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Language Contact in Amazonia

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Language Contact in Amazonia. Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. 320 pp., 1 map. £90.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-19-925785-0. [www.oup.com]

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The discourse-areal approach suggested as suited to a more complex study of Amazonian languages (Beier et al. 2002) appears at a time when scholarly integration of formerly quite different anthropological perspectives has proven exceptionally productive in Amazonian studies. Particular with regard to the newer interest in “ethnogenesis,” this approach demonstrates the many benefits of an orientation away from sodalities to social networks, characterized by multiple overlapping relations of marriage, ritual practice, trade, and warfare alliances in the recent discussions of Amazonian ritual practices that probe the actual sources of community, and which understands these to involve processual shifts from latent hostility and inherent “tension” to at least temporary sociality. We are also moving from attention to such public, large-scale ceremonial practices to more private ritual talk, coming to understand the pervasiveness of household-centered ritual genres and registers or styles, still in need of more careful study. What we have learned so far is that such apparently “everyday” events as joking and avoidance, honorification, greetings, leave takings, protests, and the languages of trade and marketing seem in fact to have important resonances within the far better known collective ceremonial events.

In connection with these approaches to discourse, and influenced by the shift to typological-comparative interests in linguistics, a good deal of linguistic research has turned to the pervasive fact of Amazonian multilingualism. Of special interest of course is the Northwest Amazon area, where language contact involves different members of Arawak, Tucanoan, Hup (a member of the so-called “Maku” [Epps 2006]) and Carib language families. As these are typologically as well as genetically different languages, linguists are interested in how contact-induced changes may have affected their grammars, or “internal” constructions. In Alexandra Aikhenvald’s view, only where there is extensive bi- or multilingualism, can we hypothesize a linguistic area, where diffusion has caused local genetically distinct languages to share extensive and “reasonably” distinctive traits not found elsewhere (p. 8).

Alexandra Aikhenvald’s book on languages in contact is a special example of how researchers may construct answers to such typological matters in multilingual contexts. The result of at least 10 years work in the Vaupès Basin studying Northern Arawakan Tariana and neighboring Tukanoan languages (as well as the influences of Portuguese), Aikhenvald makes productive use of several sub-fields of linguistics, resulting in an important contribution. In the Vaupès

Basin (and, one might add, in the very different but also multilingual Alto Xingu area of central Brazil), multilingualism involves in the author's words "a strong tendency to keep languages strictly apart by restricting the influx of borrowed forms." Aikhenvald (p. 2) continues: "This creates an almost ideal 'linguistic laboratory' for investigating diffusion of patterns rather than forms." What is needed, she shows, is an approach that goes far beyond collecting lists of the more obvious lexical importations to see how linguistic structures themselves are affected. This is a complex project requiring historical, typological and social considerations, that is, to investigate the specific sociolinguistic parameters at work in the different contact situations (p. 30). The author includes descriptions of the historical consequences of European influences in the area, which have relentlessly promoted a politics of language use through religio-educational institutions; she provides examples of how the relative statuses of different local languages vis-à-vis one another influence the context of use and confidence of use of particular languages or varieties by individual multilinguals, and discusses at length the changing practices regarding marriage (formerly strictly language exogamous) as one crucial locus of language enculturation into which speakers have been recruited by kinship.

The sociolinguistic descriptions of individual lives in effect provide the anthropologist with many good details for understanding the workings of those very networks of relationships mentioned at the start of this review. While her discussion focuses upon language in process, Aikhenvald cannot, in fact, help but remark upon the social relationships between speakers that motivate those processes. While the book includes numerous detailed linguistic descriptions of phonology, grammar, syntax (and to a lesser extent, discourse), the whole is set in a historical and social frame which provides the actual contexts for understanding the speech practices of specific individuals and the network of socialization involving speakers and their children. As such, Aikhenvald's book is a particularly important illustration of how understanding languages in process promotes anthropological understanding more generally.

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