

Multiple multilingualisms: Indigenous and Romance languages in Amazonia

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The Romance superstrate across Latin America overlays an enormously diverse set of indigenous languages. In contemporary indigenous communities across the region, processes of language shift are widely visible and attested at various stages and degrees, with monolingualism in a colonial language as a typical endpoint. Yet many of these indigenous contexts themselves have long histories of stable multilingualism, in which speakers of various indigenous languages have interacted on a regular basis for many generations, and competence in two or more languages was not a step toward shift. The radical shifts observed in many contemporary communities can be attributed to the introduction of new linguistic ecologies, such that we even find the same speakers using distinct multilingual behaviors with Spanish or Portuguese from those they use when speaking local indigenous languages. However, at the same time, some of the multilingual practices involving colonial languages resonate with more traditional practices, and sometimes points of continuity can be identified even where they seem least evident. In this talk, I explore these variable multilingual practices in the context of the northwest Brazilian Amazon, where dozens of indigenous languages have coexisted for centuries and perhaps millennia, but where many are now giving way to Portuguese.