Indigenous languages and healing practices in Latin America

Sergio F. Romero
The University of Texas at Austin
Outline

1. Indigenous societies of Latin America
2. Indigenous languages of LA: A labyrinth of diversity
3. Migration to the US and its consequences for indigenous communities
4. Cultural issues in legal translation for indigenous migrants
5. Cultural issues in medical translation for indigenous migrants
6. Some practical recommendations
Latin American indigenous societies

• Spanish America: A model of colonialism different from that prevalent in the US
  – Few settlers
    • *Mestizaje*
  – Systematic Christianization
    • Religious syncretism
    • Medicine
  – No reservations
    • Indigenous peoples constitute demographic majorities in large areas of Latin America, especially in Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru and Bolivia.
Latin American indigenous societies

• No “tribes” but ethnic groups
  – Based on ancient forma of socio-political organization
    • Altepetl, calpulli
    • Chinamit, barrio, parcialidad
  – Strong corporate identity, ritual practices and shared ancestral history
    • Indigenous migrant communities cluster in terms of ethnicity
  – Not “Latin”
  – Culturally and historically diverse
Nahualá, Guatemala
Manuel Tzo’k, founder of the township of Nahualá
K’iche inscription on the base of Manuel Tzo’k’s monument in Nahualá
Latin American indigenous societies

• Indigenous cosmologies and cultural practices are quite different from those of mainstream Spanish-speaking Latin American societies
  – Sacred landscape in Mesoamerica and the Andes
  – Time among the highland Maya
  – Body heat and disease

• Syncretism
  – Not simply a “mixture”
  – Its own unique structure combining signs from two different traditions
  – May appear deceptively similar to Hispanic practice
Mexicanos dance drama performed in Cubulco, Guatemala
Cave shrine at K’aqb’atz’ulu, Guatemala
Latin American indigenous societies

• Economically, socially and politically marginalized
  – The poorest citizens and most oppressed citizens are often indigenous (Mexico, Guatemala, Bolivia, Peru, etc.)
    • But not all indigenous citizens are poor!
  – Land dispossession
    • Combined with booming population leads to internal and external migration
  – Lack of access to quality education and healthcare
    • High illiteracy rates
    • Does not entail “ignorance”!
  – Almost no access to government services in indigenous languages
Latin American indigenous societies

- Systematic state violence
  - Guatemala
  - Mexico
  - Peru
  - Bolivia
- Other forms of violence
  - Gangs
  - Domestic violence
  - Racism
Indigenous languages of LA: A labyrinth of diversity

• A caveat: The term “dialect” should be discarded to reference indigenous languages
  – Inaccurate and stigmatizing term
  – For linguists, a “dialect” is a regional variant of a particular language
    • Texas English, Mexico City Spanish, Moscow Russian, Comalapa Kaqchikel, Nebaj Ixhil, Ayacucho Quechua

• Let’s call them “languages”
  – As complex as any western language
  – They can be written and many have substantial literary traditions
Indigenous languages of LA: A labyrinth of diversity

- Indigenous Latin America:
  - Linguistically very diverse
  - Scores of language families
  - Hundred of languages, many of them with substantial regional variation
  - Most do not have commonly used standardized forms
    - Two Mam speakers, for example, may not necessarily be able to understand each other
An example: The Mayan family

- Thirty three different languages still spoken in Mexico and Guatemala
  - Substantial regional variation
  - Some of them have hundreds of thousands of speakers
    - A couple have more than one million
      - K’iche’
      - Mam
      - Kaqchikel
FIGURE 1.1. THE MAYAN LINGUISTIC STOCK  
(CAMPBELL 1997)
Geography of Guatemala’s indigenous languages
K’iche’ Mayan: An example of regional diversity
Dialect geography of K’iche’ Mayan
Migration to the US and its consequences for indigenous communities

• Migration precedes conquest
  – The Nahua of Central America
  – The Subtiaba of Nicaragua

• Continued during colonial times but subjected to the interests of the Spanish
  – Mines in northern Mexico and the Andes

• After Independence, loss of communal lands prompted many highland Maya to migrate
  – Settlement of northern Guatemala and southern Belize
Migration to the US and its consequences for indigenous communities

• In the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, massive indigenous migration to cities
  – Peru went from 80\% rural to 80\% urban in four decades
  – Guatemala, from 80\% rural to 50\% urban.

• Pushed by political violence and lack of jobs, indigenous migration to the US started in the 1970s
  – Until recently most Guatemalan migrants to the US were ethnically non-indigenous
Migration to the US and its consequences for indigenous communities

• Indigenous migrants to the US are part of the lower middle classes
  – Need land, property as collateral to take loans or substantial family savings to pay for the trip
  – The poorest families cannot afford it!
  – Sometimes high-school and college educated young men and women
  – Remittances are a crucial component of the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of indigenous families in Guatemala and Mexico
Migration to the US and its consequences for indigenous communities

- Indigenous migrants usually settle in areas where they have family and/or other members of the same community/ethnic group
  - Language names only imperfectly describe ethnic and linguistic boundaries
    - K’iche’
    - Zapotec
    - Mixtec
Migration to the US and its consequences for indigenous communities

• In consequence, translation requires the correct identification of the language and regional variety spoken by the client
  – Language names like K’iche’, Ixil, Zapotec, Maya, Quechua, Otomí, Tepehua, etc. are often not enough
  – Specific identification required
    • Joyabaj K’iche’, Cotzal Ixil, Juchitan Zapotec, Pastaza Quechua, Mezquital Otomi
Dialect geography of K’iche’ Mayan
Cultural issues with legal translation for indigenous migrants

- Most indigenous migrants speak a native language as primary language
- Limited competence in Spanish
  - Restricted lexical repertoires
  - Rarely able to discuss legal, scientific, political issues in any detail
- Different strategies to signal speaker cooperation from those used by English speakers
Cultural issues with legal translation for indigenous migrants

- Indigenous systems of ideas/practices about crime, community and punishment incongruent with Western law
  - Consuetudinary law
  - Avoidance of national judicial and law enforcement institutions
- Gender roles
- Child labor
Cultural issues for medical translation for indigenous migrants

- The way the body is conceptualized and interpreted differs from Western ideas
  - Matter/spirit dichotomy does not exist
- Some psychic illnesses seen as having physical causes/remedies
  - *Mal de nervios*: Depression, PTSD (?)
- Some physical illnesses seen as having spiritual causes/remedies
  - *Mal de ojo*
    - Evil eye
      - Ruwawinaq (Kaqchikel)
      - Medicine man/woman
  - *Susto*
    - Fright
      - Xib’in ri’il (Kaqchikel)
      - A ceremony required to collect the lost soul
  - *Awas*
    - Taboo
      - Sundry remedies
Cultural issues for medical translation for indigenous migrants

• Syncretism
  – Involves concepts of pre-Hispanic and Western origin
  – Some ideas of Western ancestry may be obsolete today
    • Hot/cold continuum
      – Illness
      – Medicine
      – Food
      – Physical states
        » Pregnancy
    • Mollera
      » Fontanel states and child sickness
    • Bolsa de lombrices
      » Threadworms and inception of digestive sickness
Cultural issues for medical translation for indigenous migrants

• Lack of access to quality school education
  – Superficial knowledge of western science
    • Modern anatomy, physiology
      – Body parts and their operation only partially understood
      – Sometimes indigenous notions may contradict scientific models
        » Birth control
    • Germ theory of disease
      – Microbial agency not well understood
    • Modern genetics
      – Poorly understood
Some practical recommendations

• Do not assume cultural identity between indigenous and non-indigenous migrants
• Inform yourself about the specific indigenous groups in your area
• Be as specific as possible when identifying a speaker’s language: Aldea, municipio, departamento and language name
• Educate health care practitioners and law enforcement officials
Some practical recommendations

• Remember: Indigenous migrants are not Latin
• If you translate in clinics and hospitals inform yourself about indigenous health systems, if you translate in law enforcement/judiciary contexts, inform yourself about indigenous consuetudinary law.
Maltyox chech alaq!
¡Muchas gracias!