

How (not to) count in Murui (Witotoan, Northwest Amazonia)?

This paper focuses on the numeral system in Murui, a Witotoan language spoken in southern Colombia and northern Peru. The Murui language employs several distinctive 'counting systems' or 'numeral strategies':

- 1) 'one' and 'two' are basic, separate, and unanalyzable lexemes;
- 2) 'three' and 'four' are analyzable forms conveying an idea of 'having a brother';
- 3) number words from 'five' onwards are complex analyzable expressions with classifiers based on 'hands' and 'feet';
- 4) Spanish numbers are used for values above 'five'. Elders say that there is no other option in Murui for values higher than 'twenty' than using Spanish numbers. Other elders (and younger people) maintain that one can easily count beyond 'twenty'.

It has been argued in the literature that small indigenous societies in Amazonia are 'astonishingly poor' in number words. This indicates that counting, as an original cultural practice, might have been absent altogether in Amazonia (Aikhenvald 2012). Amazonian languages have only a handful of underived number words (typically, 'one', 'two', often 'three', and sometimes 'four'). Further, number words above 'three' and 'four' are descriptive expressions based on a body part, and are rarely used in natural discourse. Often, across Amazonia, number words come from words whose meaning is not numerical and do not indicate an exact quantity (Aikhenvald 2012). This paper, based on first-hand data collected between 2010-2017 among the Murui communities, is further evidence for the absence of counting routine in Amazonia. An analysis of Murui counting practice points towards the possibility that the Murui counting system may have been innovated fairly recently as a result of language contact and the introduction of schooling in the region (see also Aikhenvald 2002; Dixon 2012; Epps 2006a, 2006b).

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