The language of coca: Tracing the spread of ‘coca’ in Amazonian languages

Coca (*Erythroxylum coca*) is one of the most ritually charged plants of Northwest Amazonia, playing a central role in Indigenous cosmologies, ceremonies, and intergroup interactions. This paper traces the linguistic history of coca across the region by identifying major lexical clusters, analyzing their diffusion across language families, and examining how these patterns relate to ritual and sociocultural practices.

The study draws on original fieldwork conducted in two adjacent regions of northwestern South America: the Caquetá–Putumayo (C-P) River Basins of southern Colombia and the Vaupés River Basin, which spans Colombia and parts of Brazil. While the Vaupés constitutes a classic linguistic area—characterized by stable multilingualism and grammatical diffusion—the C-P region is considered a cultural area, defined by shared ceremonial practices, multilingualism, and intense language contact. These regions are home to Witotoan, Boran, East Tucanoan, and Arawak-speaking peoples. In addition to fieldwork data, we draw on comparative materials from grammatical descriptions, ethnographic accounts, and expert consultations with linguists and anthropologists working on other regional families, including Tukanoan, Carib, Nadahup, and Tupi-Guarani. In the C-P area, coca is ceremonially ingested and licked in powdered form, often mixed with ash from *Cecropia* leaves. In contrast, Vaupés River Basin societies (e.g. Tariana) typically inhale coca—a difference that reflects divergent ritual systems and associated linguistic traditions (Echeverri, 1997; Stradelli, 1890).

Two main lexical clusters emerge in the data from Northwest Amazonia: the *hibie* set (e.g., Murui-Muina *hibie*, Resígaro *híibíʔé*, Bora *íípií*), concentrated in the C-P region; and the *patu* set (e.g., Tariana *hipatu*, Baniwa *hiipáto*, Tucano *pátu, Carijona iiha’tu*), widespread in the Vaupés and beyond. While previous work (Haynie (Haynie, Bowern, Epps, Hill, & McConvell, 2014) suggests a Witotoan-Boran origin for *hibie*, the presence of related forms in Andoke (isolate) and Yagua (Peba-Yagua) calls for a reevaluation of this hypothesis, possibly pointing to older southern roots and a northward diffusion through ceremonial trade networks. Conversely, the *patu* form appears to have spread along Arawak–Tukanoan corridors, supported by intense interethnic contact and shared shamanic hierarchies (Aikhenvald, 2002; Ramirez, 1997).

Despite a general inhibition of lexical borrowing in Vaupés languages (see e.g., Aikhenvald, 2002), coca-related vocabulary is a clear exception—an example of a *Wanderwort* (Haynie et al., 2014), whose spread might be tied to its spiritual and social prestige. That coca terms are largely absent in the languages of the Makú (Nadahup) and Piaroa families (Labrada p.c., Rodd, 2002) reinforces their distinct ceremonial traditions and relative insulation from coca-centered ritual systems.

This study highlights how coca functions as a linguistic and cultural tracer of historical contact, ritual exchange, and symbolic economies in Northwest Amazonia. By tracing the distribution of coca-related terms across language families and linking them to ethnographic and ceremonial contexts, it sheds light on how culturally significant plants contribute to patterns of lexical borrowing and diffusion across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

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