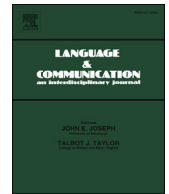




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# Bodies that speak: Languages of differentiation and becoming in Amazonia

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## ABSTRACT

In this article I consider the metaphysical underpinnings of a specific language ideology in Amazonian Ecuador by comparing Waorani ideas about the agency of speech in shamanism and funerary practices to their engagements in language documentation. I relate the notion of language as a force inseparable from the bodies of speakers to concepts of language as “culture” in research to document their language. By considering how Waorani consultants have come to see certain features of their language in video recordings, such as sound symbolism, I examine the differences and interconnections between Waorani language ideology and multiculturalist understandings. These interactions suggest divergent ontologies at the same time as they demonstrate how indigenous people operate simultaneously within contrasting imaginings of differentiation.

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## 1. Introduction

Among indigenous peoples of the Americas language is often seen less as a system of representation than as a practice that brings things into being or effects changes (Course, 2012; Smith, 1985, 1998, Whiteley, 2003; Witherspoon, 1977). Being spoken to or being evoked in language, even at a distance, can have material effects and consequences for people and their relations with others. As linguists and philosophers have observed with regards to speech-acts in Western languages (Austin, 1962), certain utterances demonstrate the performative qualities of language as a form of action that does far more than simply represent the world. While the force of language to effect changes is certainly not exclusive to Amerindian contexts, in Amazonia the relational power of speaking as a bodily practice evokes key differences in terms of how people imagine the very nature of language. In places where social relations routinely transcend our own distinctions between “nature” and “culture” (Descola, 1994, 2013, Viveiros de Castro, 1998; Hallowell 1955; Brightman, 1993; Smith, 1998), non-human beings also have important stakes in linguistic practices. Amazonian understandings of the force of language are particularly clear in shamanism, ritual, and various forms of singing that transform or create something in the world (Déléage, 2009; Townsley, 1993). In these contexts language, or more specifically the embodied act of speaking, has an ontological status distinct to that with which many Westerners are familiar. But what is language exactly for these people that allows it to have such force in these contexts? How much is this power understood to be specific to a given language, and how much of it do they see as a general feature of speech in any language?

In this article I explore these questions in terms of what Waorani people in Amazonian Ecuador understand as the particular power of speaking their language. Since Waorani themselves rarely reflect openly on the nature of language in abstract terms, I consider contexts where the effects of language become apparent in making or unmaking relations. As has been described among other Amerindian peoples, Waorani generally understand language to have a certain agency of its own.

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More than simply a mode of representation, certain kinds of speech have powerful and even dangerous effects in inter-subjective relations, whether between humans or between humans and non-human beings. While the spoken words of a shaman can themselves do harm, in funerary practices speaking in unintelligible languages is part of how Waorani differentiate and separate themselves from deceased kin and the dangers associated with them. The ontological status of language in these contexts presents certain contrasts to the idea of language as “culture” in the social dynamics of a research to document their language through video recordings, transcriptions and translations. By considering how Waorani language consultants have come to see certain features of their language in video recordings, such as the extensive use of ideophones, I examine the differences and interconnections between Waorani language ideology and the multiculturalist paradigm that tends to frame language documentation work. Whether in shamanism, funerary practices, or the foregrounding of perspective in ideophonic performances, the affective properties of language point to the inseparability of body and voice in Waorani understanding of becoming.

While I am interested in the differences between Waorani and Western understandings of language, I also want to resist the tendency in previous work on ontology to posit them simply as polar opposites. Even if the natures of language in “Western” and “Amerindian” contexts are in some ways logically incommensurable, in practice Amazonian peoples are engaged in diverse social contexts that cannot be reduced to a single, coherent metaphysical understanding of language. In addition to exploring different situations where the power of speaking comes to the fore in making and unmaking social relations, I suggest that emergent Waorani understandings of language as emblematic of “culture” – whether in bilingual education or language documentation research – might present exactly the contexts where ontological differences become most apparent. Put another way, collaborative projects premised on shared ideas of language and culture are precisely the sites where we can better understand these differences as part of what shapes contemporary social dynamics in Amazonia. In this way, attention to distinct metaphysics of language may have important practical implications for rethinking current educational programmes in the region.

## 2. The affective properties of voice/body

One of the clearest examples of the agency of language can be seen in Waorani understandings of shamanism, and particularly assault sorcery.<sup>1</sup> Shamans, who have a special adoptive relationship with jaguars, are at times inhabited by jaguar-spirits who speak through a shaman’s body in dreams. While jaguar speech is said to bring about successful hunting, it is also associated with a dangerous predatory perspective (High, 2012a). One of the great risks in shamanism is the power of the jaguar/shaman’s speech to cause actual harm to other human beings. Though Waorani tend to say little about the technical process of how shamans enact assault sorcery, on several occasions it was explained to me that they can cause harm by merely speaking the names of specific people. Part of what is dangerous about a jaguar-spirit that inhabits the body/voice of a shaman is that other people present may (even inadvertently) bring misfortune on a person by talking about him or her (even jokingly) during jaguar speech. Given the potential effects of speech in these contexts, elders remind young people to take great care in what they say in the presence of a jaguar shaman.

I would be wary of reading a specific Waorani theory of language into a highly specific context like jaguar-shamanism. Animals do not normally speak – at least not in ways that are intelligible to Waorani people in the way human language is. In fact, in everyday life they generally find troubling the idea of a non-human being speaking (in human language) to them. This is evident in Waorani concerns about assault sorcery and encounters with nonhuman beings who appear and speak as humans.<sup>2</sup> I remember watching the movie *Star Wars* (dubbed in Spanish) in a Waorani village about 15 years ago, when, after a scene where Yoda talks with Luke Skywalker, a young man asked me: “Do animals really talk to people in your country?” This was at a time when Waorani had less access to movies and other foreign images than many do today. As elsewhere in Amazonia (Descola, 1994), they routinely point out the social lives of animals in terms that are analogous to humans. What I think baffled the man about Yoda, quite reasonably, was the idea of a clearly non-human body speaking in human form. For Waorani, language, rather than being a uniquely human capacity, is about relations with beings who share the same bodily form. So although it did not make sense for Yoda to talk with Luke, a jaguar can speak to human beings insofar as it inhabits the body/voice of a shaman. What this appears to suggest is that “body” and “voice” are intrinsically connected insofar as they define the character of inter-subjective relations.<sup>3</sup>

This connection between language and the body evokes Viveiros de Castro’s (1998) proposal that Amerindian perspectivism posits a “multinaturalist” ontology whereby the body (rather than “culture”) is the principle site of differentiation. He contrasts multinaturalism, whereby all beings share the same social categories, to the Western emphasis on “culture” as the primary site of difference in multiculturalism. Viveiros de Castro’s formulation illustrates the need to think about difference in Amerindian contexts beyond conventional Western understandings of “cultures” as different representations of (or

<sup>1</sup> For a more extensive analysis of Waorani understandings of shamanism and assault sorcery, see High (2012a, 2012b, 2015a, 2015b) and Rival (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Encounters with nonhuman beings in the forest who appear and speak as human beings are particularly dangerous and even fatal, as speaking with them involves adopting their (nonhuman) perspective (see also Lima 1999).

<sup>3</sup> This has certain parallels with Vilaça’s (2016) description of a concept of translation among the Wari of Brazilian Amazonia in which the possibility of communication between different human and animal beings “occurs through a bodily transformation enabled by new foods, the proximity to other bodies, and the new relations of sociality as a whole” (59–60).

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