



A study of linguistic and cognitive categorization in a Panoan language

Language and Speakers

Cashinahua is a Panoan language which is spoken by a major part of the ethnic population of about 6,000 individuals inhabiting the Brazilian-Peruvian border region.

While all of the about 1,400 members of the group in the Peruvian region of Ucayali, living



By Sabine Giesser

in villages along the Purus and Curanja rivers, still fluently speak their native language and are mostly non-proficient speakers of Spanish, the situation varies greatly on the other side of the border, in the Brazilian state of Acre. Here most Cashinahuas have been in constant and close contact with the national society for an extended period, resulting in a high rate of bilingualism with Portuguese.



Eliane Camargo and older specialists in the village of San Martin (Peru) discuss bird names which are elicited by listening to their sounds on a CD (San Martin/Peru 2007)

Especially the communities in the Jurua basin, along the rivers Tarauacá, Humaitá, Murú and Envira, who were first contacted more than 120 years ago during the rubber boom and forced to work in the rubber estates, use varieties of the language which are heavily influenced by Portuguese. Code-switching is a frequent phenomenon, and some of the younger people living in urban areas can be observed to have totally switched to Portuguese.

Since the 1970s many Peruvian Cashinahuas have moved downriver, populating the Brazilian side of the river Purus. A substantial migration to towns can be currently observed in both countries.



Bilingual teachers from various villages along the river Purus participate in a workshop on orthography development (Puerto Esperanza/Peru 2010)



Workshop participants perform ritual chanting (Mucuripe/Brazil 2006)

Documentation Team

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Alberto Roque Toríbio, Hulício Moises Kaxinawá, Texerino Kirino Capitán (principal consultants) and many other members of the Cashinahua community



Bilingual teachers from the Jurua basin develop a Cashinahua terminology for places of articulation in a workshop on phonetics and phonology (Mucuripe/Brazil 2006)

Major Issues

The project focused on a documentation of Cashinahua mythology, cultural practices and rituals which are rapidly disappearing from common knowledge and have come into disuse. As a stimulus for myth-telling and as a base for research in older cultural practices a 100-year-old text collection assembled by the Brazilian historian Capistrano de Abreu was used.

Another important issue was the study of linguistic and cognitive categorization. Workshops for the Cashinahua bilingual teachers were held each year in which the participants received a basic training in general linguistics, while at the same time developing their own Cashinahua terminology for linguistic concepts. The discussions of terminology gave a valuable insight into how the speakers categorize their world and how this is reflected linguistically.

Challenges

A major challenge was the fact that the Cashinahua population has been divided by a national border for almost a century. As a consequence, the communities have developed into different directions. While in Peru the presence of missionaries has led to the abandonment of certain cultural practices, in Brazil language and culture are being revitalized, a tendency which has been supported by anthropologists since the early 1980s.

In both countries different writing systems were developed which are used in bilingual education. During the linguistic workshops the Peruvian bilingual teachers could be convinced of some minor amendments to their orthography. In Brazil any changes to the current phonetically-based orthography are a matter of political negotiations rather than of linguistic considerations.



Iliodoro demonstrates how to produce a traditional feather headdress (San Martin/Peru 2007)

Highlights

Apart from the data collected by the project team, older material recorded by Camargo and by the German anthropologist Barbara Keifenheim could be inserted in the archive. Keifenheim's recordings include a valuable collection of female ritual chanting and present a thematic bias on the history of contact and migration of the Peruvian group. The archive further contains different versions of myths told by Cashinahuas in both countries.

The Cashinahua linguistic terminology developed during the teachers' workshops served as a basis for monolingual linguistic material to be used in the training of Cashinahua bilingual teachers.

A transcription of Capistrano's text collection according to current (Peruvian) orthographical standards was elaborated by members of the project team as well as a book on the group's history in Cashinahua, Portuguese and Spanish to be used in bilingual education.



Reginaldo tells a Cashinahua myth and is interviewed by Paulo, a young workshop participant, about traditional culture (Mucuripe/Brazil 2006)

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