
**Theoretical and social implications of
language documentation and description
on the eve of destruction in Rondônia**

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Theoretical and social implications of language documentation and description on the eve of destruction in Rondônia

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1. INTRODUCTION

The frontier of colonisation in the Amazon region continues to involve a dramatic loss of indigenous languages and cultures. It is estimated that, since the first arrival of Europeans in the Amazon region, more than 75% of the native languages have disappeared. In the Brazilian state of Rondônia, the encroachment of Western culture is relatively recent. However, aided by exogenous diseases and accelerated destruction of the habitat of their speakers, one third of the native languages are being driven to extinction. Rondônia, located in the southwest of the Amazon basin and about the size of England, represents one of the most linguistically diverse regions of the Americas. It harbours some 25 languages from eight different linguistic stocks, three of which are represented by genealogically isolated languages. More than 50% of these languages have less than 50 speakers and have not been sufficiently documented or described. Fortunately, linguists have been paying more attention to Rondônia during the last two decades and recently a Tupi documentation project was set up with HRELP funding. The following table provides a brief overview of the indigenous language situation, reflecting the linguistic diversity of the region, the level of endangerment of the languages and the amount of descriptive work completed.

Table 1
Endangered linguistic diversity in Rondônia, Brazil

	lgs.	sp.	work
5 Stocks			
Chapacura	4	1300	1 grammar, 1 sketch
Jabutí (Macro-Jê)	2	50	2 sketches
Nambikwara	2	20	1 grammar
Pano	1	?	1 sketch
Tupi (6 families)	13	2250	4 grammars, 7 sketches
3 Isolates			
Aikanã	1	200	1 sketch
Kanoê	1	5	1 grammar
Kwazá	1	25	1 grammar

I have been conducting descriptive linguistic fieldwork in Rondônia since 1995. This presentation will focus on three indigenous languages of Rondônia (in different stages of endangerment): Kwazá (isolate), Arikapú (Jabutí) and Aikanã (isolate). To illustrate the scientific and social relevance of the study of these languages, I will show how certain constructions that pervade the grammar of

Kwazá form a clear counterexample to the idea that degrammaticalisation is only a marginal phenomenon. Apart from its scientific importance, the combination of archived bits of old documentation and modern recordings of the language has also been instrumental in the recent recognition of native land claims. Furthermore, although efforts to document the Arikapú language are now too late to make a complete description possible, the last speakers remember enough to enable sound historical-comparative research. The new evidence from Arikapú in favour of the hypothesis that the Jabuti languages belong to the Macro-Jê stock puts the prehistory of the South American continent in a new light. Finally, the Aikanã language still has some speakers with command of all speech registers and knowledge of the almost extinct culture. The study and documentation of traditional Aikanã mythology, which the community regards as highly important, is not only urgent in view of the age of the remaining knowledgeable persons. It also contains important clues for defining the boundaries of the original territory of the Aikanã in view of the impact of a hydro-electric dam planned in southern Rondônia. In all these cases, language documentation had to be now or never.

2. KWAZÁ

Kwazá (isolate, 25 speakers) is a morphologically complex language, with derivational and inflexional suffixes and extensive nominalisation possibilities. Kwazá verbs are obligatorily inflected for person and mood, which is expressed by suffixes that terminate a grammatical word and sentence. Note that Kwazá person marking allows for ‘pro-drop’ and that pronouns and person markers are etymologically unrelated. Normally, words are only inflected once, but there is a special construction for quoting speech (van der Voort 2002), in which there is an extra layer of person and mood suffixes:¹

- (1) *kukuihỹ-da-’ki-Ø-tse*
 ill-1S-DEC-3-DEC
 ‘she_i says she_i is ill’ (lit. ‘she says “I’m ill” ’)
 (van der Voort 2002: 312)

The first layer of inflexional suffixes (counting from the left) represents the quoted event, whereas the second layer represents the event of quoting. Consequently, in Kwazá, the expression of a third person quoting himself involves the first person marker *-da*, as in example (1).

Apparently, the quoted speech construction is part of a more general intentional construction, in which thoughts, wishes, intentions and even inanimate processes are represented in the grammar as if they involve quoted conversation:

¹ Abbreviations: 1s = first person singular, 2 = second person, 3 = third person, DEC = declarative, DESI = desiderative, INT = interrogative.

- (2) *ʔtxa kui-da-he ʔta-xa-re*
 tea drink-1S-DESI-2-INT
 ‘would you like to drink tea?’ (lit.: ‘do you_i want “I_i drink tea”?’)
 (van der Voort 2002: 318)

The desiderative element *-heta* in example (2) is one of the very few derivational suffixes that can occur to the right of inflexional suffixes. It is almost as if it were originally a mood marker in an early stage of Kwazá, which has turned into a modality suffix. For the lack of earlier documentation, this cannot be proven, but there are some indications that a similar process can be attested for several mood markers:

- (3) *bwa-da ʔmỹ-Ø-tɛ*
 finish-want-3-DEC
 ‘it is about to run out’ (the gas of the cigarette lighter)
 (van der Voort 2002: 321)

The modal element *-damỹ* originates in the first person suffix *-da* and the volitive mood suffix *-mỹ*, which are still used productively elsewhere in the language. As a matter of fact, *damỹ* can even be used as a verb root, meaning ‘to want’. Hence, this element represents the result of a process in which inflexional elements become derivational and even lexical. The direction of this process runs counter to what has been claimed about the ‘cline of grammaticalisation’, according to which bound inflexional elements ultimately originate from free lexical elements.

The documentation and study of Kwazá is of considerable scientific importance since it might provide new clues about what is possible in language. However, the documentation of the language may be of even greater importance for the speakers of Kwazá. Nowadays, the majority of the Kwazá live among the Aikanã in a reserve on the Chupinguaia river in the south of Rondônia, although they claim to be originally from the São Pedro river. The lands in the São Pedro region are very fertile, but they are occupied by Westerners. The Kwazá still have some Portuguese-speaking family members in that region, who have been living under constant threat by gunmen of the land ‘owners’ while the Kwazá’s lands were being deforested for lumber and cattle-herding (van der Voort 2001). According to the Brazilian constitution of 1988, the Indians are entitled to their original lands, but they need to support their claims with proof. In 1913, the famous Brazilian explorer Col. Cândido Rondon put the name of a tribe called *Coaiá* in various places along the São Pedro river on a hand-drawn map, but that was based on indirect reports. When visiting the Salamãï (Tupi) Indians in 1938, Claude Lévi Strauss (1955: 381) documented some 50 words of an unidentified language of a boy who lived among the Salamãï, but who was originally from the region of the São Pedro river. During my fieldwork among the Kwazá it was easy to document the present-day Kwazá equivalents of those 50 words on tape. When I visited the São Pedro region in 1996 to interview the people, the eldest woman recognised the words and even remembered more Kwazá words, which I again

recorded. Copies of the recordings and of all the personal, historical, and linguistic documents involved were sent to the National Indian Foundation FUNAI and to lawyers of the non-governmental organisation CIMI. After an extraordinarily short process, the Kwazá do São Pedro indigenous reserve was demarcated in 2000, in part on the basis of linguistic documentation.

Note that legal ethnic identity in Brazil is a complicated issue and criteria are quite dependent on regional political conditions. There is clearly a risk involved in the use of linguistic evidence in questions of identity and land rights. The Brazilian constitution entitles the Indians to their original lands and guarantees their right to maintain their cultural and linguistic traditions, even if they have been driven off their lands in the past or have lost their culture or language. In the case of the Kwazá, language was nevertheless used as supporting, more or less indirect evidence. On the Bolivian side of the border, however, the indigenous peoples cannot always resort to similar provisions. In the case of the Itonama (who speak an isolated language, Crevels 2002), the indigenous language was used by local authorities as a direct criterion for ethnic identity, stating that one is indigenous if one speaks an indigenous language. Since the Itonama language was almost extinct, the Itonama were not considered entitled to their own ethnic identity. So, in that case, the language factor had the effect of depriving an ethnic group of the rights to their original lands. The Itonama were punished twice. First they were punished for being Indians for 300 years, during which they consequently lost their lands, language and culture. When the socio-political climate had finally changed and they tried to retrieve their lands, they were punished for having lost their language. Fortunately, this situation is going to be repaired.

3. ARIKAPÚ

With only two speakers left, Arikapú is nearly extinct. Together with Djeoromitxí, which has less than 50 speakers, it forms the small Jabutí language family. The genetic ‘splitters’ usually consider this little family as isolated, whereas ‘lumpers’ like Joseph Greenberg classify it as Macro-Jê, but the evidence for either hypothesis had been very weak. To specialists of Macro-Jê and Amazonian studies, Greenberg’s classification (1987) is unlikely for several reasons. Most importantly, the Macro-Jê languages are spoken by peoples of the more arid regions of central and eastern Brazil and the presence of Macro-Jê-speaking populations in the Amazon basin is the result of migration in historical times. Only Rikbaktsa, which is suspected to be a Macro-Jê language, is spoken in the Amazon region. Greenberg’s hypothesis was not new. In 1935 the legendary ethnographer Curt Nimuendajú (2000) had already classified the Jabutí languages as Jê, on the basis of a handful of lexical similarities, but this idea did not catch on, and the ‘splitters’ set the tone.

After my Kwazá studies I wanted to see whether I could find more speakers of Arikapú than the six reported. I found only two who turned out to live in two different reserves at a great distance from each other. The speakers remembered

the language very well as their native language, but they had not spoken it for decades. They produced words and only several sentences at a time, but no extended coherent narrative. During my last field trip I managed to organise a meeting between the speakers, but they were not able to converse with each other in Arikapú. They had lived for too long speaking only Djeoromitxí or Tuparí with their families. There was still enough grammatical and lexical information to be gleaned, however, and I also collected Djeoromitxí data, which made comparative research possible. My colleague, the Macro-Jê specialist Eduardo Ribeiro, and I compared reconstructed Proto-Jabutí (van der Voort in press 2007) with Proto-Jê, and we were able to confirm Nimuendajú's hypothesis (Ribeiro & van der Voort, submitted). The Jabutí languages appear to share many typological characteristics with the Jê languages, as well as a significant number of lexical and bound grammatical morphemes. In the following table, I have listed some of the cognates and their reconstructions in Proto-Jabutí and Proto-Jê:

Table 2
Jabutí and Proto-Jê cognates

Proto-Jê	Proto-Jabutí	Arikapú	Djeoromitxí	
*kra	*kraj	kraj	tə	'offspring'
*par	*pra(j)	praj	pa	'foot' I
**j-arkua	*sako	tsako	h/rakʉ	'mouth'
*j-õt	*nũtã	nũtã	nõtõ	'to sleep'
*j-ĩ	*nĩ	nĩ	ni	'flesh'
*j-um	*su	tsu	ru	'father'
*j-ua	*so	tsu	rʉ	'tooth'
*ma	*mə	mə	mə	'to hear'
*ma	*mə	mə	mə	'liver'
*ko	*ku	ku	ku	'tree'
**kə	*kə	kə	kə	'skin'
*ku	*ku	ku	ku	'to eat'
*tõ	*tã	tã	tõ	'NEG'
*pa	*(sa)pa	tsapa	h/rapa	'arm'

Note especially the shared homophony between the languages in the forms for 'liver' and 'to hear'. Other homophonies we encountered are Arikapú *rẽ* and Proto-Jê **prẽ* for 'egg' and 'to dance', and Apinajê *tswa* and Proto-Jabutí **so* for 'tooth' and 'to bathe'.

The confirmation of Nimuendajú's hypotheses has important consequences for our understanding of the prehistoric past of Brazil. In the first place it indicates that Macro-Jê peoples extended much farther west into Amazonia than was previously thought. Secondly, the time depth between the Jabutí languages can be estimated on the basis of glottochronological calculations to be around 20 centuries. Since it is unlikely that Arikapú and Djeoromitxí diversified from the proto-language somewhere else and thereafter immigrated together, they must have been present in the area for at least two thousand years. Thirdly, Rondônia

seems to have been a starting point not only for Tupi migrations but also for part of the Macro-Jê migrations. Finally, it is interesting to note the elevation that runs from the base of the Central Plateau, near Cuiabá, in a northwesterly direction almost to Porto Velho. At times in the past that elevation has been savannah, which is a characteristic of the habitat of the Central Jê groups.

What is the significance of documentation work on Arikapú for the community? Outsiders (in Brazil and elsewhere) often ask what is the use of investing in this sort of research. Sometimes people even wonder whether there is a more absurd way to spend time and money and suspect that the linguist is secretly prospecting for gold. The Indians hardly ever question the use of the study of an indigenous language and sometimes call upon the linguist to get involved in their native language too. In the case of Arikapú, the question is not easy to answer. The ethnic Arikapú do not form a separate community from the Djeoromitxí or from the Tuparí anymore. They represent descendants of an ethnic group that had already been decimated in the 1940s (van der Voort 2006). The language survived for decades in certain families and is nowadays an aspect of the personal background of two individuals. My research into their language seemed very much to rekindle memories, and one of the speakers started to sing the old Arikapú songs. These songs are now hugely popular among their kinspeople and are sung at *chicha* (maize beer) festivities. Some young people find it a pity that their parent has not been able to pass the language on and have requested that the linguist help them learn the language, either by participating in field interviews or by preparing written language material. Unfortunately there is not much hope for the language in that respect. Its value for the community is mainly historical and emotional. Presently NGO-driven initiatives are on their way to help the Arikapú and other peoples from the region to claim their ancestral lands, and it is possible that the language can also play a role in the averment.

4. AIKANÃ

Part of my present research activities concerns filling in a number of serious lacunae in the documentation and analysis of Aikanã, an isolated language that shows some remarkable and possibly unique grammatical features. The language has roughly 200 speakers. It is still being acquired by children, and the majority of speakers are under 40 years old. The language is, of course, highly endangered, but in the context of Rondônia the situation of Aikanã is not yet so dramatic. The major problem of the Aikanã is the passing away of elderly people, the bearers of culture who were born in the communal straw house and grew up in the days before Westerners had set their bulldozers on Rondônia. When I first met the Aikanã in 1995, there were still three old men who knew how to play the sacred four-hole flutes called *purikũ*, which played a central part in the lengthy origin myth that also includes reference to actual recognisable places, rivers and boulders of the traditional territory of the Aikanã. Today only one of these men is still alive. The Aikanã lament this situation, but they do not know how to go about preserving and revitalising their heritage under the cultural pressure from the

Western world. There are two or three elderly women who can sing the old songs in the ritual varieties of the language. There are a handful of elderly people left who can still tell traditional stories, which are full of expressions and registers that can only be understood in the original contexts. And it is only these elderly people who can interpret and explain these oral traditions. As one might expect, 20 years of missionary activity among the Aikanã have not contributed to any documentation, except for a meagre sample of predominantly Christian texts in a shaky orthography. Thus, even though Aikanã is not moribund, the documentation of the language, focussing on the collection and analysis of traditional texts aided by the remaining elderly people, is extremely urgent. The young Aikanã are, in spite of their adoption of Western customs and ideas, highly aware of the urgency of this task and call upon the linguist to help save their heritage.

The documentation of Aikanã is still in progress, but its preliminary results are already being used in the debate over the limits of the original territory of the Aikanã. Their present reserve covers only an infertile sub-area of their original lands, and due to barely controlled deforestation in the surrounding areas, the people suffer increasingly from difficulties in subsistence hunting. After an old burial site outside the reserve was destroyed by bulldozers, the Aikanã submitted a request to the federal authorities for augmentation of their reserve in order to preserve such places and to improve subsistence conditions. Since last year, however, the construction of a hydroelectric dam is being planned close to the Aikanã reserve, and it is bound to flood part of the original territory. If that is allowed to happen, ancient burial sites and other archaeological remains will be destroyed, making it much more difficult to submit any land claims in the future. The Aikanã have been offered indemnification by the dam company, but they do not yet know whether it is wise to accept. They have to choose between accepting indemnification or keeping open an uncertain possibility for future expansion of their reserve. The community has to decide, and the linguist living among them can only try to furnish as much dependable information as possible so that the community can come to an informed decision. Here the knowledge of the elderly people plays an important role in at least two ways. As contemporary witnesses they can provide details from their personal history that prove the limits of the original Aikanã territory. Such details were recorded on an indigenous map of the area made with the help of the linguist. Furthermore, they tell traditional stories in which certain physical aspects of the territory figure directly, such as the aforementioned rivers and boulders.

Another important function of documentation of the Aikanã language relates to the development of an orthographical standard and the establishment of a writing tradition. As we have recently seen in the case of the Sakurabiat or Mekens (who speak a Tupi-Tuparí language), the bilingual book of Sakurabiat traditional tales edited by Galucio (2006) has been very popular not only among the Sakurabiat themselves but also among the Aikanã and other remnant groups, who insist on a similar book for their own language. Such a book does not only represent a means to preserve a disappearing tradition, but it may also help keep that tradition alive. Moreover, it supports reading and writing in the native

language which again may help the language to survive in the modern context. In the end, documentation of the oral traditions may help prevent the disintegration of the indigenous group under the ever-increasing pressure of Western culture.

5. EPILOGUE

Is it wise to equate the different levels of endangerment of languages directly with different levels of urgency of their documentation (all other things being equal)? Sometimes otherwise intelligent linguists criticise DOBES and ELDP projects because these invest in the documentation of languages that are not in immediate danger of extinction. Indeed, many languages are in extremely urgent need of documentation, study, and salvage. However, the case of Arikapú shows that whatever amount of time, energy, or money one could manage to find, it will not help to document the lost oral traditions of the Arikapú, the different registers of their language, or even its syntactic structures. Does this mean we should then just do extensive documentation like with Aikanã and forget about salvage linguistic projects like the one on Arikapú? Obviously not. We should do both types of projects. That is our duty as linguists and we should welcome every opportunity we get to do our duty. We should help our fellow human beings in every possible way with the general knowledge and abilities that we have acquired in our privileged education. But it is the linguistic work that may make us feel better in the current context of disappearing underdocumented languages, since it is actually the only thing we can do, as linguists.

In this context it is worth mentioning that the DOBES and ELDP programmes are having a considerable positive impact on Brazilian indigenous linguistics. The new president of the FUNAI has found major national funding (over one and a half million Euros) for a four-year linguistic documentation programme in the manner of DOBES/ELDP. This may never have happened if DOBES and ELDP had not been active in Brazil. Furthermore, there are plans to set up three servers in Brazilian institutions to store digitalized data of indigenous languages. And there is a proposal by the Instituto de Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional to conduct a field survey of the current situation of all of the languages of Brazil. It seems likely that the aforementioned linguists are upset because these major initiatives are beyond their political control.

In this article I have demonstrated that the predicament of the indigenous linguistic heritage of Rondônia is serious. It is true that some languages are actually doing quite well. The Wari (Chapacura) language is still relatively safe with around a thousand speakers, as are Cinta-Larga (Tupi) and Suruí (Tupi). And even the small Djeoromitxí (Jabutí) language is doing better than expected, with a high rate of literacy and a high self-esteem. However, a major number of languages have fewer speakers every year, and the bearers of culture are passing away one by one. With these people, the stories will disappear, and the history of the region will come to be represented by silent archaeological remains only, that are themselves endangered. Often, when I go for an errand in the small loggers' town of Chupinguaia, just outside the Aikanã reserve, the local people are curious

in a friendly manner and want to know where my blue eyes and relatively light coloured hair are from. A few minutes into our conversation, one can usually hear them ask: ‘Indians, do you mean real Indians? I didn’t know there were ever any Indians around here’. As a quick glance at the indigenous map of the Aikanã could show, this little frontier town is right in the middle of the most fertile part of Aikanã territory. When also the Aikanã themselves have forgotten their history, the destruction of Rondônia, as known by the Aikanã, will be complete.

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