

Erreffe

75

Contributi
allo studio
della cultura
delle classi
popolari

Il buon uso sociale dell'antropologia medica

Numero dedicato al 2°
Convegno nazionale
della Società Italiana di
Antropologia Medica (SIAM)
«Un'antropologia per capire, per
agire, per impegnarsi». La lezione
di Tullio Seppilli (Perugia, 14-16
giugno 2018)

a cura di Donatella Cozzi
e Fabio Dei

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Erreffe La ricerca
folklorica

Rivista annuale
numero 75, anno 2020
direttore responsabile
Glaucio Sanga, Università Ca' Foscari
Venezia

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La ricerca folklorica | Grafo

Erreffe

Rivista annuale

Direttore responsabile:

Glauco Sanga
*Università Ca' Foscari
di Venezia*

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On a “last speaker” The comeback of Chaná¹

ABSTRACT

In 2005, the news of the existence of a “semi-speaking” of Chanà [qsi], a language that was considered “extinct” more than 150 years ago, transformed the sociolinguistic reality of the Litoral region in Argentina and Uruguay. The fact also sparked debates on social, historical and political issues. This article aims to trace the identification of a person as a “last speaker”, to show how an entity called “Chanà language” has been shaped over time, and to present the emergence of a community that feel an emotional connection to this language.

Keywords: chaná, last speaker, metalinguistic communities, indigenous re-emergences, endangered languages, linguistic anthropology.

1. A ghost speaker

There is a “category” of speakers called “ghost speakers” (GRINEVALD and BERT 2011), in other words those people who know a language but do not manifest themselves as speakers. Often, these people acquire prominence due to some particular circumstance that, in general, depends on outsider interest, or on the re-framing of the local community (EVANS 2001).

In 2005, news began circulating regarding the existence of a “semi-speaker” of Chaná, a language that was believed to be “extinct” for more than 150 years: Blas Jaime, a resident of Paraná (Argentina). His investiture as “last speaker” transformed the sociolinguistic reality around him. These “last speakers” (cf. VULETIĆ 2013 on “the last speaker of Dalmatian”; ÖZSOY 2016 on “the last

speaker of Ubykh”, or EYRE 2016 on Ishii, “the last Yahi”²) are probably the most emblematic figures in the social drama that is the disappearance of languages. This circumstance profoundly affects their lives and those of the people around them.

This paper on “the last speaker of Chaná” is based on ethnographic fieldwork that included linguistic elicitation sessions, personal and group interviews, the collection of material objects related to the language, and the observation of the linguistic behaviours of a large number of people between December 2019 and March 2020 in the provinces of Entre Ríos, Santa Fe, and the city of Buenos Aires (Argentina); and in Montevideo and Villa Soriano (Uruguay).

Firstly, I seek to understand how the identification of a

person as the “last speaker” is reified across multiple scales, and how his image is refracted through certain representational practices. How does this construction articulate with the discourse of our modernity and indigenism? Which images are circulating, and which ones are ideologically erased? What is the role of the different actors in this process?

Secondly, I propose to show how the Chaná language is today the product of a dialogic relationship between those who have treated it as an object of study throughout history, and those who use it (or have used it) for their communicative, representational and identity needs. What do we understand by “Chaná language” and according to which parameters? Which are the linguistic acts that are considered as such, and for what reason?

¹ This research is supported by the *Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropology* (Gr. 9813), the *Fonds de Recherche du Québec* and the department of anthropology at the Université de Montréal. It was approved by the Ethical Committee: *Projet CERAS-2017-18-248-D (1)*.

² Ishi’s preserved brain was held in the Smithsonian Institution until August 10, 2000.

Finally, I focus on the emergence of a Chaná community that we could call “metalinguistic”, following the model proposed by Netta Avineri (2012) that I have already applied in other similar contexts (DOMINGO, forthcoming). What is the role of language as a distinctive feature of these people? What is the relationship between demands for recognition and the Chaná language? What conflicts arise from this rebuilding of social groups?

2. The “coming out” of a speaker

Near the city of Nogoyá (Entre Ríos, Argentina), in that area known as “Pampa gringa”, the rich and fertile central region of the republic where the vast majority of the population is of European descent, there is a hamlet called El Pueblecito. Blas Jaime was born there “sweetly, without causing any pain to my mother” as he often repeats. Don Blas³ was treated with great respect since he was a child, because he was chosen as the *oyenden*, the guardian of the memory of his people, which used to be preserved through the maternal line.

His father died very early and Don Blas, along with his mother, moved to Nogoyá and then to Paraná, the capital of the province. He worked for several years in a publishing house, got married, had two children. Later he worked as an administrative employee in the National Highway Directorate. He converted to the Mormon religion, and became a pastor of that church. Later he separated, remarried, and had another child. Don Blas’s older brother, Miguel, a singer and a writer, fairly well known in the province, used to use some Chaná words in his texts. By contrast, Don Blas kept his language for himself during this whole period, “because no one was interested that I was an Indian.”

Once retired, Don Blas spent his mornings at the Antonio Serrano museum in the city of Paraná. Together with

the librarian⁴ of the institution they wrote down the words of Chaná that he remembered. Guaraní language lessons⁵ were given in the museum, which functions as an institution of cultural diffusion in the city. One day in 2005, the teacher in charge of these classes invited Don Blas to a meeting on indigenous peoples. On that occasion, Don Blas addressed the audience in Chaná – a language that had been considered “extinct” for almost two hundred years.

The news reached the ears of a local journalist, Tirso Fiorotto, who interviewed Blas. He would later say that he felt it was “the most important interview I ever did in my life”⁶. His article *Tradiciones: un chaná que habla su idioma?* [Traditions: a chaná who speaks his language] (FIOROTTO 2005) was reproduced by *La Nación*, a national newspaper with a wide circulation. This diffusion would change the life of Don Blas and many others.

The news of the “return of the Chaná language” generated surprise and interest in the community. From that moment on, Don Blas, together with his daughter Evangelina, began to give lessons on Chaná language and culture in the museum he used to frequent to those people who showed interest. The director of the institution, Gisela Bahler⁸, supported the initiative within the framework of the state programs of cultural diffusion⁹, in order to “give him fair recognition, and provide him with

³ Blas Jaime is nicknamed “Don Blas” by most people. His first name in Chaná is *Agó akoé inó* [Dog without an Owner]. I want to thank him publicly for his dedication and patience.

⁴ She was asked to take part in this research, but she denied.

⁵ Guaraní (Corrientes Guaraní) is the most widespread indigenous language in the region. It has been an “alternative official language” in the neighboring province of Corrientes since 2004.

⁶ The interview can be seen in the movie *El Guerrero Silencioso* [The Silent Warrior] (BADARACCO 2007).

⁷ The article can be seen at: <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/economia/campo/un-chana-que-habla-su-idioma-nid689936/> (last seen on 4-8-2020)

⁸ All the testimonies cited in this work come from interviews with the following people: Gisela Bahler (director of the Antonio Serrano Museum of Anthropological Sciences), María Teresa Barbat (museologist), Juan Castro Barros (archaeologist), Angelo Brickmann (musician), Gabriel Cepeda (potter and Chaná activist), Victoria Dobler (singer), Inés Gaona (Blas Jaime’s first wife), Silvana

García Larraburu (Senator), Julia Herrera (teacher and activist from Puerto Gaboto), Celia Herrera (teacher and activist from Puerto Gaboto), Guillermo Jaime (history student, Don Blas’s youngest son), Taita Mingo (Charrúa chief of the Gue Guidai Berá community), Horacio Piceda (director of the Italian Galileo Galilei school in Paraná), Nelson Adolfo Rey (musician), Roberto Romani (Entre Ríos cultural advisor), Griselda Sandillú (Chaná writer and activist), Damián Torko Gómez (Charrúa activist), Pedro Viegas Barros (linguist), Marina Zeising (director of the film *Lantec Chaná*). People listed with only a proper name chose not to reveal their real name. All of them have signed or orally accepted the informed consent about this research. I warmly thank everyone for their time and for their precious help.

⁹ The State stopped supporting him in this last time of political social changes and economic crisis in Argentina. The documentation work we did in 2019-20 was also intended as a way of dissemination to reawaken the interest around the language. Don Blas refuses to charge money to those who want to learn the language.

¹⁰ Several of the talks in which the book was presented can be seen on the internet, as well as TED talks and all kind of interviews.

¹¹ Alors ce fut à qui demanderait à l'Ingénu comment on disait en huron du tabac, et il répondait *taya*; comment on disait manger, et il répondait *essenten*. Mademoiselle de Kerkabon voulut absolument savoir comment on disait faire l'amour; il lui répondit *trovander*, et soutint, non sans apparence de raison, que ces mots-là valaient bien les mots français et anglais qui leur correspondaient. *Trovander* parut très joli à tous les convives. Monsieur le prier, qui avait dans sa bibliothèque la grammaire huronne dont le révérend père Sagar Théodat, récollet, fameux missionnaire, lui avait fait présent, sortit de table un moment pour l'aller consulter. Il revint tout haletant de tendresse et de joie. Il reconnut l'Ingénu pour un vrai Huron. On disputa un peu sur la multiplicité des langues, et on convint que sans l'aventure de la tour de Babel, toute la terre aurait parlé français (VOLTAIRE, s. f., 7).

¹² <http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/en/atlasmap/language-id-2060.html> (last seen on 4-8-2020).

¹³ At least for a long time. Later, she had the support of INCAA.

¹⁴ The series, which was financed by the state, has scenes that are directly traced from the film, and even the errors have been reproduced (such as, for example, the date of Don Blas's “coming out”, that was at his 70 years old and not at 71 as they both repeat.)

¹⁵ The complete series may be seen at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85t-4rvkVvgc&list=PLiskdC5D-bynn8_-gyG3AQorV9WC8_Cpb (last seen on 4-8-2020).

a place where he can feel cared for.” For state officials such as Roberto Romani, Entre Ríos cultural advisor, Chaná is part of the cultural heritage of the province: “I don't want our children to go to study elsewhere without knowing anything about the place where they were born. I want them to know, for example, that when we say *uamá*, instead of “friend”, it is because we are speaking in Chaná”.

Don Blas' presence in the museum put him in contact with historians, archaeologists, anthropologists. His teachings are now recorded in scientific articles (cf. BALBI 2013; POLITIS and BONOMO 2012; OTTALAGANO and COLOBIG 2010, among others), on museum labels, and in cultural publications with a wide media coverage.

That first newspaper article about Don Blas was seen by Pedro Viegas Barros, an Argentine linguist who works on the historical reconstruction of indigenous languages. He contacted Fiorotto to ask for his opinion and traveled to meet Don Blas, with whom he established a relationship of mutual trust that lasts to this day. Together, they dealt with the documentation and reconstruction of Chaná, without the support of Argentine scientific organizations. After four years of work, and starting from the manuscript that Don Blas was preparing, they both edited the book *La lengua chaná* (JAIME and VIEGAS BARROS 2013), thanks to the sup-

port of the governmental publishing house of the province, which declared it “Cultural Heritage of Entre Ríos”. The book, which contains some 250 words and expressions followed by explanations and a few short texts, has been widely distributed and was presented at fairs in Buenos Aires, Rosario, and Montevideo¹⁰.

The evaluation that we “experts” usually make of the speakers may not agree with that of the communities themselves (DORIAN 2009; EVANS 2001). In this very particular case (there were no other Chaná speakers, nor was there a community that identified themselves as ethnically Chaná), the linguist's work contributed to authenticating Don Blas's testimony, a bit like the character of Voltaire's *L'Ingénu*, when the Parisian high society believes that he is a “real Huron” only after having consulted a grammar of his language¹¹. Viegas Barros's work (2012; 2009; 2006, among others) on the structure and affiliation of Chaná led the UNESCO to include the language (and its only speaker) in its atlas of “endangered languages”: *vitality – critically endangered; numbers of speakers – 1; Location (s) – Paraná, Entre Ríos (Argentina)*¹². This information is often interpreted – at all levels – as a certificate (“The UNESCO says that Blas Jaime is a true speaker of Chaná”), and Don Blas always carries with him a photocopy of this documentary proof of “last-speakerhood”.

As Daniel Suslak notes, one of the cruel ironies of our times is that languages that have been ignored during their long existence become objects of intense concern in their final moments (2011, 570). Another important repercussion of the “coming out” of Don Blas was the interest it aroused in the filmmaker Marina Zeising, who “felt that she had something pending with the indigenous question” and proposed to Don Blas to make a film about his story. The role of the director parallels that of Viegas Barros. She also established a very good relationship with Don Blas and she also worked without funding¹³ for several years. His film *Lantéc Chaná* [to speak Chaná] (ZEISING 2017) received positive reviews, an important international diffusion, and even inspired a chapter (that can be defined as plagiarism¹⁴) of the series *Guardianes de la Lengua* [Guardians of Languages] on “last speakers” of indigenous languages, broadcast by the state cultural television channel *Encuentro*. In all these works, the language is almost absent, at least as a denotational code. The revival of Chaná is not based on its communicative function, but rather, as is often the case with “threatened languages”, on its status as an object of value appreciated by a particular public (MOORE 2006).

Don Blas and his language even appear in the form of a cartoon: *Las Aventuras de Calá* [Calá's Adventures¹⁵], where the main character – Calá – is

¹⁶ It is actually a series of advertisements where Don Blas teaches some aspects of the Chaná language. It is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUgY-uliT2Q>. (consulted on 4-8-2020). The interest of the company arises precisely from the diffusion of the film *Lantéc Chaná* (Zeising, personal communication).

¹⁷ It is not, in any case, the only one that exists. Don Blas has recorded elicitation sessions on other occasions.

¹⁸ The collection, available today at the Serrano Museum, is named *Neide Lantéc* (literally: “the trap for the language”), a neologism that we invented to call the microphone, and that Don Blas seemed to appreciate. It is divided into 16 sessions: we documented everyday linguistic uses such as greetings and orders, personal descriptions and presentations; we registered some didactic exercises, we visited museums and national parks, the birthplace of Blas Jaime, Fort Sancti Spiritu, among other settings. It also includes a review of the grammatical sketches of Larrañaga and Lafone Quevedo, the book written by Blas Jaime with Viegas Barros, and a Swadesh list. Luisina Genolet, from the Universidad del Litoral, collaborated in the documentation. I thank her in a special way.

¹⁹ This is why both the places and the people coincide, to a large extent, with those that can be seen in the documentary films.

²⁰ The region between the Paraná, Uruguay and Iguazú rivers is known as “Mesopotamia Argentina” (or “Litoral”, which also includes the western margin of the Paraná). It remained relatively isolated from the rest of the country until the recent construction (1960s) of a tunnel under the Paraná, which was followed by some bridges.

a Chaná boy who narrates his daily “adventures” in a pre-Columbian past. He speaks in Spanish, sprinkled with Chaná terms, which have a didactic function and are easily understandable thanks to the context and the drawings. Each episode is followed by an explanation about Chaná pottery, their means of subsistence and other topics, narrated by animated representations with the voices of archaeologists Mariano Bonomo and Gustavo Politis, from the National University of La Plata. As an annex, a cartoon version of Blas Jaime, animated with his own voice, explains the words in Chaná. In the paroxysm of the commodification of languages (HELLER 2010), Don Blas and the Chaná language are also present in an advertising campaign for Chaná coffee¹⁶, which was screened in Uruguay.

Even my own interest, which is part of a comparative research project on “last speakers” in contexts where indigenous languages are no longer used as a vehicle for daily communication, is a result of this media diffusion. It was not difficult to get to Don Blas and, thanks to the support of the Serrano museum (“my second home”, as he usually says), we conceived a documentation project that would be engaging for both of us. I was interested in studying the uses of this language, and their implications. As for Don Blas, he was concerned with continuing his work to produce an audiovis-

ual record of his language and culture¹⁷. The testimonies of Don Blas have been presented as transcripts, or in other formats already prepared and transformed, and we wanted to leave an oral history document (PORTELLI 2007) that would preserve those features that may be lost in successive manipulations.

We worked together between December 2019 and March 2020¹⁸. Don Blas was very enthusiastic about this project. The main difficulty in leaving a linguistic record consisted in looking for contexts where Chaná was actually used as a means of communication. Don Blas is used to using the language as a starting point to expand on cultural and historical matters, and not as a means of everyday communication, especially in front of a camera. It was hard to set up the conditions for “linguistic documentation”. In fact, most of the people we met thought we were making a movie¹⁹.

Despite the fact that he usually affirms that he was brought up to “neither laugh nor cry” Don Blas is an extremely kind person, who likes to make jokes and is always well-disposed for work. He always arrived ahead of time at our meetings, with his thermos and his mate, a briefcase bearing his pedigree of “last speaker” (clippings of articles about him, photos, brochures), and the Chaná flag, created by his daughter with a group of museum students. He decided how we would organ-

ize the sessions, the topics we would talk about, the places and the people we would visit. He also planned a series of interviews with the local media who were interested in our “salvage” work.

My presence, as an “expert” and as a foreigner, served to increase the prestige of the language (as shown, for example, by WERTHEIM 2009). Don Blas did not miss the opportunity to celebrate my presence and my interest, in addition to my ability to speak in Chaná. He often came accompanied by someone who wanted to witness our work. It is difficult to walk with him through the center of his city without bumping into someone who stops him to greet him or to take a photo. The truth is that Don Blas seems to enjoy his role as “last speaker”, and that he is nothing short of a celebrity in Paraná.

3. The Chaná and their language

3.1. *The Chaná*

The city of Paraná is on the bank of the river of the same name, one of the longest most and mightiest in South America, which runs parallel to another great river, the Uruguay, before they join together to form the Río de la Plata²⁰. The periodic floods due to the rising waters form a “wetland macromosaic” (MALVÁREZ 1999), an extensive plain with well-defined boundaries and an important biodiverse sys-

tem. The water and its sediments shape an ever-changing landscape of channels and islands. The wetlands are practically uninhabited today and are occupied by and for cattle capitalism. There are only two tiny, recently created national parks²¹.

The archaeological studies of the area have identified an incised-modelled ceramic called Goya-Malabrigo. It is especially recognizable by some typical artifacts called "bells," vases (probably incensers²²) with zoomorphic appendages, often a parrot's head moulded on the upper part. This archaeological entity is associated with a village-type settlement, reflecting an incipient domestic agriculture and a way of life strongly adapted to the fluvial resources. The material remains that are usually found in the slopes of the pre-delta of the Paraná River (POLITIS and BONOMO 2018), and also in the lower Uruguay River (CASTRO 2018), are attributed to the *Chaná-Timbú* group. Politis and Bonomo (2012) propose an Arawak affiliation for this entity, either by influence on pre-existing populations or by demographic displacement. The watercourses were the privileged communication routes that allowed the displacement of plants, animals, and human groups from tropical areas.

It is precisely by water that the conquerors arrived in the area, very early in the 16th century. The Venetian explorer Sebastiano Caboto, sent

by the Spanish Crown to the Moluccas, decided to go up the Río de la Plata and the Paraná in the hope of reaching the silver mines of Upper Peru, which were not yet conquered. In 1527 he founded the fort of Sancti Spiritus on the banks of the Carcarañá River, a tributary of the Paraná. Luis Ramírez, the chronicler of the expedition, wrote about the nations "of different languages" that inhabit the area: "*carearais y chanes y beguas y chanaestimbus y timbus*" (RAMÍREZ 2007 [1528], 37). Two years later, the settlement would be assaulted and burned by those same nations.

The written testimonies of other chroniclers and conquerors of the 16th century, such as Diego García, Ulrico Schmidl, the Portuguese Pedro Lopes de Souza, Domingo Martínez de Irala, among others, mention the "*chaná* (or *janás*), *chanáes*, *chaná-beguases*, *chaná timbú*" (ZAPATA GOLLÁN 1945, 6-7). This whole group of populations, which the chroniclers distinguish from the Guaraní groups by language and culture, have been given the generic designation of *Chaná-timbú* (SERRANO 1955, 53-56).

The region would finally be conquered from the north, from Asunción del Paraguay, founded in 1537. Once some colonial cities were founded, the Spaniards of Asunción began an intense policy of expansion towards the south. At the beginning of the 16th century, some "indigenous reductions [reducciones]" were es-

tablished, such as Santiago del Baradero in the lower Paraná, San Bartolomé de los Chaná near the current Santa Fe (Rochietti and De Grandis 2016), and San Domingo Soriano²³, on the east shore of the Uruguay River.

The Chana of these reductions, few in number, generally came from the islands of the Paraná River. According to the sources, they were held in good regard by the clergy of the colonies, and their way of life continued in some way linked to the river (without adopting the horse as other groups did). It is highly probable that other Chaná groups have remained extraneous to these settlements. By the end of the colonial era, the landscape of local populations had completely changed. The history of the Chaná can barely be reconstructed today from the first historical references and the scant documentation regarding the reductions (BRACCO 2017). From this fragmentary information, "a simplified framework" was made up that "went from historical works to school textbooks, helping to create a stereotypical and confusing image" (CERUTI 2000, 115).

The current archeological research on these sites was carried out prioritizing the cultural rescue that "can contribute to the construction of collective memory, especially to the revaluation of the indigenous contribution, which can still be traced among the surnames of some current inhabitants" (TAPIA, NÉSPOLO, and NOYA

²¹ These are the Predelta National Park (Province of Entre Ríos) created in 1990, and the National Park of the Santa Fe Islands (Province of Santa Fe), created in 2010. Between them they add up to just 6500 hectares of the 240,000 that comprise the wetlands. As I am writing this text, huge fires, probably intentional, devastate the area. <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/283103-incendios-en-el-delta-todos-los-caminos-conducen-a-los-produ> (last accessed 8-5-2020).

²² This interpretation still remains to be verified (Juan Carlos Castro, personal communication).

²³ The town has a great symbolic importance since it is considered, "the first European settlement founded in Uruguayan territory" (1624). It receives the name of the Dominican community of Calabria, founded in 1510 (Santo Domenico in Soriano).

2015, 25, referring to Baradero). A similar approach is present in the works of Barris D'Angelo (2000) and Marotta Castro (2000) on Villa Domingo Soriano, the "cradle of the Republic of Uruguay" (whose demonym is precisely "chaná") and its indigenous past. These orientations towards salvage archeology will be, as we will see, fundamental for the rebuilding of a Chaná identity.

3.2. *The Chaná language*

The Chaná language is classified today as [QSI], and it would be part of the macro-waikuru branch, in a hypothetical Charrúan linguistic family, together with Charúa and Guenoa (CAMPBELL 1997, 174). All these languages are scarcely documented and therefore, strictly speaking, it is impossible to determine their genetic parentage. Thanks to data from historical chroniclers, we may suppose that Chaná was a language other than Guaraní, and that the latter was practically used as a lingua franca among the different populations (BRACCO 2017; DA ROSA 2013). There is no trace of these Charruan languages either in the toponymy nor in the linguistic substrate of the region, which has, on the contrary, "a considerable presence of voices from Guaraní and Quechua" (BERTOLOTTI and COLL 2014, 119).

The only known historical work on Chaná is a small compendium from 1815 by the clergyman Damaso Lar-

raña, who had already devoted himself to the study of other American languages: "[...] you will find that they are not inferior to the of the old continent" (LARRAÑAGA 1965: 43, cited in BERTOLOTTI 2010, 2). Larraña is interested in the Chanás of Santo Domingo Soriano, whom he visits specifically to study their language. He brings together three elderly men because, as he notes, "the young no longer speak or understand the language" (LARRAÑAGA 1923, 163). Perfectly aware of the eminent disappearance of this language, his scope is to leave a written record. Although he confesses not to be an expert, Larraña compiles a small grammatical compendium with 53 phonological, morphological and syntactic rules. He bases his analyzes on a "vocabulary with phrases" that is, allegedly, "in the second notebook" (p. 174). However, as a footnote in the first edition (1923) makes clear, "among the manuscripts there is no such notebook."

Larraña's compendium was only published in 1897 (together with a small compilation of words) by Samuel Lafone Quevedo²⁴, an Uruguayan-Argentine ethnographer, who included it in his own attempt to put an order into the names of indigenous peoples of the Argentine territory. Lafone Quevedo uses the references to the Chaná language to show that the Chanás were not a Guaraní group, a common impression among the ethnographers at the time. According

to the author "in merit of his language, the Chaná Indian will become the center and the starting point of the ethnology of the Río de la Plata" (1897, 137). Chaná and its language thus came to represent the "pure" past of the inhabitants of the area, an image that still persists to this day²⁵.

3.3. *The comeback of Chaná*

Almost two hundred years after Larraña's study, Blas Jaime began to use the Chaná language in public. Viegas Barros recognizes the language of Don Blas as *Chaná* according to the following criteria:

- (i) internal data analysis, (ii) use of documentary linguistic sources of Chaná; (iii) comparison with related languages; (iv) possibility of establishing phonological correspondences; (v) congruence with what is expected in an obsolescent language state; (vi) consistency of the corpus over time; (vii) possible loans from *Chaná* to rural dialectal Spanish Castilian; (viii) presence of unknown (or different) Guaraní loanwords in Spanish, (ix) lack of agreement with what is expected in cases of falsified languages (P. VIEGAS BARROS 2015, 2).

An important aspect of the "validation" of the linguistic data was the verification of the "ethnographic" data that Blas Jaime provided together with the language. For example, Blas Jaime's insistence on the presence, in the Chaná villages, of "dumb" dogs²⁶ (so as not to betray their presence),

²⁴ Lafone Quevedo is concerned with publishing the work to support Guido Boggianni's research in the Paraguayan Chaco, "because it is possible that he will be able to identify the timbúes of that region through [these] notes [...]" (1897: 137).

²⁵ An example of this representation is the play "Chaná, mi pariente" (BARCIA 1989), where the indigenous characters (Chaná) express themselves in a pseudo-chaná, which consists of a vocabulary taken from Larraña's work with a syntactic base taken from Spanish. Another example are the texts of Blas Jaime's own brother, Miguel. In his poem *Oración Chaná* (M. JAIME 1999, 6), he recites: Oh, *Tihuinem!* Father of the Chaná / *Retán* could you forget people / If you were always our good *uamá* / And we take you inside the *an-cat*; where the denotative meaning of the Chaná words (taken from Larraña) is easily deduced from the context.

²⁶ Strictly speaking, the testimony already exists in the account of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1535): "They have some dogs that they raise at home, dumb. They do not bark and they consider them a good delicacy and they eat them when they want" (SERRANO 1955, 53).

or his knowledge of the smoke signal system (p. 10). Another peculiarity of this validation is the fact that we can accept it because we cannot prove its falseness: Blas Jaime does not make the ‘mistakes’ that those who simulate a linguistic competence normally do (cf. CAMPBELL 2014). Each of these points will be of utmost importance for the reconstruction of a Chaná identity around the language.

The differences between the “Chaná de Don Blas” (that is the way in which the linguist calls Blas Jaime’s idiolect) and the one registered by Larrañaga are, as a matter of fact, sometimes profound. Viegas Barros explains that these changes could be due to the process of linguistic obsolescence, and the influence of Spanish. His analysis shows fluctuation and disappearance of phonemes, changes in morphology (grammatical simplification), changes in syntax (evolution from an ergative system to an accusative one, from a syntactic order SOV to SVO, post-positions that become prepositions) (pp. 6-7).

Our own work followed the general lines of what was already done by Viegas Barros together with Blas Jaime. Don Blas showed great practice in conducting an elicitation interview and in the use of a certain technical terminology (such as “pluralizer”, “guttural” or “phoneme”). He was concerned with correcting spelling, he suggested etymologies, and we often discussed

the particularities of the language. He showed that he was fully aware of the changes that Chaná has undergone, even though he had never read neither the original text by Larrañaga nor its reproduction by Lafone Quevedo. He insisted several times that he had consciously manipulated both the phonetics and the syntax of the language. In the first place, “so that it would be more understandable to others” because otherwise “nobody could use the language.” In addition (emphasizing stereotypes that an anthropologist may find difficult to assimilate), he used to repeat that “before, they spoke like Indians, with the verb at the end and pronouncing inwards.” When talking about his linguistic planning, he used to give examples of sentences with an inverted syntactic order, and he acquired a pronunciation if not “guttural”, at least less transparent. Don Blas often regretted not remembering words or expressions that “surely have been lost over the years.” In the absence of certain voices, he usually helped himself with compounds (*utal*: “sitting”; *re-utal*: “not-sitting” or “standing”), or even with gestures (*nderé*: “come” or “go,” depending on the direction indicated by the movement of the hands).

Any reappropriation of a language implies a transformation of the code and its uses. As Suzanne Romaine recalls, restored languages resemble only in part their ancient forms, including modern Hebrew

(2011). On the other hand, this process does not differ from what happens in the linguistic planning of modern majority languages (IANNACCARO and DELL’AQUILA 2004).

Today, the phonology of Chaná is not distinguished from Spanish, except for the presence of some groups of consonants *-nv-*, *-nd-*, *-pt-*, which, however, only stand out in careful and repeated pronunciation. There is also a certain influence of writing. For example, the word *oyenden* (“memory”, already transcribed in that way by Larrañaga) is pronounced /oʃen’den/, in the way that the people of the pampas pronounce the Spanish letter *y*, which is generally performed as [j], (also [ʒ] or [dʒ]) in other places. As Virginia Bertolotti effectively shows in her analysis of Spanish of that time through Larrañaga’s compendium, the difference between both phonemes was still perceptible (BERTOLOTTI 2010, 5). The orthography of Chaná today follows the Rio de la Plata Spanish standard (precisely, *yogüín* will be pronounced /ʃo’win/, based on the alphabet created by Don Blas.

The “aesthetics” or the “form” (cf. SANGA 1989) of this strongly “alterizing” language, resides in its combination of phonemes, rare in Spanish. In particular, Chaná words usually contain vowels that form hiatuses (*itái*, *utái*), and they often begin with the consonant combination nasal + labial or dental (*-nv-*, *-mb-*, *-nd-*), and end

in stressed vowels (*vanatí*, *ugé*, *joté*). I would like to suggest that this “Chaná form” is easily identifiable as indigenous by the inhabitants of the area due to its similarity to the “form” of the Guaraní language.

The morphology of Chaná is practically non-existent today, except for the morphemes *-e-* (a diminutive, which can be repeated twice: *adá* – “woman”, *adǎé* – “girl”; *adǎéé* – baby girl), *-o-* (an augmentative), the pluralizer *-guát-*. Beyond these cases, words have no inflection.

The lexicon of Chaná (except for propositions, articles, pronouns) is, according to Don Blas, “multifunctional”. Simply put, terms can belong to several word categories, and are used that way. *Yogüín* will be “fire”, “heat”, “hot”, “warm”. Due to these characteristics, Chaná behaves like an isolating language: *iunal* [eat] will be used as *iunal edmú* (lit: “eat tomorrow”) to speak about the future. A large part of the lexicon is descriptive: the fox will be *agó-timóó* (lit: “big-eared dog”), the turtle *danán-uá-nderé* (lit: “house that walks”). Most of the words serve as hypernyms for categories that do not differ from the corresponding ones in Spanish. Predictably, the language reproduces semantic copies taken from Spanish: *retam cha?* (literally: “how are (you)?”).

Chaná today behaves practically like a jargon, that is, as a lexical set that is supported by a host language. However, thanks to that “multifunc-

tional” capacity (and, also, to the fact that its syntax is traced from Spanish), it is perfectly possible to construct complete sentences: *Beáda’ó ree natú áá vaté vanatí uá ndajaiu ña ugé vanatí ug beáda’ó itat joté güi utatí*.

Beáda-’ó ree natú áá vaté vanatí uá ndajaiu
mother-AUG NEG VB(punish) PREP (to) 2 son SUB VB(need)

ña ugé vanatí ug beáda-’ó itat joté güi utatí
VB(kill) ART-GMson.PREP(-from) mother-AUG. PREP(for) VB(make) NUM(t) canoe

[“Mother, do not punish your son because I need to kill the son of mother earth to make a canoe” – prayer to the Mother Earth before cutting down a tree²⁷].

The lexical compounds of chaná (the butterfly, precisely, is *amari-dul*, “the flower that flies”; the vagina is *amari-ug-itií*, “the flower that gives life”; the rainbow is *danan-ug-dioí* or “the house of the sun”²⁸) are not seen as mere descriptions, but as metaphors that contain the depths of Chaná philosophy. From these expressions an obligatory equation is made between language and culture. This interpretation, which Michael Silverstein calls “native whorfianism about culture and the so-called ‘worldview’” (1998, 422) surely reveals, as he himself argues, “nothing more than an untheorized popular interpretation”, but that does

not detract the importance of observing it.

The contexts where the language is used as an explicit symbol of culture or “worldview” are, strictly speaking, practically the only ones in the linguistic socialization (in the sense of OCHS and SCHIEFFELIN 2011) of Chaná. As there are practically no linguistic registers that activate this function, we are witnessing, rather, a re-signification of the language, thanks to the semantic flexibility of “Don Blas’s Chaná”, together with the expansive capacity and the potential for prestige of media and social networks (cf. SCHREYER 2011).

Don Blas receives, reads and responds to messages written in Chaná that come from people whom he does not know personally, and even from other countries such as Chile, Brazil or Spain. I have seen and heard several other people do the same, and many of them elaborate in Chaná their online identity performances. This flexible capacity of the language, that is, the fact that *it can be effectively used as a mode of communication* allows people to identify themselves with and through the use of Chaná.

4. Chaná community

It might seem that Chaná is still invisible in the linguistic landscape, and that it is not possible to hear this language in daily communication. However, the ethnographic record shows that Chaná is the

²⁷ The phrase is often repeated by Don Blas and it can be read, in a more complete version, in *La Lengua Chaná* (B.W.O. JAIME and VIEGAS BARROS 2013, 134).

²⁸ The word for “Sun”, Larrañaga suggests, may come from the Spanish word “Dios” (LARRAÑAGA 1923, 165).

central element in the re-building of a community of people, who identify with the language in a deeply intimate and affective way.

Due to personal and historical circumstances (read: hundreds of years of persecution and discrimination), these are people who do not have total linguistic competence, and, therefore these social aggregates are not composed of, “people who speak the same language”. It is not a linguistic community as such but rather a *metalinguistic community*, according to the model proposed by Netta Avineri (2012 and others)²⁹, which shifts the center of interest from language to people, a group of people, “who get involved in a discourse on language and cultural symbols tied to language” (2012, 4). Understanding how social groups (tribe, community, nation, public) are constituted on the basis of something “shared”, suggests Shaylih Muehlmann, is a fundamentally political issue, and it is from this perspective that it must be understood (2014, 591). People who feel they have some connection to “the indigenous” see in this symbolic display a response to their search for identity, which is articulated around the “comeback of Chaná”. They feel a connection with their own history. In this journey, they meet other people who share their same concerns.

“I always knew that I descended from French Swiss on my father’s side, and Ital-

ian from my mother’s side. But there was a grandmother, whom nobody ever spoke of, who was a brunette, and she was from here. I think she was Chaná”, Brigitte³⁰ told at a restaurant table with Don Blas.

Marina, visibly moved, uses the metaphor of incompleteness to explain her interest in the Chaná language: “For me, speaking Chaná is the way to put the missing pieces together. There are things that do not finish in my story. I am the only one of my sisters who has such dark skin, I am sure there is something there”.

Griselda Sandillú, who now defines herself as a Chaná writer, explains along the same lines that, “the history we studied did not tell me anything about my ancestors, there was something was still missing for me. It was necessary for me to understand myself, and I say that I was able to find my nest thanks to Chaná.”

Missing pieces, silences, erasures, searches are the threads that lead these people to identify with each other, starting from the language. Chaná³¹ musician Victoria Dobler, like many others, narrates her encounter with the language in almost mystical terms: “This had been coming for a long time. I am a folk singer, a songwriter too. I considered going into something deeper, and I said to myself ‘Where do I start from?’ A friend told me that Blas was teaching Chaná. We met him at a fair, and Blas invited me to his classes. I said: ‘this must be a sign’.”

Many of these people describe their personal encounter with Don Blas as “being born again”. like Gabriel Cepeda, Chaná potter. They even describe their reaction to the news of their existence in this way: “I don’t usually buy that newspaper³², but that day it seems that someone slipped it under the door, perhaps because they knew that, despite being blond, I was looking for my roots. That day I felt like I was born again.”

For Charrúa activist Damián Torko Gómez, like other people I met, even his encounter with the book *La Lengua Chaná* had that fabled halo: “It was something very strange. I was dying for that book but couldn’t get it. I went to see a friend’s mother, she needed something from me, and she said: ‘thanks to what you did for my daughter, I’m going to get you that book.’ After a week my own language was shaking in my hands”. This last image clearly shows the process of iconization of the linguistic form, in the prestigious form of a book.

The materials produced by linguistic documentation (texts, videos, audios) are also seen as valuable objects that lead people to connect with their past (EISENLOHR 2004). The work of documentation that we were doing allowed us to recreate those spaces and moments. Many times, we had visitors who wanted to “just watch” or hear how we used the language between Blas, my field assistant and me. Speak-

²⁹ In press; an edited volume edited by N. Avineri and J. Harasta with case studies on metalinguistic communities.

³⁰ Pseudonym suggested by Don Blas.

³¹ The fact that these people identify themselves as “Chaná” is something new, and only after the emergence of Don Blas as a public figure.

³² Curiously, several other people, including Pedro Viegas Barros, stressed the fact that “they don’t buy that newspaper” when they told me how they found out about the existence of Blas Jaime. *La Nación*, linked to the Argentine landowning oligarchy, indexes a conservative and middle-class identity, which does not square with those who present themselves as progressive people who are interested in indigenous cultures.

ing Chaná and working on its documentation gave us a place of privilege and recognition in front of these people, who brought us their records, books, sculptures, diplomas, and drawings as gestures of gratitude.

The “endangered languages issue” (HALE *et al.* 1992) has brought linguists into contact with people who are experiencing the pressures that lead or have led to linguistic displacement (mainly extra-linguistic) and it prompts them to seek a way of collaborating. This brings with it the problem of the objectification of languages and their subordination, which is why we end up replicating in some way what caused these languages to be displaced (DOBRIN and SCHWARTZ 2016, 259). These kinds of research and interventions inevitably create new social and political linguistic realities (JAFFE 2007).

In recent years, changes in the political climate and legal bases have encouraged indigenous peoples to fight for their rights. At the same time, the success of these measures depends on the performance of an indigenous identity according to a definition imposed from outside (MUEHLMANN 2008, 35-39). Anthropologists or ethno-linguists have a fundamental role in this process of rebuilding social groups, as notes Joseph Errington: “the work of linguists might be put to service as a means for invoking the past in the present, such that recognition of

local ‘dialects’ or ‘languages’ can be presented as valid symbolic substrates for collective identities and legitimate instruments of collective agency” (2003, 730).

The relationship of local communities with the “central” or the “external” is precisely what constructs the “local” as a cultural fact (SILVERSTEIN 1998, 404). Those metacultural and metalinguistic discourses that emerge around “local” languages and identities are dialogically constructed (MCEWAN-FUJITA 2011). The labels that are attributed to Chaná can only be understood within these semiotic processes: “old” vs. “modern”, “warm” vs. “cold”, “local” vs. “foreign” or “global”, “close to nature” vs. “without roots”.

Jane Hill (2006) insisted on the fact that those who deal with documenting “endangered” languages must be ethnographers, because they must pay due attention to the special relationships that are created between local communities and researchers, to the ways of speaking or to the ethnography of the language, and to the linguistic ideologies of a particular community. While all these points are valid in the case of the “last speaker of Chaná”, the last one is particularly important, since the interest of people who identify with this language shows that what keeps that social group together is not primarily linguistic competence but the socialization of those linguistic ideologies that arise and reproduce around

Chaná and by the negotiation of the political demands for the recognition of their indigenous status that is *authenticated* (BUCHOLTZ 2003) by means of the language.

These alignments around Chaná are manifested and put into practice through language. Each of the people who approaches Don Blas is motivated by the language and receives a name in Chaná (*Unki lantéc* – “the one who knows the language” for his ease of learning; *Mirri-é* – “little star”, for her grace; *Amari-dul* – “butterfly”, for her beauty; *Iti-u’úy*, “honey” [lit: bee’s milk], for the color of her hair). This performative act signals the baptism within the Chaná metalinguistic community.

In these acts of re-semiotization, linguistic resources intersect with others that index a Chaná identity. The Chaná flag represents *a ta ug vedé nd-iní lantéc* [parrot head³³] on a background of *dananat mir-rí* [starry sky³⁴]. This symbol, taken from the old bell-shaped vases (see 3.1.), was used, according to Don Blas, “to deceive the spirits, who entertained themselves talking to parrots thinking that they were doing it with people.” Through this complicit gesture that relates the language to an archaeological past, people strengthen its (and their own) identification with Chaná culture and with the “ancestral territory”.

Don Blas finds himself at the center of a complex network of representations that are articulated according to

³³ Lit: *the upper part of the body of the bird that speaks.*

³⁴ Lit: *the hamlet of the stars.*

his linguistic competence. His iconized figure (IRVINE and GAL 2000) merges with the Chaná language and culture and is projected towards a hypothetical pre-colonial past. Given the quality of "great preacher" with which the filmmaker Marina Zeising describes him, Don Blas uses the language as a gateway to his narratives. These ideologies about Chaná make it difficult to imagine a linguistic documentation that attempts to record uses of the language in other communicative contexts.

Don Blas's discourse responds to a large extent to the idea of the *hyper-real Indian* (RAMOS 1994) that is projected through established stereotypes about indigenous people and their culture, with which the members of these groups must comply in order not to disqualify their identity claims. In this perspective, the use of mass media and information technologies also plays an important role in the connections between indigenous groups, non-indigenous audiences and institutions (TURNER 2003). These circulations make Chaná today a *hyperreal indigenous language*, which conforms to the models that its own use requires.

Given the representations that are structured around Chaná, not all linguistic acts "count", since some are ideologically *erased* (IRVINE and GAL 2000). The interests of people who feel attracted to the language as a kind of bohemian accessory often con-

flict with some of Don Blas's ideas, such as his manifest homophobia or his anti-abortion position, which are seen as reactionary and are therefore canceled from his speeches. Just as with religion, those who "doubt" never reveal it in public. In any case, those who do not agree with certain positions frequently keep silent because they do not feel authorized to oppose those who know things "for having lived them".

It is from this testimonial place that Don Blas is received and listened to. In the Museo Serrano of Paraná, he usually makes guided tours for the occasional visitors. Chaná archaeological remains are also exhibited in museums in several cities in the area (Victoria, Colón, Santa Fe, Rosario), where Don Blas is treated with great respect. People recognize him and offer him a seat or something to drink. There is a role reversal, where the museum guides play the role of students. That interest, however, has very precise limits. In our visits, we have never passed beyond the archeology room, assuming that there can be nothing new since written records exist.

Similarly, in natural sites, such as the Predelta National Park (where we were treated with privileges such as staying after hours and the promise of a water ride), we were advised in an ashamed tone not to visit a certain lagoon "because it is artificial and your eyes, Don Blas, will get hurt." The translations that the Park

staff requested from him (to be displayed in the Park signing) referred to medicinal or edible plants, or to the customs of animals, reinforcing the link between the conservation of indigenous languages and that of biological diversity (as presented, for example, by NETTLE and ROMAINE 2000), and the association between indigenous peoples and nature. These ideas, among other things, contribute to the transformation of people into icons, instead of considering them agents (MUEHLMANN 2007, 22).

Don Blas's presence is often requested by these and other institutions. In particular, he often visits schools, where he shows up to talk about Chaná culture to students. Don Blas speaks with a soft, almost monotone, low voice, but he is listened to with attention and a respectful silence. Children are amazed by his stories about the initiation ceremony of the young (which consisted of hunting a jaguar), about the courage of the warriors, about the respect they showed for the elderly, and the rigid education received. These meetings respond to the decision of school directors with a progressive orientation who see in "the indigenous" a positive teaching value, along with other initiatives of education for tolerance or charity³⁵. This marks a huge difference with the official story about the indigenous reality – at least, as it was reproduced until recently, and how it still exists in the popular imagina-

³⁵ "When we make a collection for charity, we ask children to bring the cookie that they like to eat, and not the cheapest one," he explained to me in front of Don Blas Horacio Piceda, the director of the Italian private school Galileo Galilei in the city of Paraná, where each step is marked with the words "tolerance-tolleranza", "diversity-diversità", "cooperation-cooperazione" and "amor-amore".

tion of a country that considers itself “white” and whose inhabitants “descend from the boats”. The Chaná language thus fulfills the function of indexing social issues related to indigenous re-emergence, discrimination and the reinterpretation of history.

The figure of the “last speaker of Chaná” functions as a vortex in the ethnolinguistic division of labor of a network formed by people, even those who claim to belong to other indigenous nations. I watched many times how people come and thank on Blas for giving them the strength to recognize themselves as indigenous, in particular “islanders” (as the fishermen of the pre-delta of Paraná are called) who still continue their way of life and depend on river resources. Corondás and Timbúes de Santa Fe, two very recently emerged communities³⁶, have a close bond with Don Blas, who insists that they are actually Chaná, and that the different denomination of these nations is actually the product of the confusion of the Spanish³⁷. One of the more interesting of these identity re-accommodations (and that deserves to be treated in a separate text) is what happens with a part of the Uruguayan Charrúa community, which feels inclined to learn Chaná, for being – apparently – from the same linguistic family of Charrúa³⁸.

Artists and activists who re-semiotize linguistic resources in different ways contribute to the circulation of the

“Chaná de Don Blas”. The film *Lantéc Chaná* (among others) gives voice to these movements, as well as other radio broadcasts, and those videos that appear on social networks. Musicians compose songs in Chaná, which confer new meanings to the language and bring it to other audiences. As a young pianist Angelo Brickmann tells us, “we teach these songs to the children so that they learn something about the culture of the place”. Nelson Rey, author of a “Chaná lullaby” (with lyrics worked together with Don Blas) says that he wrote it, “as a tribute, and as the payment of a debt”. The texts are sometimes illustrated by the children, and the melodies are reproduced at school events and festivities. This *decontextualization* and *entextualization* of discourses transforms these small pieces of formulaic language into “public words” (SPITULNIK 1997) that expand the circulation of the language. The phrases pronounced by Don Blas are also taken up by writers who incorporate them into literary novel texts (cf. SANDILLÚ 2018; LETTO 2019) “in honor of the Chaná people”, exactly as it was done with the words taken from Larrañaga’s documentation (see note 24) to personify indigenous speakers in a discourse strongly impregnated with otherness, just as “odd” characters are characterized through the use of invented languages (OKRENT 2009).

The language also serves as a motor for other cultural

projects. In the neighboring province of Santa Fe, near the great city of Rosario, Gabriel Cepeda organizes workshops on “littoral pottery – *Mcatá ug Atamá* (the hug of the river)”, where he also teaches “Chaná cosmovision and language”, sometimes even with the presence of Don Blas.

Not far from there, a community center of Chaná language and culture is being built in the town of Puerto Gaboto. It is an emblematic site due to the presence of the archaeological dig (still in its exploration phase) of Fort Sancti Spiritus. The data show that, prior to that occupation that marked the beginning of the Conquest, there was an indigenous settlement (COLOBIG *et al.* 2017). When excavations began, the families who were living on the site in slums were displaced. During our visit, the excavations were harshly criticized for being “another example of colonization” and because they are sponsored by a Spanish university³⁹.

The recently inaugurated *Museo del Fuerte* collects the material testimony of that first “encounter” by exhibiting Venetian glass beads, dice games and seeds of European origin, together with the remains of indigenous pottery. In a tense and reproachful visit, Don Blas and the other members of our group showed their contempt when they noticed that pieces of pottery labeled as “Chaná” were clearly of Guaraní origin.

For the occasion, Don Blas –

³⁶ For data on the communities of the province of Santa Fe, see: [https://www.santafe.gov.ar/index.php/web/content/view/full/117260/\(subtema\)/93808](https://www.santafe.gov.ar/index.php/web/content/view/full/117260/(subtema)/93808) (accessed 04-08-20).

³⁷ “The name of the Corondas themselves was also Chaná, but history consecrated them with the name of their powerful chief” (SERRANO 1955, 12).

³⁸ “Nothing proves,” says Charruan activist Damián Torko Gómez, defending the initiative, “that the language that Larrañaga documented was not actually Charrúa, or at least a language already very mixed.” Other Charruá support the Chaná reclamation process, but without identifying it as their own, and others affirm that they have their own language. Don Blas insists that “the charrúa have only 54 words”, and that “it would be much better if we got together”. This is another of the obvious dialogic relationships between ethnolinguistic and historical studies.

³⁹ Strictly speaking, the excavations are carried out by a specific agreement between the Ministry of Innovation and Culture of the Province of Santa Fe and the University of the Basque Country / Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea. They have the financial support of the Argentine Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports, through the aid of the Institute of Cultural Heritage of Spain (IPCE) for the archaeological projects abroad.

who does not smoke – brought a lighter with him. Upon reaching the place of the fort, and in front of everyone, he pretended to set the place on fire, reenacting the deed of his ancestors who burned down the fort. The people who accompanied us were extremely moved. As for myself, I could not fail to see in Don Blas’s gesture proof of his irony and humor.

In this reconfiguration of identities around the “last speaker of Chaná”, his own close family looks at the phenomenon from the sidelines. His daughter used to take care of the classes at the Serrano Museum but has stopped doing so. His oldest son does not participate in this construction, and the youngest, a history student, has an ambiguous relationship with his personal history. Don Blas’s first wife, Inés Gaona, feels that “Blas’s fame went to his head”, and his second wife, after a moment of engagement, prefers to stay away about issues that concern the language.

Surrounded by all this deployment, Don Blas knows perfectly well that, despite enjoying a few moments of “symbolic prestige”, he continues to be relegated, as he says, “living as a *cultural attaché* in a private neighborhood⁴⁰ [...] (de)prived of asphalt, security, and often light and water”.

5. We need to believe in something different⁴¹

Blas Jaime’s personal story presents him as a modern

Ishii, the ultimate representative of an “extinct” folk, who spends most of his days in a museum and whose life has been shaped by his relationship with anthropologists, artists, institutions and officials. His recognition as a Chaná speaker has profoundly modified his and other peoples’ life. Despite the fact that in a certain way Don Blas enjoys his role as “last speaker”, he also suffers the pressures that frame, define and pigeonhole him. The idea of “universal heritage [and loss]” (HILL 2002) of indigenous languages deprives speakers of any possibility of autonomy. Since he is represented as an icon of his people and culture, he carries unusual pressure on his shoulders.

His “case” has required the opinion of “experts” across multiply scales, and his linguistic competence has been object of study and certification. The distinction between “natural” and “artificial” language should not, however, take place in the anthropology of language for which there is no pure object called “language”, since “language is always incorporated in some history-culture of some kind (...) imbued with different essences and social projections” (FLEMING 2017, 2).

Sancti Spiritus, the fort founded by Caboto is considered today the first European settlement in the Río de la Plata territory. This interpretation is made according to the current (di)vision of the region, that is, it responds to the in-

terpretation made by the victors of the conquered territories and peoples. The languages spoken by the inhabitants of these territories are classified according to the same criteria⁴². From the time of the conquest to my own work, we outsiders (chroniclers, archeologists, historians, anthropologists) have shaped and fixed the characteristics of the Chaná: their language, their culture, or their “natural territory”. These are precisely the features that are taken today to build a Chaná identity, which may appear disturbing to a society that still denies its indigenous component.

We should observe how people relate to the language and learn from the new and creative ways in which they use their power of representation. The accent on this latter aspect alters the balance between language seen as a denotational code and its more complex understanding as a malleable semiotic resource. In those languages that rely almost exclusively on their communicative function (such as many artificial languages, but also Simplified Chinese, or Simple English) what is sought is, precisely, to dilute the identities and the nexus between language and “culture”. One may think about that English spoken in youth hostels among young people of different origins, which indexes more a “global” or “modern” identity rather than anything connected directly to the English language. At the other extreme

⁴⁰ [Barrio privado ... privado de asfalto].

⁴¹ I have heard this phrase several times said by people who have participated in this research.

⁴² For an excellent chronicle of the linguistic studies of the Río de la Plata see the works of Justino da Rosa (2013) and of Virginia Bertolotti and Magdalena Coll (2014) cited in this paper.



1



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Fig. 1. Blas Jaime “sets fire” to Fort Sancti Spiritu (Puerto Gaboto, Santa Fe, Argentina, December 2019).

Fig. 2. Group of Chaná activists (including Blas Jaime and his son) pose with their flag at the archaeological site of Fort Sancti Spiritu (Puerto Gaboto, Santa Fe, Argentina, December 2019).

⁴³ Argentina is proposing to recognize all the indigenous languages of its territory as official languages (including Chaná) “of equal value to Spanish” (García Larraburu, personal communication). Without a better understanding of “language”, these initiatives may contribute to the same discrimination they pretend to fight against.

of what can be seen as an axis between “pride” and “profit” (HELLER and DUCHÊNE 2012; GAL 2012), the comeback of Chaná is based on its performative force.

The figure of Don Blas may appear as disturbing as his language. Strictly speaking, there is no “native speaker” of a national standard (BONFIGLIO 2013), but it is something we prefer to ignore. In the same way, we must bear in mind that all languages have been invented “in the most literal sense”: invented as part of a colonial project, based on a linguistic metalanguage that includes numbers and categories, and that it has had its consequences in education, in policies, in identifying people with linguistic labels (MAKONI and PENNYCOOK 2005, 139).

The phenomena of indigenous reemergence of recent years in Argentina (GORDILLO and HIRSCH 2003) have often been accompanied by linguistic revitalization initiatives. “Language endangerment” and the discourses about it (which are often reproduced even about the majority languages) arise in a particular moment in the struggle between minorities and national states (HELLER and DUCHÊNE 2007). To ignore the dynamics such as those we have seen in the case of Chaná would be to “attack linguistic discrimination in its own terms”, that is, to reproduce the schemes of the dominant ideologies and the way in which the language (unique, standardized) is tied

to the construction of the State (HELLER 2004, 284)⁴³.

The combinatorial possibilities between language, world, ethnicity, identity and history are multiple and creative. It is not possible to study “languages without their peoples” if we do not want to perpetuate reductions and purifications that are of no use to anyone ([*línguas sem povos*] SILVA and ATHILA 2012, 304-5). If we want to understand something about the linguistic issues around “endangered languages” we should perhaps put aside our obsessions about “saving languages” from the mouths of their “last speakers” and ask ourselves rather, as Jenny Davis suggests, “why these people, despite everything, still speak them” (2017, 54).

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