

Title:

A limiting case of bilingual language identification: the Quichua-Media Lengua lexicon

PI:

John Lipski
The Pennsylvania State University

How do people who know more than one language recognize which language they are hearing at a given time? And how much of a language must be heard in order to make a positive identification? In most circumstances many features simultaneously distinguish the languages, including sound patterns, grammatical structures, and vocabulary items, and identification is rapid and seemingly effortless. Little is known, however, about the relative contribution of each component, and there are few language combinations that allow for isolating a single feature, with all other factors being equal.

This project examines data from bilingual speakers of Ecuadoran Quichua and the mixed language known as Media Lengua, which consists of Quichua grammatical frames with all word roots replaced by their Spanish counterparts but pronounced as though they were Quichua. Media Lengua is related to Quichua much as Lewis Carroll's poem "Jabberwocky" is related to English, e.g. "Twas brillig and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe"; the difference is that the non-Quichua roots come from another real language. Quichua-Media Lengua bilinguals provide a unique environment in which to determine whether speakers maintain separate lexicons (word repositories) for each language or a single word-bank with some sort of language-tagging with accompanying grammatical and phonetic information. The project will employ a variety of techniques to explore the mechanisms that allow for language identification, reactions to language mixing when no grammatical differences intervene, and long-term prospects for mixed languages like Media Lengua. This project is important in testing the limits of bilingualism: the ability to keep languages apart with minimal non-lexical reinforcement, and is relevant for language revitalization and standardization efforts. The demonstration that small minority languages can hold the key to important questions about speech processing, together with the incorporation of teachers and other leaders from the indigenous communities, will aid in dispelling negative views held by the speakers and their neighbors.