



SEMANTIC TRANSPARENCY AND CULTURAL CALQUING IN THE NORTHWEST AMAZON

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Abstract: The ethnographic literature has sometimes described parts of the northwest Amazon as areas of shared culture across linguistic groups. This paper illustrates how a principle of semantic transparency across languages is a key means of establishing elements of a common regional culture through practices like the calquing of ethnonyms and toponyms so that they are semantically, but not phonologically, equivalent across languages. It places the upper Rio Negro area of the northwest Amazon in a general discussion of cross-linguistic naming practices in South America and considers the extent to which a preference for semantic transparency can be linked to cases of widespread cultural ‘calquing’, in which culturally-important meanings are kept similar across different linguistic systems. It also addresses the principle of semantic transparency

beyond specific referential phrases and into larger discourse structures. It concludes that an attention to semiotic practices in multilingual settings can provide new and more complex ways of thinking about the idea of shared culture.

Keywords: ethnonyms, toponyms, Amazon, semiotics

Resumo: A literatura etnográfica tem identificado algumas regiões do noroeste amazônico como áreas em que uma mesma cultura é compartilhada entre grupos linguísticos distintos. Esse artigo ilustra como o princípio de transparência semântica entre línguas constitui uma estratégia importante no estabelecimento de elementos de uma cultura comum regional através de práticas como a tradução direta ('calquing') de etnônimos e topônimos de tal maneira que são semanticamente, mas não fonologicamente, equivalentes entre línguas. Com isso, insere a região do Alto Rio Negro, do noroeste amazônico, dentro da discussão geral sobre práticas translinguísticas de nomeação na América do Sul e considera até que ponto a preferência pela transparência semântica se associa a casos mais abrangentes de 'calquing' cultural, nos quais noções culturalmente significativas se mantêm entre sistemas linguísticos distintos. É discutido também o princípio de transparência semântica que vai além de frases referenciais específicas e penetra na esfera de estruturas discursivas maiores, concluindo-se que uma maior atenção dada a práticas semióticas em contextos multilingues pode nos levar a uma reflexão inovadora e mais aprofundada sobre a noção de culturas compartilhadas.

Palavras-chave: etnônimos, topônimos, Amazônia, semiótica

INTRODUCTION: CULTURAL 'HOMOGENEITY' WITH LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY?

The region along the Rio Negro and its tributaries in the Northwest Amazon, and particularly the Vaupés river region, is famous as one of the most multilingual areas in the world, not just in terms of the total number of languages but especially because of the high number of languages that many individuals acquire, linked to the system of linguistic exogamy in which people marry outside their language group (Sorensen 1967; Silva 1962; Jackson 1983; Stenzel 2005). Despite this great linguistic diversity, the ethnographic literature has described many of the different language groups in the area as showing far less diversity in cultural practices than in language, since they are in a sense part of a single cultural complex that maintains linguistic differences for various social reasons, including maintaining the marriage system. The Handbook of South American Indians puts it this way:

Within this network of rivers live people of diverse linguistic families – *Arawakan, Cariban, Tucanoan, Witotoan (Miranyan)*, and unclassified – but having sufficient cultural resemblances to merit preliminary classification within a single culture area. (Goldman 1948:763)

In her well-known ethnography *The Fish People* Jackson made essentially the same point four decades later:

(D)ifferences separating the language groups of the Vaupés tend to be over emphasized (exacerbated by calling them tribes), despite the fact that the differences in language do not, a priori, indicate deep cultural divisions. The essentially

homogenous and regionally integrated characteristics of the Vaupés have not, in my opinion, been given enough consideration in the ethnographic literature . . . (Jackson 1983:101)

In fairness, what most ethnographers of the region have actually described is a complex system in which general ‘regionally integrated’ cultural characteristics exist at one social level, while a number of different social distinctions are upheld at other levels (describing the relationship of the *phratry* group versus the *sib*, and so on; Goldman 1948; Hugh-Jones 1979; Jackson 1983; Hugh-Jones 1988; Chernela 1993; and many others). However, while ethnographers have recognized that sometimes localized social groups in the region do indeed distinguish their own specific cultural practices from the larger regional culture, what they have found most remarkable is the fact that so many cultural practices are shared widely beyond individual language groups, and this fact has been emphasized as something quite special about the region.

The fact that the divisions among linguistic and cultural groupings do not necessarily entail each other, as is sometimes popularly assumed, is well-established at least as far back as Boas’s disentanglement of linguistic, cultural and racial distinctions in his famous introduction to the *Handbook of American Indian Languages* (1911). Cases in which single languages are used widely beyond any one specific cultural group are easy to find and relatively well understood, often being linked to processes of language spread through migration, trade, colonization, conquest, nation-building projects, and other similar socio-historical events. Cases in which groups show relatively little differentiation in terms of many of their cultural

practices while showing a high degree of multilingualism like that seen in areas of the northwest Amazon are rarer and have less obvious historical contexts. This paper will identify some of the linguistic and semiotic processes involved in the cross-linguistic transfer of meanings entailed by ethnographic characterizations of the multilingual northwest Amazon as an area of shared culture, both in terms of Vaupés society specifically as well as of the region more broadly, including a middle Rio Negro case study. It will first discuss place names (toponyms) and social group names (ethnonyms), and how the cultural meanings attached to them can be transferred across linguistic boundaries, and will then widen the scope to consider how these nominal referents are socially circulated through discourse. The discussion will orient around the concept of semantic transparency, which is applied as a principle of cultural practices by many peoples of the northwest Amazon as a way to manage shared meanings in a linguistically-diverse setting.

1. SEMANTIC TRANSPARENCY AND CROSS-LINGUISTIC CULTURAL MEANING

A key aspect of the different northwest Amazonian linguistic groups’ historical development of the shared culture remarked on by the ethnographers cited above is a preference for semantic transparency in many cultural concepts across languages. A good way to illustrate the principle of semantic transparency is with the case of upper Rio Negro toponyms. During fieldwork with speakers of Nheengatú, a Tupi-Guaraní *lingua franca* spoken on the middle Rio Negro, I often heard people refer to places in the Tukano- and Arawak-speaking areas upriver, from which many of them had migrated to form communities downriver. Despite the fact that their shift to Nheengatú was relatively recent, I was surprised to hear them using what sounded like proper place names that were native to Nheengatú instead of names in the languages spoken upriver.

I soon realized that these places *did* have names in the local languages, and that in each language the phonological word was distinct while the meaning was what in linguistic terms is known as a *calque*. The town known as Yawaraté, or ‘jaguar’ in Nheengatú, was known as ‘jaguar’ in all of the other local languages as well, making its meaning semantically transparent in every language, as pointed out by Silva:

The names (of places/villages) are ordinarily from the Nheengatú language or Língua Geral and correspond to others in Tukano, almost always as exact translation. It is difficult to say whether the original name is the Tukano one, and the one from the Língua Geral, by which it is known, is only a translation, or vice versa. (Silva 1962:57) [author’s translation]

Place names often refer to physical features of the landscape, but can also make reference to elements from traditional histories, so keeping them semantically transparent can make cultural meanings accessible cross-linguistically. It is not so simple, however, to say that the linguistic groups of the northwest Amazon are basically ‘calquing’ their cultures at all levels. Aikhenvald (1996) describes three levels of Tariana toponyms: currently-inhabited places, historical places and mythological places, only the first reflecting translations from other languages in the area (‘multilingual place names’), and the last two without translation (‘monolingual place names’). Tariana toponyms reflect both historically-differentiated cultural knowledge as well as the common, shared cultural knowledge of the region. Table 1 shows some of the multilingual names in Tariana, with their translations into other languages.

TARIANA	TUKANO	NHEENGATÚ/PORTUGUESE	MEANING
<i>yema-phe</i>	<i>uxtika-pūrĩ</i>	<i>cigarro</i>	<i>tabaco leaf/cigar</i>
<i>iwi-taku</i>	<i>moá-noá</i>	<i>juquirá-ponta</i>	<i>salt point</i>
<i>ikuli-taku</i>	<i>úhuri-pweá</i>	<i>jabuti</i>	<i>turtle rapids</i>
<i>tuili-taku</i>	<i>umũ-ñdã</i>	<i>japú-ponta</i>	<i>tinamou (bird) point</i>
<i>mawa-kere</i>	<i>wöhö-nãxkãro</i>	<i>arumã</i>	<i>fiber for basket-making</i>

Table 1. Tariana placenames; data from Aikhenvald (1996)

The principle of semantic transparency observed for Tariana place names appears to hold to some extent for most of the languages in the region. While some place names are left untranslated and others have become partially opaque due to historical drift, the high number of place names with obvious translations reveals cross-linguistic transparency to be a key element in the local toponymic system. Table 2 shows a similar system for Kotiria/Wanano from Stenzel (2013), in which the Wanano terms all have equivalent terms in Nheengatú or Nheengatú mixed with Portuguese.

NHEENGATÚ/PORTUGUESE	WANANO	MEANING
Ilha de Japú	<i>Mu Nitko</i>	Oropendula (bird) Island
Arara Cachoeira	<i>Maha Poa</i>	Macaw Rapids
Ilha de Inambú	<i>Kha Nitko</i>	Tinamou (bird) Island
Puraque Ponta	<i>Sa'mã Wapa</i>	Electric Eel Rapids (or “Point”)
Carurú Cachoeira	<i>Mo Phoye</i>	Salt Plant (amaranth Falls)
Jacaré	<i>Soma</i>	Alligator Creek
Jutica	<i>Napima</i>	Sweet Potato Creek
Taina	<i>Nihiphoto</i>	Boy Creek (mouth)
Taracúá	<i>Mene Koana Noaka</i>	Black Ant Rapids
Ibacaba	<i>Nĩmũ Poa</i>	Palm (bacaba) Rapids
Matapí	<i>Bukakopa</i>	Snare (fish trap) Falls
Igarapé Paca	<i>Sama Nia Phito</i>	Agouti Creek (mouth)
Macuco (type of Tinamou bird)	<i>Phota Phito</i>	Thorn Creek (mouth)
Ananás	<i>Sãne Oaka</i>	Pineapple Rapids
Vila Fátima	<i>Boho Poa/Wate Poa</i>	Tapoica Rapids
Tamanduá	<i>Mie Phito</i>	Anteater Creek (mouth)
Santa Cruz / Waracapurí	<i>Poa Wapa</i>	Hairy Stone Rapids
Tabatinga	<i>Bota Poa</i>	White Clay Rapids
Taiacú	<i>Yese Poa</i>	Pig Rapids

Table 2. Wanano placenames, from Stenzel (2013); also Waltz (2002; 2007), Marmolejo et al. (2008)

Of course, semantically transparent proper nouns can be found in many different languages and is not unique to the northwest Amazon. For example, while the common toponym ‘Holland’ is not particularly transparent, the alternative term, ‘the Netherlands’, is fairly transparent.¹ English also has an even more transparent option, ‘the Low Countries’, and similar transparent names are used in most of the neighboring languages, as in the German ‘*Niederland*’, the French ‘*Pays-Bas*’ or the Spanish ‘*Países Bajos*’, and while many languages opt for a form based on the phonological shape of the word ‘*Holland*’, a good number of languages use a calque of ‘low land’, including Finnish, Basque, Welsh, Estonian, Albanian and Romanian, to name a few.² This process is still at least partially productive, as in recent years neologists writing for the Quechua version of the wikipedia ‘Netherlands’ entry have created the semantically-transparent toponym ‘*Uraysuyu*’, literally ‘Low Country’.³ Someone learning the word for the Netherlands in any of the languages with transparent terms would also have access to a description of that country as a low area, compared to someone learning a borrowing based on the phonological form ‘*Holland*’. However, while it is possible to find

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 1. ‘The Netherlands’ is also more accurate, as ‘Holland’ technically refers only to the southwestern part of the country, but in common usage covers the entire country.

2. <http://www.geonames.org/NL/other-names-for-netherlands.html>

3. See http://qu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uray_Llaqta_Suyu. For less transparent names it was impossible to create calqued Quechua terms, in which case phonological forms are simply adapted to Quechua, as in the case of Spain, which the Quechua wikipedia calls ‘*Ispaña*’; <http://qu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ispaña>.

cases of cross-linguistic transparency in other areas, it is rarer to find this transparency used so productively for the sharing of ideas and practices among speakers of so many languages as it is in the Rio Negro area.

2. SEMANTIC TRANSPARENCY VERSUS OTHER CROSS-LINGUISTIC STRATEGIES

Contact-based linguistic influence can have many different outcomes, but one broad distinction is that between the practices of acquiring ‘loanwords’ proper, in which a phonological word is adapted into a new language, and ‘loan translation’ (Weinreich 1963:51) or ‘calquing’, in which a meaning from one language is approximated by the resources of a second, leading to phonological words of separate origins but with transparent semantic relationships. Most discussions of loanwords deal primarily with the former, and not the latter (e.g. Haspelmath 2009; Haspelmath and Tadmor 2009), and focus more on semantic and phonological adaptation in one language rather than semantic transparency between languages. Proper names are borrowed particularly frequently in language contact situations, since they often have no easy translation. However, Aikhenvald points out that Upper Rio Negro people regard the use of phonological forms from one language in the context of another negatively (2002; 2003b), so such ideological pressures have probably helped to make calquing much more widespread than word borrowing in the region.

While ethnonyms are generally transparent across indigenous languages in the Rio Negro area, in most cases transparency met its limits when the Nheengatú versions were adapted to Portuguese based on their phonological form and not their meanings. For example, the Nheengatú word form ‘*piratapuya*’ has been borrowed into Portuguese as an ethnic

identifier, but not longer preserves its meaning of ‘fish people’ in that language (which would be something like ‘*gente peixe*’). The Nheengatú terms have in many cases become official *etnia* (ethnic group) names for the purposes of legal entities like the national census,⁴ the state indigenous agency FUNAI,⁵ and foundations like the Instituto Socioambiental,⁶ where it is used to distinguish among people, but no longer on the basis of categories like ‘toucan people’ or ‘armadillo people’.⁷

Sometimes exonyms, or names applied to a people by others, and autonyms, or names people apply to themselves, develop without any semantic or phonological cross-linguistic motivation. For example, the Nambikwara peoples were given their exonym by Nheengatú-speakers who named them ‘ear holes’ (*nambi-kwara*) based on one of their notable features, the use of large ear piercings. The Nheengatú speakers were apparently unaware that the Nambikwara themselves lack a term for their language family as a whole, and instead recognize many individually named sub-groups (Kroeker 2001). The resulting situation is one of unmotivated exonym-autonym correspondences, with outsiders⁸ using

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4. <http://www.ibge.gov.br/ibgeteen/datas/indio/numeros.html>

5. http://www.funai.gov.br/etnias/etnia/etn_am.htm

6. <http://pib.socioambiental.org/pt/povo/etnias-do-rio-negro>

7. Some groups today have come to prefer the autonym from their own language rather than the Nheengatú version for official purposes, but this is equally opaque in Portuguese.

the Nheengatú term or other generic exonyms like *bugre*, *tapuya*, or even the Quechua *auca* (Roquette-Pinto 1913), while the Nambikwara themselves use unrelated clan-type autonyms like ‘*Mamaindê*’, referring to a specific northern population whose name transparently refers to a wasp species for speakers of other mutually-intelligible Nambikwara languages (Eberhard 2009).

A common scenario for South American indigenous ethnonyms is for a group of people to refer to themselves with an autonym that is the native word for ‘people’ while others use an exonym with an unrelated motivation. For example, similarly to the Nambikwara, a Western Tukano group from Peru received the name ‘Orejones’, Spanish for ‘big ears’, presumably due to outsiders’ noticing of their large ear piercings. In contrast, neighboring Quechua-speakers called the Orejones *Koto* after a monkey species whose coloring apparently bears some similarity to the body paints they use. But neither of these exonyms have any connection to the Orejon autonym ‘*mai*’, which simply means ‘people’ (Bellier 1994). This scenario repeats all over South America. A number of cases from Ecuador illustrate this point: before contact with the national society in the 1950s, the Waorani people were known as ‘*aucas*’, a Quechuan term for ‘savage’ or ‘warrior’. The Shuar were historically known as ‘*jívaros*’, a Spanish term meaning ‘wild’ or ‘untamed’. The Tsachila were known as ‘*colorados*’, a Spanish reference to the red color the men dye their hair.

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8. Neighboring indigenous peoples also have their own exonyms for the Nambikwara, the Parecí dividing them into two main groups, the Uáikoákoré and the Ouihanieré, also sometimes using the word Kabixí (Roquette-Pinto 1913) as an insult (or ‘ethnophaulism’, see Allport 1954).

The Chachi were known as ‘*cayapas*’, probably in reference to an important historical figure (a ‘chief’ or *uñi*), or possibly to the river where the Chachis live. The Quechua-speakers of Ecuador, Peru and other Andean countries are sometime referred to as ‘*quechuas*’ or ‘*quichuas*’ by Spanish speakers, but they themselves either use locally-specific ethnonyms (like *otavalo* or *saraguro* in Ecuador) or use the term *runa*, for ‘people’. A similar situation holds for the Nadahup peoples in the Vapués and neighboring areas, who are known by outsiders as ‘*makú*’, among other terms, but who call themselves ‘people’. Table 3 illustrates cases in which both the meaning and the form of exonyms and autonyms have no motivated relation.

EXONYM	MEANING	AUTONYM	MEANING
Nambikwara	‘ear hole’ in Nheengatú	many named sub-groups	(various)
Orejones	‘large ears’ in Spanish	Mai	person
Auca	‘savage’ or ‘warrior’ in Quechua	Wao	person
Jibaro	‘wild’ in Spanish	Shuar	person
Colorado	‘red colored’ in Spanish	Tsachila	person
Cayapa	Proper name of a chief and a river	Chachi	person
Quichua	Proper name of the language	Runa	person
Makú	Pejorative term in Portuguese, Nheengatú and other languages	Hup, Yuhup, etc.	person

Table 3. Some South American ethnonyms.

The naming practices illustrated in Table 3 have gone through interesting developments in recent years because many native groups have rejected non-native exonyms as offensive ethnophaulisms, and demanded – in most cases successfully – to be known by their autonyms. It is the phonological form, however, and not the meaning of the autonyms that has been adopted, which would result in dozens of distinct indigenous peoples being each known as ‘people’ in English, Spanish or Portuguese. Most of these cases are not situations of extreme multilingualism and exogamous marriage like that of the Vaupés, and so keeping cultural

concepts transparent has not been prioritized in the same way. This does not mean that these peoples never apply the principle of semantic transparency; for example, some Chachi place names have calqued Spanish alternatives, like the town of *Tyaipi* (salt-water), which is also known as ‘*Agua Salada*’. But in these cases there is a predominance of non-transparent correspondences.

3. THE UPPER RIO NEGRO ETHNONYMIC SYSTEM

Returning to the upper Rio Negro area, the ethnonymic systems in the region, and particularly those of the Vaupés River area, tend not to feature arbitrary autonym/ethnonym pairs or borrowings of phonological forms, but instead show a pervasive preference for cross-linguistic semantic transparency. If a group is named the ‘mosquito’ or ‘clay’ people, then their ethnonym in every language will be a word for ‘mosquito’ or ‘clay’, sometimes combined with a second word for ‘people’. I heard Nheengatú-speakers frequently using the Tupi versions of these ethnonyms, sometimes adding the generic term *tapuya*: ‘*tukana tapuya*’, ‘*tuyuka tapuya*’, ‘*tariana tapuya*’, etc.⁹ Piecing together information from a number of different ethnographic and linguistic sources, Table 4 shows that in most cases in each individual language the pattern is the same as that I observed for Nheengatú, even in instances where data is incomplete.

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 9. Some ethnonyms also standardly included the word *tapuya* in their official Portuguese form, such as ‘Piratapuya’, but it appears that the two elements of this name are not transparent for most Portuguese speakers, but instead constitute a frozen form.

The most complete lists were available for Tukano, Bará, Tariana and Hup.¹⁰ These first two languages are East Tukano and show cognates between them, but otherwise there is little phonological similarity of the different terms across languages, only semantic consistency. This is striking considering that, together with Nheengatú, the semantic correspondences can be observed for four distinct language families: Tupi, Tukano, Arawak and Nadahup.

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 10. Due to the diversity of sources from different time periods, there is undoubtedly some orthographic inconsistency in Table 4, and perhaps even incorrect ethnonyms in a few cases. However, this does not affect the general point illustrated by the table, that across languages social groups have phonologically different names that often have the same meaning in each language.

OFFICIAL NAME - NHEENGATÚ	AUTONYM	TUKANO	BARÁ	TARIANA	HUP	TRANSLATION
Tukano	Daséa ¹¹	Daséa	Dahca	Yasé-ne	cəkʷ'ət	toucan people
Tuyuka	Dochkáfuara		Bahka Puára		māc	clay people
Pusanga	Bará		Bará		pám'	'medicine' people
Arapaso	Koreá				clyá (Tukano)	'medicine' people
Piratapuya	Uiakena		Wai Mahkara	Kuphe-ne	hōp	fish people
Wanano	Kótitia	Okotikarā	Ohkoti Mahkara		deh-həg agua-?	water people
Yurutí-tapuya	Uaiana	Yutabopinō	Wayiara			dove people
Karapaná-tapuya	Mütē	Mutea-masā	Mütea			mosquito people
Pisá-tapuya	Wahüná					net people
Tatú-tapuya	Pamoá		Pamoá			armadillo people
Desana	Winá	imiko masa	Winá		miná? (probable borrowing)	(wind? sky?)
Karawatana mira	Buhágana					blowgun people
Tariana	Iri-ne ("blood")		Pavará		cæç	type of tree (?)
Baniwa	?				Behkana (probable borrowing)	manioc people (?)
Wariwa tapuya	Hup, etc.	Makú, etc.	Makú, etc.	Makú, etc.	Hup = person	howler monkey people

Table 4. Ethnonyms across languages in the northwest Amazon; data from Goldman (1948); Jackson (1983); Epps (2009b); Aikhenvald (2003a); Ardila (1993); Melguiero (2009); Metzger (1981; 2000); Alemán et al. (2000); Koch-Grünberg (1906); ethnologue.com.

As was pointed out earlier, no naming system obeys a single principle exclusively, but systems can mix elements of semantic transparency together with other principles. Some of the *etnias'* official names cannot be obviously traced to a transparent meaning in every language, like the

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 11. Here 'autonym' means any term in the language of the group that refers to that group, even though there may also be other names. In Tukano, as well as perhaps in other languages, there are a number of ways people can refer to their own social groups, and the animal-based names may be considered a kind of 'nickname' as compared to other terms. This point is addressed further below.

Tariana, the Desana and the Wanano, whose names in Nheengatú are not known Tupi-origin words.¹² The Wanano autonym *Kotiria* translates as something like ‘water people’ in other area languages, but the origin of the Nheengatú word remains a mystery. The name comes from a traditional story that says that once the Kubeo people tried to burn the Wanano out of a hollow tree, but because water poured out of the tree preventing them from burning they were thought to be water beings, and were named accordingly (Stenzel 2013). This case illustrates how semantic transparency allows access to traditional knowledge across language groups, contributing to the shared cultural elements that ethnographers have so often noted. Multilingualism is maintained in part as a consequence of the linguistic exogamy system, but common cultural elements among inter-marrying groups can be maintained by keeping names cross-linguistically transparent.

This analysis actually oversimplifies the local naming practices, which are far more complex than I am able to address here. The different groups have different named sub-clans that also take their names from animals and objects, like one group of the Karapanã known as the ‘*duruwa* fish people’ (Metzger 1981). Some levels of naming are kept more public while others are more private, as in the case of the Tukano people who actually

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12. The Tariana are said by different sources to be possibly named for the aracú fish, (Ramirez 2001) or for ‘blood’ (Aikhenvald 2003a).

refer to themselves most frequently as *Yepa Masa*, after a figure from their traditional history called *Yepa*; this autonym does not have translations into other languages. Some sources consider the animal-based name to be more of a nickname than an official clan name (Ramirez 2001). However earlier sources show it has long been in common usage; Sorensen (1969) heard the term *dahseaye ukushe* or ‘toucan speech’ referring to the Tukano language in the sixties. At any rate, it is clear that northwest Amazon societies take care to make certain elements transparent, and to leave other things opaque, as seen in this case, and in parallel with the situation of the translatable and untranslatable Tariana toponyms discussed above (Aikhenvald 1996).

Outside of the Tukano society of the Vaupés things are a little different. It is sometimes said that the Baniwa from the Içana river are named for the Tupi *maniiwa* for ‘manioc’ but this is unclear. Actually, the Baniwa are not a single group in the way that the Vaupés *etnias* are, but include a number of sub-groups with their own names, a point taken up below. Also not directly included in Tukano society, the Nadahup peoples are sometimes referred to collectively by others with an animal-based term in Nheengatú, *wariwa tapuya* or ‘howler monkey people’, but internally differentiate themselves as well. Local groups also apply a number of other names to Nadahup peoples as *exonyms* in a relationship of social inequality, addressed in the next section.

4. OTHER PATTERNS OF SEMANTIC TRANSPARENCY IN THE RIO NEGRO REGION

While the Tukano and Arawak peoples described above have cultural ties and inter-marry, other people in the region have a different relationship to Tukano-Arawak society. The exonym *makú* has been applied to forest-based hunter-gatherer peoples, but it is not used as an autonym, and is often considered offensive, as one of a set of negatively-valenced exonyms. Epps recommends the more neutral term Nadahup for the language group of Hupda, Yuhup, Daw and Nadëb (2008:9). While Nadahup languages (particularly Hup, Epps 2009b) do maintain semantic transparency for other groups' names, their neighbors do not treat them the same way. Table 5 shows some exonyms that have been applied to them.

EXONYM	LANGUAGE	MEANING
Makú	Portuguese, Nheengatú, other languages	without speech ²¹³
Kamã	Portuguese, Nheengatú, other languages	?
Nixí-maxsa	Desana	people who ask
Wira-poyá	Desana	damaged people
Pokce	Tukano	carrier
Josa	Barasana/Taiwano	servant
Pavará-poyá	Tariana	damaged people

Table 5. Names for Nadahup people; data from Mahecha et al. (1996); Epps (2009a); Bioca (1965)

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 13. This word is probably from an Arawak term for “those without speech” (Koch-Grünberg 1906:877; Ramirez 2001:198), but its origin is not entirely clear.

The different Nadahup peoples do not use any terms that are semantically transparent with relation to any of the above exonyms, but instead they have adopted the common strategy of using the word for ‘people’ as an autonym (Epps 2008:584). This asymmetry in ethnonyms reflects a social asymmetry between Nadahup and Tukano-Arawak peoples in the region, as the former learn Tukano languages while the latter do not generally learn Nadahup languages. Consistent with this one-sided bilingualism, Nadahup people translate Tukano-Arawak ethnonyms into their languages, but the meanings of the Tukano and Arawak terms for Nadahup peoples are pejorative (‘ethnophaulisms’; Allport 1954) and unique to those languages. Between these two social groups neither semantic transparency nor phonological identity are the most important aspects of the ethnonyms, which instead reflect cross-linguistic opacity and social asymmetry, and perhaps some of the limits of shared culture in the Vaupés.

While the multilingualism of the Tukano society of the Vaupés may offer one of the most extensive examples of semantic transparency in proper names, the principle of semantic transparency can be observed much more broadly in the region through other kind of language contact situations. In the area of the middle Rio Negro where I did fieldwork with speakers of Nheengatú, the locals are migrants not just from the Tukano areas but also from different Arawak areas as well, which present a different version of semantic transparency in their proper name systems. The lower parts of the Içana River have undergone a language shift to Nheengatú while the people of the upper Içana continue to speak several varieties of Baniwa. The different populations of Baniwa, like the Tukano people of the Vaupés, each have a uniquely-identifying name based on an

animal or object. Like the linguistic groups of the Vaupés, these named ‘clan’ groups provide the basis for exogamy, but their names are not semantically-transparent across different languages in the same way, and instead are cognates across a dialect continuum. However, the Baniwa that have shifted to Nheengatú were able to bring these important social distinctions along by maintaining semantic transparency with the shift to Nheengatú.

KURRIPAKO/BANIWA	NHEENGATÚ	TRANSLATION
Adzaneni	Tatú-tapuya	Armadillo people
Aini-dákenai	Kawa-tapuya	Wasp people
Dzawi-minanei	Yawaraté-tapuya	Jaguar people
Dzúreme	Yibóya-tapuya	Bushmaster (snake) people
Hâma-dákenai	Tapiíra-tapuya	Tapir people
Kapité-mananei	Kuati-tapuya	Coati people
Kumada-minanei	Ipeka-tapuya	Duck people
Moríwene	Sukuriyú-tapuya	Anaconda people
Wádzoli-dákenai	Urubú-tapuya	Vulture people
Aslipéri-dákenai	Siusí-tapuya	Pleiades people

Table 6. Baniwa ethnonyms; data from Granadillo (2006:37-43); Koch-Grünberg (1906:168-169); Nimuendajú (1950:160-163)

Beyond the semiotic principles described above, the naming strategies in the region are ultimately subject to a superordinate cultural principle of exogamy. For multilingual groups, social distinctions must be communicated cross-linguistically, for example, between a Tukano and a Tariana. For people who speak varieties of the same language, as in the Baniwa dialect continuum, semantic transparency comes into play when they must preserve social distinctions through a language shift, for example, between an upriver Baniwa and a downriver Baniwa. And toward the groups that are not part of exogamous relationships in the area, the Nadahup peoples, semantic transparency is not applied, but instead a set of non-transparent exonyms and ethnophaulisms are

used.¹⁴ In this way the norms of cultural sharing and belonging, as well as social exclusion, are reflected in these different forms of cross-linguistic negotiations of meaning.

5. SEMANTIC TRANSPARENCY IN DISCOURSE

Examining naming practices provides a convenient way for fixating on sets of noun phrases and their equivalents and lining them up with their correspondences across languages, as seen in the many tables above. But of course the referential strategies for which such noun phrases are used occur embedded in their usage in discourse, where they are circulated and transmitted. One can imagine hundreds of thousands of conversations in which specific cultural concepts became salient and multilingual speakers calqued them into other languages. In the recordings I made with Nheengatú-speaking people these processes were often observable online. This section will give several relevant examples of semantic transparency in the context of verbal art (Sherzer 2002) where the referential and propositional functions that enable the sharing of cultural concepts are embedded in language’s poetic functions (Jakobson 1960).

In example (1) the storyteller Marcilia is a native speaker of Tukano and long-term Nheengatú-speaker who also has some knowledge of several other languages, especially the language of her late husband, Piratapuya. She was an exceptional source of cultural knowledge during my research, and she will feature in all of the following examples. Here, as she begins

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 14. However, Nadahup languages can show semantic transparency with the other local language families, but this is not reciprocated; see above.

to tell a story in Nheengatú, she explicitly links referents in this story to a version she heard originally in Tukano. Line 1 shows how she establishes a semantically equivalent term for ‘deer’ across languages, stating both the Nheengatú and Tukano words.

(1)

- 1 *Suasú, suasú paá yamã kwáru ta-mu-seruka*
 deer deer REP ‘yamã kwáru’ 3PL-CAUS-name
 ‘The deer, they say, is called ‘yamã kwáru.’
- 2 *ne a-kua ma-nungar nheengatú irum ya-mu-seruka.*
 NEG 1SG-know what-like nheengatú COM 1PL-CAUS-name
 ‘I don’t know in what way we call it in Nheengatú.’
- 3 *Suasú yuruparí raíra paá.*
 deer devil child REP
 ‘The deer is the child of the devil, they say.’

On several occasions during narratives Marcília became concerned with finding the proper translation for the names of characters in the stories. Some characters have equivalent proper names in most of the local languages, like the forest monster *curupira*, who was referred to by this Tupi name in the Nheengatú stories that I recorded, but who is also well-known in languages around the region (in East Tukano languages, Stenzel 2013; in Arawak languages, Aikhenvald 1999; and in Nadahup languages, Epps 2008). Other characters might not have pre-established translations in Nheengatú, since the language is a more recent introduction

to the area, but speakers often care about finding translations, as in this example where Marcília unsuccessfully attempts to think of Nheengatú translations for two characters from a story she knows in Tukano.

(2)

- 1 *Aá-pe paá ta-kuéma táira Wariró. Wariró, nome dele.*
 DEM-LOC REP 3PL-dawn son Wariró Wariró name of.him
 ‘There they say that it dawned on his son Wariró. ‘Wariró’ is his name.’
- 2 *Maá taá pukú? Pai dele,*
 what Q long father of.him
 ‘What is the other part (of the name)? His father,’
- 3 *ah nome dele, nome dele, pai dele,*
 ah name of.him name of.him father of.him
 his name, his name, his father,’
- 4 *Quando eu- nome dele paá, tukana Basebó.*
 when 1SG- name of.him REP Tukano Basebó
 ‘When I, his name, they say, in Tukano, is Basebó.’
- 5 *Língua geral como taá (?) tó dizendo*
 Nheengatú how Q 1SG.be saying
 ‘In Nheengatú like I am saying.’
- 6 *SF: Pode falar só em tukano tambem, o nome.*
 ‘You can speak just in Tukano also, the name.’

7. *Basebó, so ae-ntu, Basebó. Wariró, Basebó.*
 Basebó, only 3SG-RESTR, Basebó. Wariró Basebó.
 ‘Basebó, just him, Basebó, Wariró and Basebó.’

Meta-cultural descriptions are also an important way that cultural concepts can be rendered cross-linguistically transparent. In (3) Marcilia describes events at the pan-regional *dabucurí* celebrations, employing the linguistic resources of Nheengatú, including richly iconic elements like ideophones and imagistic gestures which can be thought of as further ways for increasing transparency.



Image 1. Circular gestures representing the movement of dancers at a *dabucurí*.

(3)

- 1 *Ixé iri umbaá a-kuá a-nheengari,*
 1SG again NEG 1SG-know 1SG-sing
 ‘Me on the other hand, I don’t know how to sing;’

- 2 *puranga u-nheengari u-suaxara amú-tá*
 excellent 3SG-sing 3SG-companion other-PL
 ‘he sings excellently, to his companion, the other one.’

- 3 *Suaxara-té paá maníwa ta-sú vwuuu,*
 companion-FOC REP manioc 3PL-go IDEO
 ‘His companion, they say, (with) manioc he goes, ‘vwuuu’,
 ((circular gestures))

- 4 *u-yuiri paá kwayé, yawé paá u-sú.*
 3SG-enter REP like.that like.this REP 3SG-go
 ‘(he) comes in, they say, like this, they say, (and) he goes.’
 ((circular gestures))

Many of the meanings of the cross-linguistically transparent elements discussed in this paper had to do with the cultural significance of different animals as a system of social distinction. Example (4) is from a data-collecting session in which I was recording the names of animal species with the help of a Brazilian Amazon wildlife guidebook, looking at the pictures and eliciting the names. When Marcilia saw the image of the *saracura* bird, she was reminded that in upriver communities during her childhood she had seen a ceremony where the men became *saracuras* and sang and danced. Presumably the songs were not in Nheengatú, but Marcilia creates an improvised online translation to render something from a Tukano tradition in the Tupi language. In this way the principle of semantic transparency is extended beyond specific lexical items and into the elements of verbal art and performance.



Image 2. (Left) Gestures show the beating of a drum along with singing. (Right) The *saracura* bird (*Aramides cajanea*); image from the Projeto Brazil 500 Pássaros website: <http://webserver.eln.gov.br/Pass500/BIRDS/INDEX.HTM>

(4)

- 1 *Kwaá nungara festa ramé ta-nheengari kariwa, tamburina irum, tititititi.*
DEM similar festival when 3PL-sing white.person drum COM IDEO
'When they have a festival like that they sing, white man, with a drum, 'ti ti ti ti ti.'
- 2 *Yandara ramé ta-mbaú-rã. Yandara ramé.*
noon when 3PL-eat-DAT noon when
'At noon they would eat. At noon.'
- 3 *Ya-sú ya-mbaú sarakura, meé taá puku rã*
1PL-go 1PL-eat saracura how Q long DAT
'Let's go eat saracura ((singing)), how does it go?'

- 4 *Yandara u-pisika-ana yande rã sarakura*
noon 3SG-arrive-PFT IPL DAT saracura
'Noon has arrived for us saracura. ((singing))'
- 5 *Ya-sú ya-mbaú. Ya-sú ya-sikí yepe roda sarakura.*
1PL-go 1PL-eat 1PL-go 1PL-pull one wheel saracura
'We are going to eat. Let's form a wheel, saracura. ((singing))'
- 6 *Ta-meé prato iké aikwé timbiú*
3PL-give plate here be food
'They give a plate 'here food''
- 7 *colher wasú irum ta-yuka ta-yupuí i-yurú-pé.*
spoon AUG COM 3PL-get 3PL-feed 3SG-mouth-LOC
'with a big spoon, grab it and feed them in the mouth.'
- 8 *Ai! Yúkitaya irum chega u-babari u-sú sarakura.*
hot spice (?) COM arrive 3SG-drool 3SG-go saracura
'Ai! With hot spice he goes drooling, the saracura.'
- 9 *Eeta! U-mutai-ana yandé sarakura.*
3SG-bless(?) -PFT IPL saracura
'Eeta! The saracura blesses (?) us.'
- 10 *Ya-sú ya-yasuka garapá kití sarakura u-nheé.*
1PL-go 1PL-bathe beach towards saracura 3SG-say
'Let's go swim at the port saracura ((singing)), they say.'

Not only are ethnonyms and toponyms made semantically transparent across languages in the northwest Amazon, but the ideas that those nominal forms refer to are transmitted in broader discourse forms that are in their own way made transparent through translation. Like with ethnonyms and toponyms, however, semantic transparency is not the only operative principle at the discourse level either, and in my fieldwork I encountered cases of other principles at play. For example, when I was given a traditional treatment for a sore knee that included a specific spoken blessing, the blessing necessarily had to be performed in Tukano, even though the speaker used Nheengatú dominantly (see Floyd 2007). The meaning of the words was rendered opaque and mysterious, while their phonological form remained consistent across languages, and with it presumably whatever makes it an effective treatment.

CONCLUSION

The data from the Rio Negro region presented above describe a multilingual society with many shared cultural elements across linguistic groups. The limits of this regional culture are somewhat continuous with the limits of the system of exogamy, partly excluding the Nadahup peoples who are not typically involved in these exogamous relations. This exclusion is not total, as Nadahup peoples to some extent participate in Tukano society and translate Tukano names into their languages, but this is not reciprocated, and Nadahup cultural concepts have little currency for the other groups in the region. Additionally, Portuguese-speaking settlers and other outsiders such as white foreigners like myself are also not expected to participate in semantically-transparent naming systems, and intermarriage with them is one way that people are considered to leave the domain of the ethnonymic system altogether (particularly through the father's line; see Floyd 2007). As discussed above, Arawak societies like

that of the Baniwa also participate in pan-regional cultural practices on a broader scale, including exogamy and semantically-transparent naming systems across dialects or languages, in cases of language shift.

Among intermarrying peoples, as part of complex inter-group social relationships including spouse exchange and widespread co-participation in different cultural practices and oral history traditions, the different peoples can calque their set of ethnonyms based on words for well-known animals and objects that would be expected to exist in all languages in the area. The practice of calquing and the avoidance of direct lexical borrowings in this region contrasts with other language contact situations in which the most prominent effect of contact is increased lexical borrowing.¹⁵ In cases of lexical borrowing a new word enters a language, adapting to its phonology and morphology, usually because it refers to a new concept acquired from speakers of another language. The calquing of words for animals, plants and other well-known objects to refer to people and places, on the other hand, does not add new lexemes to a language, but expands the meaning of existing words for social categorization and other kinds of cultural practices. The meanings of the words are in that sense motivated by social norms that require social groups to be distinguished, and they map differences from the non-human world onto the human world. As a way for maintaining these important social distinctions cross-linguistically, speakers of upper Rio Negro languages are able to detach a term's meaning component from its sound component through calquing, a process which does not

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15. Among many other sources, see the classic Weinreich 1963 or the more recent Haspelmath 2009.

occur in lexical borrowing, when sound and meaning are adopted and adapted together. There are different semiotic processes at play in these two types of borrowing with respect to ethnonyms, because while both types preserve an indexical relationship to the human groups they refer to, in one case the translation is based on a symbolic association and in the other case it is based on a kind of iconicity in which sound shapes must physically resemble each other cross-linguistically. In some contexts the preservation of the phonological form of borrowed words is desirable as a sign of prestige associated with multilingualism in high-prestige languages – like Latin and French in certain moments of the history of English, or like English in many places today – but ideologies against borrowing and codeswitching in the Rio Negro region favor speaking many languages, but not combining elements from any two languages at the same time.¹⁶ The different ways of translating names, either borrowing a foreign word or calquing, raise the question of what exactly ‘proper nouns’ consist of, and whether ethnonyms (and toponyms) in the shared culture of the northwest Amazon are not single sound-meaning pairings but are primarily semantic concepts held by multilingual individuals whose sound-meaning correspondences are only generated emergently as they use one language or another. It is the meanings that constitute elements of shared culture, not the specific word forms, which are specific to each language group.

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 16. The exception to the prohibition of code switching appears to be Portuguese, which is often mixed with local languages – perhaps because it is not associated with a specific local group of people.

Relations of semantic transparency were not all-encompassing but proved to have their limits, as reflected in the data considered here. Many of the local groups keep some of their cultural knowledge monolingually to themselves while making other parts of it transparent to the larger culture. Some terms have become ingrained, leaving their etymologies opaque. Some peoples are not considered socially equal, and are partly excluded from transparency. Sometimes the boundaries between language groups, cultural groups, and points on a dialect continuum can become mixed up and yield the wrong level of granularity between sub-group and macro-group. In discourse, some traditions of language usage like shamanic singing can call for phonological identity to be preserved at the expense of semantic transparency. These incomplete correspondences complicate the claims of the ethnographers about cultural homogeneity cited at the beginning of this paper. Their accounts describing the importance local people place on making cultural knowledge transparent and on circulating it widely are accurate, but it should also be noted that there are also limits to this principle. Ethnographic accounts have also documented many different levels of social categorization in the region beyond the language group, and each of these has its own scope of socialization. This means that although cultural sharing is pervasive, it is also partial, and that the peoples of the region can be both independent social groups and members of a larger macro-group. Focusing on the semiotic processes through which cultural elements are shared in the Rio Negro region helps us to take account of this complexity and to understand exactly how cultural sharing can be achieved in such contexts of extreme multilingualism.

ABBREVIATIONS:

I, 2, 3 = person, SG/PL = singular/plural, AUG = augmentative, CAUS = causative, COM = comitative/instrumental, DAT = dative (prospective), DEM = demonstrative, FOC = focus, IDEO = ideophone, LOC = locative, NEG = negation, PFT = perfective, PL = plural, REP = reportive, RESTR = restrictive (delimitative), Q = interrogative

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III. GRAMMAR AND LANGUAGE RELATIONSHIP