

Exploring historical contact in northwest Amazonia through lexical and morphological evidence

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The northwestern fringe of the Amazon basin, where the lowlands meet the foothills of the Andes, is one of the most linguistically diverse areas of South America, with over a dozen different linguistic families in close proximity of each other and widespread multilingualism (van Gijn 2014). Unfortunately, it is also one of the least understood regions of the continent. Historical distributions of languages are unclear and many questions about the dynamics of language contact remain unanswered.

One fact that is clear is that the effects of language contact are ubiquitous in northwestern Amazonia (Epps & Michael 2017; Muysken 2012). However, one area that remains understudied is the diffusion of lexical items and shared morphology across the region.

This talk will present findings on patterns of loanword diffusion and morphological convergences in eastern Ecuador and northeastern Peru, building on a lexical database of South American languages compiled by Epps (n.d.) and fieldwork by the author. First, hotspots of contact were identified (e.g. in the Pastaza basin, amongst Chicham and Kandozi-Chapra communities), as well as long-distance chains of lexical diffusion (e.g. *Wanderwörter* which have diffused across the continent).

Second, and perhaps more importantly, this talk will explore the specific patterns of language use that may have led to the contact phenomena found today. The role of specialised discourse in facilitating lexical diffusion will be given special attention. A concrete example of this is the use of a secret hunting register in the Conambo river basin in which loanwords are used as replacement terms for hunted animals, but where over time the replacement terms become the primary term in the language.

On a closely related point, the importance of community-based research will be discussed. Although many of the dynamics of language contact and language use may be opaque to outside researchers, native speakers and community members have rarely been given the opportunity to explain those social structures in their own terms. Substantial input from native speakers and engagement with the community is critical to understanding language.

Finally, an analysis of lexical diffusion patterns can also be insightful in unravelling historical contact between groups which no longer live in adjacent territories. A clear example is the widespread presence of Arawak loanwords in the western fringes of the Amazon basin despite the absence of Arawak languages in the area today, providing insight into the historical distribution of Arawak languages.

References

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