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Vaupés multilingualism and the substance of language

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Introduction

To date, most studies of the pervasive multilingualism characteristic of Colombian and Brazilian northwest Amazonia have been largely concerned with ordinary, conversational speech occurring spontaneously in unmarked, secular contexts, paying relatively little attention to the more esoteric variants associated with ritual and shamanism. In this paper, I draw on some of my recent work on Tukanoan bodies (Hugh-Jones 2017; 2019; 2021) and older work on house societies (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Hugh-Jones 1995) to build on Pattie Epps’ (2021) innovative paper on lects and multilingualism in Amazonia, and on two recent papers by Janet Chernela, the first talking of an “East Tukano ethnolinguistics” (2013, 234-35) and the second (2018) of an ontology that equates language with corporality and shared corporal substance. I suggest that, by keeping these shamanic and ritual registers in mind, we may not only shed fresh light on Vaupés multilingualism, but can also contribute to recent studies on the ontology of language, such as those by Hauck and Heurich (2018), Walker (2018), and others.

I want to make three principal points. Firstly, that if our understanding of Vaupés multilingualism is still dogged by what Epps (2021, 1) calls “relatively reified associations between language and social group, anchored in space and time,” part of the problem lies in the notion of group that tends to figure in this context, a notion derived from rather outdated and contextually inappropriate kinship theory.1 This gets in the way of a closer approximation to Indigenous understandings. Allied to this, I suggest that the linkage between reified languages and reified groups that crops up in relation to the Vaupés echoes a Western ideology of language in which discrete languages figure as marking and underpinning the identity of discrete nation-states, a view that runs counter to our understanding of the different peoples of northwest Amazonia as comprising an open-ended regional system, and of the role of linguistic diversity within this system. Secondly, and in line with this, I present data that suggests that if we are to take the idea of a Tukano ethnolinguistics seriously, this also means taking their ideas about sociology, physiology, and eschatology seriously. Lastly, apropos of Epps’ (2021, 2) remarks about widening the field of enquiry to linguistic varieties “not necessarily anchored straightforwardly to locality or descent,” my focus is less on ordinary, conversational varieties of language, the patri-lects that dominate discussions of Vaupés multilingualism, and more on some other -lects that tend to get left out of the picture, the shamanic-lects and musical-lects of Tukanoan ritual and mythology. That said, I should add that my paper does not pretend to be a linguistic analysis of ritual speech. My aim is rather to provide some wider cultural context to discussions of Vaupés multilingualism.

The Tukanoan origin story as ethnosociology

I begin with a brief, condensed, and composite summary of the Tukanoan origin story based on a combination of data from my own field research and my reading of versions by Desana and Tukano narrators published in the series Narradores Indígenas do Alto Rio Negro.2

1. See also Seeger et al. (2019).
2. For an extended discussion of this series, see Hugh-Jones (2016).
As the start of an extended process that leads eventually to the appearance of ordinary human beings, a female deity first creates five celestial Thunder ancestor deities by blowing tobacco smoke from a cigar held in a fork-shaped wooden holder into coca powder contained in a gourd. Luiz Lana’s illustration of this event (Umusi Pãrõkumu and Tôrãmu Kêhiri 1995, 67) portrays the smoke as containing a homunculus-like figure. One of these celestial Thunders, a personification of the box containing feather ornaments that hangs from the roof of a traditional Tukanoan maloca (Hugh-Jones 1995), then vomits up the proto-ancestors of humanity in the form of these same ornaments. The disembodied ornament-souls then enter an anaconda canoe and travel westwards upriver from the source of life in the east to the center of the world at Ipanoré, a rapid on the Vaupés River. The ornament-souls’ nine-month journey is broken by stops at a series of transformation houses, where they come up onto land to take part in a sequence of dance rituals, each time returning to the water to continue on their journey. This process gradually transforms them into embodied and fully human ancestral beings. These ancestors, now in the guise of human dancers wearing on their bodies the ornaments from which they have just emerged “like chicks from an egg (Umusi Pãrõkumu and Tôrãmu Kêhiri, 1995, 39), then come permanently up from the river onto dry land via a hole in the rocks of the Ipanoré rapids, spreading out to occupy the territories where their descendants now live.

At the start of their journey, the prehuman ancestors were all brothers who spoke the same flute-music language or flute-lect, the universal language of all sentient beings at the dawn of time when humans and animals still spoke the same language, the flutes being simultaneously the animals and birds whose names they bear today. But when a female deity gave birth to Kaapi, a personification of the ayahuasca vine (kaapi in Tukano), this set off a process of differentiation. As the ayahuasca blood from Kaapi’s birth flooded the house where the ancestors were assembled, the visual and auditory hallucinations the blood produced caused human beings to become different from animals and birds, each species now acquiring their own distinctive voice and appearance. At the same time, human beings became different from one another. Men became different from women, so that sexual reproduction, made possible by the appearance of different genitals, took its place alongside the previous exclusively oral and asexual mode of reproduction, the exhaled cigar smoke and vomited ornaments that we have seen above. This oral reproductive mode endures to this day in the form of ritual events where coca and tobacco, ritualized speech, music, song, dance, and ornamentation take pride of place.

At the same time as women became different from men, the ancestors began speaking in different human languages. With this linguistic speciation, the men ceased to be brothers and instead became ~teyá, cross-cousins and affines, marking the start of the marriage, ritual, and verbal exchanges that now bind their descendants into a regional system based on linguistic and other cultural differences operating within an overarching shared cultural framework. Finally, the colors and designs on the bodies of birds, snakes, and other creatures and the sounds of their voices, originally all merged together in the swirling patterns of sound and light of an ayahuasca trip, now became resolved as the differentiated speech, song, music, feather ornamentation, basketry designs, and other colorful, patterned products of human creativity.

There are two points to note here. Firstly, in myth-time, which is also the space-time of ritual, there are no men and women, no genitals, and no sex—these only appeared when spirit-ancestors became human, and when myth gave way to history. Before this, all reproduction took place via the mouth in acts of blowing, vomiting, and ingestion associated with cigars, gourds, flutes, feather ornaments, and other ritual objects, all of them with obvious reproductive connotations: phallic cigars in vaginal cigar holders; seminal smoke; womb-like gourds and houses; vomiting deities; seminal, egg-like feather ornaments; and a watery, nine-month gestation-like journey in an anaconda canoe also serving as a transforming womb. Secondly,
in myth-time, feather ornaments and speech (especially speech in its more ritualized forms as mythology), chants and incantations, song and flute-music, are all undifferentiated, generative soul-stuff and sources of vitality, at once semen and fertile blood.6

Languages and groups

The sociology behind most discussions of Vaupés multilingualism has its roots in the theory of unilineal descent, a theory whose own roots lie in the Africanist ethnography of Meyer Fortes (1953) and others, and in Henry Maine’s (1861) Ancient law. In line with this sociology, corporate patrilineal descent groups, brought into existence through the operations of a separate and autonomous “kinship system” that owes nothing to language, are held to “own” discrete languages as a form of collective property. Individual “members” of such groups express their “loyalty” to these languages, which function as “badges” or “emblems” serving to signal the identity of the groups concerned. If all this is clearest in Jean Jackson’s (1974) classic early paper on Vaupés multilingualism, I must emphasize here that I do not wish to criticize Jackson—or anyone else who writes in these terms. 1974 was a long time ago; I, too, have written in these same terms, and they contain some truth. My point is that this way of thinking, one that takes traditional descent theory as an unproblematic given, is still with us today and risks allowing a Western ideology that associates language with nationhood to obscure Indigenous notions that start from quite different premises.

One result of this talk of “ownership,” “badges,” “signaling,” and “identity” is that discrete “languages” are understood as components of a semiotic set not unlike the flags that hang outside the headquarters of the UN in New York to signal the identity of the world’s nation-states. Anthropologists and linguists have long been aware that the different, named, exogamous units of the Vaupés regional system are in no sense “tribes.” Despite this, the marriage of descent theory with the idea of emblematic languages unwittingly still tends to produce an implicit model in which the notion of a language standing for a nation is not far beneath the surface.

All this is problematic for three reasons. To begin with, as Jackson (1974, 61) herself observes, speaking one’s own language as way of communicating group membership “rarely informs other Indians of something they don’t already know.” This raises the question of why it is worth investing the effort in maintaining the differences between these emblematic, badge-like languages. Secondly, any hint of language-and-nation, or here, language-and-tribe, is especially inappropriate in the context of multilingualism as an integral component of a northwest Amazonian social system held together by marital, material, ritual, and linguistic exchanges that are made possible by principles of difference operating within a region characterized by an overarching cultural homogeneity that transcends the differences between three major language families, Tukanoan, Arawakan, and Nadahup.

Thirdly, I don’t think the model does justice to the Indigenous point of view, for the body that figures in unilineal descent theory is the wrong kind of body. It is not the tangible, living body of flowing breath and blood that would figure in an “overarching ontological framework that equates language with corporality” (Chernela 2018, 23), but rather the abstract, disembodied body of Roman jurisprudence, the metaphorical “corpus” of the corporations and corporate groups that figure in Maine’s (1861) Ancient law and Fortes’ (1953) unilineal descent groups.

The alternative is to take Tukanoan ethnosociology seriously and focus on their maloca (wii, “house”), at once a building, a dwelling, a social group, and a ritual space (basaria wii, “dance house”) that provides the setting for the ritual actions and events that bring into existence and perpetuate the groups in question. As I have argued elsewhere (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Hugh-Jones 1995), I think that the house qua social group of Lévi-Strauss’ house society model is a closer approximation to Tukanoan idioms than the usual descent
groups and patrilineages. Note here that the Tukano origin myth is structured as a journey broken by stops for ritual dances at a succession of transformation houses (~basa yuhiri wii); that such collective rituals are themselves referred to as “houses” (idire idiria wii; “beer-drinking house,” baare ekaria wii, “food-giving house,” hee rika ~sooria wii, “taking-in fruit house,” etc.); that hee wii, “flute house,” is the local idiom for the initiation rituals that perpetuate the anthropologists’ and linguists’ “sibs,” “lineages,” and “clans;” and that, with the succession of house moves resulting from perishable building materials and subsistence based on slash-and-burn agriculture, genealogical memory is structured not as the segmentary, branching, dendritic model of classic unilineal descent theory, but rather as a linear sequence of houses that move rhizome-like from site to site up or down a stretch of river over the course of time.

Compared with the unilineal descent group, Lévi-Strauss’ notion of the house-as-group has two advantages. Firstly, the model is partly inspired by European noble houses and evokes a concern for rank, fame, and renown reflected in a coat of arms and a glorious name.7 This fits the Vaupés context well, for Tukanoan groups are also noble groups, each one encapsulated in their name. As C. Hugh-Jones (1979, 26) observes, “the identity of a sib is so intimately bound up with the name that, in a sense, the name is the sib.” In line with Chernela’s (2013, 209) statement that “the formation of hierarchies in the northwest Amazon is, at least in part, a linguistic project, created in the act of speaking,” the chanting of origin myths at ritual gatherings serves to validate the claims to prerogatives of rank, hierarchy, and nobility associated with the group name. Secondly, even though the house, in Lévi-Strauss’ sense, is not entirely free of idioms of property, instead of presenting languages as independent, thing-like entities “owned” by social groups brought into prior existence by the hidden workings of a “kinship system,” the model opens the way for the recognition of ritual speech as something that actively constitutes the groups in question. Wii, the Tukanoan maloca, is both the setting and the idiom for the gatherings of people that take place within its space, an inclusive, contextually-defined unit that draws attention to the importance of ritual as a key element of the cultural context in which Vaupés multilingualism operates.

Lévi-Strauss’ houses are defined by an estate made up of both material and nonmaterial components: wealth, land, and other tangible assets on the one hand, and a name and reputation on the other. In the Tukanoan context, the material component of the house estate is made up of flutes, feather ornaments, and other ritual objects. As these objects embody the bones and spirit-souls of ancestor-deities, they are living relics (Hugh-Jones 1995; 2009). The nonmaterial component of the estate consists of linguistic items that come in two basic forms: firstly, the patri-lect or oka (“language”) that has been the usual focus of the linguistic and anthropological attention with regard to multilingualism, and, secondly, the ritualized, sacred speech or keti oka (Tukano kihti ukäse) that is the main focus of Indigenous attention. Keti oka might be glossed as the “speech of the ancestors” or “myth speech,” for it consists predominantly of formal speeches, chants, songs, flute music, and the potent verbal formulae or spells uttered by ~kubua (“shamans”), along with the myths on which all such forms of ritual speech are based, the “keti,” also alluding to bikira keti, “stories of the ancestors,” the Indigenous term usually rendered as “myth.”

Speaking and activating keti oka is indicative of a ritual return to myth-time and to the undifferentiated state of communication that preceded the ancestors’ transformation into normal human beings differentiated by ordinary human languages. While the keti oka of different Tukano groups varies in line with the variety of their more ordinary forms of speech or “language,” it nonetheless forms one component of a shared ritual lingua franca that includes shared mythology, shared maloca architecture, shared ritual space, shared modes of dress and ornamentation, and shared conventions regarding ritualized behavior and mutual respect, thus integrating the Tukanoans and their Nadahup, Arawakan, and Cariban-speaking neighbors into a single, peaceable regional system (Hugh-Jones 2013, 57). This overall northwest Ama-
zonian cultural homogeneity is a counterpoint to the region's linguistic diversity. Aside from esoteric ritual chants (~yagore kitise), whose highly formulaic character makes it possible for the speakers of different languages to perform them in unison despite many of the chanters having little understanding of their content, the most striking example of this ritual *lingua franca* is the dance songs (basa, Tukano: basamori, kaapiwaya) performed at ritual gatherings. Each group claims a repertoire of these songs as their own, but there is considerable overlap in these repertoires, and both the songs themselves and their accompanying choreography are strikingly similar across the whole region and its different language families, a commonality necessary for intercommunity rituals to function. Many, perhaps most, of the words of these songs appear to be Arawakan in origin. People in the Pirá-Paraná area consider the words to be in a largely untranslatable language of the ancestors.\(^8\)

**Descending names and eschatology**

Crucially, *keti oka* also includes group-specific names, the spirit-souls of the original ancestors that are perpetuated as the names of living individuals (Hugh-Jones 2006). In traditional unilineal descent theory, what descends is filiation or blood, a line of consanguineal ties between fathers and their children in a patrilineage, or between mothers and their children in a matrilineage. However, in Tukanoan descent theory, what descends is emphatically *not* blood. Blood must not come from within the patrilineage, but rather from outsider mothers belonging to affinally-related patrilineages—from ties of “complementary filiation,” to use the jargon of classic descent theory. What descends or is perpetuated through time are, firstly, the father’s contributions to conception, his semen, and the durable bone that this semen produces, and, secondly, ritual objects, especially feather ornaments associated with seminal breath and flutes identified with ancestral bones. These are owned collectively by the father and his male agnatic relatives and passed along paternal lines as heirlooms. Lastly, there is the father’s language (*oka*), especially ancestral ritual language (*keti oka*), the -lect or form of language that is also spoken by the flutes.

Rather than thinking in terms of descent groups owning languages, it is perhaps more accurate to think of acts of speaking—telling myths, blowing spells, conferring names, chanting chants, singing songs, and playing flutes—as creating, perpetuating, and constituting the group—so much so that the Tukanoan group could be said to be a collection of people who share a common stock of names, talk in the same way, tell the same stories, chant the same chants, sing the same songs, and play the same flutes, so that “group and narrative would be one and the same” (Andrello 2019, 100). As Chernela (2013, 211) observes, “speech functions as a ‘substantialized symbol’ … of relatedness in a manner similar to the metaphor of ‘blood’ in Western ideology.” This also accords with Walker’s (2018, 17) discussion of words and language being consumed and absorbed by the body, a corporeal understanding of language that contrasts with the more familiar view of language as something interpreted by the mind. Just as eating together creates communities of people who share a common substance, so also does speaking together create groups, a coincidence of commensality with communication.

In particular, what descends within the group are names, the *basere ~wabe* or “names conferred through spell-blowing,” the vehicles of isi (“vitality, breath, heart, soul”) that are intimately linked to the health and wellbeing of their bearer. The more substantial, bodily counterpart or manifestation of the name-soul is semen or ~ria, so a line of related people sharing a common immediate paternal ancestor are ~sigi ~ria, the “children or seed of one man.” Newborn male babies are given the name of a recently-deceased paternal grandfather and newborn females the name of a recently-deceased paternal grandmother, so, even though individuals may die, immortal name-souls still live on. This is made clear in the rituals associated with naming.

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8. On these songs, see Fri gnati (n.d.).
As he inhales draughts of tobacco smoke, then blows them out again charged with the muttered words of the spell for naming, the ~kubu’s thoughts and soul travel to the paternal ancestral origin house located downriver in the east. There, he fetches a name-soul and brings it back to confer on the infant. For each individual, the ~kubu’s words and thoughts repeat the ancestral origin voyage of the group, the baby’s conception, gestation, and birth recapitulating the original nine-month ancestral canoe journey of feather-ornament spirit-souls that transform into people—and vice versa. The material counterparts of these name-souls that cycle between the dead and the living are the feather ornaments that originally gave rise to living people, and which are now buried as grave goods along with the corpses of important individuals.

On arrival at the river of the dead in the underworld below, these ornament-souls meet up with the Sun and travel with him on his nightly upstream journey to the east. There, they rise up with the Sun to repeat the journey of origin upstream from the east along the rivers of this world. The close congruence between ~ria, “semen, children,” and ria, riaga, “river,” is surely not fortuitous here. This same recycling of souls and ornaments figures in a Desana account of mortuary rituals, where the burned corpse is transformed into the birds that supply feathers for ornaments. Fernandes and Fernandes write, “This was done so the feather ornaments would come back from the world of nature, so the grandchildren of the dead person could have ornaments in their own lifetime. The dead person’s soul waits in the universe to be reborn again” (2006, 120; my summary-translation).

When a ~kubu confers a name, he uses his tobacco-laden breath to blow incantations into coca powder that is eaten by the baby’s mother and father, into red and black paints that the parents smear on their bodies and on that of their child as a vitality-enhancing, protective coat, and into the mother’s milk that the baby then drinks. The ~kubu also puts invisible down (~gabo wito, “ear down”) into the infant’s ears to ensure that s/he hears and takes in the speech of the parents and other adults. Why down? Because down, with its airy, wispy filaments, registers the movement of breath, and thus appears to catch the speech carried on this breath, giving it visible presence and substance. It is this visible synergy between moving air and light, filamentous materials such as down, feathers, and kapok, that clarifies why feather ornaments are buya biki, “ancestral kapok,” and why ornaments are associated with breath, and thus with vitality and soul.

Later, as the baby grows stronger, s/he will eat a succession of progressively stronger kinds of food. Before each new food can be eaten, a ~kubu must first blow protective spells into a small sample that the child then eats. The spells list off all the foods in the relevant category, one after the other, each time repeating the refrain baare baa, oka ~saya, “as the food is eaten, the speech goes in.” Infused with words from the ~kubu’s breath, the homeopathic sample now encompasses all the kinds or species included in the category of food in question. Eating words contained in coca and other foods, drinking words contained in milk, smearing word-infused paint on the body, and trapping speech with down in the ears all point towards an understanding of speech as more akin to a substance that flows within and between bodies than to a possession owned by a group.

Breath, ornament, and substance

Janet Chernela (2018, 26) talks of language as a “shared corporal substance” and discusses a “complex ontology in which language is a consubstantial, metaphysical product, a substance in the development of the person. Through speech, speakers of the same language signal a corporality based in shared ancestry and mutual belonging.” But what kind of a substance is language? The short answer is breath. The Tukano term ehêri põ’ra (Ramirez 2019, 47), the Hudp’ah hâwâg (Athias 2015, 67), and the Barasana isi all refer not only to “breath” but also...
to “heart,” “soul,” and “vitality,” suggesting that breath is conceived as a kind of vital bodily fluid and soul-substance akin to blood, an idea that aligns Tukanoan notions of physiology with those of Galenic medicine (Hugh-Jones 2021). But we can go further. As the ~kubu recites his cleansing, healing, and protective words (~wadoore) in a barely audible, muttered voice, the tobacco smoke he exhales loudly gives his breath both visual and sonic substance. Likewise, the keti oka typical of ritual events, a language made up of rhetorical, chanted speech, songs, and the music of wind instruments, gives breath and speech greater sonic substance, with the colored feather ornaments that accompany keti oka providing visual reinforcement. Hill (2013, 324) notes that “the musical sounds, melodies and rhythms produced with wind instruments are considered to be augmentations or amplified forms of shamanic breath,” adding, with respect to why,

so many Amazonian communities have developed such a diversity of wind instruments and made this special class of artefacts into the centrepiece of their ritual and ceremonial practices, [that] it is necessary to explore the importance of indigenous understandings of breath and breathing as expressions of life-force and the associated meanings of wind instruments as cultural tools for channeling this life-force into activities designed to collectivize shamanic abilities to return to life from death and to ensure the continued fertility of animal nature as well as the regeneration of human social worlds. (ibid.)

For Tukanoans, flute music is a form of language, but one with no immediate semantic or propositional content, a point underlined for me by Rufino Marín, a distinguished Barasana dancer (baya), chanter (~yoabi), and friend who sadly died some years ago. Rufino told me that, when the first true human beings came into being, they, too, initially talked only in flute music. But then the deity who oversaw their emergence from the water said, “Ah, but you people will certainly want to argue with each other.” So, in addition to flute music, he gave them the ordinarily language that people talk today. But it is not this spontaneous, conversational language that has the power to impart life. It is rather keti oka, the formalized, metaphorical, ritual speech of chants and shamanic spells and flute music, all of them forms that must be learned and practiced over a long period, that has this power. This suggests that, as for the Urarina (Walker 2018, 18), “speech is most thing-like, and most effective or instrumental, precisely when it’s most disconnected from a speaker’s thoughts.” In the Tukanoan context, this disconnection from thought is indicative of a return to the precultural, undifferentiated state of myth. In sum, we can conclude that the more esoteric, rhetorical, musical, or visual ornamentation is given to breath, the more substance, vitality, and strength it possesses. This means that language and speech are not things owned by groups, but that they are rather what constitutes the strength, vitality, soul, and very existence of those groups. The rituals that feature ~kubu shamans blowing spells and ornamented dancers singing songs, chanting stories of origin, and playing flutes are arenas for linguistic displays of strong, vital souls.

Language and ontology

Janet Chernela’s (2018, 23) characterization of Vaupés multilingualism as operating within an ontological framework that equates language with corporality is consistent with the Barasana term oka, a term usually glossed as “language.”12 The presence of “oka” in composite phrases such as bedi oka, “menstruation,” buti oka, “strength,” guari oka, “fierceness, belligerence,” ~küdi oka, protection, defense,” and tudi oka, “anger,” suggests that oka is perhaps better understood in more concrete, bodily terms as “behavior,” “demeanor,” or “index of inner bodily or mental states” rather than through the abstraction of “language,” a suggestion that also accords with the fact that yire, “to say,” is also “to do.”13

That language is a manifestation of bodily activity, vitality, and soul, and that speaking is an activation of this vitality as breath, can also shed light on the cases of intermarriage between affinally-related groups speaking the same language that are often cited as excep-

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12. See Jones and Jones (2009: 204).
13. Compare the use of “she was like” for “she said” amongst some younger English speakers.
tions to the Vaupés “rule” or norm of linguistic exogamy. Chernela (2018, 23, fn. 3) mentions the Makuna, Cubeo, and Arapaso in this context and goes on to state (2018, 24, fn. 3) that although “Barasana and Taino [sic.] are mutually intelligible, [they] do not intermarry.” I am in no position to comment on the Cubeo or Arapaso, but let us look at the case of Makuna and Eduria, both of whom do in fact intermarry with Barasana.

In each case, although people will readily recognize that the two intermarrying groups speak the same language, in my experience they still deny “linguistic endogamy or incest” because, in each case, the two “languages” in question remain crucially different as the embodiments of different ancestral souls. Barasana, who also refer to themselves as Yeba ~Basa (“Earth People”), are Yeba ~Hidoria, “descendants of Yeba Anaconda,” a status they share with the Yeba/Yiba ~Basa, one of the two groups that make up the composite “Makuna,” the other being the Ide ~Basa, “Water People,” or Ide ~Hidoria, the “descendants of Water Anaconda.” Barasana Yeba ~Basa and Makuna Yeba ~Basa are related as brothers and do not intermarry, but both can and do intermarry with Ide ~Basa, the other part of the composite “Makuna.”

Barasana are well aware of the similarity of their own speech to that of the Makuna as both brothers and affines, and state that they were even closer in the past. But they are adamant that marriages with the speakers of this very similar language are in no sense aberrant because the two “languages” are manifestations of the isi (“soul/vitality”) of two different anaconda ancestors, one of earth, the other of water.

The same logic applies to Barasana and Eduria, who intermarry yet speak “languages” sufficiently close, in terms of their phonology, grammar, syntax, and lexicon, to merit one and the same dictionary (Jones and Jones 2009). Barasana and Eduria are fully aware that their “languages” are linguistically close, but they still emphasize that, because Iko ~Hido, or “Medicine Anaconda,” the ancestor of the Eduria, is a far cry from Yeba ~Hido, or “Earth Anaconda,” the ancestor of the Barasana, the two “languages” embody different isi (“breath/soul/vitality”), sometimes seizing upon minor differences in phonology or lexicon to reinforce this point. Today, with Eduria as a minority language overshadowed by the numerically dominant Barasana and Makuna languages in political and educational contexts, some Eduria teacher-leaders insist yet more on these relatively minor differences. This tendency is reinforced by the official recognition and greater prestige accorded to Indigenous languages in contemporary Colombia, and by the increasing influence of wider Colombian notions of ethnicity that associate language with nationhood on Indigenous ideas concerning linguistic diversity. The adoption of the Spanish “etnia” as a term for “language group” is symptomatic of this fusion of two quite different ideologies of language.

An analogy with Juruparí flutes may help clarify how apparently identical languages are nonetheless different in spirit. To an outsider, and when viewed “objectively,” the Juruparí flutes of different Tukanoan groups would appear to be all the same. They are all made from polished, tubular sections of paxiuba palm wood, they look identical, and they produce much the same sounds. But they are still not the same, because, as the bones of different anaconda ancestors, they have different origin stories, and their voices are the embodiments of different kinds of group vitality. As with “languages,” it is the keti oka that makes the difference.

All of this explains why Tukanoans frequently assert that speaking the language of any group of people other than one’s own can only ever be “mimicry” or “imitation” (kesoose). In part, this reflects a wider Tukanoan reluctance to display in public any form of limited competence, one that applies as much to knowledge of mythology as it does to mastery of language. But it also reflects the fact that, irrespective of degrees of competence, in order to really speak a language properly, the speaker must by definition embody the same isi or “soul” as the language in question. Instead of seeing this mimicry in purely negative terms as asymptomatic of a lack of competence or “soul,” given what has been said above concerning the
linkage between communication and commensality, it might also be seen as a positive refusal to engage in something that risks a dangerous or unwelcome transformation. As Viveiros de Castro (1998), Vilaça (2005), and others have noted, in a perspectival world, to speak in the language of an Other, and, above all, to accept food from them, implies adopting the Other’s perspective and risks transformation into that Other, a common theme in Amerindian mythology. In the Vaupés context, those who have lost the language of their own (father’s) group and been brought up to speak in the language of another group are considered to have undergone a transformation and become part of the group whose language they speak. As in the case of the hunter who imitates, but avoids becoming, his quarry, mere mimicry might be a way of avoiding such a risk. 16

Conclusion

Like outsider anthropologists and linguists Tukanoans can, and often do, adopt an “objective” or “etic” perspective on language, especially when they compare the phonological, lexical, and grammatical details of different “languages.” Indeed, as many observers have noted, one of the correlates of the Tukanoans’ multilingualism is an unusual degree of interest in language, an extreme elaboration of, and sensitivity towards, different ways of speaking, a delight in puns, jokes, and other kinds of linguistic play, and a remarkable capacity to learn new languages and imitate the speech of others. As a married couple doing fieldwork together, my wife and I were constantly impressed by how rapidly our hosts not only imitated our daily interactions but also deciphered some of what we said to each other—“come here,” “I’m off to pee,” etc. As anthropologists struggling to learn an unwritten language monolingually from people with no previous experience of ever having to teach it, we were not only the butt of our hosts’ frustration—“What’s wrong with you people? Our kids learn to speak in no time without all this fuss!”—but also struck by their rapid understanding of what we were trying to do, their capacity to generate a spontaneous metalanguage to help us learn, their ability to explain the etymology of words, and their enthusiasm for tracing phonological transformations between the words of different languages. 17

But Tukanoans can also adopt a cultural or “emic” perspective, especially when it comes to the question of what language actually “is.” Much of this cultural view of language is embedded in mythology and implicit in ritual practices. In the spirit of Epps’ (2021, 20) observation concerning multilingualism that “we must embrace a broad view of how language and linguistic difference are culturally conceived,” it is some of this cultural conception that I have been concerned to elucidate here. Discussions about Vaupés multilingualism in terms of “languages” as “badges” or “emblems” of “identity” are not entirely wrong. But these very words suggest that the discussions are nonetheless often colored by some familiar yet unexamined Western assumptions about what a language is, how it works, and why it is socially relevant. An observation by Hauck and Heurich (2018, 2) is very pertinent here. They write:

I have suggested above that, in treating patri-lect or oka in isolation from the other -lects of keti oka or ritual speech, and in continued references to “patrilineal descent,” “badges,” “emblems,” and “exceptions” to “rules” of linguistic exogamy, a full understanding of Vaupés multilingualism still risks being hampered by our own Western intellectual tradition.
References


