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Bilingual rapping in Yucatán, Mexico: strategic choices for Maya language legitimation and revitalisation

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This paper explores the sociolinguistic practices of a group of young bilingual rappers in the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico. Against the background of ongoing language shift to Spanish in the region, the language choices of a group of Maya youths involved in Hip Hop culture and their agency as policy-makers at the grassroots level is analysed. While language mixing and hybridisation are everyday communicative practices for Maya speakers, rapping either completely in Maya or in a clear-cut alternation between Spanish and Maya is a conscious strategy for language promotion among these youths. I argue that the language choices in their music performances, which are underpinned by an essentialist outlook on language contact, accrue authenticity and legitimacy to Maya and can ultimately work towards the revitalisation of this language.

Keywords: rap; language choice; indigenous youths; language revitalisation; Yucatec Maya

Introduction

In the last two decades, particularly in the aftermath of the Zapatista uprising of 1994 in Chiapas, institutional language policy and planning in Mexico has experienced significant legislative changes that affect indigenous populations. Thus, in 2001 the Constitution was amended to include for the first time a paragraph that mentions the indigenous contribution to the composition of the nation. The passing of the Law on the Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2003 and the subsequent creation of a federal agency in Mexico City that promotes indigenous languages (Inali, National Institute of Indigenous Languages) have been other important institutional developments. In the case of the Yucatán Peninsula, although there is no regional body in charge of devising language policies, Indemaya (Institute for the Development of Maya Culture), created in 2000, has among its objectives the promotion of the Maya language and culture in the state of Yucatán.

In spite of these policies, Yucatec Maya, known plainly as Maya in the Peninsula, is undergoing a gradual process of shift to Spanish. Spoken in the states of Yucatán,

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Campeche and Quintana Roo, and also in the neighbouring country of Belize, the percentage of Maya speakers within the total population has been steadily decreasing in the last decades (Pfeiler 1999; Güémez Pineda 2008; Inegi 2010). Whereas language abandonment is underway, about 20% of the roughly 4 million inhabitants of the Yucatán Peninsula are still Maya speakers (over 800,000 people, according to the last Inegi census of 2010); they have one of the highest rates of bilingualism in Mexico (Cifuentes and Moctezuma 2006); and language vitality is particularly strong in a contiguous inland area of the Peninsula bordering the states of Yucatán and Quintana Roo. Levels of Maya language retention and self-ascription to the status of indigenous person are prominent in this particular area (Bracamonte and Lizama 2008). Moreover, this region, a culturally conservative area with traditional means of production and high rates of poverty and marginalisation, is the place of origin of the Maya rappers interviewed below. In the following sections, I analyse the language practices and ideologies of these bilingual youngsters from Yucatán and Quintana Roo state and then I look at the importance of language policy and planning from the ground up and the role of youths in language revitalisation.

Youths and language revitalisation from the grassroots

Despite the notable legislative advances mentioned above and the introduction of bilingual programmes in the formal education system in Mexico since the 1930s, indigenous language shift to Spanish is widespread in Mexico. Not only is discrimination and racism towards indigenous peoples still rife (Castellanos 2003), but there are also important limitations stemming from deficient bilingual educational policies, geared exclusively to indigenous peoples and the emphasis on technical issues such as standardisation and the development of literacy (Pinali 2009).

Apart from national language policies, the task of promoting Maya in Yucatán at the local level is usually undertaken by individuals through generally isolated actions. This lack of organised efforts does not mean that there is not language activism in Yucatán or that a small number of people cannot lead a revitalisation movement. In this sense, Kroskrity (2009) has noted the importance of individual agency, particularly linked to the central issue of language ideological change, and the impact that personal commitment can have in language revitalisation efforts. Similarly, Combs and Penfield (2012, 471) point out that:

> all efforts and causes which promote linguistic diversity follow from the development of an active base consisting of either a single individual or a group, and from the conviction that taking action is at the core of all efforts to raise awareness about maintaining linguistic diversity.

An outstanding example of a project that combines grassroots efforts with academic support is the Revitalization Project, Maintenance and Linguistic and Cultural Development, which for over a decade has produced materials in indigenous languages and has organised workshops in communities across Mexico, including the Yucatán Peninsula (Flores Farfán 2012).

Several scholars have highlighted the interactions between the multiple layers of language policy and planning and the urgent need to undertake ethnographic work to look at linguistic practices ‘on the ground’ (Ricento and Hornberger 1996; Hornberger and Johnson 2007; McCarty 2011). Along these lines, this paper explores revitalisation efforts

that emerge from the grassroots with linguistic choices of young people constituting core strategies of micro language policy and planning situations (Baldauf 2006). While the emphasis is, therefore, on the local context, linguistic practices on the field, and local actors as agents of change, institutional policies at the macro and meso levels, as I will show, do have an influence on the linguistic choices of bilingual rappers in Yucatán.

Indeed, in the context of a sociolinguistics of globalisation (Blommaert 2010), the communicative practices of young people are influenced by numerous linguistic ideologies that come from local, regional, national and global contexts. On the one hand, the appropriation and localisation of Hip Hop for cultural revival and the increased use of indigenous languages in digital environments are two notable examples of this complexity where the global and the local are intermingled and influence each other (Alim, Ibrahim, and Pennycook 2009; Terkourafi 2010; Nortier and Svendsen 2015). On the other hand, although there exists an extensive body of research focusing on language socialisation in contexts of language shift (Garrett and Baquedano-López 2002; Garrett 2011; Friedman 2011), particularly among children (see Rindstedt and Aronsson 2002; Augsburger 2004; Makihara 2005 for examples of Latin American case studies), fewer works have looked at indigenous youngsters and their impact as agents of language revitalisation, especially in non-institutional contexts (Wyman, McCarty, and Nicholas 2014, xv). In particular, we do not know much about how indigenous youths in Latin America manage their increasingly complex linguistic repertoires, how they negotiate the use of languages in their daily lives and how their linguistic choices affect a dynamic identity formation (but see Messing 2014 for Central Mexico). In the case of Yucatán, it is becoming increasingly apparent that, beyond institutional policies, central domains in the lives of youngsters such as social networks are being used as a catalyst for cooperation and promotion of indigenous languages and cultures (Cru 2014a). In short, 'youth's voice, choice, and agency', as Tulloch (2014, 149) puts it, are key elements in processes of language revitalisation in need of more attention.

Popular music and language revitalisation

Popular music has not been a 'serious' subject of academic research until relatively recently (Connell and Gibson 2003), even if many music genres have been particularly relevant to movements for cultural promotion and even sociopolitical struggle (see Ayats and Salicrú-Maltas 2013; Borrull 2014 for the Catalan case). Music has grown to occupy a central place in the lives of young people and the formation of urban cultures, especially from the 1950s, but the scholarly neglect of this kind of cultural production is part of an academic look that has generally favoured the so-called 'high culture' art forms (Pennycook 2007, 78).

In the particular case of Hip Hop, several studies (Mitchell 2001; Pennycook 2007; Alim, Ibrahim, and Pennycook 2009; Terkourafi 2010) have analysed the intersection of this cultural movement, hence the capitalisation, and the use of complex linguistic repertoires among youths in the context of globalisation. Case studies include such distant and culturally distinct contexts as Australia, Italy, Japan, Tanzania, Brazil, South Korea and Germany to name but a few. Indeed, as Sarkar and Low (2012, 404) write, in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century Hip Hop has become a popular culture movement in its own right. In Latin America, and particularly in Bolivia, some researchers have explored the possibilities that rap, one of the four traditional elements of Hip Hop (along with break dancing, Djing and graffiti), offers for empowerment and language pedagogy within grassroots and non-institutional contexts (Swinehart 2012;

Tarifa 2012; Ramírez Ballivían and Herrera 2012; Jiménez Quispe 2013). Language revitalisation, however, is not the main focus of these works.

In Mexico a growing number of bands are adopting popular music and using indigenous languages as a vehicle for artistic expression. Sak Tzevul (rock in Tzotzil), La Sexta Vocal (ska in Zoque) or El Rapero de Tlapa (rap in Mixtec) are but some examples of cultural activism among youths and functional expansion of some indigenous languages which may work towards language revitalisation (see, for instance, López Moya, Ascencio Cedillo, and Zebadúa Carbonell 2014). In Castells i Talens and Novelo Montejo (2013) have examined some contemporary Maya songs as acts of cultural resistance and the ways in which music has helped to make visible a socioeconomically and culturally marginalised group in society.

Against the backdrop of growing Maya language revalorisation efforts, rap, a key component of Hip Hop culture, is blossoming in the Yucatán Peninsula. In contrast to institutional policies that stress the development of literacy and standardisation (Pinali 2009), two sociolinguistic features make rap an especially relevant genre for language revitalisation. The first is the central place that orality, verbal fluency and creativity play in its lyrics. Owing to the saliency of orality in primary Maya language socialisation in Yucatán (all rappers interviewed have grown up in environments where Maya is still widely spoken), rap has adapted well within a context of sociocultural practices, such as story-telling, that favour orality over literacy (Hull and Carrasco 2012; Worley 2014). The second feature is the fact that rap is a kind of music genre associated by many young people with modernity and 'coolness'. As is known, one of the ideological pillars of contempt for indigenous languages is the alleged inability of these languages to express modernity and their association to rural and traditional areas, or worse, to socio-economic and cultural backwardness (Dorian 1998). In this sense, in Yucatán it is significant that the adjective 'ancestral' commonly appears in discourses of Maya language and culture, particularly among the mainstream media and some intellectuals, creating an association to a remote past, often pre-Hispanic, and separating it from everyday contemporary uses. In Yucatán this view is closely linked to the widespread ideology of linguistic purism, a phenomenon closely linked to the concepts of legitimation and authenticity, prominent issues to which I return below.

Methodology

The fieldwork for data collection was conducted during the month of August 2014 but it is, in fact, the continuation of research on language revitalisation carried out in Yucatán in an intermittent way since 2008 and which culminated in a doctoral dissertation (Cru 2014b). While recurrent themes in the discourses of Maya language promotion among activists and intellectuals emphasise the need for institutional language planning (in a salient way the drafting of specific language legislation, the use of Maya in the education system, and the development of literacy in Maya), it became apparent during fieldwork that grassroots initiatives of revitalisation among youths were also taking place in other domains and needed further attention. Of particular importance in that research was the role that purism plays in the process of revalourising Maya in the Peninsula. The methodological approach to gather data for this paper has been ethnographic and qualitative, with special attention to language ideologies, that is, beliefs and values associated to language choice and use, and is based on informal interviews in Spanish with a group of bilingual youths and especially with Pat Boy, pioneer in the use of Maya in Hip Hop music and rap in the Yucatán Peninsula. In addition to interviews, observation

of gigs in the field, collecting artwork, flyers and photographs accompanying the advertising of musical events, and reading news items which appeared in local media have provided valuable data. Certainly, the concerts held in southern Mérida as a tribute to the late rapper El Cima Atte and the event organised by the radio station Radiacción in central Mérida were particularly fruitful occasions to watch live artistic performances of these young rappers and talk to them in an informal setting.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasise the use of social networks, especially Facebook, as a fundamental tool not only to establish and maintain contact with these young people but also to look at the ways in which they use these platforms to publicise their work and express themselves. Thus, several months before the interviews in the field, I had been communicating through electronic media with some of these youngsters and particularly with Pat Boy. It was also through Facebook chat that I could obtain interesting insights on popular music and the use of Maya by other rappers such as El Maya and Residente Sabán. Undoubtedly, the centrality of digital technologies and the use of social media in the lives of young Maya speakers deserve wider and deeper exploration given the impact that this area, associated like Hip Hop to modernity, can have on the reclamation and recovery of Maya.

Language practices among young rappers in Yucatán

As noted above, in the Yucatán Peninsula rap in Maya is growing in popularity, most prominently in the state of Quintana Roo. Rappers like Pat Boy, El Maya, El Poeta, Residente Sabán, El Cima Atte, Príncipe Maya are examples of male youngsters in their early twenties who have incorporated Maya in some of their songs. To better understand this current momentum is necessary to recall the role played by mature artists, such as Santos Santiago, and some public institutions as promoters of Maya through music. In the three states that make up the Yucatán Peninsula, the consolidation of official indigenous radios (Xepet, Xenka, Xexpuj); the creation of a short-lived independent radio in Mérida (Yóol Íik, 2005–2009); and the establishment of an official cultural agency such as Indemaya, despite their institutional constraints, have all contributed positive changes in linguistic attitudes and in increasing the revalourisation of Maya.

Unlike the common urban emergence of rap in other locales, young rappers who sing in Maya in Yucatán come from small towns located in the interior of the Peninsula. As mentioned, all of them are taking advantage of the technologies of communication and information to publicise their work. Some rap artists who sing in Maya have uploaded several video clips on Facebook and YouTube, and also songs to digital platforms such as Soundcloud and Hulkshare, which provide free cloud storage. In this sense, it is particularly significant the diffusion of rap sung in Maya thanks to social networks and web portals. Thus, since its publication in September 2012, the song ‘Sangre Maya’ (Mayan Blood) by Pat Boy and El Cima Atte has had over 75,000 views and 143 comments at the time of writing. Moreover, beyond the popularity that YouTube videos can have locally among youngsters in the Peninsula, transnational Maya speakers, according Indemaya (2005) between 50,000 and 80,000 Mayas live in the Bay Area of California, can also follow the musical production of the Peninsula (see Johnson and Callahan 2013 for an exploration of how the Garifuna people are creating a supraterritorial cyberspace using social media).

While this paper focuses on the language ideologies and practices of a group of rappers, there is no doubt that the potential influence of their linguistic choices and activism on the lives of other youth needs further research. Indeed, we do not know much

yet about the impact that consumption of popular music and participation in social media, both as separate and increasingly as intertwined domains, has on the linguistic ideologies and practices of Mexican youths.

In an interview to understand the motivation for choosing to sing in Maya, Pat Boy, a rapper from Pino Suárez, a small village of some 250 inhabitants in Quintana Roo state, replied that he does it because it is easier for him to rap in Maya and also to help combat linguistic prejudice. In his own words:

> Pues la verdad es que más que nada a mí me gusta la música hip hop pero a veces se me dificultaba rapear en español y lo intenté en maya y se me facilitó y además por aquí muchos se avergüenzan de hablar maya y de su origen. Rapear en maya es algo diferente, novedoso y creativo. (Mérida 20 August 2014)
>
> [Well, the truth is, more than anything I like hip hop music but I found it difficult sometimes to rap in Spanish and I tried in Maya and it was easier and also a lot of people around here are ashamed of speaking in Maya and their origin. Rapping in Maya is something different, novel and creative].[1]

To the same question, El Maya, a young Yucatec rapper from Peto, answered that:

> Pues para promover mi propia cultura y por las ganas de darla a conocer en otros estados y ciudades. Para nosotros es algo innovador, mezclamos la música en lengua maya para tener un ritmo diferente y para transmitir lo que nosotros sentimos al cantar en nuestra lengua. Es todo un orgullo para nosotros. (Mérida 23 August 2014)
>
> [Well to promote my own culture and the wish to make it known in other states and cities. For us it is something innovative, we mix the music in Maya to get a different rhythm and to transmit what we feel when we sing in our language. We are very proud of it].

These excerpts point out some recurrent themes that surfaced in interviews and informal conversations with these youths. On the one hand, it is easier for them to memorise rhymes and sing in Maya, while on the other, it is a way of combating discrimination and stigmatisation of Maya speakers. Therefore, critical language awareness expressed through pride and self-esteem, which are fundamental components for language revitalisation, underpins these statements. Equally salient are references to emotions and creativity, aspects closely linked to artistic production, but more often than not ancillary in institutional language policy and planning.

Delving into the issue of language choice, Pat Boy stated in the same interview that Maya has a good flow, namely a good combination of rhythm and rhyme, which he attributes to the morphophonological structure of that language:

> El rap en maya se escucha como en inglés, se escucha chingón, corto y fluido, no como el español, que tiene palabras más largas. Esto es lo que les diferencia. (Mérida 20 August 2014).
>
> [Rap in Maya sounds like English, it sounds cool, short and fluent, not like Spanish, which has longer words. This is the difference between them].

As noted in the introduction, the rural origin of these bilingual youths, who come from villages where, despite the increasing shift to Spanish, the percentage of Maya speakers is high and Maya still plays a role in children's socialisation, explains their verbal

proficiency and the possibility they have to include Maya in their musical production. Urban and rural spaces, though, should not be seen as dichotomous but rather as geographical and social realities often experienced as a continuum. Mobility is a key feature in the lives of the great majority of inhabitants of Yucatán, including of course the young musicians interviewed here. The town of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, for instance, has served as a focal point for young people in Quintana Roo interested in popular music sung in Maya, not only rap but also other genres of popular music such as reggae.

One of the most prominent ideological features of the rap produced by these bilingual youngsters is the alternate use of languages in their repertoire. It is common to freely translate the stanzas that make up a song, a fact that is explained by the need to keep the rhythm and rhyme both in Maya and Spanish. There is also a commercial reason, since a wider audience that does not understand Maya, or does it only partially, can be included in this way. According to Pat Boy, 'cantamos también en español para llegar a un público más amplio' (we also sing in Spanish to reach a wider audience). The song 'Sangre Maya' (Mayan Blood), performed jointly by Pat Boy and El Cima Atte, is sung in Spanish and Maya, languages which are alternatively used in separate stanzas. Even in the chorus of the song the same phrase, Mayan blood, the title of the song, is juxtaposed in Spanish and Maya:[2]

> Sangre maya u k'i'ik'el máasewal,
> Be'elake' kin taasik teech u jaajile' ak ch'i'ibal.
> Sangre maya ma' saajako'on meyaj.
> Chíinpoltik lela', bobo'chi' maaya k'aay[3]

What follows is part of the transcription of the song as published on YouTube, which shows code-switching at the level of the stanza with parallel contents in Maya and Spanish:

> U k'íik'el máasewal, bix u kaxtik u kuxtal
> Tu'ux ku k'ubiko'ob le máako'ob u puksi'ik'al
> Way be'elak te'e lu'uma' wey kik pak'iko'on xi'im.
> Leti' meet u kuxtal le winik ma' tu cha'ik u kimil
> Ak Úuchben ch'i'ibal yaan u chíikulajilo'ob
> U'uye'ex leti'obe' mix yaanchaj ti'Leti'ob
> u nu'ukulil meyajo'ob, yaanchaj ti'ob
> u náajaltiko'ob U ma'alo'obil tuukulo'ob.
> SANGRE MAYA CIUDADES QUE NO CONOSEN
> DONDE OFRESEN CORAZONES PARA DE LEITAR ADIOSES
> EN MI PRESENTE TIERRA MAYA DEL CULTIVO
> EL MAIZ SAGRADO QUE MANTUBO EL MAYA VIVO
> UNA CIVILISACION DE CULTURA DE MISTERIOS
> COMO ELLOS SIN HERRAMIENTA LEVANTARON SU IMPERIO
> CULTURA QUE OFRESEN SUS CREENCIAS LEER LAS ESTRELLAS
> LES DAVAN LAS RESPUESTAS A SUS CIENCIAS[4]

On YouTube language choice is clearly marked by the use of fonts, normal typeface for Maya and small caps for Spanish. The latter language is sometimes misspelled owing to homophony in Mexican Spanish between c/s ('conosen' instead of 'conocen', 'ofresen' instead of 'ofrecen'), b/v (as in 'mantubo' instead of 'mantuvo', and 'davan' instead of daban'), plus lack of accents and incorrect separation of words ('de leitar adioses' instead of 'deleitar a dioses'). This is unsurprising as informal digital environments such as YouTube do allow for deviation of standard orthographies. One outstanding feature,

however, is the use of standardised Maya alongside Spanish. Thus, in the drive to legitimise Maya, the Maya excerpts follow the standard variety agreed upon in 1984 and currently used by institutions and most Maya writers and academics (those very few who can actually write in Maya). These young rappers, however, do not belong to this select group. As Pat Boy said in an interview when I asked him about the process of composing songs, 'yo escribo la letra en maya tal y como suena' (I write the lyrics in Maya just as it sounds). In the case of 'Sangre Maya' the transcription in Maya was done by el Chilam Balam, a Yucatec writer and an activist of Maya revitalisation who has been working closely with these youngsters.

One of the latest local hits released by these Maya rappers is *In watech tulakal* (To tell you all), a collaborative work among Pat Boy, El Maya, El Poeta and Residente Sabán. This is a romantic song, which mixes pop and rap, while again maintaining a bilingual structure with a short introduction in Maya, a chorus in Spanish and consecutive interventions in which each of the rappers step in to sing in Maya. The video for the song, which was uploaded to YouTube in mid-August 2014, has had over 12,000 visits at the time of writing.[5]

A key issue, again, is the fairly neat separation of codes. This is a feature that differentiates rap production of these young people from other cultural contexts where the merging of the communicative codes used by youngsters blurs the boundaries between languages. Language mixing and hybridisation, often reflecting colloquial language use on the ground, are common practices in rap worldwide (Alim, Ibrahim, and Pennycook 2009; Pennycook 2010). Sociolinguistic analyses of rap production (Urla 2001; Low, Sarkar, and Winer 2009; Leppänen and Pietikäinen 2010; Moriarty and Pietikäinen 2011; Lin 2014, to mention but a few examples) have highlighted the contrast between increasing complex linguistic repertoires among youths played out in rap and dominant ideologies stemming from public institutions such as the school, in which penalisation of hybrid language use is the norm. According to the studies mentioned above, both alternating and mixing codes are not perceived by rap artists as a barrier to communication, but rather as strategic resources that foster creativity and authenticity, namely, 'keepin' it real', which is a basic premise of hip hop culture (Pennycook 2007).

In the case of bilingual rappers of the Yucatan Peninsula, however, the choice of singing completely in Maya or the clear-cut alternation between Spanish and Maya in the same song is a conscious strategy to legitimise Maya against the background of widespread ideologies that devalue the use of vernacular Maya. In Yucatán there is a perceived division between two varieties of Maya, which differ in the amount of lexical borrowing from Spanish present in each of them (Pfeiler 1997). These two varieties are commonly known as *jach* Maya and *xe'ek'* Maya. The former corresponds to a supposedly pure and authentic variety spoken by some older people, while the latter literally means 'mixed' and is often referred to in Spanish as 'amestizada'. These varieties are highly ideological and stand in stark contrast with each other, often becoming symbols of authenticity (or lack thereof) of the speakers that use them. Worldwide case studies attest to the important role that authenticity plays in the ideological tensions arising from language revitalisation processes (Hornberger and King 1998; Wong 1999; Hinton and Ahlers 1999; O'Rourke and Walsh 2015).

Unlike the expression of purist ideologies of language contact in Yucatán by both intellectuals and public institutions, I argue that these young artists are strategically setting boundaries within their linguistic repertoire with a view to instilling authenticity and legitimacy into Maya in order to revalourise it. Thus, while purism, particularly in its extreme form, can have detrimental effects for the reproduction of Maya (Cru 2014b), a

dose of 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak 1993) seems to be needed for legitimation purposes. As Pat Boy explains:

> Me han dicho algunos que haga una canción en xek' pero me esfuerzo para que mi rap suene a maya, maya. Y las canciones que son totalmente en maya, que investiguen la traducción. (Pat Boy, Mérida 20 August 2014)
>
> [I've been told to make a song in xek' (mixed Maya) but I make an effort for my rap to sound Maya, Maya (completely Maya). And the songs which are completely in Maya, they can seek out the translation].

The fact that these rappers all come from a traditional area where Maya is widely spoken and that they have been socialised in Maya allows them to easily switch back and forth between Spanish and what is perceived as 'authentic' Maya, which in this case is expressed by the emphatic repetition of the noun 'Maya'. Rather than mixing codes, in many of their songs these youngsters prefer to juxtapose the languages that make up their linguistic repertoire with a view to putting Maya on a par with Spanish and reach a larger audience.

As is often the case, though, polyvalent language ideologies emerge from a close ethnographic look at the local context. In this regard, fluid and porous uses of Maya and Spanish are common sociolinguistic practices in Yucatán but these are usually not foregrounded by activists involved in the revitalisation of Maya, even if everyday use of Maya can be productively studied through the lens of emergent sociolinguistic terms which put the emphasis on the fluidity of communicative practices on the ground, such as translanguaging (García 2009) or heteroglossia (Bailey 2012). Indeed, in an exchange on Facebook with Residente Sabán, he highlighted the blended uses of Spanish and Maya in everyday speech:

> Pues aquí en el sur del estado lo que hablamos es maya con una combinación de español. Prácticamente es como hablar y decir hola y bye en inglés para despedirse sin darse cuenta que ya se combina inglés y español, pues aquí lo mismo. (Facebook chat. 25 November 2014)
>
> [Well here in the south of the state (Quintana Roo) what we speak is a combination of Maya and Spanish. It's almost like speaking and saying hello and bye [original in English] to say farewell without realising that both languages are being combined, well, here is the same thing].

Thus, we see how the linguistic practices of these youngsters are based on strategic choices drawn from ambivalent ideologies that include both fixed and fluid categories (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010). Crucially, though, for reclamation purposes activists may give preference to the reification of indigenous languages, consciously emphasising their boundedness. The aim is to counterbalance the pressure of deeply ingrained language ideologies, stemming from dominant institutions and speakers, which often conceptualise minoritised languages as 'incomplete', 'mixed' or 'dialects' in a derogatory way, as these languages may not be standardised and are not commonly used for literacy. As Jaffe (2011, 222) has aptly pointed out, 'essentialism can be "strategic" to the extent that it establishes sociolinguistic legitimacy, often a prerequisite for the mobilisation of local or extralocal resources (material or attitudinal)'. This statement clearly resonates with the Yucatecan case, as well as in neighbouring Guatemala, where essentialist discourses have

played a central role in the sociopolitical agenda of advocates for the reclamation of Maya languages and cultures (Warren and Jackson 2002).

Furthermore, although lack of space prevents a detailed semiotic analysis of the video clips, the authenticity associated with rapping in Maya appears not only in the linguistic choice of the lyrics, as is clear in 'Mayan Blood', but also in the selection of images of videos uploaded on YouTube, linking therefore the Maya language with place and territory, which is a basic tenet of the ideology of authenticity (Woolard 2008, 304). Thus, the video for this song displays quintessential images of rural Yucatan, where all these artists come, such as thatched Maya houses, the iconic church from the town of Tihosuco in Quintana Roo, traditional activities (extraction of gum, weaving a hammock), and 'milpas' (corn plots).

Another important ideological issue arising from the choice of Maya by these youths is the view that they are filling a niche in the market because until recently there was no rap in that language. Their proficiency in Maya is, therefore, considered as a resource rather than a hindrance (Ruiz 1984). Singing in that language not only stamps a mark of artistic authenticity and originality in a market where standing out in Spanish would be more complicated but also accrues symbolic capital to the indigenous language. Language legitimation, therefore, takes place through rapping in Maya, an activity which unlike formal education, youngsters can be in control of (Bourdieu 1991). According to Residente Sabán:

> Nosotros cantamos bilingüe, que es cosa que muchos raperos de la Península no hacen. Mi rap es maya maya y español maya. Con esta integración logramos llegar e incluso ser escuchados a otros países que entienden español pero no la maya. La idea es dar a conocer el idioma maya como una lengua de Yucatán, más allá de la Riviera y los monumentos. (Residente Sabán, Facebook chat 25 November 2014)

> [We sing bilingually, which is something that many rappers in the Peninsula don't do. My rap is Maya Maya and Spanish Maya. With this integration, we try to reach out and even be listened to in other countries where Spanish, but no Maya, is understood. The idea is to make Maya known as a language of Yucatan, beyond the Riviera and monuments].

Along the lines of Pat Boy's comments on the language choice for his songs, Residente Sabán also stresses the fact that he raps in 'complete Maya' (hence the emphatic repetition again of the name of the language) or bilingually. It is difficult to gauge the influence that dominant language ideologies stemming from regional institutions may have on these youngsters but recurrent discourses that highlight the eminently bilingual nature of the Yucatan within Mexico are common in the Peninsula.

Moreover, the potential commodification of Maya identity and language as cultural capital and the increasing impact of this process on its revitalisation has become an ever more central issue in language revitalisation (see Heller 2003; Leppänen and Pietikäinen 2010 for Sámi; also Comaroff and Comaroff 2009 for a comparison of international case studies on ethnicity). Rapping in Maya has provided an opportunity to some of these Maya youngsters to go out of their communities and expand their horizons. For Pat Boy at least, knowing and using Maya resonates with discourses of 'forging ahead' studied by Messing (2007), which in Mexico are most commonly associated with mastering dominant languages such as Spanish, and increasingly English. These are the words of Pat Boy on this topic:

> Muchos jóvenes se han animado a cantar en maya porque han visto que he salido, que he viajado. Muy pocas personas han viajado más allá de su pueblito. 'Si él puede, pues nosotros podemos igual', dicen. (Mérida 20 August 2014)
>
> [A lot of youngsters have been inspired to sing in Maya because they have seen that I have been out [of the community], that I have travelled. Very few people have travelled beyond their own little village. 'If he can, then we can too', they say].

Selling T-shirts, CDs and other merchandise complement the fees that these youngsters are beginning to receive for some of their gigs. For these youngsters, rapping in Maya supersedes the opposition, often mutually exclusive, which is drawn between the instrumental uses of languages and their sentimental value, this latter closely linked with one's identity (May 2004). Thus, performing an essentialised indigenous identity through a modern and enjoyable music genre, which may even offer possibilities for social mobility, is a powerful combination for language reclamation.

Noteworthy in this sense is the fact that Mexican institutions, both at federal and state level, have started promoting music performed in indigenous languages. In 2010, for instance, the National Council for Culture and the Arts (Conaculta) launched the programme 'De tradición y nuevas rolas' (Of tradition and new songs), which supports indigenous bands by organising concerts and helping to release records. Likewise, in the state of Yucatán the Second Youth Contest of Songs in Maya was supported by Indemaya in September 2014. This contest was aimed at youths between 15 and 30 years old and offered three substantial monetary prizes, showing the circular ways in which different layers of language policy and planning interact and influence each other. Young rappers in Yucatan are well aware of these opportunities. As Pat Boy stated:

> Ahora las instituciones de México se han enfocado mucho en esto. Por ejemplo Conaculta invita a los jóvenes y los manda a otros estados, hay hasta rock tzotzil, y los jóvenes se han animado mucho con esto. (Mérida 20 August 2014)
>
> [Now Mexican institutions have focused a lot on that. For example, Conaculta invites young people and send them to other states, there's even rock in Tzotzil, and young people have been inspired by this].

Finally, in a country where clientelism and patronage are deeply rooted, institutional involvement in the promotion of indigenous languages creates profound dilemmas and ambivalence among young artists who are at the moment working for the most part independently and rely primarily on private sponsors to produce their songs and videos. As Connell and Gibson (2003, 6) have note, there is 'a tension between music as a commodified product of an industry with high levels of corporate interest, and simultaneously as an arena of cultural meaning'. Therefore, a paradox arises from the fact that the more successful these rappers become, the higher the chances of institutional pressure and control of their work. Pat Boy, one of the few youngsters in Yucatán who is striving to become a professional rapper, argued that:

> No me gusta trabajar con instituciones públicas porque te van a decir, 'vente al evento gratis', no me van a pagar, 'ya te apoyamos, nos tienes que devolver el favor'. Y entonces, ¿cuál es el chiste del apoyo? Por eso no me gusta trabajar con ellos. Prefiero trabajar con independientes como asociaciones civiles. (Mérida 20 August 2014)

> [I don't like working with public institutions because they'll tell you, 'come to the event for free', they're not going to pay me, 'we supported you, you'll have to pay the favour back'. And then, what's the point of the support? That's why I don't like working with them. I prefer to work with independent people like civil associations].

In sum, the active role of these rappers and their conscious language choices, either with the performance of songs completely in Maya or in bilingual juxtaposition (Maya and Spanish), constitutes a powerful strategy that works towards language ideological change and can, eventually, help to revitalise Maya.

Conclusion

Both social networks and popular culture, expressed in the case analysed here through a group of young rappers, can have a significant impact on the revitalisation of minoritised languages, especially when used in combination and mutually reinforce each other. Without a doubt, in the last decade Internet has become a fundamental tool for the dissemination of popular culture and an entertainment platform which includes a significant amount of musical production and consumption (Eisenlohr 2004). The introduction of Maya in domains associated with new technologies and 'cool' cultural trends such as Hip Hop is influencing a process of language revalourisation among some young people of the Yucatán Peninsula.

Unlike the formal education system which places an emphasis on language standardisation and literacy, the oral use of Maya by these youths in popular music celebrates bilingualism and extends the functions of the minoritised language in a playful, modern and creative way, emotional aspects which have not been a priority for institutional language policy and planning. In Yucatán, the ideologies of these young rappers point to a high metalinguistic awareness of the possibilities offered by their linguistic repertoire. Although hybridisation and language mixing are common in everyday language practices of Maya speakers, these youngsters favour a neat separation of the codes at their disposal in their music performances. These conscious decisions aimed at increasing the symbolic capital stem from strategically mobilising and essentialising the languages that make up their communicative repertoire when they rap. This is a key feature in the ongoing process of Maya language revalourisation which illustrates the complexity and malleability of language ideologies that speakers change and adapt depending on context and the circumstances of language use (McGroarty 2010).

Although these cases suggest that linguistic reclamation and activism are underway and that there is a positive impact on self-esteem among these youngsters, it is necessary to further investigate the potential knock-on effects these artists may have on the language attitudes of their peers and families, based both in cities and rural areas and, ultimately, on the social reproduction of Maya in the Yucatán Peninsula, where purism is widespread and mixed communicative practices are often seen as illegitimate. The question remains whether vernacular 'mixed' varieties of Maya will also be legitimised in the current process of language revalourisation. These are vital aspects in a context where institutional language policies are timid and where language shift towards Spanish is driven by the marginalisation of the Maya-speaking population and the lack of socio-economic value associated with Maya, especially in urban settings.

Notes

1. All translations are mine.
2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1hzf1-_Ibw
3. Translation: Mayan blood, the blood of the indigenous person (Maya)/today I'm bringing to you the truth of our ancestors/Mayan blood, we are not afraid of work/listen to this rap in Maya.
4. Translation: Mayan blood, cities you don't know/where they offer hearts to please the gods/at present Maya cropland/the sacred maize that kept the Maya alive/A civilisation of culture and mysteries/like those that built an empire without tools/a culture that offers its beliefs/reading the stars/gave them answers to their science.
5. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11G6sSfe3zs (Accessed 13 January 2015).

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