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# 10

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Language secrecy and concealment  
in Chamacoco (Zamucoan)

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## Language secrecy and concealment in Chamacoco (Zamucoan)<sup>1</sup>

Luca Ciucci

### 1 Introduction

This study addresses language secrecy and concealment in Chamacoco, with particular reference to the so-called Ebitoso dialect, spoken by the vast majority of Chamacoco people. Secrecy and concealment involving Chamacoco manifest themselves into four aspects: (i) the secrecy of the Chamacoco Indigenous religion, which resulted in linguistic taboos, mostly concerning myths and ritual songs; (ii) the con-

cealment of the Chamacoco language, a strategy adopted when speakers want to hide their Indigenous identity; (iii) the use of Chamacoco as a secret language, in other contexts; (iv) the emergence of a secret register in Chamacoco, as a reaction to the Hispanization of the language, which makes some expressions potentially understandable to Spanish speakers.

After introducing Chamacoco and its family (§1.1), Section 2 deals with language secrecy in the traditional Chamacoco culture.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> By “traditional”, I refer here to the Chamacoco culture before 1956, when the Chamacoco abandoned their initiation ceremony and their Indigenous religion (Blazer 2010: 53), cf. Section 2.

The speakers of the Ebitoso dialect have been in contact with Western people for a long time, abandoning many aspects of their traditional culture, including the secrecy related to their religion. Nowadays, language is the main component of the Ebitoso speakers' identity. Unfortunately, discrimination towards Indigenous people often obliges Chamacoco speakers outside their communities to conceal their language (§3). The situation is different when the speakers are in their traditional territory (in the Alto Paraguay Department, Paraguay), where they do not need to hide their ethnic identity. Here Chamacoco is used as a secret language not understood by the rest of Paraguayan society (§4). In more than one century of contact, the Ebitoso dialect has borrowed many elements from Spanish (Ciucci 2021a). This has made some information potentially accessible to outsiders so that, to maintain language secrecy, the Ebitoso dialect has developed a secret register, whose strategies are dealt with in Section 5. Section 6 offers some conclusions.

### 1.1 The Chamacoco language

Chamacoco is spoken by about 2,000 people in the department of Alto Paraguay in Paraguay. It belongs to the Zamucoan family along with †Old Zamuco and Ayoreo. Old Zamuco was spoken in the 18th century in the Jesuit mission of *San Ignacio de Zamucos*, one of the Jesuit missions of Chiquitos (Chomé 1958; Ciucci 2018). Ayoreo

has about 4,500 speakers in northern Paraguay and southeastern Bolivia. It stems from one or more sister languages of Old Zamuco. Ayoreo people had their first stable contacts with Western culture in 1947. Contact has played a crucial role in the evolution of the Chamacoco language and culture. The Chamacoco religion, for instance, is fairly different from that of other Chaco groups, including the Ayoreo (Cordeu 1989-1992), possibly due to the influence of Jê populations (Cordeu 1997). Other peoples, such as the Chiquitano (Sušnik 1969), the Guaraní (Ciucci & Bertinetti 2015) and the Kadiwéu (Guaycuryan) (Ciucci 2014, 2020) also influenced the Chamacoco language and culture.

The Chamacoco call themselves *Ishiro* 'the people, the Indigenous' (on this ethnonym, see Richard 2011; Ciucci 2021b) and their language *Ishir(o) ahwoso*, literally 'the words of the Chamacoco'. The Chamacoco are now divided into two groups, each speaking a separate dialect: Ebitoso (*Ibitoso* in Chamacoco) and Tomaraho.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I use the term Chamacoco to refer only to the Ebitoso people, with whom I have done my fieldwork. Although the two groups used to be culturally very similar, the Ebitoso have abandoned many of their traditions, which are still preserved among the Tomaraho, who have lived for a longer period in isolation from Western society (on the Tomaraho, see Sequera 2006 and Escobar 2007). In this study, I use the orthographic transcription generally adopted for the Ebitoso dialect of Chamacoco.<sup>4</sup> It was established by Ulrich &

<sup>3</sup> For reasons of simplicity, I have used here the orthography *Ebitoso*, as done by Sušnik in her seminal studies (1957, 1969). However the Ebitoso are properly called *Ibitoso* in their own language. The same word is transcribed *Ybitoso* according to the orthography used in Sequera (2006).

<sup>4</sup> The Chamacoco orthography reflects the phonology of the language. Chamacoco has six short vowels /a e i o u i/ <a e i o u i> and as many long vowels /a: e: i: o: u: i:/ <aa ee ii oo uu ii>. Vowel nasalization (a suprasegmental feature) is indicated by <~>. The consonants /p t k b d ts s h m n w l/ are represented by identical letters. The following phonology-orthography correspondences apply for the other consonants: /tʰ/ = <ch> (<c> word-finally), /z/ = <rz>, /ʃ/ = <sh>, /x/ = <j>, /rŋ/ = <hm>, /ŋ/ = <hn>, /r/ (usually [ɹ]) = <r>, /ɹ/ [ɹ̥] = <rh>, /j/ = <y>, /j̥/ = <hy>, /w̥/ = <hw>, /ɬ/ = <hl>. The sequence /rʰtʰ/, realized as [ɹ̥] in intervocalic context, is rendered with <rrz>. Ulrich & Ulrich (1989) transcribed word-initial /ts/ as <s>, I prefer to always use <ts>, in order to avoid ambiguity with word-initial /s/.

Ulrich (1989) along with the Chamacoco leaders at that time. A different orthography is used for the Tomaraho dialect (Sequera 2006). For an analysis of Chamacoco orthography, see Ciucci (2016: 42-44, 57-65).

## 2 Secrecy in traditional Chamacoco culture

Despite some attempts at cultural resurgence in recent years (see Escobar 2007), the Ebitoso have abandoned their traditional culture. This process was described by Sušnik (1969). In Chamacoco society, there was an initiation period during which young men were introduced to adult life. The initiand was also exposed to religious secrets and told myths that had to remain unknown to children and women. The culminating event was the feast of the *Ahnapsĩro*, mythical beings who were impersonated by the men of the community. Women could only watch some moments of the ceremony, and they were supposed to believe that the *Ahnapsĩro* were real. Women were killed if they were too curious, and the same punishment applied to men who revealed their hidden knowledge to them (Alarcón y Cañedo & Pittini 1924: 40). Chamacoco mythology explains this. Indeed, according to the myth, the *Ahnapsĩro* were killed by the men of the tribe. For this reason, the goddess *Eshnuwĩrta*, the mother of the *Ahnapsĩro*, ordered the men to impersonate the *Ahnapsĩro* in their rituals. When women discovered that their men pretended to be the *Ahnapsĩro*, the goddess ordered them to kill all women and children. Then, new women were created, unaware of what had happened before (Sušnik 1957: 7-32; Cordeu 1997). According to Sušnik (1969: 14-17), the Tomaraho were despised by the Ebitoso,

because they did not observe the ceremonial secrecy.

This situation determined some linguistic taboos: for instance, men could not pronounce the name of their goddess, *Eshnuwĩrta*, in front of a woman because her name was taboo for women, so the goddess was simply referred to as *timcharrza* 'woman' (Sušnik 1957: 18). Myths existed in a reduced version for the whole community and a complete version for initiated men: one can see an example in Sušnik (1957: 29-32). Sušnik (1957: 6) reports that women were reluctant to tell myths about *Ahnapsĩro*, even in the version they were allowed to know, because they thought that telling myths was something only men could do.

The celebration of the initiation ritual, also called *Ahnapsĩro* ritual (Sušnik 1957), was abandoned in 1956 (Blaser 2010: 72-74). After that year, myths could be told in their complete form (Cordeu 2006). However, owing to the profound cultural change that has taken place in the meantime, a study on secrecy in traditional Chamacoco (Ebitoso) society has to be based mainly on the available bibliographical sources (such as Cordeu 1989-1992) rather than on fieldwork. My informants remember stories of women and even children being killed because they wanted to or gave the impression that they tried to access prohibited knowledge. According to them, people simply disappeared: they were killed and their bodies were never found. Only the military leader knew who had actually committed the murder, but the tribe was told that the missing people had been killed by *Pawchata*, the Tarantula, a mythical being. They used to say *Pawchata shuu*, lit. 'the Tarantula kills/killed'. An informant told me that her mother was curious, so her grandfather worried about her. According to them, not only was the name of

the goddess *Eshnuwĩrta* taboo for women, but also the word *Ahnapsĩro*, as well as the names of the single *Ahnapsĩro*, such as *Pohichuwo* and *Nehmurc*. It is difficult to evaluate the reliability of my informants as far as the traditional culture is concerned since they were born at a time when the Indigenous religion was being abandoned to embrace Christianity. The ethnographers mentioned above, who worked with older generations of Chamacoco, provide more detailed information on the initiation rites and mythology.

Ritual songs are also covered by secrecy. The older or late-middle-aged Chamacoco speakers may still have learned ritual songs when they were children (and possibly even later). However, the people who know such songs are reluctant to sing them because they refer to aspects of their abandoned Indigenous religion. They were also deterred from singing shamanic songs by Christian missionaries. Ritual songs were performed for some magic effect and often involved the continuous repetition of a formula revealed to a shaman in dreams, as in (1).

- (1) *Tok-õya*            *ow-ta*            *l-a-ta*  
 1s-accompany    stream-FS.AF    3-mother-FS.AF  
*l-ote=he*            *ehe-t*  
 3-play=PREP    3.inside-MS.AF

'I accompany the mother of the stream, she plays inside (the stream).'

(Barras 2014, track 1)

Although the songs were known to many people, they belonged to a shaman, whose family was allowed to sing them and transmit them to the younger generation, but no person outside the family could sing them without permission. Apart from their literal meaning, the songs had another hidden meaning which had to remain secret and was only known to the shaman, who revealed it to a chosen family member of the next generation. The formula in (1) comes from Barras (2014, track 1), a collection of traditional Chamacoco shamanic songs. This compilation allows for the rediscovery of material otherwise difficult or impossible to document.<sup>5</sup>

The cultural assimilation of the Chamacoco by Paraguayan society has reshaped language secrecy. In place of the secrecy linked to the Chamacoco Indigenous religion, the language itself is kept hidden depending on the context (§3-4). At the same time, the speakers have developed a secret register not to be understood by the other Paraguayans, who may identify some lexical items borrowed from Spanish (§5). This information emerged spontaneously during the various periods of fieldwork I undertook on Chamacoco since 2009, often in conversations after the proper fieldwork sessions dedicated to transcribing texts. During my fieldwork in 2017 and 2019, I asked the speakers to confirm or retell stories and anecdotes that I had heard in the previous years but which I had considered more part of the friendly social relationships established during fieldwork than the focus of my linguistic analysis. The following sections summarize the contents of

<sup>5</sup> The recording of these songs was useful for research, but it would not be allowed in the traditional Chamacoco culture: some informants indeed complained that some of the songs belonged to their family and could not be sung by other people without asking for permission. In addition, they did not recognize the song in track 9 of Barras (2014) as a Chamacoco song. It is possibly a Guaná (Enlhet-Enenlhet) song.

many conversations I had over the years. To protect the speakers' anonymity, I will not give any personal detail about the informants.

### **3 Concealing the language and the Indigenous identity**

The first aspect of secrecy in present-day Chamacoco society has to do with the discrimination suffered by Chamacoco speakers in Paraguayan society. The fact itself that they can speak Chamacoco must be kept secret, because the language exposes them to potential discrimination. In Paraguay, 95% of the population is of mixed Spanish and Native American descent (CIA 2022). The people who identified themselves as Indigenous totaled 117,150 people in 2012, representing about 1.82% of a Paraguayan population of 6,435,218 in the same year (DGEEC 2014: 48-49). The rights of the Indigenous people are recognized in the Paraguayan Constitution of 1992 (Articles 62-67). Despite this, there is a persistent attitude of racism and discrimination towards the Indigenous minority in Paraguayan society (UNGA 2015). At the same time, the vast majority of Paraguayans who do not recognize themselves as Indigenous descend from Indigenous people and speak Guaraní, an Indigenous language, along with Spanish.

Discrimination and marginalization are serious problems faced every day by all Indigenous people, and the Chamacoco are no exception. Unlike other Indigenous populations who have been isolated from Western people for a long time and still live in separated communities, the Chamacoco have been in contact

with Paraguayan society at least since the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first contact with Chamacoco was made in 1885 with the foundation of Puerto Pacheco (now Bahía Negra in Paraguay), a settlement on the Paraguay river (Boggiani 1894: 27), and the first traveler who reported contact with them was Luigi Balzan in 1892 (López Beltrán 2008: 257).

The Chamacoco not only underwent the cultural influence by the outsiders, but many of them partly descend from non-Chamacoco. This is also because many Chamacoco families used to sell their young daughters to men living in the nearby area (Ciucci 2013: 173).<sup>6</sup> Since these forced marriages were contracted when women were not mature enough to make decisions about their own life, the couples often split after some years and the women returned to their community with the children born in the meantime. The women were then free to marry a Chamacoco man. Consequently, it is not rare to meet elderly Chamacoco with a non-Chamacoco biological father; past visitors also have left descendants in the community (cf., for instance, Fajkusová 2006). To this, one should add the past contacts of the Chamacoco with surrounding Indigenous populations, such as the Kadiwéu (see Boggiani 1894: 47-49; Oberg 1949).<sup>7</sup> While the cultural influence of neighboring populations was mentioned in §1.1, language contact has produced interesting cases of morphological borrowing, even involving typologically rare features (Ciucci 2014, 2020), thus making Chamacoco the most innovative language of its small family (see Ciucci & Bertinetto 2015, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> The practice of selling children to foreigners was relatively common and continued for longer.

<sup>7</sup> The available literature mentions the fact that the Chamacoco were often taken as prisoners by the Kadiwéu and incorporated in their group. Chamacoco, owing to the loss suffered by the Kadiwéu, also used to take prisoners from militarily weaker groups (see Boggiani 1894: 22). This illustrates the type of contact that happened between different populations in the area.

The Chamacoco language is now de facto the main (if not the only) link with their Indigenous origin and cultural tradition. Being Indigenous, for them, means having their own language. Since language identifies them as Chamacoco Indigenous and makes them “different” from the rest of the Paraguayan population, it must be kept secret and inaccessible to all other Paraguayans. The Chamacoco generally shift to Spanish in the presence of other Paraguayans. This is possible, because, except for some very older people, all Chamacoco are bilingual in Spanish-Chamacoco. In (2), the speaker warns a companion that a non-Chamacoco is coming, implying that they have to shift from Chamacoco to Spanish.

- (2) *¡Obi! Yee Baa-ch*  
 Watch.out! now Paraguayan-MS.AF  
*t-irēt*  
 3-come  
 ‘Watch out! The Paraguayan is coming.’

This also has more extreme consequences: in many cases, owing to racism against Indigenous, some Chamacoco feel ashamed of their origin and usually keep their Indigenous identity hidden from people they meet in their everyday life, including their non-Chamacoco friends. This often implies pretending not to know Chamacoco friends or relatives who could be recognized as Indigenous by non-Indigenous Paraguayan people. Here language plays an important role, because one of the

main risks in meeting people from their community is being addressed in Chamacoco or that someone could hear them talking in Chamacoco, which could have a disruptive social impact. My informants told me several anecdotes about relatives or acquaintances who pretended not to know them in order not to be considered Indigenous.

Although there are mixed marriages with the non-Chamacoco, it may be challenging for a Chamacoco partner to tell the other that they are Indigenous and feel free to speak their language. In extreme cases, the Indigenous identity is never revealed, even after marriage. The Indigenous partner may cut off all contacts with their relatives and community so they can no longer be identified as Indigenous.

Concealing the Indigenous identity is a phenomenon known not only to the Chamacoco. Indeed, people from other Indigenous groups, who, for whatever reasons, have abandoned their community, often hide their Indigenous origin to be fully accepted by Paraguayan society.<sup>8</sup>

Many Chamacoco only tell trusted people that they are Indigenous. This often happens involuntarily, for instance, when they meet their Chamacoco relatives/acquaintances and are heard to speak a different language by Paraguayan people. Since discrimination is due to prejudice, it usually does not occur among people who have known each other for a long time, but the Chamacoco are often vulnerable, because “revealing” to other people

<sup>8</sup> Since many Chamacoco cannot be associated with a “typical” phenotype, when Chamacoco is heard, funny misunderstandings can arise. Some Chamacoco can be mistaken for foreign groups, so to protect themselves, they claim to be descendants of Ukrainians or Koreans, two immigrant communities traditionally present in Paraguay. Sometimes, they are even considered Americans, which is a reason for pride considering the high status enjoyed in Paraguay by Americans and the English language. One informant told me that a bus driver believed them to pretend to be Indigenous. The bus driver thought that the informant was lying and that they were a Paraguayan who pretended to be a Chamacoco, because they had just learned the language.



that someone is Indigenous can lead to social marginalization. Revealing that an acquaintance is Indigenous is something people may do, for instance, out of revenge, as an act with the purpose of harming the person involved. Owing to local discrimination, people coming from other countries may be perceived as more trustworthy. Some informants told me that for a long time only foreigners who attended the same church (but not Paraguayans) knew that they were Indigenous and that this openness had to do with the fact that they were foreigners.

Since the Chamacoco language is the main component of identity, it must be kept secret to avoid discrimination. In addition, Spanish-Chamacoco bilingualism is different from Paraguayan society's typical Spanish-Guaraní bilingualism. Spanish is the predominant language and has long been the only official language of Paraguay. It was the only language used in education until the *Ley de Lenguas* 4251 of 2010, which promotes the use of Guaraní in public contexts. The Guaraní language is an essential part of Paraguayan identity. According to the 2012 census, 80.3% of Paraguayan people speak Guaraní at home. Of these, 46.3% are bilingual Spanish-Guaraní, and 34% only speak Guaraní at home (DGEEC 2016). The role of Guaraní is even stronger in rural areas around Chamacoco communities, where 62.2% of the population only speaks Guaraní at home, and 25.7% practices Spanish-Guaraní bilingualism. Although not all Chamacoco speakers can speak Guaraní, fluency in Guaraní is necessary to be accepted in Paraguayan society, particularly among low social strata, where speaking Guaraní is a feature of identification as "Paraguayan". The fact that a Paraguayan of non-European descent can speak Spanish but

not Guaraní would reveal the very Indigenous identity that many Chamacoco want to keep secret. After having left their community, an informant used to say to other Paraguayan people that they came from Bolivia to justify their lack of fluency in Guaraní. Guaraní is gaining ground in Paraguayan institutions and in education, but it will presumably never replace Spanish as the primary language of education. A risk of encouraging the use of Guaraní among non-Guaraní Indigenous people is that a wider use of Guaraní might occur at the cost of other Indigenous languages, such as Ayoreo and Chamacoco.

#### **4 Speaking Chamacoco in the presence of the non-Chamacoco: Chamacoco as a secret language**

The general attitude of most Chamacoco in Paraguayan society is to conceal their language to avoid being identified as "Indigenous" and therefore discriminated against. This radically changes when they are among people who already know that they are Chamacoco. Then Chamacoco is no longer a language to be concealed but is overtly spoken. Chamacoco is often used in everyday situations to convey a secret message. For instance, it can be used in the public domain to make decisions that must remain secret: during elections several years ago, the members of a major Chamacoco community, who generally share the same political views as their non-Chamacoco neighbors, decided to vote for an opposing party. All meetings were held in Chamacoco to avoid conflict with their traditional political allies. The final decision to support a different party from their traditional one was communicated in Chamacoco so that only the people

of the community could understand. For the Indigenous football team of the Puerto Diana community, Chamacoco is the language used during matches not to be understood by the opponents, who only speak Spanish and Guaraní. *Mutatis mutandis*, something similar happens with the national representative of Paraguay, whose players, as is known, speak Guaraní during matches, giving them the advantage of communicating in a language not understood by the other South American teams.

When Chamacoco people speak with outsiders, they can take advantage of a moment of distraction to insert short Chamacoco words into the Spanish conversation, which foreigners hardly perceive, but this can be used to convey a message to another Chamacoco speaker: *shish* 'quick', *bu* 'go!', *wichi* 'that/this', *yuko* 'let's go!', *takaha* 'I go', *aak* 'eat!'. Chamacoco can also be used to offend the addressee without them noticing, using expressions such as (*owa*) *oterc* 'your ass' or (*owa*) *amach* 'your anus', which are also commonly used among Chamacoco when they argue.

The secret language needs to be protected. Many Chamacoco do not want other Paraguayans, and often also foreigners, to learn their language. This is the most conspicuous component of their identity, which they do not want to share with outsiders who are often perceived as disrespectful. Another serious concern is that outsiders could use their language to ridicule them, which also applies to people known for a long time. An exception are people who want to learn the language

for a reason beyond simple curiosity, such as missionaries. I was accepted as a fieldworker because I had been introduced by the missionaries who had translated the New Testament into Chamacoco (Ulrich & Ulrich 2000). The interest of a linguist, whose goals were relatively opaque to the speakers, was seen as an antidote to the everyday discrimination suffered, as was the fact that I was a PhD student sent by his university to investigate their language. The presence of a scholar representing an institution symbolizing a high level of education, unobtainable for most Paraguayans, indicated to them that their language was a valuable asset and that it would be treated with respect.<sup>9</sup>

When asked by outsiders to teach them some words, many Chamacoco speakers deceive them by teaching vulgar words or expressions which make a laughing stock of the "learner", such as: *pomach* 'my anus', *tomsaha pomach* 'I enter my anus' (it is a common offense in Chamacoco), *yok totihla* 'I am mad', *yok jār* 'I am greedy, hungry', *yok mihnik* 'I am ugly, bad'. In these cases, they either refuse to tell the real meaning of the words they have taught or say that these, and other similar expressions, have a positive meaning so they can continue making fun of them. An example of this situation can be seen in the following text, which is an often-told anecdote.

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<sup>9</sup> This is a very common situation occurring when a linguist investigates a language spoken by a discriminated minority. Ciucci's (2016) book, published in Paraguay, aimed to contribute to the social and cultural emancipation of Zamucoan peoples: the presence of a book on Zamucoan languages in a country where they are spoken, written by a foreign scholar, indicates a scientific interest at an international level, which is in sharp contrast with common discriminatory attitudes towards Indigenous people.

(3) a. *Boshesh-o o-l-ote=he=chi o-kihniya ich dihip-it*  
 child-MP P-3-play=PREP=there 3P-be.many CONJ foreigner-MS.AF  
*kinehe-t t-aāch=ihī. Eseeḫi hn umo boshesh-o im:*  
 different-MS.AF 3-arrive=there DM CONJ 3.see child-MP v  
 ‘Many children play, and a foreigner arrives. He asks the children.’

b. “*¿Like ii-tik-i-po?*” *Ts-owa boshesh-t nohme-t. Esee-ki wir*  
 this:MS name-MS.IF-EP-INT 3-show child-MS.AF one-MS.AF DM-RETR 3P  
*o-mo ire otsii: “P-oma-ch.” Esee ts-eēt ḍr im:*  
 3P-see 3S 3P.QUOT 1s-anus-MS.AF DM 3-imitate 3P 3.QUOT  
 ‘“What is the name of this?”. He shows it to one child. They say to him, “Pomach” (lit. ‘my anus’). He repeats.’

c. “*P-oma-ch.*” *Esee-ki hn nos o-y-ana. Esee hn uu*  
 1s-anus-MS.AF DM-RETR CONJ all P-3-laugh DM CONJ DET.MS  
*dihip kinehe-t um ḍr: “¿Inaapo ani-lo?”*  
 foreigner different-MS.AF 3.see 3P why 2.laugh-P  
 ‘“Pomach”. And they all laugh. The foreigner asks: “Why do you laugh?”

d. *Esee hn boshesh-o o-m ire otsii: “Hap e-yuhu*  
 DM CONJ child-MP 3P-see 3S 3P.QUOT INTERJ 2s-say  
*ese ahwosh-t, ese p-oma-ch.” Esee-ki ich o-y-an=po.*  
 that.MS 2s/3.WORD-MS.AF that.MS 1s-anus-MS.AF DM-RETR CONJ P-3-laugh-again  
 ‘The children say to him: “You said that word, that pomach.” They laugh again.’

e.	<i>Esee=ki</i>	<i>hn</i>	<i>dhip</i>	<i>kinehe-t</i>	<i>um</i>	<i>ōr</i>	<i>im:</i>
	DM=RETR	CONJ	foreigner	different-MS.AF	3.see	3P	3.QUOT
	<i>"Tak-aha</i>	<i>ya.</i>	<i>Shi</i>	<i>o-l-oter</i>	<i>yoo."</i>		
	1s-go	now	only	P-3-make.fun.of	1s		

'Finally, the foreigner says: "I go now. They only make fun of me"'.

The outsider often understands the situation, gets angry and stops asking questions, which is the desired outcome. Behind this, one can see a defensive mechanism used by the speakers to protect themselves and their language. This way of acting is consistent with the self-image of many Chamacoco. They often depict themselves as funny people with a rich inventory of jokes and amusing stories in their language.

My informants have always spontaneously talked about discrimination and how they "protect" their language from outsiders. At the same time, I noted that the same speakers who told me stories to transcribe avoided recording Chamacoco texts about this kind of anecdotes or episodes (including the funny ones), although they had been mentioning them for a long time. There may be several reasons for this: (i) the humiliations associated with constantly experiencing discrimination; (ii) these personal experiences are usually not part of the narrative schemes and (iii) are not considered worthy of being recorded in a document that could be published. At the same time, the need to address the topic of discrimination has produced comical stories that make fun of Paraguayan people who do not understand the Indigenous cultures and show unfair *a priori* discrimination. My informants did not show any reticence in telling me this kind of invented stories.

## 5 The Chamacoco secret register

Owing to contact with Spanish, Chamacoco now has many loanwords (Ciucci 2021a) that Paraguayan people can potentially understand. Consequently, the language has thus developed a "secret register" consisting of several strategies to overcome this problem. Owing to Chamacoco-Spanish bilingualism, it is often difficult for the scholar to distinguish between code-switching, foreign words that are not integrated into the system and proper loanwords. There are several degrees of integration of foreign words into the Chamacoco nominal paradigm. This section will show that the secret register is a force driving Spanish words toward morphological integration.

Spanish loanwords can alternate with older Chamacoco words, but the former are gaining ground and are replacing the Indigenous lexicon. However, in the secret register, a Chamacoco word is preferred. This contributes to the preservation of the original lexicon. Below are some referents for which a Spanish word alternates with an older form (4). The latter is generally a Chamacoco word, but there are exceptions. For instance, *okiyuta* / *okiyutit* is possibly an older adaptation of the same Spanish word *galleta*, which in Paraguay refers to a type of bread. *Nihyokot* is now the only Indigenous word for 'water', but, even though it is considered

a Chamacoco word by the speakers, it is an old borrowing from neighboring Kadiwéu, a Guaycuruan language (see Ciucci 2014: 37).

Some Paraguayans who live close to the main Chamacoco communities know some Chamacoco words, which affects the secrecy

(4)	<i>abwela / abwelta</i>	(Spanish: <i>abuela</i> )	→	<i>dekuta / lekuta</i> ‘grandmother’
	<i>awit</i>	(Spanish: <i>agua</i> )	→	<i>nihyokot</i> ‘water’
	<i>keyetit</i>	(Spanish: <i>galleta</i> )	→	<i>okiyuta / okiyutit</i> ‘simple and long-lasting type of bread’
	<i>mananta</i>	(Spanish: <i>banana</i> )	→	<i>poshikinta</i> ‘banana’
	<i>hmont / hmontit</i>	(Spanish: <i>monte</i> )	→	<i>ormit</i> ‘forest’
	<i>tia / tiya</i>	(Spanish: <i>tía</i> )	→	<i>nahnta / lateemcha</i> ‘aunt’

of communication. For instance, *Baach* (MS.AF) ‘Paraguayan’ is frequently used, and the non-Chamacoco neighbors can understand it.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, in their secret register, the Chamacoco prefer to use the word *Kechint* (MS.AF) ‘Paraguayan’, considered more archaic. Another old word used for ‘Paraguayan’, and also not understood by outsiders, is *Oshamshūrc* (MS.AF), which is considered less archaic than *Kechint*. *Baach*, *Kechint* and *Oshamshūrc* refer to the rest of Paraguayans as opposed to the Indigenous people, particularly the Chamacoco. To sum up, the Chamacoco secret register is often based on the puristic use of archaic words, which are not accessible to outsiders who may recognize Spanish loanwords or high-frequency Chamacoco words.

When borrowing from Spanish is necessary to fill a gap in the language, the word can undergo some changes to avoid intelligibility by Spanish speakers. Of course, one does not have to assume that this is the only reason,

but, according to Chamacoco speakers, the intention to speak a secret code definitely plays a role. For instance, Chamacoco has introduced a deontic marker, *tyenij*, from Spanish *tiene que* ‘s/he has to’ (Ciucci 2016: 321-322). *Tyenij* is the most widely attested form, but the variants *tyeniji*, *tyeneje* and *tyeneji* are also found, owing to common phonetic phenomena in Chamacoco. However, sometimes I have found the unexpected forms *teneji* and *teneje*. They are more distant from Spanish because they have lost the characteristic diphthong of *tiene que*. When I inquired about these forms, I was repeatedly told that *tyenij* or its related forms are changed into *teneji* or *teneje* so that Paraguayan people do not understand them: this is thus a manipulation strategy employed in the secret register.

Another strategy involves morphological manipulation, so it is necessary to briefly address some features of nouns and adjectives. All Zamucoan languages are fusional. Nouns

<sup>10</sup> *Baach* (MS.AF) ‘(non-Indigenous) Paraguayan’ has the irregular plural *Maro* (MP.AF) (cf. Table 2).

and adjectives (here referred to as “nominals”) have suffixation expressing gender (masculine or feminine) and number (singular or plural). In addition, there is a difference between a form used to express nominal predication, called predicative form, which is shorter than the others, and an argument form, used in argumental context. Finally, an indeterminate form marks an argument with an unspecified referent. The nominal system

of Zamucoan is represented in Table 1. While in Chamacoco the indeterminate form is still productive, the distinction between predicative and argument form is lost in the plural (see Table 1); it is also disappearing in the singular, where the argument form tends to replace the predicative form to mark predication (Ciucci 2016).

	Old Zamuco		Ayoreo		Chamacoco	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
<b>Masculine Predicative Form</b>	-∅	-(y)o, -ño	-∅	-(y)o, -ño	-∅, k, -(y)ak	-(y/w)o, -(y)e, -tso, -cho, -lo, -no
<b>Masculine Argument Form</b>	-(i)tie [-re, -(d)de, -nne, -ye]	-oddoe, -onnoe [-ao, -iao, -rao]	-i,	-ode, -one	-(i)t, -(i)ch	
<b>Masculine Indeterminate Form</b>	-nic, -ric, -tic	-nigo, -rigo, -tigo	-nic, -ric, -tic	-ningo, -rigo, -ringo, -tigo	-ĩrk, -tik,	-tiyo, -ĩr
<b>Feminine Predicative Form</b>	-∅, (-e)	-(y)i, -ñi	-∅, (-e)	-i	-∅, -aʔ, -eʔ, -oʔ, -iʔ	-(y/w)e
<b>Feminine Argument Form</b>	-(i)tae [-ac]	-(i)yie, -(i)ñie [-ai]	-∅, -(i)a, (-e)	-(i)die, -(i)nie	-(i)ta, -(i)cha	
<b>Feminine Indeterminate Form</b>	-nac, -rac, -tac	-rigui	-nac, -rac, -tac	-ningui, -rigui, -ringui, -tigu	-rā(k), -tā(k)	-ĩr

Table 1: The threefold nominal systems of Zamucoan<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Less frequent affixes are in square brackets. For more information on Zamucoan nominal suffixation, see Ciucci (2016) and Bertinetto et al. (2019). In previous works, such as Ciucci (2016, 2018) and Ciucci & Bertinetto (2019) the predicative and argument form were called “base form” and “full form”, respectively.

The masculine singular predicative form is rare in loanwords (Ciucci 2016: 552). Such low productivity is further evidence that the distinction between predicative and argument form is disappearing. By contrast, singular argument form suffixes *-(i)t* and *-(i)ta*, for masculine and feminine, respectively, are well documented on Spanish loanwords. However, Spanish loanwords have a different degree of adaptation to Chamacoco morphology.

(5)	<i>latril-t</i> (MS.AF)	'brick'	<i>latril-o</i> (MP), <i>latril-a</i> (MS/MP)	(Spanish: <i>ladrillo</i> )
	<i>nemes-t</i> (MS.AF)	'table'	<i>nemes-o</i> (MP), <i>nemes-a</i> (MS/MP)	(Spanish: <i>mesa</i> )
	<i>sil-t</i> (MS.AF)	'chair'	<i>sil-o</i> (MP), <i>sil-a</i> (MS/MP)	(Spanish: <i>silla</i> )

Leaving aside the indeterminate form, if the loanword is considered masculine, it can receive the masculine singular argument form suffix *-(i)t*, which is in contrast to the plural marked by *-o*, as in (5). This is not the only possibility because in the same paradigm there is also a morphologically non-adapted form, which can be used for both singular and plural (Ciucci 2016: 522, 538).

In loanwords assigned to the feminine gender, the distinction between singular predicative and argument form is always maintained (6). This is because the feminine paradigm is more regular than the masculine. In the feminine, the predicative form coincides with the root,

while the argument form has the suffix *-(i)ta*. Here, one can also see morphologically non-adapted forms that are only used in the singular (6a, d); unlike masculine loanwords, their use with plural referents is not documented (Ciucci 2016: 560-561).

(6)	a.	<i>ishtor-ita</i> (FS.AF)	'history'	<i>ishtor</i> / <i>ishtor-e</i> (FP), <i>ishtor</i> <sup>?</sup> (FS.PF)	(non-adapted form: <i>ishtorya</i> ; Spanish: <i>historia</i> )
	b.	<i>ley-ta</i> (FS.AF)	'law'	<i>ley</i> / <i>ley-e</i> (FP), <i>ley</i> <sup>?</sup> (FS.PF)	(Spanish: <i>ley</i> )
	c.	<i>myen-ta</i> / <i>myenti-ta</i> (FS.AF)	'wind'	<i>myent-e</i> (FP), <i>myent-e</i> <sup>?</sup> / <i>myent-o</i> <sup>?</sup> (FS.PF)	(Spanish: <i>viento</i> )
	d.	<i>mintan-ta</i> (FS.AF)	'window'	<i>mintan-e</i> (FP), <i>mintan-a</i> <sup>?</sup> / <i>mintan-e</i> <sup>?</sup> (FS.PF)	( <i>mintana</i> <sup>?</sup> is also used as non-adapted form; Spanish: <i>ventana</i> )

The use of the singular argument form suffixes, particularly the feminine argument form, might be a conscious attempt by the speakers to differentiate their language from Spanish in order not to be understood. This is a relatively frequent interpretation given by the

speakers. In examples (7-8) are Spanish words in the feminine singular argument form marked by *-(i)ta*. As for (7), the speaker overtly told me that the form *empresta* 'company', from Spanish *empresa*, is preferred to *empresa* (also documented in the same context) so that

Paraguayan people cannot understand the word. For the same reason, they prefer to use

*universidata* 'university' in (8) rather than the original Spanish form *universidad*.

- (7) *A-bey*            *naa*            *yok*            *empres-ta*  
 2s-look.after    this.FS        1s            company-FS.AF  
 'Look after my company!'
- (8) *O-ch-upa*        *yoo=chi*        *esa*            *universida-ta*  
 P-3-employ      1s=there        that.FS        university-FS.AF  
 'They employ me there at that university.'

The deliberate use of the argument form to hide Spanish words seems more frequent in the feminine: the suffix *-(i)ta* is clearly perceptible but uninterpretable by Spanish speakers. By contrast, final *-t*, proper of the masculine argument form, is often an unreleased consonant, difficult to perceive for people with no language knowledge. Language secrecy also seems to be associated here with the Saussurian *esprit de clocher* ('parochialism'),<sup>12</sup> which preserves the linguistic tradition of a given community, in contrast to the *force d'intercourse* (Saussure 1971 [1916]), represented by the need to speak Spanish.

A particular kind of Spanish loanwords are toponyms, some of which are listed in Table 2. Some toponyms used in Chamacoco have the same pronunciation as in Paraguayan Spanish, the only difference being that the transcription in the second column is closer to Chamacoco orthography (*Asun-*

*syón, Konsepsyón*).<sup>13</sup> Spanish compound toponyms are simplified in Chamacoco but still intelligible: Bahía Negra > *Baya*; Fuerte Olimpo > *Olimpo*; Puerto Diana > *Nyana*. The initial /n/ of *Nyana* is due to nasal harmony. Since Spanish speakers easily understand the forms reported in the second column, the toponym can undergo some alteration (third column) or be referred to by a Chamacoco expression alluding to it (fourth column).

<sup>12</sup> "C'est par l'esprit de clocher qu'une communauté linguistique restreinte reste fidèle aux traditions qui se sont développées dans son sein." (Saussure 1971 IV, 1) ['It is through parochialism that a restricted linguistic community remains faithful to the traditions that have developed within it'; my translation].

<sup>13</sup> In order to show that the accent does not change its position, I have indicated the accent of some toponyms in the table, although no accent is indicated in Chamacoco orthography.



Spanish toponym	Standard toponym in Chamacoco	Chamacoco secret register: (i) altered forms of the word	Chamacoco secret register: (ii) expressions designating the toponym
Asunción	<i>Asunsyón</i>	<i>Asiksión, Lasiksión</i>	<i>dít bahlut</i> ‘the big town, the city’, <i>Maro dít bahlut</i> ‘the big town, the city of the Paraguayans’, <i>Kechino òr dít bahlut</i> ‘the big town, the city of the Paraguayans’
Bahía Negra	<i>Baya</i>	-	<i>Kechino òr dít</i> ‘the town of the Paraguayans’, <i>Kechino òr ihyuch</i> ‘the home of the Paraguayans’, <i>Maro òr ihyuch</i> ‘the home of the Paraguayans’
Concepción	<i>Konsepsyón</i>	<i>Kosuksión, Kosiksión, Kosipsión</i>	<i>dít shakir/shakirc</i> ‘the small town’, <i>Kechino òr dít shakirc</i> ‘the small town of the Paraguayans’
Fuerte Olimpo	<i>Olimpo</i>	-	<i>kojāch uut</i> ‘under the hill’
Puerto Diana	<i>Nyana</i>	-	<i>Ishiro òr ihyuch</i> ‘the home of the Chamacoco’, <i>eyok ihyuch</i> ‘our home’, <i>eyok dít bahlut</i> ‘our big town’
Vallemí	<i>Vallemí</i>	<i>Vallemíta</i>	-

Table 2: Spanish toponyms in the Chamacoco secret register

Most alterations seen in the third column are merely phonological: *Asunción* > *Lasiksión, Asiksión*; *Concepción* > *Kosuksión, Kosiksión, Kosipsión*; *Puerto Diana* > *Nyana*. In the case of *Vallemí*, the already mentioned feminine singular argument form suffix *-(i)ta* is added. According to my informants, it serves here to confuse Spanish speakers. Proper nouns are uninflectable. The fact that *-(i)ta* is used here, where there is no morphosyntactic need for it, provides evidence that in this context affixation is a manipulation strategy of the secret register (cf. Storch 2017: 309).

Finally, in order to make the referent completely opaque to foreigners, the Chamacoco use an expression that indirectly designates the place name. Such expressions are often vague,

and their meaning is often clear only depending on the context. The list of expressions with their literal translation (in the fourth column) is not exhaustive: the speakers’ creativity may produce many other variants. Here I have only reported those expressions heard in the field.

*Asunción*, the capital city of Paraguay, is the biggest city in the country, situated at the center of a metropolitan area with more than two million inhabitants. For this reason, it is referred to as *dít bahlut*, ‘the city’ par excellence, or the ‘big town’ (9). In Chamacoco, there is no proper term for ‘city’: the concept is rendered by the word *dít* (MS.AF) ‘town, village’ followed by the adjective *bahlut* (MS.AF) ‘big’. *Asunción* is also referred to as ‘the big town of the Paraguayans’ (see Table 2).

(9) *Y-uko y-itĩr Kechin-o ðr di-t bahlu-t*  
 1PI-go 1PI-go.to Paraguayan-MP 3P TOWN-MS.AF big-MS.AF

‘We go to Asunción.’ (Lit. ‘We go to the big town of the Paraguayans.’)

Analogous to Asunción, the biggest Chamacoco community is Puerto Diana, which can be referred to as *eyok dit bahlut* ‘our big town, our city’, also because, unlike other places hosting a Chamacoco community, the only inhabitants are Chamacoco. It is also called *eyok ihyuch* ‘our home’ or *Ishiro ðr ihyuch* ‘the Chamacoco home’. Here the word *ihyuch* (3.MS.AF) ‘home, house’ metaphorically refers to the whole town. Close to Puerto Diana is the Paraguayan town of Bahía Negra. This place is referred to as *Kechino ðr dit* ‘the town of the Paraguayans’, or *Kechino ðr ihyuch* ‘the home of the Paraguayans’ (10) as opposed to Puerto Diana.

(10) *Tsēhe tak-ihla owa t-uu pik-aap par e-tĩr wahacha*  
 VOL 1S-hire 2S 1S-do piece-DIM.MS.PF SUB 2S-go there  
*Mar-o ðr ihyu-ch*  
 Paraguayan-MP 3P 3.home-MS.AF

‘I want to hire you for a short time (lit. I make a little bit) so that you go to Bahia Negra.’ (Lit. ‘To the home of the Paraguayan people.’)

Fuerte Olimpo, a town that also includes a Chamacoco community, is usually called *Olimpo* in Chamacoco. The place is characterized by three hills, so that Fuerte Olimpo is referred to by the expression *kojāch uut* ‘under the hill’ (11).

(11) *¿E-tĩr iraāpo owa? Tak-aha t-itĩr wahacha kojā-ch uu-t*  
 2S-go.to where.INT 2S 1S-go there there hill-MS.AF 3.under-MS.AF

‘Where do you go?’ ‘I go to Fuerte Olimpo (lit. ‘under the hill’).’

Finally, Concepción, an important river port for the Chaco, is often a place of transit for the Chamacoco to and from the capital city. If compared with the latter, Concepción is referred to as *dit shakir* ‘the small town’ since it is much smaller than Asunción.

## 6 Conclusions

In this paper, I have analyzed several aspects of language secrecy and concealment in Chamacoco. I have shown that contact with

Western society played a role in reshaping secrecy (cf. §2 vs. §4), in language concealment (§3) and in the formation of a secret register (§5).

Indigenous Chamacoco culture involved religious secrecy (§2). The whole knowledge was only accessible to initiated men, and myths circulated in two different versions, the real one for initiated men and an adapted version for women and children. The association between men and origin myths is typical of many Indigenous societies (Aikhenvald 2016: 166) and is often connected with some linguistic taboos for

women. It is unclear how strong the linguistic taboo among Chamacoco was, but linguistic taboos for things women are not supposed to know are well documented in Indigenous societies worldwide (Aikhenvald 2016: 169-174). Another aspect of secrecy involved the meaning of shamanic songs, which were abandoned after evangelization.

The Chamacoco have lost many aspects of their Indigenous culture to assimilate into Paraguayan society so the language remains the most important component of their present-day identity. However, being Indigenous in Paraguay means being exposed to discrimination and marginalization. For this reason, most Chamacoco try to conceal the fact that they have their own Indigenous language (§3). Chamacoco is thus a hidden language in Paraguayan society, but it turns out to be used as a secret language when the speakers are surrounded by people who already know their Indigenous identity (§4). Chamacoco has accepted many lexical borrowings from Spanish; consequently, some information could be understood by the other Paraguayans. In order to keep the language secret, the Chamacoco have developed a secret register (§5), which involves phonological and morphological manipulation, the use of periphrases and an archaic lexicon. This has contributed to preserving both the original lexicon and the nominal suffixation. Chamacoco nominals show a rare threefold system, which is collapsing. Here morphological manipulation has helped maintain the feminine singular suffix *-(i)ta*, which has partly lost its functional justification. Since language manipulation is also a tool to define and maintain identity (Storch 2011), it can also be considered a response to the cultural and linguistic changes that occurred after contact with Western society.

**Abbreviations:** 1, 2, 3 = first person, second person, third person; AF = argument form; CONJ = conjunction; DET = determiner; DIM = diminutive; DM = discourse marker; EP = epenthesis; FP = feminine plural; FS = feminine singular; IF = indeterminate form; INT = interrogative; INTERJ = interjection; MP = masculine plural; MS = masculine singular; P = plural; PF = predicative form; PI = plural inclusive; PREP = preposition; RETR = retrospective; QUOT = quotative; S = singular; SUB = subordinator; VOL = volitional.

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