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The destabilization of multilingual coexistence: Language contact in the Vaupés
River Basin

1. Introduction

In the Northwest region of the Amazon rainforest in South America, there exists a cultural community of indigenous people mostly scattered long the Vaupés River Basin, a tributary of the larger Rio Negro. A map of this region can be found in the Appendix under Figure 1. Also known as Uaupés in Portuguese, this geographic area spans some 40,000 square miles (Stenzel, 2005) and lies on the border of Colombia and Brazil; it is the population indigenous to this area from which this paper draws interest. Stenzel (2005) notes that the indigenous community along the Vaupés River is known to encompass sub-communities belonging to some 20 languages grouped within two larger indigenous language families, Eastern Tukanoan and Arawakan. The significance of this large amount of linguistic diversity lies in the mostly homogenous shared cultural practices—the main feature being exogamy in marriage, which in turn gives rise to an incredible amount of multilingualism among the indigenous sub-communities within this region (Aikhenvald, 2013, 2014; Jackson, 1989; Sorensen, 1967, 1985; Stenzel, 2005, and others). The literature sometimes describes these sub-communities as “tribes”, but I agree with Jackson (1989) and find that the usage of “tribes” is misleading, and will borrow her term “language aggregate” for the purposes of this paper. This community is sometimes termed the Vaupés Indians in the broader literature, however, I will use the term Indigenous Vaupés when speaking of the community on the macro level, and otherwise use the individual names of their respective language aggregates as much as I can.

Throughout the study of linguistics, and language in general, there goes without saying that language usage is not fixed, nor does it exist in a vacuum; it is not impervious to changes, no matter if they are directly or indirectly imposed. Language change is a well-studied field of linguistics, and within it, one of the more interesting topics is the identification and analysis of language change via contact. Historically, language contact tends to result in some influence of participating languages on the others, in various ways: lexical borrowings, changes in syntax and grammar, loan translations, etc. (Millar, 2007). With respect to the Indigenous Vaupés, the presence of 20 different languages under a single, or mostly similar, cultural context implies great possibility of an overwhelmingly large amount of language contact, and subsequent change. However, this is not traditionally the case. The most notable aspect of the people residing in this geographic area is their traditional propensity for multilingualism. And it is this multilingualism, borne from

the coexistence of many different languages, upon which I base this paper, and my main argument.

By and large the Indigenous Vaupés remained in close linguistic contact and maintained this cultural multilingualism in their geographically remote communities. However, as history moved on, there has been a notable language shift occurring, resulting in the decline of use (Aikhenvald, 2013, 2014; Jackson, 1989)—a sad, similar story to many of the indigenous languages across the American continent. What was it that spurred on the rapid degradation in the use of indigenous Vaupés languages despite the peoples’ cultural propensity for multilingualism? I argue that the occurrence of language shift was not necessarily due to the introduction of, and resultant contact with, outsider languages, but the result of a continuous interference and constant destabilization in Indigenous Vaupés cultural norms and social structures. As a result of these interferences, we can see the effects manifest on the various language aggregates in different, and maybe surprising, ways. In order to argue such a point, this paper will be structured as follows: §2 will describe the cultural practices of the Indigenous Vaupés, and how that lends credence towards their unique brand of multilingualism; §3 will contextualize this multilingualism and eventual decline in the propagating factors of language shift; §4 follows with a summary of the points raised, and my conclusions.

2. The Indigenous Vaupés

2.1. Culture and society

In his early piece, Sorensen (1967) traveled to the Northwest region of Amazonia and observed an interesting, and somewhat unusual by Western standards, cultural practice that encompasses a region known for its high rate of linguistic diversity; most of the language groups spoken in the region belong to this cultural sphere. This cultural practice holds basis in the unique divisions of social groups—where Sorensen (1967, 1985) and Stenzel (2005) use “tribe”, or Jackson’s (1989) “language aggregate”, to describe a unit of speakers of a particular Vaupés language. In this way, it is important to understand that Indigenous Vaupés do not separate themselves from each other through ethnicity, or even bloodline, as would be suggested when using terms like “tribe”. What this means is that language is by far the most important factor in distinguishing communities from each other. And the “tribal” element of community belonging is deeply rooted in the shared language. The separation of these language aggregates fuels the multilinguistic aspect of Vaupés culture; it is through these language aggregates that Indigenous Vaupés practice linguistic exogamy and develop their multilingualism.

The exogamic practice in the Vaupés is one where males of one language aggregate must marry a female from separate, neighboring language aggregate. The rules are fairly complicated, and language aggregates may view another as a “sibling” from which you cannot take a wife, lest the marriage carry undertones of

incest. These “sibling” relationships are not based in linguistic evidence—more closely related languages are not necessarily viewed as “siblings”, and some “sibling” relationships are between less related languages—and likely stem from cultural epistemology. As a patrilineal—family lineages are forged through the father—and patrilocal, the wife then moves to her husband’s longhouse community, and their children are initially brought up speaking the father’s language. Within a longhouse, there are wives from different linguistic backgrounds, though generally from the same few neighboring language aggregates. There are some rules to when and where a particular language can be spoken—which I will touch upon in §3—but, largely, people will be brought up learning at least two languages, father language first, then the mother’s language. And, as typical of young children, will acquire some additional other languages that are spoken in close proximity. Therefore, it is not unusual for individuals to be multilingual in three, four, or even five or more languages. Important to their culture of multilingualism, Indigenous Vaupés believe in the integrity of language, and will withhold actively speaking a new language until they are mostly fluent, while taking great care to speak without an accent. In addition, they will assert the mutual unintelligibility of the languages as a marker of identity, and loyalty to their father-language aggregate (Jackson, 1989; Sorensen, 1967, 1985; Stenzel, 2005). Some of the languages traditionally spoken among the Indigenous Vaupés who share multilingualism as a cultural trait can be seen in Table 1 of the Appendix.

It is with these attitudes towards language, and their culture of linguistic exogamy that Indigenous Vaupés are able to maintain the linguistic separation needed in this heavily linguistically diverse cultural sphere. The next section will describe the outsider forces influencing the eventual decline in language use and multilingualism to support my claim that it is not merely the introduction of other languages that has led to the decline of Vaupés indigenous languages, but emerged as a result of constant interference by outsiders in the destabilization of these established cultural norms.

2.2. Language and identity

In his overview of the Vaupés region, Sorensen (1967) asserts that the Indigenous Vaupés communities share multilingualism as a cultural trait, a claim that is now well attested to in the subsequent literature. Throughout his survey of the region, Sorensen notices that the communities are deliberate in their multilingualism; learners will not speak a new language until they have reached a certain level of fluency. Additionally, code-switching is generally done out of courtesy, or as a sign of respect, where interlocutors will code-switch to another language, more mutually understood language among those in conversation. As well, when addressing individuals of a higher social status, like shamans, speakers will differ to the father-language of that individual. Borrowing words from one language to another is generally looked down upon, and sometimes calls for a reprimand; but, as borrowing is essentially inevitable, many borrowed terms are still consciously

understood as being borrowed, and take a much longer time to fully integrate into the lexicon of the borrowing language (Sorensen 1967, 1985; Stenzel 2005). The driving factor behind this deliberate separation of languages is because, as Jackson (1989) argues, language—most specifically, the father’s language—is a marker of identity and proof of membership in a particular language aggregate. To argue this claim, Jackson describes the cultural practices of establishing identity within the Indigenous Vaupés communities. When in mixed company, individuals will speak their father language first—regardless of whether all of the interlocutors speak or understand it—in order to establish their affiliation to their father’s language aggregate, before switching into a more mutually understood language.

An interesting situation arises when there are some twenty or more languages spoken under a common cultural practice, spread out over a region spanning 40,000 square miles. How is it that multilingualism can survive? Surely, some few languages will start emerging as dominant, leaving still others to shift into disuse, or take on forms of the other languages and change over time. These questions can be answered if you ask the people themselves: the relatively stable coexistence of the vast amount of languages and multilingualism is from the lack of prestige via social hierarchies imposed on the language aggregates. Communities will also stress the mutual unintelligibility of the languages, even despite how close they may be genetically, by linguistic standards (Jackson, 1989; Sorensen, 1967, 1985; Stenzel, 2005). Meaning, in the traditional view, languages are not considered to be superior or inferior compared to each other. As a result, there is the attitude of ‘separate, but equal’ in consideration of the Vaupés languages.

These descriptions of language in their cultural practice indicates the high level of importance the Indigenous Vaupés have placed on identifying themselves as belonging to a certain language aggregate. By having language as a marker of group affiliation, the preservation of language becomes integral to an individual’s sense of identity and belonging. This is true under Sorensen’s (1967, 1985) evaluations of the Indigenous Vaupés, with respect to the emergence of *lingua francas* in the area. Since the Vaupés region spans over the Colombia-Brazil border, two of the *lingua francas* are the colonial Indo-European languages Spanish and Portuguese. In certain communities, most commonly mixed communities within the rubber extraction regions, the *lingua franca* used was Nheengatú. Sorensen finds out that, at the time of his investigations, there were some people who speak these languages well enough to communicate with monolingual Spanish and Portuguese speakers who travel to the area. Within their own communities, however, Spanish and Portuguese were slow in taking root, and the *lingua francas* used among indigenous communities tended to be another indigenous language: Tukano.

The shift in use of *lingua francas* and the widespread use of Tukano throughout the region is due to a dismantling of the linguistic equilibrium between the other Vaupés languages. In the communities themselves, identifying with the father-language allows the individual to differentiate languages from another, in

categories that can be thought of as a 'language of the self', and 'languages for communication'. When Indigenous Vaupés social structures and cultural norms are undisturbed, there is robust maintenance of the 'language of the self' as distinguished from 'language for communication'. Multilingualism in the region is the respect given and validation of multiple languages as representative of multiple, separate identities. The next section will describe and analyze some of the factors leading to the destabilization of these traditional ideologies toward language, identity, and linguistic distinction. Following, it will describe how that manifests in Vaupés languages in different ways. Most of the languages experience a shift from 'languages of the self' to the proliferation of lingua francas and national languages, with few exceptions.

3. Factors for language change

3.1. Language contact

Where Sorensen (1967) leaves off, he describes an Indigenous Vaupés situation where they are more-or-less free to live and operate under their cultural brand of multilingualism. His 1985 work revisits the population and describes continued efforts by outsiders to impose their language ideologies on the Indigenous Vaupés. At the time, a bulk of the region came under national control, and more and more indigenous families were moving into ethnically mixed communities in pursuit of work or further education. These relocations were either historically forced—as laborers in the growing rubber extraction industry during the early 1870s to 1920s—or voluntary, but largely influenced by outsiders. Within the region, there is a strong, and lengthy, history of missionaries of variable denominations coming into the area, and imposing negative language attitudes and ideologies toward indigenous languages, and multilingualism. These missionaries then either forced communities to leave their longhouses for these new mixed-ethnic urban settlements, or established mission school education on their children (Stenzel, 2005). In order to better understand the effects these kinds of long-term contact has had on Indigenous Vaupés communities, it is imperative to know the kinds of contact, and its proliferation throughout the region.

3.2. Dislocation and relocation

Four hundred years of contact with outside and intruding forces upset the cultural and linguistic equilibrium found within the various Vaupés language aggregates, and smaller longhouse communities, in differing proportions. Since the early invasions of colonial powers, Indigenous Vaupés have been dislocated from their territories, or find themselves relocating in order to maintain a sense of traditional identity. These territorial fragmentations forced communities to renegotiate and redistribute their cultural definitions, relationships, and practices (Stenzel, 2005). In the next subsections, I illustrate the kinds of contact that has occurred, and the immediate implications for the integrity of Indigenous Vaupés and

their cultural and linguistic structures.

3.2.1. Early contact: Colonial slavers, government investment, and forced labor

Since the early 18th century, and in particularly during the 1740s, Spanish and Portuguese colonial slavers raided the indigenous-settled territories in the northwest Amazon in order to extract individuals to be used for slave labor, estimating as some 20,000 people captured. Oftentimes, these waves of raiding resulted in the destruction of entire communities, emptying the territories where they lived. As an eventual result, these territories were being slowly reclaimed by Tukanoan groups, replacing what used to be an Arawakan language majority in the region (particularly the Tariana), allowing the Tukanoan groups to expand, and have their presence as a linguistic group to become more prominent (Stenzel, 2005). The displacement of Arawakan language groups with Tukano ones are visible in the distribution of the core Vaupés languages as surveyed by Sorensen in 1967 (and shown in Table 1). The capture of entire communities also deals a heavy hand in destabilizing the linguistic diversity of the Vaupés region, and possible appearance of certain language groups, if their communities were extensively damaged.

The implications of this, is that now Tukano speaking people hold a majority proportion in the region, allowing the language to spread ubiquitously throughout, leading to its usage as a lingua franca. Returning to the notion of ‘language of the self’, the introduction of lingua francas is not necessarily indicative of an immediate widespread result in language shift, and as the language of focus is a fellow Vaupés language, all this suggests is communities learn Tukano, in addition to their home languages. Conversely, the result of the slave raids is the unfortunate dismantling of Arawakan language family communities in the area.

Following the early slave raids, which lasted until the 1790s, new colonial governments began investing in the region to resettle the indigenous populations in more urban centers elsewhere. Unsurprisingly, their aim was to repurpose the land for their own use. Much of these investments resulted in the mass introduction of missionaries, as I mention in greater detail in the next subsection. By the 1870s, these investments turned to the forced labor of indigenous people in the new industry of extracting rubber materials for use in trade and industry. Many were moved to the mixed ethnic communities that largely used Nheengatú as a lingua franca, and remaining communities were forced to relocate to more remote regions, as the industry expanded in order to extract more materials (Stenzel, 2005), resulting in further fragmentation of the indigenous territories of the Vaupés.

These interferences by the emerging governments of Brazil and Colombia fed into the growing cycle of relocation and resettlement that is characteristic of the relationship between indigenous peoples of South America, and the dominance of the colonial establishments of nations. What we see by the forced labor model, is the cultural sphere retreating deeper and deeper into the remote areas of the Amazon. The implications here are twofold: the ever growing dominance of non-indigenous

Vaupés languages, while those indigenous languages fade further into the shadows. Secondly, the creation of a gulf between speakers of Vaupés languages moved to the urban communities, and the speakers who remained with the cultural communities. When the speakers were removed from the cultural context, and alienated as a result of their ever growing remoteness, the Vaupés languages shifted in these urban communities as there was no longer the support base with which speakers could maintain the languages. These supports were most notably severed with the introduction and ongoing interference of missionaries in the Vaupés region.

3.2.2. Missionaries in the Vaupés region

Much like elsewhere in South America, missionaries penetrating indigenous regions were a driving factor for change derived from close, intense contact. According to Stenzel (2005), missionaries have had a strong, continuous presence in the Amazon since the late 1600s to the 20th century, with attempts to convert the local populations, and subject them to their personal ideologies about civilization and language. These language ideologies viewed indigenous languages as inferior and ‘uncivilized’, a common view found across all colonial-indigenous interactions. Interestingly, they also viewed the Vaupés’ penchant for multilingualism to be indecent as well. Many of the missionaries viewed monolingualism as a superior for of language understanding, and tried to ‘teach’ the Indigenous Vaupés out of multilingualism through conversion, and forceful relocation. It wasn’t until the early 1900s that children started being sent to mission schools for education. For a long time since then, the Brazilian Salesian schools in the towns of Iauaretê and São Gabriel, in particular, were more effective, with an 80 year history of boarding school-type education promulgating Portuguese, as well also encouraging Tukano as a lingua franca, with bilingual Portuguese and Tukano as languages of early instruction, before more advanced grades switched to monolingual Portuguese instruction (Sorensen 1985; Stenzel, 2005).

By moving indigenous people, and their families, outside of their cultural and geographic context, the process of interference begins to hold much greater power, and has longer lasting effects—it is typical for a family relocated to a mixed community to lose use of their father-language in favor of Portuguese or Tukano within two generations Stenzel (2005). When missionaries decided to use Tukano as a language of instruction, and its continued usage as a widespread lingua franca as a result, the ideology of Vaupés languages as ‘separate, but equal’ is shifted, where Tukano is now noted to have more use in non-indigenous interactions. Sorensen (1985) does mention the use of Tukano as a lingua franca prior to European contact, as Tukano speakers generally employed a larger representation, due to their inhabitation of emptied territories as I’ve mentioned earlier. I suspect Tukano as a lingua franca never posed the same problem it does today, as indigenous communities were largely isolated from outside contact, and lingua francas were used only out of utmost necessity. Communities were in contact with different languages from the outset, and it is not the result of the introduction of a language

that set in motion the shift in usage of indigenous Vaupés languages.

3.3. Effects of language contact in Vaupés languages

As I've written about thus far, there have been many opportunities for outside groups, missionaries, colonialists, and industrialists, to interfere with the cultural practices and social hierarchies traditionally defined by Indigenous Vaupés communities. In many of these cases, the destabilization of the Vaupés culture invariably lead to a shift in the use of language, and a shift in their propensity for multilingualism. The next few sections highlight some of the different ways interference have affected individual Vaupés languages; it will be interesting to note that not all of these cases end in language shift, some exceptions do apply, but the degree of interference by others have direct influence on the state of the communities, and their relationship with their native languages.

3.3.1. Language loss and major shift

Sorensen (1985) and Stenzel (2005) both go into some detail about Vaupés language groups that have experienced major shift and decline. Given particular spotlight are the speakers of Waikhana, and the status of the language. At some point in history, the Waikhana were dislocated from their original geographical territory, spreading out and into new mixed communities with Desano, Tukano, and Tariana speakers. The public languages in these mixed communities were largely Tukano and Portuguese—Tukano, not just as a *lingua franca*, but by this point Tariana and Desano speakers had mostly shifted to Tukano and were no longer teaching the language to their children. Relocated Waikhana still tried to adhere to their cultural practice of exogamy, but the in-law groups were largely speaking Tukano, and maintaining Waikhana began to decline. This language shift was further exacerbated because this area was under the sphere of influence of Iauaretê missions, and Tukano and Portuguese were used as the languages of instruction, and families had to live in Iauaretê for some parts of the year in order to send their children to the schools for education (Stenzel, 2005).

The reason for the Waikhana language shift is pretty clear. Having been displaced from their original territories upset the balance between culture and language. Moving to areas where all other language aggregates have shifted to Tukano, and used quite a lot of Portuguese as well, doomed the language to be consistently overshadowed, until it was snubbed out. Indirectly as well, destabilization of the neighboring Desano and Tariana groups by mission schooling and relocation has also had an impact in accelerating the decline of Waikhana.

3.3.2. Language shift and revitalization

Shifting focus away from Eastern Tukano languages for this section, Aikhenvald (2013) presents a case study of the Arawakan language, Tariana, and the speakers' struggle to retrieve their language from shifting and revitalize it. Since the

early 20th century, much of the Tariana language has been lost to Tukano, with only very small communities still able to speak it. Since the early 2000s, there has been a shift in attitudes by the community to revitalize Tariana, and invigorate the community with identification with their cultural and ancestral heritage. Prior to which, forced conversions by Salesian missionaries and major relocation to urban centers influenced negative attitudes by the community. In 2005, a Tariana language school was established in Iauaretê, with two native Tariana speakers employed as language teachers (Aikhenvald, 2013).

Much like the previous case of Waikhana speakers, Tariana suffered from language shift and almost full displacement by the dominating language of Tukano. However, large efforts by the community have enabled them to work towards revitalizing the language, rejecting the consequences of the mass indigenous community destabilization affecting the Vaupés River Basin.

3.3.3. Language blend

Turning again to Tariana, Aikhenvald (2014) describes a curious case of language blend. In this case study, she looked at a dialect of Tariana that had fled the initial missionary settlements into the Iauaretê sphere of influence, and relocated close to another Arawakan language community, the Baniwa. Tariana and Baniwa are closely related languages, but areal diffusion within the Eastern Tukanoan majority region caused Tariana to incorporate some Eastern Tukanoan forms over time. The language blend Aikhenvald describes is manifest in the extremely close contact between the majority Baniwa, and minority Tariana speakers. What happens, across all points of language, is the strengthening of the linguistic forms in Tariana shared by those in Baniwa, and the attrition of forms picked up from Eastern Tukanoan (Aikhenvald 2014).

With the case of this dialect, the growing threat of missionary control and the implications of conversion, forced homogenization of language and culture, forced speakers to leave their original territories, and settle as a linguistic minority within the influence of a large, closely related language. With these unbalanced proportions, Tariana inevitably began to blend into Baniwa, and linguistic diversity loses again.

3.3.4. Thriving language

It is now quite clear how much colonizers, missionaries, and government have interfered in the Vaupés community, to the point of destabilizing entire communities and causes mass amounts of language shift. However, there are still some communities in the Vaupés that enjoyed a negligible amount of interference. Stenzel (2005) mentions the Wanano language community, still occupying its original territory in the Vaupés River Basin area. There is still the persistent use of multilingualism as per the cultural norms, and robust language maintenance among all of the language aggregates in the area. This maintenance is largely attributed to

the geographic inaccessibility of the territory, allowing the population to continue living without outside interference.

Probably an exception to the rule, the lack of interference or destabilization, or even relocation, in the territory is a significant factor in their continued maintenance of their language despite most other Vaupés languages shifting or changing in some way. Their continued coexistence with the other language aggregates in the area also speaks to the idea that being near other languages would not trigger language shift in the multilingual Vaupés communities.

3.3.5. Dominating language

Out of all the Vaupés languages, it has become clear that the one that has come out on top is Tukano. The domination of Tukano can still be linked to the interference of colonial powers, missionaries, and others. Early on the language has been placed on an arbitrary platform above all other Vaupés languages, and has enjoyed a privileged status as *lingua franca*, language of school instruction, and majority language across the region. Since 2002, Tukano has also been granted official language status in the Upper Rio Negro areas of Brazil (Aikhenvald, 2013). There is no question about the continued use of Tukano in the Rio Negro area, as contributing factors have cemented its place as the most dominating of the Vaupés languages.

4. Summary and conclusions

In this paper I have looked at the rapid degradation of indigenous Vaupés languages over time, despite their cultural propensity for multilingualism, and multilingual coexistence. This language shift was not necessarily a result of the introduction of other languages to the region, but from a continuous destruction of cultural norms and social structures. The multilingual aspect of Vaupés culture thrived on a system that placed no one language over another, and allowed for opportunities to be exposed to, and to speak such a myriad of languages. This is evidenced in the case studies written about by Stenzel in her 2005 revisit to Sorensen's (1967) original survey of the Vaupés region. It is not the presence of multiple languages that inevitably draw these languages to shift, decline, and change. It is the extensive fragmentation of territories, destabilizations of communities, social structures, and linguistic practice forced upon Indigenous Vaupés by colonial aggressors, their missionaries, and plans for industrialization and cheap labor.

One could not argue that language shift is inevitable with given the close proximity of different languages, as we see the Wanano speakers in their geographically remote environment showing a thriving use of the original indigenous languages and exogamous culture, enjoying multilingualism whilst robustly maintaining their languages as separate, yet valid. Comparing this to the situation of the Waikhana, and dialect Tariana speakers, vastly displaced from their

homelands, and under pressures from the more dominating groups in their areas. Both communities are feeling a change in the use of their heritage languages, manifest in language shift with the Waikhana, and language blend between Tariana and the Baniwa language of their more prominent close neighbors. It is clear that given the chance to thrive, Vaupés languages can coexist, because of the cultural practice of identifying language to the self, and to group membership.

Peoples across the globe have a right to speak their heritage languages, and many of the Vaupés language communities realize this, as I' ve mentioned with Tariana, and are working with the modern governments and community support to establish paths to revitalize shifted languages, and reinvigorate others which have suffered from the interference of outside control. The various modes of interferences and regional destabilizations have seen a community that once valued linguistic integrity, and the importance of allowing communities with a separate language with which to identify with, become one of imposed hierarchies and the breakdown of the previously neutral social order. A recurrent theme within the literature, and this paper, on the subject of language shift and decline in the Vaupés region of the northwest Amazon is the destabilization via contact, leading to the removal of the people from their cultural and social context. Overwhelmingly, the results of which are communities who have relocated from their traditional homelands, whether by force or by their own volition. But, as we look towards the future, it is my hope that further support from the governments and social structures that caused such ruthless decline of one of the more interesting, and unique, cultures of multilingualism in the world, will help these Vaupés communities find their languages and identities once more.

Appendix

Figure 1: Map of Vaupés River Basin region and approximate distribution of language aggregates (Stenzel, 2005)

Arawakan	Tariana
	Baniwa
	Coripako

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