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Indigenous and minority languages in Colombia:  
The current situation

Introduction

The situations of minority languages in Colombia are not unlike those seen in many other parts of the world, though they may seem considerably different to those accustomed to European views on minority languages. Therefore, this paper provides an overview of the current situation of minority languages in Colombia from legal, educational, and media perspectives, showing the developments and the shortcomings of the processes that have affected these languages—including those that have been undertaken to protect, maintain, and foster them. Following a general historical overview and a description of the most recent achievements, the paper offers some specific recommendations to support the maintenance of these languages.

Historical and Linguistic Background

Colombia, situated at the juncture of Central and South America, has long been a zone of considerable linguistic and cultural diversity resulting from the interaction of peoples from the Mesoamerican, Caribbean, Amazonian, and Andean regions (Constenla Umaña 1991). The country officially recognizes over 80 ethnic groups (Rodriguez, El Gazi 2007: 449), though out of a national population of over 41 million people (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE) 2007: 64), the indigenous population estimated at less than 5% (approximately 1,392,623 people). Adding the nation’s other officially
recognized minority ethnic groups (principally Afro-Colombian and Romani), puts Colombia’s ethnic minorities little over 14% of the total population (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE) 2005: 27, 2007: 37). Recent estimates suggest that around 68 indigenous American languages survive in Colombia, still spoken by perhaps some 850,000 people (Ministerio de Cultura de Colombia 2010b). The largest recognized indigenous populations are the following: Wayuu, 236,590 (Girón 2010: 5), or 270,413 (Ministerio de Cultura de Colombia 2010a); Nasa/Paez, 186,178 (Ministerio de Cultura de Colombia 2010a); Pastos/Quillasingas, 69,789 (Arango, Sánchez, 2004, pp. 70–71).\(^1\) Of these three indigenous groups, the first two maintain the use of their respective indigenous languages, whereas the Pastos/Quillasingas are now all Spanish monolinguals (Pineda Camacho 2000: 119). Besides indigenous languages descended from pre-Columbian populations, contacts with people from Europe and Africa during and since the Colonial period have led to the presence of a variety Afro-Colombian\(^2\) and Romani minority groups. The approximately 4,850 Romani-speakers are dispersed in a number of communities, though all appear to use Vlax dialects (Lewis, Simons, Fennig 2013). Two Afro-Colombian groups maintain the use of distinctive creole languages: the self-recognised Palenquero community of San Basilio de Palenque numbers approximately 7,998 people (Girón 2010: 5) speaking an Afro-Iberian creole (Bickerton, Escalante 1970; Friedemann, Patiño Rosselli 1983; Schwegler 2013), and the self-recognised Raizal community of the San Andrés Archipelago has approximately 30,565 people speaking an Afro-English creole (San Andres-Providence Creole), which is distinct from but in relationship with (Standard/Caribbean) English, indigenism policy in the 1970s (Correa 2006) itself spoken by a minority of the creole-using community (Bartens 2013; Decker, Keener 2001).

Data on linguistic/communicative competences (and especially literacy, in either minority languages or Spanish) amongst Colombian minority communities is scattered and incomplete. The main sources referred to in

\(^{\text{1}}\) Please note, however, that the information on the total number of indigenous people and the population estimates for the Wayuu and Nasa are based on Colombia’s 2005 census, whereas population data on the Pastos/Quillasingas is based on the 2001 census.

\(^{\text{2}}\) Wade (2009) has highlighted the problematic status of this categorization and has shed light on the dynamics that create inclusive concepts of blackness in Colombian academic and governmental circles, which place Raizal and Palenquero identities as sub-categories of a wider Afro-Colombian concept.
the present paper are Ministerio de Cultura de Colombia (2010a) and Girón (2010), though neither is entirely ideal. The Ministerio de Cultura’s report provides information on about 34 indigenous groups (out of the more than 80 officially recognized ethnic minorities) that are defined as being “under threat of disappearance” by Colombia’s Constitutional Court. Girón (2010) presents 14 linguistic self-diagnoses made by different minority language communities; they overlap in 7 groups, and their conclusions are similar, revealing literacy rates in Spanish of around 60–70% and in the native language of around 40%. Overall, Girón’s data suggests that, of the 14 groups he considered, around 67–85% of their populations claim oral competence in their community’s language, though the Ministerio de Cultura’s report suggests a rather lower level of oral competence, around 48%, in the populations they looked at. Both studies considered the relatively numerous (over 230,000 persons) Wayuu community,3 in which there is a relatively high proportion (85%) of persons claiming linguistic competence in the minority language. Only the Ministerio de Cultura’s report included the Zenú/Sinú community, with a similarly large population (around 230,000), only 13.4% of whom (according to the Ministerio de Cultura) claim linguistic competence in their community’s language. This seems to give some indication of the range of variation with regard to linguistic/communicative competences that can exist within Colombia’s minority communities—though the fact that “the surviving descendants of the Sinú … have no record of their original languages” (Adelaar, Muysken 2004: 52), which the academic research literature generally agrees became extinct several centuries ago in the post-Conquest period, perhaps offers more reasons for skepticism regarding the quality of the available data than it does to celebrate an unexpectedly sudden and robust re-emergence of the lost Zenú/Sinú language.4

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3 The discrepancy of more than 35,000 persons between Girón’s and the Ministerio de Cultura’s respective reports represents a number of people considerably greater than most other Colombian indigenous communities contain in total (Landaburu n.d.).

4 The Ministerio de Cultura’s report itself goes on to observe (2010a: 313) that “el pueblo indígena Zenú perdió su lengua, es monolingüe, habla el castellano” (“the indigenous Zenú people lost their language, are monolingual, speak Spanish”), which makes the accompanying claim (p. 311) that 13.4% of the Zenú “habla la lengua de su pueblo” (“speak the language of their people”) all the more baffling. It seems likely that there is a fundamental problem in the way the data has been collected, in that some members of a given minority community may consider an ethnic language to be “the language of their people”, while others may consider
Nevertheless, despite a basic lack of either extensive or reliable data, it seems likely that while the percentage of a given minority population possessing oral competence in the community’s language may vary considerably, most of the indigenous and other minority populations are currently Spanish monolinguals. Less than 2% of the Colombian population seem to be first-language users of languages other than Spanish. Moreover, it seems safe to generalize that literacy in minority languages tends to be low—typically lower than Spanish literacy in the same communities. In some cases, certain communities have resisted the idea of written versions of their language; others have embraced the idea more enthusiastically, though even in such cases it is hard to detect any significant positive effects (yet) on effective literacy in the minority languages.

The road to the 1991 Constitution

The point of departure for any study on the contemporary state of affairs of indigenous sociolinguistics in Colombia is the establishment of the 1991 Constitution. This constitution was enacted after a democratic process that included the participation of indigenous leaders, political parties, students associations, and various ethnic and religious leaders (Correa 2006; Rodríguez, El Gazi 2007). Murillo (2003) has described the 1991 Constitution as an attempt to correct many problems with Colombian democracy. He argues that it “was widely seen as resulting from years of organized resistance—armed and ‘legal’—to a very authoritarian, undemocratic system that based its legitimacy on the veneer of a constitutional democracy” (p. 126) and that its creation brought together participants who had been excluded from the national debate for years.

The new constitution modified the centralist state, granting indigenous groups the right to exercise their own legislative and judicial powers within their territories, something that has been criticised on occasion by international organizations that deem some of their practices inhumane (Jackson 2002). Although the 1991 Constitution gave indigenous groups more self-determination rights, contemporary problems—such as the armed conflict,
illegal colonization, land tenure, private economic interests, and corruption processes and their resolutions—still pose a threat to these rights.

The movement for more political participation and territorial rights was part of a long struggle of the indigenous peoples with the Colombian establishment. In particular, the 1930s and 1940s saw a surge of armed opposition started by the indigenous leader Quintín Lame in the Cauca region, it was from this region that many later indigenous movements emerged, including the development of CRIC (Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca/Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca) in the 1970s, and the ONIC (Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia/National Indigenous Organization of Colombia) in the 1980s (Correa 2006; Espinosa Arango 2007; Gow, Rappaport 2002; Jackson 2002; Velasco 2011). Simultaneously with these indigenous movements, the commitment of university anthropology scholars to the indigenous population contributed to increased criticism of the state’s indigenism policy in the 1970s (Correa 2006).

These processes are seen as having contributed to a process of “reindigenisation” (Chaves and Zambrano 2006) and a conception of all indigenous peoples of Colombia as an “imagined community” (Anderson 2006; Jackson 2011). Such a concept of common indigenous identity represents a distinct change from earlier constructions of ethnicity and identity, in which persons often claimed membership in a specific ethnic group but resisted the stigmatized term indio (“Indian”). This new, broader (and multi-layered) conception of indigenous identity owed something to increased awareness of other indigenous movements around the world but was also fuelled by increasingly progressive state policy on indigenous land rights—and taking advantage of this trend effectively required individuals or groups to present an indigenous identity that could be recognized by the state authorities. Jackson (2011) has emphasized the role that an ability to demonstrate “culturally distinct customary practices and traditions” played in validating claims to such rights, a situation which also led not infrequently to wrangling with the state—and, significantly, within indigenous communities themselves—over who was, or was not, “indigenous”. In the same sense, the emergent

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5 Indigenism is the term given to the instrumental use of indigenousness to justify nationalistic perspectives. In the Colombian context, it is usually understood as the symbolic appropriation of the indigenous past by white or mixed-ethnicity elites, rather than granting more access, power, or voice to indigenous peoples themselves.
common indigenous identity is not extended to the Afro-Colombian and Romani minorities, though there is some recognition of a common cause at least with regard to language rights (though perhaps not so much with regard to land rights).

The climate of change in the 1960s and 1970s also found expression in new views on indigenous educational policy, codified in Decree 1142 of 1978 (Presidente de la República Colombiana 1978). This law recognized the right of indigenous Colombians to an education appropriate to their interests and in the planning of which they should participate, additionally mandating that teachers in indigenous communities should speak that community’s language (as well as Spanish). Previously (ever since the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest), colonial and national authorities had been content to leave concerns regarding education amongst indigenous peoples entirely within the hands of the Catholic Church. This was an approach that had been formalized in not only the constitution of 1886 but also an explicit contract between the state and Church for this purpose in 1888 that included the promulgation of Spanish at the expense of indigenous languages as a goal, either implicitly or explicitly (Jackson 2011; Jiménez D. 1998; de Mejía 2004; Zuluaga 1996).

By the 1980s, indigenous leaders were beginning to make their voices heard at national level, and figures such as Lorenzo Muelas (of the Guambiano people) and Francisco Rojas Birri (of the Emberá Katio) played fundamental roles in the development of the 1991 Colombian Constitution, which (according to Rodriguez, El Gazi 2007) modified the concept of the Colombian state from a supposedly homogenous nation to that of a multi-ethnic and multicultural nation. Indeed, the ratification of the new (and still current) constitution (Asamblea Nacional Constituyente 1991) represented a watershed in the state’s stance towards the variety of ethnic groups within (and sometimes across) its borders. Critically, the 1991 constitution (Asamblea Nacional Constituyente 1991) addressed the obligation of the state to protect ethnic and cultural diversity (Article 7), and accorded “official” status (alongside Spanish) to all the country’s minority languages within the territories where they are spoken. It also modified national educational policy, newly committing the government to linguistically, ethnically, and culturally responsible education (Rodriguez, El Gazi 2007; Ross 2007), removing the control of indigenous education from the hands of the Catholic Church and declaring that education provided “in communities with their own linguistic traditions” would be bilingual (Article 10), as well as that members of
“ethnic groups” had the right to education that “respects and develops their cultural identity” (Article 68).

**Ethno-education and Bilingual Policy**

There can be little doubt that the government’s recognition and support for minority languages, especially as reflected through state education programs, have a significant impact on present uses and future fates of those languages. In the wake of the 1991 constitution itself, the General Education Law 115 of 1994 took a step further by establishing policies for ethno-education (Spanish *etnoeducación*)—that is, education for, by, and of the indigenous groups themselves—and granting minority language communities a certain degree of autonomy with regards to the content and conduct of education within the community.

More recently, the Native Language Law 1381 (*Ley de Lenguas*) of 2010 (Congreso de Colombia 2010) and the establishment of the Consejo Nacional Asesor de Lenguas Nativas (National Support Council for Native Languages) in 2012 expanded on these earlier provisions, specifically granting extended official recognition and support to Colombia’s indigenous and creole languages as well as Romani, rights to use indigenous and other ethnic minority languages in all public spaces and in all interactions with government authorities. The Native Language Law was the result of a concerted effort by the Ministry of Culture together with various academic institutions and indigenous/minority communities, and it has gone further towards enabling the actual implementation of the policies implied in its contents than many other similar pieces of Colombian legislation. Its Article 20 mandates the teaching of minority languages (alongside Spanish) within communities that use them, as well as the creation of programs to train teachers of these languages. The Language Law also paved the way towards a sociolinguistic survey to determine the situation of linguistic minorities in Colombia (Bodnar C. 2013), elements of which have actually been carried out (which is relatively unusual for a state-sponsored program related to minority languages and cultures in Colombia), although these results have not been widely publicized and the future of the rest of the survey might be most optimistically be described as “uncertain”.

Nevertheless – on paper at least – the last four decades have seen significant improvements in the Colombian state’s stance towards minority languages and
minority-language education (Liddicoat, Curnow 2007; de Mejía 2013; Mitchell 1996). It is also possible to point to some indigenous communities who, taking advantage of this new stance, have been able to carry out impressive feats of self-determined educational reform. For example, the Cofán people (or A’i) of south-western Colombia, moved from the first modern linguistic description of their language (in a Master’s thesis developed by a member of their community in a Colombian university) in 1995 to, by 2009, developing a complete primary and secondary school curriculum that teaches Cofán language (A’inge) and culture alongside Spanish and the Colombian national curriculum, with teachers trained and qualified in both tracks and an considerable selection of specialized printed and digital materials (Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia 2009; Quenamá Queta, Queta Quintero, Lucitante 2011; Quenamá Queta 2007, 2011). Yet successes such as that of the Cofán are very much the exception rather than the rule and should not distract attention from the considerable systemic problems that remain – among which are a shortage of appropriately trained teachers and the simple fact that issues like curriculum development are left largely in the hands of the individual communities. No comprehensive information on how the communities view or address these issues has been published or otherwise made available.

It also remains a significant problem that Colombian state education is, if one accepts the testimony of the 2012 exam results from the Programme for International Assessment (PISA) (OECD 2013) as a proxy, amongst the worst in the world. Of course the majority of participants in this system are native Spanish speakers, though few would suggest that state education is strongest in regions containing minority language communities (which tend to be in relatively remote, relatively poor regions of the country, while even those communities found in urban centres tend not to be in well funded or equipped parts of those centres). It is, however, seldom appreciated that Colombia faces not merely a task of bringing education for minority-language speakers into line with national standards, but bringing education for minority-language speakers and everyone else up far beyond current national standards to some level of international parity appropriate for the twenty-first century.

Lack of appreciation for this fact may be related to the significantly different approaches to and understandings of education for minority communities (ethno-education) and “bilingual” education for the majority Spanish-speaking population. Hamel (2008) has remarked on how in Latin America minority bilingualism (that is, the use of indigenous, creole, and in
Colombia’s case the Romani language) is contrasted with “elite” bilingualism (that is, the learning of international languages; nowadays particularly English). This situation certainly pertains to Colombia (de Mejía 2011; Ordóñez 2008; Usma Wilches 2009; Usma 2009; Valencia Giraldo 2005), where in 2004 the Ministry of Education (MEN) launched a National Bilingual Program aimed at improving use of English amongst Colombian citizens as a step towards boosting national competitiveness within the global “knowledge economy” (de Mejía 2011; Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia 2006; Usma 2009). This, while not necessarily a bad idea per se, illustrates the great gulf that exists between ethno- and “mainstream” education in both execution and conception. De Mejía (1996, 2004, 2011) has additionally noted that the Spanish-speaking majority often view “elite” bilingualism (i.e. Spanish and, usually, English) as socially acceptable and economically advantageous, while still associating “minority” bilingualism with poverty and backwardness. Such a conceptual division is neatly reflected in the official articulation of Colombian educational policies, with “ethno-education” (aimed explicitly at minority communities) and “bilingual education” (aimed implicitly at the majority Spanish-speaking population) being administered by separate departments within the Ministry of Education, and some responsibility for ethno-education being shared with the Ministry of Culture (de Mejía, Ordóñez, Fonseca 2006; de Mejía 1998, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2011, 2013). Moreover, the historical use of education as a tool for acculturation has hardly been forgotten, contributing to the suspicion with which any kind of state-mediated education, including ethno-education, is viewed by many ethnic minorities (Kværndal 2013; Ortíz Ricaurte 2004; Trillos Amaya 1996). The practical effect is that Spanish dominates the classroom and literacy practices in the educational contexts of most Colombian minority communities, with the effect of further eroding their own languages.

The conceptual separation of “minority” and “mainstream” bi-/multilingualism can also have a curious mirror image; one can readily find students from minority communities who object that, by having learned Spanish alongside their first language (a very common if not entirely universal achievement), they have already achieved the state of “bilingualism” demanded by the educational system and should, therefore, be excused from any requirement to learn English as well (Hamel 2006, 2008; de Mejía 2006). There are complicated issues at work here – the system of credit hours in university systems may be one of them – and it would be a mistake to assume a generalization of such
attitudes, especially given the extremely wide variation of situations between the many very different Colombian minority communities and indeed between members of those communities. The example is, nevertheless, illustrative.

Thus, although idealistically phrased legal provisions have indeed been put in place, and administrative responsibility has been transferred from contracted missionaries to government agencies, it seems clear that “ethno-education” is still understood as something other than “real” education (however poorly the latter may be being implemented). One could be forgiven for detecting an implicit understanding that education in respect to minority language communities remains effectively “somebody else’s problem” for the Colombian state – that the degree of autonomy that has been devolved to the communities effectively absolves the state from further action. At the very least, the good intentions that helped bring about the admittedly unprecedented legislative support for minority languages in Colombia is not matched by an equal amount of political will to implement them (Jackson 2011).

Thus, as has so often been found to be the case, if the will to take action in support of minority languages and their communities is going to come from anywhere, it must come from within the communities themselves.

Current Situation

Although the 1991 Constitution took a significant step forward by including space for minority languages in policy development, it must be conceded that very little has since been done beyond the general commitment to ethno-education and some particular initiatives, such as the 2000 Comunidad programme that promoted the development of indigenous radio stations. The following sections will present the recent state of minority language media and ICTs to illuminate the role that these policies and developments have had on the language landscape.

Media situation

Colombian radio broadcasting development, similar to the trend in Latin America, has been predominantly commercial, and considerably extensive, since there are a great number of radio stations licensed all over the country, totalling more than 1500 in 2011 (Ministerio de Tecnologías de la Información
y Comunicaciones 2012). Television, on the other hand, was a mixed system of public ownership with slots given by auction to independent producers until 1995 when regional and local channels were established and two private channels were allowed to begin broadcasting, leading to the demise of the previous model (Arango Forero et al. 2009).

Radio Law 1341 and Decree 2805 of 2008 provided the normative basis for the use of the electromagnetic spectrum and the overall structure of radio broadcasting, providing three possible avenues for radio stations (Ministerio de Tecnologías de la Información y Comunicaciones 2010):

1. public interest radio, stations financed by governmental or traditional authorities and that cannot derive revenue from advertisement, further divided into three remits:
   i. armed forces stations;
   ii. territorial stations, which include indigenous traditional reservations (cabildos, resguardos); and
   iii. stations for educational institutions;
2. commercial radio; and
3. community radio.

Minority languages have been better represented in public interest radio and community radio. There are smatterings of output in minority languages in some local commercial stations (as is the case of La voz de las Islas in San Andrés) and in illegal and pirate radio broadcasting, but they are usually incidental, in the former, and irregular, in the latter.

**Television**

In 1995, following the requirements of the 1991 Constitution, the CNTV (Comisión Nacional de Televisión/National Television Commission) was established as a separate independent governmental body in charge of television policy and commissioning of regional programmes. Simultaneously, the possibility of new private national channels – as well as regional, local, and community channels, both public and private – was enacted (Arango Forero et al. 2009).

As of 2013, there are four national public television channels (one of which broadcasts commercial programming), two national private commer-

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6 This radio station was taken off the air in 2012, but some of the Creole content moved to a Web-based broadcast in 2013.
cial channels (RCN and Caracol), eight regional channels with commercial and government-sponsored programmes, one local commercial channel (City TV), 46 local not-for-profit channels, 718 community not-for-profit closed-circuit channels, and 46 subscription-based channels (CNTV 2010). In 2011 a senate proposal to dismantle CNTV, following a row of scandals and allegations concerning its finances and working practices, led to its closure and the establishment in 2012 of the ANTV (Agencia Nacional de Television/National Television Agency) with an almost identical remit, but with a different composition.

**Minority Language Media**

From 2000–2006, radio stations sponsored by the Colombian Government under the Comunidad programme of the Ministry of Communications and the Ministry of Culture were granted to 26 indigenous communities, not all of which still retain a traditional language (ONIC 2009; Rodriguez, El Gazi 2007; Uribe-Jongbloed, Peña Sarmiento 2008). According to a report from 2009, there is a total of 29 indigenous radio stations, 21 of which broadcast in indigenous languages, 3 of which broadcast solely in Spanish (despite the target indigenous audience maintaining their own languages), and 5 of which that belong to indigenous groups who have lost their indigenous languages altogether (ONIC 2009). Aside from the slots of Creole-language television programmes on the regional channel Teleislas and one weekly programme on indigenous issues from the regional television channel Canal Capital, there is no television output in minority languages.

Minority language media in Colombia are rare and dispersed. Although the social and community value of indigenous radio stations is unquestionable, the amount of indigenous language output remains considerably low: usually less than one hour a day (ONIC 2009; Uribe-Jongbloed, Peña Sarmiento 2008). Other radio stations, especially the pirate Christian radio stations in San Andrés, have more ample broadcast content in their native Creole language, but their scheduling is irregular and their illegal use of the broadcast spectrum makes them difficult to study. Indigenous radio stations, just like community radio stations, are also targeted by participants in the Colombian internal conflict; in some cases, the stations receive threats regarding the language they use for broadcasting (see, for instance, the case reported by Caracol TV, 2009). Radio remains the second most widespread
medium in general use, with 68% of the population tuning in as of 2007 (Arango Forero et al. 2009), and it is clearly the main medium for minority languages in Colombia, reaching over 78% of the indigenous population (Rodriguez, El Gazi 2007), as well as some of the other minority groups. As this radio output consolidates itself, more studies exploring the correlation between media production and worldview (Cuesta Moreno 2012a), on the one hand, and language, on the other, may provide an answer to, or at least a perspective on, the way in which media can help maintain cultural, linguistic and ethnic identities.

Television output is limited to few shows in Creole on the regional channel Teleislas. Despite an incentive in 2009 by CNTV to encourage universities and other institutions to develop projects with indigenous and other ethnic minority groups to try to ensure that they gain access to the 5% of the total broadcasting space already assigned to them in the public service channel Señal Colombia, this has yet to result in more minority language content.

**ICTs and education in ML**

It has been widely recognized that, despite many challenges, emerging information and communication technologies (ICTs) offer a range of tools that can assist with endangered language revitalization efforts (Eisenlohr 2004; Shetzer, Warschauer 2000; Ward, Genabith 2003; Ward 2004; Warschauer 1998; Yang, Rau 2005). This is of course part of a wider global trend in search of ways to integrate rapidly evolving (and so often still poorly understood) ICTs effectively into their teaching and learning practices (Baylor, Ritchie 2002; Casal 2007; Greenhow, Robelia, Hughes 2009; Liang et al. 2005; Redecker 2009; Reinders 2006; Vanderlinde, Van Braak, Tondeur 2010; Williams, Boone, Kingsley 2004), not least for the purposes of learning additional languages (Godwin-Jones 2005; Rogerson-Revell 2007; Shetzer, Warschauer 2000). Colombia is certainly participating in this trend (Alvarez, Cuesta 2012; Arias Soto 2012; Cantor Barragán 2009; Clavijo Olarte, Hine, Quintero 2008; Cuesta Medina 2014; Cuesta, Wu 2013; Cuesta 2010; McDougald 2009, 2013; Prendes Espinosa, Castañeda Quintero 2010; Quintero 2008) but, despite isolated examples such as that of the Cofán (Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia 2009; Quenamá Queta et al. 2011; Quenamá Queta 2007, 2011), it is probably safe to say that focus of Colombian work on the use of ICTs to support language teaching and learning is focused on, or at least derived from, contexts of
English-language learning. This is, of course, no bad thing in and of itself – and, to be fair, the vast majority of global resources dedicated to furthering processes of additional language-learning are probably dedicated (at present) to English – but it also probably reflects the same lopsided approach found in divergent state policies (and societal attitudes) that place “mainstream” education and “elite” bilingualism on one side, with ethno-education and “minority” bilingualism on the other (rather smaller side).

Perhaps the greatest problem here is that more of the lessons learned from research on the use of ICTs for general education and English-teaching (especially that which has been conducted in Colombia) are not being more widely applied in cases where they might be relevant (and possible). Of course, the Colombian Ministry of Education is still struggling to promote more effective use of ICTs in its (also struggling) “mainstream” educational environments, and though considerable efforts are being made, the separate administration (and fragmented implementation) of ethno-education means there is no real coherent strategy or training being undertaken. No one would deny that there are certainly significant differences in terms of context (among other factors) between, say, an “elite bilingual school” in the capital and minority community schools in remote (and often neglected) regions of the country, but nor can it be denied that that many tools and strategies that can be used to support the learning of one given language could also be adapted to teach others. The fact that this is not happening may be partially attributable to institutional (and societal) apathy (on more than one side), though this itself reflects a further tragic disconnection between minority language communities and the academic sphere that conducts the research and (not infrequently) plays a major role in implementing new approaches.

Challenges and Recommendations

Colombia has seen tremendous positive advances with regard to legislation and policy in support of minority languages during the last several decades, but although these achievements should not be belittled, they should also not blind us to the fact that there has been a disappointing lack of action or real change accompanying them. To an extent, this should come as no surprise; the strength of governments is often more in creating policy than implementing it.

Certainly, resolving the currently separate policies for, and implementation of, ethno- and “mainstream” education (with their respective language-
-teaching policies) would be a welcome move, as would an improvement of quality of all education in Colombia. Indeed, surely all Colombians (and others) deserve education that “respects and develops their cultural identity”, regardless of the different individual cultural identities that they have. Likewise, all Colombians deserve education that prepares them for effective participation and action and the local, national, and international arenas.

Nevertheless, policy is only part of the picture; certainly with respect to minority language communities, it is a truism worldwide that real results language education and revitalization efforts are realizable only when the community itself owns and drives the process. In many cases, Colombia’s minority language communities remain too isolated, fragmented, and poorly equipped with the knowledge the need to navigate the increasingly complex realities they face. Elsewhere, globally, successful partnerships between minority language communities and academia have contributed to at least qualified successes in language support and revitalization efforts (Hinton 2011; McAlpin 2008; McCarty 2008a, 2008b, 2010, 2013; Weinberg, De Korne, Depaul 2013). Academia can play a “bridging” role between the state and minority language communities, offering knowledge, services, and training that can assist the communities with their implementation of legislative policies. While it is commonly understood that that minority language communities bring local- and self-knowledge to such partnerships, the critical role played in such cases by members of minority communities who have entered into, participate in, and serve as mediators with “mainstream” academia is not always appreciated; in Colombia, the apparent success of the Cófan project surely owes something to exactly this phenomenon. Thus, new state policies (and sources of funding) should be developed with the aim of bringing more members of minority communities into academia, giving them greater opportunities to learn how to shape and use knowledge drawn from global experience more effectively for their communities. This would also help reduce or eliminate the attitude of suspicion many (though, it must be emphasized, not all) Colombian minority communities hold towards “mainstream” academia (which may be seen as simply another surely exploitative arm of “mainstream” culture and society). Meanwhile, ICTs have a role to play not simply in leveraging more from existing educational resources, but in connecting members of (often dispersed) communities with each other (via ICT platforms localized for the communities’ languages), to connect whole minority communities with other minority communities (to share experiences and knowledge), and to connect
communities and their members with potentially useful external actors (the state, and perhaps particularly academia). Similarly, media programmes have been moderately successful in bringing indigenous languages into new domains, with mixed results stemming mostly from the lack of overall governmental support. The efforts of the Wayuu and Nasa media outlets have shown the need for standardization of the languages, as well as the difficulties in the dual requirement of the media to be a space for the use of the minority language at the same time as a place where intercultural and multilingual negotiations take place, to cater for both indigenous language monolinguals and indigenous people who have shifted to the majority language. Media were not developed to maintain languages, but rather to open opportunities for communication and expansions of the public sphere, so this new role does not become evident unless media policies are specifically designed with that purpose in mind (Cormack 2007). They also require constant governmental support, because the geographic and economic conditions of minority language media demand funding which cannot be obtained otherwise (Cuesta Moreno 2012b).

It should, perhaps, be no surprise that two of the perhaps most powerful avenues to supporting minority languages in Colombia – and, indeed, elsewhere – are communication and knowledge, themselves intimately interrelated with language. Each actor involved – the communities, the state, and academia – has its own strengths and weaknesses, and each as a potentially valuable role to play if these strengths and weaknesses are mutually understood and appropriately exploited. If recent years have seen a wealth of good intentions and policies from the state, it is now up to the communities and academics to take concrete actions in support of minority languages. Otherwise, their futures may be all too brief.

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Indigenous and minority languages in Colombia: The current situation

(Summary)

This paper discusses the current situation of indigenous and minority languages in Colombia, identifying advances made in recent years, as well as challenges—and opportunities—that remain. Although minority languages obtained legal recognition in Colombia’s 1991 Constitution, and the 1994 Education Law recognised particular educational rights for ethnic communities, more proactive legislation defining avenues for development of indigenous language education, access to media, and other relevant provisions only appeared in the 2010 Language Law. This paper examines to what extent different language communities have been able to make use of the provisions of the Language Law, paying special attention to how ICTs have been used to try to encourage language acquisition and visibility. We also examine the policy challenges that remain, especially the artificial separation of “ethno-education” for minority communities from policies of “bilingual education” for Colombia’s educational mainstream, as well as the need for greater communication and cooperation amongst the various categories of actors—governmental, academic, and the communities themselves—if Colombia’s linguistic and cultural diversity is to be genuinely strengthened in an ever more interconnected 21st-century world.

Keywords: indigenous languages, ICTs, language legislation, Colombia

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