This prejudice stems from the resentment against the abandonment and exploitation by the centralized government of Peru.

In her study *Linguistic Survey of Cozco Quechua*, Lise Lefebvre observes (329) that "for fluent Quechua speakers, Quechua is considered better than Spanish for expressing jokes, stories, word games and poetry. Generally speaking, Quechua is the intimate code and Spanish is the formal code. Needless to say Quechua has always been alive and vibrant among members of the community in the sierra and indigenous world.

Nowadays, Quechua is mostly spoken in the Sierra villages of Peru and in community pockets in the urban areas of the sierra and by migrant populations in the capital city of Lima. In the Sierra communities, the formal education given in the schools is becoming more accessible to the population. It is in the schools, after all, where the Quechua speaking child can acquire or become proficient in Spanish. However, education in Spanish in no way means that they would abandon their indigenous language. Parents send their children to school because they understand the importance of interacting with the dominant society. People are attached to the language and culture which has survived at times through rebellion and most often by passive resistance to the dominance of the Spanish mestizo culture.

According to the UNICEF and the BBC in London (*El Comercio*, 2), there are currently 20 million Quechua speakers in South America. Even though Quechua is associated with low social rank in Peruvian society, especially in the capital city of Lima, there are positive manifestations acting in its revalorization in the non-Quechua, non-indigenous world. The

educational reforms regarding the teaching of Quechua may have been abandoned, but since the 1970's there has been a growth of a cultural nationalistic movement to accord Quechua its proper social status in Peruvian society and also as part of claiming our indigenous cultural identity. This movement is responsible for the creation of the Quechua Academy, the celebration of the *Inti Raymi*, the feast of the sun, on June 24th, where the offerings to the *Pacha Mama* (Mother Earth) and the *Apus* (land deities) for the fertility of the soil and good crops and harvest are all spoken in Quechua before a local, national and international audience, as well as for the work done by radio stations and television channels in promoting Quechua. The Catholic Church broadcasts the Christian mass in Quechua in Cuzco, a fact that is seen with pride by the local Quechua and non-Quechua speakers alike. This kind of broadcasting exists not just in the *sierra* region of Peru but also in Lima where nowadays there is an important community of Quechua speaking migrants. This revitalization and revalorization work has also been complemented by the involvement of artists like comedian Tulio Losa, and social activist actress Magali Solier (*Madeinusa*, *La teta asustada*) both Quechua speakers, Juan Diego Flórez (opera tenor), Gian Marco Zignago (Latin Grammy winner singer-composer), and cultural authorities such as the Instituto Nacional de Cultura.

Quechua has transcended the Andean countries' boundaries partly due to the interest of new groups of linguistic researchers, scientist, architects, and social anthropologists to learn more about the myths and realities of Quechua society and ways of living as well as to investigate the goods and resources offered by new crops to the western society and the biodiversity of the highlands. Hence, we will find information about Quechua not just in newspapers, magazines and scholarly journals, but also in the internet where there are innumerable sites for Quechua speakers and Quechua lovers and where the Quechua vernacular has been transliterated to conform to the writing standard of current literate society.

Quechua has also permeated politics as evidenced by anthropologist trained Eliane Carp, the wife of former president of Peru Alejandro Toledo who, during her husband's presidential campaign in 2001, spoke Quechua to communicate and convey their message to the far and forgotten communities of Peru highlands in an effort to add votes to Toledo's bid for the presidency of Peru. She was seen by these communities as someone who could communicate and listen to their need, though not necessarily fulfill the promises made. Another example is the first Quechua-speaking congresswoman and social reformer Hilaria Supa, who from her position in legislature hopes to bring changes in education to the marginalized people of the *Sierra*.

As evidenced by the opinion article in *El Comercio*, the debate about whether Quechua should be taught in schools all over Peru continues. Proponents of this measure maintain that its teaching will build upon identity and social inclusion vis-à-vis the people who only see the difficulties in implementing a methodology and the qualified instructional staff to teach the language. These arguments are not new but place the divide of Peruvian society on the table. Fortunately society and its cultural perceptions do evolve as people also evolve and question the historical and social basis of sticking only to Spanish.

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