



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Language & Communication

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom

Language in an ontological register: Embodied speech in the Northwest Amazon of Colombia and Brazil

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

ABSTRACT

Speakers of Eastern Tukanoan languages in Brazil and Colombia construe linguistic differences as indices of group identity, intrinsic to a complex ontology in which language is a consubstantial, metaphysical product—a 'substance' in the development of the person. Through speech, speakers of the same language signal a corporality based in theories of shared ancestry and mutual belonging while speakers of different languages signal difference. For Tukanoans, then, one creates one's self in the act of speaking. These ontological beliefs underlie speech practices, influencing language maintenance and contributing to one of the most extreme examples of multilingualism reported in the literature.

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1. Introduction

The proposition, held by most Tukanoans,¹ that languages are discrete objects representing relations among people, is an ontological project. It cannot be divested from its cosmological and sociosemiotic foundations. Speakers of these languages, who reside along the Colombian/Brazilian border, construe linguistic difference as an index of group identity, intrinsic to a complex ontology in which language is a consubstantial, metaphysical product—a 'substance' in the development of the person. Through speech, speakers of the same language signal a corporality based in shared ancestry and mutual belonging, while speakers of different languages signal difference. As such, inter-linguistic variation is iconically and indexically related to social differentiation (Chernela, 2013). For Tukanoans, then, one creates one's self in the act of speaking.

These ontological beliefs underlie speech practices, influencing language maintenance and contributing to one of the most extreme examples of multilingualism reported in the literature. The combined forces of language practice and surrounding beliefs create and maintain the polyglossia that is at the center of a vital Tukanoan economy of social reproduction, sustained over time through ideological and practical mechanisms.

The same overarching ontological framework that equates language with corporality precludes marriage between speakers of the same language (a practice that scholars call linguistic exogamy).² It thereby disambiguates the relationship

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¹ I use the term 'Tukanoan' here as a shorthand to stand for the phrase 'Eastern Tukanoan language family' or any of its speakers. The generalities presented here do not apply to speakers of the Western Tukanoan languages spoken in Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia. The choice is also intended to differentiate the designation 'Tukanoan' from 'Tukano,' reserved for one of the Eastern Tukanoan languages.

² Several Eastern Tukanoan groups do not practice linguistic exogamy: the Makuna (Århem, 1981, 1989), the Kubeo (Goldman, 1963), and the Arapaso (Chernela, 1989; Chernela and Leed, 2003). Each of these groups does, however, conserve a form of descent-group exogamy (Chernela, 1989, Chernela and Leed, 2003; Chacon and Cayón, 2013; Århem, 1981; Cayón, 2013; Chacon, 2013; Goldman, 1963, 2004).

of language and speaker to one another, through a scheme of contrastive categories comprised of one's own language (*patrilect*), mother's language (*matrilect*, spoken by affinal relatives), and the languages of others with whom one has no specified kinship relationship (*alterlect*) (Chernela, 2013). Patrilect is intrinsically related to a speaker's self and its acquisition is part of the process of developing into a person. Matrilect preferentially becomes a passive language that the speaker understands but does not produce, and which does not form part of self-identity. The third category, *alterlect*—the languages of unrelated others—is learned through processes of 'imitation' and implies no association or claim to social identities. I will discuss each in turn.

In this complex linguistic matrix nearly all speakers are capable of performing in several languages but preferentially perform in only one, their patrilect, which they regard as their 'own' (C. Hugh-Jones, 1979; Jackson, 1983; Gomez-Imbert, 1996; Stenzel, 2005; Epps, 2007). This norm of linguistic loyalty and purism influences one's own speech practice and defends against the pressure of adjacent languages.

In using the case of Eastern Tukanoan multilingualism I wish to emphasize the power of extra-linguistic factors, including speaker attitudes, beliefs, and other social factors, over linguistic criteria in determining outcomes of language contact. Linguists generally hold that the typological distance between languages in contact is a fairly reliable predictor of contact-induced change, because features that are structurally similar are readily exchanged between systems (Thomason, 2001:77; Winford, 2003). This widespread process, however, is fettered among the typologically similar Eastern Tukanoan languages,³ where a general understanding of languages as markers of identity and alterity leads to a vivid separation of speakers. Here I use the case of the Kotiria (a.k.a. Wanano, Uanano),⁴ one group of Tukanoans living along the Vaupés River in Brazil and Colombia, to consider the ontological foundations of language practices that produce the self and the group through speaking.

2. Language in the Vaupés basin

Although the ontological status of language in the Northwest Amazon has been undertheorized, researchers who work in the Vaupés region have long noted and explored the social and conceptual underpinnings of language use. The first of these was the linguist Arthur Sorensen, whose 1967 paper on multilingualism in the Northwest Amazon provided an important overview of the languages spoken in the area and the relationships among them. Sorensen was the first to observe that the language groups of the Eastern Tukanoan family are not distinct ethnicities (or 'tribes,' as he called them), but, instead, linguistico-descent groups in which each putative descent group identified itself on the basis of language (Sorensen, 1967, 1973). He employed the term *father-language* to refer to the identifying language of the descent group, explaining that "[b]ecause descent is patrilineal in the Northwest Amazon ... an individual belongs to his (or her) father's tribe and to his father's linguistic group, which is also his own. Because of exogamy, his mother always represents a different tribe ... and a different linguistic group" (1967:677). Sorensen estimated that the languages of the Eastern Tukanoan family were "a little farther apart than are the languages in the Romance group" (1967:675). His most insightful observation, for our purposes, however, was the importance among speakers in maintaining diversity and the sociolinguistic practices employed to sustain it. Sorensen pointed out that "the diverse and discrete phonologies of these languages and their dialects loom very prominently in the Indians' regard" (1967:680). He noted, "I have observed that when an Indian knows how to speak two closely related languages, ... he carefully and even consciously keeps them apart. It has occurred to me that the exogamic and other cultural institutions ... may be exerting a force that makes a speaker want to render closely related languages farther apart, even to an artificial extent" (1967:675). Sorensen, in this way, contributed to the rise of the new field of linguistic anthropology.

Perhaps more than anyone else, Jean Jackson productively explored the cultural conceptions of language among Tukanoans. She teased apart language as an interpretive filter through which we make sense of experience, from language as symbolic of self and community. It was Jackson who coined the term 'language group' to refer to what others called the 'maximal exogamous patrilineal descent group' (C. Hugh-Jones, 1979); her choice was a shorthand that underscored the salience of language as a marker of kin group identities and relationships. In her 1983 book, *The Fish People*, Jackson proposed that for Tukanoans language served as a 'badge of identity' that carried 'a kind of message' (1983:165). "[T]he features that render each badge distinct from others in the set becomes highly charged with meaning," she wrote. "In the Vaupés, the [symbolic] dimension is language or linguistics, and the features are those linguistic elements that are seen by Tukanoans as making Vaupés languages mutually unintelligible. Vocabulary and grammatical differences and the co-occurrence rules that serve to keep Tukanoan languages as discrete category systems are vigorously maintained by Tukanoans" (1983:166).

Jackson considered the Tukanoan case in light of John Gumperz's 1967 exploration of multilingualism in western India, in which he argued that linguistic distance is a function of the social value placed on separation (1967: 54–56). Jackson also drew

³ Obstacles to comprehension are minimized for several reasons. First, the percentage of cognates across Eastern Tukanoan languages is high. Second, speakers are always familiar with at least two languages (patrilect and matrilect) and typically more. The languages to which they have greatest exposure are those spoken by the in-marrying wives in the settlement where they were raised. Some Eastern Tukanoan languages, like Kotiria/Wanano and Piratapua or Barasana and Taino, are mutually intelligible (yet these groups do not intermarry). North Eastern Tukanoan languages, like Kotiria, Piratapua, Tukano, and Desana, are closer to one another than any of them is to Kubeo, identified by some as occupying a central branch (see Chacon, 2013). Languages belonging to the Arawakan and Tukano families are unrelated, posing substantial challenges to comprehension.

⁴ The term Kotiria is also known in the literature by the name Wanano (alts. Guanano, Uanano). The latter terms, derived from Nhengatu (a Tupian derivative) have been widely used in the literature. Recently Kotiria speakers, reflecting on a new bilingual school curriculum, corrected the designation to the self-name Kotiria, which I utilize here. I occasionally use 'Wanano/Kotiria' for greater recognition.

on Susan Ervin-Tripp's observation that speakers of languages in frequent contact may hold that linguistic diversity is greater than it actually is because of the importance of maintaining distinctions between the social groups identified with each code (Ervin-Tripp, 1969:145).

My own work⁵ builds upon these foundational studies. I treat language not only as the site of articulating conceptions about the world, but as a central component of the conceptualization itself (Chernela, 2001). In 2003 I showed the linguistic work entailed in producing sameness and difference in women's song exchanges where women sing common messages in diverse codes (Chernela, 2003). The article also discusses linguistic features that function as icons of crying and frustration. In 2004 I explored Kotiria processes of language transmission, emphasizing linguistic and social modeling as the means by which children learn the appropriate contexts for mother's and father's languages.⁶ In two recent works I take up the topics of reported speech, evidentiality, and irony in song dialogues among Kotiria girls (Chernela, 2011, 2012). In 2013 I made the case that, despite the intense degree of language contact among Eastern Tukanoan languages, a number of mechanisms, including language ideology, counter linguistic assimilation and inhibit bilingualism. In the same paper I made the case that the abundance of metadiscursive resources deployed by Tukanoans to theorize about language and its speakers amounts to a rich and coherent Eastern Tukanoan ethnolinguistics (Chernela, 2013).

There is not sufficient space here to acknowledge the many authors and works that have contributed to our understanding of Eastern Tukanoan languages and their speakers (a list that would include Andrello, 2006; Árhém, 1981, 1989; Azevedo, 2005; Calbazar, 2000, 2013; Cayón, 2013; Chacon, 2013; Chacon and Cayón, 2013; Fleming, 2016; Goldman, 1963, 2004; Gomez-Imbert, 1993, 1996, 1999; Hosemann, 2009, 2013, 2015; C. Hugh-Jones, 1979; S. Hugh-Jones, 1979, 2013; Jackson, 1972, 1974, 1976, 1983; Shulist, 2013, 2016, 2018; Stenzel, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2013; Waltz and Waltz, 2000). The rich corpus of literature indicates that linguistic practices and values shown for the Kotiria are widely shared across Eastern Tukanoan groups. To the extent that one group may stand for others in this culture complex, then, the claim may be made for a general Eastern Tukanoan ontology in which language is a central concept. We are also fortunate to have the research of Alexandra Aikhenvald (1999, 2001, 2002, 2003a,b) and Patience Epps (2005, 2007; Epps and Stenzel, 2013) as a basis of comparison with Arawakan and Nadahup language families in the region.

3. Background: The Northwest Amazon

The Vaupés River and its tributaries form the center of the Eastern Tukanoan *Sprachbund*, site of one of the greatest concentrations of linguistic diversity in the world. In this area of some 110,000 km²—a region larger than Denmark—about 40,000 residents speak languages from four indigenous language families: Eastern Tukanoan, Arawakan, Tupi, and Nadahup (ISA, 2017). About a third of that number (20 or so language groups) are speakers of Eastern Tukanoan languages, including Desana, Piratapua, Tuyuca, Barasana, Baré and Kotiria, whose numbers range from 10 (Yurutí) to 6151 (Tukano) (IBGE, 2010).

We are concerned here with speakers of Kotiria, a northern branch of Eastern Tukanoan, whose 1400 speakers are located along the banks of the Vaupés River from Santa Cruz in Colombia to Arara in Brazil. The data in this paper were gathered in the Brazilian portion of the territory, a stretch of about 40 km, where 600–700 Kotiria live in ten separate villages.

Kotiria villagers throughout this region speak indigenous languages in their everyday lives, with Portuguese and Spanish being the preferred languages with itinerant merchants, missionaries, and other outsiders. When the linguist Kristine Stenzel described the Kotiria in 2005, she evaluated language use this way, "The Wanano are an example of a group within the Vaupés system that still retains many of its traditional characteristics, including high degrees of individual and community multi-lingualism" (Stenzel, 2005). In towns and cities⁷ Kotiria speakers typically defer to Tukano and, more commonly, Portuguese.

4. Ontology: language and the making of subjectivities in the Vaupés basin

Linguistic anthropologists have convincingly demonstrated that the project of language is never solely about language. This is evident in the case of the Kotiria, for whom language is at the center of an 'ontology of being'—a set of underlying precepts about existence that entails a theoretical understanding of the person and her/his existence among others. As language is regarded as the quintessential identifier of self and other, the act of speaking signals, and thereby establishes, commonalities and differences among and across individuals and collectivities. The use of one's own language therefore connects to the idea of what I have called 'speaking the self' (Chernela, 2013).

⁵ The data presented here were collected with the help of Kotiria speakers over nearly four decades. The earliest were collected during eighteen months (1978–1982) of immersion in villages belonging to the Kotiria, where males and children spoke Kotiria while in-marrying wives belonging to Tariana, Tukano, Desana, and Kubeo language groups, additionally spoke their own, outside languages. In recent years data have been collected in ongoing conversations with Kotiria speakers in São Gabriel da Cachoeira and Manaus.

⁶ The 2004 work remains the only case study of language learning from the Vaupés basin.

⁷ Sixty Kotiria reside full or part-time in São Gabriel da Cachoeira, a town about 170 km from the village area; another twelve live in Manaus, 1200 km from the area.

Members of the Eastern Tukanoan language groups recognize a common⁸ origin account in which the body of an ancestral anaconda (known by the names *Pamuri Bəsoku* (Tukano, Kotiria) and *Pahmelin Gahsiu* (Desana), among others) swam upriver to the headwaters of the Vaupés and turned around. From its vessel-body, stretched along the river, emerged the founding ancestors of each of the linguistico-descent groups that comprise the Eastern Tukanoan social universe. The narrative both accounts for commonalities among groups and makes sense of their separation.

The idealized, sociosemiotic arrangement of the ancestral founders is a template invoked to account for the establishment of situated descent groups along the river. Rather than using the often-misapplied terms from the anthropological literature to refer to these localized clusters of relatives (sib or patriclan), I use the Kotiria's own concept, conveyed in the term *koro* (plural: *koroa*). Translated as 'one-after-another,' the term refers to a series of succeeding generations. Based upon recursive patrilineal principles, each *koro* is known by the name of its mythological founding ancestor plus the affix, *-pona*, meaning 'children of.'

The members of a *koro* are understood to share a natural connectedness or, what [Sahlins \(2013\)](#) calls 'a quality of inter-subjective belonging' akin to [Schneider's 1972](#) notion of a shared 'substance' that imparts a transpersonal sense of being. One of those shared corporal substances is language. As an indicator of such ties, shared speech defines the community within which familial sentiments and moral commitments prevail.

This type of sociality, however, does not exhaust the full extent of one's networks of relatives. Mother and her fellow in-marrying wives are members of different *koroa* than those of their husbands and children. These in-marrying women, and their close kin, are referred to by the term *phaña*, for in-laws. These relatives by marriage, who may be among one's closest relatives by different criteria of relatedness, are nonetheless considered Others (*Paye Mahsa*); that is—not one's 'own.' At the same time the categorical distinction does not preclude close, ongoing ties of solidarity and mutuality. Indeed, marrying *koroa* form interlocking webs bound by social ties, but differentiated by language.

In other words, the Kotiria recognize two kinds of relatedness. The first of these, which may be known as corporality after [Anthony Seeger \(1980:130, 1981\)](#), is based in common agnatic heritage and consubstantiality; this type of relatedness is regarded as *inalienable*, based upon an *intrinsic* 'mutuality of being' ([Sahlins, 2013:20](#)) that is manifest, in part, in shared language. The second type of relatedness is based in *alienable*, *extrinsic* attachments comprising networks of sociality that are subject to overt negotiation and improvisation. The first is constructed as given; the second as pragmatic. The first is a relatedness based on sameness; the second, a relatedness based on difference.

5. Creating Brothers and Others in the Northwest Amazon

A language cannot be reproduced or transmitted without a theory of what that language is ([Sergeant, 2009](#)). Such a theory is based not only on interactive practice and ideology, but on underlying ontological assumptions.

For the Kotiria, the processes by which a child learns his or her patrillect are regarded as natural, inseparable from the child's physical and spiritual inheritance. Deeply rooted in ontology, speech is regarded as a fundamental property of the human body. As we have said, language is a consubstantiating property of the collective, reflecting, by that reasoning, the speaking person's belonging to the collective body. It is one of several substances transferred gradually from father to child to create a full consanguine, a member of the *koro*.

The process of becoming a Kotiria person begins when the father's bodily liquid (*wahsó*) enters the mother's womb. *Phaati*, for womb, refers to a shelter or covering and is regarded as a protective garment for the growing infant. Within this thoroughly female enclosure the growing fetus is nourished by the mother's own ingested food as it falls through her body to the child in a process likened to the falling of forest fruits.

A woman gives birth alone or in the company of her mother, who may have returned for this occasion to her own natal village. The birth usually takes place in the new mother's garden and it is there that she cuts the umbilical cord and disposes of the placenta. Cutting the cord is the first act in a progressive and inexorable process of separating the child from its mother.

The body of a newborn is vulnerable, open, and susceptible to harmful contaminants from the environment into which it has been born. Soon after birth, it is painted with protective black body paint, bathed, and blessed by a shaman (*kumuno*). This is the first in a series of protective incantations administered by the shaman to protect the infant from harmful substances. Once the infant has been settled into a hammock with mother in a secluded corner of the house, the shaman purifies all objects coming to it from the outside. Dangers extend even to mother, as she, too, is a potential source of pollution, and to mother's milk, which, like all objects from or related to mother, is potentially perilous to the infant. When first provided, its power must be neutralized by a shaman before it can be presented to the infant.⁹

In the developing body of the infant, the appearance of new teeth is a significant milestone. Like bone, from which the teeth emerge, and other hard substances, fingernails and teeth—the instruments of predation and consumption—are part of the child's paternal inheritance. The earliest teeth, *wama piri*, signal the start of weaning, an important turning point in the process of cleansing the infant's body of maternal substances and replacing them with male ones.

⁸ Although it is important, the well-known narrative of the transformational anaconda figure, known to many as *Pamuri Bəsoku*, is not the sole origin account recognized by Tukanoan groups. Additional accounts of the origin of the Kotiria, for example, have been published by [Brandão de Amorim \(1926\)](#) and [Chernela et al. \(2015\)](#).

⁹ See Christine [Hugh-Jones \(1979\)](#) for discussions of infant development and language learning among the Barasana. She writes, "... another form of control must be shown for the child must speak its father's language and not its mother's" (C. [Hugh-Jones, 1979:120](#)).

Only when all traces of maternal substances have been replaced by paternal ones, and when the soft malleability of the infant is hardened, does the child become *Kotiria-kuru/o*, a Kotiria person. The process culminates in a name-giving ceremony in which the child receives a soul name (*yeheripona*), another substance which binds him or her to the agnatic *koro* collectivity and to its ancestral heritage.¹⁰ From then on, to the extent possible, he or she avoids speaking mother's language, because hers is the identity of Otherness.

5.1. Patrilect: embodied speech

For the Eastern Tukanoan Kotiria, for whom speaking and being are indivisible, the same phrase, *Yu Kotiria hiha* can be used to convey both 'I am Kotiria' and 'I speak Kotiria.' On one occasion I heard a Western researcher quizzing a speaker of Kotiria with the question, "How do you say 'his father's language?'" The respondent laughed politely before he explained what he regarded as plainly obvious: "His father's language is his language." The expectation is that a person who identifies as Kotiria should speak Kotiria at all times, unless comprehension is an issue.

By the same logic, when a Kotiria person is asked whether they speak their mother's language, they are likely to respond by saying, "I am not X." So, for example, when asked whether he speaks Kubeo, a Kotiria son of a Kubeo mother is likely to reply, *Yu Bu'siakuru hierara*, "I am not a Kubeo." Because speaking-and-being are indivisible, it is often sufficient to say "I am not Kubeo" to fully communicate its corollary: "I [therefore] do not speak Kubeo." The degree to which linguistic loyalty is valued varies widely across linguistico-descent groups. For some, like the Arawakan Tariana, contextual considerations override loyalty to patrilect (Aikhenvald, 2002, 2003a). For most Kotiria and Tukano, however, loyalty to one's patrilect is strongly valued.

In yet another example illustrating the logic of the patrilect and the ontological foundation on which that logic is based, I report a conversation I overheard while visiting a village of Tukanoan Piratapuia on the Papurí River. There a villager admonished the child of a Piratapuia mother and an absent Colombian father, saying, "You shouldn't speak Piratapuia, you should speak Colombian!" The speaker's point was that the child should not be speaking his matrilect, Piratapuia; instead, he ought to speak his patrilect, 'Colombian.' The anecdote points to the conflation of language (speech), paternity, place, and identity. According to these equivalences, the critic's expectation was a reasonable one, in spite of the fact that the child had never known his father, a Colombian trader. But it also illustrates that those who speak languages not their own—that is, those who speak in a language other than their patrilect—can become the targets of criticism.

5.2. Matrilect: language and the making of alterity

In the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next, every attempt is made to avoid hybridization, so that, to the extent possible, linguistic identities remain intact and linguistic boundaries are kept stable. The situation is modeled for the child when people speak back and forth in two languages. The term *dubu?e*, containing the root *du* that refers to one's own language, is reserved for one's patrilect, i.e., one's 'own' proprietary language; it should not be applied to the matrilect. As it is not considered her child's language, a mother's language is said not to be acquired or learned by a child. A proper relationship to one's matrilect is to understand it but *not* to speak it: '*tuora*.' Thus, a Kotiria child begins life learning and speaking both matrilect and patrilect but is socialized over time against speaking the latter by having its use curtailed through casual interaction.

Although Kotiria children are exposed to at least two languages from birth, the acquisition processes, while parallel, differ from one another. A toddler begins her first utterances in her matrilect but is prodded away from that language by elders (including mother herself) and later, peers (Chernela, 2004). Rather than understand the early process as 'natural' (Klein, 1986:28–29; Krashen, 1981), the Kotiria transfer from matrilect to patrilect is the inverse: it is the 'naturalization' of the guided process (Chernela, 2004). The case confounds a simplified distinction between first- and second-language acquisition, reversing the tendency by infants to identify with the language of affect, the language of their mother. This provides an interesting mirror image of the naturalization attached to the term 'mother tongue' in Western usages.

A child must learn to distinguish matrilect and patrilect and discern which of them is appropriate to vocalize and which not. To speak one's matrilect is to be like mother and therefore unlike one's kin and village peers. As the alignment of like-self and unlike-self is established in the course of Kotiria language acquisition, mother becomes the quintessential Other. And, as the language of Otherness, mother's language must be rejected as the child matures. Along with other substances that are mother's, the growing child is divested of mother's language and develops the healthy, strengthening, and 'intrinsic,' language of the father.

The dominance of patrilect over matrilect extends eventually to all arenas of social use, resulting in the total decline in the production of one's matrilect. As the production of patrilect gradually eclipses matrilect, the first becomes dominant, while the second becomes a passive language, limited to comprehension rather than production.

The transition to patrilect is complete only when the learner interacts regularly with other youngsters of the village, who are ordinarily members of a single *koro* and speakers of its language. Playmates are likely to chastise a peer that uses their

¹⁰ Among the Kotiria the soul is understood to be part of a person's paternal legacy and may therefore be identified as consanguineal, which for Kotiria comprises agnatic relations exclusively. The case differs from the generalization, made by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, that in Amazonia the soul is always affinal (2001:34).

matrilect. During my stay in the Kotiria village of Yapima, a child who was playing among friends accidentally shouted a vocable that signaled pain in her mother's language. In spite of the brevity of the outburst, she was the target of harsh mockery by her playmates. She took care to not repeat the mistake.

The general orientation to the alterity of mother and mother's language leads to an avid effort to avoid combinant forms such as code-switching in order to attain monolingualistic purity and thereby demarcate the separations among codes.

5.2.1. Creating otherness through talk

For Tukanoans affinity is not distance approximated; it is proximity distanced. The pattern contrasts with that found in the Guianas and elsewhere in Amazonia (Rivière, 1993), where differences can be nullified through sharing food or other substances so that categorical outsiders may become categorical insiders. The Northwest Amazon stands apart from this generality. Through a linguistic 'othering' of wives and mothers, Vaupés descent groups are reified and boundaries maintained. Together, the high value on loyalty to one's own language (patrilect), combined with the idea that one's matrilect has no social or public value, serve to inhibit the reproduction of the matrilect and to perpetuate the diversity requisite to multilingualism.

Thus for Eastern Tukanoans like the Kotiria, *Alterity* or 'Otherness' is created through talk. Those who are deemed 'Others' or 'outsiders' are *made so* through speech practices which enact distance. As such, speech performs the role of categorically isolating and containing Otherness. Persons who do not speak one's patrilect are categorically regarded as 'Other.' At the same time, such categorical outsiders may be among one's closest intimates. Alterity is thoroughly interlaced into life in a Kotiria village. It is not only *within* the family, it is at its heart, present in its most intimate experiences and spaces. Categorically alien in the communities of their husbands, mothers and wives are irreducibly Others (*Paye Mahsa*: other people) who remain so despite physical proximity, substance sharing, or sentiment. Instead of being brought into proximity by language, affines are distanced by it. This alterity, that adheres to an entire social category of persons, regardless of physical or sentimental proximity, complicates our notions of Otherness and the attitudes often associated with it.

Although both categories of relatives—those united through the intrinsic bonds of the koro and those whose ties are extrinsic—are indivisible in the practice of daily and ceremonial life, it would be a mistake to conflate the two into a single category of relative, as the Tukanoans go out of their way to construct and maintain this categorical distinction in spite of life-long co-residence and deeply felt connections and sentiments.¹¹ We must conclude that, from the Tukanoan standpoint, these distinctions are good to think.

5.3. Alterlect: mimicry as a third type of language learning

In addition to patrilect and matrilect, which signal different sets of identities, and which are associated with different learning processes, the Kotiria recognize a third type of language learning, also defined in relation to speaker. In this form of language learning the speaker has no specified relationship with the social identities it indexes.

According to the Kotiria with whom I spoke, acquiring a language that 'belongs to' others, described as *khayo bu?ero*, is understood to be a qualitatively different process than the natural process of learning one's own language. Epps (2007) reports a similar phenomenon in her description of the Nadahup concept of 'appropriating' a language that is not one's own. Together the two accounts suggest an area-wide phenomenon of some interest. According to the Kotiria speakers with whom I consulted, the process involves mimicry or copying (*khayo*), which closely glosses as 'answering the same way he does' (*khayo*, mimicry, or 'answer the same way'). I have introduced the term *alterlect* to capture the sentiment of this category.

Since, according to the ontological precepts of the Kotiria, speaking-and-being are inseparable, to speak a language not your own is to 'become' another. *Doho*, which glosses as 'changing' or 'becoming,' also refers to 'spoiling' or 'rotting.' By speaking a language other than his or her own, a Kotiria person 'stops being Kotiria' and 'becomes something else.' She is *doho*, spoiled, rotten, or broken. *Dohoa* (where *-a* refers to the plural) can refer to 'persons of changed identities,' or 'those who became Other.' In 2011 I was told by several Kotiria that people who migrate to cities such as São Gabriel da Cachoeira or Manaus and speak Portuguese are often told, in partial jest, "*Nariro dohore daliro*": "You became a whiteman!" The assumption is that the ideal Kotiria self is intact and uncontaminated by external influences (*Kotiria yawaro*).

6. Valuing purism

The Kotiria with whom I spoke place a high value on linguistic purism. According to them, people who readily shift to other languages are likened to *mu*, the yellow-backed mocking bird (*Cassicus persicus*), that is said to 'speak in all the languages of the world.' The Kotiria deride the Kubeo, a Central Tukanoan group that includes an Arawakan subgroup, for speaking other languages. 'They sound like the *mu*,' they comment, 'imitating every kind of sound.' The commentary illustrates the high value placed on linguistic loyalty and standardized performance by some Tukanoan groups, including the Kotiria; at the same time it points to the fact that not all groups place the same high evaluation on linguistic loyalty.

¹¹ Likewise, it would seem inappropriate to characterize Eastern Tukanoan local communities as 'consanguineal.' The designation is problematic insofar as it conflates the categorical with the practical, and the native/local with the anthropological. It furthermore discounts Tukanoan ontology, which linguistically and ontologically excludes affines from the blood-body register of agnatic relatives. That Tukanoan ontology precludes these relatives from participating in the trans-bodily koro, does not diminish the profound and far-reaching significance and intimacies of these 'networks of difference.'

Favoring linguistic purism has its expression in the phrase, *Kotiria yawaro*, referring to pure (correct) Kotiria, which does not allow for mixing, and is contrasted with *daho[-mene]*, ‘mixing up’ or incorrect speaking. The Kotiria recognize several types of mixing, including the practices referred to in Western scholarship as code switching and borrowing.¹² *Duruku more*, which glosses as ‘mixed language,’ is used to refer to an interlanguage such as *Portuñol*, which combines features of Portuguese and Spanish (Español). Code-switching is regarded as ‘speaking in pieces’ and is ridiculed, by saying, “A piece of Kotiria, a piece of Tukano!”

A high value is placed on the quality *poo*, a term that may be glossed as ‘internal discipline’ or ‘self-control.’ A bearer of this quality, *pooriro* (one with inner discipline), does not mix or confuse languages. I have been told, “I do not mix languages because I am a disciplined (self-controlled) person”: *yʉʉ duruku doho meʔnera, yʉʉ ʌ duruku pooriro hiha*.

7. Reifying difference

As Sorensen surmised a half-century ago, maintaining systematic differences among linguistic varieties entails sociolinguistic work by speakers. Kotiria speakers employ a number of linguistic resources to theorize about the nature of language and to discuss speech *per se* using criteria to discern, compare, and theorize about patterns. These concepts draw attention to selected phonological features that act as shibboleths of linguistico-descent group membership and that Kotiria and other Tukanoans use to actively construct difference (Chernela, 2013). Some of the sound features that are marked by Kotiria and other Tukanoan speakers as indicators of identity include: (1) sound flow versus stops (glottalization); (2) ‘closed’ vs. ‘open-mouthed’ (nasality); (3) speech velocity; (4) word length (agglutination); and (5) breath (aspiration).

The Kotiria with whom I spoke drew on visual analogies to characterize these phonological features. For example, the presence of glottal stops, described as ‘sharp angles,’ was compared to their absence, ‘flowing waves,’ or aspirations, that are often the sole distinguishing features between two related lexemes in distinct languages. I was told that Kotiria speech flows slowly and smoothly, “like waves of water.” The Tukano spoken downriver, by comparison, was said to “sound like lightning,” with abrupt stops and starts: “It goes and then stops! Like an angle—sharp!” Thus, a salient difference can be easily recognized: “We have a wave; they have an angle.”

For example, comparing the words for ‘meat’ in Tukano, Tuyuka, and Kotiria, speakers emphasize the indexical role of the glottal stop. According to native speakers the glottal stop was strong in Tukano, mild in Kotiria, and absent in Tuyuka:

Tukano *diʔi* meat (Barnes, 1999:210)

Kotiria *diʔi* meat

Tuyuka *diif* meat (Barnes, 1999:210)

Kotiria and Tukano terms for a ceremonial gift likewise show the patterned differences in the glottal stop that mark speaker’s socio-linguistic identity. The Kotiria term *poohari* employs vowel elongation and aspiration while the Tukano term with equivalent meaning, *poʔati*, employs a shorter vowel duration and a glottal stop.

A different set of features that serves to distinguish a variant’s sound system are those involving nasalization. The Kotiria conceptualize a continuum of languages proceeding from most ‘open’ (least nasalized) to most ‘closed’ (most nasalized). According to this evaluation, Tukano speech is characterized as ‘open’ (least nasalized); Kotiria speech as ‘closed’ (mildly nasalized); and Kubeo speech ‘very closed’ (most nasalized).

Word length is yet another feature used to describe and compare languages. Eastern Tukanoan languages are suffixing languages in which verb roots are followed by multiple affixes indicating person, number, tense, causation, motion and evidential category. The extent of agglutinative tendencies, however, differs among the languages (Barnes, 1999:212). My Kotiria interlocutors described the differences in suffixing this way: *Ni yudoro* where *ní* glosses as ‘speak’ and *yudoro*, as ‘add a little piece’. Kotiria speakers observe that Tukano speakers use more ‘little pieces’ (affixes), and therefore, produce longer words than Kotiria. The word for tree (and all cylindrical shapes) illustrates the point quite simply:

Kot., tubular (cylinder, tree): *tʉ*

Tuk., tubular (cylinder, tree): *tigʉ* (Barnes, 1999:210)

Languages are also characterized and compared according to speaking velocity: *kheroka*, fast, or *pirodero*, slow. Tukano is said to be fastest, Kotiria a bit faster than Tukano, and Desana very slow. Additional factors used to differentiate languages include vowel elongation, accent, and vowel change.

From the perspective of the speakers’ ethnotheory, the differences between these closely related words mark the boundaries between languages. In the process of reifying difference, distinctions between languages are exaggerated, giving languages a degree of perceived fixity and increasing the contrast among related languages. The process reinforces an ontological understanding of the speaking self.

The implication is that phonological differences between recognized varieties are heightened, rather than softened or eroded, by close language contact. For example, Barnes has reported a weak glottal stop among upriver, Colombian, Tukano (Barnes, 1999), whereas downriver, Brazilian, Tukano show a strong glottal stop. The possibility remains that the strength of the Tukano glottal stop downriver is a recent innovation that serves to differentiate it from the other Eastern Tukanoan languages with which it is in contact. In the Northwest Amazon—much like India (Gumperz, 1964, 1967), Southeast Asia or

¹² For comparison, see Mutua Mehinaku’s work on the use of *Lingua Misturada* among Kuikuru speakers in the Upper Xingu region of Brazil (Mehinaku, 2010).

the neighborhoods of Philadelphia (Labov, 2001)—distinctions are maintained, and even exaggerated, in order to mark identity. This runs counter to the alternative argument that languages in contact tend to become more proximate.

8. Norms, essentialisms, and truths

The construction ‘one language equals one people’ and associated values of purism and language loyalty have been criticized as ideological red herrings. However, in considering the specific problem of the language-to-group relation, it is important to distinguish between language ideology, linguistic practice, and ontology of language.

In one of its most conventional usages, ideology is artifice; it constitutes a compelling narrative that is presented in the form of common-sense universals or natural principles that serve to justify or to rationalize certain linguistic practices and to reject others (Blommaert, 1998; Silverstein, 1979, 1998; Woolard and Schieffelin, 1994; Gal, 1998, 2005; Schieffelin et al., 1998; Irvine and Gal, 2000). In this sense ideology contrasts with and obscures lived experience. It is concerned more with ideals and aspirations than with actualities.

To speak of languages as identifiable entities that can be closed, bounded, and named, is an essentializing move (Sergeant, 2009:350; Blommaert, 1998, 2006). Rather than closed and bounded, languages are inherently open, dynamic, and variable, existing within an ecology of other systems. As elsewhere, one can safely suggest that in the Northwest Amazon speakers do, in fact, appropriate linguistic resources from one another over time. For example, parents bemoan the fact that their children pick up Tukano in the city. These are the trends and slippages countered by more conservative speakers.

An ontology of language is not at odds with reality: it is the actuality in which speakers live and speak. Where speaking-and-being are inseparable, as they are among Eastern Tukanoans like the Kotiria, the ‘one language equals one people’ maxim is a foundational presupposition. It is a simple truth.

9. Conclusions: Language in an ontological register

As an objectified phenomenon, then, language has a prominent place in Kotiria ontology and serves as an explanatory resource for understanding social life. This extensive body of symbolic and sociopragmatic knowledge about language forms part of what we call the ‘ontological register.’ Language in the ontological register entails a holistic view of the nature of language itself, including beliefs about what is or is not a language; how languages differ from one another; attitudes toward languages that attach to their speakers; meanings attributed to the speaking person; what code choice signals about a speaker; and much more.

Among Tukanoans, where language is implicated in the way one thinks about the self and the collectivity, language is part of the person and her/his development. It may be said that, for Kotiria, those who share a language share a body. Being and speech are mutually entailed, as bodily development and language acquisition and learning are aspects of the same processes of producing the person. Language in the ontological register, therefore, encompasses basic premises underlying existence, including the way in which selves, through symbols and meanings, construct collectivities; their modes of being in the world; how the social world is to be understood; and how it constructs, defines, and differentiates units through language. Language, always intrinsically social, is here an index of group belonging, reflecting a theory of the nature of language and being. Speaking a specific variety, or avoiding it, contributes to the production of two kinds of mutualities: one based on sameness, the other on difference. Speakers manage linguistic choice to create, maintain, and reproduce sociolinguistic distance.

Marshall Sahlins disputed David Schneider’s revision of kinship on the grounds that it was “based on an ontological distinction without a difference ... ignoring the symbolic constitution of social relations” (2013:16). Such a shortcoming would be an unlikely oversight for analyses of Tukanoan sociality, where differences among mutually constituted participants are not only maintained; they are reified, reinforced, and produced in language.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Chris Hewlett, Chris Ball, and Sheila Dauer, for their helpful conversations that inspired this manuscript, as well as Mateus Cabral, Miguel Cabral, Emilia Trindade, José Cordeiro, Iginu Teixeira, and other speakers of Kotiria, for their long-time collaboration, instruction, and friendship.

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