

Transmitting linguistic diversity: Multilingualism and local language ideologies among the Indigenous peoples from Northwest Amazonia

This talk examines how linguistic diversity has been maintained and transmitted among the Indigenous peoples of the Caquetá-Putumayo (CP) region of Northwest Amazonia, focusing on Witotoan, Boran, Andoke, and Arawak-speaking groups. Rather than treating multilingualism as a simple outcome of contact, it approaches it as a socially organized practice grounded in kinship, intergroup relations, mobility, and ritual life. It also argues that linguistic diversity in the region cannot be understood solely through Western models that treat languages as bounded, structurally comparable systems. Among CP peoples, linguistic difference is constructed socially and ideologically, and tied to cosmology, territory, consanguineal and affinal relations within and between groups, and other locally recognized forms of distinctiveness.

In the CP region, multilingualism formed part of a broader regional system in which linguistic knowledge was embedded in marriage patterns, postmarital residence, alliance, travel, trade, and the circulation of ritual and ecological knowledge (Echeverri 1997). The transmission of multiple languages was therefore not a matter of random individual acquisition, but part of a relational order in which groups maintained distinct identities while participating in dense networks of interaction. Oral histories and genealogical data suggest that older generations commonly acquired multilingual repertoires through sustained interethnic contact, and that these repertoires were central to the reproduction of regional diversity across generations.

The talk also argues that such transmission was always shaped by social constraints. Traditionally, these included local linguist ideologies, demographic imbalance, unequal prestige of certain Indigenous groups, and warfare that caused disruptions in mobility and exchange. In recent times, these constraints have intensified through missionization, state schooling, sedentarization, and the growing dominance of Spanish (Echeverri 2022). As these processes have expanded, the social conditions that once supported multilingualism in everyday life have weakened, and linguistic diversity is no longer transmitted through the same intergenerational and intergroup channels.

Drawing on long-term ethnographic research, genealogical interviews, and historical interpretation of multilingual practices, the talk shows that the erosion of multilingual repertoires is not simply a matter of language shift, but of changing social patterns of diversity. The CP case demonstrates that linguistic diversity is neither self-sustaining nor reducible to grammatical difference alone (Wojtylak 2026). It depends on specific forms of sociality, mobility, and interdependence, shaped by local understandings of belonging and distinction. By focusing on both enabling conditions and constraints, the analysis contributes to broader discussions of how linguistic diversity is socially reproduced and transformed in small-scale multilingual societies (Lüpke 2016). *Word count:* 400.

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