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Learning a language through culture-inherent concepts: the case of Nahuatl

This article supports the line of thought, which proposes that the process of revitalization should embrace culturally specific ways of knowing in a more fundamental way, taking into account the emic, internal perspective of a native speaker, which encompasses traditional indigenous knowledge and interpretations existing within the culture, determined by local custom, meaning and belief.

Practical solutions in the field of language revitalization must transcend a purely linguistic perception of a language as an abstract communication system, which can be passed on to students as set of grammatical rules and lexicon with the use of “universal” methods and techniques. Western education should be implemented not as the single best one but as a parallel system of knowing, which enriches students’ cognitive tools without depriving them of those, which have been passed on to them via their mother tongue. Similarly, the very knowledge and cultural values encoded in indigenous languages should be put into effect as an educational tool, together with other methods recommended by indigenous scholars. These include bringing culturally-relevant etymology and documentation of traditional teachings on word meaning, root words, and stories into language education¹, as well as introducing experiential learning techniques such as modelling, practice and animation, connected to specific cultural moments and places of significance.

Traditional indigenous knowledge in language revitalization

In a modern academic discourse a variety of terms are used to describe Traditional Knowledge: traditional ecological knowledge or TEK, indigenous knowledge, local and traditional knowledge and wisdom, as well as terms used specifically by certain groups or peoples in their local languages. A common feature of many of these terms is the fact that they situate traditional knowledge outside of knowledge generated in scholarly or academic

¹ Personal communication with Maya Chacaby, Aboriginal Cultural Competency Education Coordinator at the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centers (OFIFC), July 2013.

pursuits (Huntington: 2005). There have also been numerous attempts to define this concept in the literature. For the purpose of this article, I will focus on the definitions which highlight multidisciplinary character of Traditional Knowledge, its transfer mechanisms and the importance of its intrinsic connection to language.

Marie Battiste (2002: 2) states that “Indigenous knowledge comprises the complex set of technologies developed and sustained by Indigenous civilizations. Often oral and symbolic, it is transmitted through the structure of Indigenous languages and passed on to the next generation through modelling, practice and animation, rather than through the written word”. She further explains that “(...) Indigenous knowledge is typically embedded in the cumulative experiences and teachings of indigenous peoples rather than in a library” (Battiste, 2002: 2). In a similar way, according to Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) — whose goals include the protection of Traditional Knowledge, innovations and practices connected with biodiversity (Maffi: 2005) — TK is expressed through a specific set of local cultural practices and serves as means of transmitting particular elements of this holistic system. These practices can take a form of stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language, as well as agricultural methods and traditions (CBD: 2013).

Joseph Couture (1991: 57) speaks of “indigenous knowing” rather than “knowledge”, thus emphasizing its processual nature: “The mode of indigenous knowing is a non-dualistic process – it transcends the usual oppositions between rational knowledge and intuition, spiritual insight and physical behavior. It is inclusive of all reality”.

Pierotti & Wildcat (2000: 1335) refer to the Traditional Knowledge as a way of thought that includes “(...) respect for nonhuman entities as individuals; the existence of bonds between humans and nonhumans, including incorporation of non-humans into ethical codes of behavior; the importance of local places and the recognition of humans as part of the ecological system, rather than as separate from and defining the existence of that system”.

The definitions provided by Battiste (2002) and the Convention on Biological Diversity reflect the importance of inherent modes of transmission, characteristic for traditional knowledge, such as experiential learning and modelling, which have significant implications for indigenous languages education. It is thus worth pointing out, that considering the subtractive and monocultural nature of most education systems, these transfer mechanisms are probably almost entirely absent from many mother tongue pedagogies.

The last two definitions make reference to the multidisciplinary character of Traditional Knowledge. It represents space in which different areas of human knowledge and experience (e.x religion, ethics, politics, ecology) interweave and connect as there are no clearly defined boundaries between them in indigenous thought (Pierotti & Wildcat: 2000). As a consequence, this feature of Traditional Knowledge naturally shapes the way it is transferred and taught, pointing to the necessity of a more holistic education model. Furthermore, because of the interdisciplinary nature of Traditional Knowledge, language revitalization similarly needs the experience of many disciplines: ethnopedagogy, cognitive linguistics, anthropology, ethnohistory and ethnoinguistics.

Nahua pedagogy: towards and experiential model of language learning

Nahuatl is an agglutinative language and a member of the Nahuan branch of the Uto-Aztecan language family, endemic to Mesoamerica (Suarez: 1986; Launey: 1992). The core Nahua languages include the Nahuatl varieties and Pipil – the language spoken in El Salvador (SIL: 2013). It is one of the most important indigenous languages of the New World and one of the principal languages of Mesoamerica, currently spoken by around 1.5 million people in Mexico (INEGI: 2010). This population is dispersed over a large area and the number of native speakers from the youngest generation, especially children, is decreasing rapidly. This is caused by the lack of implementation of bilingual education and unofficial discrimination of indigenous peoples in many aspects of their lives (Perez: 2010). The public education system has been an instrument of Hispanization since 1964 and although bilingual education is expanding, its goal of replacing indigenous languages with Spanish has not changed (Olko & Sullivan: 2013). Nahuatl is at risk of total replacement by Spanish unless steps are taken to ensure its continued transmission to children (Rolstad: 2002). Therefore, the task of language revitalization is of great urgency, especially in heavily urbanized areas such as Tlaxcala.

Nahuatl is a vehicle and depository of traditional knowledge and it encompasses epistemological beliefs and conceptions, the loss of which would significantly impoverish the native speakers' cognitive, social and spiritual resources. For example, Justyna Olko and John Sullivan describe Nahuatl as a highly contextualized language with no infinitive forms of verbs. Its structure emphasizes the importance placed on which kind of subjects can perform action (deities, humans, wild animals, domestic animals, flora and/or inanimate entities) and reflects a culture in which mountains, celestial bodies, springs, land and other natural

phenomena are considered more animate than humans. These inherent features should therefore naturally determine the methodology of learning, especially when thinking from “within” the language, and when undertaking a task of elaborating monolingual definitions (Olko & Sullivan: 2014). According to some representatives of the native speakers’ community, such methodology might embrace the following elements:

1. Nahuatl should be taught as a means of transmission, expression and perpetuation of cultural values.

A Nahua poet, Ethel Xochitiotzin Perez, considers that her mission as a writer is to “rescue the language because it carries something very precious- the wisdom of the ancestors and their inherent values”². One of the most important points to be considered is the preservation and revitalization of the reverential or honorific forms which are linguistic elements used to express respect and distance. For example, such system of marking social distance and respect can be found in the morphology of the Nahuatl spoken by the communities in the Malintzin volcano area in the states of Tlaxcala and Puebla (Hill & Hill: 1978). In regard to this topic, one of the consultants, a retired school teacher from San Felipe Cuauhtenco in Tlaxcala region, stated the following:

“Through the language flows all of our culture’s wisdom. The western culture is teaching us equality, which is good. But if it is misunderstood it will not lead us to something very positive. Our language brings a lot of reverence towards our grandparents and our parents. And previously, even children used reverential forms when speaking to each other. It is important to transmit this value”³.

A similarly important principle is related to respect one should demonstrate towards life and natural environment, as expressed by another primary school teacher of Nahuatl from the same locality:

² “Mi misión es el rescate de la lengua porque lleva algo muy valioso, que es la sabiduría de nuestros ancestros, y lleva implícito los valores”. Interview with Ethel Xochitiotzin Pérez, San Miguel Xaltipan, 22.09.2014.

³ “Dentro del idioma transita toda la sabiduría de nuestra cultura. La cultura occidental nos esta enseñando la igualdad que es buena. Pero mal interpretada no nos está llevando a algo muy positivo. El idioma nuestro trae mucha reverencia hacia los papas y los abuelos. Y anteriormente hasta los niños se hablaban en usted. Es muy importante transmitir ese valor”. Interview with a Nahuatl teacher, San Felipe Cuauhtenco, 17.09.2014.

“If you are a native speaker of Nahuatl you have a different way of perceiving the world. It is natural because you have a different attitude towards things which surround you. When my grandma was walking sometimes she would find a seed. She would always pick it up as a sign of respect because it shouldn’t be laying there on the ground”⁴.

2. A student of Nahuatl needs to “live” the language through a daily experience.

The significance of an emotional and sensory connection to the language experience cannot be overstated. For example, learning toponymy equals gaining a profound understanding of the place. It means going to a specific destination and experiencing the shape of the river, the number of trees, the presence or lack of the sand or rocks, the specific landform, the configuration of plants and trees. This holistic experience leads the speaker to understand the name and its origins. In this way, the language symbolically transcends its intangible nature and makes one with sensory experiences:

“If you want to find out what a name of a place means, you have to visit the place and see if there are many trees, if it ends in a form of a tip or if there is a lake. When you make a person live through the language you make meanings. When you make a connection between the story of *maguey*⁵ and the story of your ancestors you make meaning. It is your experience and it tastes of *pulque*^{6,7}.

3. The language one speaks should be contextualized, alive and spoken.

⁴ “Si tu eres hablante tienes otra forma de ver la vida. Eso es natural porque tienes otra actitud frente a lo que te rodea. Cuando mi abuela caminaba por la calle y encontraba una semilla la levantaba como signo de respeto que no debería estar ahí tirada”. Interview with a Nahuatl teacher, San Felipe Cuauhtenco, 13.09.2014.

⁵ *Maguey* or *agave americana* is a native plant of Mexico.

⁶ *Pulque* is an alcoholic beverage made from the fermented sap of the *maguey*.

⁷ “Si queremos encontrar un nombre del lugar que significa tenemos que ir a parar en este lugar para ver si hay muchos arboles o si termina en forma de punta o si hay un lago. Cuando haces que la persona conviva a traves de la lengua haces sentido. Cuando haces que la historia del *maguey* se conecte con la historia de tus abuelos haces sentido. Es tu vivencia y te sabe a *pulque*”. Group interview with the team of an NGO *Avido. Desarrollo Humano A.C*, Mexico City, 25.09.2014.

It is important to stress the value and richness of local variants of Nahuatl. These variants have been subjects of different linguistic studies and they are often considered part of regional folklore. However, this ideology seems to deprive them of their innately communicative character as vehicles of human interaction. Contrarily, classical Nahuatl has been greatly acknowledged and valued academically and often transmitted as the only correct version of the language (Avido. Desarrollo Humano A.C: 2014).

As expressed by the native speakers, the language of transmission has to be legitimate, alive and spoken in a particular place, although historical writing tradition is an important part of cultural heritage and it carries a significant educational value:

“I talk about *pulque*, I grab a lot of words from here. These are everyday terms but they carry a metaphor. Every language has evolved and my writing expresses the way Nahuatl is evolving. Other writers reintroduce Classical terms which are not used anymore. It is useful because it shows how Nahuatl was spoken before. But today if a speaker reads a Classical text sometimes he doesn't accept it”⁸.

Conclusions

Language endangerment is one of the biggest challenges of modern humanities. Linguistic diversity is of strategic importance for the human kind because when languages die precious intellectual resources and ways of perception disappear with them. The fiasco of subtractive and mono-cultural education programs, which continue to limit the scope of traditional knowledge systems that are being passed on to the next generations, together with a dangerously fast pace of language loss, makes it indispensable to conduct studies leading to the construction of experimental revitalization models, tied to indigenous educational practices. These models could benefit from exploring an intrinsic connection between language and traditional, local knowledge by adopting a more experientially grounded, holistic approach, inclusive of a “sense of place and its attendant cultural practices and manifestations” (Barnhardt & Kawagley: 2005).

⁸ “Hablo del pulque, agarro mucho las cuestiones de acá. Son terminos cotidianos pero llevan una metafora. Toda la lengua ha evolucionado. En el caso de mi escribir es también así como está evolucionando el nahuatl. Pero yo veo a otra escritora y ella rescata los términos clásicos que ya no se utilizan. Es útil porque te muestra como antes se hablaba el náhuatl. Pero si un hablante lee un texto clásico hoy, uno aveces no lo acepta”. Interview with Ethel Xochitiotzin Pérez, San Miguel Xaltipan, 22.09.2014.

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