Endangered languages with millions of speakers: Focus on Quechua in Peru

Willem F. H. Adelaar (Leiden University Centre for Linguistics)

Abstract

Programs designed to address the documentation and preservation of endangered languages have mainly concentrated their efforts on languages spoken by small speech communities that are relatively easy to survey. Endangered languages with large numbers of speakers have only marginally benefited from such programs. This article addresses the reasons for this discrepancy, taking as an example the situation of Peruvian Quechua and its numerous varieties.

1 Introduction

The massive extinction of languages in the modern world has been a matter of serious concern for linguists, educationalists and policy makers over the last 25 years. Although languages have arisen and disappeared throughout human history, their rate of extinction has accelerated in an alarming way and is affecting some parts of the world to a much higher degree than others. The New World is among the areas most affected in this respect as a consequence of the marginal situation occupied by the remnants of its indigenous population, which has been decimated by conquest, epidemics, exploitation, local genocide and forced assimilation ever since European invaders reached that continent. To date, the native languages of the Americas have no legal or political status effective enough to guarantee their survival in the future. On the contrary, there are clear historical and social-political trends predicting their extinction within a relatively short period.

For the science of linguistics it is important that the indigenous languages of the Americas exhibit an extraordinary degree of diversity, both from a genetic and a typological point of view. Many native American languages are also extraordinarily complex and unusual at different levels of their structure. Their extinction would mean a tremendous loss of linguistic diversity on a global scale. International organizations linked to UNESCO have recognized the problem of the massive loss of languages at an early stage (in the 1990s) and have taken action in favor of the maintenance of minority languages world-wide, thus providing a necessary legitimacy for the issue at the academic, cultural and political levels.[1]

Over the last 25 years, national funding agencies for scientific research and academic institutions worldwide have provided support for research on the description and documentation of endangered languages. However, what is very remarkable, and rather unique, in connection with linguistic research not focused on technical

[1] See, for instance, Robins and Uhlenbeck (1991), a survey on language endangerment published with the authority of the Permanent International Committee of Linguists (CIPL) that was distributed at the 15th International Congress of Linguists in Quebec (9 to 14 August 1992).

applications, is the supportive engagement of private funding organizations. In 2000 the *VolkswagenFoundation* in Hanover initiated its program DoBeS (*Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen*), and from 2003 on the *Lisbet Rausing Charitable Fund* (now *Arcadia*) gave its support to the ELDP program (*Endangered Languages Documentation Programme*) hosted by the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. Both programs have had an enormous impact on the study of endangered languages all over the world. The DoBeS program has been instrumental in introducing entirely new standards and methods of language documentation, which were codified in a volume edited by Gippert, Himmelmann and Mosel (2006), and which were subsequently also adopted by other programs. Both DoBeS and ELDP have taken up the task of creating language archives for endangered languages. These archives are not only meant to receive linguistic information on a particular language, but also any other information that is relevant for a good understanding and knowledge of the community of its speakers. DoBeS and ELDP also motivated the participation of linguists from countries where endangered languages are used, even when these countries were in a less favorable economic position or unable to consider the preservation of minority languages a priority. Both programs thus contributed to a long neglected transfer of knowledge and skills.

2 Endangerment of languages with large numbers of speakers

Now that both the DoBeS and the ELDP programs are drawing to an end, after more than ten years of successful activity, and possible follow-ups may be envisaged, it is time to ask the question about what sort of endangered languages have benefited most from these programs. Has there been a balanced coverage of all types of endangerment? Unfortunately, that does not seem to be the case. Most of the documentation projects focused on language maintenance and revitalization that have been funded over the last decades address the documentation of languages with a limited number of speakers, usually belonging to small communities whose immediate survival is at stake. These are communities with varying degrees of preservation of the ancestral language, varying from language use among all generations to a situation in which only a few elderly speakers continue to practice the language among a majority of non-speakers. On the one hand, they seem to represent the most urgent cases, but, on the other, they make it possible to address the issue of language loss at a more or less controllable level with the help of representative organizational structures. Projects involving small language communities can usually be handled by small teams of researchers and community workers, who know the members of the community well and collaborate closely with them and with the advantage of direct lines of communication.

A situation that is much less well represented among the projects funded by programs for endangered languages is that of historically important languages with large numbers of speakers but no well-defined official status. Such languages are located and often dispersed in regions where their speakers have occupied an inferior socio-economic position for many centuries, and they are much more difficult to reach and support than small speaker communities with a high degree of internal cohesion. Most of these languages are subject to a dramatic language shift that threatens to interrupt their transmission to future generations, if it has not already done so. This process has already caused enormous losses, and it seems to be only a matter of time before such languages will disappear completely. Driven by social and attitudinal

factors deeply rooted in history, this massive language shift is difficult to reverse, and it requires more complex techniques than language maintenance and revitalization in small language communities, if any success can be expected at all.

The countries in which such languages are found often have a colonial past but have subsequently been independent for a considerable period of time and have thus adopted the language of their former colonizers as their national and official language. This is typically the case in Latin America, where numerically important vernaculars, such as Aymara, Guaraní, Mapudungun, Mixtec, Nahuatl, Otomí, Quechua, Quiche, Yucatec Maya, Zapotec, and several others, are still regularly used, albeit at a local level.[2] They managed to survive European domination during the colonial period and Eurocentric ideologies and policies after the Independence. Sooner or later, however, the time will come when this kind of language resistance, not supported by any substantial political backing, can no longer be upheld, as witnessed by several regions of Latin America with a Spanish-speaking population of predominantly indigenous origin (for instance, Central America, central Colombia, most of Venezuela, northeastern Mexico and northern Peru). In those areas the language shift towards Spanish already reached completion (or nearly so), in the 18th, 19th or 20th centuries. The exact circumstances under which these massive transformations occurred, as well as their time-path, remain largely unknown and undocumented as they were considered of limited interest by contemporary observers.[3] In other parts of Latin America, where the principal vernacular languages have remained in use, a seemingly unstoppable process of language shift is taking its course, right now and before our eyes, in spite of educational programs and protective measures that have been installed over the last decades. It should be observed that language shift on a large scale is not limited to the expansion of Spanish, because major indigenous languages such as Aymara, Mapudungun, Nahuatl and Quechua have replaced other languages before falling victim to massive language shifts themselves.

The speakers of the languages that have managed to survive colonial and postcolonial repression are facing constant pressure from the side of the Spanish-speaking national society that drives them towards the abandonment of their ancestral languages. Characteristically, the process of language shift assumes the shape of an intergenerational rupture that separates an older generation of more or less active speakers from a younger generation which refuses to learn the language any longer or is discouraged from doing so. All generations apparently share the view that the use of a native language is a sign of backwardness and social stagnation, an object of shame (*vergüenza*), whereas the adoption of the national language, coupled with the denial of any knowledge of the vernacular, is seen as a gateway to social mobility and emancipation, better education, better economic prospects, and integration into national society on a more equal basis. It is important to stress that in the modern context we are not dealing with outright genocide or the exclusive effect of massive migration.[4] What

[2] Paraguayan Guaraní is the second indigenous American language in terms of speaker numbers (after Quechua). The survival of Guaraní is not immediately threatened, but it is losing much of its authenticity due to massive borrowing.

[3] A telling example is that of the Muisca language of the Colombian high plateau. Although it continued to be widely spoken in the 17th century, contemporary observers established its disappearance in the second half of the 18th century (cf. Triana y Antorveza 1993: 34-38).

[4] Although genocide is not the main reason for the ongoing language shift in Latin America, whole-scale massacres of indigenous speaker communities have occurred, in particular, during the internal wars in Guatemala (1979-1985) and Peru (1980-1992).

happens is that well-preserved indigenous populations are shifting languages of their own accord, even though that decision may be based on coercive grounds.

3 The case of Quechua in Peru: demographic issues

Quechua is the indigenous language (or rather a language family) with the greatest number of speakers in the Americas. The largest group of Quechua speakers, about 3,5 million, is found in Peru, where the language had its historical origin, and where the internal variation is the greatest (see map 1 for the distribution of Quechua dialects in Peru in the mid-20th century).

Map 1: Approximate distribution of Quechua dialects in Peru in the mid-20th century
(after Adelaar/Muysken 2004: 184; map designed by Arjan Mossel)

A similar number of Quechua speakers are found in the neighboring countries Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia and Ecuador all together. Speaker numbers for Quechua are notoriously unreliable. While estimates for the total population of a nation such as Peru are adjusted every year, speakers of indigenous languages are only counted once in a while and not always in a professional manner. Children under five years old are not

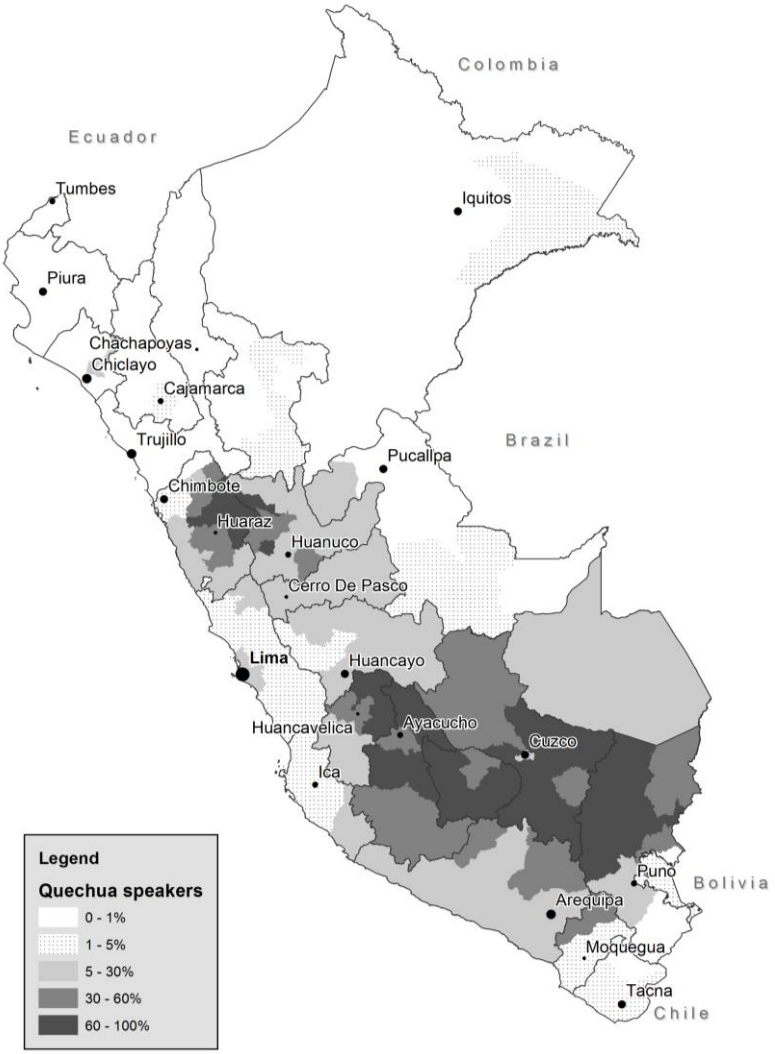
normally counted as Quechua speakers but as non-speakers for whom the language choice is still undecided, whereas for counts involving the total population of the country all inhabitants are taken into account including the newly born (cf. Chirinos 2001: 15-21). Urbanization is another issue that provokes considerable fluctuations in speaker estimates. For many decades Quechua speakers have migrated to Lima and other coastal cities in environments that are predominantly Spanish-speaking and highly unfavorable for the retention of indigenous languages (see Marr 2011). In general, it has been assumed that such migrants, who were responsible for a large part of the population growth in these coastal cities, abandoned their native language almost overnight. Nevertheless, detailed studies are lacking, and some relatively recent surveys estimate the Quechua-speaking population in Lima and Callao at about 500,000 (cf. Chirinos 2001: 118). Under such conditions it is not surprising that the estimates for Quechua speaker numbers differ wildly, not to mention the ideological factor which can incite a source to present the number of speakers as either higher or lower than the numbers suggested by more or less objective counts.

If we accept the highly uncertain figure of 3,5 million for the number of Quechua speakers in Peru and compare it to the total population of the nation, estimated at 30 million in 2014, the percentage of Quechua speakers would be somewhat lower than 12% of the total population of Peru. It should be observed that the Peruvian population has tripled over the last fifty years, whereas the number of Quechua speakers has grown at a rather modest pace.[5] Meanwhile, the center of gravity of population growth in Peru has been situated in the urban centers on the Pacific coast and not in the rural areas where Quechua remained predominant. Thus the language situation in rural Andean Peru may not have changed as much as one might assume on the basis of crude percentages of speakers calculated at the national level. However, this does not mean that there is no ongoing language shift.

A formerly Quechua-speaking area in the Peruvian Andes, where the shift from Quechua to Spanish has become notoriously visible is constituted by the Central Peruvian Andes, more concretely, the Andean sectors of the departments of Junín and Pasco, as well as the high valleys in the interior of the coastal department of Lima. This region was reported to be about 60% Quechua-speaking around 1940 (see Rowe 1947), whereas nowadays the Quechua-speaking population does not exceed 10% of the total population of this region (see Chirinos 2001). It can be assumed that the remaining Quechua speakers mostly belong to the older generations, but Chirinos's survey based on the Peruvian national census of 1993 also indicates the existence of small pockets of speakers who seem to be resisting the language shift. Examples are the community of Checras in the province of Huaral (department of Lima) and the area of Andamarca in the province of Huancayo (department of Junín). Therefore, it appears that a more or less bilingual Quechua-speaking population has been shifting towards a homogeneous Spanish-speaking population interspersed with a few enclaves of 'resistant' Quechua-speaking communities (see map 2 for the percentage of native speakers of Quechua in Peru per province). When these communities will give up their language loyalty is probably only a matter of time. Meanwhile, the newly Hispanicized population remains typically Andean in culture and traditions, and the Spanish language as used by them is a variety of Andean Spanish (*castellano andino*) with an undeniable Quechua substratum. As a result, the indigenous population of this region will continue to be

[5] In 1947, Rowe estimated the number of Quechua speakers in Peru at ca. 2,500,000 in a total population of 7,000,000 (based on a census held in 1940).

viewed by outsiders as a Quechua population that has forgotten its language. From a geographic and historical point of view, however, the original 'continuous zone' (*zona continua*) of Quechua speakers, which covered most of the Peruvian Andes, was broken up into two separate areas, which will find it harder and harder to preserve their linguistic identities.[6]



Map 2: Percentage of native speakers of Quechua in Peru, per province
(source: INEI 2007 census; map designed by Arjan Mossel)

4 Loss of diversity

Quechua is not a monolithic language but rather a family of closely related languages subdivided into dialects. Within the Quechua language group the boundary between language and dialect is usually difficult to determine due to a lack of uniform criteria. Uninformed outsiders have traditionally referred to all Quechua varieties as 'dialects' (*dialectos*). Nowadays, this term is rejected for its discriminatory flavor, because in everyday Peruvian usage it conveys the suggestion that some varieties of Quechua

[6] The expression *zona continua quechua* was introduced by Torero (1964).

(especially Cuzco Quechua) are more legitimate than others. Therefore, it is preferable to use the neutral term *variety*, by which the problematic dichotomy between language and dialect can be avoided.

Although from a synchronic point of view Quechua local varieties are usually treated on an equal level, their historical background can be very different. Some dialect distinctions originated in the colonial post-contact period or in the time of Independence, but others were already in place during the formation of the Inca Empire (15^{th}-16^{th} centuries) or even before. All varieties, especially those that owe their existence to Quechua expansion during Inca and colonial times, contain interesting remnants of contact with languages that are now extinct and virtually unknown, and that were once spoken in areas where Quechua became dominant. Since Quechua displaced scores of other languages at different stages of its history, each of its varieties may retain particular traces of past language contact that can be helpful for a reconstruction of the linguistic prehistory of the area.[7]

The more conservative varieties of Quechua may exhibit features testifying to developments in the early history of the language family and its symbiosis with proto-Aymaran. This symbiosis and its effect often referred to as *convergence*, must have played a determining role in the formation of the Quechua linguistic identity, possibly during the first centuries of the present era (see Adelaar 2012). Some Quechua varieties present evidence of contact with unidentified Aymaran languages in locations where otherwise no Aymaran speakers are known to have existed historically.[8]

From a linguistic point of view, Peruvian varieties of the Quechua family are of particular interest due to their complex morphology. It has been subject to subtle and complex formal, distributional and semantic shifts that account for existing dialectal differences. In particular, the verbal morphology of the different Quechua varieties constitutes a true laboratory for the study of synchronic interaction among linguistic categories and diachronic developments, which can contribute unique data to typological and theoretical linguistic research. Since most modern descriptive studies of Quechua are from a relatively early date (mostly between 1965 and 1985), there is a broad field of research ready to be explored. This state of affairs justifies the need for descriptive research on each individual Quechua variety in its own right because invaluable historical and typological language data will be irretrievably lost once the dialect speakers are gone.

5 Quechua as an endangered language

From a perspective of language endangerment the situation of Quechua outlined above is challenging. Whereas tribal languages in the Amazonian region may differ only marginally (for instance, those belonging to the Tupí-Guaraní family) but are treated as fully independent languages requiring protection and recognition, such a policy has not normally been followed with respect to the Quechua local varieties. In the very best

[7] The northernmost varieties of the Quechua I dialect group, spoken in the departments of Ancash and Huánuco, may retain information about extinct and undocumented languages once spoken further north in the province of Pallasca and the neighboring department of La Libertad. The same holds for the local Spanish, which is also potentially endangered.

[8] The village dialect of Pacaraos in the upper Chancay valley (province of Huaral, department of Lima) contains a substantial amount of vocabulary from an unidentified Aymaran language, although there is no written or oral record that places Aymara or any of its relatives in that part of Peru.

case a compromise was reached, as in 1975-1978, when the Peruvian military government, in response to academic concern about the preservation of Quechua internal diversity (see Torero 1974), authorized official recognition to the dialect situation by introducing a set of six regional standards, referred to as six 'Quechua languages': *Ancash-Huailas*, *Ayacucho-Chanca*, *Cajamarca-Cañaris*, *Cuzco-Collao*, *Junín-Huanca* and *San Martín* (see Escobar ed. 1976). This recognition constituted a step in the right direction but still failed to do justice to all the linguistic variety found in the Quechua-speaking areas of Peru. Furthermore, due to political changes and a general lack of interest, the recognition of Quechua linguistic diversity was never implemented by means of educational and cultural policies, and the measures introduced to stimulate the six regional standards mostly remained a dead letter.

In the following years, language maintenance projects and educational projects geared at Quechua-speaking populations in Peru were mainly concerned with the more wide-spread varieties of Quechua, such as the Quechua of Cuzco and Puno (both *Cuzco-Collao*). The other varieties only locally received attention from private cultural institutions, such as provincial language academies, religiously inspired institutions such as SIL International, and occasionally from young researchers looking for a topic for their dissertations. Only in very recent years there have been a signs of an incipient government policy to promote the systematic survey of indigenous linguistic diversity in Peru, which on the long run may benefit the maintenance and the revitalization of endangered Quechua varieties (see Ministerio de Educación 2014).

6 Why Quechua does not benefit from international efforts to document and preserve linguistic diversity

As we have seen, endangered languages with a great number of speakers, such as Quechua, have not been a target for the large-scale documentation programs of the 2000s. This was not due to a lack of interest on the side of the protagonists of these programs, who are usually well aware of the consequences of massive generational language shift, but rather to a certain indifference among language communities with large speaker groups and a lack of initiatives on the side of support groups involved with such communities. The latter include academic institutions engaged in descriptive and documentary research of these endangered groups. It is possible to identify the following reasons for the fact that the documentation and research of demographically important languages such as Quechua is considered less urgent:

1. Speaker numbers

Even though it has been established on several occasions that the degree of endangerment of a language is not necessarily determined by the number of its speakers,[9] large speaker numbers seem to reduce a sense of urgency. Small language communities may get priority because the feeling exists that there is still enough time to deal with the numerically important languages. In the case of Quechua the total number of speakers prevails over the consideration that many Quechua varieties are close to extinction (see also map 2). Furthermore, the generational shift lacks visibility as long as the number of middle-aged and elderly speakers is still substantial.

[9] See, for instance, Krauss (1998: 103) on the parallel cases of Breton and Navajo. For the Andean language shift see also Adelaar (2007).

2. Degree of documentation

Languages with high numbers of speakers can usually benefit from a long history of descriptive, sociolinguistic and literary research. In most cases there are grammars, dictionaries, text collections and anthologies, sound recordings and historical treatises. There may also be some sort of a fixed standard language with a well-defined orthography. All these commodities are available in the case of Quechua. Meanwhile, there is a lack of awareness that a large part of the existing materials are insufficient, cast as they are in the mold of outdated linguistic theory and poorly adapted to the needs of modern maintenance and revitalization programs. Consequently, though up-to-date and adequate language documentation is considered a prerequisite for any action in favor of language maintenance, languages such as Quechua do not seem to represent the most urgent choice.

3. Underestimation of internal diversity

The Quechua case is particularly illustrative of a complex situation of geographically defined internal variation that constitutes a challenge for programs of language documentation and maintenance. In the 1960s researchers from different countries enthusiastically took up the task of studying a rich array of Quechua varieties, treating them as languages in their own right. Maybe due to the initial success of Quechua dialectology, the impression grew that enough research had been done in this field, and that other priorities should be pursued. Nevertheless, many Quechua varieties remained unstudied and are now on the verge of extinction, if not already extinct. With their disappearance, the possibility of finding hidden traces of substrate languages or contact with extinct neighbor languages will also vanish.

4. Lack of motivation for research

There has been a general feeling among language researchers and language planners in Peru that everything that could be done with regard to Quechua has already been attempted.[10] Encouragement to submit innovative projects to international funding organizations supporting language documentation and description has not produced much effect. The expectations are now mostly directed towards political mobilization, legal protection, educational programs, etc. However, it is uncertain whether the information basis in the form of linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge is large and fine-tuned enough for such action to be successful at all.

5. Lack of support among Quechua-speaking communities

Lack of support and enthusiasm for language maintenance efforts on the side of communities that are supposed to benefit from them is a crucial obstacle for any project or program that tries to stimulate the use of Quechua in its many varieties. Centuries of oppression and social marginalization have convinced Quechua speakers that progress will only be possible if they shift to a dominant language first. This will naturally be Spanish, but English could serve the same purpose if the opportunity were offered. Quechua speakers often have an excellent feeling for the amount of economic and cultural success associated with either of these languages. Even though adult speakers

[10] The author remembers an informal meeting in Lima with Quechua-speaking students from Huancavelica who were eager to conduct research on their native language. They had been told that all the relevant work had already been done by foreigners, and that it would be better for them to direct their efforts to research on Amazonian languages.

nowadays may express pride with regard to their native language, often under the influence of positive attitudes from outsiders, they can be internally convinced that a knowledge of that language is useless, if not harmful, to their own children. In their view, social mobility and access to the benefits of modern society are only possible when using another language. Using that other language in a context of balanced bilingualism is not considered enough, because all signs of familiarity with the native language must be erased in order to make the Quechua background invisible.[11] All in all, it is very hard to obtain community support for language maintenance programs as long as one is unable to show what the direct economic advantage would be for the Quechua speakers in question (see Hornberger 1988, Marr 2011).

7 Conclusion

When we consider the particular situation of numerically large minority languages such as Quechua, it would not be right to say that little has been done to preserve these languages. Most of them have been documented and studied from the 16th or 17th century on, and they have been the object of occasional scholarly attention ever since. In the case of Quechua (and its neighbor Aymara) there have been ambitious educational programs, supported by funding organizations operating on an international scale, which have been successful in their goals of documentation and elaboration of educational materials.[12] Missionary groups, such as SIL International, and local language academies have played their part in keeping attention focused on these languages. Political movements and state policies have at times been favorable to the use of these languages, as is now the case in Bolivia, for instance.

Nevertheless, everyone acquainted with the situation of the major Andean languages is left with the impression that the process of language shift with its powerful historical drivers is somehow irreversible.[13] Where so many initiatives have failed to stop the historical language shift from following its course, it may not be immediately clear whether documentation projects that have been successful with small language communities can contribute to arresting the decline of larger language communities. At the very least, such projects may provide a model for the identification and documentation of geographically restricted varieties of the major languages, so that some of the internal linguistic diversity and cultural knowledge can be recovered and preserved. It is to be hoped that this issue will receive more attention in future programs, along with the development of new techniques intended to reach and engage large speaker communities in a more effective way than has been the case until now.

[11] The particular pronunciation of Spanish by Quechua speakers known as *motoseo* or *motosidad* (see Cerrón-Palomino 2003: 83-84; Pérez, Acurio and Bendezú 2008), basically a confusion of high and mid vowels, is even considered more harmful for social acceptation than the use of Quechua itself.

[12] In this connection we may mention a Bilingual Educational Project (PEEB) based in Puno, which operated with the support of the German development agency GTZ during the 1980s.

[13] Even the political renaissance that is currently occurring among the Mapuche people in Chile and Argentina could not prevent their language from being in a weaker position than ever before as far as speaker numbers and the transmission to younger generations are concerned.

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