Exploring endangered languages: A story from the Amazon

Kasia Wojtylak
Ph.D candidate
James Cook University
Bob Dixon, Professor of Linguistics at JCU, a linguist who devoted his life's work to Australian languages
Alexandra Aikhenvald, Professor of Linguistics at JCU, working on Kumandene Tariana in Santa Terezinha, Amazonas, Brazil (2012)
SOUTH AMERICA
The languages of the Amazon
Why did I become a linguist?
Why did I become a linguist?
The words
barbeque
canoe
cashew
cannibal
hammock
are of Amazonian origin!
Why did I become a linguist?
Why the Amazon?
Armchair linguist
Field linguist
DO IT WITH PASSION OR NOT AT ALL
Members of the Language and Culture Research Centre
The Murui people and their language
WITOTOAN LANGUAGES

MURUI    NONUYA    OKAINA

INDO-EUROPEAN LANGUAGES

GERMAN    ENGLISH    SPANISH
MURUI = WITOTO

Are there groups to the south?

Yes, we call them ‘WITOTO’!
The Rubber Boom (1879 – 1910)
Tragedy of Rubber Boom in the Amazon

Pictures taken from:
Modern Murui
The venture into the Amazon
The first encounter

Lucinda (Riberiño) of the Gidoní clan and Jimenaki (RIP)
The possum *jimenaki* (RIP 2010)
The Murui community of ‘Kilometro 11’, Amazonas, Colombia
My first Murui words:

Murui               English
bie                =  this
kue                =  my
jimenakɨ            =  possum

Bie kue jimenakɨ! ‘This (is) my possum!’
The possum *jimenaki* (RIP)
The first encounter with Murui

You said: “Bie kue jimenaki! This (is) my possum!” People say this when they are hungry! If not hungry, why would you say kue jimenaki!?"
The Murui people and their language

City of Leticia

Murui community
The Murui people and their language

City of Leticia
Community of La Chorrera
Community of Tercera India

COLOMBIA
Journey to the Tercera India community
Journey to the Tercera India community
Language immersion and documentation
Life in the Tercera India community
The Tercera India community
Dobairaiñaiñō

= ‘the one who turns (words) upside down’
Why is it important to work on minority languages?

There are currently about 6,000 languages spoken on Earth.

Linguists estimate that three of quarters languages spoken today will become extinct in the next century.
What happens when a language disappears?

No record of the people’s knowledge and history.

Egyptian hieroglyphs

Mayan glyphs
The Amazonian languages

• developed for more than ten thousand years
• belong to many distinct language families
• very complex in their grammatical structures
• no written tradition
The Amazonian languages

• population between 2-5 million before the first contact (1492)

• massive extinction of native groups after the contact

• Amazonian groups are very small (between 500 - 2,000 speakers on average)

• only a few languages have large numbers of speakers (e.g. Guarani with over 5 million of speakers)
Why do the Amazonian languages disappear?
Why do the Amazonian languages disappear?

• globalization

• urbanization

• bilingual speakers shifting from using two languages to using the language which is more ‘prestigious’
What can we do?

• national policies to recognize and protect minority languages

• promote bilingual education

• help from community members and linguists

• awareness of the community
Why should young Australians be interested in studying languages?

• enrich your cultural experience by knowing other person’s language!

• experience the cultural diversity in the world!

• understand other cultures!

• understand your own culture!

• And… ANY language will do!
MAKE IT MATTER AND BECOME A LINGUIST!