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SOME ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS CONCERNING BILINGUAL EDUCATION[1]

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The invention of writing has gradually made it possible for man to perceive reality primarily through the sense of sight. In the Western world some of the finest art and most profound knowledge are communicated to us by means of writing. In an intensive manner, peculiar to the Western world, artistic and scientific writing transmit a view of reality which results in the transformation of that reality.

Hearing, taste, and touch, which are essential means of cognition and of communication in traditional societies, tend to be used less than the sense of sight in modern civilization. Norms, values, and knowledge in our society are determined more and more by the fixed yet dynamic universe of writing and by the sometimes unfortunate combination of written literature with movies and television.

In order to understand the Western world, one must understand, therefore, that it is dominated by the visual. One may enter this universe with confidence through the gateway of sight, i.e., reading, without the stress which one would expect in commercial and political interchange between a culture dominated by the visual and one dominated by a sense of touch and fluid oral communication. Stress is created when the

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1 Much of this article appeared under the title "Lenguas Aborígenes y Educación Nacional" in *Educación: La revista del maestro peruano* 1:2. 50–52 (October 1970).

peoples who have been dominated do not understand the central force of the Western world: writing.

It is therefore important that traditionally illiterate groups learn to write. In fact, we believe that written communication is fundamental to a just relationship between different peoples. This is a reality which Peruvian aborigines cannot escape: they cannot even initiate a just and fair dialogue with the governing civilization if they do not possess this weapon, the most powerful one in the Western world.

Acquisition and mastery of written communication is essential, with learning the national language a related but secondary problem. If speakers of vernacular languages learn the function of writing and are able to use it to initiate a dialogue with the Western world, an important step will have been taken by all concerned. Use of the national language can be a negative element in the process. If a person is putting forth tremendous effort to pass from the *audio* world to a *visual* world and is *simultaneously* confronted with the complementary task of acquiring one more system, a foreign language, he will be hindered in his task by the necessity of paying attention to two things at once. That is, the attention being given to language learning ought to be concentrated on the acquisition of writing.

Many Third World governments have understood this and have developed bilingual education programs. In Peru, the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with SIL, has put forth a tremendous effort in the past twenty-five years to make it possible for numerous jungle and mountain communities to concentrate on the task of learning to read and write. Initial instruction is done in the mother tongue of the student, opening up the possibility of undertaking a second task: learning the national language. It is recognized, and has been sufficiently proved, that in countries where this type of program has not been applied, both learning to handle written material and learning the national language have been slower and less effective.

Apart from the fundamental reason already stated, bilingual education—learning to read and write in one's mother tongue without the obstacle of simultaneously learning these skills in a

second language—offers other benefits which we would like to outline within the Peruvian framework.

ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES AND NATIONAL EDUCATION

The geographic areas of Peru where there is a high rate of illiteracy tend to coincide with the areas where the official language is not spoken as the mother tongue. In other words, the schools have had very limited impact on the populace that speaks little Spanish. In order to launch a new effort in literacy and educational reform, it is necessary to examine the reasons for such a situation. Why does the school tend to fulfill its goals better in areas of urban influence, where Spanish is traditionally spoken?

Except for a few pilot projects being carried out at the moment, the educational policy in Peru is to try to use Spanish exclusively in education. From the pedagogical point of view, this position creates a situation of unequal opportunity in which pupils whose mother tongue is not the official one must make a double effort: they must not only learn the new concepts being taught in the school but they must learn them in a new language.

At the same time that the present system of education insists that every student learn to express himself in Spanish, it pressures him to discontinue speaking his mother tongue. Even though some of the better–oriented teachers realize that the vernacular language could continue to be spoken along with Spanish, the whole social context and the very purpose of the school itself appear to deny such a possibility.

The school, then, appears to the students to be a threatening institution determined to pull them up by the roots from their cultural environment. Those who are able to reject their mother tongue and their culture with a minimum of conflict will find that they have an easier time in school. The pupils, as well as their parents, see the school as an alchemist's pot, able to change the basic personality of those who submit to its rigors.

The attitude one should take with regard to this change is

problematic. On the one hand, one would desire the change insofar as it represents a possibility for a life of less hardship, but at the same time, it is to be feared as a threat to one's very personality. From the latter point of view, the principal defect of education in Peru, as it has traditionally functioned, has been that it tacitly negates the use of the aboriginal languages as an expression of culture. This, of course, also implies negation of the aboriginal cultures themselves; and denying the students their language and culture is the first step towards an education which is disconnected from reality in a thousand ways and favors memorization rather than creative thinking. Such education does not promote the formation of a unique national personality.

And so the dilemma: the direction Peru takes to solve this dilemma will have far-reaching consequences in the future. We could try to gain homogeneity by imitating the Western world and renouncing our own unique personality, or we could claim the status of a more diversified nation which has originality and be all the richer for it.

Peru will be strong as a nation only if we opt for the second possibility—if the transformation of structures is accompanied by the determination to be spiritually independent and culturally unique. Only thus will we be able to contribute something to humanity. It is not a question of narrow nationalism. Not only for our benefit but also for the good of mankind we ought to preserve the milleniums of experience accumulated in the languages and cultures of the Andes and Amazonia. Since the beginning of the colonial period the Quechua, the Aymara, and the Huanca have been held in contempt and humiliation. They have almost been convinced that their culture is to be despised. We cannot continue to commit this unpardonable error of contributing to the extermination of their culture and their language.

The following are some of the most common arguments given against the teaching of the aboriginal languages:

- *Teaching of the aboriginal language could be a threat to national unity.* Peru represents a diversity of badly-integrated cultural traditions. The Hispanic tradition flourishes in the

cities, while the native traditions are hidden away in the rural areas. Up to now, the school system has denied our cultural differences and clashes, thinking that thereby the problem would be resolved. Actually, abolishing the students' language and culture from the classrooms has impoverished the schools and has made it more difficult for them to fulfill their objectives.

By making the school the agent which forces a second language on students who speak only the non-Spanish mother tongue, an unnecessary gap is created between the school and the children who speak the suppressed language. At the same time, a psychological basis is established which favors the survival of exploitative structures. The children whose mother tongue is Quechua or Aymara, for example, are not only at a disadvantage in the first years of school but also receive the false idea that their culture is inferior and that they will be able to participate in the official culture of the country only insofar as they abandon their own traditions. The struggle against the aboriginal languages can only foster misunderstanding among the different peoples of Peru.

- *The teaching of the native language would be an obstacle to the learning of Spanish.* Results obtained in teaching in the mother tongue in countries like the USSR, New Zealand, and the Philippines have caused UNESCO experts to affirm categorically that, "... it is possible to give the students an equal or better knowledge of the second language if the school begins teaching in the mother tongue."[2]

These experiences have also shown that in order for the teaching of a second language to be beneficial, it must be done in a way that does not threaten the use of the mother tongue or endanger the personal identity of the student or the group. If Spanish ceases to be identified with the oppression of a culture and a people, the motivation to learn it will be greater.

- *The vernacular languages are not adequate to express modern concepts; they are primitive languages which do not*

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2 UNESCO, "L'emploi des langues vernaculaires dans l'enseignement." Paris: UNESCO, 1953.

have a grammar or literature. Linguists agree that all languages are completely adequate to express abstract ideas even though they are borrowed from another culture. Only adaptations in their vocabularies need to be made, as is done in all languages in order to express new concepts or to name new objects.

Every language has a structure, a key shared by all its speakers, which permits them to understand each other. This orderly arrangement of a language, its harmonious flow, is its grammar. Linguists study it and try to decipher it, but the grammar exists before it is converted into a set of rules, just as a mineral deposit exists before the miner discovers it.

All our aboriginal languages have a rich oral literature—complicated myths, stories with deep social meaning and very beautiful songs. The fact that only fragments of these have been recorded does not deny their value or the possibility that they will be written in the future. After all, Homer's poems were oral tradition, and all Greek literature thrived on the myths which were passed from person to person for centuries.

We are aware that the educational task in Peru will be more and more complicated in proportion to the measure in which its linguistic and cultural variety is taken into consideration. We must promote investigation of the actual linguistic situation in the country and gather oral, popular literature in the aboriginal languages as a basis for a more complete written literature. This is one of the most immediate and serious problems that the new educational system will have to confront. Linguists and others who study the aboriginal languages and cultures could also cooperate in the training of teachers and the preparation of school materials.

The new educational policy will doubtless meet with certain resistance from those who understand Spanish. During a recent visit to Parinacochas in the Department of Ayacucho, we interviewed many parents. We found that a number of them were afraid that the teaching of Quechua would not only be useless but would also be an obstacle to the learning of Spanish, which is the first and foremost requirement for accomplishing the painful process of abandoning one's own

culture. Some confuse this with cultural integration. These prejudices of the rural people are the result of a social order, an educational system, and an ideology that tended to discourage the aboriginal cultural personality. The situation can be corrected by making changes in the economic structure, but it will only be abolished by radical educational reform. To accomplish this, a tremendous effort must be made to encourage recognition of our great diversity and the value of each and every culture. Only through mutual respect for the variety of cultures which comprise our country can dialogue be established which will enrich and strengthen all Peruvians.