

***Lel l'an*¹: What dies when languages die.**

By Facundo Pignanelli

You feel the rays of the sun warming your face, and you know it is time to wake up. You open your eyes, and you see everything just as you left it before, it is just another day. In *Antiñir* – or how the others call it, *Los Miches* – not a lot happens on the daily, so you just get on with your day. Your present worry is to find a new job, as you were fired from your old one – at the municipal gym – because your former boss grew tired of you not being able to understand his language very well. You put on your finest clothes, you make the broadest of smiles, and you start walking, as if the wind were taking you. You spot a place that appears to be a market. You enter, and you greet the people you see there with a warm *Mari mari*² and they look at you puzzled. Instantly, you know, that they speak little – if any – of your language. You try to use some of the few words that you know in their language, but it becomes clear that there is no place for you here. Feeling somewhat defeated, you continue walking, hoping to find the right place for you.

As the afternoon comes, you have visited, what, *mari, epu mari*³ places? At some they did speak your language a tiny bit, at some, they did not speak it at all. How will you find a job that way? A part of you feels very exhausted and defeated. You know what you are capable of, you know you have a good set of skills, but it seems that they cannot seem to go past beyond the *Mari, Mari*: You just do not speak their language. You continue walking – passing by that market of before - until you see a sign that reads “*Escuela Primaria N° 93*”. You are not sure of what the second word means, but you know that the first one is *Kimeltuwe ruka*... Maybe they can help? If you only spoke their language... And then you promise yourself something: You will learn their language, and your children will speak their language, so they do not have to go through what you go through. You want them to have the opportunities you do not have. You enter the place, hoping for a better future, hoping to finally get a chance to show your worth.

What you experienced in the previous paragraphs is none other than the phenomenon of Language Death. In this essay, we will explore this phenomenon as it applies to the

¹ ‘To die suddenly’.

² Literally ‘ten, ten’ but it is used as a warm greeting.

³ Twenty

Mapudungun case, one of the languages of the *Mapuche* community, predominantly used across Chile and some parts of Argentina, like Neuquén, Santa Cruz and Rio Negro. We will explore statistics that will help us get a clear picture of the situation, then we will dive into the factors that are causing the death of the language, and, lastly, we will explore what can be done to help revitalize the language.

Mapudungun is, according to the encyclopaedia of languages Ethnologue, considered to be a moribund language in Argentina. According to the 2004 Census, around 8000 people speak the language across the scattered *Mapuche* communities in Argentina. At first, this number seems plausibly reasonable, but there is more than what meets the eye: If we compare the number of people that reported belonging to the *Mapuche* community in the same census, we start to get a clearer picture: Around 114,000 people consider themselves to be *Mapuche*, yet only 7% of them speak the language. A stark contrast of what studies quoted by the *Biblioteca Nacional de Chile* found in the year 2000: They estimated the number of *Mapudungun* speakers in Argentina to be around 100,000. Where have all those speakers gone? A plausible explanation for this sharp reduction can be found if we take a look at even more statistics.

According to research by Zúñiga (2007), only 1.8% of speakers reported to speak the language better than Spanish – the official language of Argentina and Chile; 12% of them claimed to understand *Mapudungun*, but they could not speak it in any capacity; 21% of people that identify as *Mapuche*, do not speak the language at all, and, out of the ones who do, only a quarter of them do so competently. This means that the language is not being transmitted across generations, and the newer generations of *Mapuche* people are not learning *Mapudungun* at a rate that would allow it to survive: An abysmal 3.8% of those aged 10 through 19 speak the language, and out of those, only 4% claim to use the language with their parents and at home, compared to 5.3% for their grandparents. This suggests that their parents are not using *Mapudungun* with them, and out those that do, only around 4% of them do so on a daily basis, which implies that the older generation of speakers of the language are actively choosing to not pass it on to their offspring, and/or that the newer generation is not interested in learning the language.

Out of all speakers of *Mapudungun*, people that live in rural communities speak the language better than those in urban communities. This fact means that there is a hidden force in those urban communities that discourages the use of *Mapudungun* within them.

If one takes a walk through Neuquén City, you will find plenty of signs, indications, advertisements and more, that are written in Argentina's official and dominant language, Spanish. You may even find advertisements and signs written in English, as its use becomes more widespread in the country, arguably thanks to globalization. But one would have to look really hard to find a piece of writing in *Mapudungun*, if you manage to find one at all, despite the fact that Neuquén is home to the largest community of *Mapuches* in Argentina, with the cherry on top being that the name of the province comes from the *Mapudungungan Newenken*.

However, despite the undeniable significance of *Mapudungun* in the cultural and historical landscape of Neuquén, the government's role in language preservation has been notably absent. In official communications, the *Mapudungun* language remains notoriously absent, a silence that reflects the wider struggle of indigenous languages in the face of dominant languages. The government's decision to primarily employ Spanish in official documentation, public signage, and educational materials reinforces the marginalization of *Mapudungun*. This neglect not only undermines the cultural identity of the *Mapuche* people but also perpetuates the linguistic imbalance, further eroding the viability of *Mapudungun*.

The dominance of Spanish over *Mapudungun* in these communities, not only extends to language use by the Government, but also resonates in the stark disparities faced by *Mapuche* people in accessing opportunities in education and employment. As Spanish stands as the prevailing language in educational institutions and professional sectors, *Mapuche* individuals who do not speak it fluently encounter significant obstacles. This linguistic divide inadvertently contributes to discrimination, exclusion, and limited access to employment, education, and other essential services. The language barrier, stemming from the government's failure to acknowledge *Mapudungun* in a meaningful capacity, further deepens the socio-economic disparities between the *Mapuche* and non-indigenous communities. The unequal linguistic playing field is a reflection of systemic, broader discrimination.

It is important to note, however, that the discrimination faced by *Mapuche* people is not necessarily the outcome of a deliberate government policy targeting the community. Instead, it primarily results from government inaction in addressing the linguistic and socio-economic disparities faced by the *Mapuche* population. The absence of proactive measures to promote *Mapudungun* and bridge the language gap within official communication, education, and the job market creates a systemic barrier that inadvertently perpetuates unequal access to opportunities. This inaction, rather than explicit policies, is the main driver of this lack of equal access to opportunities for the *Mapudungun* users.

This failure of action – rather than deliberate policy – can be exemplified by the *Modalidad de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe* program that was created by the *Ley de Educación Nacional N° 26.206* sanctioned by the Argentinean Congress in 2006. The program established that schools should offer educational programs in both Spanish and other local languages – such as *Mapudungun* – with the aim of creating a community of bilingual speakers in the areas where the two languages are spoken by the population. However, its implementation has fallen short of the spirit of the law. According to a map published by the Argentinean Ministry of Education in 2011, there were only 10 or less Educational Centres (which can be schools or other educational institutions), that offered bilingual education in the province of Neuquén. Out of those 10, most were primary education schools, and there was not a secondary education school in or around Los Miches – the closest being in the capital of Neuquén. In Los Miches, there is no educational institution that targets the adult population as well, leaving, arguably, the demographic that needs this program the most out of its reach.

The ineffectiveness of this program has been the subject of several protests by the *Mapuche* population. A news article published by InfoNews in June of this year, quoted the *Confederación Mapuche de Nequén* as claiming that there are 64 *Mapuche* communities in Nequén that do not have access to any sort of bilingual education, which goes in direct contradiction to the provincial Constitution of Nequén, which claims on its article 53 that “*La Provincia reconoce la preexistencia étnica y cultural de los pueblos indígenas neuquinos [...]. Garantiza el respeto a su identidad y el derecho a una educación bilingüe e intercultural.*” (SAIJ, 2006). This goes to show that there is a current failure in the

action of both the National and Provincial levels of Argentina and Neuquén. This failure in enforcing the already sanctioned laws, as well as the Constitutional mandate effectively perpetuates the systematic discrimination of the *Mapuche* language.

The government holds a pivotal role in safeguarding *Mapudungun* from extinction. To prevent its demise, government actions should begin with the formal recognition of the linguistic and cultural significance of *Mapudungun*. This recognition should be translated into concrete policies, such as the inclusion of *Mapudungun* in official communication, public signage, and educational curricula, following the already enacted educational law. The promotion of bilingual education programs in schools within *Mapuche* communities and beyond is vital for fostering language use. Government support for language preservation initiatives, community-driven language immersion programs, and the documentation of *Mapudungun's* vocabulary and grammar can provide the essential resources for its preservation. Furthermore, social, and economic policies should be designed to address the socio-economic disparities faced by the *Mapuche* population, ensuring that they have equal access to education, employment, and other opportunities.

Private sector engagement is equally crucial in the collective effort to safeguard the language. Companies and organizations can contribute significantly by actively embracing bilingualism and fostering an inclusive work environment that values linguistic diversity. This can involve offering job opportunities, internships, and training programs for individuals proficient in *Mapudungun*, thereby empowering *Mapuche* community members and supporting their economic well-being. In addition, private enterprises can support and sponsor cultural events, workshops, and educational programs that celebrate the *Mapuche* heritage, including the language. Such initiatives can not only raise awareness about the importance of linguistic diversity but also foster a deeper appreciation for the cultural richness that *Mapudungun* embodies.

These combined efforts from both the government and the private sector have the potential to reshape public opinion and kick start a positive societal change. As *Mapudungun* becomes more visible and appreciated through official communication, bilingual education, and cultural events, public perception is likely to shift. A growing awareness of the linguistic and cultural significance of *Mapudungun* can foster a deeper appreciation for the *Mapuche* heritage. This, in turn, can lead to reduced discrimination

against *Mapuche* people. Collaborative partnerships between the private sector, government, society at large, and *Mapuche* communities can create a combined approach towards preserving and revitalizing the Mapudungun, ensuring its continued presence and significance.

The language, as it currently stands, is in a *critical* state, in the truest sense of the word: “*having a decisive or crucial importance in the success, failure, or existence of something*” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). Action must be taken now, as the fate of the language is at the hands of the current generation of speakers. It will only be possible to save the language from its current trajectory towards extinction by having the current generation of *Mapuche* people embrace it, aided, and joined by the Argentinean government, society, and private sector institutions. The death of Mapudungun is not a distant future, but rather, the unequivocal state of the language as it is today.

Shall the government and people of Argentina take no action, they will find sooner, rather than later, that *Mapudungun* will be another museum piece, joined by the likes of *Puelche* or *Yámana*. They will find out, as well, that when a language dies, a lot more than a collection of words, sounds and grammatical rules die. A host of culture, traditions, stories, teachings, and knowledge will also be lost to time. Stories like the one we explored at the beginning of the essay will not happen anymore, because nobody will be there to tell them. The speakers of *Mapudungun* will slowly die, until one day – probably without anyone registering it – the last *Mapudungun* word will be uttered, and that will be the moment we reach *Lel l’an*. The language will simply cease to exist, suddenly, because we let it do so. In the words of David Crystal: “*A language dies when nobody speaks it anymore.*” (Crystal, 2000, p. 1). The question that remains is, then, will we let Mapudungun die? Time will only tell.

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