

# Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

---

Volume 7 | Issue 1

Article 7

---

June 2009

## Sounds Like Life: Sound-symbolic Grammar, Performance and Cognition in Pastaza Quechua

Michael A. Uzendoski  
*Florida State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Uzendoski, Michael A. (2009). "Sounds Like Life: Sound-symbolic Grammar, Performance and Cognition in Pastaza Quechua," *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol7/iss1/7>

This Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact [jcostanz@trinity.edu](mailto:jcostanz@trinity.edu).

'the good life' (see their introduction to *The Anthropology of Love and Anger*), saying that they offer conviviality as 'a universal theoretical construct rather than as a value' (page 16), the great strength of their work is to take indigenous statements at face value and not to impose foreign constructions on them.

The final chapter offers a slight change of tone, describing the *Levantamiento* of 2001 in which various people in Napo, including *mestizos*, protested against a number of issues, mostly of economic importance, including the dollarization of the Ecuadorian economy. Uzendoski shows how contemporary Napo Runa connect these events to the revolution led by Jumandy in 1578 (page 145). He argues that this is done by 'eliciting kinship between the current generation and the great revolutionaries of the past' (page 150). Unlike in the rest of the book the ethnography and analysis feels somewhat shallow, but this was perhaps unavoidable given the recent nature of the events. Nevertheless, Uzendoski's approach is to be applauded for it is only through a deep understanding of a group that their position in the current world and their feelings and reactions to indigenous and national politics can be fully understood.

The overall strength of the work lies in the manner in which it draws on a wide range of theoretical work from Wagner and Strathern, through Terry Turner and Gow, to Overing and Viveiros de Castro rather than following a single theoretical strand. While Uzendoski's attempts to synthesize these works may not always be entirely successful, his efforts are to be applauded in a field of study that is, all too often, represented as consisting of irreconcilable theoretical positions.

*Sounds Like Life: Sound-symbolic Grammar, Performance and Cognition in Pastaza Quechua* (Oxford Studies in Anthropological Linguistics) by Janis B. Nuckolls. 1996. Oxford University Press [<http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/>].

MICHAEL A. UZENDOSKI  
Florida State University

*Sounds Like Life* is a book about language aesthetics that confronts much broader and deeper anthropological problems about the relativity of language and how Amazonian peoples use language and grammar to create communicative relationships with nonhuman nature. The key theoretical concept in the book is the notion of "sound-symbolism," a concept directed at how images and sounds work together in complex, embodied, non-arbitrary ways. Sound-symbolic usages in Pastaza Quechua "give an outward form to the inner movements, sensations, and awareness experienced through one's body" (page 6). Nuckolls' position is that sound-symbolism is iconic and imitative in its symbolic logic, and, she uses a sophisticated theoretical approach inspired

by Peirce to critique Saussure's dismissal of sound-symbolism/onomatopoeia as insignificant.

In this review, aside from describing Nuckoll's main arguments, I will emphasize two central aspects of Nuckoll's work that have broader implications. First, I want to emphasize how Nuckoll's research provides further evidence for the "Amazonianess" of the Amazonian Quechua dialects and peoples, a statement that is grounded in historical and social processes indigenous to the Amazonian world. Second, Nuckoll's work provides compelling data for the linguistic relativity principle, and the intimate relationship that develops among culture, language, and thought. Taken as a whole, both of these propositions are meant to challenge people to think about the fine-grained and complex nature of cultural and historical processes, and to show the pitfalls of oversimplifying historical processes as well as the nature of language itself.

As an aside, however, I should note that most scholars of Amazonian Quechua speaking peoples of Ecuador refer to them as "Quichua" or "Kichwa" since their historical origin is one connected to Ecuadorian Quichua, with Quichua/Kichwa signaling an Ecuadorian dialect. Nuckolls prefers to use the designation of "Quechua" that many people associate with Peruvian dialects or with the general language family. As a general term, "Quechua" makes sense, but from here on I will use the more precise classificatory convention of "Quichua."

## PART I: THE ARGUMENT

Nuckolls convincingly shows that sound-symbolism is central to the discursive practices of Pastaza Quichua speakers and indispensable to what is considered good speech. Sound-symbolic words work with verbs, as in the example, of a narrator telling a story about water making the sound "*khawww*," which conveys the sound, and associate imagery, of an anaconda thrashing about underwater. People, in sound-symbolizing, create perspective changes through speech acts, acts that make "animism" and "perspectivism" part of communicative reality. A woman puts down a cooking pot on a fire "*tak*," a sound-word that conveys the meeting of two surfaces that make contact through definitive action. In the larger narrative in which it is embedded, "*tak*" conveys not only the sound of putting the pot down, but also the end of a series of actions, a moment of closure in the succession of the story. Here, the sound-symbolism works recursively as specific action as well as metaphor in the narrative shape of the story. These examples show how sound-symbolic "grooves of thought" (to borrow a phrase from Sapir) reveal the intertwining of speech acts and complex cultural principles among the Pastaza-Quichua.

In the book, the author provides copious details of imagery, usage, and context of over forty sound-symbolic expressions, but she provides even more examples of sound-symbolic terms if one examines and studies the longer narratives. Sound-symbolic terms are discussed through six basic categories,

all of which correspond to individual chapters that deal with terms of: 1) contrasting sensible experience, 2) contacting and penetrating, 3) opening and closing, 4) falling, 5) deforming, and 6) suddenness and completeness. The data are very good and the author shows a good command of the language, as well as a sensitivity and skill at interpreting the larger symbolic logics of the examples and narratives.

## PART II: HISTORY

Nuckoll's work relates well to the general scholarship on Amazonian Quichua speakers. Nuckoll's work builds upon the ethnographic work of Norman and Dorothea Whitten, who were the first scholars to really show the complexity and history of the Amazonian Quichua world. While it may not be possible to write a definitive linguistic history of the Amazonian Quichua dialects, Nuckoll's work significantly advances our understanding of the "Amazonianess" of Quichua and how Amazonian Quichua speakers use unique kinds of language expressions to define their worlds. It is often assumed that Amazonian Quichua speakers are "immigrants" from the Andes or "acculturated" Natives (Taylor 1999), both debilitating stereotypes that are erroneous. These stereotypes have their roots in an article by Steward and Métraux published in the influential *Handbook of South American Indians* (1948); it is hard to find fault with these authors, however, since their article was published at a time where there was little or no serious research about Amazonian Quichua speaking peoples.

While Amazonian Quichua peoples are part of the greater symbiotic flow of people, things, and ideas between the Andean and Amazonian worlds, they are not lost Andeans living out "lo Andino" in a tropical forest environment. Nor are they Native people who have lost their identities. There is now overwhelming scholarship that shows that Amazonian Quichua peoples are Native Amazonian peoples who have redefined themselves via an Amazonian Quichua language complex that allowed them to adapt to the debilitating effects of the European invasion. These processes, often referred to as "ethnogenesis," are not unique to Amazonian Quichua speakers but also define other Native Amazonian groups, even in pre-Hispanic times (Hornborg 2005, Whitten 2008). Instead of thinking of Amazonian Quichua dialects as "Andean," scholars who work in this part of the world consider Amazonian Quichua to be an Amazonian language, one that also happens to be widely spoken in the Andean world. The reason for this classification of "Amazonianess" is that the genesis of Amazonian Quichua languages and peoples is a result of social and linguistic processes occurring within the Amazonian world and among Native Amazonian peoples.

The linguist Pieter Muysken argues that the data do not support the thesis that Amazonian Quichua was brought by immigrations from the highlands nor

the idea that it was propagated mainly by Jesuit missionaries. He instead applies Seruen and Wekker's "semantic transparency principle" to demonstrate that the massive language shift towards Quichua can be attributed to "pidginization" and "creolization" processes that were intensified under colonialism (Muysken 2000: 981; Torero 1984). The semantic transparency principle refers to the basic processes that define pidginization and creolization: uniformity, universality, and simplicity. It is interesting that Amazonian Quichua has been found to share traits of pidgins and creoles, while also still being related to other Quechuas that do not. Muysken says that "LEQ[lowland Ecuadorian Quechua] emerged before 1750 as an offshoot of a general early variant of Ecuadorian Quechua, and it has developed separately but share a number of specific innovations with neighboring dialects, pointing to frequent highland-lowland contacts even in the recent period" (page 80). If I interpret Muysken right, his formal linguistic analysis suggests that early in the colonial period, or possibly even before the Spanish arrived, a simplified Quichua existed within Amazonia as a lingua franca that facilitated communication among various Amazonian and Andean groups, including of course the Inkas, who never sought to "standardize" Quechua like the Spanish did. Over time this way of speaking developed into the various Amazonian Quichuas as people integrated it into the sociocultural and communicative patterns of Native peoples of Upper Amazonia.

Although more research is needed on these relationships, the bottom line is that Amazonian Quichua language(s) are products of Amazonian people and their subaltern agency in history. This idea really is not new, however, as the Peruvian linguist Alfredo Torero (1984) hypothesized many years ago that Amazonian Quechua had its roots in preHispanic long-distance trade within a larger Amazonian-Andean world system of relations. In a memorable passage, Torero writes, "Possibly from many centuries before the Hispanic conquest, Quechua speaking peoples had entered into contact with the Omagua-Cocama in the Ecuadorian northern Oriente, the Peruvian Northern Oriente, and with one or several peoples of Colombia, whose languages took over as those of long distance commerce" (page 380, my translation). Furthermore, painstaking research by historian-anthropologist Alan Durston (2007) has shed light on how much scholarship has been influenced by colonial priestly efforts to standardize and sanctify one Quechua (the supposed original dialect of "the Inkas") as representative of a world that is much more heterogeneous and historically complicated. Nuckoll's work is a good example of just how heterogeneous Quechua (in the broad linguistic sense) is, not as a language "type", but as one strand of a more complex whole of symbolic, pragmatic, and semiotic practices—practices connected to specific regions and peoples of both the Andes and Amazonia. Each Quechua speaking group has their own history, a history that cannot be reduced to a typology of Quechua. The "largeness" of Quechua is indeed misleading.

### PART III: LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY

Aside from these historical complexities, *Sounds Like Life* raises broader issues that challenge conventional assumptions about the nature of language and how language works in relationship to culture. Nuckolls argues that Quichua sound-symbolic adverbs for example, facilitate “iconic imitation of the salient qualities of an action’s spatiotemporal unfolding” (page 100). Here, sound-symbolic usages converge with Nancy Munn’s practice oriented approach towards value, as symbolic actions bring into being spatiotemporal worlds. Nuckolls’ work is unique, however, in that she shows how people use iconic, aesthetically imbued language to create and “feel” complex cultural patterns. There is no pretense of a “universal grammar” or the oversimplification of the symbolic lifeworlds of people—a problem with much linguistic theory that reduces communication to specific modes or forms of grammar. Indeed, Nuckoll’s work shows that, despite sharing some aspects of “simplicity” with pidgins and creoles, Amazonian Quichua is a complex language in the way that it is spoken and used, specifically in the metaphorical and figurative competencies of the language’s speakers, and in the way they use these competencies to set up a communicative world among humans and various non-human subjectivities. Nuckoll’s book provides convincing and detailed evidence for the linguistic relativity principle of Whorf and Sapir, a misunderstood position that was never meant to be “deterministic” nor even posed as a “hypothesis,” as Penny Lee’s (1996) excellent work, *The Whorf Theory Complex* has shown.

Part of the problem is a phenomenon that Whorf himself explored in the way that SAE, or “Standard Average European” languages organized the linguistic perception of the world: they proceeded to “contain” and reify life itself into categories of thingness rather than fluidity, a principle extended even to temporal experience itself. My own experience with Amazonian Quichua patterns of thought is that they are more relational and fluid, with language use itself reflecting a sociality of relationality that is material, ecological, as well as symbolic (Uzendoski 2005, Uzendoski, Hertica, and Calapucha 2005). Perhaps what is needed is a linguistic history of the rise of capitalism and its influence on grammar and ways of speaking and perceiving. I expect that Nuckolls’ next book, *Lessons from a Quechua Strongwoman on Ideophony, Dialogue, and Perspective*, will make an even stronger case for her unique and insightful perspective on language, as well as provide more details on how Amazonian Quichua speakers elicit and experience their world(s).

### REFERENCES CITED

Durston, Alan

2007 *Pastoral Quechua: The History of Christian Translation in Colonial Peru, 1550–1650*. University of Notre Dame Press.

- Hornborg, Alf  
 2005 Ethnogenesis, Regional Integration, and Ecology in Prehistoric Amazonia Toward a System Perspective. *Current Anthropology* 46(4): 589-618.
- Lee, Penny  
 1996 *The Whorf Theory Complex: A Critical Reconstruction*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Company.
- Muysken, Pieter  
 2000 Semantic Transparency in Lowland Ecuadorian Quechua Morphosyntax. *Linguistics* 38(5):973-988.
- Steward, Julian and Alfred Métraux  
 1948 "Tribes of the Peruvian and Ecuadorian Montaña." In *Handbook of South American Indians*, Volume 3. ed. Julian Steward. Smithsonian Institute, pp. 535-656.
- Taylor, Anne Christine  
 1999 "The Western Margins of Amazonia from the Early Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century." In Frank Salomon and Stuart B. Schwartz, editors, *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas*, Volume III: South America, Part 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 188-256.
- Torero, Alfredo  
 1984 El comercio y la difusión del quechua. El caso de Ecuador. *Revista Andina*, 2:367-389.
- Uzendoski, Michael  
 2005 *The Napo Runa of Amazonian Ecuador*. University of Illinois Press.
- Uzendoski, Michael, Hertica, Mark, and Calapucha, Edith.  
 2005 The Phenomenology of Perspectivism: Aesthetics, Sound, and Power, in Napo Runa Women's Songs of Upper Amazonia. *Current Anthropology* 46(4):656-662.
- Whitten, Norman E. Jr.  
 2008 Interculturality and the Indigenization of Modernity: A View from Amazonian Ecuador. *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 6(2):33-37, 47-49.