

Scientific and applied research in the context of documentation of language and culture: Cashinahua examples

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Indigenous communities in the Amazon as much as in other parts of the world increasingly expect linguistic fieldworkers to cooperate in the development of didactic material. Consequently, scientific research, i.e. linguistic analyses as well as the annotated primary data stored in a documentation archive, should have an immediate practical applicability for the communities themselves in their efforts to counteract language endangerment.

The Cashinahua community is living in various indigenous territories in the Brazilian state of Acre and in adjacent areas in Peru. Nearly each of the many small villages belonging to these territories has its own school. Both countries have established indigenous education programs which are adapted to the structure of indigenous societies. In Brazil and Peru bilingual indigenous teachers are trained to teach children on the primary and intermediate level of education in their respective communities. Unlike in Peru where no further methodological differentiation is made between individual ethnic and linguistic communities throughout the country, cultural specificities of different peoples are taken into account in Brazilian indigenous education. Still, in this country, too, there are considerable methodological draw-backs and inadequacies (on the cognitive level) which make indigenous school education a problematic issue. One of these problems is the development of reading (and writing) skills, since literacy education is mostly restricted to learning the alphabet which in fact means that children are taught to recognize the letters of both the national and the native language without being made aware of phonological sequences or syllable structure. Consequently, these children often memorize whole words instead of reading them aided by such structural knowledge. A first step into changing this situation is to provide indigenous school teachers with basic linguistic notions. This can be easily done by a field linguist who, in addition, may profit from the increase of metalinguistic awareness of these native consultants. With a better understanding of how their language can be linguistically described the teachers will be able to include grammatical knowledge into their syllabus and develop didactic material which is more adequately designed for building up reading skills.

A linguistic workshop on phonology and morphology held by Camargo and Reiter in May 2006 in the Cashinahua village of Mucuripe/ Praia do Carapanã (Brazil) represents such a measure towards balancing out methodological shortcomings in indigenous education. This workshop for Cashinahua teachers and forestry agents, organized by OPIAC (the indigenous teachers' association of the State of Acre) and Camargo, took place in the context of the DOBES project on the documentation of Cashinahua. While communicating the results of linguistic research on the language to a very interested audience, the project members were able to gather new information from fruitful discussions among the participants. By using an old Cashinahua text collection as a stimulus, material for didactic purposes could be recorded. This collection also served as a basis for exercises on different possibilities of orthographical writing in which the participants could apply their newly acquired linguistic knowledge. A reader,

summarizing content and results of the workshop, was printed on paper and sent to OPIAC later in the year and will be included for download in the documentation archive.