Hedy Penner

1. Summary. This volume is a collection of articles by Hedy Penner addressing the current linguistic situation in Paraguay, with special attention to the problems of definition concerning Guarani today, and Jopara (a label used by speakers and researchers to designate productions recognized as mixing Guarani and Spanish at some level). The book’s chapters all appeared previously in different publications and were revised for this volume (chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5; when necessary translated into Spanish), sometimes substantially so (chapter 6). The only completely new chapter is chapter 1 (only 3 pages long), which provides the introduction to the volume, and where Penner prefigures some of the themes that recur throughout the remainder of the book: the birth of Jopara out of a desire of certain sectors of Paraguayan society to identify and impose a “pure” Guarani; how this reification of Jopara as an object of study also contributes to establishing “pure” Guarani as an existing variety, even in the absence of a cogent demonstration that such a variety is spoken by anybody; the inability, especially concerning proponents of the return to a purer Guarani, of describing it and Jopara without judging either code prescriptively; and finally—and crucially—the lack of informed linguistic description overall, which harms any attempts to understand the nature of Jopara and Guarani, and their respective places in today’s Paraguay.

Penner’s observations are of enormous consequence for future research, and in this sense I think the volume is a success. Unfortunately, given that all content chapters are reworked from previous publications, there is a vast amount of repetition in the book, where the same points are made over and over in different places, sometimes in rather similar form. Although I enjoyed reading the book, my enjoyment was often marred by this repetitiousness.

The book is generally carefully edited. I found 16 typos overall, but this did not detract in any way from my reading experience.

2. Contents. I will summarize the contents of each chapter briefly. In chapter 2 (“El bilingüismo: ¿guaraní o jopara? Bilingualism: Guarani or Jopara?”), Penner shows how Paraguay has gone from being unquestioningly accepted by researchers as a

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1 I follow Penner’s orthography, Guarani, instead of Guarani, which would be consistent with the modern accepted orthography.

2 This should not be construed as an appropriate definition of jopara.
bilingual country—especially after Rubin’s (1968) thesis, which established the “meme” that Paraguay is the country with the highest levels of bilingualism in the world—to being viewed as a primarily monolingual country, with Guarani as Paraguayans’ “real” mother tongue. She shows how, in the 60’s and 70’s, the notion that Paraguay was a bilingual country contributed to elevate Guarani to the status of a language on a par with Spanish, and to institute it synchronically as Modern Guarani different from Jesuitic Guarani. Penner shows how the debates leading to Paraguay’s 1992 Constitution reified the Guarani-Spanish Paraguayan bilingualism to the detriment of other possible multilingualisms (involving minority languages, be they Amerindian or European, which are not official languages of the state). For example, the new Article 77, that states that education should be in the native language of the student, only really contemplates education in Spanish or Guarani.

Penner continues on to examine and criticize the assumption that a student entering school is usually monolingual in one of the official languages (mostly Guarani), and that the relationship between L1 and L2 is simple: the language you learn first, at home, is your L1.

Thus, academics and language planners have switched from an idea of Paraguay as a country with a high degree of individual bilingualism, to that of a country with societal bilingualism, with many Guarani monolinguals. What is the place of Jopara here?, the author inquires. During the course of the 20th century, Jopara became a label with which purists could exclude a whole range of contact phenomena from what real Guarani “should be”. Thus Jopara is reified and becomes distinct from Guarani, which by the same token is granted implicit existence. Yet, as Penner says, it is very hard to find any complete Guarani monolinguals that have no contact and no knowledge (even minimal and passive) of Spanish. In order to define Modern Guarani, one should, according to the author, study these putative Guarani monolinguals, if they can be found.

Whereas I found chapter 2 provocative (even if extremely repetitious), chapter 3 (“En la búsqueda del bilingüismo más alto del mundo; el paradigma ineludible” ‘In search of the highest bilingualism in the world: the unavoidable paradigm’) was not equally engaging. This chapter is devoted entirely to a criticism of Rubin’s (1964) thesis methodology. It aims to show that Rubin’s widely cited conclusion that Paraguay is the country with the highest degree of bilingualism in the world is in fact an artifact of her data collection. Among the problems with Rubin’s study, Penner cites the fact that the researcher was more competent in Spanish than in Guarani; the fact that 100% of population in the rural community of interest was interviewed, but only 4% of the total population in the urban center of interest was; the short time spent
documenting the relative linguistic competence of each speaker (Penner calculates at most 15 minutes per person, but probably a lot less); survey instruments directed at measuring relative knowledge of Spanish, but not of Guaraní; survey questions that were not acceptable or were considered offensive by the community; and the lack of a clear category assignment for answers by interviewees that reveal language mixing phenomena. According to Penner, all of these factors bias towards concluding in favor of the bilingualism thesis, and of an advance of Spanish over Guaraní in Paraguayan society. What the alternative conclusion should be, in Penner’s view, was not entirely clear to me from this chapter.

In chapter 4 (“El guaraní y sus glotónimos” ‘Guaraní and its glossonyms’), Penner examines the terminological explosion surrounding Guaraní. She shows that there are about 30 different labels under which researchers talk about Guaraní (for example, Guaraníete ‘true Guaraní’, Guaraní académico ‘Academic Guaraní’, Guaraní del pueblo ‘people’s Guaraní’, Guaraní Jopara; etc.). A label implies that there exists a variety that is referenced by that label. Yet the author shows these labels mostly refer not to linguistic realities but instead to analytical constructs by speakers and researchers. In fact, there is no real linguistic research aimed at demonstrating the existence of these varieties. For example, Penner accepts that militants in favor of Guaraníete ignore the pressing question of who actually speaks this variety (if anybody), but for linguists to do the same, and reify Guaraníete by giving it a name without questioning if it really exists, without any real linguistic analysis, is obviously very problematic. In particular if one takes into accounts that most labels in use reflect the assumption that a Hispanicized Guaraní is inferior to a pure Guaraní. Having labels for “pure” varieties of Guaraní becomes then crucial, especially in work by non-Paraguayan researchers who are very sensitive to the issue of indigenous language death.

If chapter 4 examined the different labels attached to Guaraní, chapter 5 (“El jopara: un caleidoscopio de definiciones” ‘Jopara: a kaleidoscope of definitions’) complements it nicely by examining the different definitions given to Jopara by researchers. Unfortunately, this chapter repeats many of the same themes in previous chapters, including the methodological difficulties with Rubin’s thesis, and the different conclusion reached by Rubin’s contemporary Rona (1966).

Penner states from the outset that her goal in this chapter is not to add another definition of Jopara, but to examine the assumptions behind each definition, and in so doing to elucidate how Jopara became an object of study with a reality distinct from that of Guaraní. The chapter opens with several pages summarizing the definitions of the word (Jo)para in early dictionaries and grammars. Then it takes the reader through a panoply of different linguistic definitions of
Jopara: as a variety of “bad” Guaraní; as an interference phenomenon; as a new third language; as a kind of code-switching, as an interlanguage. In Penner’s view, all these equally define Jopara as opposed to Guaraní, which allows the reification of a putative non-Jopara Guaraní without addressing the issue of whether it exists, what it is, and whether it is spoken by anybody. However, to inform language policy we need first clear definitions of what Guaraní is, and presumably what Jopara is as well. Penner concludes the chapter with these claims:

(1) It is clear that for the specialists the existence of Jopara is the result of the absence of linguistic policies related to Guaraní.
(2) Both Jopara and Guaraní have rarely been analyzed from a linguistic point of view. The terminology contributes to nourish the assumption that both exist as different objects of study and different practices/languages.
(3) It is most important to define first what present-day Guaraní is, and only then, the efforts to define Jopara could succeed.

Finally, Chapter 6 (“Guaraní, jopara, lengua mixta. Implicaciones e inferencias sociolinguísticas de enfoques estructurales” ‘Guaraní, Jopara, mixed language: Sociolinguistic inferences and implications of the structural approaches’) aims to show the limitations of purely structural analyses and the need to couple them with investigations on the actual competence of speakers. The beginning of this chapter restates the themes that:

(1) Speakers mostly assume that any production showing any evidence of mixing between Spanish and Guaraní is automatically Jopara
(2) The reification of Jopara leads to the concomitant implicit assertion that there is a pure Guaraní (that is not Jopara), without supporting evidence, and this is done on the basis of a confused analysis that mixes social (mostly) and linguistic facts

Penner correctly raises the issues faced by the few structural analyses performed on decontextualized examples that also ignore the speaker’s linguistic competence. That is why she proposes that elucidating Jopara cannot be done on the basis of a sociolinguistic analysis of speakers’ opinions (Jopara as a “mental construct”, p. 152), but on a careful structural analysis of naturalistic language productions in context (Jopara as a “linguistic manifestation”, p. 152) in situations where the bilingual competence of each speaker can be examined.

She then moves on to a detailed linguistic analysis of historical fragments mixing Guaraní and Spanish leads her to the following classification of mixing phenomena:
She cautions, however, against concluding too hastily from the appearance of Spanish elements in favor of Spanish competence/bilingualism. In all of these fragments, she sees at least some evidence of “code-switching” and this implies the speakers had at least some knowledge of Spanish. But in the absence of phonological evidence, these are consistent as well with Guaraní monolingualism with Spanish borrowings.

Next, Penner engages in a comparison of two of the best developed structural analysis of Jopara: Thun (2005) and Gómez Rendón (2006; 2008). Whereas Thun's approach is to identify mechanisms whereby Spanish encroaches upon Guaraní, Gómez Rendón attempts to elucidate mechanisms and rules in a system that is already accepted as mixed. These different starting points have language planning consequences because adopting Thun's approach forces one to recognize the existence of Guaraní monolingualism (in the absence of studies of putative Guaraní monolinguals), but this is not entailed by Gómez Rendón's approach.

For Penner, both analyses have shortcomings. She criticizes Thun's conclusion that both Paraguayan Spanish and Paraguayan Guaraní are today mixed codes, because Thun does not make explicit how these mixed codes interact with themselves and with strategies like code-switching or alloglottal citation. Would this mean that many Paraguayans are actually trilingual? Likewise, she criticizes Gómez Rendón's analyses for being based purely on structural criteria without taking into account the competence of speakers. Importantly, because most concepts in language contact theory are predicated on the basis of two separate, identifiable languages with monolingual speakers coming into contact with one another, their application to the Paraguayan case can only proceed if we assume that Guaraní and Spanish have an independent existence in the community as monolingual entities.

These observations lead Penner to conclude:

1. It is not likely that there are still completely monolingual speakers of Guaraní.
2. The phonological system available to any Guaraní speakers incorporates many sounds originally from Spanish, complicating the assessment of phonological integration.
3. There is a clear primacy of Guaraní in the verb phrase and this needs to be further studied.

This chapter and the book conclude with the clearest statement of what steps the author considers necessary in future research on linguistic issues in

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(1) Guaraní verbal morphology (affixed to Spanish bases)
(2) Spanish words with Guaraní morphosyntax
(3) Constituents entirely in Spanish
Paraguay. First, researchers must think about the Paraguayan not as communities of practice that have different languages, but as a single community permeated by bilingualism. Second, and perhaps most importantly, there is an urgent need for the construction of a spoken Paraguayan corpus that is stratified by speakers’ linguistic competence.

3. Evaluation. One of Penner’s major themes seems to be what kind of speakers Paraguayans are and what kinds of different constellations of competencies we see in Paraguayan society today. Part of her methodological criticism is that depending on how one assigns units to Spanish or Guaraní in decontextualized examples, the speaker one reconstructs from such productions will be more or less bilingual, more or less competent in either Guaraní or Spanish. Penner’s proposal (which even though not extremely well articulated in the book is clearly recognizable, especially from chapters 5 and 6) is to approach the necessary fieldwork with tasks and surveys that take as departure point the actual competence of speakers and only then classify their production using categories like Guaraní, Jopara, or Spanish on the one hand, and code-switching, mixed language, etc. on the other. The book, in my view, succeeds in raising these important issues that impede real progress in our understanding of the Paraguayan situation and concomitantly in language planning. I am not convinced, however that the reader is well served by this book’s being a collection of revised articles previously published. I believe many of these points could have been made more clearly and more forcefully by an original monograph with a more thorough, coherent rewriting. That said, I believe this book’s positive aspects outweigh the negatives, making it an important reference for researchers interested in the linguistic situation in Paraguay.

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