Identity, Modernity and Language Shift in Kaqchikel Maya Adolescents

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I. Introduction

The documentation of the rapid loss of the world's languages gained momentum with Krauss' (1992) article that estimated that half of the world's 6,000 spoken languages will vanish in this century. He pointed out that children are not speaking 20-50% of all languages because parents abandon the minority language and speak the language of local, social prestige with their children. Moreover, Hale *et al.* (1992) suggested that languages spoken by a million or more people will survive only if government policies support them. This rapid language loss is due to such factors as parents shifting to the prestige language, government policies, industrialization, urbanization and education.

The research reported here is concerned with language loss, language shift, and the language attitudes of adolescents in the Kaqchikel¹ Maya community of Tecpán, Guatemala. This paper presents, first, an overview of Guatemala's national linguistic context. This is followed by a summary of language shift studies of some Kaqchikel Maya communities. An examination of the research results is given, and the paper concludes with comments on these findings.

2. The national linguistic context of Guatemala

Appel and Muysken (1987) have proposed a typology of bilingualism, and described five dominant language contact situations. One of these contact situations results from colonialism, and has created societies in which the high-prestige European languages 'coexist with the native languages of the conquered peoples' (1987:5). Guatemala's bilingualism and multilingualism represent this language contact situation; the country's linguistic context is the direct outcome of Spanish colonialism. The Mayan languages have coexisted and still coexist with Spanish as low-prestige languages. According to the Census of 1994 (X Census), Maya, Xinca and Garífuna speakers officially make up 42.8% of Guatemala's population, and *Ladinos*² comprise the rest. Despite the 1994 Census, Mendoza (1999) reported that the Mayas, in fact, represent 61% of the country's ten million people, which would make Guatemala one of the few nations on the continent with an indigenous majority. According to Quintana (1996), the figures of the *Proyecto de Educación Maya Bilingüe Intercultural* (PEMBI) estimate that 6,176,126 Mayas speak the twenty-three Mayan languages of Guatemala. Kaqchikel is a member of the K'ichee' ³ branch of

¹ The Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala (ALMG) has replaced the old written form *Cakchikel* for the new form *Kagchikel*.

² They are the product of inter-marriages between Spanish and Indigenous people. They are Spanish-speaking monolinguals with political, economic, and social power.

³ K'ichee' was previously written as *Quiche*. The orthographic convention established by the Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala (ALMG) assigns the symbol ['] to indicate a glottal stop.

the eastern division Mayan family⁴ spoken in the highlands of Guatemala, and has 1,032,128 speakers (Quintana, 1996).

The various Mayan populations have had different levels of language contact, mostly with Spanish, but also with other languages, including American English, and English Creole from Belize (Garzon 1998). Contact with the Spanish language has resulted in varying levels of bilingualism and multilingualism. Language contact and economic and social pressures have resulted, for some communities, in language shift toward Spanish.

2.1. Two studies on Kaqchikel language contact and language shift

Several studies clearly show that although language shift varies across communities, language loss and language shift is occurring in Guatemala's Kaqchikel communities. For instance, Brown (1998) worked with four communities in the Quinizilapa Valley, where Kaqchikel speaking parents have shifted to Spanish in their communication with their children. The author found that in 444 homes, people over forty years old, the oldest group surveyed, were most fluent in Kaqchikel, had learned it during childhood, and still used it with their parents. In all the towns of the Valley, half the respondents did not speak Kaqchikel with their children. Spanish was spoken to some degree in over two-thirds of the Valley households. Brown (1998) concluded that if present patterns of language use continue in the next generations, Kaqchikel will not be spoken in the Valley.

In San Juan Comalapa, Garzon (1998) found that some parents had shifted to speaking Spanish with their children, and these children were learning both Spanish and Kaqchikel at home. She also conducted interview-style proficiency tests in Kaqchikel and Spanish in Comalapa's primary school, and her findings indicated that while many children still learned Kaqchikel, Spanish served as the common medium of communication among school-age children. One-fourth of the children tested failed to respond adequately in Kaqchikel. In contrast, all were able to converse in Spanish. According to Garzon (1998), Kaqchikel lost its hegemony in the homes of San Juan Comalapa.

3. Language shift and patterns of language use of the Kaqchikel-Maya adolescents of Tecpán, Guatemala

A 16-question survey was designed to learn about language shift and the language attitudes of Kaqchikel Maya adolescents in Tecpán, Guatemala. The design of the survey took into consideration some of the findings of De Vries (1992), who pointed out that a Canadian General Survey HAD made use of two unreliable questions:

- 1. Which languages do vou vourself speak at home?
- 2. Do you speak this language at home more than 90% of the time?

Moreover, I suggest that these questions are too general and mostly focus on only one of the speakers in a potentially multiple-speaker dialogue at home. Thus, a 16-question survey written in Spanish⁵ was designed to include questions about intergenerational and intragenerational language use, to determine the extent of language shift in this generation. In other words, the survey addressed the broader questions: Who speaks what language, with whom and where?

⁴ Speakers of the Mayan language family inhabit Belize, the Mexican states of Chiapas, Tabasco, the Yucatan Peninsula, and Guatemala.

⁵ Spanish was necessarily used due to reasons of illiteracy in Kaqchikel.

3.1. Detecting language loss and language shift

The municipality of Tecpán has nine high schools; three are located in the rural areas, and six in the town of Tecpán. All nine high schools were visited, and a total of 1069 students filled out the survey. Of these 1069 students, 187 were from rural high schools and 882 from urban high schools. The first survey question inquired about the languages that the high school students spoke. It was found that there were more rural bilinguals; ninety-two percent of the students from the rural schools reported themselves as speakers of both Kaqchikel and Spanish. On the other hand, only 35% of the urban students spoke both languages. Sixty-five percent of the urban students indicated that they spoke only Spanish, while 8% of the rural high school students did so. Thus, of the 1069 students, 45% reported themselves as speakers of both languages, and 55% reported speaking only Spanish.

In order to detect language loss and language shift among the students who reported themselves as speakers of only Spanish, questions about language knowledge, language preference, and intragenerational patterns of language use were asked. These questions, translated into English, are as follows:

- 1. What languages do you understand?
- 2. If your parents are bilingual, in which language do they like to speak?
- 3. In what language do your parents speak with each other?
- 4. If your grandparents are bilingual, in what language do they like to speak?
- 5. In what language do your grandparents speak with each other?

The responses for the first question allowed me to divide the 588 Spanish monolingual students into those who do, and those who do not, understand Kaqchikel. Table 1 shows this division in its two principal columns, which are subdivided to reflect the students' responses to questions 2-5. These two groups of students were further subdivided into two subgroups: those with Kaqchikel-speaking families, and those without such families. Table 1 also lists the number of students for each subgroup, as well as the number of rural and urban students.

	- Kaqchikel		+ Kaqchikel	
	understanding		understanding	
	+	- Kaqchikel	-	+
	Kaqchikel	Family	Kaqchikel	Kaqchikel
	Family	_	Family	Family
Urban	229	57	71	216
573				
Rural	3	3	0	9
15				
Total =	Language	Monolinguals	Passive	Language
588	loss		bilinguals	shift

Table 1: Passive knowledge of Kaqchikel.

An important finding is that of the 588 Spanish monolinguals, 292 students (50%) do not understand Kaqchikel, and 296 students (50%) do. Another important finding is that of the group that doesn't understand Kaqchikel, 232 monolinguals (79%) have Kaqchikel-speaking families, while just 60 students (20%) do not. This means that of these 292 students, 79% have experienced language loss. The 60 students who do not understand Kaqchikel, and do not have Kaqchikel-speaking families, most likely represent Spanish monolinguals of *Ladino* origin. The 71 students (24%) who reported not to understand Kaqchikel and do not have Kaqchikel-speaking families,

most likely represent passive bilinguals, i.e., *Ladinos* who have learned Kaqchikel from their peers. Finally, of the 296 students who understand Kaqchikel, 225 of them (76%) have Kaqchikel-speaking families. This means that their parents stopped speaking Kaqchikel to them, or the students stopped speaking Kaqchikel to their parents. This is also a noticeable finding because these students represent language shift within their generation.

3.2. Language attitudes of the bilingual students

Regarding language attitudes, the survey explored the students' attitudes, along with their patterns of language use with their parents, grandparents and siblings. Language attitudes were also explored in the public domains of the school and the market. Regarding the patterns of language use, Table 2 lists the results from the 478 bilingual students, based on their responses to the questions:

- 6. What language do you use when you speak with your parents?
- 7. What language do you use when you speak with your grandparents?

Table 2 lists the results in two principal columns. The number of bilinguals who speak Kaqchikel to either their parents or grandparents appears in the first column. The second column lists the number of bilinguals who speak Spanish to either their parents or grandparents. The number of students from the urban versus rural schools is also indicated. Of the 306 urban students, 89% reported that they speak Kaqchikel with their parents or grandparents. However, slightly more of the rural students, i.e., 91%, speak to their elders in Kaqchikel. In contrast, the percentage of bilinguals who speak Spanish is small. Eleven percent of the urban bilinguals speak Spanish with their elders, and 9% of the rural bilinguals do so.

Table 2: Knowledge and practice of Kaqchikel

	Speak Kaqchikel with	Speak Spanish with
	parents or grandparents	parents or grandparents
Urban - 306	273	33
Rural - 172	157	15
Total = 478	90%	10%

A positive finding was that bilingual students from rural and urban high schools use Kaqchikel with their parents or grandparents. In other words, of those students who reported speaking both languages, 90% are actively using Kaqchikel with their elders and 10% are not. This 10% represents the group that is transitioning to speaking only Spanish.

The results of Table 3 contrast sharply with those in Table 2. Table 3 reports on the bilingual students' intragenerational patterns of language use. Students were posed the question:

8. What language do you use when speaking with your siblings? Table 3 lists the number of urban and rural students corresponding to each type of answer. Spanish was the general language of communication between the students and their siblings.

	Speak Kaqchikel	Speak Spanish	Speak both
	with siblings	with siblings	languages
			with siblings
Urban - 309	85	196	28
Rural - 172	104	63	5
Total = 481	30%	54%	7%

 Table 3: Intragenerational Communication.

With regard to the difference between the rural and urban groups, more of the urban bilinguals use Spanish with their siblings. That is, 63% of the urban bilinguals speak Spanish with their siblings, compared with just 37% of the rural bilinguals. There was a stronger tendency for rural bilinguals to speak in Kaqchikel with their siblings, than for the urban bilinguals, since 60% of the 172 rural students reported using Kaqchikel. In contrast, just 27% of the urban bilinguals use Kaqchikel with their siblings. Small percentages of students reported using both languages with their siblings. Nine percent of the urban students reported using both languages, whereas just 3% of the rural students do so. In general, Spanish language use is more widespread, with 54% of both groups reporting its use with their siblings. Additionally, of the three patterns of language use, it is the Spanish pattern that seems to be a threat, since the students who reported speaking in Spanish with their siblings represent the early stages of language shift.

Concerning language use in the public domain of the school, the number of students for each type of response is listed in the three columns of Table 4. Of the 172 rural students, 13% use Kaqchikel at school, and 8% of the 306 urban students reported using it at school, as well. In contrast, the percentages of students who use Spanish at school are much higher. Eighty-five percent of the urban students use Spanish, and 78% of the rural students do so. Eight percent of the urban students use both languages at school, and 9% of the rural students use both, as well. The overall results indicate that Spanish is the language of the school domain, since 82% of the 481 bilinguals use it there.

Table 4: The school domain of language use.

	Kaqchikel at school	Spanish at school	Both at school
Urban - 306	23	260	23
Rural - 172	22	134	16
Total = 478	9%	82%	8%

The tendency of students to speak Spanish with their school peers and teachers may also indicate early stages of language shift. A similar pattern occurs with these students at the market. Table 5 shows the results of language use at the market, and is organized in the same manner as Table 4.

	Kaqchikel at market	Spanish at market	Both at market
Urban - 300	43	232	25
Rural - 170	32	125	13
Total = 470	16%	76%	8%

Table 5: The market domain of language use.

A total of 470 students indicated that they use Kaqchikel, Spanish, or both languages at the market. Students from both rural and urban schools use Spanish at the market. Seventy-seven percent of the urban bilinguals reported using Spanish at the market, while 74% of the rural bilinguals reported such use. The rural bilinguals reported the use of Kaqchikel at the market at a slightly higher percentage than the urban bilinguals, i.e., 19% for the rural bilinguals and 13% for the urban bilinguals. A small 8% of all students reported using both languages at the market. Overall, for the school and market domains, 76% of the bilingual students use Spanish at the market, and 82% use it at school. In contrast, 9% use Kaqchikel at school, and 16% at the market. It was also found that 8% use both languages at school, and 8% use both at the market. Thus, Spanish dominates in the public domains of the school and market.

3.3. Language transmission⁶ and the motivations for it

Language shift has been closely linked to the parents' decision to speak in the prestige language to their children. It is crucial for the future of minority languages to document language shift in minority communities, as well as the choices that adolescents make when becoming parents, to document adolescents' motivations for choosing one language over another for transmission to their children. In order to collect data on language transmission and its motivations, students answered the following hypothetical question:

9. What languages would you teach to your future children? Table 6 lists the percentages for the responses of the bilingual group. The types of answers listed in the far left column were correlated with two groups. One group speaks in Kaqchikel to their parents or grandparents, and the other speaks to theirs in Spanish.

Table 6: Language transmission.

	Kaqchikel with	Spanish with	Total
	parents/grandparents	parents/grandparents	
Teach both	40%	45%	40%
languages			
Teach Spanish	41%	28%	39%
Teach Kaqchikel	12%	8%	12%
Teach English	3%	15%	4%
No marriage	2%	-	2%
I don't know	-	2%	2%

⁶ This term is used in the sense that language as a system of communication must be transmitted from an experienced user to a non-experienced user.

Significantly, 40% of the bilingual group indicated that they would raise their future children as Kaqchikel-Spanish bilinguals, and 39% would raise them as Spanish monolinguals. Another important finding is that 12% indicated that they would raise their children using the Kaqchikel language. Interestingly, this result suggests that speaking in Kaqchikel to parents or grandparents is not a decisive factor in the choice to transmit it as a first language, given that this 12% of students fall within the 430-student group that speak in Kaqchikel to their elders (see Table 2). It is significant that the percentage of students who would choose to teach English to their future children is slightly higher, at 15%, than the 12% of students who would teach Kaqchikel to their children.

In order to find out about the bilingual students' motivations to transmit either of the two languages to their children, the adolescents were asked the follow-up question:

10. Why would you like to teach your future children these languages? In their responses to this question, the students demonstrated their understanding of the sociolinguistic dynamics of their speech community. In this study, their responses are classified qualitatively into the categories of culture, communication, equality and monetary value.

Regarding the category of culture, the bilingual students pointed out the cultural importance of Kaqchikel with answers such as 'It is part of the Mayan culture' or 'I want to teach them Kaqchikel to value our culture'. They also made a direct connection between their ancestral inheritance and their identity with answers like 'Kaqchikel is the language of our ancestors' or 'It is the language of our grandparents'. The students also recognized that Kaqchikel is beautiful, and indicated their understanding of the threat to the language's survival with responses such as 'I'll teach Kaqchikel so that it won't disappear' and 'It is beautiful'. Thus, these students intend to transmit Kaqchikel for cultural, familial, aesthetic and survival reasons.

The students' motivations to transmit Spanish contrast sharply with those to transmit Kaqchikel. They associate modernity with *Ladino* culture and to the Spanish language. Students indicated that they would teach Spanish to their children because 'Kaqchikel is not civilized' and 'Spanish is more modern'. The notion of preparing for the future is of heightened significance to adolescents, which motivates them to favor the language or languages that seem to be associated with "the future"; thus, for them, 'Spanish and English are the languages of the future', and economic and social conditions press them to incorporate Spanish and English into their conceptions of their economic and social future lives.

Historically, the Mayas, as well as other indigenous peoples, have had problems of communication with Spanish speakers. That is, the Spanish conquerors and, later, the *Ladinos*, imposed the Spanish language on the Mayas; however, neither of these two groups learned to speak in a Maya language (Lerner 2000). Thus, the burden of properly producing and receiving a message has historically been placed on the Mayas. Thus, to the Mayas, clear and appropriate communication with *Ladinos* is still essentially important.

The bilingual students demonstrated their preoccupation with appropriate and clear communication. That is, they were concerned with the effective production and reception of the message. These students recognized that their messages must be produced efficiently in order to be understood. They described Spanish as the language of efficiency and reach; for instance, they said that with Spanish 'You can express yourself in different places'. For these students, communication with teachers and *Ladinos* is essential, and Spanish is the language for that. Students said that they would teach Spanish to their children 'So, that my kids can communicate with *Ladinos*'.

On the other hand, it is also important for these students to understand the message that is being communicated. The students answered that it is important to know Spanish 'In order to learn and understand in school'. Also, for them, Spanish would help their children 'Understand *Ladinos* and teachers'. For these students, not transmitting Spanish to their children would hinder understanding, which could be detrimental; a student made this explicit by saying, 'I wouldn't want my kids to be insulted in a language that they don't speak'. For this student, speaking Spanish equates with understanding Spanish; Spanish must be understood, even if the message is offensive. In general, the students projected the view that communication problems can be alleviated only if Spanish is the language of communication between Mayas, teachers, and *Ladinos*. For them, Spanish is the language that has broadest scope of use and does not create confusion. Thus, for these students, it is a 'good thing to speak Spanish'.

Two categories that were deduced from the students' answers concern the concepts of the "equality" of languages and the value of language. With regard to the equality of languages, the bilingual students responded that they would transmit Kaqchikel because 'It is my right and the right of my children' and 'I am Maya and it is my right'. These students believe that Kaqchikel language use, as well as its transmission, is their right. Furthermore, they believe that the acquisition of Spanish tends to make them equal to *Ladinos*. Spanish, for them, is 'the language of the majority' and 'Everybody uses it'. Spanish, then, is an "equalizer" since it allows them to be part of the majority. Moreover, since equality in political terms may only be achieved through the framework of the state of Guatemala, the students find it necessary to teach Spanish to their future children because it 'is the language of Guatemala' and the Mayas are also Guatemalan.

Interestingly, their understanding that they have linguistic rights contrasts with their acknowledgment that Spanish may be an economic asset and a commodity in itself that if transmitted would provide 'a good job' and 'more opportunities for progress' since 'it is an international language'. This is in sharp contrast with the monetary value given to Kaqchikel, a language that, according to the students, 'doesn't get you a job'. Moreover, English knowledge is also perceived as being monetarily valuable; students think that 'to learn English is to make huge progress' and English permits them 'to communicate with tourists'. In sum, the students' answers shed light on the complex sociolinguistic conditions of the Tecpán community.

5. Closing Remarks

In order to maintain indigenous languages, it is vitally important that adolescents take an active role in transmitting and maintaining them. It is known that young people may refuse to speak their indigenous language, particularly if it is the low-prestige language. For instance, House (2000) reports that Navajo children refuse to learn or use the Navajo language. Also, Kroskrity (1993) reported that adolescents of Tewa families in Arizona respond in English when their parents address them in Tewa or Hopi. Similarly, according to Trudgill and Tzavaras (1977), Albanian Greek children pressure their parents not to speak Aravanitika, especially in the public arena. These adolescents and children are examples of the shift from non-prestigious languages to prestigious ones.

The results of the present study indicate that Kaqchikel adolescents, particularly those in the town of Tecpán, are indeed a shift generation. This study also demonstrates that questions regarding intergenerational and intragenerational language use are especially useful and effective at detecting language loss and language shift. It was found that 79% of the monolingual students have Kaqchikel-

speaking parents or grandparents but did not speak Kaqchikel, themselves. This study also shows that some students have not lost their home language entirely, since 76% of the students who understand Kaqchikel have parents or grandparents that speak it. Finally, language shift seems to be occurring more rapidly in the town of Tecpán than in the surrounding rural areas.

Concerning the language attitudes of the bilingual students, it was revealed that urban adolescents prefer to speak in Kaqchikel with their elders, while they prefer to speak in Spanish with their siblings. In contrast, rural adolescents generally prefer to speak in Kaqchikel with their parents, grandparents and siblings. Nevertheless, the general tendency of the bilingual group is to speak Kaqchikel with their elders and Spanish with their siblings. Ninety percent of both rural and urban adolescents speak Kaqchikel with their parents or grandparents, and 54% speak Spanish with their siblings. This is an important finding, which indicates that the shift to Spanish is mostly intragenerational.

With regard to the home, school, and market domains, the results illustrate complex dynamics of language use. Although Garzon (1998) suggested that the Kaqchikel home has become the domain of Spanish, this study points out that the dynamics of language use in the home are multifaceted, since both languages are used intergenerationally as well as intragenerationally. Moreover, these dynamics include monolinguals who understand Kaqchikel but do not speak it, i.e., they are passive bilinguals.

The school, as part of a country's system of governance, advocates the learning and use of the prestige language. Even in a school setting that is under the control of a minority culture, the prestige language is still the norm. For instance, House (2000) reported that at Diné College, a Navajo school on the Navajo reservation in Tsaile, Arizona, janitors, maintenance and cafeteria workers, as well as secretaries, speak in Navajo, while faculty and administrators speak it only to show solidarity or to indicate that a particular event is a Navajo event. English language use is the norm. By comparison, it is the norm for Kaqchikel-Spanish students to speak Spanish in the high schools of the Tecpán municipality. Eighty-two percent of the bilingual adolescents who participated in this study reported using Spanish at school.

Interestingly, this study revealed that the market is the domain of Spanish, as well. Mendoza (1999) points out that the market in Tecpán is the most important in the region, and Mayans from distant places go once a week to sell there. While Garzon (1998) reports that young women have learned Kaqchikel in the market of Comalapa, nevertheless, according to this study, 76% of the bilingual adolescents use Spanish at the market. Thus, schools and markets are Spanish domains for Kaqchikel adolescents in the Tecpán municipality.

Another important finding of this study is that 40% of the Kaqchikel-Spanish bilinguals from both the rural and urban high schools favor the transmission of both languages to their future children. This group of students that favor bilingualism is slightly higher than the 39% that favor the transmission of Spanish only. Interestingly, these two groups contrast sharply with the 12% of students who favor the transmission of Kaqchikel only. This last result is disconcerting; however, it can be explained by taking into consideration the students' preoccupation with effective communication. Bilingual students understand profoundly that Spanish monolinguals control communication. They are aware that the communication experience of the community has been historically negative due to the fact that *Ladinos* refuse to learn Kaqchikel. They are also aware that broadly speaking, the Mayas have lacked proper training in Spanish. Thus, these bilingual students confer great importance on the language or combination of languages that would most facilitate effective communication with *Ladinos*.

With regard to questions of the cultural and national identity of the bilingual adolescents, the findings of this study demonstrate that the students have a

sophisticated understanding of the sociolinguistic conditions of their community. Their responses show that they navigate between a Mayan cultural identity and a Guatemalan national identity. They negotiate between Mayan community pressures to maintain the Kaqchikel language, and social and economic pressures to choose Spanish over Kagchikel. These adolescents are aware of the cultural values placed on Kagchikel and the monetary values placed on Spanish. They believe that the Kaqchikel language provides them access to their rich cultural past and their Maya identity. They also believe that Spanish and English would provide them with the opportunity for progress. Thus, Kaqchikel is their source for cultural and linguistic identity, while Spanish is their tool for social and economic mobility.

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