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Gender and beliefs about language

Introduction

In Chapters 2 and 3, I laid the theoretical foundation for discussing transcultural language practices. In this chapter, I use this foundation to discuss the beliefs the Runa Takiks held about their language practices. I compare the beliefs of the male participants in the Pacific Northwest with those of their wives and mothers back in Ecuador. In my discussion of these beliefs, I discover strong feelings of closeness and affection for Quichua among all participants, as well as the belief that the language is an essential component of indigenous identity.

I continue by highlighting a surprising paradox with respect to gender, language use, and language maintenance: whereas the men, whom I perceived as speaking less Quichua than the women, were confident that the language will be maintained for future generations, the women, who spoke more Quichua, were decidedly less optimistic with respect to the future of the language. I argue that this contrast may not necessarily be related to gender, but rather the different spaces that the Runa Takiks and their wives inhabited during much of the year. I also problematize the notion of ‘women as gatekeeper’ from previous literature, citing the transcultural language beliefs and practices of the Runa Takiks’ wives as evidence that these women are not as restricted in their language use as has been asserted in previous literature.

I begin this chapter with an overview of gender and language use and how it has been viewed in the previous literature, particularly with respect to the ‘women as gatekeeper’ trope. I then discuss my participants’ beliefs regarding their own language use and the gender
lines along which these beliefs seemed to divide. Finally, I analyze interview data pertaining to my male and female participants’ beliefs about the maintenance of Quichua and conclude by situating these findings in a transcultural, postructuralist perspective.

Women as gatekeepers: Gender and minority language use

Although the disconnect between language use and language ideology has been amply explored in literature on Quichua language maintenance (see for example King 2001, Rindstedt & Aronsson 2002), to date most research has not addressed beyond a superficial level the role that gender might play in this disconnect (I discuss one exception, Loftin 1996, below). Despite a plethora of studies on gender and language use or maintenance, most researchers in Quichua have opted to focus more on the generational aspects of use and maintenance. Yet there is a distinct separation of gender roles among the Runa Takiks and their families, as well as among Quichua-speaking indigenous communities in general, which could play a substantial role not only in their language use, but also in their perceptions of the language’s continued existence.

Many studies on language maintenance have discussed the perception of women as the ‘gatekeepers’ of a ‘purer’ form of a given language. In previous sociolinguistic literature, this gatekeeper role has been described as a ‘paradox’ in which women both preserve prestigious forms and spearhead certain types of change (see for example Labov 1972 and Trudgill 1991). However, from a multilingual perspective, this role is often interpreted as a deficit. Scholars such as Pavlenko (2001) have taken a critical look at the women-as-gatekeeper belief, stating that this notion, rather than placing women in a superior position with respect to men, in fact positions them as linguistically inferior due to their inability to use multiple languages. To a certain extent, this critique builds upon Labov’s (1972) reflection that monolingual women use prestigious language forms as a form of ‘linguistic insecurity’ and as a way to enhance their social position without the use of additional languages.

Pavlenko (2001) called upon researchers to examine further the ‘gatekeeping practices’ that might prohibit women from using additional languages (p. 131). As an example of these practices, Pavlenko cited Loftin’s (1996) study on a beauty contest in Otavalo in which