

A note on the Maco [wpc] (Piaroan) language of the lower Ventuari, Venezuela

The present paper seeks to clarify the position of the Maco [wpc] language of the lower Ventuari, Venezuela, since there has been some uncertainty in the literature on this matter. Maco-Ventuari, not to be confused with other languages with a similar name, is so far poorly documented, but the present paper shows that it is nevertheless possible to show that it is a dialect of Piaroa or a language closely related to Piaroa.

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1. Introduction

The present paper seeks to clarify the position of the Maco language of the lower Ventuari, Venezuela, since there has been some uncertainty in the literature on the (so far poorly attested) Maco-Ventuari language.

According to one strand, since Koch-Grünberg (1913:468-469), it is held to be a dialect of Piaroa. This is uncomfortable only insofar as the only published comparison of actual Maco-Ventuari data with Piaroa (Loukotka 1949:56-57, Koch-Grünberg 1913:468-469) amounts to very few lexical matches, and, although one may perhaps agree that they are related, they show considerable divergence. For example, the numerals in the comparison are totally different, which is surprising if they are indeed dialects.

Another possibility is that Maco-Ventuari could be a language which is not mutually intelligible with Piaroa—this would explain the divergence in vocabulary—and reports of intelligibility with Piaroa could reflect bilingual Piaroa competence on the part of the Maco-Ventuari.

A third option is to leave the matter undecided, i.e., to call Maco-Ventuari “unclassified” (Mosonyi 2003:109), since there are only a couple of dozen words actually attested in publication. However, there is in fact one early vocabulary with another dozen words that all 20th century authors have failed to notice.

In this paper, we first distinguish Maco-Ventuari from other languages in the literature with names similar to Maco. Next, we bring all data together, including the unnoticed vocabulary. Using more recent and more extensive data than was available early in the century, we show that Maco-Ventuari, as far as can be said given its scarce attestation, is indeed a dialect of Piaroa, or a closely related language.

The Maco language/dialect is not extinct—there are 1,130 ethnic Maco of which the majority speaks the language, according to latest Venezuelan census data (Mattei-Müller 2009:491). Although no new language data has been collected for a century, at least not such that has reached publication, there is in principle no reason why Maco should remain so poorly documented.

2. The Different #Makus

There are a number of different South American languages/ethnic groups so far referred to with a name resembling #Maku² which are very different linguistically. Mahecha

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Rubio et al. (1997:112-120) is an excellent listing of most “#Maku-sightings” in the literature but not all of which are pinpointed linguistically. For reference, we list them here grouped by (arguable) language family. In each case, we use the first attested spelling variant of #Maku for that group with a dash and a disambiguating term. If an ISO-639-3 code exists for the language/ethnic group, we give the code in brackets.

1. **Macos-Cuyabeno [iso-639-3 code lacking]:** The extinct Macos at the Cuyabeno river (near the headwaters of the Aguarico in Southeast Colombia) of which no linguistic data remains, but which were believed to speak a dialect of Cofán (Pérez 1862:475). These Macos are only very scarcely attested, and no ethnic group with the name Macos is attested in most early sources near the Cofán (Friede 1952:203).
2. **Maku-Auari [iso-639-3 code lacking]:** A small tribe speaking a language isolate at the Auari river (which together with the Parime forms the Uraricuéra) in Venezuela-Brazil. It was first reported by Koch-Grünberg (1913:455-458) with a 15-word vocabulary, though see Koch-Grünberg (1922:227-228) for possible earlier mentions without linguistic data. Thanks to Migliazza (1965, 1966, 1967, 1978, 1980, 1983, 1985, 2008), Faria (no date) and Maciel (1991) the language is relatively well-documented with a published phonology and a grammar sketch. The total amount of data collected by Migliazza actually amounts to a 300-page grammar (p.c. Raoul Zamponi 2006). This Maku language is sometimes missing from handbooks/overviews, e.g., Crevels (2007)³ and Lewis (2009), in spite of its status being clear from the above publications and other handbooks/overviews (Adelaar 1998, Baldus 1968, Fabre 1998, Tovar and de Tovar 1984:165, Loukotka 1968:151-152, Brêa Monteiro and Brasil 1998:40, Aikhenvald and Dixon 1999:361-362).
3. **Macú-Yanomami [shb,xsu,wca,guu]:** Occasionally, the term Macú brabos was (is?) used to refer to Xirianá and Waicá groups roaming the right bank of the Upper Rio Negro (Nimuendajú 1950:172, Tavera-Acosta 1907:300-302). Presently, these groups are rarely called #Maku and are unquestionably part of the Yanomami family (Migliazza 1972).
4. **Macú-Nadahup [kwa,jup,mbj,yab]:** Possibly the first unequivocal reference to the Macú-Nadahup dates from 1774-1775 (Sampaio 1825:114), though the first linguistic data to be published are the wordlists of Makú of Rio Curicuriarý (= Dâw) and Makú of Rio Tiquié (= Yuhup) in Koch-Grünberg (1906). These Macú groups have since been the subject of countless publications (Fabre 2005), and, although they constitute some four mutually unintelligible languages, are unquestionably related in one family (Epps 2008, Martins 2005). Although the Nadahup languages are often held to be genetically related to the Kakua-Nukak languages, there is, at present, insufficient evidence for a common origin (Bolaños and Epps 2009).
5. **Makú-Kakua-Nukak [cbv,mbr]:** The vocabulary of Makú of Rio Papurý-Caiarý-Querarý (Koch-Grünberg 1906, Silverwood-Cope 1972) appears to be the first unequivocal reference to a Kakua variety. Later Makú (of the Guaviare and Inirida) has been applied also to Nîkak (Torres Carvajal 1994, Mahecha Rubio et al. 1997, 1998). The two distinct ethnic groups speak closely-related varieties (Cathcart

²I use the # symbol to denote resemblant forms, so #X means ‘a form resembling X’ agnostic of whether the forms in question are cognate, spelling variants, or just resemble each other by chance. For example, by #Maku, we mean any string that resembles ‘Maku’, e.g., ‘Macu’, ‘Máku’, ‘Mako’ and so on.

³ Where it was listed by the author but tacitly removed by the editor of the volume.

1972, Cabrera Becerra et al. 1999, Mahecha Rubio 2009, 2007). Although Kakua-Nukak are often held to be genetically related to the Nadahup languages, there is, at present, insufficient evidence for a common origin (Bolaños and Epps 2009).

6. **Maco-Ventuari [wpc]:** This Maco language is first met with in Humboldt (1822:155-157) on the Ventuari in Venezuela. It is poorly attested—only some 38 words published—but, nevertheless, discernibly a variety closely related to Piaroa (Krule 1988) of the Sáliban (also known as Sálipa-Piaroan) language family, as we discuss below.
7. **Makú-Achagua [aca]:** According to Mahecha Rubio et al. (1997:112), an occasional 1736 Makú reference denotes Achagua (or an Achagua clan, see Acosta Saignes 1954:77-78). Achagua is an Arawak language (Meléndez Lozano 1998) and the label Makú for Achagua is restricted to 18th century sources (Mahecha Rubio et al. 1997:112-120).
8. **Maco-Hoti [yau]:** Mahecha Rubio et al. (1997:93-94) suggest that some early usages of Maco at the upper Orinoco may actually denote (groups of) the language isolate Hoti (Vilera 1987, Guarisma P. and Coppens 1978, Vilera Díaz 1985). This identification appears to be confused, since the Hoti territory is further northeast and much more remote (Zent and Zent 2007:80, Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1973:128). In any case, modern labels for the Hoti do not include #Maku (Coppens 1983, Zent and Zent 2008). To further complicate matters, Hoti has been suggested to be genetically related to the Nadahup-Puinave-Kakua-Nukak (“Maku” family) languages (Henley et al. 1996), but the evidence presented for this relationship is clearly insufficient.
9. **Macú-Carabayo [cby]:** Lewis (2009) lists “Amazonas Macusa” as a derogatory name for the Carabayo/Rio Puré Indians and notes that “Macusa” or “Macú” is arbitrarily applied to uncontacted groups. Only some 17 utterances with uncertain meaning are known of the Carabayo/Rio Puré language (d’Arenys de Mar 1970, Berchmans de Felanix 1969, Font 1969), though there is the suspicion (Vidal y Pinell 1970) that it is the same language as, or the related to, the Yurí which have otherwise not been sighted in the past century (Wallace 1853, Martius 1867:268-272).

In addition, the name Makú is also frequently used as the name of a hypothetical language family including Nadahup and Kakua-Nukak. As noted, such a genetic relationship has yet to be adequately supported by evidence (Bolaños and Epps 2009). To avoid confusion⁴, the name Makú should not be retained for any or all parts of this alleged family. The names Nadahup and Kakua-Nukak are unambiguous alternatives for the respective branches and Nadahup-Kakua-Nukak(-Puinave) would be an unambiguous alternative for the hypothetical macro-family.

Of the nine different #Makus, only the Macú-Nadahup and Makú-Kakua-Nukak are mobile hunter-gatherer oriented groups in a patron-client relationship to more sedentary and agriculturally oriented Tukano/Arawak speaking groups (Mahecha Rubio et al. 2000).

⁴In addition, the denomination #Maku has been used since the 18th century for indigenous peoples in servitude in the Orinoco region (Useche Losada 1987:74, 100, 102-103, 145, 164), and could therefore be considered derogatory. For that reason, even if nothing else, it should be avoided.

3. The Position of the Maco-Ventuari [wpc] Language

The first linguistic data of Maco-Ventuari to appear are the 10 words in Humboldt (1822:154-156)—collected by him from a Maco youth. He indicates that there are three groups of Macos, the first on the Ventuari above the tributary Rio Mariata, the second on the Orinoco tributary Rio Padamo and the third near the headwaters of the Orinoco above Rio Gehette.

The second mention comes from Koch-Grünberg (1913:468-469), who published 4 words furnished to him by a Venezuelan official. He reports being told that the Mā’ku (his spelling) inhabit the savannas of the right banks of the middle and lower Ventuari, especially around its tributaries Camáni and Mariéte, and at the upper reaches of the small right-hand tributaries of the Orinoco up to a few days downwards from the mouth of the Cunucunúma.

The third and final author to publish data on Maco-Ventuari is Loukotka (1949:56-57) who gives 25 words collected by the Czech traveller E. St. Vráz in 1894. Loukotka’s location for the Maco is nearly identical to Koch-Grünberg’s, and is presumably copied from there.

It should be noted that, Koch-Grünberg and Loukotka—authors who otherwise show near exhaustive command of the literature—appear to have been unaware of Humboldt’s earlier vocabulary.

The (rather minuscule) total of words is reproduced in Table 1.

	Humboldt 1825:V7:154-156	Koch-Grünberg 1913:468-469	Loukotka 1949:56-57 [Vráz 1894]
ananas			<i>kana</i> [Piároa <i>kianú</i> ; <i>keaná</i>]
banane	<i>paruru</i> [en tamanaque aussi, <i>paruru</i>]		
bois de sarracane			<i>mavi</i>
bremse (tabanus)		<i>mátułe</i> [Piaróa <i>mbex̄sále</i>]	
courge			<i>kauya</i> [Piároa <i>káuiya</i>]
deux	<i>tajus</i>		<i>tagús</i>
eau/wasser	<i>ahia</i> [en salive, cagua]	<i>áhiya</i> [Piaróa <i>ahī'ya</i>]	<i>ahia</i> [Piároa <i>ahí:ya</i>]
écorce de l’arbre amyris balsamifera			<i>kurukaye</i>
écorce de l’arbre icica heptaphylla			<i>takamaré</i>
épervier			<i>guerimaka</i>
femme			<i>iñaku</i> [Piároa <i>izaxu</i>]
flambeau			<i>tehaguaré</i> [Piároa <i>duhu</i> =bois]
flamme			<i>taguaka</i> [Piároa <i>istakuaxa</i>]
garçon			<i>mure</i>
liane			<i>guipo</i> [Piároa <i>uipo</i>]
lune	<i>jama</i> [en salive, <i>vexio</i>]		<i>gama</i>
maigre			<i>iñake</i>
maïs	<i>niarne</i>	<i>īmó</i> [Piaróa <i>nyāmē</i>]	
maison			<i>paupa</i>

	Humboldt 1825:V7:154-156	Koch-Grünberg 1913:468-469	Loukotka 1949:56-57 [Vráz 1894]
manioc	<i>elente</i> [en maco, <i>cahig</i> (sic!)]		
nom d'un mont			<i>payaraima</i>
oiseau			<i>trogon</i>
petit			<i>kikiče</i> [Piároa <i>xikičae</i>]
quatre	<i>imontegroa</i>		<i>imontegua</i>
rouge			<i>dú</i> [Piároa <i>tíu</i> , <i>túahe</i>]
sarbacane			<i>uñana</i> [Piároa <i>noana</i> , <i>nyoana</i>]
schlecht		<i>txūlāha</i> / <i>tžūlāha</i> [Piaroa <i>txüráha</i>]	
soleil	<i>jama</i> [en saline, <i>mumeseque-cocco</i>]		
trois	<i>percotahuja</i>		<i>perkotahuya</i>
un	<i>nianti</i>		<i>niareti</i>
viridis			<i>tutau</i>

Table 1. The three published vocabularies of Maco-Ventuari and comparisons adduced by the respective authors.

Humboldt (1822:154-156) compared his 10 words to Sáliva, since “Maco is generally held to be a dialect of Saliva” but the result of his comparison, with the Sáliva available to him, actually contains hardly one match with Sáliva. The best match being *paruru* ~ *paruru* “banana” which, however, matches Tamanaku (an extinct Cariban language of Venezuela) rather than Sáliva.

Koch-Grünberg (1913:468-469) compared his four words with Piaroa and found matches for all four—consistent with reports of Maco-Ventuari being a dialect of Piaroa.

Loukotka (1949:56-57), who had more extensive materials for Piaroa available than Humboldt, has convincing comparisons for about half of his 25 words, but, notably, there are no matches adduced for the numerals. The numerals (1-4) were independently collected by Humboldt and Vráz and agree in forms, so they could hardly be the result of a confused elicitation.

At this stage, the paradox is that on the one hand we are told that Maco-Ventuari is a dialect of Piaroa, but on the other hand, no more than 50% of the (admittedly minuscule, but it is all we have) wordlist has plausible Piaroa cognates. In addition, among the plausible cognates we find words that are widely assumed to be diachronically less stable (Tadmor et al. 2010), and among those for which no cognates can be mustered—notably the numerals—are among the most stable. The state of affairs even raises the suspicion that Maco-Ventuari is a language unrelated to Piaroa that has come under heavy Piaroa influence. Under such a suspicion, the Maco-Ventuari would be bilingual in Piaroa and Maco-Ventuari (giving rise to rumours of dialect level intelligibility) and would consequently have borrowed a fair amount of Piaroa vocabulary. Indeed, more recent authors have simply assumed that Maco-Ventuari is a Piaroan dialect (e.g., Fuchs 1967:87-90, Tovar and de Tovar 1984:161 and with some hesitation Kaplan

1974:40-43, 79) or left Maco-Ventuari as an independent “not definitively classified” language (Mosonyi 2003:109)⁵.

However, the paradox can be resolved using the old Maco-Ventuari vocabularies and more extensive data on Piaroa. Piaroa is a language with classifiers attaching to nouns and noun modifiers, and numerals 1-3 in particular, infix the classifier morpheme. For example, *dæ* is the classifier for a flat, non-round, angular and/or pointed saliently two-dimensional object (Krupe 1988:144, 279), and attaches to both the noun and the numeral in a noun phrase:

<i>kuro-dæ</i>	<i>hi-dæ-tetæ</i>	"one machete"
<i>kuro-dæ</i>	<i>to-dæ-re</i>	"two machetes"
<i>kuro-dæ</i>	<i>wæbo-dæ-tukʷæ</i>	"three machetes"
<i>kuro-dæ</i>	<i>paʰkʷæhæno-dæ</i>	"four machetes"

In addition, there are animate/inanimate suppletive roots for lower numerals (Krupe 1988:150-153, Mosonyi 2000, 2002). When we consider the animate forms, (at least) the numerals 1-2 of the Humboldt and Loukotka vocabularies do find good Piaroa cognates. Loukotka (1949:56-57) must simply have overlooked the (quite different) alternative roots. Table 2 displays the comparisons.

		Maco-Ventuari		Piaroa	
		Humboldt 1822	Loukotka 1949	Inanimate (Krupe 1988:150)	Animate masculine (Krupe 1988:153)
Un	<i>nianti</i>		<i>niareti</i>	<i>yo- -tetæ</i>	<i>ñatetæ</i>
				<i>hi- -tetæ</i>	
eux	<i>tajus</i>		<i>tagüs</i>	<i>to- -re</i>	<i>tahū</i>
				<i>ta- -re</i>	
Trois	<i>percotahuja</i>		<i>perkotahuya</i>	<i>wæbo- -tukʷæ</i>	<i>wæmetukʷæ</i>
				<i>wæba- -tukʷæ</i>	
Quatre	<i>imontegroa</i>		<i>imontegua</i>	<i>pahakʷæ(hæ)nia-</i>	<i>pahakʷænt</i>
				<i>pahakʷæ(hæ)nio-</i>	

Table 2. Numeral forms 1-4 in Maco-Ventuari and Piaroa

I have failed to find parallels for the forms of the numerals for ‘3’ and ‘4’ of the vocabularies of Humboldt and Vráz, only an isolated Piaroa form *imonteroa* (Ernst 1895:401), *imotéhua* (Koch-Grünberg 1928:356) or *jimótejua* (Tavera-Acosta 1907:30) seems close enough in form, but with the meaning ‘5’ rather than ‘4’. If this identification is correct, then actual meaning of the #imontehua-word was presumably an inexact quantity—a situation which is common in languages with restricted numeral systems (Hammarström 2010). In any case, Sáliba also only has cognates for 1-2 with Piaroa (Benaissa 1991, Ramírez 1996, 2000, 1998, Suárez 1977, Rivet 1920), so the ancestor of Maco-Ventuari, Piaroa and Sáliba is likely to have had only the numerals 1-2.

⁵Mattei-Müller (2006:295, 301) even calls it both “unclassified” and “closely related” to Piaroa!

With (at least) the numerals 1-2 being cognate between Maco-Ventuari and Piaroa, the case for Maco-Ventuari as related to Piaroa becomes much stronger. However, it is hardly meaningful to use the meagre lexical data at hand to try to pinpoint whether Maco-Ventuari is a dialect of Piaroa or a separate, but closely related, language.

4. Conclusion

The Maco-Ventuari language was reported as early as Humboldt (1822:155-157) and is different from many other Amazonian languages with a similar name. It is still very poorly attested, with published data amounting only to some three dozen words. Judging from earlier comparisons, there may have been some hesitation as to its proper position, but more careful examination of the wordlists show that there are no good reasons for doubting the Piaroan affiliation of Maco-Ventuari.

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