

Sustaining Work and Social Practices in the Colombian Amazon: The case of the Caquetá-Putumayo peoples

Katarzyna I. Wojtylak
(University of Warsaw)

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This study delves into the complex dynamics of language, culture, and social practices among the ethnolinguistic groups in the Caquetá-Putumayo (CP) River Basins of the Colombian Amazon, examining seven endangered groups from three language families—Witotoan (Murui-Muina, Ocaina, Nonuya), Boran (Bora/Miraña, Muinane), and Arawak (Resígaro), along with the Andoke isolate. Coexisting historically within a ‘cultural complex’ as ‘the People of the Centre’ (Echeverri 1997), these groups form a rich tapestry of cultural and linguistic interconnections (e.g., Aikhenvald 2012, Epps 2021, Wojtylak 2020).

Each CP group specialized in producing and trading specific goods, creating a unique network of relations. For instance, Murui-Muina excelled in tobacco and hammocks, while Bora crafted mats and woven products. Remarkably, the Andoke did not produce stone axes but found pre-made axes buried underground, revealing intricate pre-Columbian dynamics of resource exchange (Eriksen 2011). Beyond trade, multilingualism, intermarriage practices, and shared cultural rituals (e.g., long-distance drum communication) fostered a distinct but shared linguistic environment. Despite speaking different languages, CP groups comprehended each other’s languages (though not all), emphasizing nuanced social relationships, e.g. the Muinane and Murui-Muina considered themselves “brothers” but refrained from intermarrying (Fagua Rincón 2015).

The proposed study seeks to delve into the historical and present-day landscape of the CP peoples, exploring language ecology in the context of informal (i.e. everyday – both traditional/present-day) and formal (ritual – both both traditional/present-day) language learning. It aims to unravel the traditional transmission of language and knowledge within the intricate web of the CP economy, evaluating its impact on contemporary social practices. By examining visible changes resulting from migration in the CP area, particularly in Leticia city (the capital of the Colombian Amazonas state), the study draws on a unique comparison between two CP local economies and their language use: the Tercera India (a very remote community, located deep in the jungle along the Caraparaná River in Colombia) and the Kilometro 11 community (a community located very close to Leticia city).

The methodology includes first-hand ethnographic fieldwork, linguistic data analysis, and linguistic documentation of traditional and current narratives of the Murui-Muina community. The data comprises linguistic corpora, historical records, and notes from ethnographic fieldwork. The expected results aim to shed light on the intricate CP language practices (including those resulting from migration). This research contributes to the broader understanding of the Northwest Amazonian peoples, examining language sustainability practices and their transformations amidst the forces of migration over the past two centuries.

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