**Globally Speaking**

**Episode 054**

**Saving Latin America’s Endangered Languages**

R This is Renato Beninatto

M And I am Michael Stevens

R Today on Globally Speaking we have a special guest. A friend of ours.

M Absolutely, and on a very interesting topic. I think back to the Noam Chomsky quote where he says, “Every time a language disappears, we lose a culture.”

R Yes, and all over the world we have these efforts, and we’ve talked about some of them here in our podcast, of recovering and reviving languages around the world. And this time we’re going to South America.

M Yeah, it’s our first time, and the work that’s being done there is in early stages, but listening to our guest, it sounds like it’s going to have a really big impact.

R Let’s hear from our guest.

C My name is Cecilia Piaggio, and I've been working in the localization industry for 21 years, and now I've opened Latin America Habla.

R Latin America Habla. That's sounds for those who don't speak Spanish, Latin America Speaks.

R And…

M Globally Speaking, Latin America Speaks. It's a perfect connection.

R Very good. And what's the goal of this organization that you started Cecilia?

C Latin America Habla is a nonprofit organization that ... I was born in Argentina, and I didn't know, everybody speaks Spanish, and I didn't know that even in my home town, they were other people speaking endangered languages. People that spoke languages, and they were the first inhabitants of this land.

So, I was surprised by that fact, and I've never even heard the music of that language. So, for me, it was interesting, and I started to explore that, and it ended up being Latin America Habla because in Latin America, we speak many languages. So, the idea is to have a project saying Latin America Habla.

M So this is able to take you back to your roots. Talk about how they've become endangered. What is the loss?

C It's kind of a natural cycle where new languages emerge and some languages die. In the world you have 7,000 languages, and only 20 languages are spoken by half of the population, and the rest are languages that are spoken by a few citizens. So, these dominant languages tend to grow, and minority languages tend to die. And the reasons why the languages die, is because the children stop speaking the language at home, because they don't see any use in speaking their native language. And, also, because they're not proud of their identity, and there lies the main reason why we want to revitalize. It's not because we want to keep the language alive itself. It's because we want those inhabitants to feel proud of their ethnicity.

R It’s very interesting. To one of your points that you make that I found very interesting is that only as an adult were you able to identify the fact that people didn't speak Spanish in Latin America originally, because you are part of the dominant culture that has made you believe, until you were an adult, that that was the reality of the country. But how many indigenous languages have you identified in Argentina so far?

C Well, with the people I've been connecting with, we've already mapped seven languages, but the UNESCO has identified many more. But those languages, we couldn't find any speaker left. It's something that we are just starting. Currently, the government is doing a census, so we will know more by the end of the year.

But at this moment, it’s really hard to be at a relationship with this community. So, I've started with Latin America Habla with one specific language that is called Qom; the people call them Toba. Toba is the foreign name, and it means ‘straight hair’. So, when we speak, and we want to be respectful of their ethnicity, we say Qom. Qom community. So, we are working with them, and through them, since they have, they articulate with the government, we will also believe that we will be successful in engaging, in cooperation with other communities as well.

R So, is this a grass roots initiative? Is that something that you started out of the blue because ‘hey, I've found out this cool language called Qom, and I want to enable and bring them to 21st Century’. Or was there a need identified by themselves? By the indigenous people?

C Well, it was the other way around. I wanted to do something social, and I couldn't picture myself going to a poor neighborhood to serve dinner. I didn't even have the time to do that, but I also wanted to do something social that was related with my expertise, and this idea of drinking a beer with a friend. He said, “Why don't you work with this community?” And then I got to know the community. It took me some time to really get access to the key leaders in the community, and them to trust me. But the idea was, I wanted to do something social, and I wanted to do something that relates to my expertise.

And that's how it started. And what is really amazing is that the more I speak about it, the more I find people in the same situation that I am. That they want to contribute out of their desk. They want to do something that, maybe something to donate one hour of their time, out of their desk, but feel good that they are doing something better for their community. So, I think that this is a very interesting initiative for those that want to do something social in the localization industry.

M Cecilia, how many members of the Qom community are there currently?

C Locally, we believe that there are around 30,000. I've seen reports where they say that there's 60,000, but that’s...we will confirm the amount of inhabitants in Argentina by the end of this year, hopefully.

M Ok. What impact do you see the new census having on your work with your organization? Will other people groups come to light, and you be able to go and pursue the same thing, and look to add additional endangered languages? Will it help you grow what you're doing with the Qom people?

C So, there are two aspects of this initiative. We are working on different pillars. One of them is to have videos in YouTube that are accessible to children. And even get open source games, memory games, or very easy games that they can play, and start feeling proud, and connect their language with technology, so that it’s cool to use their native language. And for that, what you need is to create a template; you need to build the solution. Either with this open source game, and then you can reuse the same template with the other languages.

M Okay.

C So, there's one effort that can be leveraged by other languages. We're piloting the way we are working with one language so we can focus our efforts. But the idea is to work in this direction. We are designing an agile approach to the way that volunteers can contribute. I want to generate a backlog of these activities, kind of in isolation, so people can grab one task, for example, one video. They can modify it, localize it, and upload it. We will, of course, be providing the translation in the native endangered language. And then they can edit or apply subtitles, or whatever the task is, and then upload it. And maybe that donation was, the work was 30 minutes, and then they record that they donated 30 minutes, and in that way, we can keep track and perform the proper acknowledgements to their donations.

R So, it's interesting that your project-management background and program management …

M Exactly.

R … flares when you're talking about this, but I'm more curious about the language itself. What can you tell me about the Qom language? We know there are between 30-60,000 people that speak it. Indigenous languages in any continent, they don't follow geographic boundaries because these geographic borders were created by the colonization of America. So, is it only in Argentina, or are they present in other countries? Tell us more about the nature of the language and what you have found out about it.

C Well, you know, that's a very good question, Renato. Because when we were discussing about the names, and Argentina Habla was the first one, it's like, ‘no, we cannot limit it because the first inhabitants were not based in Argentina or in this land’. So, that's why we said, "Okay, let's focus on Latin America, so we don't have the issue of the boundaries."

Qom community is also present in Uruguay and potentially in Paraguay, but mainly they are based in three different provinces. They're originally from the north of Argentina—Chaco and Formosa provinces—but Rosario is the second or third largest city in Argentina, so it's very common that these communities migrate to Rosario or Buenos Aires.

So, now it's not their natural habitat, and these people didn't know the language and didn't have any education. So, now they live in really, really poor neighborhoods in Rosario, so it's all in the suburbs. And this is one of the reasons why they live in the suburbs, and they need to adjust culturally and learn the language just to get a job. And right there, it's kind of how you see the dominance of a language over a minority language.

R This language is a live language; they speak it at home …

C Yes.

R ... they communicate in it. It's like Guarani in Paraguay, which is a…

C Exactly.

R … In Paraguay, they made Guarani an official language of the country, but Qom is not recognized as such. Do they have an alphabet, or has the language been codified? Is there a grammar? Tell us about linguistic aspects.

C Well, it's been written not that long ago; in the 1940s, it was written. Now they are losing some of the special characters because they want to make it easier for the speakers to write in that alphabet. So, I am just getting to understand better their languages. Like, there’s a lot of books written, but it seems that there is quite a lot of freedom that bilingual people tend to—they feel empowered to write as they like in some cases. So, one of the reasons why I want to connect with different bilingual teachers is because I want to validate what they are telling me.

R Well, I'll tell you something, Cecilia. We've heard here in a previous episode at Globally Speaking with Manuela Noske when we were talking about African languages that one of the challenges is that a lot of these languages come through oral traditions. And different people have independent efforts to write the language, and there are different standards. This is very common; I remember a project that I was involved with that we had to do ... I think K'iche', one of the languages in Central America. And there were like a few thousand people who spoke it, but there were three different versions of K'iche'.

C Yes, exactly.

M Yup.

R Because one university follows one rule, the other group follows another. And this is also very common in African languages, and I understand also in Australia; these are common challenges. So, I think it's a laudable effort that you have by trying to coordinate these different factions because, ‘it's my language; I write it any way I want it’.

M Right.

C Yes, but … and that’s why the idea is to add, as opposed to focus on one term. If there are two ways to say one word, we will have two entries in the glossary and move on because the goal would be to capture it as much as possible and to make available whatever we produce. One of the main concerns that the community has is that they've welcomed researchers and politicians, and they cooperated with them, but then they are left empty-handed because they don't receive the research, the final results. They don't get anything after the elections.

So, the idea, and something that has been successful, is that once we record a video, we try to post it during the same session, the draft version of it, and then a polished one. So, they own it; they have the sense that we make the acknowledgement to whoever recorded the session, whoever translated something. It's really important for them because there has been a lot of abuse in that sense, and we want to be really respectful about that.

M Yeah, and so for the community, what benefit is it to have the recording?

C In Argentina, a couple of years of ago, the bilingualism education was approved. This means that for public schools where you have a percentage of students that belong to these indigenous communities, the teachers should also teach some of the concepts in this indigenous language. So, now there's a legal framework, but teachers don't belong to these communities; they don't speak the language-

M Yeah, they probably don't even have the tools to have the resources to provide this for the students.

C Exactly. So, we've partnered with one public school here in Rosario, that they're a part of this bilingual program, and the teachers are eager to collaborate with us. We are going to start this year with ... it's called ‘initial cycle’; it's before the primary school. And we’re going to start developing the content, producing the content in digital format for them. There's games; there's how to count from 1 to 10; geometrical shapes; really the basics, and also in Spanish and in Qom. So, even the teacher can learn the language, and then share it with the students.

M When we discussed with the Endangered Alphabets Project their work, they were saying that oftentimes, these linguistic issues prevent academic challenges for the students. They are so limited, and even just engaging in their native language gives them confidence to go in and perform better academically.

C Yes, and what is funny about this school is that they have ... they call it like ... how to translate, it's like … they call it a technological track. They're based in a poor neighborhood, so everything is kind of locked with a lot of security. They have this locked track with 20 computers, so it's available. It's something that they can move from classroom to classroom, but they cannot use it because they don't have the content to use it, or maybe they do have it, but teachers don't know how to use it.

So, it’s interesting that when we offered to produce this material and teach the teachers how to use it, all the teachers were really, really happy. And usually what we hear is that teachers are demotivated, or teachers really don't care about the work they are doing. These teachers, I am amazed to see, and they really welcome any kind of contribution. We are going to start with the initial primary school, and then the idea is to make it really long-term and to start adding more and more. There's a lot of work that needs to be done in collaboration with the community because some concepts cannot even be translated because they don't have the notion of it. I am really excited to even learn more about this culture.

R Have you learned some Qom? Can you say a couple of words in Qom?

C I wouldn't dare to say anything, but they would kill me. They are trying to teach me; I am horrible. I'm not like you, Renato, that speaks so many languages, unfortunately.

M Are you a bad student? Is that what it is?

C I've always been a bad student.

R What I find fascinating … it always brings me back to this ... there was a futurist back in the 90s, John Naisbitt. He wrote a series of books, and one of them was *Global Paradox*. And one thing that stuck with me, and I see this more and more, and I can see your effort fitting in this paradox, which is that the bigger the world economy, the more powerful the smaller players become. And we're going through this huge globalization effort, and more and more we see this initiative, so going back to the roots, gaining full cultural identity. It's happening in Spain with the Catalans. It's happening in Ireland with the Gaelic community. It's happening in Africa. It's happening everywhere. So, I find it very commendable that you are putting your skills into starting a project of this nature and that you plan to extend it to other languages. Do you have any other languages already in mind?

C Well, in fact, I have a group of teachers that speak Mapuche. They're helping me, because they already produced some videos that were really good, and I asked them if they could donate those videos for the Qom community. They said, "Yeah, change the costumes, because if not, they're going to be confused by the Mapuche community." So I took away, I didn't add, the costumes, because I want someone from the community to come up with the right icons for the video. Then I sent it back to the Mapuche community and said, "Do you approve me to go ahead with this?" And so now I leverage from their work, and once we start creating more content, we're going to share that template with them. So if they like it, they can leverage it.

C The idea is to collaborate and not to have kind of a selfish approach to it. We're going, of course, to have certain guidelines. The owner, the people that produce the material, but the idea is that anyone ... because, you teach emotions, the dramatical figures, how to count. If you can adapt what we've done and replicate, this can be global. It doesn't need to be limited to Latin America.

R Well, congratulations. This is a, like I said, commendable activity, and it's great to see the passion that you're putting into it.

M Right, and how many volunteers do you currently have working on it?

C Well, we have a core team of six, and then I've been working for so long here that I ping people. I needed to do a script, so I connected with someone. They volunteered that. Then I needed someone else to create a core glossary, so I remembered who could help me, and I ping them. I haven't built—we haven't built—because the core team is working with me. We haven't built yet the framework to generate this rich backlog for people to start grabbing this.

M Okay.

C The idea is to start with a volunteer program soon because this is a long-term effort. The beauty of it is that once we generate the backlog, we can speed up how much material we can produce.

**END OF CONVERSATION**