

Amazonian hunter-gatherers and the language of space

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Indigenous foragers have long been calling researchers' attention across disciplines for their particular sociocultural preferences, such as a high degree of mobility, as well as dwelling and subsistence patterns. Thus, there is an expectation that such communities are internally diverse, and that this diversity is driven by a foraging-oriented lifestyle and spatial mobility. Recent studies in the field of linguistics addressed the question about possible correlations between *language* and lifestyle choices (Bickel & Nichols 2020), and revealed that there are *no* systematic differences in grammar and phonology when comparing foragers and horticulturalists. However, when looking at the domain of space and its linguistic instantiations, Indigenous hunter-gatherers are reported to display specific strategies such as a preference for non-egocentric frames of reference (Majid et al. 2004), lower place-name density (Hunn 1996), and language-specific patterns of motion event encoding (O'Meara et al. 2020). Such results are supported by observations on how non-linguistic factors as rooted in culture and the environment can play an active role in molding linguistic structure. For the case of Indigenous foragers, we might thus expect that linguistic instantiations of space are impacted by factors such as local ecologies, subsistence, and lifestyle choices. On the other hand, hunter-gatherer groups have different linguistic resources at hand, which are equally responsible for the shape of the linguistic representation of space. This raises the question to what extent languages' typological profiles, widely shared aspects of human experience, and culturally/ecologically specific phenomena (esp. subsistence pattern/mobility) can conspire to generate grammatical and discursive patterns over time? In this talk, I approach this question by presenting a case study of certain aspects of the spatial grammar of two related Indigenous languages spoken in the Brazilian Northwest Amazon region: Dâw and Nadëb (Naduhup family). Both groups maintain a hunting-gathering focus, inhabit similar ecologies, rely on similar subsistence patterns, but show significant variation in their typological profile. The results exemplify how a similar environment and lifestyle choices *can* result in similar linguistic strategies, and that, at the same time, diverging grammatical and discursive solutions for spatial reference are possible results of the languages' more general typological preferences. Finally, addressing both diversity and commonalities among Dâw and Nadëb, the data and methods of data collection presented in this talk offer novel perspectives in the inquiry into hunter-gatherer representations of space.

References

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