A comparative case study of multilingualism in the northeastern Andean foothills

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The area between the northeastern slopes of the Andes Mountains and the northwestern fringes of the Amazon Basin is the most linguistically diverse corner of South America. In these foothills, languages from over a dozen families are in close contact with each other, reinforced by tight socio-cultural and trading relationships between different communities and resulting in long-term multilingualism. However, the dynamics and effects of multilingualism are not the same across the board. In this paper, two multilingual zones will be compared: the Conambo river basin in Ecuador and the Sibundoy valley in Colombia. In both regions, three languages are spoken: a small local language, a northern Quechuan language and Spanish. Although the linguistic situation is at first sight comparable, different inter-cultural dynamics have led to very different language contact effects.

The Conambo river basin is at the heart of Shiwiar territory. Shiwiar people speak a Chicham language; they also speak Pastaza Kichwa (a northern Quechuan language) and Spanish. Shiwiar people have been in close contact with their Pastaza Kichwa neighbours for many generations but code-switching between the two languages is frowned upon. On the other hand, code-switching between Shiwiar and Spanish (brought there by missionaries in the 1970s) is common. These practices are reflected in the lexicon and grammar of Shiwiar: Pastaza Kichwa loanwords are rare due to the avoidance of code-switching, whereas Spanish loanwords are plentiful. However, although there are virtually no grammatical contact effects from Spanish, Shiwiar shares many morphological and syntactic traits with Pastaza Kichwa, presumably as a result of long-term proficient bilingualism.

The Sibundoy valley in southern Colombia is in many ways analogous. It is the traditional territory of the Kamsá people, whose language is an isolate. The Kamsá traditionally also speak Inga (a northern Quechuan language closely related to Pastaza Kichwa) and Spanish. However, Spanish has been spoken in the Sibundoy valley for centuries, and there is no code-switching taboo between Kamsá and Inga. This has resulted in almost opposite effects to those described for the Conambo region. Kamsá exhibits a significant number of loanwords from both Spanish and Inga, but also syntactic influence from Spanish.

This paper will examine the different contact phenomena that are found in the two regions. Because many elements are the same – a multilingual rural Indigenous community setting involving virtually the same contact languages – this case study will help highlight how different social/interactional, cultural and historical subtleties can lead to drastically different contact effects. Taking into account language attitudes and interactional practices is central in understanding how a multilingual environment can shape a language. These insights will in turn be crucial in the endeavour to develop a typology of multilingualism and its effects on language change.