The relationship between language teaching and Mayan language conservation in Guatemala

International Conference on Language Documentation and Conservation
University of Hawai‘i
March 14, 2009

Rusty Barrett
Linguistics Program
University of Kentucky

Mayan summer language programs in Guatemala

Oxlajuj Aj Kaqchikel program
• Began in 1990
• Sponsors: Tulane University and the University of Texas at Austin

K’iche’ Maya program
• Began in 2008
• Sponsors: University of Chicago, Vanderbilt University, University of Kentucky

Both programs aim to challenge prevailing language ideologies that denigrate Mayan languages:
“The student of Kaqchikel is likely to produce reactions of surprise and delight with their communication attempts. That someone who speaks a global language like English would take an interest in learning and speaking Kaqchikel subverts ever so slightly the established order and doing so helps establish trust and rapport, because the time and effort expended in crossing that linguistic divide is an act of recognition and respect.” (Brown, Maxwell and Little 2006: 5)

Both programs have relied (to varying degrees) on FLAS [Foreign Language/Area Studies] fellowships from the U.S. Department of Education for student funding.

Language-oriented employment for teachers and host families creates economic opportunities that are only available to those who speak Maya.

Approaches to dialectal variation

The Kaqchikel program teaches a standardized variety that is not widely used in local communities.

The K’iche’ program teaches a local variety (Nahualá, Sololá).
Oxlajuj Aj Kaqchikel curriculum

- Kaqchikel is undergoing language shift much more rapidly than K’iche’
- Student-teacher ratio is 1:1 in order to facilitate teacher training in Standard Kaqchikel, particularly for those working in bilingual education
- Program founded early in the Maya (cultural revitalization) Movement

Oxlajuj Aj Kaqchikel curriculum

- Use of numerous neologisms and standardized grammar
- Judie Maxwell (Tulane) worked closely with Kaqchikel language planners, particularly in developing neologisms
- Simultaneous development of standardized Kaqchikel and pedagogical materials

Oxlajuj Aj Kaqchikel curriculum

Use of Maya numbers above 20
Use of traditional Mayan names:

K’iche’ program curriculum

Decision to focus on a single local dialect:

- More dialectal variation compared to Kaqchikel
- No consensus on standardization (or orthography)
- Higher levels of language maintenance compared to Kaqchikel
- Local bilingual education materials already developed

K’iche’ program curriculum

Conservative features of Nahualá K’iche’:

a. the 10-vowel (5 long/5 short) distinction
b. absence of unstressed vowel deletion
c. maintenance of /h/ as a phoneme
d. prosodic phonology, phrase-level alternations
e. distinct marking for negation and irrealis
f. maintenance of full forms of question words
g. consistent use of instrumental/benefactive voice
h. consistent use of VOS as basic word order
i. full use of respect forms of second person pronouns
K’iche’ program curriculum

Materials developed in collaboration with Manuel Tahay Gomez, one of the founders of the local bilingual education program (Oxajuj No’j Tijob’al Maya).

English-language L2 materials follow principles established by local teachers, leaving language planning questions entirely under control of the local community.

Relationship to local community

- In keeping with original goals of pan-Maya political unity, the Kaqchikel program occurs at multiple teaching sites.
- Majority of time is spent in tourist centers (Antigua, Panajachel), with short stays in Kaqchikel towns (Comalapa, Tecpan)
- Primary connection to Kaqchikel communities through developing close relationships with teachers

Relationship to local community

- K’iche’ program involves six-week stay with local host families (in which Maya is the primary home language).
- Students with no prior knowledge of K’iche’ were placed with families in which some members of household are monolingual.
- Longer presence in Nahualá resulted in high visibility, knowledge of student presence.

Role in language description

- There is a long tradition of pedagogical grammars for Mayan languages, particularly for K’iche’ (Wick and Cochojil-González 1968, Mondloch 1978)
- The Kaqchikel textbook (Brown, Maxwell and Little 2006) includes the most detailed description of Kaqchikel grammar currently available in English.

Role in language description

- In the K’iche’ course, all examples used in class are discussed by local teachers.
- This method uncovered a number of previously undescribed constructions and new information about language variation, including change in progress

Change in kinship terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Traditional meaning</th>
<th>Emergent meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>atz</td>
<td>older same-sex sibling</td>
<td>older sibling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chaq’(ixel)</td>
<td>younger same-sex sibling</td>
<td>younger sibling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anab’</td>
<td>sister of a male</td>
<td>sister of a male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xib’al</td>
<td>brother of a female</td>
<td>brother of a female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Changes in instrumental voice

i. Xatukunaj ruk’ q’ayes.
   x+at+u+kunaj r+uk’ q’ayes.
   COMP+2sABS+3sERG+cure 3s+REL(with) herbs
   S/He cured you with herbs.

ii. Q’ayes xukunab’ej awech.
    q’ayes x+ø+u+kuna+b’ej a+wech.
    herbs COMP+3sABS+3sERG+cure+instr 2s+REL(oblique)
    It was herbs s/he used to cure you.

Changes in instrumental voice: Emergence of ditransitive constructions

iii. Q’ayes kukunab’ej ri ajkun le awanab’.
    q’ayes k+ø+u+kuna+b’ej ri ajkun le aw+anab’.
    herbs INC+3sABS+3sERG+cure+instr DET doctor DET 2sPOS+sister
    S/He is using herbs to cure your sister.

Role in language description

The existence of pedagogical materials in English makes it possible to speed up courses in language description.

In a course at the University of Kentucky (Fall 2008), undergraduates spent two months learning K’iche’ grammar before spending one month working with a native speaker, allowing students to examine previously undescribed areas of grammar.

Example: Affective roots (mostly onomatopoeia)

CVC+VC1Vb’ik single occurrence
CVC+najik intermittent
CVC+lajik regular and repeating
CVC+VC1Vtik rapid, intensive repetition
CVC+VC2ik hyperintensive

In cases, where teaching a language to students from outside of the community is appropriate and there is sufficient interest in learning the language, language programs may:

- help provide financial resources for language work by the community
- challenge language ideologies that denigrate minority languages
- foster collaboration with local teachers that contributes to language documentation and description
- create opportunities for new areas of research by providing students with a solid background in the current state of language description

References:

