

Capturing the multilingual experience: two methodological approaches

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The Vaupés region of the northwest Amazon houses one of South America's best known small-scale multilingual societies. It involves speakers of more than twenty languages from four different language families (East Tukano, North Arawak, Nadahup, and Kakua-Nikak) whose intense linguistic and cultural interaction over the last five centuries has shaped a language ecology with linguistic diversity and cultural homogeneity as complementary signature features (Sorensen 1967; Aikhenvald 2002; Epps & Stenzel 2013; Epps 2018). In this talk, we outline our approach to investigation of linguistic practices in the Vaupés context as a central component of a project of collaborative language research conducted with members of the Kotiria and Wa'ikhana (East Tukano) speech communities.* The repertoires of individuals involved in our project typically include their father's language (linked to ethnic identity), mother's language, Tukano (as ethnic language or regional lingua franca), other East Tukano (or Arawak) languages, as well as Portuguese/Spanish. Yet, we still know very little about how such extensive linguistic resources are effectively deployed, in which kinds of speech contexts they occur and for what purposes, and how actual practices may conform to or diverge from ideologically-established norms as discussed in the literature on the region (e.g. Gomez-Imbert 1996, 1999; Aikhenvald 1999, 2001; Chernela 1989, 2004, 2013).

Our research sheds light on these issues through (i) extensive documentation of informal, everyday interaction, the most frequent and basic arena for language use, and (ii) collection of a large set of sociolinguistic interviews conducted in the indigenous languages themselves by members of the communities.

Documentation of informal conversations offers an unprecedented empirical base that allows us to describe *how* multilingual speakers employ their linguistic resources in a wide range of everyday contexts, observing the extent to which phenomena such as code-switching or other types of language "mixing" occur. We use the analytic framework of Conversation Analysis/ Interactional Linguistics (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson 1974; Sacks 1992; Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2018), which focuses on the sequential organization of action in interaction, to identify specific interactional functions of various multilingual resources. This approach helps ground our account of multilingual practices in specific sequential contexts that can be compared crosslinguistically.

The sociolinguistic interviews we have conducted follow a semi-structured format (cf. Singer and Harris 2016) designed for the Vaupés context. It leads participants to reflect on their own language acquisition histories, on their use of languages (principally "identity" languages vis-à-vis the regional lingua franca) in day-to-day family, school, and community settings, and on the fate of linguistic diversity in the region. Interviewees range from teenage students to elders in their 70s and include ethnic Kotiria and Wa'ikhana as well as in-marrying women from a variety of "in-law" groups, the collection reflecting the multilingual and multiethnic make-up of Kotiria and Wa'ikhana villages. Our collection currently includes interviews with thirty-three individuals, comprising over fifteen hours of primary linguistic and ethnographic data that offers an unprecedented insider view of the "multilingual experience" in this fascinating setting.

Through ongoing analysis of these two types of data, our study contributes to discussions of methodological approaches in research in traditional multilingual environments and brings initial insights on questions related to (i) the link between language and social identity(ies) in small-scale multilingual societies and (ii) modes of acquisition and patterns of multilingual speech as they relate to local linguistic ideologies in the complex Vaupés setting.

* NSF-DEL Grant No. BCS-1664348 *Grammar and multilingual practices through the lens of everyday interaction in two endangered languages in the East Tukano family* (2017-2020).

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