



# “Graduated authenticity”: Multilingualism, revitalization, and identity in the Northwest Amazon



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## ABSTRACT

In the Upper Rio Negro region of the Northwest Amazon of Brazil, although language plays a vital role in determining and understanding identity, the 21 Indigenous languages spoken there can all be considered endangered. Power dynamics among speakers of the various Indigenous languages complicate the political debate about what it means to be Indigenous. Questions of authenticity and the importance of “traditional” practices for revitalization projects take on political significance in these debates. In this paper, I use the concept of “graduated authenticity” to demonstrate how different configurations of ethnic identity, ancestry, and language contribute to assessments of individuals’ “authenticity”. The politicized nature of revitalization introduces new concerns for assessing the dynamics of multilingualism and Indigenous identities.

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## 1. Introduction

In both language revitalization and Indigenous cultural politics, the question of “authenticity” is one that has been addressed from a number of perspectives. The degree to which the political outcomes of Indigenous peoples’ struggles have depended upon outsiders’ recognition of the validity of their identity claims has subjected all aspects of their social lives to scrutiny (Conklin, 1997; Graham, 2002). As Sissons (2005:43) points out, the question itself “has deep roots within colonial racism”, and recent work by Indigenous scholars has advocated a move away from the discussion of “the politics of recognition” and towards analysis of “the politics of refusal” – Indigenous peoples’ negations of the terms that have been set for them by these colonial enterprises (Coulthard, 2014). The material stakes of these politics, however, are very high, as “in some contexts, expectations of Indigenous cultural purity or environmental naturalness exist alongside the imposition of varying degrees of blood quantum as criteria for citizenship, political recognition, and access to resources and services” (Harris et al., 2013:1). This paper fits within this discussion of these processes of identification and the relationship between them and the “differential access to power [that] occurs within and among Indigenous groups” (Harris et al., 2013:6) – especially in a context of urbanization, contact among different linguistic and cultural groups, and prominent Indigenous activism, such as the one discussed here.

Within the field of language revitalization studies, examination of the idea of “authenticity” has primarily occurred with respect to the language itself, or domains for its use. Dorian (1994) lays out a set of questions about the various types of ideological conflict between “purism” and “compromise” involved in increasing the use of endangered languages; similarly, the papers collected in Henze and Davis (1999) reflect on the various ways in which the concept is applied or debated with

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respect to the development of terminology, the role of second-language learners, and the educational setting in particular. Meek (2011) presents an account of how, in the Yukon, emphasis on elders' ways of speaking as the most authentic ones can result in the exclusion of young people and learners from revitalization processes, while questions about the appropriateness of using Indigenous languages in new or non-traditional settings persist and function differently depending on the political and cultural circumstances (Hornberger and Swinehart, 2012; Shulist, 2012). In addition to the assessments of authenticity of the domains of use or the linguistic forms themselves, however, language revitalization contexts are sites in which the broader political questions of what it means to be Indigenous – and by extension, how it is that one might become non-Indigenous – also come into play. As a variety of authors have shown, the connection between linguistic knowledge and authentic Indigenous identity is not, in fact, one that can be assumed, but rather is one that is being made and remade through the political and social practices that are associated with language revitalization efforts (e.g. Ahlers, 2006; McCarty et al. 2011; Granadillo and Orcutt-Gachiri, 2011). How these practices work in the demonstration or assessment of the authenticity of identities remains an emerging topic of discussion, and here, I show that it is not simply a binary question between “authentic” and “inauthentic” – Indigenous or non-Indigenous – but rather one in which varying degrees of authenticity can be assigned based on different ideological configurations of the language-identity relationship. This relates to Silverstein's (2003:532) observation that “there are differential claims to social participation based on differences of membership in what we can term a language community”, while at the same time, expanding beyond the boundaries of a singular language community to consider how these claims function within a multilingual speech community.

The particular terms of assessment that operate within the context discussed here relate to the specific dynamics of multilingualism present in the Upper Rio Negro region of the Northwest Amazon of Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela. Despite its small and sparse population (approximately 50,000 people inhabit a territory of 250,000 km<sup>2</sup>), the region is known as one of the most linguistically diverse in the world, with approximately two dozen languages, from five different language families, spoken within it (FOIRN/ISA, 2006). Adding to this intriguing phenomenon is the fact that this large number of languages persists alongside very high levels of individual multilingualism. Explaining the extraordinary degree of language maintenance, then, has been a primary goal of linguists and anthropologists working in this part of the world (Sorensen, 1967; Stenzel, 2005; Chernela, 2013). Over the last few decades, many ethnographic and linguistic analyses of the region (Stephen Hugh-Jones, 1979; Christine Hugh-Jones, 1979; Jackson, 1989, 1983; Chernela, 1993) have emphasized the ideological role played by language within the local system of social organization – and specifically, the Uaupés (Vaupes) basin practice of “linguistic exogamy”, which I will discuss in more detail below – as a contributing factor to the maintenance of this diversity.

Although this system has proven stable over an extended period of time, ongoing colonial dominance, economic globalization, and even climate change – which increases the need to migrate out of traditional Indigenous territories in which languages and cultural practices remain strong – are placing great pressure on the languages of the region. All of these Indigenous languages can be considered, to at least some degree, endangered, though some much more critically than others. Accurate information about speaker numbers, intergenerational transmission, and other important factors is available only for a few of these languages; I present a general picture of the languages and how they relate to one another in the table below (See Fig. 1).

Given this changing sociolinguistic reality, more recent scholarship on the subject has expanded upon the discussion of ethnolinguistic identity in the Northwest Amazon in two ways – first, the implications of endangerment and language shift on the identity-based meanings of language use have become increasingly important (Stenzel, 2005; Fleming, 2010), and second, the functions played by the multiple languages within an individual's repertoire, and ideologies of multilingualism, have been specifically considered in various articles by Janet Chernela (2004, 2013), primarily in relation to the Kotiria language. In this paper, I link these two lines of thought in considering how the Northwest Amazonian situation of Indigenous multilingualism requires a descriptive approach to language shift and its impact on identity that extends beyond the common tendency to oversimplify the dynamics in terms of a binary opposition between Indigenous and colonial languages. I also situate this discussion in relation to language revitalization efforts, rather than shift itself, as the social and cultural impacts of each are, in fact, distinct from one another. The specific responses and strategies put in place in different contexts relate to and intersect with pre-existing language ideologies, cultural practices, and political realities. In the Northwest Amazon, the salience of these language ideologies constitutes one factor shaping the outcome of language revitalization projects, while another, less well recognized in the literature, comes from the power relationships among the various groups of Indigenous people of the region. These disputes emerge not only along ethnolinguistic lines, but also based on other social differences – for example, between urban and rural Indigenous people, or between speakers and non-speakers of Indigenous languages. The assessment of “authenticity” in relation to linguistic abilities becomes, in this case, a fraught and multifaceted question that draws on all of these various ideological, social, and political concerns.

## 2. Background: revitalization and authenticity

This paper is based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork, conducted over two visits in 2011 and 2012, in the small city of São Gabriel da Cachoeira, Amazonas, Brazil. The population of the town includes 85% Indigenous people who are either themselves migrants from the surrounding communities, or first generation descendents of these migrants (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2010), of whom no single ethnolinguistic group can claim distinct dominance. The situation, then, is not only one of contact among different language groups, but also one of ideological change and conflict, as

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