

Exploring the ideological underpinnings of Amazonian multilingualism

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As recent work on small-scale multilingualism has highlighted, the dynamics of language maintenance, usage, and contact are dependent on a range of variables. Many of these factors are themselves anchored in linguistic ideologies, which align with broader cultural perceptions relating to the connections between behavior, group membership, and social identities and alignments (Sorensen 1967, François 2012, Kroskrity 2018, Di Carlo forthcoming, etc.). The cultural variability of these perspectives is likely to be a crucial consideration in understanding the different constellations of linguistic diversity that appear around the world.

This paper explores the associations among linguistic behaviors, expressed ideologies of language, and cultural conceptions of social alignment in the context of Amazonian indigenous multilingualism. Within Amazonia, the ethnographic and historical record indicates a number of regional ‘systems’, in which multilingual interaction among groups is or was frequent and linguistic diversity widely maintained. The Vaupés region of the northwest Amazon is a well-known example (see e.g. Jackson 1983, Aikhenvald 2002, Epps 2007), but other regions show striking similarities in the dynamics of multilingualism and language maintenance, such as the Upper Putumayo, parts of the Guianas, and the Xingu (Epps forthcoming, Epps & Michael 2017, Hill & Rodriguez 2015). While the general pattern seen across these regions has various features in common with other small-scale multilingual contexts around the world, there are also some particularities, including the relative *lack* of diversification within most language families, the (seemingly contradictory) prevalence of genderlects (different speech patterns associated with men and women), and the resistance to shift even in the case of social imbalance.

I suggest that many Amazonian multilingual practices are grounded in a broader conceptual system, described in the ethnographic record as an “Amazonian package” (e.g. Londoño Sulkin 2012:10), that hinges on the notion of *alterity*, or the view that identity must be symbolically constructed with reference to ‘otherness’ (Fausto 2000:934; see also Overing 1981, Viveiros de Castro 1998, Ball 2011). This concept of the ‘other’ is described by ethnographers of many Amazonian societies as a scalar notion that combines with notions of animacy, and incorporates inanimates, plants, lower animals, higher animals, humans, and even spirits – all of which are understood to have comparable points of view (Viveiros de Castro 1998). Similarly, the same scalar quality may apply to *human* groups, spanning one’s own group, then those within one’s larger social sphere, and finally enemies, foreigners, and non-Indians (e.g. Vilaça 2010, Chernela 2018). Language plays a crucial role in this system; the different groups along the scale of animacy and humanness are frequently described as having their own forms of language (Basso 1985, Chaumeil 1993, Nuckolls 2010), ranging from, for example, noises or high-pitched sounds (inanimates, plants), to cries and calls (lower and higher animals), to unintelligible, semi-intelligible/familiar, and fully intelligible speech (humans), to song (spirits). At the same time, one’s identity as belonging to a particular group is not a given; it must be actively constructed and maintained through particular behaviors – which includes not only what and how one eats, adorns the body, etc., but also how one *speaks* (e.g. Viveiros de Castro 1998, Uzendowski 2005, Vilaça 2010, *inter alia*) – and participation in the behaviors of ‘others’ risks permanent, potentially irreversible absorption into their existential sphere. I argue that this conceptual system guides the dynamics of Amazonian multilingualism, and fosters a tendency to ignore differences that are not associated with perceived social distinctions (thus constraining diversification), while reifying those that are (thus encouraging the maintenance of existing languages and the development of genderlects).

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