

Challenge from the margins

New uses and meanings of written practices in Wichi

Camilo Ballena & Virginia Unamuno

CIFMA, Argentina / CONICET-CIFMA-UNSAM, Argentina

This paper explores the production of new meanings linked to written practices in the Wichi language in the Impenetrable Chaqueño (Argentina). Through collaborative ethnography examining different collective experiences and points of view, we study changes in writing in connection with changes in the access, distribution and availability of written practices in the Wichi language, and particularly in connection with social processes that position the Wichi people as key agents. Voice and agency are considered in order to explain meaning-making of language practices that are central but at the same time peripheral, and which seem to challenge, from the margins, social relationships between languages and people that hitherto seemed to be immovable.

Keywords: Wichi; sociolinguistics of writing; collaborative ethnography; Argentina

Introduction

Writing *in* Wichi is not the same as writing Wichi. For some time now, there have been new uses and new senses regarding written practices in the Wichi communities of northern Argentina. These new uses occur in the context of recent and contemporary local and global sociolinguistic processes. However, their meanings arise from other changes, in the context of which writing Wichi means – perhaps for the first time ever – writing with one's own voice.

The aim of our paper is to contribute a single case analysis to the study of how actors located at the periphery of the world and states exercise transformational power on the social meaning of language. We are especially interested in how these actors signify the present and project alternatives for the future through daily actions calling into question ethnic and social relations that seemed to be immovable. Furthermore, we would like to stress that these new meanings which emerge from the margins are not simply the result of appropriation of the resources and

technologies of the center, but emerge, rather, from “improper” uses that resignify resources and technologies, transforming them.

To this end, we have located ourselves in the Wichi communities in the region of El Sauzalito (Chaco, Argentina), where we carry out different projects on Wichi language in the framework of collaborative research (Rappaport, 2007, 2008). We understand collaborative research as a form of research based on at least three principles: 1. each idea for a project is discussed among different actors (researchers, indigenous teachers, community referents, students, etc.); 2. teams are made up of different types of researchers (academic and non-academic) and tasks and responsibilities are distributed among them; 3. any direct and indirect outcomes from the research work are distributed among the different actors.

Methodologically, we also consider using co-authorship by traditional and native researchers (Lassiter, 2005; Rappaport, 2008). For the past six years, the two authors of this paper have worked together: Camilo as a Wichi teacher and language activist, and Virginia as a non-Wichi sociolinguist. The heteroglossia in this paper seeks to reflect our co-theorization and co-authorship. Co-theorizing is rooted in the collaborative approach. As actors with different life trajectories and academic backgrounds, we discussed how to account for the links between orality and writing, and for the processes of incorporation of written practices among indigenous peoples who did not use writing in the recent past. We also discussed the senses of written Wichi practices that we observe in our environment, explicitly taking into account the different positions from which we reconstruct these senses and question them. This has not always been easy: we have reached agreements without necessarily having reached consensus.

In this quest to represent the dialogue between knowledge, experiences and perspectives, we finally decided to present a text that may seem confusing at times. In particular we have decided to use the pronoun “WE” with at least two values.¹ Unlike other languages, Spanish and English do not have two types of “We” – one “We” that is inclusive and another that is exclusive. It is therefore difficult to reflect the alternation and tension that exists between voices that seek to speak from the Wichi community – positioning itself as Wichi – and the “We” that proposes, complementarily, to speak from the community of researchers/authors, which in

1. “It is difficult to express an idea from the Wichi standpoint using the pronoun “WE”. In Wichi, a neutral term is used. For example, the particle “to” is added to form “tolhamil” (term indicating something not specified, which are many and few also, can be a community, a whole, a complete society, or a family, even a single person). Translated texts express it as “we” ... so we ask ourselves ... who says it? And who are they? *Tolhamil* is not necessarily specific, but it gives you the support of many and at the same time one’s own support” (Camilo Ballena).

this case includes a Wichi person and a non-Wichi person. We also decided to use other graphical elements (bars and parentheses) to represent and respect positions in the text. The result is a text that alternates voices and reveals the backstage of its construction.

Our data are part of a larger research project currently underway.² The aim of this project is to study new uses of indigenous languages and how they are conveyed in northern Argentina, the region with the greatest linguistic/cultural diversity and the highest rates of poverty and school failure in the country. In this project we investigate new uses of Wichi writing using different types of sources.

Studying the emergence of these new uses leads us to study uses of writing in the past and meanings we understand as being traditional. Conversations with community elders, study of primary and secondary sources, analysis of photographs taken in public spaces and institutions, all contextualized within our daily experience, provide an ethnographic approach to the traditional meanings of writing. As we will show, these traditional senses are in opposition to others we consider innovative. These new meanings are linked to participation in written practices that until recently were alien (to us).

We assume that writing practices are part of repertoires of communication that are in constant change. This view, based on the original studies of the ethnography of speaking – especially on the work of Gumperz & Hymes (1972); Gumperz (1972: 20); Blommaert & Bakus (2011) – allows us to focus not on the rupture between oral and written practices, but on continuums. These continuums also include multimodal practices that characterize current interpersonal communication. This view of writing as part of the repertoires of communication is also useful to us because it enables us to distance ourselves from those who describe peoples without a written language as being appropriators of an external technology – writing – and allows us to emphasize the active role of indigenous peoples in the transformation of such repertoires.

There is no doubt that the changes in the use of writing Wichi are related to sociolinguistic transformations that are taking place in our communities.³

2. After discussing the idea of community, we decided to keep “our communities / our community” in the text to emphasize our different but common belonging to everyday life in Wichi territory.

3. “Where we work, there are three terms for the groups that live there. The term “white” refers to people who are not indigenous and originally come from the cities; “creole” is used to refer to non-indigenous persons of the region; “Wichi”, “indigenous” and “aboriginal” are used to refer to native people. There are also several derogatory terms to refer to the latter.” (Virginia). “In Wichi, we say “*suwele*” to refer to non-indigenous people in general; we prefer to be called indigenous” (Camilo).

We take from Blommaert (2012) the idea that writing can be analyzed as a socially distributed semiotic practice, whose access is regulated socially and whose availability has to be explained through an analysis that crosses linguistic and social variables. From this perspective, we shall analyze the emergence of new uses of writing in the framework of historical and social changes: changes in the ways people access writing, its distribution among groups and its availability, influenced particularly by the use of technologies. Different types of texts are currently produced in Wichi, as part of new social practices and transforming communicative repertoires. However, the diversity of texts does not *per se* explain changes in meaning. Rather, new meanings are linked to other processes which, as a whole, we call “agency of the voice”. In this paper we will endeavor to explain this idea, taking into account the notions of voice (in the sense of Hymes, 1996; and Hornberger, 2006) and agency (Duranti, 1994), and showing how these notions can be related to language ideologies (Woolard, 1998, 2007; and del Valle, 2007). As we will argue, the contestable value of saying (from the periphery) lies in the way in which the common sense about who we are and what we are able to say is challenged from the margins.

This article is organized as follows: the next section provides some notes about the Wichi and our multilingual context. The subsequent sections analyze the uses and meanings of writing. Firstly, we analyze the traditional uses and meanings of writing in Wichi. Secondly, we analyze the social processes of emergence of new writing practices that frame their change in meanings. Lastly, we present some final remarks.

Languages and/ as territories

Wichi are / We are one of 38 indigenous peoples currently inhabiting Argentine territory (INDEC, 2012). Approximately 50,000 Wichi people live in the Argentine provinces of Chaco, Formosa and Salta, as well as southern Bolivia. This paper focuses on the Wichi communities of Chaco Province, specifically in the area of El Sauzalito, where about 5000 Wichi live. Most are/We are speakers of the language that bears the same name.

The Wichi language belongs to the Mataco-Mataguaya family. It is an agglutinative language, characterized by complex phonology that uses the contrast between plain, aspirated and glottalized phonemes. Unlike other languages spoken in the region, Wichi has high vitality, in particular due to the high degree of intergenerational transmission. According to our studies, this is related to two fundamental variables: the fact that most Wichi live in rural areas and as a result of the Wichi language ideologies that frame its high intergenerational transmission

(Unamuno, 2017). According to the latest available demolinguistic data, almost 94% of the Wichi speak the language (Censabella, 2009).

The Wichi people define themselves / We define ourselves as an ethnic group of great spiritual strength. Since ancestral times, organization has consisted of two fundamental interconnected pillars: the earthly and the spiritual. In the spiritual realm, the elders of each clan carefully choose a person for each deity. This person is responsible for watching over the connection with nature through the deity. The Wichi and the deities thus coexist in harmony and keep nature in balance.

In the past, the Wichi were hunter-gatherers, consuming small animals, fish, fruit and other naturally available food. However, it has become difficult to survive through traditional ways of life due the expansion of the western agricultural and livestock frontier. In addition, in recent decades, the modernization of agricultural methods and the expansion of soybean cultivation have undermined jobs. Community livelihoods are thus becoming increasingly precarious. From a Western perspective, Wichi people are poor, i.e. they do not have money in their daily lives. Where they live/work, there are very few salaried jobs. Some Wichi live on public welfare, while others are employed by the state. This type of employment includes non-professional employees and, more recently, Wichi professionals who work in the fields of healthcare and education and have been trained mostly at institutions with intercultural perspectives, and the use of Wichi language along with Spanish, the national language.

Why do we say national language? From our perspective, the idea of national language is a product of dominant historical and social processes which imposed on the social imaginary, the univocal correspondence between language and nation. In this respect, the national language is the result of diverse glottopolitical actions framed in the postcolonial processes that promoted – and still promote – the idea of Argentina as a monolingual nation (Unamuno, 2014). In these processes, postcolonial nationalist ideologies assigned a key role to the Spanish language in the construction of the emerging nation-state (Arnoux & Bein, 1999; Varela, 1999; Bein, 2012; López García, 2009).

Formal education maintained (maintains) an interrelated set of practices oriented towards the construction and imposition of a common representation of the country: the “white” Argentina. Spanish played a key role in this process. It became an effective resource for erasing differences, taking the place of “common” language. As such, it was endowed, through hegemony, with the symbolic capacity to cross over different classes and ethnic-social groups. As a “democratically” distributed resource, it was produced discursively as the most important means of cohesion and the most representative instrument of social inclusion. In the terms of Woolard (2007), it became the language of “anonymity”. We will return to this point in the analysis of the data. At the same time, indigenous languages were

physically and symbolically reduced, and relegated to a remote pre-national past. From dominant standpoints, they are treated as folk objects, categorized as part of a cultural heritage that must be documented before it disappears. They are, in addition, languages considered “agraphic” (illiterate).

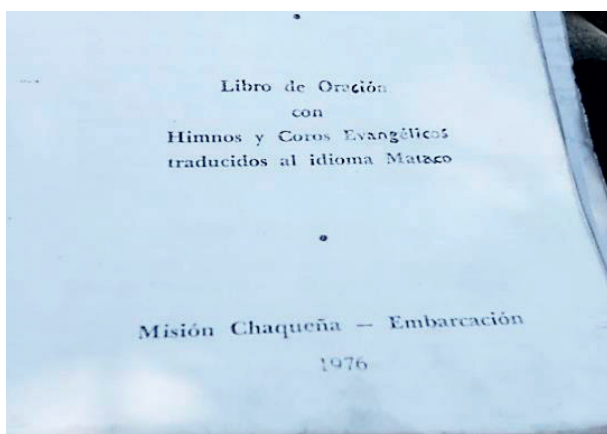
Writing in Wichi

The earliest records of the use of writing among the Wichi date back to the evangelization process carried out in the Chaco. The Jesuits and the Franciscans at first, and later on, members of the Protestant churches, employed Wichi language for teaching the gospel and in the translation of the Bible (Franceschi & Dasso, 2010). Wichi writing was linked to the processes of translation in a field where the religious and the educational were amalgamated. Wichi was the means of introducing religious precepts both orally and in writing. But it was also the object of knowledge for the agents of evangelization, who learned the language in order to incorporate the indigenous population into Christian precepts and practices. Thus, writing mediated the process of learning Wichi by non-indigenous people. In these processes of systematization of the language and in the development of its incipient writing, the Anglican groups played a key role. They were, as Montani (2015) points out, non-academic ethnographers and linguists who described Wichi language and culture in terms of their religious project. Montani says (2015: 91) “Anglicans were ‘the ethno-linguists of God’. Although they put their grammars and their dictionaries into the partial service of science, these texts were always at the service of God and God’s Wichis”.

During these processes, different proposals for alphabets were developed. At present, most Wichi in Argentina recognize the legitimacy of one of these proposals, developed by the *Consejo Wichi Lhamtés*, an NGO that brings together members of the Anglican and Catholic churches and members of Wichi communities. In 1998, the *Consejo* proposed an alphabet known as “unified”. This alphabet uses Latin spellings to represent phonemes found in different Wichi dialects (common spellings) and particular phonemes that are only part of some dialects (regional spellings). From our/the Wichi perspective, this kind of alphabet is the most suitable to represent and respect the internal diversity of the Wichi language and people.

According to different elders in our community in El Sauzalito (Chaco), the use of Wichi writing has been linked to Anglican pastors from the beginning. Anglican pastors were the first to introduce written texts in Wichi from Salta in the 1970s. These religious texts (testaments, hymnals, psalms, etc.), still used in churches, are written in the dialect of Salta. The following photos, taken at the

Anglican church of El Sauzalito in 2013, provide some examples. The first picture shows the Book of Prayer translated into “Mataco” (ancient name of the Wichi language) in 1976. In the second photo, an Anglican pastor displays the Bible in Wichi used in his sermons.



Photos 1 and 2. Wichi written texts used at the Anglican church of El Sauzalito

Some members of the Wichi communities were trained in Anglican churches in Salta and then led congregations in other Wichi territories. They were distinguished people, respected, among other things, for their knowledge of Spanish, but especially, for their skill in writing Wichi. They could read Wichi translations of the bible as well as other texts translated by the Anglicans. Their participation in the translations of religious texts and their language skills were considered, some years later, in their incorporation to schools as Wichi teachers of writing.

They were thus the first Wichí who were part of educational institutions, in the role of assistants to white⁴ teachers. However, the widespread introduction of the teaching of writing in Wichí would not come until many years later. Until a few years ago, most Wichí learned to read and write in their own language in Anglican churches. In turn, the systematization of the language was also developed by foreign and Argentine researchers who wrote Wichí grammars and dictionaries even though they could not speak the language. Many of these productions are unknown in Wichí communities.

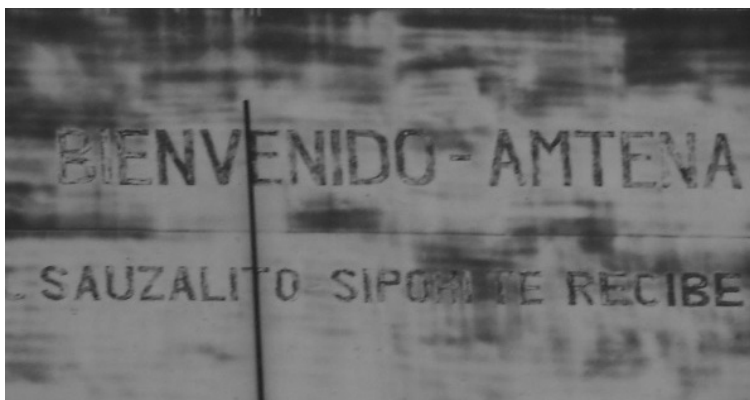
In short writing in Wichí has been historically associated to a continuum of religious-educational-descriptive practices, which were and still are mostly linked to non-Wichí people. Most of these texts are still present in the Wichí communities and coexist with others, which, as we will show, reinforce their meanings. We refer to contemporary uses of writing in Wichí that are present in texts that make up the linguistic landscape of the villages inhabited by the Wichí people.

The notion of linguistic landscape refers to the presence of different languages in the public space (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Backhaus, 2007). This type of study is regularly used in the analysis of relationships or hierarchies between languages in multilingual contexts. However, in the present study, we are interested rather in observing the linguistic landscape in relation to semiotic processes involving Wichí and non-Wichí people, focusing not so much on the product (the text) as on the way in which these texts index processes and speakers (Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009).

We use the result of a study we conducted in 2013 in El Sauzalito area as part of collaborative research with children at a primary school (Unamuno, 2013). We found that although the Wichí language was only used exceptionally in public spaces (compared to Spanish), it was nonetheless present. There were texts in Wichí, for example, on some bilingual street name signs and often on murals painted by students from educational institutions on village walls.

Murals are common in public space in this area. They use drawings and bilingual writing to illustrate significant phrases related to education, health and the unity of the people (Photos 3 and 4). These murals are like the backdrops used at schools during public ceremonies, and are made by schools or other public institutions to celebrate special days. Wichí teachers often participate in their production as translators. It should be emphasized here that translation is the role most often assigned to Wichí teachers by public institutions (Ballena, Romero, & Unamuno, 2016).

4. The *Wiphala* is the multicolored flag that represents indigenous peoples in many South American territories. Its origin is under discussion, but it is usually associated with the Aymara people of Bolivia. It is currently found in most schools in Chaco attended by indigenous children, and is also used by indigenous people as an emblem during public events.



Photos 3 and 4. Written texts in public space

There are also texts in Wichi in public buildings (schools, hospitals, municipality, magistrate's court, etc.), mainly on walls and shelves, on posters, invitations, calendars, etc. written in Wichi, and signed by local and international institutions and NGOs.

We noticed that most of these texts are issued by institutions, and though written in Wichi, do not speak *in* Wichi, i.e. do not necessarily address Wichi speakers or assume a Wichi interlocutor. Rather, they intend to point out, through the use of the Wichi language, the context in which they are located.

We found one such example at the local hospital: a UNICEF poster (Photo 6) on the wall of the early childhood care office. It is written in Wichi, but uses another dialect of the language, i.e. with regional spellings from another zone. Located in a corner where patients cannot easily see it, the poster serves, as pointed out by the Wichi interpreter who helps the pediatrician, as an “ornament”, a token indicating that *we are* in Wichi territory.



Photo 5. Invitation to an official act

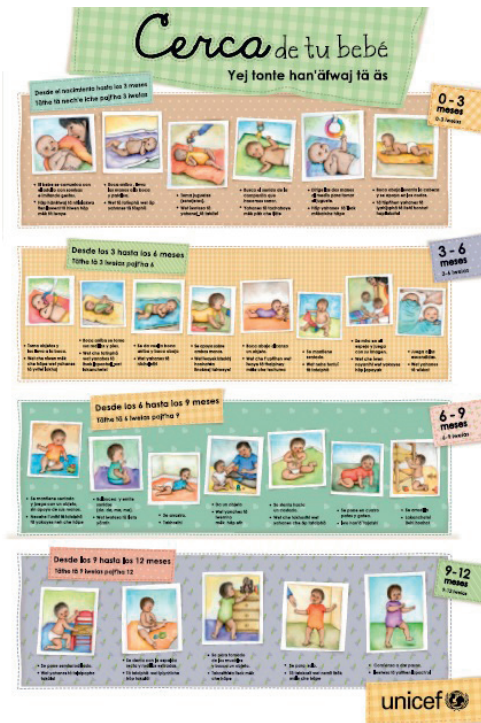


Photo 6. Poster in the local Hospital

According to our analysis, these contemporary uses of writing, like those earlier texts linked to religious practices, use translation as the framework to produce writing, and non-indigenous institutions as producers of texts intended for the Wichi. In addition, these texts in particular “point out” the presence of Wichi in the territory or in the institutions, without necessarily implying or assuming their participation in the exchange of information or the use of writing as a resource for interaction. The meanings of these alien and symbolic uses can be explained if we take into account dominant language ideologies in Argentina.

We understand language ideologies as an organized system of ideas “that articulate the notions of language, language, speech and/or communication with the specific cultural, political and/or social formation” (del Valle, 2007: 20). Language ideologies can also be considered as a repertoire of beliefs that give meaning to practices and make them understandable. Among these beliefs are those that place indigenous languages in relations of subalternity (subordination) to national language which, as mentioned above, stands as the “common” language. These relationships are often not explicit, but are described in more or less subtle practices, such as those documented herein.

According to our analysis, the use of Wichi in texts “written by others”, produced in the framework of translation (from Spanish) and serving as a “token” (rather than as a sign), in fact describes indigenous language as a mere code at service of the translation of universal Western practices embodied in the “common” language⁵ (Unamuno and Bonnin, forthcoming). In the production of these texts, the Wichi are positioned as translators of the voices of others; they are actors whose agency is subordinate to others. Texts written in Wichi and Wichi actors are placed as instruments of access to such practices, while they allude to a patient otherness. In short, these texts do not discuss the character with which we/indigenous people are described. On the contrary, they reinforce, through the use of Wichi as a “token”, the linguistic uniqueness of public discourse, reinforcing the idea of Spanish as the “common” language.

It is worth noting that these texts currently coexist with others: texts that produce new meanings and allow us to position indigenous voices differently and to put into play other language ideologies. These new meanings, linked to new discursive practices in Wichi, are situated, i.e. their emergence is imbricated in social changes.

5. For an analysis of bilingualism, code-switching and mixed language texts in this corpus, see Ballena & Unamuno (2017).

Writing Wichi

With the return of democracy in Argentina after the military dictatorship (1976–1983), different indigenous and non-indigenous initiatives achieved a specific legislative framework which included, among other things, the petition of indigenous populations to receive education in their own language. Thus, the Law of Indigenous Communities of the Province of Chaco (Law 3258/1987) included the formal recognition of indigenous languages, the right to bilingual and intercultural education, and the creation of an indigenous teacher-training center. In 1987, the CIFMA (Center for Research and Training for Aboriginal Modality) was created. It is a center exclusively for training indigenous teachers. To be admitted, students must have formal support from their communities and must be able to speak the indigenous language.

At first, young people elected by communities were trained at the CIFMA to teach writing in the native language. However, their certification as Indigenous Teacher Assistant (*ADA-Auxiliar Docente Aborigen*) did not qualify them to be in charge of a school class, so they were placed as assistants and translators of white teachers at schools.

Beginning in 1995, Bilingual Intercultural Teachers (*PIB – Profesor Intercultural Bilingüe*) are trained at the CIFMA. Unlike ADAs, PIBs earn a degree that enables them to be in charge of a class and teach alone. According to our research team's data (Ballena, Romero and Unamuno, 2016), there are currently over 100 Wichi bilingual educators (ADA and PIB), most of whom work at educational institutions in the region, while a few work autonomously.

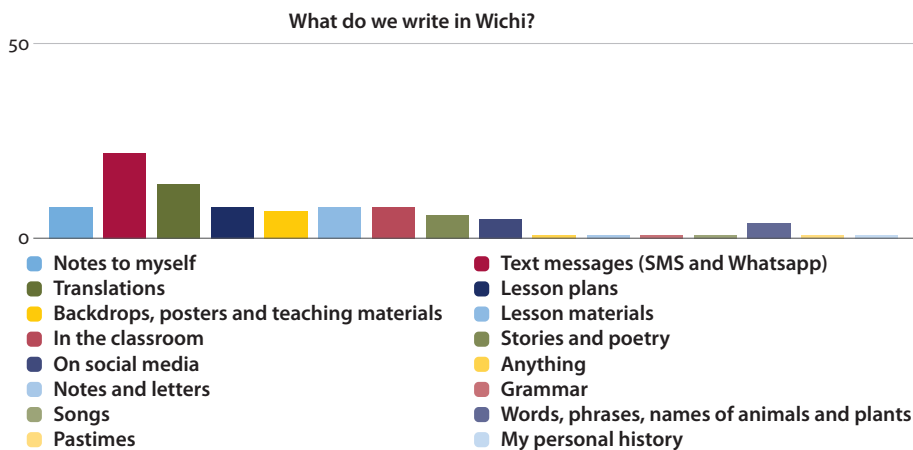
Changes in language policy have been deepening over the past decade (Unamuno, 2015). Indigenous communities play a key role in these changes. Their actions of vindication (roadblocks, chains in parliament, marches, etc.) as well as the political lobbying of their leaders have enabled indigenous actors to be positioned as interlocutors and policy-makers in indigenous affairs and language matters. Thus, in 2010, the indigenous languages of Chaco Province were recognized as official languages by Law 6604/10 (Chamber of Representatives, 2010).

Since then, indigenous teachers have organized into associations and unions to demand the implementation and development of this Law, as well as greater autonomy in the management of schools in indigenous territories. Their petitions include the creation of positions for Wichi teachers at schools, greater opportunities for vocational training for indigenous people, and co-management of schools, i.e. shared stewardship of public schools between indigenous communities and the state. In March 2017, Law 7446/2014 on public education of bilingual indigenous intercultural community management (Chamber of Representatives, 2014)

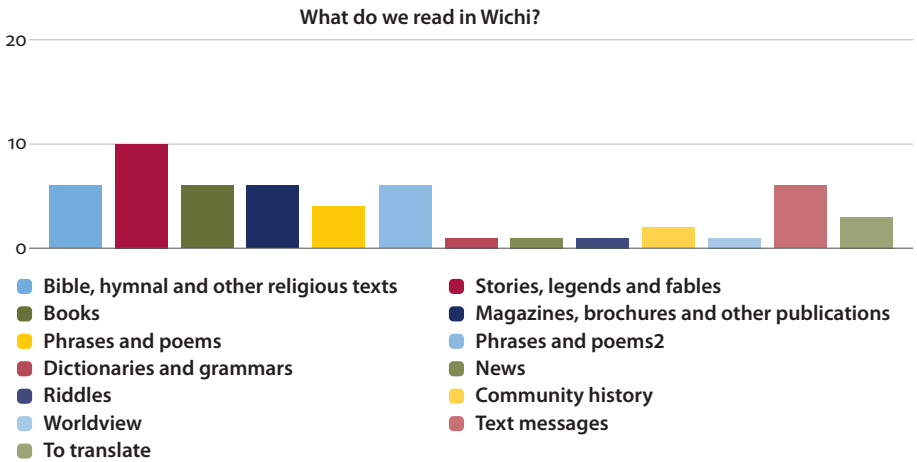
and Executive Decree 309/2017 (Executive Branch, 2017) were regulated. Among other things, the Law established that 50% of teachers at public schools attended by indigenous children should be indigenous.

In this context, Wichi teacher training and incorporation into formal education have strongly increased the number of people who know and use writing. This marks a major shift from the ways in which people accessed writing in the past – strongly linked to the churches. In addition to teachers, other professionals (health workers and translators) have largely learned to write in Wichi in their vocational training. This group, known jointly as “the bilinguals”, represents approximately 20% of the Wichi population in the area. They are the most active group in the dissemination of Wichi writing. As we have noted (Ballena, Romero and Unamuno, 2016), most Wichi people who attended formal education in the area during the last decade have had contact with Wichi writing. This is a significant quantitative difference from previous decades. However, it is also a qualitative difference: Wichi writing is not only used by some people who act as translators for institutions, churches and NGOs, but also by Wichi speakers who produce texts for other speakers of the language. Changes in access thus have impact on distribution patterns.

During a teacher training-meeting, we distributed a socio-linguistic questionnaire designed to inquire about how people currently access writing and the actual uses of written texts. It was a semi-structured questionnaire that was answered by 53 PIBs, accounting for 98% of the total. The findings showed that texts currently written in Wichi are diverse and represent different discursive genres – something unthinkable a decade ago.



Graphic 1. What do we write in Wichi?



Graphic 2. What do we read in Wichi?

Of these answers, we would like to highlight writing texts on social networks, the practice that teachers mainly associate to written Wichi. Moreover, it is the most common use nowadays as a result of significant changes not only in access to writing but also in access to technology, mainly smartphones providing Internet access. Use of technology is a major change with relation to the availability and ultimately the use of writing.

According to official data, the number of cell phones in Argentine households tripled from 2001 to 2010 (INDEC, 2012). In Chaco Province, 17.5% of households had cell phones in 2001, rising to 84.1% in 2010. This remarkable increase in cell phones in Chaco has not been matched by the number of computers in homes. The National Survey on Access and Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ENTIC) reveals that in Chaco Province in particular, the number of smartphones in households triples the number of computers, and that Internet access is provided through smartphones more often than through computers.

It should be noted smartphones are not widely available in Wichi communities, and are used mainly by people who can afford them, mostly, the “bilinguals” and their families. Distribution and availability are thus linked to a socio-structural change in the communities. However, smartphones are becoming increasingly affordable, especially among young people. This involves a significant change in the circulation of writing and impact on the emergence of particular discursive genres which, unlike previous genres, are highly interactional. In the discursive genres that occur through telephones, the link between authorship and enunciation is accentuated.

We will take as example usages of written Wichi on Facebook, which we consider remarkable. This analysis will allow us to raise one final aspect that we consider important to understand the changes of meaning related to writing Wichi: the link between identity of the practices and language ideologies.

Writing Wichi on Facebook

Firstly, we should consider that contexts such as Facebook contain interventions that go beyond the immediate (synchronous) interpersonal communication function. What is written there is “available” in asynchronous mode. While the texts can be addressed to a particular interlocutor (or group of interlocutors), they remain available for new interventions, even for other people. They are open interactions to which one can return later (Noblia, 2012). The fact that they are open means that in addition to the original addressees of the utterances, other people may participate.

These characteristics of media such as Facebook clearly define a particular context in which language usages not only acquire strong communicative and interactional value, but can also play a key role in local production of ethno-linguistic identities. This is possible because writing on such media implies writing not only for one person, but for a larger group, whether real or potential. In the case we study herein, such media could provide a space in which to be recognized as Wichi by others, and to reinforce an internal sense of belonging.

We were interested to note the use of different semiotic resources to emphasize the link of Wichi with the indigenous realm in these contexts. For example, the *Wiphala*⁶ flag is of the used as a cover photo on the timelines of Wichi Facebook users, and references to indigenous matters are usual and noticeable. Thus, the use of Wichi in social networks is articulated with other semiotic resources to locally produce the Wichi being as part of the indigenous being (Ballena & Unamuno, 2017). By way of illustration, we have selected the following picture. This is a post that circulated via Facebook as a greeting card on American Aborigine Day (April 19). It combines Argentine flag and the *Wiphala* behind an image of a native and the text “American Wichi”. This tension between the local and the global – accentuated by the use of English in this case – characterizes the new written practices on social networks.

6. According to our observations, the use of Wichi as we-code (Gumperz, 1982; Sebba & Wooton, 1998) and Spanish as a lingua franca among different indigenous groups is common in other contexts, especially in WhatsApp messages.



Our argument is that these new discursive practices in Wichi distance themselves from the previous ones (when people used written Wichi but not necessarily write *in* Wichi) because of their interactional orientation and because they project a Wichi identity onto discursive practices which, in connection with “the Indigenous”, call for a review of language ideologies.

To show this, we will analyze data that we have produced with young female teachers who authorized us to use their Facebook interactions in our work, with our commitment to change any personal reference in order to anonymize their texts. We have constituted a corpus from 68 entries (status updates) from Facebook, with a total 123 comments or “posts” made between July 2014 and June 2015. In our corpus, there are instances of writing used as a resource producing identity to Wichi activities. We will refer in particular to three cases that we find remarkable: (i) participants’ preference for public use of Wichi language in interactional sequences directed to Wichis; (ii) negotiation of the language of interaction in favor of Wichi when Wichi or (non-Wichi) participants interact in Spanish or other languages; and (iii) the consecutive use Wichi and Spanish when a Wichi addresses Wichi and non-Wichi people at the same time.

Fragment 1

Luciana’s entry.

Wichi tsinhay wit hinul ... to’teinlok to yenlhi “XXX” julio. Tuk hope Tojh tachuta toy-enhilhna venta de loco. Che tuk t’einlok hanejh ap hotenla ishe tayotsan.

[Translation: Wichi women and men ... we want to organize the XXX in July. Whoever wants to help, we will be organizing a “locro” sale. If you want to know more, ask].

1. Mauro: no entiendo nada
I didn't understand anything
2. Mirna: sólo Ische ja ja ja qué hay en julio? Para qué es el locro?
just ische ja ja ja what is there in July? What is the “locro” for?

In this case, Luciana posts a request for cooperation to organize a public event (“locro” sale). Clearly, it is addressed to Wichi people (“*Wichitsin hay wit hinul*” i.e. Wichi women and men). But then two non-Wichi participants take part in the interaction and try to negotiate their participation by using some Wichi words. However, their attempts fail and no one answers their questions.

With regard to the negotiation of the language of interaction, we shall comment on three outstanding examples. In the first case, a photo of an armadillo posted by Marta triggers a discussion about its use as food or as a pet. Lucia uses mostly Spanish in her turn and says “great”. In the next turn, Marta participates using the Wichi expression for “great” (*thalowk*). In her following turn, Lucia takes up this Wichi word again, and the interaction continues in Wichi.

Fragment 2

Entry by Marta

Marta posts a photo of an armadillo.

1. Martha: *ja ja ja wènmayek yujkwet t'ek tewf*
[Hahaha when they see it they already want to eat it]
2. Lucia: ah sí... mi hija siempre ichojlhi... el bicho ya está muy grande
[Oh yeah.... My daughter always has one ... the animal is big enough]
3. Marta: *ja ja thalowk*
[Hahaha it's great.]
4. Mark: *yohot n'aj tolhok... ja*
[No longer eats it seems.]
5. Lucia: *ja ja nem akój.. Netoyen mascota ja ja*
[Jajaj is no longer rich .. we have it as a pet haha]
6. Marta: *ja ja najh am tojh kaoka ne ok poshos*
[It seems that you no longer eat it, you prefer chickens]

The second case is an interaction in which participants discuss and consult the possibility of rain. This is especially relevant because El Sauzalito is connected to the nearest urban population – located almost 400 kilometers away – by dirt roads that are impassable during the rainy season.

As Victoria's post includes text and a photo, a non-Wichi person, known to the participants (Luis Martínez), takes part in the interaction using Wichi (turn 2). Then, between turns 9–18, a negotiation sequence is opened and ends in favor of the

Fragment 3

Translation

Entry by Victoria

Victoria posts a photo of the dirt road and cloudy sky.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>1. Victoria: según comentan mañana ichek iwumcho. Hamatatsu? [según comentan mañana va a llover. ¿Será verdad?]</p> <p>2. Luis Martínez: mat, Atsiyej? [Es verdad. ¿Si?]</p> <p>3. Luciana: hoteha tojh n-lotche comentarios ... [también escuché esos comentarios...]</p> <p>4. Victoria: campesinos tojh yomey. [dicen los campesinos]</p> <p>5. Luciana: Uy...</p> <p>6. Marta: hla buen dia ep ihi tojh ihi tojh iwulacho que parte [Hola buen día ¿dónde va a llover? ¿Qué parte?]</p> <p>7. Luciana: Thajej hope tojh n-tenlok n-hanejh, seguro lheihi ruta jajaj bah!! [No lo sé, también quiero saber, seguro que estás en la ruta jajaj bah!!]</p> <p>8. Mariela: Tik mat tojh nilhenhen tojh hatsu? Jaja [¿No estarán preocupados estos? Ja ja]</p> <p>9. Ricardito: faaaa no entiendo nada, alguien que me traduzca que cuernos dicen</p> <p>10. Marta: hate'taj en'ajh chemeta jaja a tradci ayej [¿Este quién es? ¿Alguien querrá traducirle?]</p> <p>11. Mariela: Fwemnhu matche n-hanej suwelelhañhi. [Lo hacés vos porque no entiendo el español]</p> <p>12. Ricardito: faaaaa sigo con la intriga, no se lo que dicen</p> <p>13. Ricardito: entiendamen, no se el idioma wichi yo soy de santa fe, algunas palabras e, como,, taipo, mawú, toja, elóW y eso nada más, je. escuché que decían eso pero no se que quiere decir</p> <p>14. Marta: hla amigo estamos comentando si se va a llover</p> <p>15. Ricardito: a hola por fin alguien del mismo palo je. y que honda va llover o no, porque yo estoy en sauzalito ahora</p> <p>16. Marta: no cuesta nada aprender en idioma wichi falta interes no mas nyenche hatsu suwele pikna tayotnej ja [no cuesta nada aprender en idioma wichi falta interes no mas es mi opinión para el blanco que pregunta ja]</p> <p>17. Ricardito: ok ok muchísimas gracias y discúlpe la molestia</p> <p>18. Marta: ok</p> <p>19. Teresa: Cheee tsinai!.. Ap wuye wichi fwitajha iwumlancho. Nichayukwe lhama!.. Tsak nahayuj ilonhen jaja [Che mujeres!.. ¿Por qué la gente dice que va a llover? Hace calor! O lo pueden hacer real jaja]</p> | <p>1. Victoria: they say tomorrow ichekiwumcho. Hamatatsu? [They say it's going to rain tomorrow. I wonder if it's true.]</p> <p>2. Luis Martínez: mat, Atsiyej? [It's true, yes?]</p> <p>3. Luciana: hotehatojh n-lotche comments ... [I also heard those comments...]</p> <p>4. Victoria: peasants tojhyomey. [the peasants say]</p> <p>5. Luciana: Oh-oh...</p> <p>6. Marta: hla buen diaepihitojhjihitojhiwulacho where [Hi. Good morning. Where will it rain? What area?]</p> <p>7. Luciana: Thajej hope tojh n-tenlok n-hanejh, seguro lheihi ruta jajaj bah!! [I don't know, I want to know too, I'm sure you're on the road jajaj bah!!]</p> <p>8. Mariela: Tik mat tojhnilhenhentojhatsu? Jaja [Do you think these guys are worried? ha ha]</p> <p>9. Ricardito: wow! I don't understand a word. Someone translate what on earth they're saying.</p> <p>10. Marta: hate'tajen'ajhchemetajaja a tradciayej [Who's this? Does anyone want to translate for him?]</p> <p>11. Mariela: Fwemnhumatche n-hanejsuwelelhañhi. [You do it, because I don't understand Spanish.]</p> <p>12. Ricardito: Wow! I'm still curious. I don't know what they're saying.</p> <p>13. Ricardito: Understand me, I don't know the Wichi language, I am from Santa Fe. Some words, like taipo, mawú, toja, eló,, and that's it, ha. I heard you say that but I don't know what you mean.</p> <p>14. Marta: Hi friend, we're wondering if it's going to rain.</p> <p>15. Ricardito: Hi, at last someone like me, ha ha. So... is it going to rain or not? because I'm in Saualito right now.</p> <p>16. Marta: it's not hard to learn the Wichi language. It's just lack of interest nyenchehatsusuwelepiknatayotnej ja [It's not hard to learn Wichi language, it's just lack of interest, in my opinion, for the white who asks, ha ha.</p> <p>17. Ricardito: Ok, ok, thanks a lot and apologies for the inconvenience.</p> <p>18. Marta:ok</p> <p>19. Teresa: Cheeetsinai!.. Apwuyewichifwitajhaiwumlancho. Nichayukwe lhama!.. Tsaknahayujilonhenjaja [Hey ladies!.. Why do people say it's going to rain? It's hot! Or they can make it real, ha ha]</p> |
|--|---|

use of the Wichi. Thus, Ricardito, a non-Wichi resident of El Sauzalito, says he does not understand and asks for a translation (turn 9). The other participants discuss the appropriateness of translating or not (turns 10 and 11). In turns 12 and 13, Ricardito insists on asking for the translation and provides arguments to support his request. First, he argues that he is not proficient enough in the language, then appeals to his “foreignness” (“understand, I do not know the Wichi language, I am from Santa Fe”), and finally he talks about his incipient knowledge of Wichi (“some words I know”). After this last argument, Marta decides to translate. Ricardito believes he has managed to negotiate the language of interaction. However, Marta participates again, emphasizing his lack of interest in learning the language. After that, Ricardito apologizes. Marta accepts the apologies, and the conversation continues in Wichi.

Fragment 4

Laura’s entry

Laura posts a photo of a homemade meat.

1. Natalia: *mmm mattojh akogh... ehche nwen!*
[mmm.. delicious... I’d like to have some]
2. Dante 我! 終於!! 摸到鹿了!!! 真是太萌了 (好心導遊有發吐司所以省下飼料餅的錢)
3. Paula: *seguro enekhahala? jajaj*
[Sure you made it? Ha ha!]
4. Flor: *Tisn’u!! n’cheye!*
[Share some! I’m hungry!]

Here, Laura posts a photo and after Natalia’s post in Wichi, and Dante participates using Chinese characters, as a “protest” against language choice. However, the interaction continues in Wichi and the participants ignore Dante’s participation.

The analysis of these sequences and the way in which they are resolved (or not) shows that the ethno-linguistic identity that indexes the use of Wichi is projected towards interactions as a social practice. These practices are interactively described as Wichi (and of the Wichi), and this identity of practices is recognized by others, who accept it, manifesting their incipient knowledge (fragments 1 and 3), orienting themselves towards them through the use of Wichi (fragment 2 and 3) or “protesting” (fragment 3).

With regard to the third point, we find examples in which the teachers use both languages in the same post, each addressed to different groups. This is a post in remembrance of Aboriginal Day. The first two lines, in Wichi, are a call to take care of the past and preserve things that have cultural value for the Wichi. The following lines, organized parallel to the previous ones, express a desire addressed to other natives (“Aboriginal brothers”), and a shared thought about the importance of indigenous identity. Spanish is chosen here as a *lingua franca* among different ethnic groups, but not as a “common” language.

Fragment 5

Laura's entry.

19 de abril Día del Aborigen.

April 19 Aboriginal Day.

Nat'amajhejlhatetsel before

Wet nat'eya mak tojh lhoyalhip tojh laha ihi.

[Take care of our ancestors

And let us also take care of those things that are important to us]

To all the Aboriginal brothers today I wish you a happy day ...

Preserving the roots is to preserve the most important: identity.

Final remarks

Describing the phenomena that we perceive in our communities from the standpoint of the agency of the indigenous actors is an important starting point in this work. In this regard, we want to make a difference regarding the way we/they have often been described. The image of the silent, passive indigenous person has long been one of the most widespread social representations of the indigenous people; thus, hegemonic discursive practices have left us out of the possibility of “speaking out” (*poder decir*).

In this case, we decide to “speak out” about some of what happens to Wichi writing, with special emphasis on the fact that it is not just about processes of appropriation of objects or practices of others, but rather, a re-signification of those practices. We therefore feel that it is essential to describe the changes related to the meaning of writing, taking into account that transformations in access to writing, its distribution and availability are linked to new agencies. Writing has new senses, and these new senses transform writing as resource. It is now a resource that enables us to speak out and to produce identity.

This movement can be correlated with two words that currently exist in Wichi. The word TOLETSAYNEK refers to writing in general, and especially to writing that appears in the Bible, while TITSHONHY refers to a particular use of writing, e.g. when it is used to teach or on badges or T-shirts often worn at social events. Both terms refer to the mark that is made and survives the passage of time. However, the latter refers to a particular mark: a mark made in first person (individual and collective).

Becoming writers and authors is what marks the change of meaning in the written practices we observe. The indigenous struggle has brought about effects that have transformed the socio-linguistic order, capitalizing on the language and transforming the sense of using it in public domains. As we have shown, the analysis of the changes in meaning linked to Wichi writing results in an expression: “agency of voice”. We believe that the use of this expression allows

us to distance ourselves from the idea of “appropriation” and to emphasize that it is not merely a matter of using a particular language. Rather, it is about saying something when you use that language, expressing thoughts and showing who you are. In other words, this expression allows us to explain the changes in meanings we observe and live, linking three interrelated aspects: voice, agency and language ideologies.

With regard to voice, we have argued herein that the new meanings of writing are related to a shift from old traditional uses to new ones. Former traditional uses placed non-Wichi actors as enunciators and are linked to texts that employ the Wichi language as a token, but are not necessarily oriented to interlocution with Wichi people. The new uses, on the contrary, highlight the link between authorship and enunciation, projecting onto written practices a Wichi identity that is recognized as such and linked through various semiotic resources to a broader indigenous identity. As we have shown in the analysis of the use of Wichi on Facebook, in concrete interactions, this identity of practices is produced locally and recognized as such by others, who orient themselves towards it or protest.

Regarding agency, throughout this work we consider that it is crucial to understand the role of the Wichi people in sociolinguistic changes: we situate ourselves/ we situate the Wichi as actors of transformations of the social value of the language, and as agents of the new conditions of access, distribution and availability of writing. Agency is thus linked to processes of social empowerment that allow us to produce meanings that transform central discourses and contexts from the periphery.

With regard to language ideologies, we have explained herein that the new senses of writing seem relocate the Wichi language in relation to the dominant language, Spanish, and to relocate the Wichi, as a collective, in relation to others. From the periphery, the current uses of writing put into circulation language ideologies that call to question the role of the Wichi language as a mere instrument of access to Western practices and knowledge – veiled by Spanish, and, ultimately, its subordination to Spanish in everyday life. From a non-colonial standpoint, these new senses are critical because they argue against the place of indigenous people in the world of the “illiterate” and as “appropriators” of external technologies.

In this paper we have considered that new senses are explained in relation to the possibility of becoming actors of social changes that generate new practices and transform communicative repertoires. In addition, the results of our analysis allow us to review the traditional distinction between periphery and center. Some of the common senses produced from the center and which place the natives (position us) in subalternity can be challenged from the peripheral daily life that allows us to become the present and delineate the future.

References

- Arnoux, E., & Bein, R. (Eds.). (1999). *Prácticas y representaciones del lenguaje*. Buenos Aires: EUDEBA.
- Backhaus, P. (2007). *Linguistic landscapes: A comparative study of urban multilingualism in Tokyo*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Ballena, C., & Unamuno, V. (2017). Contextos y sentidos de las prácticas escritas bilingües entre jóvenes wichis. In M. Giammatteo, P. Gubitosi, & A. Parini (Eds.), *El español en la red. Usos y géneros de la comunicación mediada por computadora*. Madrid & Frankfurt: Iberoamericana & Vervuert.
- Ballena, C., Romero, L., & Unamuno, V. (2016). Formación docente y educación plurilingüe en el Chaco: Informe de investigación. Segunda parte. (Informe inédito).
- Bein, R. (2012). 'Argentinos: Esencialmente europeos...' La influencia de las representaciones en la política lingüística. Quaderna, 1. Université de Paris-Est.
- Blommaert, J., & Backus, A. (2011). *Repertoires revisited: 'Knowing language' in superdiversity* (Working Papers in Urban Language and Literacies, 65). London: King's College.
- Blommaert, J. (2012). *Writing as a sociolinguistic object* (Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies, 97). London: King's College.
- Censabella, M. (2009). Chaco. In I. Sichra (Ed.), *Atlas sociolingüístico de los pueblos indígenas de América Latina*. La Paz: Bolivia.
- Del Valle, J. (2007). *La lengua, ¿patria común? Ideas e ideologías del español*. Madrid & Frankfurt: Iberoamericana & Vervuert.
- Duranti, A. (2004). Agency in language. In A. Duranti (Ed.), *A companion to linguistic anthropology* (pp. 451–473). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Franceschi, Z., & Dasso, M. C. (2010). *Etnografías: La escritura como testimonio entre los wichí*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor.
- Gumperz, J. J. (1972). Introduction. In J. J. Gumperz & D. Hymes (Eds.), *Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communication* (pp. 1–15). London: Blackwell.
- Gumperz, J. J., & Hymes, D. (Eds.). 1972. *Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communication*. London: Blackwell.
- Gumperz, J. J. (1982). *Discourse strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
doi:10.1017/CBO9780511611834
- Hornberger, N. H. (2006). Voice and biliteracy in indigenous language revitalization: Contentious educational practices in Quechua, Guarani, and Maori contexts. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 5(4), 277–292. doi:10.1207/s15327701jllie0504_2
- Hymes, D. (1996). *Ethnography, linguistics, narrative inequality: Toward an understanding of voice*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- INDEC. (2005). Encuesta complementaria de pueblos indígenas (2004–2005). Buenos Aires: INDEC.
- INDEC. (2012). Censo Nacional de Población, Hogares y Viviendas 2010. Censo del Bicentenario. Resultados definitivos, serie B 2, tomo 1, Buenos Aires: INDEC.
- INDEC. (2015). *Encuesta Nacional sobre Acceso y Uso de Tecnologías de la Información y la Comunicación (ENTIC)*. Buenos Aires: INDEC.
- Landry, R., & Bourhis, R. Y. (1997). Linguistic landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality: An empirical study. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 16, 23–49.
doi:10.1177/0261927X970161002

- Lassiter, L. E. (2005). *The Chicago guide to collaborative ethnography*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. doi:10.7208/chicago/9780226467016.001.0001
- López García, M. (2009). Discusión sobre la lengua nacional en Argentina: Posiciones en el debate y repercusión en la actualidad. *Revista de Investigación Lingüística*, 12, 375–397.
- Montani, R. (2015). Una etnolingüística oculta. Notas sobre la etnografía y la lingüística wichí de los misioneros anglicanos. *Boletín Americanista*, año LXV, 1(70), 73–94.
- Noblia, M. V. (2012). Medios, modos y lenguaje: la escritura digital II. Conferencia realizada en el marco del Congreso Metropolitano de Formación Docente, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 6 de diciembre de 2012.
- Rappaport, J. (2007). Más allá de la observación participante: La etnografía colaborativa como innovación teórica. In X. Leyva et. al., *Conocimientos y prácticas políticas reflexiones desde nuestras prácticas de conocimiento situa do* (pp. 327–369). México: CIESAS/UNICACH/PDTG-Perú/ISS-HIVOS.
- Rappaport, J. (2008). *Beyond participant observation. Collaborative ethnography as theoretical innovation. Collaborative Anthropologies*, 1: 1–31. doi:10.1353/cla.o.0014
- Sebba, M., & Wooton, T. (1998). We, they and identity: Sequential versus identity-related explanation in code switching. In P. Auer (Ed.), *Code-switching in conversation: language, interaction, and identity* (pp. 262–289). London: Routledge.
- Stroud, C., & Mpendukana, S. (2009). Towards a material ethnography of linguistic landscape: Multilingualism, mobility and space in a South African township. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 13(3), 363–386. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9841.2009.00410.x
- Unamuno, V. (2013). Prácticas letradas en contextos plurilingües: Notas desde El Sauzalito (Chaco). In *Actas del III Encuentro de lenguas indígenas americanas* (pp. 236–257). Bariloche: Universidad Nacional de Río Negro.
- Unamuno, V. (2014). Language dispute and social change in new multilingual institutions in Chaco (Argentina). *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 11, 409–429. doi:10.1080/14790718.2014.944530
- Unamuno, V. (2015). Los hacedores de la EIB: Un acercamiento a las políticas lingüístico-educativas desde las aulas bilingües del Chaco. *Archivos Analíticos de Políticas Educativas*, 23, 1 – 35.
- Unamuno, V. (2017). ¿Niños silenciosos?: Sobre “lo silencioso” y “lo bilingüe” en las aulas con niños Wichí.
- Unamuno, V., & Bonnin, J. (forthcoming) “We work as bilinguals”: Socioeconomic changes and language policy for indigenous languages in El Impenetrable. In J. W. Tollefson & M. Pérez-Milans (Eds.), *Handbook of language policy and planning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Varela, L. (1999). Ideas sobre el lenguaje y proyectos de país. Posiciones en el debate de 1837. In B. Arnoux (Ed.), *Prácticas y representaciones del lenguaje* (pp. 117–134). Buenos Aires: EUDEBA.
- Woolard, K. (1998). Introduction: Language ideology as a field of inquiry. In B. B. Schieffelin, K. A. Woolard, & P. V. Kroskrity (Eds.), *Language ideologies: Practice and theory* (pp. 3–47). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Woolard, K. (2007). La autoridad lingüística del español y las ideologías de la autenticidad y el anonimato. In J. Del Valle (Ed.), *La lengua, patria común* (pp. 129–142). Madrid & Frankfurt: Iberoamericana & Vervuert.

Corpus of regulations

Cámara de Diputados de la Nación (1884). Ley N.º 1420 de Educación Común.

Cámara de Diputados de la Provincia del Chaco (1987). Ley 3258 “De las Comunidades Indígenas”.

Cámara de Diputados de la Provincia del Chaco (2010). Ley 6604 “De la oficialidad de las lenguas de los Pueblos Preexistentes Qom, Moqoit y Wichi”.

Cámara de Diputados de la Provincia del Chaco (2014). Ley 7446 “De educación pública de gestión comunitaria bilingüe intercultural indígena”.

Cámara de Diputados de la Provincia del Chaco (2015). Ley 7516 “De creación de la carrera de traductor-intérprete de lenguas indígenas”.

Poder ejecutivo de la Provincia de Chaco (2017). Decreto 309/2017 “Reglamentación parcial de la ley 7446 De educación pública de gestión comunitaria bilingüe intercultural indígena”.