

## **CULTURES OF ORAL AND WRITING TRADITION**

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### **Abstract**

This paper confronts characteristics of cultures based on orality and those based on writing in order to approach the issue of writing in languages of oral tradition, especially Qom language (Toba) writing and its instrumentalization. References will be provided concerning the effects of writing on societies that traditionally do not practice it, on the basis of data provided from different perspectives, and of our own work on the Qom (Toba) groups.

**Keywords:** oral tradition cultures - written cultures - writing of the Qom (Toba) language

### **Resumen**

En este trabajo se confrontan las características de las culturas basadas en la oralidad y las basadas en la escritura, a fin de aproximarnos a la problemática de la escritura de lenguas de tradición oral y, puntualmente, a la de la escritura de la lengua qom (toba) y su instrumentalización. Se hará referencia a los efectos de la escritura en las sociedades que tradicionalmente no la practican, a partir de datos proporcionados desde distintas perspectivas y de trabajos propios acerca de los grupos qom (toba).

**Palabras clave:** culturas de tradición oral – culturas escriturarias – escritura de la lengua qom (toba)

### **Resumé**

Dans cet ouvrage seront confrontées les caractéristiques des cultures fondées sur l'oralité et celles basées sur l'écriture visant d'aborder le problème de l'écriture de langues de tradition orale et ponctuellement l'écriture de la langue Qom (Toba) sur la base de données fournies par différentes perspectives, et par nos propres travaux sur les groupes Qom (Toba).

Nous ferons référence aux effets de l'écriture sur des sociétés à tradition orale

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**Mots clés :** cultures bassées sur oralité -cultures basées sur l'écriture – écriture de la langue Qom (Toba)

## **1. Introduction**

“...That the Nambikwara could not write goes without saying. But they were also unable to draw, except for a few draws and zigzags on their calabashes. I distributed pencils and paper among them, nonetheless, as I had done with the Caduveo. At first they made no use of them. Then, one day I saw that they were all busy drawing wavy horizontal lines on the paper. What were they trying to do? I could only conclude that they were writing --- or more exactly, that they were trying to do as I did with my pencils. As I had never tried to amuse them with my drawings, they could not conceive of any other use of this implement. With most of them, that was as far as they got: but their leader saw further into the problem. Doubtless he was the only one among them to have understood what writing was for. So, he asked me for one of my notepads; and when we were working together he did not give me his answers in words, but traced a wavy line or two on the paper and gave it to me, as if I could read what he had to say. He himself was all but deceived by his own play-acting. Each time he drew a line, he would examine it with great care, as if its meaning must suddenly leap to the eye; and every time a look of disappointment come over his face. But he would never give up trying, and there was an unspoken agreement between us that his scribbling had a meaning that I did my best to decipher; his own verbal commentary was so prompt in coming that I had no need to ask him to explain what he had written. And now, no sooner was anyone assembled than he drew forth from a basket a piece of paper covered with scribbled lines and pretended to read from it. With a show of hesitation he looked up and down his 'list' for the objects to be given in exchange from his people's presents. So-and-so was to receive a machete in return for his bows and arrows, and another string of beads in return for his necklaces-and so on for two solid hours. What he was hoping for? To deceive himself, perhaps: but, even more, to amaze his companions and persuade them that *his* intermediacy was responsible for the exchanges. He had allied himself with the white man, as equal with equal, and could now share in his secrets...

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1976)<sup>2</sup>

In this passage of *A Writing Lesson*, a text that has been widely argued, we are interested in highlighting the symbolic endowment of writing. Without knowing how to write, the Nambikwara chief had apprehended writing as a symbol of power and prestige. Lévi-Strauss understands that the indigenous man “had guessed that the great means of understanding could at least serve other purposes”. It is the “sociological” end of writing (which Lévi-Strauss distinguishes from the “intellectual” one) that has impacted and seduced the Nambikwara chief. The symbolic record of writing relates us, in a general way, to its expanded use as an instrument of power (political, religious, cultural, etc.).<sup>3</sup>

If the practical needs of some societies have prompted the “invention” of writing, one of the questions raised regarding indigenous groups of oral tradition is to what extent and under what circumstances that prestigious and powerful symbolic value affects the appropriation of the technology of writing as a “loan”<sup>4</sup> from societies with other cultural systems, in which writing is recognized and legitimized through the categories of perception and appreciation generated by their users (Bourdieu, 1993). Another question raised is how linguistic and cultural contacts and socio-ethnic relations (interaction of subordinated oral groups with dominant writing groups) determine the evaluative structures from which certain appreciation of writing derives.

An important issue regarding the intellectual use of writing is how the transition from orality to writing may impact on groups that have traditionally based their social organization on oral practices.

To approach the problem of writing in oral tradition languages, and specially that of Qom (Toba) regarding the aspects mentioned before and its instrumentalization, we will address the specificities of oral tradition cultures and make reference to the effects of writing in societies that traditionally do not practice it. We will base the analysis on data provided from different perspectives as well as on our own work on the Qom (Toba) groups.

Anthropologists, ethnologists, ethnolinguists have been carrying out important work for several decades, studying societies of oral tradition. However, assessing their characteristics and contrasting

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<sup>2</sup> Translation recovered from <https://archive.org/details/tristestropiques000177mbp/page/n7>

<sup>3</sup> One of the most discussed and criticized aspects of "A Writing Lesson", noted as Rousseauian (Derrida 1970), (Calvet 1984), has been Lévi Strauss' interpretation on the indigenous people' lack of solidarity with their chief after the reading game; his hypothesis is that the Nambikwara had understood that writing and perfidy appeared concatenated. In the text, Lévi-Strauss poses an indissoluble unity between domination, violence, and writing.

<sup>4</sup> By "loan", we understand the transfer of an element from one culture to another, as a result of certain motivations and conditions.

them to those of writing tradition societies has opened up other fields of studies.

## **2. Cultures of Oral Tradition**

The privative adjectives “without writing”, “unlettered”, “illiterate”, usually applied to oral cultures, are but projections of an ethnocentrism falsified by writing, which estimates the absence of writing as a shortcoming, instead of as an inherent trait. As H. Vázquez (Vazquez, 1995 a) argues, the incidence of ethnocentrism is not overcome in the constructions of sociocultural anthropology: “In a non-conscious way, anthropologists tend to project the categories of analysis of theories that are useful for studying Western cultures on the analysis of social realities that do not belong to those cultural frameworks”.

Other analytical perspectives directed to define the specific characteristics of these societies have often proposed a contrastive analysis with written cultures, inevitably bordering the controversial issue of the unity and diversity of the human mind (universal human reason and alternative standards of rationality), which has been raised in social sciences. C. Geertz (1994) makes a distinction between the “process” of thought (internal psychological phenomena) and the “products” of thought (totality of culture), pointing out that, since the 1920s and 1930s, a unified conception of thought as “process” eventually matched a pluralistic conception of “products”. The connections between thought as a process and as a product were formulated in different ways: from identifying particular cultural products with particular mental processes (“primitive thinking”, “cognitive relativism”) to understanding the invariants of the aspect “process” after the aspect “product” embodied in many diverse cultural codes.

The standpoints regarding the relationship between orality and writing in connection with the processes of thinking range –not without nuances– between these two approaches.

By means of comparisons with calligraphic cultures, W. Ong (1993) analyzes verbal thinking and expression in cultures of oral tradition. He classifies them as “primary orality” cultures in contrast to “secondary orality” cultures, linked to technology (telephone, radio, television, etc.), dependent on writing and printing. He also points to differences in “mentality” between oral cultures and writing cultures. Ong argues that many of the characteristics taken for granted in literary, philosophical and scientific thought and expression, and even in oral discourse among people who know how to read, are actually not strictly inherent to human existence. On the contrary, these derive from the resources made available to human consciousness by the technology of writing. He also affirms that “the shift from orality to writing and then to electronic processing compromise social, economic, political, religious and other structures”. His diachronic and synchronous line of

analysis draws data from different disciplines. As a contrastive precedent between oral and written modalities, he outlines the studies conducted by Milman Parry about Homeric poetry. Parry considered that the characteristics of Homeric poetry were a consequence of the economy imposed by the oral methods of composition. His analysis of the verse in hexameters (orally constructed) led him to develop the concept of “formulaic construction”. This concept generally refers to fixed phrases or expressions, repeated more or less exactly, and grouped around equally uniform themes. Based on what Parry and others have shown, Ong emphasizes, on the one side, the correlation between the expressive characteristics detected in these analyzes with the constitution of thought and, on the other side, he distinguishes the general characteristics of primary oral cultures psychodynamics: accumulative, redundant, traditionalist, situational, agonistic, close to the human vital world, empathic and participant, homeostatic, as opposed to those referring to cultures with a writing tradition.

Ong claims that the results of the experiences carried out by Luria (1980) with illiterate Deikan peasants and Ichkari women, and people attending school—to whom tests about geometric figures, classification of objects, self-analysis, and syllogisms were administered— can be taken as representative of the different kinds of intellectual processes: the ones based on oral principles as opposed to those based on calligraphic principles.

In his theory of cross-cultural cognition, P. Denny (1995) estimates that cross-cultural differences in thought have nothing to do with the “ability” to think but rather with the “habits” of thought; and recognizes decontextualization as the single property distinguishing Western thought from the thought of farmer and hunter-gatherer societies, without writing. By “decontextualization”, he means handling information by disconnecting or relegating other information. In turn, by “contextualization” he implies making connections with other units of thought, either information that requires knowledge of the situational context to be understood or inter-contextualized information. For example, for the Eskimos, the numerical information is contextualized by other information. Numerical concepts cannot be expressed in isolation; the context to be expressed (by a suffix) is either “element” or “set”.

According to Denny, decontextualization can occur regardless of writing (although he recognizes its influence), and it develops as a result of the complexity of human societies, which causes its members to stop sharing a common background of information.

Resorting to linguistic references, he concludes that the languages of hunter-gatherers and emerging farmers (small social groups with a shared context) have a greater proportion of elements whose understanding depends on the knowledge of the situational context (for example, spatial deixis) than the languages of farmers of medium and complex level.

In relation to decontextualization, he underlines that the availability of relative clauses —which allows contextual information to be included in the message instead of being added by the listener according to the situational context— increases in medium-size societies without writing, and even more in the Western groups of written culture.

Within this scheme, Denny considers Ong's approach to be incorrect. The following oppositions, which Ong establishes in reference to written and oral cultures: subordinate-additive, analytical-aggregative, objectively distanced-empathetic and participatory, abstract-situational, are actually subsumed in the decontextualization-contextualization pair.

J. Bottéro (1995), on his part, argues that writing develops special mental dispositions. In his analysis of the ancient Mesopotamian civilization, he considers that the complexity of the system and economic and social factors required instrumentalizing a writing system and, as a consequence, practicing this technique. This included the possibility of setting messages and disseminating them at any time and place, as well as providing new learning resources, etc. It also influenced the trajectory towards a more generalizing, abstract vision, thus mastering a thought increasingly able to free itself from the immediate, the singular, the concrete, and the casual.

## **2.1. Words, knowledge, patterns of behavior**

In the heterogeneity of oral societies, the procedures to preserve and transmit “knowledge” within the framework of the mnemonic needs of orality constitute —in general— an axial aspect, and are also related to processes and products of thought. The forms of thought, language structure and discursive realizations, social organization, beliefs and patterns of behavior integrate an inter-conditioned scheme —subject to the changes experienced by every society— that configures the “orality system”.

In oral tradition societies, the immediate interpersonal relationships support knowledge transmission. If observation and practice prevail as instruments to learn technical elements, oral intercommunication practice becomes more important in spreading the “knowledge” related to cultural patterns of behavior. Sayings, proverbs, myths, stories, tales, and other textual forms —which convey a certain vision of the world— provide the arguments that legitimize and preserve the social order, ensuring the continuity of the group. The capacity to store and transmit knowledge and the ability to narrate traditional texts gives the elderly and specialized individuals greater authority and prestige.

In this context, words are perceived by the collective imagination as actions exerting power over

men, nature, objects. The effectiveness of words (magic, taboo, spell, among others) derives from a total identification between linguistic expression and actions on the world. According to Habermas (1989), magic practices ignore the distinction between teleological and communicative actions. In his analysis of the mythical interpretation of the world, he points out that the “confusion between nature and culture”, regularly discussed by anthropologists, is also a poor differentiation between language and world. In this “totalizing vision”, Habermas states that “it is difficult to precise the semiotic distinctions to which we are accustomed between the sign- substrate of a linguistic expression, its semantic content and the referent”.

The importance of the spoken word strongly emphasizes the concern for language domain. Oral exercises (children's argots, tongue twisters and riddles), which are also practiced to some extent in societies with writing tradition, are of central importance in oral societies. These exercises constitute what Calvet (1984) calls an “intuitive linguistics” since they rest on a language analysis (phonological difficulties, grammatical specificities) that comes from traditional knowledge; and an “applied linguistics” since, in addition to their playful function, they have an educational purpose.

As regards the limits of memory, the brevity of the spoken word is neutralized by some recovery strategies and situational adaptation that, while preserving it, adapt it to a “constant present”. Ong, based on Goody and Watt (1968), characterizes oral cultures as “homeostatic”. These are societies that live intensely a present that keeps its balance or homeostasis by detaching from what is no longer relevant. In these cultures, the meaning of words is controlled by what Goody and Watt call “direct semantic confirmation”, that is, by the real situations in which the word is used. When the object or institution to which a word refers to is no longer part of the experience, its meaning is altered or just disappears (W. Ong, 1993).

In this sense, in Qom language, one of the frequent procedures to express referents from the contact culture is the so-called “semantic extension”, which consists of applying a word corresponding to an element of one's own culture, generally in disuse, to an element of the contact culture that is perceived as partially analogous.

The mnemonic needs of orality are embodied in oral texts on the basis of the structural particularities of the story and the forms of expression. Rhythm, intonation and body language are also relevant constituent elements. The most common resources are relatively fixed thematic cores (with a repertory suiting the type of text), episodic juxtaposition, formulaic language, reiterations in juxtaposition.

Accordingly, the relationship with experiential reality is manifested in the continuous updating of the texts, configuring a model of selective fidelity that guides the different variants of a same text depending on a specific situation and audience. Generally based on the same elements —with

elisions, aggregates and syncretism— and under particular circumstances, oral texts are constantly resignified.

In oral societies, the resolution of conflicts based on oral agreements, strongly supported in sayings, proverbs, myths, etc., promotes a kind of justice that is conceived in an operational (not formal, fixed by law) manner, also from the perspective of immediate practical situations.

The functionality within the “orality system” shows a radical difference from written tradition societies. Although in these societies orality occupies a very extensive communicative space and the “oral style”, which is also transferred to certain written texts, uses expressive techniques similar to those of oral system societies, it is all about an orality influenced by writing and other technical means (“secondary orality”, in terms of Ong), integrated to the cultural system with a status defined by its complementary relationship with writing.

In the contexts of contact and interaction of oral minority groups and hegemonic societies (socio-ethnic relations), the psycho-cultural referents<sup>5</sup> of oral tradition groups, while guiding the game of appropriations and rejections of elements from hegemonic societies, are interfered by the psycho-cultural referents of the contact society, quantitatively and qualitatively differentiated according to the socio-historical conditions and the degree of interaction of the groups. This generates changes in cognitive categories<sup>6</sup>, symbolic systematizations (religious syncretism, linguistic interferences, reinterpretation of stories, etc.), attitudes and values systems, and patterns of behavior.

### **3. Writing**

In a broad sense, writing means producing and using graphic systems for communicative purposes. It includes pictography (representation of objects and facts of the surrounding world); ideograms (schematic representation of ideas corresponding to linguistic sequences); phonograms (extension of the representation of objects to their sounds, which can be used in the notation of the sounds of other words or parts of words), syllabic and alphabetic systems (Cardona, 1994).

In a limited sense, and operatively, we define writing as a technique consisting of a representation

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<sup>5</sup>For Fernández Guizzetti (1983), “psychocultural referents” alludes to culturally conditioned views of reality, and operates as referents of the meanings in linguistic signs.

<sup>6</sup>Regarding cognitive schemes from a historical-critical perspective, Vázquez (1988) argues: “cognition ... is constructed through a historical, social, psycholinguistic and culturally conditioned process, and as such, this process is never immutable. On the one hand, the logic of its development is multidimensional—it implies different symbolic systematization qualitatively differentiated or, what is the same, alternative standards of rationality—. On the other hand, it is multi-directional—it implies a ramified deployment of different standards of rationality according to the sociocultural changes experienced by each human group within the context of a particular social historical formation (Vázquez, 1995).

of the oral language through a system of graphic signs.

The possibility of fixing the spoken language to space has been and still is deeply related with society and culture. The invention of writing is in fact connected with the practical needs of certain types of societies. Because of the complexity of human relations, sedentary, hierarchical, and economy-structured societies required laws, contracts, and accounting in order to develop.

The birthplace of the Sumerian cuneiform writing (3300 AD) –signs that worked as logograms and others with phonetic value, representing a vowel or a syllable– as well as Egypt (3100 AD) – hieroglyphic writing constituted by logograms and phonograms– were agricultural, partially urbanized societies with large populations and an elaborated exchange system.

As a technical resource to fix the spoken language, writing has made the accumulation of knowledge possible and has led to characteristic forms of learning. In its long process of development, writing has promoted changes in mental operations, providing models for organizing information and classifying knowledge. It has been decisive for recording the position value of figures, enabling calculation and accounting. The independence of the linear-temporal dimension and the memory allows to manipulate words and texts, and to materialize communication in time and space, favoring analysis, comparison and argument.

### **3.1 Writing in oral tradition societies**

If writing as an invention has emerged from a social and cultural need, the introduction of writing in societies of oral tradition is not always the product of a historical necessity. The problem to be considered is why and how it is introduced, and what would be the consequences of introducing writing in societies that have traditionally been oral.

Following Calvet (1984), we consider that the arbitrary imposition of writing in societies ruled by orality, at a given historical moment and under conditions beyond self-management, can cause sociocultural instability. Therefore, the transition to writing must be governed by the self-determination of the involved parties, who must follow their own path to writing and finding how to use it. The action of specialists in the related disciplines should be limited to providing a technical answer to the requirements arising from self-management.

Even in the agreed processes, if writing is limited to certain areas (education, religion) and no complementary measures are implemented by competent authorities so as to ensure better circulation in broader contexts, writing then has a symbolic value and prestige, disguising unequal relationships without contributing to reverse the linguistic-cultural subordination of oral tradition groups.

The power correlated with writing makes it a non-neutral resource. Frequently, ideology, political-religious pressures, prestige are imposed upon the criteria of functionality in the standardization of a language, in the selection of writing systems and in spelling conventions.

Homogenization and assimilation language policies, which resort to literacy in the indigenous language so as to facilitate the transit to the official language, tend to use the orthographic system of the official language to avoid discontinuity. By contrast, when trying to make the indigenous language official (adopting its use in administrative and legal areas) the orthographic system tends to differentiate itself from the hegemonic language system, as a vindication of the right to be different.

Adopting orthographic conventions not originated from self-management can cause sociocultural instability. In the adoption of orthographic conventions to transcribe Indo-American languages, for example, decisions mainly oscillate between the following criteria:

- Favoring a specific spelling system of the language, based on the phonological system and taking into account the functionality of such system.

- Favoring a smooth learning of the dominant language, adopting its spelling system.

- Maintaining the “traditional” system imposed by the first translations, generally translations of the Bible (New Testament).

#### **4. Qom (Toba) people: attitudes towards writing their own language**

The Qom (Toba) people, originally hunter-gatherers, mostly inhabit the provinces of Chaco and Formosa. In recent decades, due to the economic crisis in the area, migrations to large cities have increased, and numerous settlements were thus established.

The different socio-historical conditions, such as different degrees and types of interaction with parts of the hegemonic society, have influenced the constitution of the symbolic and the forging of identity, individual and group processes, resulting in relatively heterogeneous groups. However, although urban groups develop in very different conditions than rural groups, the constant migrations (new families arriving to the urban settlements) and the recurrent trips made by different groups already settled partially neutralize the effects of urbanization by promoting the reproduction of cultural practices in their places of origin (Bigot, 2007).

In terms of inequality, the socio-ethnic interaction (between the Toba minority groups and parts of

the hegemonic society) has generated restrictions to the dominant world for the subordinated groups, which are expressed in complex strategies of “ethnic resistance”, with different modalities depending on the contexts of domination.

These strategies are deployed in the intersection, conservation and rupture of what these people consider their own, and their rejection and appropriation of patterns, concepts, objects from the dominant society, thus benefiting their own cultural reproduction (Bigot; Rodríguez; Vázquez, 1992); (Bigot, 1993). Therefore, the expressions of “resistance” are not aimed at reproducing stereotypes but at orienting the change related to the concept of “cultural recycling” (Moser, 1992). Inserting elements in a new production cycle contextualizes it, thus compromising appropriation and transformation in a specific way, one typical of the sociocultural forms that make it possible (Bigot 1993, 2007).

The appropriation of elements from the dominant society has created new needs of expression in the Toba language. The procedures used are lexical innovations, semantic extension, loans from Spanish, which overlap in specific “ethnolinguistic resistance” strategies. Using “loans”, for example, fits the restrictions imposed by the phonology and morphosyntax of the receptor language. The borrowed items are recycled according to the structural patterns of the Toba language (Bigot, 1993).

The Toba language writing, initially imposed by Protestant missionaries with evangelizing purposes, is currently accepted by the community. In the ideology of vindication, and integrated to the strategies of ethnic resistance, adopting the writing system of the dominant society promotes the Qom language and culture, and enables its incorporation into public schools. Although the use and products of Toba writing are very limited, the production of practices similar to those of the dominant society emerges as a strategy to acquire similar living conditions, without excluding ethnic differentiation. Thus, two aspects –a religiosity based on biblical “writings”, different from the majority religion of the dominant society, and a “loan” from the dominant society– help configure a “representation” of their own language, in which the value added by writing equates it with the official language.

At the same time, in daily practice “orality” continues to be used among rural groups and also in urban settlements. Oral rules are relevant to solve intra-group conflicts. The agreement between the parties, accepted by the group through implicit agreements, mainly works in family contexts, and in instances of intra-community conflicts. These agreements do not refer to fixed (law-like) rules but to well-founded decisions about what is appropriate depending on the situation (Bigot; Rodríguez; Vázquez, 1995).

Patterns of behavior, values, and beliefs continue to be transmitted through oral narratives (myths,

tales, stories, etc.) These texts are continually resignified and transformed, from an ethnic present, common to the different experiences lived by them and reflected in different types of texts. In the syncretism of traditional beliefs and Pentecostalism, the recurring procedures related to resignification are: variants by "agglutination" (biblical reasons), by "syncretism" (the figure of the "Savior" as shamans and mythical characters is confused with the Christian God); variants by "ellipsis" (suppressing some thematic units, representative of a new taboo, the distinction implied is the time before or after the new Protestant religiosity).

Some of those texts have been fixed through writing, making this a general practice since the standardization of a variant would precisely cancel the condition by which it is adapted to contemporary circumstances, according to how these texts work in the organizational system that governs behavior and is inherent to the oral system.

The Intercultural bilingual education (IBE) programs established by legislation are widely accepted by Toba groups. However, the literacy in their mother tongue and its use in education as reflected in these programs have raised the complex problem of the written representation of Toba, whose resolution triggered conflicts between powerful sectors in the Toba community.

In the "booklets", in the collection of stories, and in the first reading book "*Qolaq innaixaqtega*" (Let's go together) approved by the General Council of Education of Chaco province, (declared a experimental research by Resolution 3799/92), the spelling system known by the Aboriginal Teacher Assistants was adopted, which is the "traditional" system used by Protestant churches.

New Testament texts translated into the Toba language by Protestant pastor A. Buckwalter have been among the Toba community for many years. Also his Toba Vocabulary (elaborated from one of the varieties of the Toba language) is used in the training courses for Aboriginal Teacher Assistants.

The orthographic conventions used are not considered definitive, and even the aboriginal teachers who participated in the elaboration of didactic material consider that the community should rethink how to write their own language, and that the dialect variants of each zone must be respected. The act of standardizing a variety of the language (the one studied by Buckwalter) without considering the existence of others has been constantly questioned by those sectors of the community that speak other varieties.

Hecht and Ossola (2016) argue the following:

Although IBE is part of the official school regulations and programs, there have been few advances in the quality or educational development of indigenous populations. Although the school system recognizes linguistic-cultural diversity, attention to these issues of the indigenous populations is still insufficient in scope and development. That is, many subjects drop out halfway through or are expelled from schools at different levels, and that is why few Toba (Qom) or Wichí individuals arrive

at higher education levels. Interculturality in education is yet to be achieved.

Currently, according to Ana Carolina Hecht (personal communication 09-14-2018), “They still use the Buckwalter alphabet ... but the classes are delivered without teaching materials ... there is still a lack of materials to teach Qom in schools... And there are fewer and fewer children who speak the language”.

#### **4.1 Their attitude toward Spanish language reading and writing**

Among the different modalities of indigenous resistance, vindication of ethnic rights by means of “lawfulness”, through the national legal system, fosters a new attitude towards Spanish language reading and writing. The “written” law, on the one hand, is perceived as necessary because the same power the spoken word has in contexts of intra-ethnic relations is conferred to writing in the context of relations with the dominant society. Words, without written support coming from different official instances are considered to lose their value completely. The “written” law, on the other hand, offers a certain degree of credibility because of its permanent nature and irrefutability.

Within the framework of this type of complaints, reading and writing the official language is an important and power factor, essential for the exercise of a new type of “leadership” whose function is having relations with the legal-political channels instituted by the dominant society. An important motivation for being able to read and write, in addition to applying for a job, is the prevailing need to access a higher level of education that allows these people to have their own professionals, who would assume the responsibility of standing up for their ethnic rights (Bigot; Rodríguez; Vázquez, 1995).

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