

Concepts and forms of ‘plurality’ in Kuikuro (Southern Carib)

Bruna Franchetto and Mutuá Kuikuro

Mutuá, a 27-year-old Kuikuro teacher of the village school in Ipatse, chose the topic “How the Kuikuro language expresses plurality” for his undergraduate monograph. From 2001 to 2006, Mutuá was a student at the Indigenous Undergraduate Course at the University of the State of Mato Grosso and one of the main consultants of the Kuikuro DOBES Project. There, he discovered both linguistics and the richness of his mother language. Mutuá, to start with, was interested in finding counterparts to the number and gender marking of Portuguese—the colonizing and dominant language—in his mother tongue Kuikuro—a minority and dominated language. As his investigation progressed, he was enthralled by the discovery of a number of different concepts and forms of ‘plurality’ in his own language, which transformed the negative tension produced by his encounter with the white-man’s language into a positive affirmation of difference. This paper is thus the result of true coauthorship.

Kuikuro, an ergative and highly agglutinative language, has diverse suffix forms on nouns and verbs that express facets of two (or three) basic concepts, as Mutuá states: plural, collective/grouped. The suffix **-ko** codes ‘plural’: “more than one or more than two” on countable nouns; it indicates ‘grouped’ with proper nouns; it codes ‘number’ agreement on absolutive pronominal arguments; it operates as an inter-clausal co-reference marker; and it indicates the plurality of events. In each case, **-ko** spells features of functional categories in distinct structural positions. Another set of affixes (**-(jo)mo**, **-ão**, **-ho-**, **-pe**), reflecting the Karib ‘plural’ proto-form ***(ko)mo**, as does **-ko** itself, express specific types of ‘groupings’ whose meanings must be understood within the Kuikuro and Amerindian cultural context, as they occur with terms denoting kinship and social relationships (woman, chief, and shaman, among others). Other affixes code nuances of the progressive ‘cumulativity’ of the event, repetition, with or without the intentionality of the ‘subject’. In this paper, we discuss the complexity of the morphosyntax and semantics of ‘plurality’ in Kuikuro on two epistemologically and complementary levels: (i) a formal analysis alongside a description of the facts: (ii) the notions of ‘plurality’ as related to basic cultural ideas, which, for their part, generate daily and ritual practices as well as strategies for the memorization and transmission of knowledge (songs, sequences of narrative groups, etc.). Notions as ordering, embedded grouping, and distribution are the

basis for the traditional numbering system and counting, which is now practically extinct due to the arrival of schools and outside media in Kuikuro villages.