

Chapter 12 In Brief

Languages of the Amazon: Dimensions of diversity

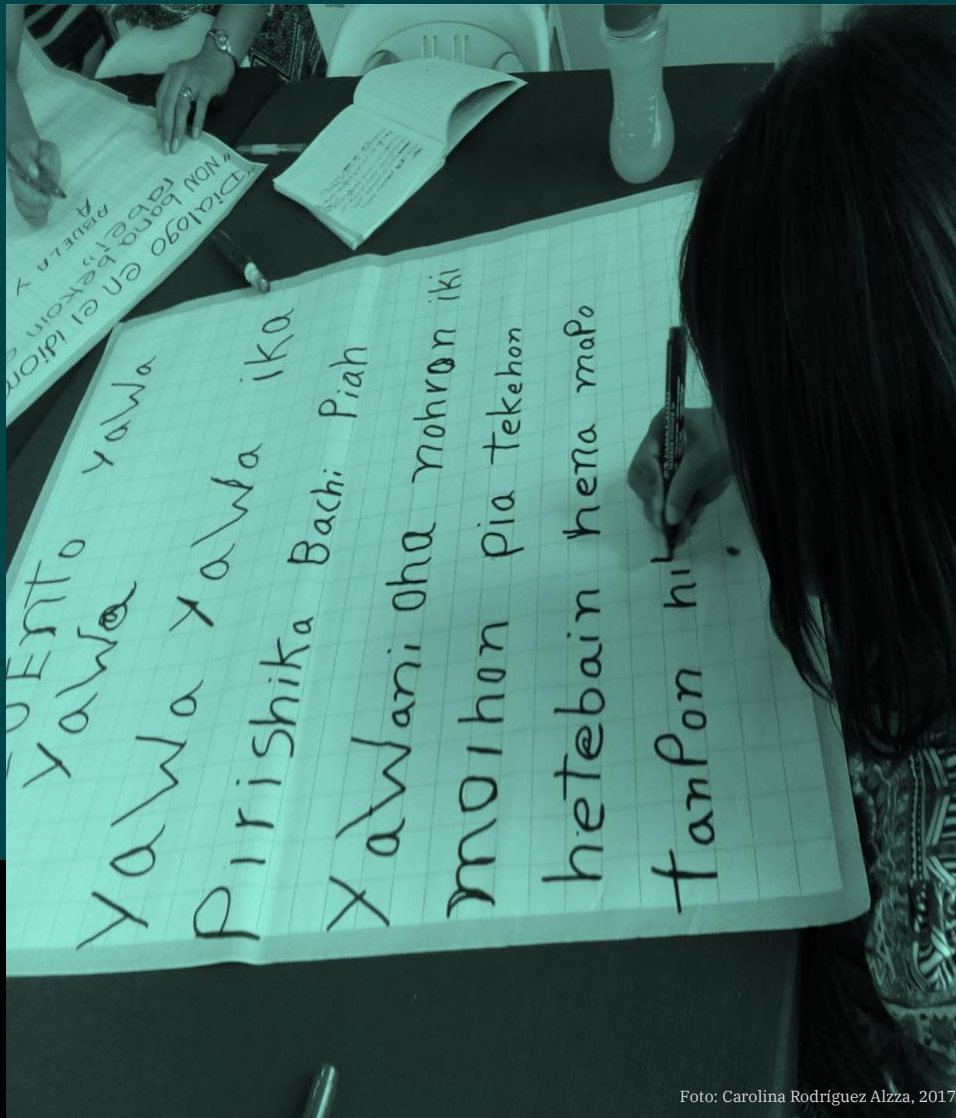


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THE AMAZON WE WANT
Science Panel for the Amazon

Languages of the Amazon: Dimensions of diversity

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Key Messages

- 1) One of the most important dimensions of the linguistic diversity of the Amazon region is its genealogical diversity. In terms of language families and isolates, the Amazon is one of the richest parts of the world, and this diversity is, not coincidentally, mirrored by the extraordinary Amazonian biodiversity.
- 2) Each language represents centuries of cultural and intellectual creativity that holds scientific and cultural value for humanity as a whole. With the loss of each culture and each language, humanity loses yet another alternative and possibly unique way to understand the world around us.
- 3) All languages and cultures are permanently subject to change, and are capable of adapting to new circumstances. However, since the arrival of Europeans, the Amazon region has lost 75% of its languages^{1,2}. Most Amazonian languages are in danger of extinction, but only a few have been sufficiently documented and studied. The disappearance of linguistic diversity in the Amazon, disintegration of Indigenous societies, extinction of biological species, and destruction of Amazonian ecosystems are interconnected.
- 4) Indigenous peoples are taking advantage of the growing connectivity throughout the Amazon and developing solutions by exploring new domains for language use such as social media, in which young speakers participate without feeling stigmatized and promote the documentation and revitalization of their languages.
- 5) Solutions to prevent language extinction involve the promotion of bilingualism, recognition of Indigenous rights, the protection of Indigenous lands, and sustainable economic alternatives to uncontrolled deforestation and mineral prospecting and extraction.
- 6) Indigenous communities should be consulted about their priorities with regard to language policies, and their demands should be met.
- 7) Bi- or multilingualism should be valued rather than considered an obstacle, both by society at large and by Indigenous communities. One does not have to abandon one's native language in order to learn a national language.
- 8) Indigenous education should be improved and high-quality educational material in Indigenous languages should be developed.
- 9) Indigenous territories must be protected against ecological degradation and invasion. The presence of outsiders should have the informed consent of their populations.
- 10) All aspects of Indigenous life, including Indigenous languages, cultures, and religions, should be respected. This requires adequate educational curricula, awareness campaigns, and replacing stereotypes and myths with reliable information. Only a public informed on diversity and its advantages is in a position to value, preserve, and defend it.

Recommendations

- 1) Reliable national censuses on languages, covering population and speaker numbers, proficiency levels, and sociolinguistic situations, and carried out by professional linguists, can help governments understand which languages exist and

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Abstract This chapter covers the extraordinary Indigenous linguistic diversity of the Amazon region, including its different dimensions: the existence of a relatively large number of languages in the region; how these languages are related to each other, representing an impressive genealogical diversity; geographical distribution over different Amazonian subregions; the effects of language contact that have resulted in several linguistic areas; different levels of endangerment and the social circumstances that contribute to it; and, finally, what is lost when languages disappear.

Linguistic diversity The Amazon region is highly linguistically diverse. It is estimated that over 300 Indigenous languages are spoken today, relative to over 1,000 languages spoken upon the arrival of European colonizers. Over the past five centuries, exogenous diseases, colonial violence, slavery, and dispossession have diminished original populations and in the process many languages have become extinct. Despite rising Indigenous populations for the past 50 years, most languages remain in danger of extinction.

The emergence of genealogical language diversity There are perhaps 250 different language families in the world today, some of which are very small, containing only two or three languages, many of which are found only in South America. Some languages are isolates: they do not belong to any known family and can be considered as single-language families.

The classification of languages into families requires historical comparative linguistic research and depends on reliable and well-analyzed descriptive linguistic data. Especially in the Amazon, such data are not always available, and in view of the endangered situation of most Amazonian languages, researchers face a race against time.

Furthermore, the greater the diversity within a language family in a specific region, the more likely it is that language family originated there. Hence, the origin of the Tupi language family is estimated to be in the border region of the Brazilian states of Mato

Grosso and Rondônia. Classification of languages involves the reconstruction of sound changes and words, such as terms for material and immaterial culture, subsistence technology, and features of nature and the landscape.

Language diversification and change through contact Languages can change through contact with other languages, which occurs in situations of bi- or multilingualism, or when people that do not speak each other's language are in contact^{3,4}. Due to contact, languages can display specific similarities with other languages, even though they are not genealogically related. One of the challenges of comparative linguistics lies in distinguishing the contact signal from the genealogical signal⁵. Vestiges of language contact and knowledge about the directionality of linguistic influence can be highly relevant for our understanding of present and past cultural, societal, and trade relationships between populations.

The Amazon region contains several linguistic areas, the most famous and striking one being the Upper Rio Negro region where the Tucanoan, Arawakan, Naduhup, and Kakua-Nukak languages share grammatical traits that are not shared with genealogically related languages outside of the region^{6,7}.

Language variation Both historical language change and contact-induced language change are kinds of linguistic variation. In fact, variability is an important characteristic of any language. What is usually called a "language" is not a clearly definable entity. A living language may vary through time; by region; across social strata; according to occupation, gender, or age; by audience, etc. The contrast of Amazonian languages could not be bigger. We are lucky if an Amazonian language can boast a single comprehensive grammatical description, and many Amazonian languages are under documented. Nevertheless, Amazonian languages are as rich and varied as any other, and fortunately the documentation and study of dialectal variation, speech styles, specialized language use, and verbal art are beginning to receive more attention^{8,9}.

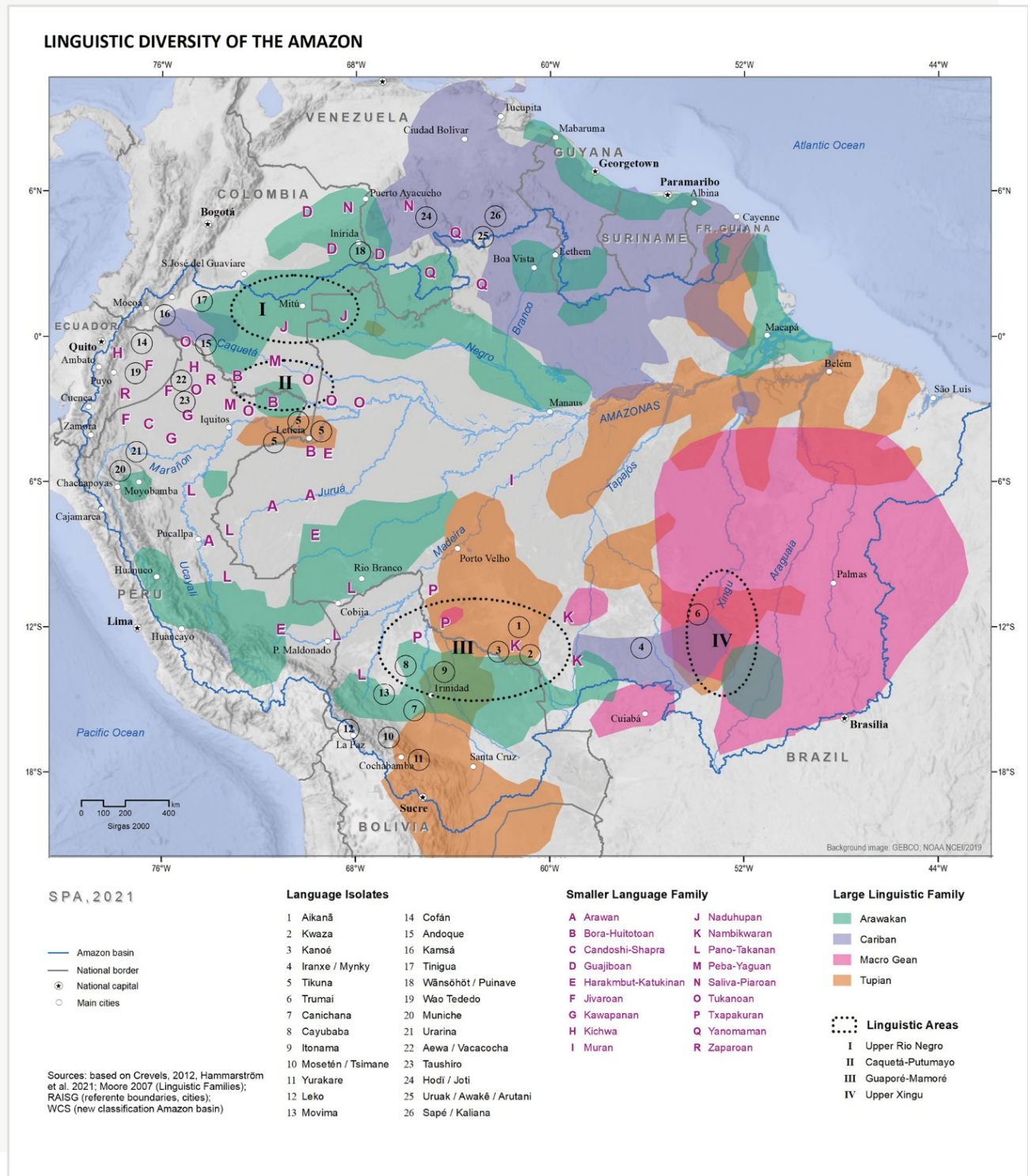


Figure 12.1 Linguistic diversity of the Amazon, Sources 10,11,12,13,14.

For example, the Hup language of the Brazilian-Colombian border has three dialect areas where pronunciation, the meaning of words, and grammar may differ. The languages of the Zoro, Cinta Larga, Gavião, and Aruá ethnic groups of Brazil are in fact different dialects of the same language. They are mutually intelligible, even though each group may insist that the other group “speaks differently.” Several Amazonian languages have separate speech varieties for men and women. In Kukama-Kukamiria (Peru, Colombia and Brazil) for example, men and women use different personal pronouns.

Language vitality and endangerment Many Amazonian languages have become extinct during the past few centuries. Language can become obsolete and disappear due to gradual historical processes, or when people abandon their native language, usually for economic or political reasons. Languages may also become extinct when their speakers die out, for example due to natural disasters or genocide.

Nevertheless, many languages survive today in the Amazon Basin. Up to 200 isolated or recently contacted Indigenous groups¹⁵⁻¹⁷ continue to speak their languages. Amazonian Indigenous groups struggle to maintain their languages inside as well as outside of their own territories. In cities, for example, the national language is dominant and the use of Indigenous languages is often stigmatized.

There are different proposals to measure the degree of language endangerment or vitality¹⁸⁻²⁵. Most of them have created categories for the different degrees of endangerment, such as vital, vulnerable, in serious danger, and critically endangered²⁶.

Amazonian populations have always been part of extensive social networks. Coexistence and sharing of social activities, such as rituals, festivities, and marriage, have encouraged people to learn more than one language. Despite the linguistic differences, communication is possible thanks to a common socio-cultural background underlying oral traditions (e.g., mythical heroes, similar discursive

genres). In healing ceremonies or festivals, for example, each community uses its own language; the success of communication lies in mutual knowledge, active or passive, partially supported by inter-ethnic marriages and alliances.

Drivers of change Although change is natural, the Amazon region is losing linguistic diversity at an alarming and increasing rate. To understand how the drivers of this change operate it is useful to recall that language vitality requires a critical mass of speakers living in the same area, and that this population must have confidence that their language has a future, and that it will be a productive medium of their children’s livelihood as well as their social well-being.

Christian missionary movements, epidemics, and a succession of extraction booms were the major drivers of language loss prior to 1970. As the twentieth century progressed, a significant driver of linguistic change was the accelerating connectivity of the previously isolated whitewater regions such as the headwaters of tributaries in the western Amazon where the greatest concentration of language families and language isolates lie.

Perhaps the greatest driver of language loss, however, is a change in the type of employment young people aspire to. Because land loss, deforestation, and the depletion of game animals have made sustaining a family in their Indigenous territory more difficult, many seek jobs outside their territories, often seasonal work in oilfields or in agriculture. For administrative jobs, formal education is required and although governments throughout the Amazon have committed to providing native language education, serious difficulties remain.

What exactly is being lost? It is easy to underestimate the extent of language loss because it occurs not only in the number of speakers, but also less visibly in the functions, domains, and ways in which languages are used. The loss of language diversity is interconnected with the broader loss of species in the micro-environments where the languages are spoken. A clear example is the loss of species names,

which vary greatly from one river to another and carry a wealth of knowledge. Another important area of loss is the language of social relations. Amazonian languages helped maintain social order and cohesion through the use of kinship terms, evidential markers that recognize the speech of others, and suffixes that express emotional delicacy, politeness, and endearment. Finally, contact with other languages may influence not only the vocabulary, but also the grammar and sound system of a language. Consequently, Indigenous languages today may lose some of their most distinctive features through Spanish or Portuguese influence.

Importance of Indigenous languages in new contexts In recent years, the Amazon has seen a surge of connectivity through social media, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp. Another driver of language change countered by social media is the hegemony of national languages in broadcasting news, arts, entertainment, and sports. While cost and government licensing controls previously limited natives' access to the airwaves, native broadcasters are now flourishing on social media and avoiding these controls. While inadequate for documentation and the creation of a lasting record, cell phone recording and posting may raise awareness of endangered forms of speech among young activists. Finally, the internet opens up important new avenues for Indigenous language education in the territories, thus limiting migration. Although most drivers of change associated with modernity work to decrease language diversity, there is hope that others may counter these forces by providing new avenues for its preservation and revitalization.

Conclusions This chapter presented some of the remarkable diversity aspects of Amazonian languages, their vitality as well as their vulnerability to loss. Most of the Amazonian linguistic diversity is concentrated in the west, with fewer language families in the east. Coincidentally or not, this difference roughly corresponds to geological divisions between the western Amazon's much younger Andean alluvial soils (with greater biodiversity) and the eastern

Amazon's much older weathered soils and less biodiversity. See Chapter 10 for correlations between biological and linguistic diversity.

The linguistic diversity of the Amazon is at great risk of extinction. The accelerated disappearance of languages can be attributed to five centuries of colonization by Europeans and their descendants, who brought disease, poverty, violence, and genocide to local populations. After the 1970s, the effects of globalization have added to the general decline of linguistic diversity.

The survival of a language is interdependent with the integrity of its community of speakers, which again is often tied to the legal and ecological protection of their lands. With the loss of a language the sense of being a distinct people with the right to a territory is often weakened.

To counter these losses, Indigenous organizations throughout the region have pressured their governments to guarantee rights and formal recognition of their languages and to establish bilingual education programs. This has resulted in substantial progress in gaining legal status and bilingual education rights. Sobering challenges remain, however. Often political solutions remain symbolically in writing, with initiatives to protect Indigenous languages greatly underfunded and understaffed.

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