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# **Documentation, description and teacher training: workshops on language and culture**

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## **Documentation, description and teacher training: workshops on language and culture**

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of documenting and archiving endangered languages, linguistic and ethnological description play an essential role.

In the last few years easy-to-use modern technology has opened up the opportunity for language speakers to actively participate in audio and video recordings as collectors and to transcribe the collected material themselves with software such as ELAN or Transcriber. At the same time, many members of the language communities expect that a documentation initiated by a research project can be continued by themselves since – according to their own perception – the ancestors' knowledge which is still alive in the older generation should be recorded before it may be too late. However, when trying to take up certain tasks, such as elaborating a dictionary or simply transcribing the data in a unified way, the local documenters see themselves as confronted with the problem that there may be an orthographical representation of their language which often does not reflect, or even take into account, rules of grammar which can only emerge from a careful morphophonological analysis of the language.

In recent years linguistic training of bilingual teachers and other interested members of a language community has become current practice among language documenters<sup>1</sup>, but usually this is done exclusively in the national language, not in the language of the workshop participants. One reason may be that most linguists are not fluent speakers of their interlocutors' languages; another reason is that often members of different ethnic groups living in one area attend a single workshop which requires a common language. During the DoBeS Cashinahua project we had the opportunity to organize several linguistic workshops exclusively for Cashinahua people. These were held in the national languages, Portuguese and Spanish, as well as in Cashinahua. In the following we will describe how the development of a Cashinahua meta-language for technical terms helped the participants to understand the abstract concepts of linguistic description and how the discussions among the workshop participants influenced the documentation of Cashinahua language and culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Roessler (personal communication) has reported on a project of teaching linguistics to members of different ethnic groups in Paraguay, and a similar project exists for the Chaco languages of Argentina. Both initiatives are based on DoBeS projects (Aché, Chaco languages).

## 2. THE CASHINAHUA PEOPLE AND THEIR LANGUAGE

Cashinahua is a Panoan language spoken in the Amazonian lowlands on both sides of the Brazilian-Peruvian border. It has an agglutinating structure, prototypical roots for nouns, verbs, adverbs, and there is also a restricted class of adjectives. The verb-noun opposition is not consistent. Lexical categories are further determined by the respective suffixes they take and by their clause position. The default word order is SOV.

The Cashinahua people were first contacted in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the course of the rubber boom when they were all living in one area, the Juruá basin, in Brazil. They were forced to work on the rubber plantations, and in the 1920s a part of the group fled to Peru where they remained in complete isolation for two decades.

Currently there are about 6,000 members of the ethnic group with approximately 1,400 individuals living in Peru. These latter descendants of the isolated group are still competent speakers of their language which they use on a daily basis, even though bilingualism with the national language Spanish is constantly growing. On the Brazilian side of the border the competence in Cashinahua varies considerably, ranging from balanced bilingualism to Portuguese monolingualism as a result of the long and uninterrupted history of contact with Brazilian society (cf. Iglesias 2008).

In both countries the Cashinahuas are increasingly relinquishing their autonomy and migrating to towns, where they try to adapt to Brazilian or Peruvian society and where their children are exposed to the monolingual national education systems. Also in the Cashinahua village schools in Brazil and Peru, bilingual education is heavily biased towards the national language, even though in Brazil a programme of ‘differential education’ of indigenous people in their own languages has existed since the 1980s.

There are currently two orthographies of Cashinahua.<sup>2</sup> The Peruvian orthography was produced by SIL linguists who started to visit the group in the late 1950s and in the following years produced grammars, dictionaries and bilingual teaching material alongside a Cashinahua translation of the New Testament. Although indigenous education in Peru has been taken over by governmental institutions, the influence of SIL and other missionary groups is largely unchallenged and their educational material is still predominantly used in the village schools. In Brazil, since the 1980s, the education of the Cashinahua has been organized by members of the NGO comissão pró-índio (CPI) do Acre who developed a different orthography and – together with the Cashinahua teachers – have produced a large quantity of educational material. In contrast to the Peruvian one, the Brazilian orthography has little basis in linguistic analysis.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A third orthography in Brazil is regionally restricted and not used for the production of educational material.

<sup>3</sup> See Camargo’s discussion of *Shenipabu miyui*, a collection of myths assembled by OPIAC (2000), which shows phonetic transcriptions (such as nasal vowels) or affixes analyzed as particles (Camargo forthcoming a: 3).

With regard to cultural knowledge and attitude there is also a fundamental difference between the Peruvian and the Brazilian Cashinahuas. While on the Peruvian side people still know the chants and proceedings of traditional feasts but do not perform them in their villages because of the missionary presence<sup>4</sup>, in Brazil this knowledge has either completely disappeared or has intermingled with elements from other cultures. An example for the latter is the ritual of collectively taking the hallucinogenic liana ayahuasca (*nixi pae*), which has been taken up by the religious cult of Santo Daime.<sup>5</sup> As a result the Brazilian Cashinahuas accompany their ritual with guitar playing and chanting as is common in the Santo Daime cult. At the same time the Brazilian part of the Cashinahua population shows a stronger interest in maintaining and revitalizing their language and culture. This may be partially due to the fact that these are more endangered than in Peru, and partially because in the last decades indigenous groups in Brazil have developed a political conscience about their status and rights as minority groups.<sup>6</sup> In Peru the tendency towards acculturation is generally stronger, and even though younger people have started to blame the missionaries for their people's negative attitude towards indigenous culture, currently the two religious systems, animism and Christianity, co-exist in the Peruvian Cashinahua society. A positive impact on the maintenance of Cashinahua language and culture has been observed in areas where contact between the Brazilian and the Peruvian groups is currently reestablishing itself. This is especially the case with the migration of Peruvian families to the Brazilian side of the river Purus, where they encounter better economic conditions. According to Lagrou (2007) it is in this region that cultural practices are revitalized, bringing together the knowledge of the Peruvian and the interests of the Brazilian group. An example is *Nixpu Pima*, an initiation rite which – as reported in Cashinahua testimonies – has recently been revitalized in the villages of this area.

### 3. THE WORKSHOPS

The DoBeS documentation project of the Cashinahua language and culture (2006-2011), hosted at the Max-Planck-Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig and at the Laboratoire d'Ethnologie et Sociologie comparative (LESC-CNRS) in Paris, came into being in response to a request formulated by the Cashinahua representatives of the indigenous teachers' association of the Brazilian state of Acre (OPIAC). The bilingual teachers and other members of the Brazilian Cashinahua group had started to document their language and culture and encountered various problems which – according to their own estimations – could only be resolved by knowing more about the linguistic methods and decisions underlying the description

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<sup>4</sup> In Brazil missionary activities in indigenous areas are officially prohibited since the late 1970s but the influence of religious groups is still prevalent.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <http://www.santodaime.org/>

<sup>6</sup> Indigenous rights have been defined in the Brazilian Constitution of 1988.

of languages in general and the various orthographical representations of their language in particular.

Altogether five linguistic workshops were carried out during the time of the DoBeS project. The number of participants, consisting mostly of bilingual village school teachers, ranged from under ten to more than twenty. While the first workshop in May 2006 took place in the village of Mucuripe (Tarauacá river, Brazil), subsequent workshops were held in Puerto Esperanza (Purus river, Peru). A smaller workshop on verbal arts took place in August 2008 within the framework of a more general DoBeS workshop for linguists and indigenous teachers in Campinas (S.P., Brazil), which was organized by our project in cooperation with other Brazilian DoBeS projects and the University of Campinas (UNICAMP).<sup>7</sup> The participants were four Cashinahua teachers, originating from different areas of Brazil and Peru.

The workshops fulfilled various important functions for the team of the documentation project as well as for the linguistic community. These included:

- a) the facilitation of collection of material for documentation;
- b) the creation of a unified orthography and orthographical training of local documenters;
- c) linguistic training of bilingual teachers for educational purposes and as field assistants;
- d) clarification of doubts regarding existing linguistic analyses by trained speakers with a growing meta-linguistic awareness;
- e) the production of teaching material and material for the archive;
- f) technical training (use of video cameras and computer programmes) for local documenters.

The 2006 workshop which was organized in cooperation with OPIAC, was dedicated to orthographical matters. The Cashinahuas primarily wanted to learn how to write their language in an appropriate orthography in order to produce uniform material for educational purposes. In Brazil the orthography which is widely used is mostly phonetic and based on the Portuguese orthography, e.g. phonetically nasal vowels are orthographically represented by tildes. In Peru a different orthography which takes into consideration phonological rules and processes is adapted to the Spanish orthographical system. A phoneme /h/, for example, is written as <j>, representing the velar fricative /x/ which in Spanish is the closest phoneme to the Cashinahua glottal fricative.

For the purpose of raising awareness of different writing standards and their consequences we started out from Abreu (1941), a 100 year old Cashinahua text collection written in an outdated – and to Cashinahua speakers unreadable –

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<sup>7</sup> This workshop, uniting representatives of ten Brazilian, Argentinean and Peruvian indigenous groups, researchers and students of linguistics, was financed by the Volkswagen Foundation and UNESCO.

orthography. A reading key was presented to the workshop participants, and when transferring the texts into the current Brazilian and Peruvian orthographies, they were given explanations on the underlying decisions and their linguistic bases.

The idea of teaching the basics of phonetics and phonology in more detail to the workshop participants was further supported by the experience that they were especially interested in working out how to transcribe recurrent onomatopoeic elements in Cashinahua ritual chanting. As a means to make the linguistic analyses more transparent to the speakers, a Cashinahua meta-language was jointly created and agreed upon, which was used by the participants during their productive discussions of the meanings of technical terms and of the acceptability of certain words or constructions. The experience of being able to apply a theoretical framework to the data of their own language and to base their decisions concerning a unified Cashinahua orthography on scientific criteria was very much appreciated by the participants of this and of the following workshops. The workshops have, since then, taken place each year with teachers from both sides of the border in differing proportion. Within the many discussions among Cashinahua teachers, the meta-language was constantly being further developed and refined, and as a result a monolingual teachers' manual was produced in 2010/2011, which explains in Cashinahua the language's phonetics, phonological rules and syllable structure.<sup>8</sup>

Capistrano de Abreu's collection of myths could further be used as a stimulus for storytelling: first among the workshop participants themselves and later with other community members. Young Brazilian Cashinahuas during the first workshop gave their own accounts of several of the myths, which showed that there are regional versions differing from the ones collected by Capistrano in the Ibuacú river area. The storytelling also revealed that there are only a few competent storytellers left who still use expressive techniques of oral presentation such as gestures, ideophones and marked prosody. These are mostly older men and women in the Peruvian villages.

When, during this very first workshop in Mucuripe/ Brazil, we visited an older community member, asking him to tell us about his memories of Cashinahua myths, we observed the strong interest of the young Cashinahua workshop participants in capturing information from their own culture. The young men, accompanying us, recorded the old man's speech with their own devices (tape recorders) and during and after the storytelling asked him questions regarding the content of the narrative and cultural practices. Another concern regarding the 'purity' of the Cashinahua language, which since then has often been pronounced in the workshops, also became apparent: on several occasions, when the old man used a Portuguese loanword, a young man sitting next to him corrected his speech by offering the Cashinahua word.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>[http://corpus1.mpi.nl/qfs1/media-archive/dobes\\_data/Cashinahua/Culture/Annotations/Manual\\_Hantxa\\_kuin2010.pdf](http://corpus1.mpi.nl/qfs1/media-archive/dobes_data/Cashinahua/Culture/Annotations/Manual_Hantxa_kuin2010.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Cf. [http://corpus1.mpi.nl/qfs1/media-archive/dobes\\_data/Cashinahua/LinguisticData/Non\\_Elicitation/Monological/RE\\_Ti\\_ika\\_nawa](http://corpus1.mpi.nl/qfs1/media-archive/dobes_data/Cashinahua/LinguisticData/Non_Elicitation/Monological/RE_Ti_ika_nawa)

Similar observations were made among the Peruvian workshop participants in the following years. Several of these participants started to interview older relatives about cultural practices. During transcription work young Cashinahua field assistants often pointed out especially competent storytellers who used ‘elegant structures’ or ‘beautiful words’.

During the first workshop one specific myth known as *Yuxabu yaix katsidan* (‘The old woman who turned into an armadillo’) also served as a basis for further discussion regarding the Cashinahuas’ classification of different types of armadillos as well as other elements of nature and the criteria they applied. These are summarized in the first workshop manual produced and handed over to OPIAC in 2007.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. EXAMPLES

This section summarizes some of the discussions regarding the creation of Cashinahua linguistic terminology or the acceptability of certain grammatical constructions which reveal a different level of abstraction in Cashinahua culture.

##### 4.1. Examples of a Cashinahua meta-language

Two recent examples of linguistic terms are the Cashinahua word *batu* for ‘consonant’ and the expression *denka wamaya* for ‘nasalization’. The discussion regarding an appropriate Cashinahua word for the representation of the concept underlying the term ‘consonant’ started in 2006 and only recently came to an end. At first the word *huyu* in the sense of ‘sound coming out with difficulty’ had been chosen by the 2006 workshop participants, but in 2011 an older community member determinedly rejected this term for also meaning ‘mute’. The term *batu*, usually referring to ‘improving’, especially in the context of recovery from illness, was chosen to contrast with *huiya* ‘pure/clear sound’ for vowels. With this term the participants wanted to express that the sound is not uttered without obstruction like vowels, but that it is uttered nonetheless. Alternative suggestions, such as a calque *kunsun* or a Cashinahua word for ‘noise’ were declined, the former because it would obscure the concept and because any kind of loanword is currently disapproved of, the latter because the Cashinahua language disposes of a broad range of words referring to different kinds of noises.

A vivid discussion also arose regarding a Cashinahua expression for ‘nasalization’ for which at first *denka wamati* was chosen and which later was changed into *denka wamaya*, changing the expression from a noun to an (attributive) adjective.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> [http://corpus1.mpi.nl/qfs1/media-archive/dobes\\_data/Cashinahua/Culture/Annotations/Manual\\_Hantxa\\_kuin2006.pdf](http://corpus1.mpi.nl/qfs1/media-archive/dobes_data/Cashinahua/Culture/Annotations/Manual_Hantxa_kuin2006.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> The abbreviations used in this paper are ABS – absolute, ASP – aspectual marker, ASS – assertive, ATT – attributive, CAUS – causative, ERG – ergative, FOC – focalizer, GEN – genitive, HAB – habitual, LOC – locative, MOV – movement suffix, NOMINSTR – nominalizer of instrument, PERF – perfective,

- |     |  |   |   |
|-----|--|---|---|
| (1) | <i>denka wa-ma-ti</i><br>make.nasal-CAUS-NOMinstr<br>'something to cause to make<br>nasal' | > | <i>denka wa-ma-ya</i><br>make.nasal-CAUS-ATT<br>'having the property of causing to<br>make nasal' |
|-----|--|---|---|

Some of the workshop participants argued that the construction with the nominalizing suffix *-ti* would indicate a human causer who induces a causee to do this by his nose, a feature not present in the adjectival construction which, on the other hand, suggests that nasality is a property attributed to an entity.

#### 4.2. Examples of cultural specifics expressed in linguistic structure

During the workshops several specifics of the Cashinahua language emerged from examples produced by participants which did not correspond to current theory building. The following example shows the interaction of morphology with semantics, taking into account the Cashinahua way of structuring the world. A genitive construction in Cashinahua is formed by a possessum which is preceded by a possessor, as illustrated in (2):

- (2) *due*    *bake*  
axe    child  
'axe handle' (lit.: 'child of an axe')

If the possessor is human and the expressed possessive relation is not a generic one, the possessor is marked with a genitive *-n*, as in *huni-n bake* ('the man's child') in opposition to *huni bake* ('boy'). There are, however, also constructions like the following in (3), where the genitive suffix is applied to a noun referring to an inanimate entity:

- (3) *uxe-n*            *baba*  
moon-GEN    grandchild  
'Venus' (lit.: 'the moon's grandchild')

This construction reflects the Cashinahuas' classification of the moon as an animate, formerly human being, because according to the myth *Yube Nawa buxka* ('The head of Yube Nawa') the moon is the head of a person called Yube Nawa who went away from his village after committing incest with his sister and later was decapitated by enemies.<sup>12</sup>

During the 2009 workshop in Puerto Esperanza the participants suggested elaborating on the subject of a Cashinahua classification of the world and the interrelation between language and culture. Examples like the following in (4) with *pia* ('arrow') as the unexpressed subject suggest that objects manufactured from elements of nature do not lose their animacy:

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PRES – present tense, TOP – topicalizer.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Camargo (forthcoming b: 8).



- (4) *Hui benima-kidan-mis-ki, ha-wen bitxati anu hu-i-dan.*  
 return happy -MOV-HAB-ASS 3-GEN place.of.arrows LOC return-PRES-FOC  
 ‘(The arrow) happily returns (from hunting); it returns to its place (where it is kept inside the house).’

The workshop participants produced many examples of this kind, confirming that an arrow in Cashinahua culture is considered an animate being with feelings and physical sensations (e.g. happiness after a successful hunting trip, sadness and hunger when left in its place for too long). In addition, different arrow tips are assigned properties which reflect social relations between husband, wife, first and secondborn son (cf. Camargo forthcoming b: 5ff.).

A clash with the Cashinahua order of their natural environment could be observed in the context of adapting the orthography to linguistic analysis based on combinability tests. In the Peruvian Cashinahua orthography the graphemes <s>, <x> and <n> are used in the coda of a syllable ending in a consonant. However, in addition to an alveolar nasal, a bilabial nasal can also occupy this position. A nasal consonant at the end of a word is not represented phonetically but nasalizes the preceding vowel.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the difference between a bilabial nasal and an alveolar nasal can only be perceived if it is followed by a suffix with a vocal onset. In this specific case it was rather difficult to make the workshop participants accept abstract concepts, since the existence of /m/ instead of /n/ in the coda of certain lexical items only becomes apparent when these receive ergative case marking, as in (5):

- (5) *Samum-an ea keyu-a-ki.*  
 queen.bee-ERG 1sg.ABS bite-ASP-ASS  
 ‘The queen bee stung me.’

The problem for the Cashinahua speakers arose when ergative case was applied to a non-agentive being, such as *kanum* (‘bow’) in example (6):

- (6) *?Kanum-an mai kentxa pusa-xu-ki.*  
 bow-ERG clay pot break-PERF-ASS  
 ‘The bow broke the clay pot (e.g. when slipping down from its place at the wall).’

Even though they spontaneously produced such examples, the speakers had difficulties admitting the grammaticality of these sentences, confirmed by the linguistic test, due to the fact that their world knowledge made the sentence unacceptable.

With the word *txidim*, the name of a traditional feast, a similar problem occurred, in that part of the group wanted to differentiate orthographically between an actual feast *txidin*, written with /n/ in the coda for not being able to have an ergative case suffix, and a singer of the feast referred to by the word *txidim* which, denoting an animate being, could receive ergative case marking.

Another morphophonemic analysis of the language was also difficult to pass on to

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<sup>13</sup> In the Brazilian phonetic orthography the consonantal coda is not represented at all. Instead, a nasalization of the preceding vowel is graphically represented by a tilde.

the Peruvian workshop participants who – even though their orthography is mostly based on phonological rules – in certain morphological environments also use a phonetic transcription. One of them is the usage of the topicalizing or emphatic suffix *-dan* after words ending in /n/. In this case the /d/ between two nasalized vowels is deleted, as shown in (7) as opposed to (8):

- (7) *Huni-dan daya-xu-ki.*<sup>14</sup>  
 man-TOP work-PERF-ASS  
 ‘The man [hunã] worked.’
- (8) *Huni-ni-dan pi-xu-ki.*  
 man-ERG-TOP eat-PERF-ASS  
 ‘The man [hunĩnã] ate (something).’

A further difficulty in this context is that the phonetic realization of *huni-n-dan* is identical to *hu-ni-nan* (‘two people arrived’) with a distinct suffix *-nan* marking the dual.

In order to resolve such morphophonemic problems and rehearse the content of the lessons the workshops included sessions of orthographical writing practice. The participants produced texts which were then discussed in small groups in which the constructions used by the authors were morphologically analyzed and orthographically corrected. Thus, the functioning of the language was studied via its written form, which facilitated understanding of the technical explanations.

## 5. PRACTICAL RESULTS AND PROSPECTS

During the workshop, and by including the DoBeS data collection, bilingual and monolingual Cashinahua educational material was developed: two monolingual primers and a monolingual book on the Cashinahua history of contact and migration, with texts chosen by the workshop participants.

A recent result of the workshops on phonetics and phonology is that, at the request of the Cashinahua bilingual teachers who attended the workshops, the Peruvian Ministry of Education agreed to change the order of the Cashinahua alphabet in dictionaries and other material used in the Cashinahua village schools. While <x> used to be grouped between <w> and <y> according to the order of a Spanish dictionary, it is now placed directly after the letter <s> in order to create a symmetry to the affricates <ts> and <tx> following <t>.

From the 2008 DoBeS workshop experience a separate project on Cashinahua ritual chanting has developed. This subject is of special interest to the group as this kind of verbal art usually covers all aspects of the ethnic identity of a people and their relationship with the world.<sup>15</sup> The project team consists of four young Peruvian Cashinahuas, two men and two women, one of whom had participated in the Campinas workshop. They have interviewed older and younger members of their

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<sup>14</sup> A phoneme /d/ between two oral vowels is realized as [p].

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Cesarino (2008) on the verbal arts of the Marubo, another Panoan group.

families, using the recording equipment (video camera). Their discussions regarding the information they have gathered are also recorded on video and can thus be inserted into the Cashinahua DoBeS archive.

When the DoBeS project began in 2006, the Peruvian Cashinahuas were regarded by their Brazilian kinsmen as traditional in culture but economically backward. Even though their educational material was of a higher quality, the Peruvians used to admire the colorful history books and primers published in Brazil and the documentaries the Brazilian Cashinahuas produced within the framework of the initiative ‘vídeo nas aldeias’. With the advances made during the workshops in the development of technical vocabulary and analyses based on linguistic methods, the Peruvian Cashinahuas have started to refer to the Brazilian educational material as representing an ‘improper handling’ of their language. This shows that the workshops have had a positive effect on the self-confidence of this part of the group.

A unified orthography to be agreed upon by members of the speech community in both countries is a matter of inner-group politics and still under negotiation. In August this year it was accepted by the Cashinahua authorities in Peru.

This year we have continued with linguistic training on the morphophonemic level, and a further workshop on morphosyntax is scheduled for 2012. For the future, we plan to continue the theoretical discussions with the teachers and to produce further monolingual manuals on different linguistic subjects to be applied in language education in the village schools. Although the activities of the DoBeS project were centered in Peru, we are also in contact with Cashinahua teachers living in different areas of Acre/ Brazil. With the help of the Peruvian Ministry of Education and the Secretary of Education of the state of Acre (SEE-AC) we hope to realize further workshops with participants from both sides of the border. In this way, monolingual material in a unified orthography can be produced and distributed in both countries. Furthermore, the workshop participants from different areas can exchange their cultural knowledge, as happened during the DoBeS workshop in Campinas and as constantly happens where members of both groups live together.

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