

COMMUNICATIONAL NETWORKS AND IDENTITY-BUILDING PROCESSES AMONG QOM SETTLED IN THE CITY OF ROSARIO (ARGENTINA)

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Resumen

Las migraciones de la población qom desde los lugares de origen hacia la ciudad de Rosario, comenzaron en la década del 60 y continúan hasta la actualidad. En este trabajo se tratarán las redes comunicacionales de los qom, sus representaciones y prácticas lingüísticas en vinculación con los procesos identitarios.

Palabras clave: - redes comunicacionales - representaciones y prácticas lingüísticas- procesos identitarios

Résumé

Les migrations des populations qom depuis leurs lieux d'origine vers la ville de Rosario ont commencée dès les années 60', et se poursuivent jusqu'à l'heure actuelle. Ce dossier concerne les réseaux de communications des qom, leurs représentations et pratiques linguistiques, par rapport aux processus identitaires.

Mots clé: réseaux de communications – représentations et pratiques linguistiques – processus identitaires.

Abstract

Qom populations started to migrate from their original locations to the city of Rosario in 1960, and continued all over these years to our days. This paper deals with Qom's communicational networks, their representations and linguistic practices in a liaison with identity-building processes.

Keywords: communicational networks – linguistic practices and representations – identity-building processes.

1. Introduction

Qom populations started to migrate from their original locations to the city of Rosario in 1960, and continued all over these years to our days. These people are extremely poor and find themselves excluded from the political and social system. They started forming settlements, in which the permanence of some cultural practices and traditional behavior patterns depend on each group's degree of participation in different communication networks, and their effect on sociolinguistic representations.

In such a context of unequal social relationships, different *identity-building processes* are developed, according to the situation of interaction, that is to say the socio-historic, cultural and psychological conditions of this situation. Their behavior and attitudes, system of beliefs, their command of Qom language and use of *rioplatense* Spanish are not homogeneous, even in the inside of each settlement.

We distance ourselves from those stances that understand "ethnic identity" as culture in essence, which see *identity* as immutability, crystallization. Instead, our concept highlights the "developing" character of identity, among complex cultural dynamics which arise in the context of linguistic and cultural contacts, in conditions of inequality. We use the term "ethnic identity

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processes” (Bigot, Rodríguez, Vázquez - 1991), (Vázquez - 2000), in the sense of diachronic and diatopic processes, conditioned by psychological, social, cultural, linguistic and historical factors.

Among Qom groups, identity processes show distinctive features, even inside a single settlement, due to socio-historic conditioning, places of origin, unevenness regarding the feeling of belonging, and variables that emerge in the new setting: time residence in the settlement, interaction frequency with the society of the region, cultural syncretism. Qom language (Toba), nevertheless –we define it as an ensemble of different varieties– is known as an ethnic binder and a transversal symbol of identity.

There’s an interdependent relation between the linguistic functions “communication” (the social and collective character of linguistic practice) and “meaning” (culture, social practices, a group’s worldview)², which implies that inter-communication enables a shared world of “meanings”; language positions itself as the medium *par excellence* that people use to build relationships and distinct societies. Language brings about cohesion inside a group, and also highlights the differences with the outsiders of the group. This cohesive and distinctive power of language is what serves to cement its function as an identity marker.

2. Toba’s communication network

The concept of “communication network” (Bigot (2007) is more wide-ranging than the concept of “community” (in the linguistic sense of the word). It is more relevant for application to the situation of inter-ethnic relations (between *Toba* groups) and socio-ethnic (between *Toba* groups and segments of the mainstreaming society), as it allows us to address in a correlative way the social interactions and the use of languages (Qom and Spanish), and to characterize social and special environments as “contexts of communication”.

The “communication network” encompasses the set of linguistic interactions that take place in the “contexts of communication”. These contexts of communication are linked to the use of one or other language, Qom and Spanish, and are the environments in which Qom settlements’ inhabitants build social relationships. The concept of communication implies sharing at least a collection of knowledge, which includes language (“language” as an ensemble of varieties) and also the conditions in which it is used. The following contexts make up the network:

- a inter-ethnic context of communication, “local” and “supra-local”
 - “Local”: between the inhabitants of a same settlement, and between the inhabitants of different settlements in the same area.
 - “Supra-local”: between groups settled in big cities with Qom groups from the original location, Chaco Province.

In this context, communication takes place almost exclusively in Qom language; in the “local” context, there are different varieties of Qom, and in the “supra-local”, only one variety.

- A socio-ethnic context, in which communication with the segments of regional and national society takes place in Spanish.
- An inter-ethnic context: between indigenous peoples of different ethnic backgrounds, who take part in aboriginal movements and use Spanish as a means of communication.

Even though Qom groups are, as we have pointed out, relatively heterogeneous, they come from different backgrounds and speak different varieties of their language. Nevertheless, these varieties can be understood by all Qom natives, and thus Qom language –as a system of communication and meaning– represents a factor of ethnical cohesion that goes through all the different groups and their identity-building processes. In this sense, the context of inter-ethnic

² Communication processes are carried out through systems of meaning, and every system of meaning has communication as an aim (Eco - 1990).

communication may be defined as an “ethnolinguistic community”, which means that the relation between language, culture and society implies that all the groups acting as participants of the relation share habits of communication and linguistic symbolization in the native language, and also the intersections –albeit in different degrees– of behavior patterns, values and beliefs.

The inter-ethnic supra-local context of communication fosters the tendency to replicate cultural and socio linguistic patterns of the original locations in the urban settlements. Among rural groups there’s a higher percentage of monolingual Qom people –as contacts with the dominant society take place less frequently– and they only use Qom language for the purposes of daily communication.

Even though cities are usually the spaces where contact between different languages favors the adoption of the dominant language, Qom natives’ constant migrations: the arrival of new families –most of the times monolingual Qom– and the periodical travels of the members already settled are the factors that transfer the linguistic and cultural habits of the original locations to the city. These moves represent a retraining of migratory aspects of the original culture and Qom language is used in many levels of inter-ethnic communication –between the group, the family, in a religious context, etc.– and it is passed on to the new generations, somewhat neutralizing the influence of the urban environment.

The context of socio-ethnic communication is marked by *unequal* and *asymmetrical* relationships. “Unequal”, as we deal with a society that is dominant both from a political and economic standpoint, and whose educative, legal and health systems have been designed taking as a model the majority of the population – and its relation with the excluded, “second class citizens”: the Qom. The relation between the Qom minority and the hegemonic-majority society is “asymmetrical”, because the dominant society exerts pressure –although not deliberately. Bourdieu (1985) expresses it in terms of “symbolic domination”– because it is culturally and linguistically more prestigious. The context of socio-ethnic communication imposes to the Qom people the instrumental use of Spanish, the dominant language.

The inter-ethnic context of communication is very restricted: limited to the leaders of the different groups of natives –speakers of different languages– who develop a joint plan of ethno-politic strategies, both at national and international level, in which Spanish is prevalent as it is the vehicular language, the general means of communication.

The outcome of the communication network is a socio-linguistic situation of diglossia and bilingualism –on the one hand, there’s the Qom language, used in the context of inter-ethnic communication and, on the other hand, Spanish, used with other segments of society–. Diglossia and bilingualism are correlated with cultural syncretism and identity building- processes.

3. *Representations, attitudes and socio-linguistic practices*

There are theoretical stances which analyze socio-historic conditioning regarding language use and dissemination, and which note the relation between linguistic “representations” and “practices”. Speakers’ representations of languages have an impact on the dynamics of linguistic situations and therefore are relevant to an analysis of diglossia –the functional repartition of languages, the role of language regarding identity-building processes– within the framework of unequal relations between minority groups and the dominant society.

P. Dumont and B. Maurer (1995) highlight the relation between representations and practices, and note that it is not unidirectional –meaning that the representations would be a reflection of the practices–: actually, there is a reciprocal determination. The relation between the terms is dialectical; one is determined by the other. Representations are born out of practices, but they grow to shape the practices and guide them, eventually. A distinction can be established between “linguistic representations”, which are related to ways of speaking and have meta-linguistic aspects, and “socio-linguistic representations”, which are related to the ways in which the speakers, both as individuals and collectively, perceive their own socio-linguistic practices, the status of languages, language functions and their identity building role.

Qom's socio-linguistic representations

"Epilinguistic" speech is defined as that of speakers about language itself and what it symbolizes culturally, socially and psychologically (March 1996). It is a privileged way of analyzing socio-linguistic representations. Data collecting of this kind of speech among Qom natives was the source of our analysis.

Contexts of communication that make up Qom's communication network, namely the different environments of relations, inter-ethnic and socio-ethnic, in which Qom natives take part, have an important influence in shaping the socio-linguistic representations. These are built in a complex way, through the linking of affective and cognitive aspects that arise in the socio-cultural setting.

Affective aspects: language as an identity marker

According to the data collected during an epilinguistic survey held in the *Toba* settlements in Empalme Graneros y Los Pumitas, in Rosario city, Qom natives identify themselves as belonging to an ethnic unity "*qoomi nam qom*", and as speakers of "*qom l'aqtaqa*" (Qom language). "*Qoomi*" means "Us" and, in the context of socio-ethnic communication, it refers to a first person plural exclusive –at most, it includes "I" + "the other members of my group" + "the members of other Qom communities"–, and it works as an identity marker for Qom speakers, even when they speak different varieties of the language. Thus, it traces an ethnic frontier.

There's a general agreement regarding the delimitation of "Qom language": as different varieties can be understood by the members of different communities, language acts as an element of ethnic cohesion: being a speaker of "Qom" is inherent to belonging ethnically to the community, and Qom language is perceived as an encompassing identity marker.

The affective aspects of socio-linguistic representations are related to the inter-ethnic context of communication, and they predispose speakers to perceive Qom language as a "fundamental value", this is, as a central element of their culture and a means of identifying themselves as a group (J. J. Smolicz - 1982).

Cognitive aspects

Cognitive aspects show a polarized perception of the native language:

- There is an awareness of some opinions, information and concrete actions coming from the dominant society, which make Qom people feel stigmatized, discriminated and excluded, and which lead them to perceive their own language in a negative way. Qom people recognize the limits of their native language regarding interactions with the dominant society, and the need to command Spanish to communicate with it.
- Participation in indigenous movements and activities, and ethno-political strategies (Bigot-Rodríguez-Vázquez - 1995) promoted by local indigenous leaders help to develop a positive assessment of Qom language.

4. Conclusions

It is common for situations of conflictive diglossia –arising in contexts of inequality– to find that there is a system of contradictory representations regarding the minority language, a clash of positive and negative assessments (Gatdy, Ph.-Lafont, R. - 1981); Boyer, H. - 1997). Among Qom from Empalme Graneros and Los Pumitas settlements, contradictory socio-linguistic representations are evident in the cognitive aspect, which is conditioned and manipulated by the multiple forms of domination (thus the negative assessment). At the same time, however, ethno-political strategies enable a completely different view of the situation (thus the positive assessment).

The affective aspects linked to ethnic belonging and the cognitive aspects linked to ethno-political strategies have brought awareness to native people about their linguistic and cultural rights, driving forward positive attitudes toward the native language and somewhat undermining the idea that it holds a detrimental position in comparison with the dominant language.

The tendency shown by socio-linguistic representations is coherent with current socio-linguistic practices in related contexts of communication –inter-ethnic use and transmission of Qom language to the new generations– and also with linguistic practices which, in the midst of cultural syncretism processes, maintain Qom language's functionality. Those practices are part of the ethno-linguistic strategies of resistance but, in the meantime, command of Spanish language is perceived as a necessity (Bigot - 1998).

Taking into account the relation among contexts of communication, socio-linguistic representations and linguistic practices, it can be seen that the ethno-linguistic and ethno-political strategies of resistance are a way of processing tensions caused by the diglossic interaction of a dominant language and a subaltern one: although there is a positive assessment of Qom language, which makes people maintain it in use, they employ Spanish for their everyday activities. As a result, the number of Qom monolinguals decreases and a bilingual majority of Qom speakers emerge as constituent element of ethnic identity processes in Empalme Graneros and Los Pumitas settlements.

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