

Specialized discourse, linguistic diversity, and language change: Amazonian perspectives

Patience Epps

University of Texas at Austin / Collegium de Lyon & Laboratoire Dynamique du Langage

While much work on language variation and change has stressed the role of social context, far less attention has been paid to the ways in which particular socio-cultural practices may guide processes of language change and diversification in locally or regionally variable ways. This talk explores the relevance of specialized discourse forms, such as shamanic incantation and ceremonial dialog, to the broader panorama of linguistic diversity within Amazonia. First, I build on the observations made in Epps (2021) that the frequent esotericity encountered in Amazonian ritual speech is part of a broader panoply of registers and lects, which both intersect and align with the diversity of everyday languages across the region, and are arguably cultural grounded in regional conceptions of language and social identity. Second, I argue that specialized discourse provides a likely locus for the emergence and propagation of linguistic innovations in the Amazon basin, particularly those associated with language contact. The relevance of these discourse forms for language contact and change derives from the following characteristics: an emphasis on extensive circulation across speakers, communities, and languages; a particular value ascribed to dispersed and linguistically distinct forms; discursive norms that favor close replication while also licensing creative manipulation; a high potential for ‘leakage’ between registers and genres; and the social position of specialists themselves, who tend to bring together both diffuse social networks and relative status. I consider a range of examples of lexical and grammatical change in Amazonian languages that have plausible ties to specialist discourse.