

## **Theoretical and social implications of language documentation and description on the eve of destruction in Rondônia**

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The frontier of colonisation in the Amazon region continues to involve a dramatic loss of indigenous languages and cultures. It is estimated that, since the first arrival of Europeans in the Amazon region, more than 75% of the native languages have disappeared. Although relatively recent in the Brazilian state of Rondônia, the encroachment of Western culture has, aided by exogenous diseases and accelerated destruction of the habitat of their speakers, driven already one third of the native languages towards the brink of extinction. Rondônia, which is located in the southwestern reaches of the Amazon basin and which is about the size of England, represents one of the linguistically most diverse regions of the Americas. It harbours almost 30 languages from eight different linguistic stocks, of which three are represented by genealogically isolated languages. More than 50% of these languages have nowadays less than 50 speakers, whereas they have not been sufficiently documented and described. Fortunately, linguists have increasingly been paying attention to Rondônia during the last two decennia.

I have been conducting descriptive linguistic fieldwork in Rondônia since 1995 and sometimes people ask me: “Who on earth benefits from the study of a language with only two speakers left?” This presentation will focus on three indigenous languages of Rondônia (in different stages of endangerment). To illustrate the scientific and social relevance of their study, I will show how certain constructions that pervade the grammar of Kwazá (isolate, 25 speakers) form a clear counterexample to the idea that degrammaticalisation is only a marginal phenomenon. Apart from its scientific importance, the combination of archived bits of old documentation and modern recordings of the language has also been instrumental in the recent recognition of native land claims. Furthermore, although efforts to document the Arikapú language (Jabuti family, 2 speakers) are now too late to make a complete description possible, the last speakers remember enough to enable sound historical-comparative research. The new evidence in favour of the hypothesis that the Jabuti languages belong to the Macro-Jê stock puts the prehistory of the South American continent in a new light. Finally, the Aikanã language (isolate, 200 speakers) still has some speakers with command of all speech registers and knowledge of the almost extinct culture. The study and documentation of traditional Aikanã mythology, which the community regards as highly important, is not only urgent in view of the age of the remaining knowledgeable persons; it also contains important clues for defining the boundaries of the original habitat of the Aikanã in view of the impact of a hydro-electrical dam planned in southern Rondônia. In all these cases, language documentation had to be now or never.

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