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 Guaraní today, and Jopara (a label used by speakers and researchers to designate productions recognized as mixing Guaraní 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” Guaraní; how this reification of Jopara as an object of study also contributes to establishing “pure” Guaraní 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 Guaraní, 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 Guaraní, 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: Guaraní 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, Guaraní, 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