

Phonological diffusion in the Amazonian Vaupés

Patience Epps

University of Texas at Austin

Amazonia is well known for its tremendous linguistic diversity, with some 250 languages representing over 50 distinct genetic groupings. Many of these languages are highly endangered, and only a fraction are well documented and described (Moore 2007). Yet, as documentation advances, they are a steady source of typological surprises, informing and revising our understanding of human language. The Vaupés region of northwest Amazonia is a microcosm of this linguistic diversity, with four different language families – East Tukanoan, Arawak, Nadahup, and Kakua-Nukak (of which all members are to some degree endangered) – represented in an area of a few hundred square kilometers. At the same time, long-term and intensive contact among many of these languages has resulted in a common Vaupés areal 'profile'. The languages of the Vaupés thus offer, on one hand, a set of theoretically noteworthy linguistic phenomena, and on the other, an opportunity to consider the variability and stability of these phenomena over time and space.

In this talk, I investigate the sound systems of Vaupés languages, and explore the distribution of phonological features across language families and geographic areas. I focus in particular on the prosodic features of nasalization, tone, and glottalization. The nasal harmonies of the Tukanoan languages, in which nasalization is a syllable- or morpheme-level prosody and is prone to spreading across morpheme boundaries, are theoretically noteworthy (e.g. Kaye 1971, Noske 1995, Piggott & Van der Hulst 1997); however, similar forms of nasal prosody are encountered among many of the region's languages, often exhibiting intriguing variations (e.g. Botma 2005). Glottalization (of consonant, vowels, or as a suprasegmental feature) is also widely encountered, although its manifestation differs across languages and analyses (e.g. Stenzel 2007); the same is true of tone (e.g. Gomez-Imbert and Kenstowicz 2000, Hyman 2010). In contrast to these prosodic phonological features, which appear to be highly diffusible, characteristics of Vaupés segmental inventories tend to be associated more closely with particular genetic groupings. For example, features such as aspirated voiceless stops and the lack of a voiced velar are associated closely with Arawak, although they have spread to varying degrees to other Vaupés languages. It is particularly intriguing that the foraging Nadahup and Kakua-Nukak groups (often lumped together as 'Makú') share a number of characteristics relating to segmental inventory and syllable/word structure that are not shared by their agriculturalist neighbors, suggesting a more ancient association.

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