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Patience Epps

University of Texas at Austin, pattiepps@austin.utexas.edu

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Introduction: Indigenous multilingualism in lowland South America

Patience Epps

University of Texas at Austin

USA

A multitude of languages and multilingual contexts

Recent decades have seen an exponential growth in our understanding of the Indigenous languages of lowland South America—from their structures and interrelationships to the dynamics of their day-to-day use and the ways they are conceptualized by their speakers. Linguists have taken particular note of the striking linguistic diversity of the South American lowlands, which is home to hundreds of languages and more than fifty distinct genealogical units or language families—constituting both a global extreme and a historical puzzle (see, e.g., Nichols 1990; Nettle 1999; Epps 2020; van Gijn et al. 2022; Cayón and Chacon 2022). The structures of these languages bear witness to processes of maintenance over time (i.e., the relatively faithful transmission of a language from one generation to the next), together with gradual change and divergence into related but, ultimately, mutually unintelligible varieties, resulting in the formation of language “families.” At the same time, these languages reveal ample evidence of change through contact with other languages and dialects—i.e., “horizontal” processes of transmission that introduce new structures and forms, which are likewise then passed on to the next generation of speakers.

The dynamics of these intersecting linguistic processes of maintenance, change, contact, and inheritance are necessarily rooted in the practices of speakers, which are guided and shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which they live. However, our understanding of the interrelationships among these processes and practices is still incipient—a fact that is due in part to disciplinary divides between linguistics and anthropology, themselves fostered by academic trends of the latter half of the twentieth century. This dossier builds on emerging efforts to bridge these disciplinary gaps and to deepen the cross-fertilization of linguistic and anthropological perspectives on South American Indigenous peoples and their histories.

The study of Indigenous multilingualism in lowland South America provides fertile ground for exploring the sociocultural dynamics of linguistic diversity, and underscores the importance of bringing linguistic and anthropological lenses together. As the body of linguistic and ethnographic work has expanded, a clearer picture has emerged of regional microcosms of South American linguistic diversity, in which the coexistence of multiple languages is negotiated, maintained, and created by speakers over time. The local contexts of these multilingual areas have much to tell us about how South American linguistic diversity has been understood and enacted within Indigenous cultural contexts and systems of meaning. Indeed, while the South American linguistic panorama is presumably rooted in early processes of diversification across a newly populated continent, these multilingual regions suggest that the maintenance of so many small language families over time has been linked to the dynamics of interaction among speakers of multiple languages. As Hornborg and Hill (2011, 11) have observed,

linguistic models that do not take [...] anthropological observations into consideration might interpret linguistic diversity in western Amazonia as an indication of a relative paucity of interaction in the past, whereas archaeological and historical evidence from the area points in a diametrically opposite direction.

We have ample evidence that linguistically diverse regions in Lowland South America are defined not only by the presence of multiple languages, but also by speakers' multilingual practices.

In fact, recent work on “small-scale multilingualism”—the multilingual dynamics of locally rooted, relatively egalitarian social contexts, often associated with Indigenous peoples around the world—provides ample evidence that language maintenance coupled with intensive multilingual interaction is a global phenomenon (Lüpke 2016; Lüpke et al. 2020), and quite possibly was a robust norm for much of human evolutionary history (Evans 2017). These small-scale multilingual settings present significant differences from the dynamics typically observed in more urban, globalized, and/or colonially mediated contexts, which until recently have tended to define scholarly generalizations about the social and linguistic outcomes of contact. In contrast to these situations, where diglossia, language shift, and high levels of lexical borrowing and code-switching are prominent, the outcomes of small-scale multilingualism are likely to favor language maintenance, relatively constrained degrees of switching and borrowing, and long-term grammatical convergence; see, for example, Ross (2007), Harvey (2011), François (2012), Miceli (2015), Epps (2018, 2020).

Of course, small-scale multilingualism around the world is anchored in diverse social and cultural settings. Despite some significant parallels, there is much variation in the local dimensions of how people relate to language—how they understand the relationship between language and identity (e.g., as tied particularly closely to descent, to territory, to social ties and their associated benefits, etc.; compare, for example, Rumsey 1993 for Australia and Di Carlo 2018 for Cameroon), how these behaviors and ideologies underpin the ways in which languages are used on a day-to-day basis, and how they persist and change over time. Our understanding of these dynamics is still limited, even as they are eroded by new linguistic ecologies imposed by national societies. There are many questions still to be explored—for example: how are the dynamics of small-scale multilingualism similar across diverse regions and cultural settings, and how do they vary? How do linguistic ideologies guide language choices, and how are these grounded in cultural perceptions regarding proper behavior and social alignments? How do actual and self-reported (prescriptive) practices align or differ? What relationships pertain among different languages, lects, and registers? How have sociolinguistic practices changed over time? What are the mechanisms of grammatical diffusion and convergence, and how do these relate to shared discourse norms, strategies for keeping languages separate, and other factors? And how do the differences between Indigenous and/or locally grounded multilingual ecologies on the one hand, and colonial and/or national ones on the other, relate to the general acceleration of language endangerment around the world today?

As we explore here, lowland South America offers a rich set of vantage points on these questions. This dossier brings together a set of articles by scholars working in historically multilingual areas, whose collective experience and scope of interest spans temporal, geographic, and disciplinary perspectives. This collection considers a range of lowland South American regions where multiple languages have thrived alongside each other for many generations, with interaction shaped by practices such as linguistic exogamy, exchange networks, and multilingual repertoires and registers. Some of these multilingual dynamics are still active today; others may be reconstructed via the historical record and by investigating the traces of contact evident in the languages themselves. These investigations are urgent: as cultural practices change and languages lose speakers, the dynamics of multilingualism are shifting, and our opportunities to gain further insights into these locally grounded small-scale multilingual systems are dwindling.

Multilingual dynamics over space and time

While the distributions of South American Indigenous languages have been significantly altered and thinned since the European invasion, several highly multilingual regions have

received enough ethnographic and linguistic attention to allow some characterization of the social and linguistic dynamics that have pertained there over time. These include the Upper Rio Negro region (northwest Brazil and eastern Colombia, most notably the Vaupés area); the Caquetá-Putumayo (southern Colombia); the Guyanas (northern South America, associated with the Guiana Shield); the Guaporé-Mamoré (southwest Brazil and eastern Bolivia); the Upper Xingu (central Brazil); and the Gran Chaco, among others. These areas are all characterized by high linguistic diversity (of both languages and language families); extensive multilingual and macroethnic interaction, often involving trade specializations and other socioeconomically relevant practices that delimit the place of different social units within the larger system; and various regionally shared cultural features, which span ceremonial life, discourse norms and genres, material culture, approaches to bodily adornment, and other practices. For discussion, see, for example, Vidal (1993), Basso (2011), Hornborg and Hill (2011), Reeve (2014), Hill and Rodriguez (2015), Epps and Michael (2017), Epps (2020), Lüpke et al. (2020), and the articles in this dossier.

While these regions are diverse in many respects, they reveal some striking parallels in the practices and outcomes associated with small-scale multilingualism (Epps 2020). These parallels include the prominence of multilingual interactions on the part of individual speakers and/or within particular communities—whether as a basic part of everyday life, as in some Tukanoan communities of the Vaupés; or occurring mainly in ceremonial contexts, as in the Xingu (where multilingual texts are delivered principally through song, licensing the use of multiple languages on the part of an individual speaker; see Franchetto 1993; Reiter 2011, 482). Another recurrent feature involves the various manifestations of “passive” or “receptive” multilingualism (also termed “dual-lingualism”), in which interlocutors preferentially each speak their “own” language—with the result that, while individual production tends toward the monolingual, the interaction itself may be highly multilingual. Such passive multilingual practices are attested perhaps most famously in the Vaupés region (see, e.g., Chernela 2013, 2018 for Kotiria/Wanano communities), but are also reported in parts of the Gran Chaco (see Campbell and Grondona 2010 on the Misión La Paz region), in certain Xingu communities (Seki 2011, 69; Mehinaku and Franchetto 2015), within the Guyanas (Carlin 2011), and elsewhere. We also find recurrent cases of extensive intermarriage among speakers of different languages, whether rigidly institutionalized in the form of linguistic exogamy (e.g., Tukanoans in the Vaupés; see Jackson, 1983; Stenzel, 2005) or simply highly frequent (e.g., some communities in the Xingu, Guyanas, Guaporé-Mamoré, and Gran Chaco; see Mehinaku and Franchetto 2015; Rivière 1984; Maldí 1991; Campbell and Grondona 2010).

In virtually all these regions, the ethnographic and linguistic literature emphasizes the role of language as a social marker, delineating particular boundaries within the regional system, which in turn define and enable systems of interaction. For example, language is described as “a basic diacritic... working to maintain differences that dynamize the system as a whole” in the Upper Xingu (Fausto et al. 2008, 141), and as “one of the key symbols of ethnic identity” in the southern Guyanas (Howard 2001, 341; see also Rivière 1984, 8; Yakpo and Muysken 2017). This social role of language as a tool for differentiation is an obvious motivation for bi- or multilingual speakers to monitor their production and to consciously avoid mixing (see, e.g., Jackson 1983; Aikhenvald 2002 on these practices in the Vaupés region). It is therefore not surprising that descriptions of languages spoken within these regions frequently stress low levels of code-switching and lexical borrowing, while often noting extensive evidence of grammatical convergence on the level of structures and categories (e.g., Aikhenvald 2002; Crevels and van der Voort 2008, 164; Vidal and Nercesian 2009, 1021-22; Seifart 2011, 88; see also van der Voort, this issue).

Despite the parallels across these multilingual regions, it is important to recognize that particular local constellations of social units and their markers are also widely variable, both

within and across regions. Indeed, local fracturing is just as much part of the workings of a regional system as are the similarities that define the area as a whole; the cooperative functioning of interlocking parts is enabled by their distinctions (e.g., the tendency toward trade specializations within regional systems, noted above). Crucially, certain variables—of which language seems to be a key example—are important markers of these social distinctions. At the same time, they are subject to local manipulation and negotiation, and thus cannot be expected to apply in identical ways across regions, social groups, or even individuals (cf. Rivière’s 2009 analogy of a kaleidoscope for the mutually constitutive but shifting nature of Guyana interactive systems).

This localized diversity is the focus of **Thiago Chacon and Luis Cayón**’s contribution to this dossier, which explores how the multilingual societies in the Upper Rio Negro define themselves in terms of languages, exogamous social units (clans, phratries, etc.), and descent ideologies (i.e., the identification of a particular mythical ancestor and a sacred site of emergence into the world). Despite the similarities that pertain on some levels—such as the tendency for language to function as “a diacritic of the affinal cluster” (Chacon and Cayón, this issue)—the social fabric of the Upper Rio Negro is constituted by a complex, overlapping network of socially relevant units, within which particular demarcating features correspond or diverge in different ways. Within this fractal social sphere, as Chacon and Cayón lay out, multilingual speakers’ engagements with different languages and lects may index different social categories and relationships, according to locally variable social constellations.

The broad geographic distribution of recurrent features of multilingualism, set within the wider archaeological, historical, and ethnographic record, suggests that lowland South America has housed many other multiethnic and multilingual regional systems over time, probably with overlapping degrees of intensity of interaction, and potentially with extensive reach. (This point probably also applies beyond the lowlands; see Mannheim 1991; Emlen 2016; and Urban 2021 on the Andes prior to the relatively recent spread of Quechua). Sadly, the thinness of the ethnographic and linguistic records in many of these areas—where Indigenous ways of life have been radically altered or destroyed, and where the documentary record is often scant—makes tracing the full scope of South American linguistic diversity and small-scale multilingual practices difficult to impossible. For this reason, efforts like those represented in the articles by van der Voort and Balykova and Godoy in this dossier are essential; these authors draw from historical records, early ethnographic and linguistic descriptions, and contemporary documentation of highly endangered and moribund languages to reconstruct the multilingual contexts and dynamics of the past.

Hein van der Voort’s contribution focuses on two subregions within the wider Guaporé-Mamoré area, that of the Rio Branco and Colorado River basins on one hand, and of the Apediá and Corumbiara rivers on the other. Historical documentation—mostly dating from the early twentieth century—makes reference to intricate networks of peoples and languages in each of these regions. Many of the ethnic and linguistic denominations indicated in the historical record appear to have disappeared entirely, lost in a massive diaspora since the 1930s; for others, just a handful of people remain who speak and/or remember something of their heritage language. Van der Voort draws on these historical records to reconstruct a picture of the pre-twentieth-century locations of peoples, the languages they spoke, and their cultural practices, which include various shared cultural features both within and across these two subregions and the surrounding areas. The early visitors to the region also documented the linguistic practices they observed, which provide evidence for pervasive multilingualism among these regions’ inhabitants. The historical record of linguistic and cultural exchange is likewise corroborated by the existing linguistic record: Van der Voort draws on his own extensive research with the diverse but now highly endangered languages of these two areas (which include multiple language isolates, or single-member families), pointing out a range

of shared lexical and morphological forms, as well as evidence of grammatical convergence among these languages and those of the wider Guaporé-Mamoré area.

The article by **Kristina Balykova and Gustavo Godoy** likewise aims to reconstruct the multiethnic and multilingual past, focusing on the Pantanal region of southwestern Brazil. As they describe, this area represents a sort of “crossroads” or ethnic confluence zone between the Amazonian forest and the Gran Chaco, and was once home to a diverse range of languages and language families. As in the Guaporé-Mamoré region, many of these languages are now extinct or deeply moribund, following the aggressive colonization policies leveraged in the Pantanal and the disintegration of the local multicultural landscape; for example, Guató, a language isolate (which the authors have been documenting for several years), has only one to two fluent speakers remaining. Balykova and Godoy draw on archaeological, historical, and ethnographic records to review the cultural and linguistic trajectory of the Pantanal, which again points to a long history of intensive interaction among speakers of different languages, involving trade, intermarriage, and captive assimilation. The scant existing documentation of the Pantanal languages offers some suggestive indications of the linguistic effects of this history of multilingual exchange, but the authors point out that research on these languages is for the most part still incipient, and that the window for further work is rapidly closing.

Ideologies of language and multilingual interaction

The dynamics of language use are necessarily anchored in cultural views about language, how it is used, and who speaks what to whom and under what circumstances. A nuanced understanding of linguistic diversity, language maintenance, and multilingualism in lowland South America thus requires locally grounded, fine-grained ethnographic attention to how speakers themselves view language, and how these views shape their actions throughout their daily lives. In turn, these explorations can inform broader comparative perspectives that illuminate more widespread patterns of language distribution and multilingualism across the region.

Indigenous ontologies of language remind us that, just as the dynamics of language use tend to be substantially different between small-scale multilingual contexts and those of urbanized and/or globalized societies, so may speakers’ perspectives about language differ across contexts—relating to what language represents, how it aligns with social identities and goals, and what cultural frameworks govern its usage. **Stephen Hugh-Jones’s** contribution takes up this question through an exploration of ontologies of language among Tukanoan peoples of the Vaupés region. For Tukanoans, he argues, language is understood primarily as a *substance* that is actively constitutive of social groups and persons—as opposed to a reified “emblem” owned by a predetermined descent group. Crucially, acts of speaking—alongside other manipulations of breath and sound, such as singing songs, blowing shamanic spells, and playing flutes—create, embody, and enable the existence of the social entity (see also Hill 2013; Chernela 2018). Hugh-Jones emphasizes the relationship between speech and breath, semen, and soul in Tukanoan ontologies, which form the essence of corporality and of descent.

As Hugh-Jones’s article explores, observers of South American Indigenous societies may gain a far deeper understanding of linguistic behaviors and choices—including how language use is negotiated in multilingual contexts—by working through an Indigenous cultural lens as opposed to one provided by Western intellectual tradition. While it is important to remain grounded in local constellations of meaning, certain ideological constructs may also turn out to be shared across a wider region, and may themselves underpin some of the more widespread patterns of linguistic diversity and multilingual practice that we explore above—just as we find many other shared cultural practices across lowland South America, such as bitter manioc processing technology, ritual complexes involving sacred trumpets, and discursive

forms such as ritual wailing and ceremonial dialogue (see, e.g., Urban 1988; Chaumeil 1997; Carneiro 2000; Beier et al. 2002).

What components of a shared conceptual framework might be relevant to lowland South American sociolinguistic practices? A potentially productive approach to this question draws on a particular set of understandings concerning the social world that is widely attested in ethnographic work with lowland peoples, which Londoño Sulkin (2005, 2017) terms the “Amazonian package.” This conceptual framework has three principal axes, by which human social groups are viewed as coexisting alongside a range of other comparable social entities, both human and non-human, within a wider cosmos; the definition and construction of one’s own identity refers crucially to the “otherness” of these diverse groups; and identity is understood as continuously constructed and reconstructed through social action and interaction. While recognizing the ample regional variation that exists across lowland South America, the “relative conservatism and widespread distribution” (Londoño Sulkin 2017, 487) of this conceptual package among the region’s Indigenous peoples is noteworthy, and it underlies many Indigenous Amazonian practices—including, we propose, those relating to language and to the choices that shape its variation (see Epps 2020, 2021).

Indeed, the conceptual framework of the “Amazonian package”—and the behavioral expectations that follow from it—help to explain a number of seemingly puzzling aspects of Amazonian linguistic diversity and multilingualism. Linguistic diversity (particularly on the level of language families) is necessarily anchored in practices of language maintenance, including where multilingual speakers may have multiple languages to choose from. Thus, where the construction and maintenance of the social self is construed as depending crucially on one’s behavior (i.e., “the fabrication... of persons through ritual and symbolic work,” as Fausto 1999, 934 puts it; see also Hugh-Jones, this issue), there are strong reasons to channel one’s linguistic choices toward a single language, spoken as other members of one’s own social group speak it (however this group is defined). As Chernela (2013, 221) observes for the Wanano (Kotiria), “one creates one’s self in the act of speaking... to speak a language not your own is to ‘become’ another” (see also Carlin 2011; Mehinaku and Franchetto, 2015). This approach to language promotes restraint toward mixing codes in multilingual contexts (i.e., via borrowing and code-switching); encourages the maintenance of one’s “own” language (defined with reference to a given social unit) across generations; and favors practices such as passive multilingualism (as a relatively extreme version of a behavioral constraint against mixing codes).

At the same time, the grounding of social construction in the perception of alterity fosters a proliferation of other lects and registers, which make reference to a diverse set of social categories—but which are not necessarily defined according to “standard” geographic or ethnic parameters (Epps 2021; see also Queixalós 1989). Such alternative lects are remarkably common across lowland South America, and include genderlects (male/female speech varieties, see Rose 2015); clanlects; and various speech forms associated with nonhuman status (e.g., shamanic registers, which can generate either a temporary merging or a shielding of human identities from those of spirits; see, e.g., the *karawara* speech of the Awa-Guajá in Garcia 2010).

Other apparent multilingual paradoxes may also make sense in light of Amazonian conceptions of a perspectival cosmos, whereby distinct entities experience the world in similar ways, but with a crucial disconnect where those experiences converge (for example, jaguars see the blood of their prey as humans see manioc beer; cf. Viveiros de Castro 1998; Lima 1999; Vilaça 2002). For example, languages of the Upper Rio Negro region exhibit a remarkably high incidence of lexical calquing, i.e., semantic equivalences across multimorphemic constructions, indicating direct translations from one language to the next (e.g., “anaconda snake,” in Hup: *dēh-hūt-sig*, lit. “water-tobacco-piece;” in Tukano: *dia u’ti’karo*, lit. “water ceremonial

cigar”). Since speakers often do appear to be aware of these equivalences, it is puzzling that they tolerate so much calquing when direct lexical borrowing and code-switching are so highly constrained. Yet this tolerance is consistent with a perspectival framework, which assumes that the *content* will be identical while the packaging appears distinct—with such loan translations as a linguistic analogue to the jaguars’ blood :: humans’ manioc beer equation.

Conclusion

As this collection of articles explores, the study of Indigenous multilingualism in lowland South America is an important source of insights into the ways in which the peoples of this region relate to language, and how their particular social and cultural perspectives may structure processes of language contact, diversification, and endangerment. The distribution and characteristics of highly multilingual regions across the lowlands (and perhaps beyond) suggests that South American social practices may have been considerably more multilingual in the past than they are today, following centuries of language loss and social restructuring. Various features of multilingual practice that are still visible across the continent suggest significant revisions to scholarly assumptions about how multilingualism and language contact are typically enacted across human societies. Practices such as passive multilingualism, linguistic exogamy, multilingual ceremonial repertoires, and a diversity of non-geographically anchored lects and registers are all recurrent features in lowland South America, and indeed sometimes appear in small-scale multilingual contexts elsewhere in the world, but are relatively rare in Western and other more globalized settings. At the same time, lowland South America’s striking linguistic diversity challenges our understanding of how languages emerge, develop, and fade, and has important implications for our understanding of South American Indigenous ways of life over time. Indeed, in the face of the accelerating loss of both linguistic and biological diversity today in the Amazon basin and beyond, the multilingual experiences of Indigenous South Americans may have much to teach us about how language, society, and engagement with a range of others may be mutually constitutive and even mutually sustainable.

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