

Amazonia: linguistic history

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The language families of Amazonia offer a history of great complexity, albeit with much evidence erased by the spread of Spanish and Portuguese. Homelands for the six major families and some aspects of their migration histories are suggested.

Over 300 languages are currently spoken in the Amazon basin. The six major linguistic families are Arawak, Tupí, Carib, Panoan, Tucanoan, and Macro-Jê (Figure 50.1). There are also many smaller families and isolates. Over 60 percent of indigenous languages are estimated to have become extinct since the European conquest (Loukotka 1968; Dixon & Aikhenvald 1999a; Adelaar 2004; Aikhenvald 2012: 1–19), making the task of revealing the exact linguistic history of Amazonia truly daunting. Various attempts have been made, during the past two centuries, to group different families into macro-groupings or “stocks,” but none have a solid backing of consistent proof. Examples are the putative “Amerind,” and an “Arawakan” claimed to encompass Arawak proper (or Maipuran), Arawá, Chapacura, Guahiboan, and Uru-Puquina (Aikhenvald 1999).

Linguistic diversity and migrations

The Amazon basin displays a high degree of phylogenetic diversity, that is, a high number of non-demonstrably related linguistic groups. The region also scores highly in terms of diversity of linguistic structures and in the sheer number of languages or linguistic varieties still spoken, or formerly spoken.

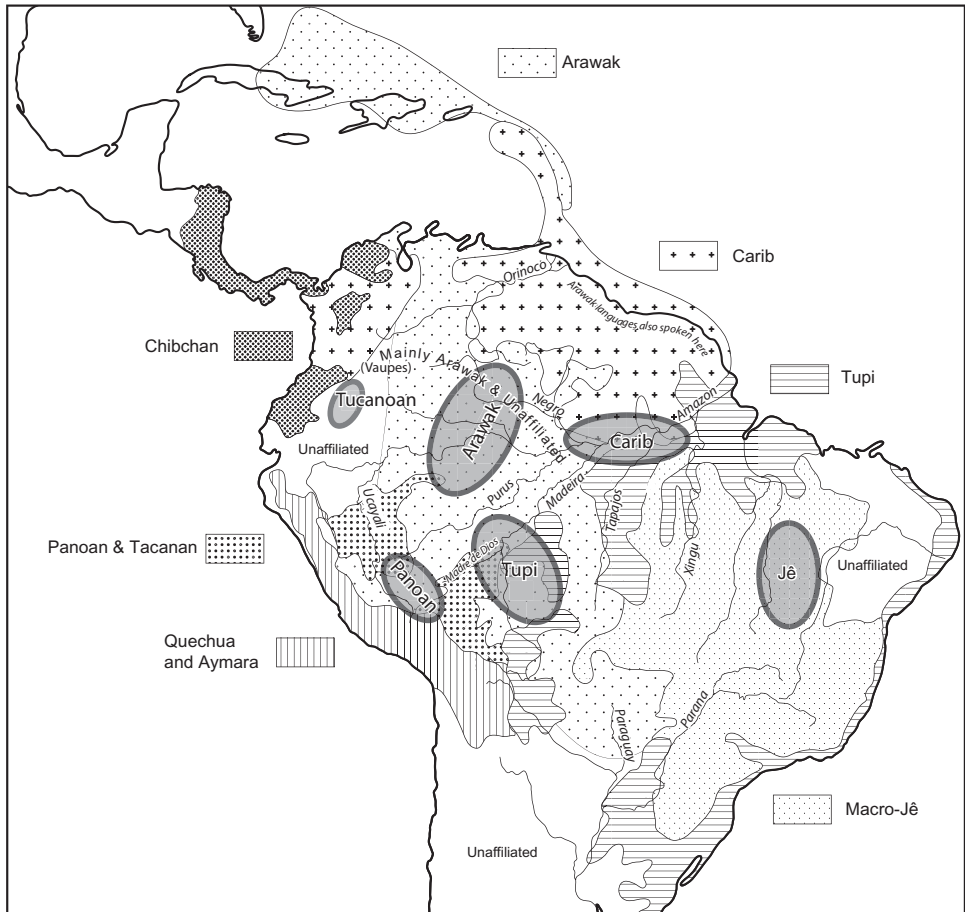


Figure 50.1 The six major language families of Amazonia and their possible homelands. The distributions are approximate and relate to the period before 1500 CE (many regions are Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking today).

For each extant family in Amazonia, we can expect to distinguish: (1) putative reconstructed routes for the dispersal of the family based on linguistic evidence, with an indication of the likely proto-home; (2) migrations of individual groups documented in oral histories; and (3) historically documented migrations (as reconstructed by Nimuendajú 1981).

Most migrations under (3) can be assigned a more or less reliable absolute date. The chronologies of migration types (1) and (2) are essentially relative. Since languages change at different rates, it is next to impossible to provide a reliable absolute dating for the time depth of individual proto-languages and prehistoric dispersals based on purely linguistic evidence (Dixon 1997: 46–49). However, linguistic diversity is typically greater in the homeland than in areas of colonial expansion. The extent of linguistic diversity, understood in terms of the relative genealogical time depths of

recognizable linguistic subgroups and linguistic structures within each particular family, is the major locating factor for a putative proto-home and the starting point for a dispersal.

Movements of people or language shift?

All the major families in Amazonia are discontinuous. These discontinuities are indicative of extensive migrations, at different times and under different conditions. On the one hand, a language dispersal may have required physical movement of speakers (Bellwood 2001: 31). On the other hand, a language may have spread through language shift. An example of the latter would be the shift to a Tucanoan language by the Desano, and such shift has also been facilitated by missionary policies, as in the case of the Tucano language.

In the context of the Amazon basin, it is often impossible to demonstrate conclusively which mechanism was the key to a dispersal of languages. No Amazonian language has a written tradition, and historical records are meager. Additional factors complicate the picture. A number of current language groups have arisen as a result of union of several ethnic groups, many of whom originally spoke different languages. Traditional intertribal warfare often resulted in one group absorbing another (see Fleck 2009, on the Panoan groups).

The Arawak family

The Arawak family is the largest in South America, formerly extending into the Caribbean islands. Arawak languages are spoken today in Belize, Honduras, and Guatemala in Central America, and in Guyana, French Guyana, Suriname, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Brazil, and Bolivia (formerly extending into Argentina and Paraguay). There are about 40 extant Arawak languages in addition to several dozen that have become extinct since the European conquest.

This family is also known as Maipuran. The family got its name “Arawak” from the language known as Lokono Arawak, Arawak, or Lokono Dian (Guiana). Its second name is based on Maipure, formerly spoken in Venezuela. There is currently no doubt as to the limits of the Arawak family, and up-to-date sources avoid using the discredited term “Arawakan” (Aikhenvald 1999, 2002). The mechanisms of Arawak expansion may have included slave raids, and movements of population in search of further hunting and fishing opportunities, and slash-and-burn farmland.

The suggestion that the Proto-Arawak homeland was on the Upper Orinoco River was argued by Noble (1965) (see criticism in Lathrap 1970: 73). Following Lathrap (1970: 74–77), Oliver (1989: 93–107) argued for Arawak dispersal from the central Amazon floodplains northwards and southwards. His model was based on data from a random selection of individual languages, many not related to Arawak, and also application of lexicostatistical methods which have since been discredited. Alternative homeland suggestions include the Upper Vaupés area, the northern or

central areas of Peru, or the headwaters of the Ucayali and Madre de Dios rivers (Urban 1992: 95).

The highest concentration of recorded Arawak languages is found in the region between the Negro and the Orinoco rivers. This is potentially a strong linguistic argument in favor of the Arawak proto-home having been located there (see Figure 50.1). This hypothesis is corroborated by the few mythical traditions of northern origin of Arawak-speaking peoples south of the Amazon. However, the diversity of Arawak languages south of the Amazon in central Peru, around the Rivers Purús and Madeira, must have been greater in the past than it is now. Due to mass extinction of languages this is hard to appreciate.

Migrations of Arawak speakers from the Caribbean coast to the Antilles are estimated archaeologically to have occurred from about 500 BCE (see chapter 49). The settlements of Arawak-speaking peoples south of the Amazon are also believed to be of considerable antiquity. Arawak peoples of the Xingu River basin were the earliest arrivals in that area (the arrival of Carib and Tupí groups there is estimated to be around the 17th century CE: Seki 1999: 219).

The Carib family

Carib languages are spoken in various locations to the north of the Amazon, in Colombian Amazonia, on the Orinoco River in Venezuela, and also in Guyana, French Guyana, Suriname and adjacent areas of Brazil, and in the region of the Upper Xingu and adjacent areas in Mato Grosso. The total number of living and extinct languages is about 43 (Derbyshire 1999; Meira 2009). The linguistic diversity of the three groups spoken south of the Amazon River appears to be greater than that in all the locations north of the Amazon. This has led researchers to suggest that the proto-home of the Carib family was located south of the Amazon (Derbyshire 1999). Villalón (1991) suggested that the centre of Carib dispersal was located in northern Venezuela (also see Urban 1992: 93–94), but her conclusion was based on a count of lexical similarities in a limited sample of languages.

The westernmost Carib-speaking group, the Carihona, probably migrated from the Guianas to the northwestern Amazon prior to the European conquest. Their current location is between the Caquetá and the Upper Vaupés river basins. The language shows linguistic affinities with other languages of the Guianas, which confirms the putative direction of migration (Derbyshire 1999).

The presence of Carib speakers in the Lesser Antilles was documented during the second voyage of Columbus, but there is little historically verifiable evidence in favor of Carib-speaking permanent settlement there in pre-contact times (Allaire 1980; Villalón 1991: 55–56). A mixed language, known as Island Carib, relates to the presence of Caribs on the Lesser Antilles, already settled by speakers of an Arawak language, Iñeri. The male speech employed lexical roots from the language called Carib (also known as Galibi or Karina: Hoff 1994) and grammatical forms from Iñeri. The female speech was fully Iñeri. This linguistic duality is believed to be the result of a military expansion of Caribs to the Antilles (Hoff 1994).

The Tupí family

The Tupí family is one of the largest in Amazonia, with at least 50 known members (Rodrigues 1999a, 2007; Jensen 1999; Gabas 2009). Nine of the ten Tupí branches are spoken in the Amazon basin. Five of these (Arikém, Mondé, Purubora, Ramaráma, and Tuparí) are spoken on the upper reaches of the Madeira River in the Brazilian state of Rondônia. A further four branches extend to the east and northeast: Awetí in the Upper Xingu area, Mawé in the lower reaches of the Tapajós River, Mundurukú on the Upper Tapajós, extending to the east to the middle course of the Xingú River up to Madeira, and Juruna on the lower and middle Xingu. The Tupí-Guaraní branch of the family is the largest in terms of number of languages, but linguistically rather uniform. It has just a few languages outside the Amazon basin.

The routes of Tupí expansion are the matter of some controversy. Early scholars attempting to determine the routes of migration and expansion did not draw a clear distinction between Tupí as a family, and Tupí-Guaraní as a branch of the family (Urban 1992, 1996; Rodrigues 2007; Noelli 2009). The high degree of linguistic diversity of Tupí branches between the Guaporé, the upper Madeira and the upper Aripuanã rivers suggests that this area is likely to have been the dispersal center of the family (Urban 1992; Rodrigues 1999a, 2007). However, a current archaeological model still places the homeland in the region of the confluence of the Madeira and Amazon rivers (Noelli 2009).

The dispersal of Tupí-Guaraní languages could have started in the area between the Madeira and Xingu rivers (Urban 1992: 92). The Tupí-Guaraní languages spoken south of the Guaporé River (e.g. Guarayo and Sirionó) are likely to have reached this region after a long migration down the Juruena and/or the Arinos into the Paraguay and La Plata basins. Some of the migrants eventually reached the Atlantic coast (Jensen 1999: 129–130; Rodrigues 2007).

There are examples of historically documented migrations within the Tupí family. The Cabahyba tribe lived on the Upper Tapajós in the 18th century. In the early 19th century they were attacked and decimated by the Mundurucú. The remainder were chased away and their descendants are the Kawahíb in the upper Rio Madeira. Speakers of Wayampí, the northernmost Tupí-Guaraní language, migrated from the lower course of the Xingú River to the Oiapoque River in the northern Brazilian state of Amapá, and to the Amarakarí River close to the border with French Guiana within the last 350 years, fleeing the Portuguese (Nimuendajú 1924: 204–211; Métraux 1927: 27–35; Nimuendajú 1981).

The spread of Tupinambá-based Tupí-Guaraní languages into northwest Amazonia and central Brazil was facilitated by missionaries. At the time of the European conquest, Tupinambá was the major language spoken on the Atlantic coast of Brazil up to the mouth of the Amazon. Creolized varieties of Tupinambá were adopted as “general” languages of European colonization. *Lingua Geral Paulista* is now extinct, and *Lingua Geral Amazônica* (Nhêngatú, meaning “good speech”) is still spoken a little in the northeast of Amazonia, and the Upper Rio Negro (Rodrigues 1996).

The Jê branch of the Macro-Jê family

The distribution of Macro-Jê languages covers part of Brazilian Amazonia; most languages are or have been spoken in eastern and northeastern Brazil, with a few branches in central and southwestern Brazil (Rodrigues 1999b). The centre of dispersal of the Jê languages, which form the major branch of the Macro-Jê family, most likely lay outside Amazonia proper, perhaps in the savannas of central Brazil. The Jê peoples who now live in Amazonia entered from the east under pressure of the Portuguese invasion (Rodrigues 1999b; Ribeiro 2009).

The Panoan family

Panoan languages are spoken on the eastern side of the Andes, in Peru and adjacent areas of Brazil (state of Acre) and Bolivia (Loos 1973, 1999; Fleck 2009). The location of the proto-home of the Panoan peoples is believed to be between the headwaters of the Ucayali River and the Madre de Dios (Lathrap 1970: 80; Urban 1992: 97). The Panoans of the Ucayali basin, of the Juruá and the Purús rivers are believed to be relatively recent arrivals from the south. The direction of migration from south to north is supported by distribution of linguistically archaic features (Loos 1973; Erickson 1992: 244).

The Tucanoan family

The Tucanoan language family spans Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and northeastern Peru. West Tucanoan languages are spoken in southwestern Colombia along the Putumayo and Caquetá rivers, and along the Putumayo and Napo rivers in Ecuador and northeastern Peru. East Tucanoan languages are spoken in northwestern Brazil and the adjacent areas of Colombia, in the Vaupés river basin. East Tucanoan languages are structurally and lexically similar; their erstwhile genetic relationship may have been obscured by constant contact in the multilingual Vaupés River basin area (Aikhenvald 2002). Most scholars concur that Tucanoan languages are likely to have originated to the west of the Vaupés region, in the hilly regions closer to the Andes than to the main area of concentration of East Tucanoan languages today (Nimuendajú 1982; Urban 1992: 98; Aikhenvald 2002).

Minor language families

Historical-comparative studies of minor families indicate a trend to move towards big river basins. The proto-home of the small Arawá family is believed to have been located in the jungle area between the Purús and Juruá rivers, major southern tributaries of the Amazon. The Paumarí are the only Arawá group located on the banks of a major

river, the Purús, and its tributaries the Tapaua and the Ituxí. They must have migrated towards the main river before contact (Dixon 2004). Members of the small Peba-Yagua family in northern Peru (consisting of extinct Peba and Yameo and the extant Yagua) migrated to the banks of the Amazon, as the original Tupí-Guaraní-speaking population there gradually declined (Peña 2009: 11–17, based on oral traditions and explorers' notes). Throughout the post-contact history of the Amazonian peoples, forced migrations into mission settlements have been a frequent practice, but this lies beyond the scope of the chapter.

SEE ALSO: 49 Caribbean islands: archaeology; 51 Amazonia: archaeology

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