



# Territory, Identity, and Language among the Añun people (Venezuela)

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## **TERRITORY, IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE AMONG THE AÑUN<sup>1</sup> PEOPLE (VENEZUELA)**

### ***INTRODUCTION:***

In this paper, I intend to bring back my own experience as a field linguist while I was living in an Amerindian community, attempting to describe its language: the Añun language (also known as “Parauhano”) declared extinct in the seventies but actually still spoken by a few aged individuals, mainly women, all speaking Spanish in everyday activities and living in lake-dwellings between Maracaibo and the Venezuelan border with Colombia, in two villages amounting around 2000 persons.

In a first part, I'll point out which in my opinion, are the most relevant factors in the decline of the Añun language; in the second part of my presentation, I'll try to show how oral narrative gives us clues to understand the speakers' feelings regarding the situation they are undergoing. In conclusion, based on my own experience among the Añun people, I'd like to introduce which tools can offer linguistic anthropology in order to contribute to this particular language's survival.

### ***I THE ROOTS OF THE SITUATION: EXTERNAL CAUSES***

According to tradition, this lake population lives from fishing and other resources taken from the ecosystem of their environment. Until recently, the women made a living from weaving rush and mangrove-root. The handicrafts they produce, such as mats and baskets, would get sold at the local market.

They call themselves Añun, which also means "human being", although they are better known in ethnographic literature as Parauhano, the latter

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<sup>1</sup> I adopt here the transcription añun for the self denomination of the people analyzed, since it is the proper one, though it is often given as añú in other texts mentioning this ethnic group. The Añun people are known also as “Paraujanos” (or Parauhanos), a term with a pejorative connotation. Other ethnic groups mentioned here are : Guajiro or Goahiro, and Wayuu (self-denomination), Arawako or Arawak (proper) or Lokono, ..... Baniva, Baré, Kurripako, Piapoco, Warekena, Arawako

being a Spanish form for the term by which their neighbours, the Guahiro, designate them, the meaning of which is probably “people from the sea”.

The contacts between Europeans and the local native groups of the area go back to the very beginning of the Columbian era: the discovery of Maracaibo Lake dates from 1499 and the city of Maracaibo, founded only a few years afterwards, was a strategic position for the European settlers. The Añun are the only survivors of the numerous aboriginal groups mentioned in the chronicles who occupied the Lake's shore and the neighboring islands.

More in the north, on both sides of the border between Venezuela and Colombia, the region called Guajira is a barren zone which acted as a refuge for the Guahiro people. This fallback position helped them in building defenses against the white world, and their resistance finds expression in language maintenance, outstanding capacities of adaptation, and even armed struggle at several stages in history.

Presently, the Añun people are faced on one hand, with the "creole" society of Maracaibo, which is likely to be descended, in an undeterminate proportion, from the local Native Americans and on the other, with the Guahiro people.

Towards the latter, the Añun people express mixed feelings, typical of a small community included in a major population, showing demographic vitality and enjoying social prestige. Relations generally denied on both sides do exist, though. Inter-marriages are in no way exceptional; and mutual intelligibility between both languages, difficult to assess here, considering the extra-linguistic factors, must occur between the statements of both parties: the Añun speakers declare they understand and often speak Guahiro; on the other hand, a Guahiro person if asked, would say "not understand a word of the Parauhano language”.

With industrialization, the city of Maracaibo saw its influence increased. Venezuela was largely an agricultural country until the 1920s, when the development of oil from Maracaibo transformed the economy. Maracaibo is now the second largest city in Venezuela, on NW shore of Lake Maracaibo, which contains one of the world's greatest oil-fields.

The space of the Añun population is now limited to a few spots scattered north of Maracaibo: i) Sinamaica Lagoon, ii) Nazaret, situated on

the border of a small town called San Rafael del Moján and iii) Santa Rosa del Agua, a native village now included in the northern peripheral suburbs of Maracaibo city.

No native speaker was to be found in Santa Rosa in the 1970s when I started to work among the Añun. Interestingly, the scholar A. Jahn (1927: 192) says that in this village visited by him in 1912 "all, even the Whites from outside, spoke the Parauhano dialect". Thus, Santa Rosa contained in the early XXth century a significant number of foreigners ("Whites" in Jahn's words); but in spite of this demographic diversity and the proximity of the city, the language's vitality was still well established.

Thus, globalization has accelerated a process started with the increasing influence of oil industry in the 1920s. As the Añun people lost control of their territory, the ecosystem deteriorated in such a way that water contamination is now a priority for the whole area. As far as the Añun are concerned, I would assess that territory recognition and environment protection are for this community the keys to survival.

## ***II. THE SELF IMAGE AND THE IMAGE OF THE OTHER***

So far, I've tried to give a picture of the external causes of the Añun language endangerment, I'll turn now to what I would call "internalized" causes (internal causes induced by the external ones) which all have to do with identity construction.

### ***• the 1981 National Census***

First, I'd like to recall here the survey of the 1981 National Census I took a part in. One of the questions was: "Which ethnic group would you say you belong to?" The reactions revealed that it touched a social problem assessed as personal. The answers were likely to vary from one to another member of the same family and resulted from a choice, a position individually adopted regarding a rather vague notion.

They all knew of course the term *parauhano*: in spite of its pejorative connotation, it seems to be taken up by certain members of the collective, particularly by more urbanized people, the ones living in Santa Rosa Del Agua now situated in the northern suburbs of Maracaibo, and members from the community of fishermen living in Nazaret. More recently, an association

was created with the name "MOCUPA" (*Movimiento Cultural Paraujano Parauhano Cultural Movement*).

On the other hand, the name *añun*, the self-denomination of the people which also means “human being”, was known by a small number of people only, generally the ones who belonged to the domestic sphere of the female speakers I mostly worked with.

- *Tales about survival*

We understand why it is particularly difficult for the Añun people, to build a sense of identity, stand up for the specificity of the group they belong to and therefore to recognize a socially classified self in an environment however different it is perceived. When illustrating the dangers of integration through animal metaphors, the narrative of the Añun people reflects the relationships held by them with the other human groups living in the area.

Thus the tale called “the tiger” (*kareira*, jaguar) alludes to the storyteller’s experience when she married out of her community. Here is a brief summary:

*The tiger falls in love with a young girl during one of his trips. He offers her to go to his place to marry. Once there, they are welcomed by the Tiger’s servants. At night, when they are alone, he doesn’t treat her body the way a man would, and instead bites and scratches her. While he is out, the people from the house tell her: “This man is not human. He looks like a man, but he is a tiger. He becomes a tiger among tigers when in the bush.” Then they help her to escape.*

Right at the beginning of the story, the tiger is introduced as Guahiro; he is an animal all the same, above all he is the other.

It is also due to her condition of non-human that the Guahiro family of the young man who left his village and went away to the bush, shoots at the lovely fiancée, a young she-monkey dancing restlessly during the party. Her escape is her salvation: as she jumps and keeps dancing from a branch to another, she gets rid of her jewels, wedding presents in fact.

The two stories bring out the topic of the humanity, or lack of humanity rather, of the protagonists. The word *añunpe* which means at the same time “non-human” and “non-añun”, actually a one-word sentence ([the already mentioned] he or she is non-human/non añun) is repeated throughout the

story-telling. This double meaning is meaningful; the ambiguity seems actually to be woven into the narrative.

The tiger behaves like an animal with his young spouse: his behaviour justifies his exclusion from the human class. The same suspicion hangs over the young she-monkey: but in this case, the story-teller hasn't she identified herself with the young girl, such a pretty skilled dancer, rejected by her in-laws?

Even though the inclusive society is not given an explicit part in the tale which points out the Guahiro as the other, these narratives actually echo the power relations experienced by the Añun.

- ***the Mother, Guardian of Tradition***

In this matrilineal society, the mother -sometimes the grand-mother- is often seen as the guardian of tradition. In the tales, the fate of the heroes depends on her as well and their salvation [we may read: from the dangers of the outside world] is subordinate to her power. Hence the story of a young girl escaping from Weather (a deity in the culture), who had fallen in love with her.

*The mother refuses their union and addresses Weather this way: "The price you wish to pay for her will never be enough". She orders her daughter to lock herself up inside the house. Weather gets angry at this, and starts frightful thunder and lightning. And yet does not overcome the mother. We can hear him when we have thunderstorms: it is the wrath of Weather."*

The oral narrative of a linguistic community conveys cultural beliefs and values of this community and helps us to understand parts of its world view. Añun oral narrative outlines through allegories the speakers' self image and the image of the other and gives us clues to understand how they perceive the external forces that threaten the survival of the group as a whole.

The Añun people say the "forgot" to pass on their language to their children. But the interruption of the intergenerational transmission is due to many external causes, among them are to be mentioned :

- i) the dispossession of much of their traditional space, due to the industrialization of the area ;
- ii) the assimilative process they have been undergoing since the ever-growing (increasing) of the city of Maracaibo ;

- iii) as a side-effect, the discrimination they experiment as the less well-off of the society.

Under these circumstances, it can be regarded as positive that they succeeded to maintain some attributes of their cultural features and of their traditional way of life, extremely difficult in the face of urbanization and industrialization. They have had to adapt themselves to the new political - and economic- order. A significant number of members of the community maintain their family as wage earners : many young people work in fishermen cooperatives (especially in San Rafael del Moján and in Santa Rosa del Agua), in construction and oil industry. But their habitat still remains -the lake dwellings bunched together by foot bridges, said to be the origin of the name Venezuela (“ little Venice ”)- remind the descriptions of the chronicles. This is a visible identity marker, which links not only the Añun, but the country and its roots.

### ***III. THE TOOLS OF LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY***

Another identity marker is their language, as closely related to, but different from the language of their nearest indigenous neighbors, the Goahiros. It also ties the Añun people and other human groups which belong to the same linguistic family, largely spread out in South America, and represented in Venezuela by Baniva, Baré, Kurripako, Piapoco, Warekena and Arawako (or Arawak/Lokono).

#### ***• Needs in documentation***

Aware that the defense of the language is one of the ways to stand up to the assimilative process it is undergoing, the community often requires from the linguist various kinds of documentation. The more seriously endangered a language is, the bigger the needs are in this respect.

Not only academic work, but also booklets with pedagogical material, part of old chronicles and historical documents concerning the community should be available for its members.

As their cultural heritage, and as a material that can be used in revitalization programs, amerindian communities need, and often require from the field-worker, to bring back the result of the work that they

participated in creating, as well as information gathered in other sources in domains such as ethnohistory, botany or the like.

In native communities threatened by extinction, the maintenance of the language will facilitate the retention of the traditional knowledge. A comprehensive study should include also the experience and the ancestral knowledge of the older people, as well as the knowhow of the local handicrafts.

“the loss of a language is bound to entail the loss of aspects of the culture that were conveyed by the language, e.g. (i) knowledge of ceremonies, mythology, environment, technology, language skills, and (ii) songs, linguistic artifacts” Tsu, p. 162

Now that a new sensibility to the loss that represents for the whole community the loss of the native language, and that a new generation of literate village residents can take over in their own language and culture documentation process, organizing training sessions for a team of motivated students from the community can be very rewarding when the conditions are met. When young people from the village get involved in the information gathering, they rediscover an inner knowledge and they are the best candidates to bring the past to the future and to fill the gap created when the intergenerational transmission broke off. Since they can have access to relevant speech acts that foreigners would not witness «it is generally preferable to train local native speakers in recording techniques and have them do most of the basic recording themselves» (J. Hill 119)

- ***Collecting data***

According to common opinion, collecting data –vocabulary and grammatical structures– through elicitation from the few remaining speakers of a language, knowing they may not have used their native language on a regular basis for years, is not the most appropriate method, at least at the beginning of the fieldwork, when trust between the linguist and the speaker has not yet been established.

Whenever possible, I give preference to oral narrative. While granting prestige to the story-teller, it conveys a large number of cultural beliefs and values of the linguistic community it originated in.



This is not always the case: when a specific language has already lost many of its functions, and the society it comes from is weakened by dominant forces, much of the traditional narratives may have been lost, just as a big amount of vocabulary, and a wide range of grammatical structures. That is at least my experience while working with the Venezuelan Añun, among whom was just a very old lady who liked to tell stories and sing them, “in the ancient style”. Another consultant, however, the most fluent and declared by the other speakers the one who spoke the “correct” language, was not of this type, but she recuperated much of the language – grammatical structures and lexicon– in the course of the working sessions. In the regular daily sessions, we tried to take up again linguistic units spontaneously emerged during our informal meetings, and to sistematize them.

The desire to give an accurate report of the language as it is actually spoken in spontaneous, informal speech can also be challenged by a somewhat conservative attitude of the speakers. Aware of the different discourse patterns existing, they are likely to model their spoken performance in accordance with their own criteria of correctness. This linguistic behavior having to do with selfconsciousness is particularly noticeable when it associates with an adverse social environment as is the case for the Añun. Some speakers would restrain from speaking their language at all, however they enjoyed joining informal meetings and training sessions involving elderly speakers. In some situations, they felt sporadically stimulated to participate more actively in the course of the session. Informal talks about everyday life or small stories helped much to reinforce the speakers’ selfconfidence and allowed the emergence of grammatical structures to be re-elaborated in further working sessions.

We used to work upon dialogues –real or fictional– introducing well known formulas, such as greetings, everyday activities, a mother’s instructions to her child, or from occasional events that occurred in the village. This way, the study of the rather complex verbal morphology could directly build upon the forms emerging along these informal sessions – always tape-recorded, then repeated and worked over again with the speakers.

- ***The production of written material***

Often requested by the community and one of the tools for maintaining an oral indigenous language alive, the production of written material is another stage. When adopting a “ practical writing ” for the Añun language, it appeared to me that it was better to write down the variants. I retained also in the writing system the differences with Guahiro and Spanish, but followed whenever possible the graphic conventions of the latter, (“ ch ” transcribing the unvoiced palato-alveolar affricate, and “ ñ ” the palatal nasal), in order that it would be more easy to read even for non specialists. In order to follow the official code to transcribe indigenous Venezuelan languages<sup>2</sup>, the symbols “ i ” and “ h ” (to write respectively, the high back unrounded and the glottal aspiration) have been changed respectively to “ ü ” and “ j ”.

I maintained in the written version the colloquialisms, the loanwords and the spontaneous style of the original source, unless the consultant wanted to change her own previous words during the further sessions when we heard again the oral version.

The transposition of narrative to written style is often a difficult issue. Writing out traditional oral narrative, with its specific rules and styles implies major changes and translates in a minor key the expressive talent of the story teller in such a way that it may fail to meet the expectations. I still remember how a young native student, tried to find how one could symbolize the intonational patterns, the different pitch levels and other phonetic changes in the melody, all markers of the emotional expression of the story-teller.

- ***Standardization and varieties***

The decline of a language seems often to reinforce in the speakers a strong feeling towards their own speech variety. Here the degree of standardization in the writing system may be a matter of debate. On the one side, a very normative system is very distant from the “ real ” speech –the one actually performed; on the other side, a very specific variety that can be of a very limited scope, might well not be able to meet the expectation of

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<sup>2</sup> ALIV, etc...

other speakers, sensitive to their own speech variety and to the gap in between. A broad phonological writing system together with a normative discourse level obliterate many of the differences between the variants. The decision is not always at hand, and the technical criteria are not always the only ones to keep in mind. Since i) normalization erases the variants, ii) adopting a writing system means the selection of the variety which will be retained and transmitted, it is not surprising that the choice of a specific variety is debatable. Such criterions, as social prestige, demographic representation and political visibility are often deciding factors.

***Promotion of meetings***

The unity of an endangered language is another issue not so easy to deal with. When the speakers are few and isolated from each other, they often tend to develop a special kind of speech, to the point that it is mostly understandable in a restricted circle of relatives. The promotion of meetings between distant speakers by furthering interactions between them, should help keep the language as a whole and allow this speech community to gain a certain degree of visibility in the dominant society.

**CONCLUSION:**

As is often the case, a combination of factors contribute to the endangerment of the Añun language. This is precisely the reason why combined efforts are required. But on the other hand, any effort made in one or another field –territorial claims, identity recognition, language revitalization– can have but positive repercussions in the maintenance of this community.

The new political order in Venezuela opens space to the rights of the indigenous peoples and to their linguistic rights. The translation in the Guahiro language (2003) of the Bolivarian Constitution can be interpreted as an outwards sign to the autochthonous communities, which integrates an international movement registered in several South-American countries for the defense of the autochthonous populations. More recently, the “Ley orgánica de Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas” (2005) gives a legal/institutional framework to the efforts made in intercultural education, revitalization efforts and delimitation of indigenous territories.

The prestigious past of the Añun people, the symbolic value of their survival, their adaptative capacities are positives, and should benefit them in their revitalization efforts as soon as a participative program succeeds to involve all the dynamic forces of the community.

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