Research that inspired me

Fish people

Hillary Waterman explains Jean Jackson’s research on language amongst the riverine Bará community who like to refer to themselves as waí mahá, ‘fish people’.

Operating under the spell of a lifelong fascination with human language and social organization, I majored in linguistic anthropology in college and studied sociolinguistics as a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania before becoming a cultural anthropologist. I encountered Jean Jackson’s analysis of the multilingual culture in the Vaupés region of Colombia more than once in my studies and later used it in my own course designs. Each time I’ve re-read Jackson’s work, it has struck me afresh that the study is a preeminent example of the intricate relationship of language and culture, as well as the stunning creativity of human social arrangements. Jackson’s fieldwork experience, recounted in her monograph The Fish People, is an inspiration because it shows how much one case elucidates understanding of a theoretical construct, in this case the speech community, and also presents a vivid portrait of linguistic anthropology in action. I am delighted to have the opportunity to share it here.

Background

In 1968 Jean Jackson, then a PhD student at Stanford University, travelled to the Vaupés, a densely forested and riverine region along the border of Colombia and Brazil, to do fieldwork for her dissertation. This period of total immersion in an unfamiliar language and culture, a hallmark rite of passage for anthropologists, usually lasts a couple of years.

Jean Jackson
Jackson was intent on studying indigenous concepts and practices related to disease and curing. After settling in a remote longhouse compound among the Bará, one of a number of groups calling themselves ‘Tukanoan,’ she immediately undertook to learn the language, as she was now the official daughter of a Bará clan. ‘It quickly became apparent,’ notes Jackson in her book, ‘that the proposed research could not be done, because it depended on an implicit research assumption that the members of the subject group all spoke the same language. I found myself in a region with more than sixteen languages, several of them represented in each longhouse. The rule of exogamy required that all in-marrying women at a settlement be from other language groups [but the same cultural region]. Every Tukanoan I talked to was at least trilingual...’

Language families included the Eastern Tukanoan, Arawak and Carib families. The languages Jackson encountered have been described by linguists as mutually unintelligible – less similar to each other than contemporary Romance languages! Nevertheless, all Tukanoans were fluent in at least three languages, many in four or five, and understanding several more besides:

**Tukanoan language groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bará (the language spoken by Jackson’s adopted clan)</th>
<th>Uanano</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuyuka</td>
<td>Cubeo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tukano (used as a lingua franca)</td>
<td>Barasana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desana</td>
<td>Taiwana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpana</td>
<td>Makuna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tatuyo</td>
<td>Tariano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siriano</td>
<td>Curripaco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuruti</td>
<td>Pisá-Tapuyo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piratapuya</td>
<td>Metuno</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arápaso</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Methodology

Although the logistical problems presented by the region’s linguistic complexity eventually forced Jackson to abandon her research topic, she soon rallied, recognizing the multilingual situation in the Vaupés as a potential window onto the social structure of the group, which was, despite the number of languages spoken, a relatively integrated cultural area. Jackson discovered that Tukanoan languages were intricately interwoven with elemental structures of the society including kinship and marriage. The Tukanoans, numbers of which at the time of Jackson’s fieldwork were somewhat indeterminate but estimated variously between 5200-10,000 people, were patrilineal, reckoning descent in men through their fathers, and practiced linguistic exogamy, a system in which men were expected to find a wife from a different language aggregate. Each clan identified with a different father-language (see list above). These languages therefore functioned as signifiers (badges or emblems in Jackson’s words) of both individual and social identity. Multilingualism and linguistic exogamy were so fundamental a part of the Tukanoans’ worldview,
and so essential a part of its organization, that they had difficulty imagining any other way of doing things – Jackson commented that her Tukanoan informants seemed to assume that her own parents must have spoken different languages!

Jackson’s theoretical focus homed in on some perennial concerns of anthropology, including:

- **Identity** – The construction of social identity and the nexus of social roles that constitute social personhood.
- **Variation** – Variation in social arrangements as it relates to the tension between structure and agency—what people have in common versus what makes them different from each other as individuals.
- **Tribe** – Tribe is a perennially problematic concept but generally assumes a shared, bounded territory, an organization, internal interaction, significant differences from neighboring groups and a shared tribal language.

**Tukanoan social organization and residence**

During Jackson’s tenure in the Vaupes, people lived together in settlements (*buros*) each consisting of a longhouse, a large structure made of poles and thatch, and perhaps a few outbuildings. People lived together in the longhouse. A wife, or ‘in-marrying’ woman, would go to live in the longhouse of her new husband and his kin group, often over twenty kilometres from her own. Each longhouse therefore featured several languages used by the five or so families who resided there – each family, or hearth unit defined by the presence of a married couple. Each longhouse had a headman, and daily life was spatially organized according to basic conceptual dimensions such as male/female, public/private, formal/casual. The longhouse, isolated and atomistic, yet integrated within the larger Tukanoan cultural complex, was the site of all domestic activities – food preparation, child-rearing and socialization, language-learning and ritual. The longhouse is a key symbol in the Tukanoans’ cosmology, such that each species of animal is associated with its own longhouse and headman. Tukanoans believe that upon death, every person goes to the longhouse of her or his ancestors.

**Language**

Kinship and marriage are features shared by all human societies. They are organized by principles referred to as *alliance* and *descent*. These principles are primal mechanisms, going back to our earliest human ancestors (for those unfamiliar with the jargon, see the Glossary of Anthropology Terms). However, they can be reckoned and signaled in highly derived ways, in this case, by language use. The main significance of language in the Vaupés was its structural role in the distribution of women and in the construction of social identity – that is, the roles that intersect in and define social personhood.
In a patrilineal society, women tend to be highly valued because men, and lineages, need descendants. Across the Vaupés territory, language governed the distribution, or exchange, of women—not as property, but as bearers of future generations. Therefore, men were eager to marry; ‘exchanging’ women referred to the optimal situation in which each of two language aggregates would give and receive a wife. Marriage was (and still is), ideally, constructed as an exchange between families from different language aggregates, the best kind being an exchange in which two men (and thus their lineages) could exchange sisters. In this way, each group would get a woman, and each would give a woman, helping to ensure the perpetuation of both. Sometimes these exchanges would take place over spans of time, as when one of the women was already of marriageable age and one was much younger, with an eye to a future match.

Acculturation and change
The Tukanoans have undergone acculturation on a massive scale, and their languages, like a third of the world’s approximately 7,000 languages, are in danger of extinction. The continued presence of missionaries is justifiably implicated in their demise, as are inexorable forces of the global economy. According to Jackson, SIL International (formerly the ‘Summer Institute of Linguistics’), a Christian organization devoted to documenting and translating indigenous languages around the world, but also, paradoxically, to translating the Bible and prosletyzing, was summarily kicked out of every part of the country in the mid 1970’s and early 1980’s. The organization has come under heavy criticism from anthropologists and linguists alike for what is seen as infiltrating and undermining indigenous languages and cultures.

As elsewhere, indigenous identity in the Vaupés is complex and contested. In general, people are very much inserted into the global economy. Young Tukanoans are aware of their cultural heritage, and various movements have attempted to valorize it, however, as commonly happens, the tendency has been for outsiders to define what it means to be indigenous. Jackson believes that the language of her residential clan, Bará, may have died out completely. On the other hand, Tukanoans continue to practice linguistic exogamy, a testament to the enduring nature of language ideologies and their critical role in this culture.

What can we learn from Jackson’s work?
In the face of a great deal of evidence to the contrary, we like to think of language and culture as overlapping each other fairly neatly —isomorphic, to use a sociolinguistic term. In the US we commonly use language as a metaphor for culture as overlapping each other fairly neatly —isomorphic, to use a sociolinguistic term. In the US we commonly use language as a metaphor for the enduring nature of language ideologies and their critical role in this culture.

“As elsewhere, indigenous identity in the Vaupés is complex and contested. In general, people are very much inserted into the global economy. Young Tukanoans are aware of their cultural heritage, and various movements have attempted to valorize it, however, as commonly happens, the tendency has been for outsiders to define what it means to be indigenous.”

In this vein it has been argued, and is now much agreed, that a speech community is not defined by a particular language, nor by frequency of interaction, but instead is characterized by a shared set of social norms about how language is used. According to this definition, says Jackson in a 1989 article based on this research, ‘the entire Northwest Amazon, including Brazilian territory, can be thought of as a multilingual speech community.’ The particular importance of her research, and the main point I want to make here, echoing what she emphasized in a personal communication, is that her work in the Vaupés was, and remains, the definitive study demonstrating that language and culture are not the same, and do not necessarily share boundaries. In addition, Jackson’s ethnography makes it plain that in this case, as elsewhere, everyday language is imbued with meaning far beyond its referential function. In the Vaupés it was, and remains even in the face of massive acculturation, a badge of identity, a sign, and in this particular case, a way of organizing society, kinship and marriage.
Facts about Tukanoan multilingualism

- Different father languages were not differentially ranked – Jackson’s informants insisted that all were equally valued (although she notes that Tukano (the lingua franca) seemed to enjoy a self-reported ‘mild prestige’).
- Speakers of all father-languages conscientiously avoided and disapproved of code-mixing, and maintained boundaries between the languages.
- Women were observed to be a little less vigilant about mixing languages during informal discourses. Men were more formal.
- Multilingualism was a salient feature even to the Tukanoans themselves. Jackson remembers that they were creative and playful with language, constantly joking, punning, making up songs, and using different languages just because they could.

The most obvious question we want to ask is, why? Why, when each father-language had a small number of speakers, overall population density was low and culture was evidently relatively uniform across the region, languages (and their speakers) had equal status with each other and were not context or role-specific, did such linguistic diversity exist? Why did Tukanoans all learn at least three languages, some as many as ten, when Tukano was available and in use as a lingua franca? Indeed, Jackson told me that when she asked an informant ‘Why don’t you all just speak Tukano?’ he answered quizzically, ‘If we all spoke Tukano, where would we get our women?’

As an anthropologist, the main theoretical strength of Jackson’s research was in her focus on social structure. In doing so, she illuminated the use of language as a marker, indeed as constitutive, of identity. Because she was focused on the entire complexity of social life, her analysis of linguistic behavior is multi-dimensional and richly nuanced, indeed more so than it might have been if she were solely interested in the languages themselves. Jackson highlighted the intersection of language and social life, contributing greatly to our understanding of the organization of diversity and the complex nature of the speech community.

Jean Jackson is a distinguished faculty member in the Department of Anthropology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts USA.

Hillary Waterman is an applied anthropologist. She studies a diverse range of topics, from linguistics to the economics of families and households to the world of ballroom dance.

Glossary of Anthropology Terms

Alliance/descent: structural elements upon which all human kinship systems are built; alliance tells us who is ‘on our side,’ from whom we can expect succor, and descent helps us to reckon who are relatives are – our most likely allies.

Clan (or language aggregate): named, ranked, exogamous, localized patrilineal descent groups, each having its own father-language.

Culture area: a geographic territory, across which people share the same, or variations of the same, cultural elements.

Descent group: a group descending from a common ancestor (in this case male).

Exogamy: marriage out of one’s group, in this case, the language aggregate.

Isomorphic: having the same shape, or the same borders, as something else.

Lingua franca: a common language employed by speakers of different languages.

Longhouse: the most important social grouping in the Vaupés residence; symbolically important; ‘the maximal’ unit of food production and consumption

Patrilineal: characterizing a group in which descent is reckoned through males, from father to son.

Tribe: commonly agreed by anthropologists to be a problematic concept, nowhere more than in the Vaupés – generally indicates a people who share a territory and certain social institutions, have more interactions among each other than with outsiders, exhibit marked differences from neighboring groups, and had previously been assumed to share a language.

Find out more

Books
