Language & Communication xxx (2018) 1–13

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Language & Communication

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom

The origin of language among the Aché

Jan David Hauck

University of California, Los Angeles, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Language ideology
Ontology
Objectification
Aché
Guaraní

ABSTRACT

For the Aché of Paraguay, language seems to never have been an issue, much less a topic. Aché verbal art emphasizes non-communicative and non-representational functions of speech. The activity of speaking was not related to ethnic or personal identity and there is no account of language in their mythology. This stands in stark contrast to their neighbors, the Guaraní, who have the concept of the word-soul, which relates to names and personhood, and a myth about the origin of language. In the twentieth century, contact with Paraguayan society, settlement in reservation communities, and the influence of missionaries led to profound sociocultural transformations among the Aché, including language shift. And as their speech practices were changing, these same practices were attended to in novel ways, as "language." This paper analyzes the origin of language among the Aché and how it became similar to what it is in many other places of the world where people struggle for the maintenance and revitalization of their ancestral ways of speaking: a decontextualized cultural object and emblem of ethnic identity.

1. Introduction

Ache djawuetegi illã nonga, djwei nongama go. …
Ache djawuete wẽ rawe djwei'i.

The real Aché language, it is no more like that, it is hard now. …
The real Aché language is almost gone, it is hard.

These words by an Aché elder, which I recorded in 2011 express the feelings and experience of many Aché, former hunter–gatherers from eastern Paraguay. Their heritage language is severely endangered owing to dramatic sociocultural transformations following settlement in the 1960s and 70s. Most Aché have shifted to the regionally dominant language Guaraní or a syncretic form composed of Aché and Guaraní elements. Only a small number of elders are still fully fluent in Aché.

Language shift is a cause of concern in the communities. At teacher meetings, community reunions, cultural events, workshops, and on a community radio, Aché leaders, teachers, and elders argue for the importance of language maintenance and revitalization and warn against mixing the language with Guaraní, "the language of the Paraguayans," their former enemies. And they ask, if they fully abandoned their heritage language, would they still be Aché?

E-mail address: jan.d.hauck@ucla.edu.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2018.03.004
0271-5309/

This paper is a commentary on the history of language among the Aché. What was language for the Aché prior to contact with Paraguayan society? How has the Aché language come to be endangered? Why is language such an important issue today? In exploring these questions I come to a slightly different conclusion than the elder quoted above. The Aché language is not something that once was there and is now "almost gone." On the contrary, it has just now arrived. I argue that before contact and settlement there was no such thing as "the Aché language." What is understood today as the "real" Aché language, *ache djawuetegi*, is the result of a number of developments in post-contact history that allowed "language" to emerge as an object that could be talked about, written down, protected, and claimed for identity – but which could now also be lost. But why was there no such thing as language among the Aché? And how did linguistic practices associated with life before contact with Paraguayan society come to be apprehended as language today?

2. The natures of language and nonlanguage

From various perspectives, the papers united in this special issue explore the ontological variation of different linguistic phenomena in the Americas. The underlying question that informs all of these inquiries is, in the words of Magnus Course (this volume) "whether our difference is the same kind of difference as theirs" (see Wagner, 2016 [1975]; Strathern, 1980; Viveiros de Castro, 1998), i.e., whether the different phenomena that "we" (the anthropologists and linguists) usually subsume under the umbrella term "language" are really instances of one and the same phenomenon for "them" (the speakers of these "languages"). Are the different languages, genres, or registers that we explore ethnographically ontologically equivalent and commensurable – a fact that the use of terms such as "language," "genre," or "register" implies? Is the difference between them actually a difference of "language," of different conventional systems of representation or "different ways of saying the same thing"? Or may they be better understood as fundamentally different phenomena, are they "different things"?[1]

Our comparative exploration of "language" in the Amerindian imagination expands on scholarship of language ideologies (Kroskrity, 2010), taking seriously beliefs and presuppositions about language, but without taking language as the ground. We have introduced the term "natures of language" in order to destabilize the notion of language as a singular phenomenon, the nature (sg.) of which is already known. The English term "language" must be understood as an "equivocation" (Viveiros de Castro, 2004) that might index potential referential alterity, to be ethnographically explored (Hauck and Heurich, this volume).

For the purpose of my discussion here, I would like to offer a few additional thoughts and propose that the question of ontological difference between languages is of the same order as that between language and nonlanguage. Especially in the face of radical sociocultural and ontological transformations resulting from colonial and post-colonial encounters, we are well-advised to not immediately assume to encounter "languages" wherever we hear people speak. I shall add a few remarks on the understanding of language in linguistic anthropological scholarship before making my case for adding nonlanguage to our collection of equivocations and for the historical absence of "language" among the Aché.

Troubles with the concept of language have long haunted the anthropology concerned with the term. Abundant ethnographic evidence from research on language contact and convergence, linguistic differentiation, and standardization has shown that the boundaries between languages or speech forms are never quite as settled as the usual glossonyms would suggest. At the same time, research on verbal art and performance, cross-species communicative interaction, and multimodality has put into question strict, a priori distinctions between language and nonlanguage. Furthermore, we are highly aware of the fact that the people whose languages we study often times have very different ideas of what these languages are. Responses to these issues usually take two forms. One is to abandon the concept of language and instead focus on discourse, performance, or representation. The other is to extend what we mean by language to include what had been confined to the paralinguistic or nonlinguistic realms in the Western intellectual tradition.

These solutions have produced a vast amount of valuable research, and I do not question the utility of turning the focus away from "language" or of expanding the meaning of the term to include a range of aspects of communication that are not part of the "code," narrowly defined (Jakobson, 1960). However, for the purpose of my discussion here, and in light of the general topic of this special issue, I feel that both solutions provide too easy a way out of our dilemmas. They both evade the question of what language actually is or may be (Hauck and Heurich, this volume). And they do not allow for a meaningful difference between attending to discursive phenomena as "language" and not attending to them. Therefore, as will become clear below, although I do focus on (the Aché word for) "speech" to some extent, my question is not what speech is for the Aché. Rather, my aim is to productively explore the absence of speech *as language* in the Aché pre-contact lifeworld (I do not claim they did not ever attend to the *practice* of speaking or to what people said).

In an insightful essay, Heryanto (1990, 40) writes that language is "a phenomenon expressing the particular history of a society" that did not exist in many parts of the world. "Language is not a universal category or cultural activity. Though it may sound odd, not all people have a language in the sense in which this term is currently used in English" (41). In pre-colonial Indonesia, that he is writing about, language was the result of a "radical social transformation" in the past centuries that involved the "restructuring of pre-existing vernacular world-views and social activities of non-Western and non-industrialised communities" (40). Here, as elsewhere, the emergence of "language" was intimately related to

[1] This, of course, amounts to the same thing as asking whether our sameness is the same kind of sameness as theirs.

Please cite this article in press as: Hauck, J.D., The origin of language among the Aché, *Language & Communication* (2018), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2018.03.004