Bill Gates speaks K'ichee'! The corporatization of linguistic revitalization in Guatemala

CrossMark

Sergio Romero

University of Texas at Austin, United States

A B S T R A C T

Based on the study of the recent development of the K'iche' Facebook platform and Microsoft Windows' K'iche' version, I discuss the conflict between Western and Maya language ideologies embodied in current translation practices in Guatemala. International corporations prefer hiring individual translators and consultants and avoid engaging the indigenous institutions charged with standardization and linguistic revitalization. The lack of community sanction for local corporate proxies leads to contestation of the translators' credentials and provokes community turmoil. It also highlights opposed community views of globalization and OF the best strategies to cope with the challenges and opportunities it affords. Finally, I examine the consequences for indigenous language revitalization of the current political economy of social media and corporate software.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Digital media in the Maya highlands

In this paper I examine the social impact of the incipient production of corporate software and social media platforms in K'ichee', a Mayan language spoken in the western highlands of Guatemala. I focus on the development of the currently available Facebook K'ichee' interface application and of the upcoming K'ichee' version of Microsoft Windows. Both involved the cooperation of K'ichee' speakers from the township of Nahualá in western Guatemala as well as non-local corporate intermediaries working on behalf of Facebook and Microsoft. This case study illustrates the strife provoked in indigenous communities by corporate software and social media translation strategies. Rather than partner with indigenous institutions charged with language revitalization, corporations like Facebook and Microsoft prefer translation agencies and unpaid volunteers without the collective sanction of their language communities. We will see that this commodification of the craft of translation into indigenous languages heightens tensions among community members having conflicting views about native language, identity and globalization. Germane to this debate is the tension between a view of language as a personal skill owned by individuals, on the one hand, and language as an inalienable, iconic practice belonging to the community that no one should appropriate, on the other. In Guatemala, indigenous institutions such as the *K'ulb'il Yol Twitz Paxil*, the Maya-run "Academy of the Mayan Languages of Guatemala" (ALMG) have stressed consensus as a strategy to minimize conflicts over standardization and revitalization policy. K'ichee' shows substantial dialectal variation and dialect stereotypes are important ethnic markers for its speakers. Glottonyms such as "K'ichee'" or "Kaqchikel" were introduced by the Spanish to unify mutually intelligible regional varieties under one name.[1] The introduction of mutual intelligibility as diagnostic criterion

---

E-mail address: sergio.romero@austin.utexas.edu.

[1] In pre-Hispanic times, "K'ichee'" referenced the polity whose seat was located at the citadel of Q'umarkaaj, near the modern town of Santa Cruz del Quiché. It did not include every speaker of varieties we would call K'ichee' today. By the same token, "Kaqchikel" referenced the particular lineages whose seat of power was located at the citadel of Iximche', near the town of Tecpán. It did not include others such as the Tukuche' or Aqajal, who were speakers of varieties we would identify as Kaqchikel today (Carmack, 1981; Van Akkeren, 2000).

responds to western language ideologies rather than to Mesoamerican practice (Woolard, 1994; Bauman and Briggs, 2003; Romero, 2015). Loyalty to one's ethnic identity often leads to resistance to "neutral" standardized forms or to forms emblematic of other ethnic communities. The intrusion of individual contractors lacking elders' sanction as translators of corporate software militates against pan-dialectal consensus and institutional legitimacy, as we will see below. Scholars have stressed the undeniable benefits of digital technology as a tool for the documentation, teaching and revitalization of minority and threatened languages. This paper, however, adds a word of caution focusing on the disruptive effect of corporate control of social media platforms and software on communities struggling to defend and revitalize their languages. Not surprisingly, the K'ichee' hold conflicting interests and personal stances vis-à-vis global corporations. Some passionately oppose them, but others are willing to collaborate with them as junior partners. This tension also points to divergent indigenous views of globalization and of the role that their languages should play in globalized communities. These are crucial tensions that revitalization activists have to contend with, especially in language communities as large and ethnically diverse as the K'ichee'. In this regard, this case study contrasts with other pieces in this volume in which successful revitalization practices enjoy widespread consensus and community support (Barrett this volume, Davis this volume). Section 2 below presents the general issues involved in corporate translation into indigenous languages. Section 3 provides a historical outline of the practice of translation into K'ichee' Mayan as historical background for the discussion. Section 4 focuses on the development of Facebook's K'ichee' interface, the strategies used by the translators and the role of native speaker volunteers in the process. Section 5 examines the development of the K'ichee'version of Microsoft's Office platform and the community turmoil unleashed by the manner in which translators were recruited for the task. Finally, Section 6 discusses the implications of the piece for language activists. Revitalization efforts hinge on shared visions of language, identity and a more or less common stance vis-à-vis the state, the market, schools, churches, or other powerful, intrusive outside agents or institutions. When diverse language communities, such as the K'ichee', are involved, however, a common ground is harder to achieve. Local identities, on the one hand, and different individual stances vis-à-vis globalization, often across generational divides, militate against it. The corporate translation practices examined in this article, however, bypass the institutional frameworks created by language communities to mediate and implement revitalization policies and can lead to conflict and community resistance. The political economy of access and implementation of digital technology are as crucial as its technical efficacy as revitalization tools for any judicious assessment of its impact. Digital technology might enable the virtual access of a language to internet and software users but at the cost of undermining consensual institutional mechanisms and a collective view of language as collective, inalienable heirloom.

My research was based on two months of ethnographic fieldwork in Nahualá in 2012 and one month in 2013. Nahualá is a large K'ichee'-speaking township bisected by the Pan American Highway. Amid green mountains and deep ravines, Nahualá boasts a beautiful and ecologically diverse territory in both the highlands and the southern piedmont of Guatemala. Torn by disputes between different political factions and in permanent territorial conflict with the neighboring township of Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán, it is a place wary of outsiders, where town officials act as gatekeepers, keeping unwanted strangers out. I have been doing intermittent ethnographic fieldwork in the highlands of Nahualá for nearly six years and was there in the summer of 2012 when the series of events I discuss in this paper first started. In subsequent visits I interviewed several of the people involved, including one of the Nahualá residents doing translation work on behalf of Facebook and Microsoft's sub-contractors, as well as the local mayor. I also had the opportunity to interview six other software and social media users. Finally, I examined online materials published by the translators as well as broadcast interviews that aired on TV Maya, a state-funded, Maya-run TV station, which are available online (see below). Nahualá is an excellent location to examine the impact of the internet, social media and migration on Maya communities. With improving and expanding availability of internet connectivity, many young people have become avid social media users, especially the thousands having family members and friends working in the United States, as we will see below.

2. Minority language revitalization and new media today

It is widely believed that the explosive growth of the internet, corporate software and social media has opened new possibilities for minority languages. Wikis, online teaching, digital archives, new social media applications and blogs are seen as new and empowering tools for language activists. They lead to a broader recognition of the target language and to the creation of new linguistic artifacts. They can also enhance community control of linguistic resources and make them easily available to members. The rise of pirate media in Ecuador, for example, shows how the emergence of new media technologies, even when controlled by corporate interests, can be subverted by indigenous communities and used for their own cultural and political agendas (Floyd, 2008). Furthermore, they can even reconcile the interests of academic linguists and activists, producing digital resources useful for both academic and pedagogical goals (Jaffe, 1999; Moore and Hennessy, 2006; Fernando et al. 2010; Bischoff and Fountain, 2013). Furthermore, social media afford the possibility of expanding the domains of use of minority languages from local to globalized virtual communities (Eisenlohr, 2004; Granadillo and Orcutt-Gachiri, 2011). Languages that only ten years ago were restricted to face-to-face contact in relatively enclosed geographic spaces could potentially become contact languages in globalized networks (Grenoble and Whaley, 2006). And last, but not least, the very presence of minority languages in social media presumably refutes claims that they – and their speakers – are unfit for new technologies and globalized economies, what Dorian has called the "ideology of contempt" (Maxwell, 1996; Dorian, 1998; Nelson, 1999; England, 2003). The availability of social media applications in minority languages indexes the "virtual" inclusion of indigenous peoples in global exchange networks.