

The pre-history of linguistic exogamy and widespread polylingualism in the Vaupés area

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The well known Vaupes linguistic area is part of a larger multilingual setting within the Upper Rio Negro region in Northwest Amazonia, encompassing languages from several linguistic families, such as Eastern Tukanoan, Arawakan, Nadahupan, Kakuka-Nukak, Tupi-Guarani and Cariban. The Vaupes has been analyzed as a linguistic area and multiethnic regional system, structured around polylingualism, linguistic exogamy, egalitarian relations among the several languages, a strong link between language and patrilineal ethnic identity and high linguistic awareness, which tends to prevent direct linguistic borrowings, code-switching and the use of a second language by persons that do not judge themselves able to speak them “perfectly” (Goldman 1963, Sorensen 1967, Jackson 1983, Chernela 1996, Aikhenvald 2002, Stenzel 2005).

Nevertheless, our understanding of this region has been overwhelmingly based on a very circumscribed zone, which Sorensen referred to as the “central Vaupes” area, encompassing only Eastern Tukanoan (ET) languages and Tariana (Arawakan family). In addition, established views reinforce a static, reified and essentialist link between language boundaries and sociocultural norms, seeing linguistic exogamy as the driving principle behind the observed linguistic diversity in the region. However, the actual facts make it clear, even within the central Vaupés area, that language is both not sufficient or necessary for defining marriage norms, given that there are social groups that must not intermarry even if they speak a different language or social groups that do intermarry even though they speak the same language. In addition, such a view has relegated to secondary importance or as marginalized cases several situations that actually coexist and interact with the central Vaupés area, but where linguistic exogamy is not fully observed, such as the situations among the Kubeos, the Tanimuka and Letuama, the Makunas, and the Barasana and Eduria (Århem 1981, Gomez-Imbert 1993, Chacon and Cayón 2013).

In this talk, I will reassess the foundational elements underlying our views of linguistic exogamy in the Vaupés based on the combination of diachronic, areal, sociolinguistic and ethnogenetic analysis. I offer a historically dynamic view of the processes leading to the development, consolidation and more recent transformations of the linguistic diversity in the Vaupes and Northwestern Amazonia regions in a time frame encompassing about 2000 years, comparing the Vaupes situation to the nearby regions dominated by Arawakan and Western Tukanoan speaking groups. I disentangle speakers’ ideology from their practices (i.e. how speakers think about linguistic exogamy and how that system actually works), focusing on the discontinuities between linguistic boundaries, ethnic boundaries and social norms that regulate intermarriage. I also discuss how ethnic identities are fluid constructs in Northwest Amazonia, based on complex correlations of descent, alliance, fission and fusional processes, all of them constantly changing over time.

My analysis suggest that linguistic exogamy emerged quite recently in the history of the region, particularly over the last six centuries as the result of the intensification of contacts among ET, Arawakan and speakers of languages belonging to other language families. Such a recent development can be inferred by the fact that all ET languages participating in the linguistic exogamy system are genetically very closely related as well as by relative dating of some contact induced changes among Eastern Tukanoan, Arawakan and Nadahupan languages (Stenzel and Gomez-Imbert 2009, Epps 2012, 2016, Chacon 2017). In many cases, this recent process can also be demonstrated to have followed from a new sociolinguistic situation, where Eastern Tukanoan languages now appear in an egalitarian or dominant situation regarding neighboring languages.

The background to the processes behind the evolution of linguistic exogamy was a system of social – and not linguistic! – exogamy, generally observed in all ethnic groups in Northwest Amazonia. As the Vaupes interethnic regional system was being formed, ethnic groups reinforced many linguistic and cultural demarcative traits of patrilineal descent while creating an open, multilateral and interethnic system of alliances with affine and/or politically allied groups. Fission social processes and patrilineal descent combined in a way that caused a burst of diversity of dialects and, eventually, different but genetically closely related languages, whose speakers could not intermarry because they belonged to the same patrilineal descent group. On the other

hand, alliance based processes lead to linguistic acculturation (or in some cases of language shift followed or not by interference through shift) of social groups that did not speak ET languages. As a result, linguistic exogamy can be seen not as an organizational or foundational principle of the Vaupes linguistic ecology, but as an epiphenomenon (Hill 1996), an outcome of a system based on a complex balance of linguistic diversity, patrilineal ethnic identity and a multiethnic and multilateral regional system.

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