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Language in an ontological register: Embodied speech in the Northwest Amazon of Colombia and Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Speakers of Eastern Tukanoan languages in Brazil and Colombia construe linguistic differences as indices of group identity, intrinsic to a complex ontology in which language is a consubstantial, metaphysical product—a 'substance' in the development of the person. Through speech, speakers of the same language signal a corporality based in theories of shared ancestry and mutual belonging while speakers of different languages signal difference. For Tukanoans, then, one creates one's self in the act of speaking. These ontological beliefs underlie speech practices, influencing language maintenance and contributing to one of the most extreme examples of multilingualism reported in the literature.

1. Introduction

The proposition, held by most Tukanoans,[1] that languages are discrete objects representing relations among people, is an ontological project. It cannot be divested from its cosmological and sociosemiotic foundations. Speakers of these languages, who reside along the Colombian/Brazilian border, construe linguistic difference as an index of group identity, intrinsic to a complex ontology in which language is a consubstantial, metaphysical product—a 'substance' in the development of the person. Through speech, speakers of the same language signal a corporality based in shared ancestry and mutual belonging, while speakers of different languages signal difference. As such, inter-linguistic variation is iconically and indexically related to social differentiation (Chernela, 2013). For Tukanoans, then, one creates one's self in the act of speaking.

These ontological beliefs underlie speech practices, influencing language maintenance and contributing to one of the most extreme examples of multilingualism reported in the literature. The combined forces of language practice and surrounding beliefs create and maintain the polyglossia that is at the center of a vital Tukanoan economy of social reproduction, sustained over time through ideological and practical mechanisms.

The same overarching ontological framework that equates language with corporality precludes marriage between speakers of the same language (a practice that scholars call linguistic exogamy).[2] It thereby disambiguates the relationship

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[1] I use the term 'Tukanoan' here as a shorthand to stand for the phrase 'Eastern Tukanoan language family' or any of its speakers. The generalities presented here do not apply to speakers of the Western Tukanoan languages spoken in Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia. The choice is also intended to differentiate the designation 'Tukanoan' from 'Tukano,' reserved for one of the Eastern Tukanoan languages.

[2] Several Eastern Tukanoan groups do not practice linguistic exogamy: the Makuna (Århem, 1981, 1989), the Kubeo (Goldman, 1963), and the Arapaso (Chernela, 1989; Chernela and Leed, 2003). Each of these groups does, however, conserve a form of descent-group exogamy (Chernela, 1989; Chernela and Leed, 2003; Chacon and Cayón, 2013; Århem, 1981; Cayón, 2013; Chacon, 2013; Goldman, 1963, 2004).

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of language and speaker to one another, through a scheme of contrastive categories comprised of one's own language (*patrilect*), mother's language (*matrilect*, spoken by affinal relatives), and the languages of others with whom one has no specified kinship relationship (*alterlect*) (Chernela, 2013). Patrilect is intrinsically related to a speaker's self and its acquisition is part of the process of developing into a person. Matrilect preferentially becomes a passive language that the speaker understands but does not produce, and which does not form part of self-identity. The third category, *alterlect*—the languages of unrelated others—is learned through processes of 'imitation' and implies no association or claim to social identities. I will discuss each in turn.

In this complex linguistic matrix nearly all speakers are capable of performing in several languages but preferentially perform in only one, their patrilect, which they regard as their 'own' (Hugh-Jones, 1979; Jackson, 1983; Gomez-Imbert, 1996; Stenzel, 2005; Epps, 2007). This norm of linguistic loyalty and purism influences one's own speech practice and defends against the pressure of adjacent languages.

In using the case of Eastern Tukanoan multilingualism I wish to emphasize the power of extra-linguistic factors, including speaker attitudes, beliefs, and other social factors, over linguistic criteria in determining outcomes of language contact. Linguists generally hold that the typological distance between languages in contact is a fairly reliable predictor of contact-induced change, because features that are structurally similar are readily exchanged between systems (Thomason, 2001:77; Winford, 2003). This widespread process, however, is fettered among the typologically similar Eastern Tukanoan languages,[3] where a general understanding of languages as markers of identity and alterity leads to a vivid separation of speakers. Here I use the case of the Kotiria (a.k.a. Wanano, Uanano),[4] one group of Tukanoans living along the Vaupés River in Brazil and Colombia, to consider the ontological foundations of language practices that produce the self and the group through speaking.

2. Language in the Vaupés basin

Although the ontological status of language in the Northwest Amazon has been undertheorized, researchers who work in the Vaupés region have long noted and explored the social and conceptual underpinnings of language use. The first of these was the linguist Arthur Sorensen, whose 1967 paper on multilingualism in the Northwest Amazon provided an important overview of the languages spoken in the area and the relationships among them. Sorensen was the first to observe that the language groups of the Eastern Tukanoan family are not distinct ethnicities (or 'tribes,' as he called them), but, instead, linguistico-descent groups in which each putative descent group identified itself on the basis of language (Sorensen, 1967, 1973). He employed the term *father-language* to refer to the identifying language of the descent group, explaining that "[b]ecause descent is patrilineal in the Northwest Amazon … an individual belongs to his (or her) father's tribe and to his father's linguistic group, which is also his own. Because of exogamy, his mother always represents a different tribe … and a different linguistic group" (1967:677). Sorensen estimated that the languages of the Eastern Tukanoan family were "a little farther apart than are the languages in the Romance group" (1967:675). His most insightful observation, for our purposes, however, was the importance among speakers in maintaining diversity and the sociolinguistic practices employed to sustain it. Sorensen pointed out that "the diverse and discrete phonologies of these languages and their dialects loom very prominently in the Indians' regard" (1967:680). He noted, "I have observed that when an Indian knows how to speak two closely related languages, … he carefully and even consciously keeps them apart. It has occurred to me that the exogamic and other cultural institutions … may be exerting a force that makes a speaker want to render closely related languages farther apart, even to an artificial extent" (1967:675). Sorensen, in this way, contributed to the rise of the new field of linguistic anthropology.

Perhaps more than anyone else, Jean Jackson productively explored the cultural conceptions of language among Tukanoans. She teased apart language as an interpretive filter through which we make sense of experience, from language as symbolic of self and community. It was Jackson who coined the term 'language group' to refer to what others called the 'maximal exogamous patrilineal descent group' (Hugh-Jones, 1979); her choice was a shorthand that underscored the salience of language as a marker of kin group identities and relationships. In her 1983 book, *The Fish People*, Jackson proposed that for Tukanoans language served as a 'badge of identity' that carried 'a kind of message' (1983:165). "[T]he features that render each badge distinct from others in the set becomes highly charged with meaning," she wrote. "In the Vaupés, the [symbolic] dimension is language or linguistics, and the features are those linguistic elements that are seen by Tukanoans as making Vaupés languages mutually unintelligible. Vocabulary and grammatical differences and the co-occurrence rules that serve to keep Tukanoan languages as discrete category systems are vigorously maintained by Tukanoans" (1983:166).

Jackson considered the Tukanoan case in light of John Gumperz's 1967 exploration of multilingualism in western India, in which he argued that linguistic distance is a function of the social value placed on separation (1967:54–56). Jackson also drew

[3] Obstacles to comprehension are minimized for several reasons. First, the percentage of cognates across Eastern Tukanoan languages is high. Second, speakers are always familiar with at least two languages (patrilect and matrilect) and typically more. The languages to which they have greatest exposure are those spoken by the in-marrying wives in the settlement where they were raised. Some Eastern Tukanoan languages, like Kotiria/Wanano and Piratapuia or Barasana and Taino, are mutually intelligible (yet these groups do not intermarry). North Eastern Tukanoan languages, like Kotiria, Piratapuia, Tukano, and Desana, are closer to one another than any of them is to Kubeo, identified by some as occupying a central branch (see Chacon, 2013). Languages belonging to the Arawakan and Tukano families are unrelated, posing substantial challenges to comprehension.

[4] The term Kotiria is also known in the literature by the name Wanano (alts. Guanano, Uanano). The latter terms, derived from Nhengatu (a Tupian derivative) have been widely used in the literature. Recently Kotiria speakers, reflecting on a new bilingual school curriculum, corrected the designation to the self-name Kotiria, which I utilize here. I occasionally use 'Wanano/Kotiria' for greater recognition.

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