

Arawak language diversity as observed in Johan Natterer's Basel wordlists (1817-1836).

Johann Natterer was an Austrian explorer, naturalist and taxidermist who spent almost twenty years in the Brazilian Amazon region preparing animals and collecting ethnographic objects to be displayed in Vienna's imperial state galleries. Less known is his contribution to the documentation of the indigenous languages of the Amazon region. During his stay in Brazil between 1817 and 1836 Natterer also recorded wordlists of about 70 indigenous languages, which were preserved in hand-written form out of sight of the academic community until their rediscovery in the University Library of Basel (Switzerland) at the end of the 1970s. Many of the languages recorded by Natterer are nowadays extinct or dormant, as is the case for 16 of the 26 Arawak languages of which he collected data. Natterer's language recordings follow a standardized set of vocabulary items and short phrases, which make them eminently suitable for comparative work. They offer an extraordinary view into a lost world of Arawak nations which occupied large tracts of the Upper Amazon and the Rio Negro river basin, as well as the area south of the Amazon river in the state of Amazonas, where very few Arawak peoples survive today. The internal diversification of the languages of the Arawak family is clearly visible and is suggestive of its dominance and early distribution in the area. At least one previously unknown branch of the Arawak family can be established on the basis of Natterer's data alone.