

Endangerment in the midst of language vitality: The case of traditional knowledge

Since the early 1990s, language endangerment has increasingly been a concern in the field of linguistics. Although most of the attention has been given to languages that have ceased to be transmitted, this presentation showcases the urgency of documentation and conservation even in cases where the language itself continues to be used vigorously by a community, but where cultural and ethnolinguistic knowledge is being rapidly lost by younger generations.

The Shiwiar language is spoken by around 1,200 people in the lowlands of eastern Ecuador and northern Peru, and it is one of the five members of the Chicham language family. Although Shiwiar communities are multilingual, the Shiwiar language is the primary language in all Shiwiar villages, and it continues to be transmitted to children. Nevertheless, despite the vitality of the language, missionisation and increasing integration to the broader Ecuadorean society have brought on a rapid change of lifestyle for Shiwiar people which has almost completely halted the transmission of many aspects of traditional knowledge to younger community members. The growing realisation that this knowledge is becoming critically endangered has alarmed the community, and many Shiwiar people are now exploring ways in which this knowledge can be documented, preserved and revitalised.

Since 2010, the author has worked on an ongoing documentation project with the Shiwiar community. The original goals of the project were centred on the description and analysis of the Shiwiar language, but over the course of the years the project shifted in focus towards the documentation of endangered Shiwiar knowledge and how that knowledge is associated with certain linguistic practices. Three critical topics that have recently been addressed in the project are traditional prayers and incantations (*anent*), knowledge of flora and fauna (including an avoidance register used for hunting), and toponymy. Interestingly, although the decision to document these areas of knowledge arose as a response to non-linguistic community concerns, the documentation of this knowledge has provided crucial insight into language structure and the dynamics of language contact. For example, an examination of hunting avoidance terms uncovered a cycle of taboo-induced lexical borrowing that would have otherwise not been apparent to a linguistic researcher.

This case study highlights the importance of including knowledge and genre endangerment as critical areas within the scope of language endangerment. It also emphasises the fact that documentary projects can still provide valuable linguistic data even when they are geared at addressing non-linguistic community goals.

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