

Do Tribal Languages Have a Future?

A Study of the Miskito Language of Honduras and Nicaragua

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One of the most frequently asked questions on some mission fields is, "Do tribal languages have a future?" What is really meant, however, is, "What kind of a future do they have?" No one is so naive as to imagine that a tribal language will simply disappear into thin air overnight. In fact, they seem to hang on tenaciously, and in some instances experience quite a revival as the result of some nativistic movement. But it is also true that small, tribal languages are subjected to very severe pressures and many of them are rapidly declining in the number of speakers, not primarily because the people are dying off, but because they are moving away, are learning other languages, and are being rapidly assimilated into other speech communities.

If, then, we grant that tribal languages do "die out", what should our attitude be? Do we necessarily delay this process by publishing the Bible in such languages? Would we be better advised to let such a language alone? Or is it possible that by giving a people a written language and educating them so as to make it possible for them to adjust better to the outside world, we are actually promoting the more rapid disappearance of such a tribal language? This certainly seems to be the case in a number of instances, but too often we have only general impressions, and up to the present time we have lacked the necessary tools of investigation to discover precisely what the real answer is.

What has severely hampered our judgments in the past has been the lack of reliable data on the so-called "disappearance of a language". In fact, our perspective has often been prejudiced by the very way in which we have put the question, for in most instances we should be studying not the disappearance of a single language, but the competition between languages in terms of bilingualism, or multilingualism, as the case may be. Except in very rare instances, we are not confronted with the problem of the demise of the people, but of the disappearance of a language by the process of its being superseded by another. What makes our problem so highly complex, however, is that where we do have statistics on such developments as bilingualism, the figures do not mean much, for they are not gathered in a proper ethnolinguistic concept. For example, to learn that almost fifty per cent of the people in a tribe are bilingual may or may not be really significant, for it may be found on closer examination that though almost all the men are bilingual almost none of the women are. This means that the tribal language will continue much longer than if the bilingualism were spread equally among both men and women, for the women are the ones who teach the mother tongue to each successive generation of children. Furthermore, the missionary has a special concern, for if the Gospel is to reach the homes of the people and be a factor in the education of children within the home, it must reach the women.

One strong argument against translating into a tribal language has been the number of children who may be taught exclusively in the national language. On the other hand, one may find that though the children do learn a foreign language, at least after a fashion, in the school, nevertheless, in their homes they consistently speak only the tribal tongue. Furthermore, it is not infrequently the case that people lose a high percentage of a school-learned language through later failure to use it.

When, however, a tribal area is subjected to such extreme economic pressure that a high percentage of the people must go to work in some urban centre or be employed in mining compounds, it is very likely that they will acquire the knowledge of the trade or national language even more rapidly than by the more artificial process of classroom instruction. But how are we to ascertain the actual effectiveness of such "enforced language learning"?

One other problem has bothered translators in their working with tribal languages, namely, the degree to which they should borrow from trade, national, colonial, or other tribal tongues. Borrowing is a process of language enrichment, but how far should it be pushed? What should be the sources of such borrowing? What types of borrowing are already evident in the language?

All these questions and problems, and a number of others not mentioned here, have constantly perplexed translators who have had to deal with the matter of tribal tongues. Not infrequently groups of interested persons have been brought together in conference to formulate judgments on such matters, but quite often the views of even the best informed have been entirely contradictory. Up to the present time, we have had few techniques for making a basic quantitative survey which would give us the data necessary to form adequate judgments. Lacking such a methodology, we have usually tried to generalize on the basis of the "random sample" which we happened to encounter in our own experience. However, with the publication in multilith form of the report on the Miskito language of Nicaragua and Honduras by the American Bible Society in April 1956¹, this situation has been altered. Dr. and Mrs. William D. Reyburn made a special investigation of the Miskito area of Nicaragua and Honduras with the specific purpose of working out a basic methodology which could be employed anywhere by linguistic investigators so as to determine the rate of growth or decline in any language.

The problems involved in determining the future of any language (whether tribal, national, trade, or colonial) are not easy, for there are so many factors. In the first place, we must know the general cultural context in which such languages are "competing". In the second place, we need to be able to distinguish between various degrees of linguistic proficiency, for though people may be rated as bilinguals, we need to know whether they are fully proficient in both languages or only partially so. Moreover, we often do not have a simple situation of one

¹ *Problems and Procedures in Ethnolinguistic Surveys*, by William D. Reyburn.

tribal language and one trade language in competition. There are often trade languages and colonial languages, or a national language and another tribal language, all exerting pressures upon the tribal language which we may be studying. Accordingly, it is of utmost importance that we should be able to assign certain degrees of use (or proficiency) to the abilities displayed by various speakers.

In addition, however, to both the cultural factors and the need for distinguishing levels of proficiency and use, we must also obtain some historical perspective. But how can this be done when there are no historical records? The answer is simply that we have to reconstruct the situation by means of an adaption of genealogical techniques and project this into the future by leading questions as to people's future hopes and expectations. By this means we can usually succeed in establishing trends.

The Choice of the Miskito Area

In order that the Reyburns might work out a basic methodology in a situation which is perhaps as complex as any other in the world, we arranged in co-operation with the Moravian Mission, for the Reyburns to make an intensive three-months study of the linguistic problems in *La Mosquitia* of Nicaragua and Honduras. This region presents special problems for a number of reasons, of which the following are some of the more important:

1. There are three competing languages: Miskito (an indigenous Indian language), English (spoken by a number of the Miskito Indians as well as people of Negro background who escaped from English-speaking areas of the West Indies, many of whom intermarried with Miskitos), and Spanish (the national language of Nicaragua and Honduras).
2. The region is divided between two countries, Nicaragua and Honduras, and these two countries have different attitudes toward the Indian population and represent two quite distinct levels of economic development of the Miskito region.
3. English is a kind of prestige language and for many people has a sentimental attachment, since it has been a symbol of their opposition to the central government, which is completely Spanish in orientation. (English was the language of the pirates who dominated the Miskito coast for a number of years and held back the Spanish-speaking people of the interior). Furthermore, the use of English and Spanish has Protestant vs. Catholic overtones.
4. The Moravian Mission has an excellent work among the Miskito people of the interior.) Furthermore, the use of English and Spanish consisting of the New Testament, portions of the Old Testament, a catechism, and a number of story books.
5. The level of literacy among monolingual Miskito people is relatively much higher than in any other Indian community in Latin America.

6. The Miskito coast is now undergoing unprecedented development by Nicaragua and Honduras, and accordingly the question of the influence of Spanish is a very live issue.

Practical Problems

The Reyburns faced a number of very practical problems in the study of the Miskito area, including of course the difficulty of travelling in a region which is as little developed as any other in Central America. They could not, of course, visit every town and village, and so they set about collecting samples of information from typical regions: cities, large towns, small towns, village areas, and mining centres. In order, however, to be sure that they were not unduly weighing the evidence in favour of one or another type of community, they had to make a study of the entire region from published reports and to check such findings with careful observation of typical areas. Furthermore, they had to be constantly on the alert for the general cultural factors which could so greatly influence any such investigation: the economic trends of people moving to the mines, the fact that a young man almost always goes to live in the village of his wife's parents, the social prestige and practical advantages derived from being able to speak Spanish with government officials, the strong aristocratic feelings of those with English background (regardless of how acquired or from whom), and the recent pressures for Spanish (reflecting in some measure mutual suspicions and jealousies on the part of Nicaraguan and Honduran officials, especially in territories still in dispute between the two countries).

Communication Elements

In addition, however, to this study of the general cultural factors (which are treated in detail in the report), the Reyburns had to set up a system for the classification of different levels of language use. These were called the *Communication Elements* and may be described under six classes:

1. R *Reads.* A person who only reads a foreign language. For example, some people were found to be able to read a Spanish newspaper, but they were relatively incapable of speaking Spanish.
2. R-W *Reads and writes.* Some people could read and write, but had no appreciable ability to speak or to understand. (This is often true of students who learn to read and write a language in school, but who have no chance to learn to speak.)
3. U *Understands.* It is not infrequent for people to be able to understand what they constantly hear, but to be unable to speak. The ability to understand may be completely unrelated to reading and writing. This situation often exists in the case of national servants working in the homes of foreigners.

4. U-S *Understands and speaks.* These people understand and speak a language but do not write. This is true of all normal illiterate monolinguals.
5. U-S-R *Understands, speaks, and reads.* Since reading is a less learned activity than writing, many individuals acquire the ability to read without learning to write. This can be particularly true of a language like English, in which the conventional spellings are so different from the pronunciation of words.
6. U-S-R-W *Understands, speaks, reads, and writes.* These people possess a knowledge of the two basic elements of normal human communication, as well as of the graphic symbols for reading and writing.

This classification of communication elements is essential, for in stating that such and such a person is bilingual, we need to know just to what extent he knows the two languages. For example, a number of Miskitos are in classes 3 and 4 as regards English. Moreover, the differences represented between classes 4 and 5 are much more important than those existing between 1 and 2, or between 2 and 3, for a person in class 5 is very likely to be able to acquire class 6 proficiency quite rapidly. Furthermore, his influence within the language community is far greater if he is in class 5 than if he only attains class 4 status. In a sense, therefore, we have to "weigh" the evidence so as to indicate the relative importance of the various classes as far as their influence within the total speech community is concerned.

Chronological Bilingualism

Nevertheless, even with a relatively adequate classification of the communication elements, we have only begun to study the real situation, for we must also be able to describe and classify bilingualism in terms of its chronological developments. For this reason the Reyburns developed a system for the charting of *Chronological Bilingualism*. We cannot here go into all the ramifications of this extremely interesting, but somewhat complex, system, but a few of the major points are essential.

In the first place, the Reyburns distinguished between full mastery of specific languages and partial mastery by the use of capitals and lower case letters: e.g., S, M, and E would stand for complete mastery of Spanish, Miskito, and English (in terms of the classification of communication elements). An incomplete mastery would be represented by s, m, and e. The various grades of this could be indicated by superscript components 1 to 6, but they had to simplify the system somewhat in dealing with the chronological aspect and so chose the criteria of "recognized by others as a native speaker". This would mean that for full mastery one would have to be in at least class 4 (and he might be in class 5 or 6). Furthermore, he would be a completely accepted member of such a speech community, in the sense that he would be recognized as a native speaker, regardless of ethnic or cultural background. In

addition, however, to the factors of full or partial mastery of certain languages (e.g., a man with the classification Ms would have full mastery of Miskito and only partial mastery of Spanish), it was necessary to indicate in some manner whether these languages were learned as a child or as an adult, and the order in which they were learned. For example, a person might learn Miskito as a child and then Spanish as an adult. If he acquired full mastery of both, this would be indicated as M_1S_2 , in which the capitals stand for Miskito and Spanish, the order indicates that Miskito was learned before Spanish and that Miskito was learned as a child (with subscript 1) and Spanish as an adult (with subscript 2). We need, however, to employ both the order of letters and the subscript numerals, for a number of people learned Miskito (with full competence) and English (with partial mastery) as children, and hence the formula would be M_1e_1 .

By the use of such classificatory formulae the Reyburns were able to classify readily a number of different possibilities and to state in a relatively succinct way the differences of types in various localities.

Once, however, the basic classification is worked out, it then becomes necessary to inquire of people as to the languages of their grandparents, their parents, and their children. This gives one an immediate spread of four generations. Of course, it is not always possible to determine degrees of proficiency, but in general people remembered quite well whether their grandparents were regarded as habitual users of Miskito, English, or Spanish. Furthermore, this "genealogical procedure" was projected even further by inquiring of school children as to what type of spouse these persons wanted to marry. Did they prefer one who spoke only Miskito, or only Spanish, or only English, or Miskito and Spanish, or some other combination? Furthermore, did they want their children educated in Miskito, or in English, or in Spanish? These questions provided very important corroborative evidence of the linguistic trends in the Miskito area.

The Use of Questionnaires

The basic data of this survey were gathered primarily through the use of two questionnaires, one a shorter and the other a longer form, but the two were so designed as to supplement each other. By this means it was possible to project the findings of the shorter questionnaire to cover some of the broader socio-economic factors, since the longer form of the questionnaire included these cultural factors.

Linguistic and Cultural Inquiries

One of the significant features of the Reyburn report is the constant emphasis upon the interplay of the linguistic and the cultural factors. This is quite in contrast with most studies, for surveys are generally either all linguistic or all cultural. As a result, such analyses, despite their technical and theoretical value, do not answer the missionaries' questions as to whether they should translate into a particular dialect, or how much of the Scriptures should be published, or what the life expectancy of a tribal language may be. Such judgments can only be

made if both the linguistic and cultural facts are gathered in such a way that they can be carefully and accurately co-ordinated. For example, it is necessary not only to know how many people speak a particular language, but to find out their attitudes toward the language in question. Do they regard it with prestige? Is it an important symbol of their ethnic unity? Do they feel that speaking such and such a language is an important factor in bettering their economic and social status? These are the questions which we must have answered, and these are precisely not the questions which the average linguistic survey attempts to answer. Furthermore, we also need to know the correlation between (1) language usage and attitudes and (2) the extent of various religious communities—in the case of the Miskito: the Protestant, Roman Catholic, and non-Christian elements in the area. In addition to this, it is essential that one investigate the extent to which the various socio-religious groups have and read the Scriptures and other Christian literature. All of these factors are essential for any sound analysis of the total ethnolinguistic situation.

On the other hand, one cannot afford to limit an investigation to the purely linguistic matters, plus data on religious groupings and the extent of Scripture use. All of these factors must be constantly evaluated in terms of the age, sex, amount of education, and occupations of the individuals involved. Moreover, it is important to have some grasp of the "upward movement" in the various groupings, that is to say, the extent to which successive generations have gone up in the social structure. Of course, all of these factors need not be worked out in detail for each and every person for whom the basic data are recorded. But this is precisely where the "longer form" of the questionnaire is so useful, for by careful comparison of sampled groups it is possible to "project" on the basis of the data from the longer forms a good deal of invaluable information for the constituency as a whole.

In the use of such questionnaires it is quite obvious that one of the important problems is the training of a few people in the interviewing and filling in of questionnaires. One cannot depend upon people filling in their own questionnaires, for that would automatically limit one to fully literate persons.

However, by careful selection and coaching of "interviewers" it was possible for the Reyburns to obtain a significant body of information in a relatively short time.

All the data of such questionnaires must, of course, be transferred to some system of punch cards, whether automatic (such as IBM²) or with border punches for use with sorting needles. Only in this way can one possibly determine in a relatively short time all the hundreds of correlations and comparisons necessary for any sizable set of facts.

Availability of the Reyburn Report

We cannot possibly include here even the basic outlines of the methodology carefully explained in the 85-page document, prepared by the Reyburns for the use of missionaries and linguists, concerned

² International Business Machines.

with some of these basic problems of determining the extent of bilingualism (or multilingualism), and the future of languages which are under extreme pressures from competing dominant tongues. Anyone who is interested in the study of such problems may obtain the report without charge by writing to the American Bible Society, 450 Park Avenue, New York 22, New York. The approach may at first seem somewhat complex, but a thorough study and mastery of the basic methodology will save endless hours of unfruitful, vague inquiry, and will in the end provide one with verifiable results indispensable for such important decisions as to what to do with tribal languages threatened with future extinction.

The Translation of Questions into Huixteco

Marion M. Cowan

The following interesting article deals with the kind of problem that translators should always have in mind. However, the sort of solution suggested here should not be adopted without serious consideration as to whether it is completely justified. Obviously it is undesirable to lose the force of rhetorical questions by rendering them as statements unless the linguistic situation really demands it. As here, even if the rhetorical question cannot be used, some equivalent means of distinguishing such a special mode of expression from ordinary statements should be sought. It would be interesting to know if readers have met this problem in other languages, and to learn the kind of solution found. Ed.

On a first translation of the Sermon on the Mount into the Huixtán dialect of Tzotzil (Maya) of south-eastern Mexico, the many questions in Matthew 6 had been translated as questions. However, as the translation was checked by one of the brethren in preparation for preaching it to his fellow brethren, we found that he was confused by the questions as the answers were not obvious to him. In checking with others we found that they reacted in the same way.

For instance, in Mt. 6:25 "Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?", they tended to feel on first thought that food and clothing were more important seeing they spend all their time in getting those two items. Then when confronted with the question in 6:26, "Are you not of more value than they (the birds)?", these new believers replied: "We don't know." Regarding the question in 6:27, "And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life?", they knew that they could not do it, but they were not so sure but that some of us foreigners might be able to, especially when they see that we do not get sick as often as they do.

In discussing with the brethren how best we could translate these verses into Huixteco, they preferred to change them into emphatic statements