

Small languages and small language communities 42

Editor: Nancy C. Dorian

TEACHING TARIANA, AN ENDANGERED LANGUAGE
FROM NORTHWEST AMAZONIA

ALEXANDRA Y. AIKHENVALD

Abstract

Tariana is an endangered language spoken by about one hundred people in a remote area of northwest Amazonia, Brazil. The language is spoken in a fascinating area where one can only marry someone who speaks a different language and who belongs to a different ethnic group. Tariana is being rapidly displaced by an unrelated language, Tucano. Plans to implement teaching Tariana in the secondary school in Iauaretê, a local mission center, started to take shape in 1999, several years after the author began her fieldwork on this language. In June 2000, a workshop on Tariana literacy was held, with over three hundred participants, having different levels of competence. The paper describes the ups and downs of the workshop, the ways in which pedagogical materials were worked out, and what problems the organizers had to confront.

This paper is about my experience in teaching Tariana, one of the many endangered languages spoken by indigenous peoples in northwest Amazonia.

Tariana is spoken in a very remote area, on the border between Colombia and Brazil. The remaining speakers of Tariana live on the Upper Vaupés river. This is one of the major black-water tributaries of the Upper Rio Negro, which flows into the River Amazon. (Having black water is not very pretty, but is beneficial to one's health: black-water regions do not have as much malaria, cholera, and such like as do white-water areas). Only about 100 people still speak Tariana, out of over a thousand who consider themselves ethnic Tariana.

The area where Tariana is spoken is not easy to get to. Before I start my travel, I usually write to the Tariana Indians in Iauaretê and in the neighboring villages of Santa Rosa and Periquitos to make sure they can meet me in the township of São Gabriel da Cachoeira. I have to fly by jet to Manaus, the capital of Brazilian state of Amazonas, a city of about a

million people, and then by small plane to the town of São Gabriel da Cachoeira (now the capital of the administrative area of the Upper Rio Negro, with over 10,000 inhabitants), where the Tariana, already notified by shortwave radio, await me with their boat. Then we have to buy food supplies for all of the family I usually stay with and get ourselves ready for the three or four-day trip upriver to the mission center, Iauaretê, on an open wooden canoe (with an outboard motor I bought for the Tariana a few years ago). We travel in the daytime only—even when the river is high, which is the case in June, the rapids are still dangerous, and the trip requires great concentration on the part of our guide. At night we sleep in hammocks strung between trees on the bank, and keep our fire lit—to keep jaguars and other animals away. Sometimes we sleep in Indian villages—very simple houses, with no other furniture than hammocks and maybe a little bench or two, where they serve us extremely hot fish, called pepperpot, with some manioc bread.

The most daunting place of all is the famous rapids of Ipanoré, which are impossible to pass through in a canoe full of people and goods at any time of the year. These rapids are known as “the navel of the world” among the Indians: this is where the first people are supposed to have come from. Before the white people ever touched Amazonian soil, Indians used to simply drag their wooden canoes along the surface, to the small settlement of Urubuquara on the other side of the rapids. Nowadays there is a half-broken truck, which is supposed to take people across by a terrifying road full of snakes and holes, and one feels very lucky when the truck is there! Once, on our way back to São Gabriel, the truck was there all right, but someone had taken the key away. So we had to walk for 12 km, carrying all our stuff. We did manage to organize some Indians to help us carry the motor and the petrol, and to drag the canoe along the road, just like back in the old days.

The mission center of Iauaretê is a safe place nowadays, but it is just across the river from Colombia, and sometimes at night one hears gunfire from the guerrillas on the other side. The Tariana often tell me that nowadays guerrillas are not as bad as they used to be—but we still have to be careful and keep on good terms with the Brazilian frontier guards who are in charge of the whole area. At least twenty speakers of Tariana live now in the mission center of Iauaretê, to be close to the school, run by the Catholic nuns, and to the church and shops.

To get to the village of Santa Rosa, one needs about five hours by a motorized boat up the Vaupés river from Iauaretê. About fifteen speakers of Tariana live there. Further up, in the direction of Colombia, there is the village of Periquitos, with a further fifty or so speakers. One is lucky to get there from Iauaretê in one day.

This whole area has been under the constant control of the Catholic Salesian mission since the mid-1920s—the missionaries made sure the people in the villages abandoned their “pagan” customs. As a result, very few still remember the traditional offering feasts, male and female initiation ceremonies, and songs. The Salesian missionaries are in charge of the school and of the hospital. Now they have changed their attitude: they are advocating language and culture maintenance.

The Tariana language is spoken in a fascinating area where one can only marry someone who speaks a different language and who belongs to a different tribe (this is called exogamy). People usually say, “My brothers are those who share a language with me” and “We don’t marry our sisters.” That is, in the Vaupés area one’s ethnic identity is inextricably linked to one’s linguistic identity—the loss of one’s language is a pitiful and, ultimately, a shameful thing. People who have lost their language run the risk of losing their group affiliation and of becoming ‘like dogs’ (*činu kayu-peni*, in the words of Leonardo Brito, one of the most knowledgeable Tariana)—that is, marrying their brothers and sisters.¹ They are pitied as those who ‘speak a borrowed language’ (*na-sawāya na-sape* lit. ‘they borrow they speak’). Hence the desire on the part of all the Tariana not to lose their language—or to “learn it back.”

The other languages in this area belong to the Tucanoan family, and they are still spoken by a fair number of people. Tariana belongs to the Arawak language family—related to the famous Taino, the first Indian language heard by Christopher Columbus when he arrived in 1492 at the Central American island of Hispaniola (it became extinct less than 150 years later: Aikhenvald 1999b). Tariana is the only Arawak language in the Vaupés region.

This is perhaps the most multilingual area in the world. In traditional times, each person knew several languages: their father’s (which is the language they identify with), their mother’s, their wife’s, and languages of other relatives and other members of the community. Now things are gradually changing.

The basic rule of language choice throughout the Vaupés area is that one should speak the interlocutor’s own language. Descent is strictly patrilineal, and consequently, one identifies with one’s father’s language. So, the children of Bere, deputy director of the school and an ethnic Tariana herself, are not considered Tariana. According to the language “etiquette” of the area, one has to speak the language one identifies with—that is, one’s father’s language—to one’s siblings, one’s father, and all his relatives, and one’s mother’s language to one’s mother and her relatives.

However, during past decades the traditional pattern of language transmission in the Brazilian Vaupés has been disrupted. When Salesian

missionaries established themselves in the area in the early 1920s, they imposed Western-style schooling on the Indians, forcing children into boarding schools where they were made to speak just one of the languages of the area, Tucano. Salesians aimed at “civilizing” Indians. This implied not only making them into “good Christians.” Salesians also considered the traditional multilingualism of the area a “pagan” habit and strove to make Indians monolingual “like other civilized people in the world.” The Tucano language was chosen because it was, numerically, a majority language. Salesian missionaries also practiced forced relocation of Indian settlements closer to mission centers—where the Indians could be more easily controlled—and amalgamation of different settlements, eliminating the traditional longhouse system and introducing European-style nuclear-family houses. A breakdown of traditional father–child interaction also brought about the disintegration of traditional multilingual patterns. With the need for cash-flow, all able-bodied men would go off to work for Brazilians—undertaking such tasks as collecting rubber and goldmining—and as a result children would have a considerably reduced degree of exposure to their father’s language. This resulted in the spread of Tucano, and, to a lesser extent, of other East-Tucanoan languages, to the detriment of Tariana.

Nowadays, what used to be a situation of stable multilingualism without dominance of one language group over another is rapidly changing: Tucano is becoming the dominant language spoken by everyone. Portuguese, the national language, is also gradually gaining ground not as “just” a lingua franca but as a dominant language in environments associated with “white people.” And, in spite of a certain resentment against those Indians who want to be “like white people” and thus “better than their peers,” regional Portuguese is becoming the main language in quite a few households—including some of those of the Tariana.

In fact, Tariana itself was once a dialect continuum spoken in various settlements along the Vaupés river and its tributaries. The Tariana clans used to form a strict hierarchy (according to their order of appearance as stated in the creation myth—this is described in Aikhenvald 1999a: 26, and Text 1 there). Lower-ranking groups in this hierarchy (referred to as “younger siblings” by their higher-ranking tribespeople) would perform various ritual duties for their “elder siblings”—for instance, they would light their cigar during the offering ritual. Each group spoke a different variety of the language. The difference between these varieties is comparable to that between individual East Tucanoan languages, or between Romance languages.

As the Catholic missions—and with them white influence—expanded, the groups near the top of the hierarchy abandoned the Tariana language

in favor of the numerically dominant Tucano language. It is hard to know when exactly this process started; according to early documents, some Tariana dialects in the area of lower Vaupés were close to extinction in the early 1900s. In the 1950s and 1960s a number of high-class Tariana dialects were reportedly still known to older people. All these dialects are now extinct.

A certain amount of knowledge remains. The traditional requirements for someone to be counted as a “real” speaker in the Vaupés area are quite strict. A speaker would simply not dare open their mouth if they were not native-like — inappropriate language use, including any kind of mistake, is ridiculed. A high percentage of ethnic Tariana know words in the language — names for fauna and flora, and some artefacts (some know hundreds of words). But they cannot — or are afraid to — speak the language; that is, carry on a conversation or tell a story. The speakers of Tariana pity them, saying *nepitaneta-mia-na, pa-sape-ri sede* ‘they only name (things), they have no talk’. In a different situation, with less strict requirements of language proficiency, these people would qualify as rememberers or even as semi-speakers.

The Tariana language is spoken nowadays just by people from two subtribes of the lowest-ranking group, Wamiarikune. They are the ones who still live in the two villages, Santa Rosa and Periquitos (some have moved to Iauaretê). The varieties are mutually intelligible — there are just a few linguistic differences, similar to those between American and British English. The sociolinguistic differences are more important. One is the degree of language maintenance — the Periquitos dialect is spoken by all generations, even by tiny children. That of Santa Rosa is not: the youngest full speaker, Rafael Brito, is twenty-nine; and there is just one child, Ireni, of about twelve, who can produce simple sentences in the language. Another difference concerns how words of Tucano origin are used: a few loans considered to be unacceptable by the Santa Rosa people are treated as correct Tariana by those from Periquitos. Back in 1989, Eric Hamp put forward a hypothesis that if a minority language is to survive next to a larger dominant language, it has to allow for a certain number of loanwords. He seems to be right as far as Tariana is concerned.

And, of course, there is a certain amount of rivalry between the two groups — though they consider each other “siblings” (those from Periquitos are “elder siblings,” and those from Santa Rosa are “younger siblings”). The Periquitos Tariana — who all bear the surname of Muniz — despise the Brito from Santa Rosa for not transmitting their language to their children. In response, the Brito from Santa Rosa mock those from Periquitos for not being able to speak properly, and for language-mixing.

When I first started doing fieldwork in the Upper Rio Negro area back in 1991, we were told that Tariana had long been extinct (this was based on a number of publications, which all proved to be erroneous). In July 1991, Graciliano Sanches Brito, who was spending his holidays with his family in São Gabriel da Cachoeira, appeared on the doorstep of our make-shift house for a chat. I started working with him then; and I have carried on working with him, and with his whole family in Iauaretê and in Santa Rosa.² Since the very first day, the main preoccupation of the Tariana was to do something about the children who do not speak the language anymore. In 1994, we designed the first ABC in Tariana. Rafael Brito, the youngest speaker of the Santa Rosa variety, together with my then-research assistant, a history student, Tatiana Baltar, supplied us with lovely drawings—this made the little self-produced booklet attractive even to small children. Copies were distributed to whoever asked for them. The publication of *Tariana Texts and Cultural Context* (Aikhenvald 1999a), based on various stories that we wrote down during my fieldwork with the Tariana in 1994, 1995, and 1996–1997, was a great success: the very fact that the stories in the Tariana of Santa Rosa (and the names of the speakers) could have been published in a book in English was seen as greatly enhancing their prestige. I mentioned earlier that the Tariana of Santa Rosa and of Periquitos are among the lowest in the Tariana tribal hierarchy. And it now seemed as if promoting the Tariana dialect spoken by the lowest subgroup could reverse their status. A local school teacher of Tariana origin, Galdino Pinheiro, a representative of another low-ranking group, put it as follows: “Did not the Bible say that those who are the lowest will become the highest? Here you go!”

There were a couple of obstacles, though. One was the general resistance of the Tariana of the upper-ranking groups to documenting and learning a “lower-class” variety. One such Tariana, the president of one of the powerful indigenous organizations of the area, tried to retaliate: he arranged for an anthropologist, with no linguistic training, to document the dialect of Tariana spoken by his father. By that time his father was over ninety, had lost his teeth, and was hard of hearing. His main language was Tucano; he could be considered a rememberer of some Tariana dialect—however, he found it difficult to produce coherent texts and his lexical knowledge failed him more than once. To cut a long story short, the project was a disaster.

In 1997 Eugénio Muniz—the only living powerful Tariana shaman, from Periquitos—managed to organize a project in collaboration with the Federation of the Indigenous Organizations of the Upper Rio Negro and the Norwegian-funded Instituto Socioambiental (which has representatives in Brasília and in São Paulo). This project became part of a general endeavor whose aim was to establish a Tariana, Baniwa, and Tuyuca

Indigenous School. The project received funding; and a linguist was appointed. However, this linguist had no knowledge of any indigenous language whatsoever and has gone as far as arguing against the importance of language description and even against the necessity of knowing an indigenous language for the creation of successful literacy programs. The Tariana of Santa Rosa were appalled. But then, in 1998, Eugénio Muniz died, under peculiar circumstances. (In the Vaupés area, it is held that there is an explicit cause—most often, sorcery—for everything that happens. People hardly ever die of old age, or by pure chance. Eugénio got drowned during a party—the Brito interpreted this as a “punishment” for trying to do a job he was not qualified to do: being the head of the project of “Tariana school,” not taking account of what the Brito have done before him.) As a result, the Tariana component of the project—which the Tariana of Santa Rosa (who were left out of it) called a ‘ghost project’ (Portuguese *projeto fantasma*)—came to a standstill.

When I came again in 1999 (staying mostly in Santa Rosa and just briefly in Iauaretê), Jovino, Ismael, and Graciliano suggested that we should claim our role in the project, since we have books, a draft dictionary (which has just been published), many many stories—and a linguist who knows the language (me). This was done; and I submitted the newly revised Tariana component with a financial breakdown and a plan to the authorities of the Instituto Socioambiental. The project was approved and new money allotted. Before I left for Australia in July, 1999, we planned a Tariana Language and Literacy Workshop to be held the following year, in June, for three weeks. A general meeting of the Tariana of the Iauaretê area approved the Workshop. It was decided that any ethnic Tariana who wants to relearn the language should be welcome; and that the project would pay for the petrol and expenses of those Tariana who come from remote areas. Schoolteachers of Tariana origin were to be given preference. The participation of children of Tariana mothers was more problematic; since their fathers were not Tariana, they could not count as such. They were initially excluded, so as to reduce the numbers of students, which were threatening to become astronomic. Even Bere, the deputy director of a local school, a Tariana herself, had to ask us to allow her son (who has a Tucano father and thus counts as Tucano) to take part in the Workshop as a student!

Systematic efforts to teach some Tariana at secondary college level started at the same time, with the support of the then-Director of the secondary school in Iauaretê, Sister Rosália da Silva. She helped us plan the organizational details for the workshop—which meals to provide, how to organize the cooks, where to get spoons and bowls, and so on. In 2000 the newly appointed Director, Sister Dária Moratelli, turned out to

be an even more ardent supporter of teaching Tariana in this school. So is the school's present Director, Sister Cristina. It may sound ironic that the Salesian nuns, whose predecessors not so long ago did everything they could to destroy language and culture in the Vaupés, are now the strongest supporters of language revival and of the right of every group to learn their language as a school subject.

The Workshop was to be taught under the auspices of the teachers' association of Iauaretê; this was slightly complicated by the fact that most of the trained teachers of Tariana origin belong to the high-ranking groups who lost their language a generation ago. Luckily, two fluent speakers of Tariana — Rafael Brito (born in 1973) and José Luis Brito (born in 1968) — did have teaching qualifications and thus could assume the teaching responsibilities at the Workshop, together with myself.

The approval of our Project by the Instituto Socioambiental enhanced the status of the Santa Rosa Tariana among other Tariana of the Iauaretê area. Like almost everywhere in the world, formal education is seen by the Tariana as “a means of acquiring the language(s) of prestige and power” (Freeland 1995: 254). The upper-class Tariana who initially did not want to learn the “low-class” dialect seemed to have lost their battle.

The Tariana language Workshop was to go on for three weeks. The whole business was to be concluded with a general assembly of the Tariana of the Iauaretê area.

As soon as I got back to Australia in late July, 1999, I started working on a practical grammar of Tariana. By that time, I already had a large dictionary, a 1500-page collection of stories of various genres, and, importantly, a complete draft of a reference grammar. In addition, over the past years I did have experience in teaching languages, having taught English, French, German, and elementary Hebrew to speakers of Russian, and then to speakers of Brazilian Portuguese. While in Santa Catarina (southern Brazil), I had to teach German to a class of ethnic Germans from Blumenau with hardly any knowledge of their language, except for an occasional expression overheard from a grandparent (German was virtually forbidden to be used by immigrant communities in southern Brazil, starting from the late 1940s). This, however, was different from teaching an indigenous language to a mixed group of those who knew hardly anything and those who knew quite a bit but were afraid to speak the language. Plus some participants were to be fluent speakers striving to learn how to write “correct” Tariana.

The choice of a language medium was also not straightforward. The overwhelming majority of ethnic Tariana nowadays speak Tucano as their first language. And Tariana and Tucano are structurally very similar (though they have hardly any words in common) — this is reminiscent of

similarities between Japanese and Korean. Take, for example, the grammatical category of evidentiality. In both Tariana and Tucano, for every statement, one adds a marker on the verb indicating how the speaker acquired the information: whether they saw the happening; or they heard it; or they inferred that this should be the case; or somebody else had told them. One can simply translate from Tucano into Tariana, morpheme by morpheme. Portuguese is quite different — Indians often complain about how difficult it is to translate things, because Portuguese just simply does not have the resources to express the wealth of meanings that come naturally in Tariana or in Tucano.

There were, however, two main reasons not to choose Tucano. First, Tucano is the father's language of the dominating majority. Adopting Tucano as the main language for teaching would have implied a de facto acceptance of Tucano dominance. This was out of the question for the Tariana. And also, Tucano has several competing writing systems; the most recent one accepted by the Salesian school is considered too cumbersome and too complicated to learn. As the result, it would have been impossible to use Tucano in our literacy materials. So we decided to use Portuguese, as a "neutral" choice of a language that everyone knows to a greater or lesser extent.

Based on some of my language-teaching experience, and also on the little practical grammar of Tucano compiled by Ramirez (1997), I set out to prepare a language manual of Tariana. It started with a general overview of the Arawak language family, which Tariana belongs to — since it is the largest language family in South America, this was done to enhance the prestige of the language in the eyes of the speakers. Then followed the pronunciation guide, with consonants and vowels, and a description of their pronunciation compared with Tucano and with Portuguese. There I included examples for each sound, such as *hekuna* 'tree' for *h*, *ku:phe* 'fish' for *ph*, and so on. Additional exercises contained minimal pairs. I did not use any linguistic terminology, of course; an exercise for minimal pairs was phrased as "Repeat the following words, paying attention to the difference between such and such sound" — for instance, *s* as in *isi* 'fat' and *ɛ* as in *iči* 'howler monkey'. The main part contained ten initial lessons (we now have more than fifty altogether). Each lesson started with a simple dialogue (followed by a discussion of a grammatical topic: for instance, lesson one features possessive pronouns); a list of frequent expressions, vocabulary of about twenty items, and then translation exercises. At the end of each lesson I added suggestions of interactive games for the teacher (something like visiting a doctor and describing what's wrong with each part of the body). Each lesson finished with a picture — of the village of Santa Rosa, of an animal, or of some typical activity. These ten lessons covered a

substantial amount of lexicon — body parts, kinship terms and terms of address, temporal expressions — and the essential grammar. At the end of the ten lessons, students were expected to be able to read, and to compose, a reasonably sophisticated hunting story.

I was told by the representative of the Instituto Socioambiental that we would have about fifty participants; and so when I came to São Gabriel in May 1999, I brought fifty copies of the grammar, the dictionary, and all the writing materials (pens, plastic files, and notebooks). But it turned out that we were going to have over 300 Tariana, of all proficiency levels, taking part. This obviously put strain on us, the teachers — we simply did not have enough copies of the manual. This neatly bound little booklet in a red plastic cover became almost a bibliographic rarity straight away. My co-teachers, José Luis and Rafael, and their brothers, had approved the version of the manual I sent them beforehand. But now that it was clear that there were not enough copies to go around, we had to make changes to our original plans. Every night of the Workshop we would sit down and write out the plan for the next session.

We also had to choose a location for the course. Fortunately, the head of the Salesian mission, Father Benjamin, offered us the largest hall in the mission; and the Director of the school, Sister Dária, provided us with extra chalk and extra notebooks.

Rafael, an experienced primary school teacher, decided to put up posters with a chart of consonants and vowels, with a verbal paradigm (“just like in Portuguese”), and with various pictures taken during my previous fieldtrips, supplied with captions in Tariana. Then he wrote out a big poster saying,

Mača inu

(Tariana) ‘be welcome’; lit. ‘may you come well’

Sejam bem-vindos

(Portuguese) ‘be welcome’

Inu waine wasapenipe ibuetasi

(Tariana) ‘come with us (and) learn our-speech right here’

Venha conosco aprender a nossa língua.

(Portuguese) ‘come with us to learn our language’

The course was jointly financed by research grants from La Trobe University and the Wenner Gren foundation, together with the Instituto Socioambiental in Brasília. The research grants paid for all the photocopies and writing materials; and the Instituto Socioambiental provided all the food. And this was not a simple enterprise. Traditionally, Indians in the Vaupés area never travel alone: they would always take their wives, numerous children, and other members of the household who couldn’t

survive on their own. That is, food for 300 participants meant feeding about 1000 people. As a result, we never had enough food; every evening we had to sit down and plan how to organize the next day's meals. And we would not have succeeded without the generous help from the nuns, who simply provided everything once we ran out of supplies.

We started with a general meeting—welcoming speeches from the ubiquitous Commander of the Frontier Regiment, from the Head of the Salesian mission, the Director of the School, and the chief of every Tariana community represented at the Workshop (all in Portuguese). Then we distributed the materials, made a list of participants—and this was the start. We taught in the morning, from eight until noon, and then in the afternoon, from two until six. Sometimes there were different students in the morning and in the afternoon; sometimes the same people came twice. We also taught on Saturday, but just in the mornings. I usually explained things in Portuguese and then wrote them on a blackboard; and then José Luis and sometimes Rafael would repeat the same thing in Tucano, so that people could understand better. We started, as planned, with pronunciation; but very soon switched to rehearsing the dialogues, teaching people how to answer questions about their names, and also talking about their families. Kinship is an important issue—so we spent quite a long time working out kinship relationships. Rafael was extraordinary inventive: at the second session, he decided to translate a popular Catholic hymn into Tariana, which he got all the participant to learn by rote. From that time on, every morning started with singing this hymn. And beginning from the second week, Rafael used to come up with a new song—translated from Portuguese—every day. The most popular one was the nursery rhyme 'Two ducklings on a lagoon' (Portuguese *Dois patinhos na lagoa*, Tariana *Ñamaita kumadatupe*): it involves imitating little ducks and the little worms the ducks are catching. Another "hit" was an Amazonian version of a Brazilian song 'Crab is not a fish' (Portuguese *Caranguejo não é peixe*, Tariana *Kuheni kuphekadena*)—this song involves clapping hands and stamping feet. Everyone—from tiny first-graders to frail elders (who could not read what was on the board simply because they were illiterate)—was joining in. And I kept hearing the sounds of 'Crab is not a fish' all over Iauaretê late into the evening each day.

The main problem was to teach everybody equally. Quite a number of people already knew a lot—their "hidden" knowledge simply needed to be activated. For instance, Galdino Pinheiro is a forty-plus-year-old teacher of Portuguese in the Iauaretê secondary school and an ethnic Tariana who had lost fluency in the language. He appeared to know most terms for fish and animals, plants, artefacts, and personal pronouns. During the Tariana language course he seemed to know just about every word—except for verbs. He learned the material in no time at all; and at the end of two weeks

he could easily write a short story in Tariana. He was not the only one; there were at least half a dozen more like him. Through the language course, quite a few “latent” speakers acquired the courage to start speaking the language they thought they didn’t know.

Another issue was reconciling dialect differences. The participants of the course included most speakers of the Santa Rosa variety, also spoken by my co-teachers. But the Munizes of Periquitos also came. And there arose the problem of dialectal differences between Santa Rosa and Periquitos — which are minor but distinctive. Marino Muniz, the elder from Periquitos, would often walk to the blackboard in the middle of a class, and say, “Well, this is not right, we say it differently.” The Brito of Santa Rosa were not amused. Marino Muniz was vociferously criticized for speaking Tariana in public, and to his children, with non-Tariana speakers present, to “show off.” Which he did, too: once Olívia Brito forgot a Tariana word for ‘godfather’ and asked Marino for help since he is an “elder.” He did answer, but added sarcastically, “Well, aren’t you old enough to know yourself?” And the Brito were not really happy about me trying to document the ways in which the Periquitos dialect differs from their own. At the end of the workshop, tension was running high.

The general feeling among the Brito of Santa Rosa was phrased by Jovino Brito — “Now that our language is taught at school, we won’t lose it.” And he stopped making an effort to speak the language to his children, saying they will get it from the Tariana school and from published books whenever they want. This is a dangerous attitude — if the language is not maintained within a family, how can a couple of hours a week “revive” it?

But nevertheless, at the very end, during the general assembly of the Tariana, everyone was pleased that Tariana is now a “real” language: it has been taught and will continue to be taught. An Indigenous Association for the Language and Culture of the Tariana of the Iauaretê area (*Associação Indígena da Língua e Cultura Tariana do Distrito Iauaretê*, abbreviated as *AILECTDI*) was established under the presidentship of Jovino Brito. José Luis Brito (previously employed as a librarian at the Mission school) was appointed as a future teacher of Tariana, for a few hours a week.

The success of the Workshop was quite obvious — especially on our way back, through the dangerous Ipanoré rapids, when everyone from little kids to frail elders greeted me in Tariana, trying to use the correct kinship terms. Everyone wanted to know when the next Workshop is going to be. I didn’t dare tell them that it may be near to impossible to afford another enterprise like this.

Regular teaching of Tariana as a second language at the secondary school in Iauaretê is, however, still under discussion. There appears to be

opposition from some teachers of Tariana origin (who come from the “upper-class” Tariana) against learning the Tariana spoken by the “lower-ranking” group. The present plan is to include Tariana in the school curriculum starting from 2003, with José Luis Brito dividing his time between the library and the school.

And there are more problems to overcome. The Tariana of Periquitos — the only group where the language is effectively maintained and is still spoken by children — are being marginalized by those who put the Tariana school project into practice. As Dixon (1989: 32) put it, “there is one main prerequisite for a language to survive: the attitude of its speakers. If parents use the language in speaking with their children, and insist that it be used back, the chances of survival are bound to be good.” That is, the Tariana of Periquitos — who insist on using their language no matter what — has more chance of surviving than the Santa Rosa variety. My next priority is to make sure there are literacy materials for the Tariana of Periquitos, just like for their “younger siblings” from Santa Rosa.

How can we summarize the results, positive and not so positive, of the experience of teaching a language and literacy course in Tariana, an endangered language spoken in a situation of multilingualism fortified by linguistically based exogamy? The positive impact of the course is hard to overestimate. It boosted the self-confidence and the self-esteem of a previously low-status subgroup and showed to the rest of the Tariana that they can still “learn back” an identity-marking language.³ This is crucial for a people in the Vaupés environment: those who have lost their language are the ones to be pitied. The Tariana — maybe for the first time ever — came together united as a single group. It was as if a desperate people saw light at the end of the tunnel.

And yet it was a difficult enterprise. We — including the researcher and the speakers of the language involved in the course — had to overcome numerous hurdles including the cost of the whole enterprise and logistical difficulties. It was not easy to cater for hundreds of students with different levels of competence, including semi-speakers who were afraid to demonstrate their imperfect knowledge and thus be potential targets of mockery. The dialectal differences emblematic of each of the two Tariana-speaking groups threatened to jeopardize the whole course. The success of the course immediately created adverse feelings among the self-proclaimed leaders of the non-Tariana-speaking Tariana (some of whom occupy important positions in the indigenous organizations in the Upper Rio Negro area).

These difficulties — coupled with lack of further resources for language courses like the one in 2000 — continue to undermine the Tariana project. To ensure the success of an enterprise like this, it would be necessary to

have similar courses at regular intervals—yet the logistical difficulties are such that this appears to be next to impossible.

The overwhelming majority of approximately 200 indigenous languages still spoken in Brazil are not being learned by children and may not survive the next generation. Tariana is one of these. Documenting these languages, and also producing various teaching materials, is an urgent priority for linguists; however, this often gets obstructed by various problems—not the least of which are difficult access to a particular community and lack of resources (see Dorian forthcoming). We have so far made the first steps toward implementing the Tariana school project and trying to activate the knowledge many have but do not dare put into practice. Only time will tell how successful these attempts will be, in the long run.

La Trobe University

Notes

1. Exogamous traditions are still very strong in the Tariana areas, even among those Tariana who lost their language generations ago. A Tariana girl who grew up in Manaus and just recently arrived in Iauaretê had no idea about linguistic exogamy. She told me how shocked she was when the first question a potential date asked her concerned her group (Tariana, Tucano, or Piratapuya) even before he asked her name. When she said she was Tariana, the boy—who turned out to also be a Tariana—did not want to have anything to do with her.
2. A full reference grammar of Tariana will soon be published by Cambridge University Press (Aikhenvald 2003). In addition, there is a collection of interlinearized texts with an anthropological introduction (Aikhenvald 1999a), now translated into Portuguese and distributed to the Tariana in a mimeographed version. A Tariana-Portuguese dictionary has recently been published (Aikhenvald 2002a). A detailed study of the impact of language contact on Tariana is in Aikhenvald (2002b).
3. At the final assembly, these feelings were summarized by Pedro de Jesus, an ethnic Tariana from a high-ranking group, and a former head of Foundation of Indians (FUNAI) in Iauaretê, in a speech written in regional Portuguese and then translated into Tariana.

References

- Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. (1999a). *Tariana Texts and Cultural Context*, Munich: Lincom Europa.
- (1999b). The Arawak language family. In *The Amazonian Languages*, R.M.W. Dixon and A. Y. Aikhenvald (eds.), 65–105. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (2002a). *Dicionário Tariana-Português e Português-Tariana. Boletim do Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi* 17(2). Belém: Editora do Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi.

- (2002b). *Language Contact in Amazonia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- (2003). *The Tariana Language of Northwest Amazonia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dixon, R.M.W. (1989). The original languages of Australia. *Vox* 3, 26–33.
- Dorian, Nancy (forthcoming). Minority/endangered languages. In *The Handbook of Bilingualism*, Tej K. Bhatia and William C. Ritchie (eds.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Freeland, J. (1995). Why go to school to learn Miskitu? *International Journal of Educational Development* 15, 245–62.
- Hamp, Eric (1989). On signs of health and death. In *Investigating Obsolescence. Studies in Language Contraction and Death*, Nancy Dorian (ed.), 197–210. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ramirez, Henri (1997). *A fala Tukano dos Yepâ-masa*, tomo III: *Método de aprendizagem*. Manaus: Inspetoria Salesiana.

Copyright of International Journal of the Sociology of Language is the property of De Gruyter and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.