What are you?
A secret 'jungle-at-night' register of the Murui people
from Northwest Amazon

Kasia Wojtylak
LCRC (JCU)
kasia.wojtylak@my.jcu.edu.au

- This paper focuses on a special 'jungle-at-night' register used by the Murui, a Witotoan group from Northwest Amazonia.

- Murui people (about 2,000 in total) are located in southern Colombia (Putumayo, Cara-Paraná, and Igara-Paraná rivers) and northern Peru (Ampi Yacú and Napo rivers) (see Map 1 in the Appendix) (see e.g. Aikhenvald 2012).

- Murui is one of the 8 ethnolinguistic groups that form a cultural area called also the 'People of the Center' (Echeverri 1997).

- Traditionally, 'Witoto' people had numerous types of prohibitions that were subject to linguistic taboo, such as names given at birth and a special avoidance speech style where animals would be 'renamed' to 'trick' their spirits (Wojtylak 2015). Murui also has a 'calling from a distance' register that is conditioned phonologically rather than lexically.

- In addition, Murui has a special register used for talking in the jungle at night, when being away from the safety of people's own villages (usually when walking in the forest or paddling on the river).

- The jungle at night is seen as dangerous, so in order to avoid the rist of attack from evil beings, it is imperative to employ this register. Failure to do so can result in falling victim to malevolent spirits (and transformed shamans), which can appear as e.g. a jaguar or a snake.

- This register does not have a special name but the Murui refer to it as 'the way one has to speak if they don't know *what* they talk to'. I was told that it is a way to disguise people's voices so evil beings would not recognize them.

- The 'jungle-at-night' register has the following features:

  - 'conversations' are never long; the exchange of information is brief, never extensive, and usually include asking for identity (but not name), where the person is going to, where they are coming from.
  - speech-like intonation with high pitch - involves a similar conversational and narration patterns but higher by at least half or double of the frequency of normal

pitch (no special phonation). Such intonation is iconic; people say that such 'speech' resembles the speech of the evil beings. There is no vowel centralization.

- frequent use of pauses.
- always addressee-oriented (2sg), as in (3) in the Appendix.
- frequent use of interjections, as in (1-2), (14-15), (23-24), (26).

- Clues for understanding that you are a human: voice, the information one reveals, female/male, etc.

- Even if one's identity is revealed, one continues using the register as one can never totally be sure who/what one spoke to, or who/what else was listening.

- Cultural implications.

Cara-Paraná river (Amazonas, Colombia, 2013)

References

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Echeverri, J. A. (1997). *The people of the center of the world. A study in culture, history and orality in the Colombian Amazon.* (PhD dissertation), New School for Social Research, New York.
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Appendix - an example of a dialogue exchange

Abbreviations: 1 first person, 2 second person, 3 third person, ANA anaphoric, CLF classifier, DR 'derivational', E event, F feminine, FUT future, G generic, INTERJ interjection, LK linker, LOC locative, M masculine, NMLZ nominalization, NSP non-specific, N.S/A non-S/A subject, q1 question word *buu* 'who', Q2 question word *nii* 'which', pl plural, PR 'pronominal', PRED predicate, Pur purposive, s subject of intransitive clause, sg singular, SP specific, Sp Spanish, TOP topical

Context: S is paddling down the river at night. She hears noise in the forest. She stops paddling and listens intensively. She makes a gesture to others not to speak. The silence lasts for a few minutes.
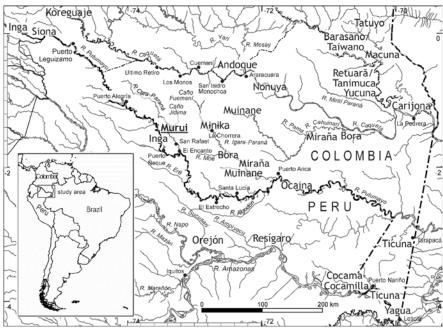
1   S: ↗↗↗uuuuu!
              INTERJ
2   Voice: ↗↗↗uuuuuu!
              INTERJ
(silence)

3   S: ↗↗↗nɨ-ne   ↗↗↗jaai-dɨ-o?PRED
              Q2-LOC:NSP   go-LK-2sg
              'Where are you going?'
4   V: ↗↗↗afai=dɨne!
              upstream=AT.LOC:NSP
              'Upriver!'

(silence)

5   V: ↗↗↗nɨ-ne   ↗↗↗jaai-dɨ-o?PRED
              Q2-LOC:NSP   go-LK-2sg
              'Where are you going?'
6   S: ↗↗↗fuirɨ=dɨne!
              downstream=AT.LOC:NSP
              'Downstream!'

(silence)

7   S: ↗↗↗[buu   ↗↗↗dɨga]   ↗↗↗jaai-dɨ-o?PRED
              Q1   WITH   go-LK-2sg
              'Who are you going with?'
(8   V: ↗↗↗da-maS   jaai-dɨ-kue!PRED
              one-CLF:DR.M   go-LK-1sg
              'I'm going alone.'

(silence)

9   S: ↗↗↗bu-e-ñe-ye   ↗↗↗jaai-dɨ-o?_{PRED}

Q1-CLF:G-do-FUT.E.NMLZ   go-LK-2sg

'Why (lit. to do what) are you going?'

10   V: ↗↗↗maka-ye-na_{Pur}

walk-FUT.E.NMLZ-N.S/A.TOP

'To walk around.'

(silence)

11   S: ↗↗↗buu-dɨ-o?_{PRED}

Q1-CLF:G-do-FUT.E.NMLZ

'Who are you?'

12   V: ↗↗↗[Tercera ↗↗↗India   ↗↗↗i-ñaiño]-dɨ-kue_{PRED}

Tercera.Sp   India.Sp   ANA.NSP-CLF:PR.F-LK-1sg

' I am a Tercera India woman.'

(silence)

13   S: ↗↗↗buu-dɨ-o?_{PRED}

Q1-CLF:G-do-FUT.E.NMLZ

'Who are you?'

(silence)

14   S: ↗↗↗uuuuu!

INTERJ

15   V: ↗↗↗uuuuuu!

INTERJ

16   S: ↗↗↗buu-dɨ-o?_{PRED}

Q1-CLF:G-do-FUT.E.NMLZ

'Who are you?'

(silence)

17   V: ↗↗↗ [Tercera   ↗↗↗India   ↗↗↗i-mɨe]

Tercera.Sp   India.Sp   ANA.NSP-CLF:PR.M

' I am a man of Tercera India.'

18   S: ↗↗↗nai-no-mo_{LOC}   ↗↗↗bu-e?

ANA.SP-CLF:SP.PLACE-LOC   Q1-CLF:G

'What is (there)?'

19   V: ↗↗↗gairi-dɨ-makɨ!_{PRED}

gather-LK-3pl

'They are gathering!'

20   S: ↗↗↗nɨ-ne?

Q2-LOC:NSP

'Where?'

21	V:	↗↗↗anane-ko-mo!
		communal.roundhouse-CLF:COVER-LOC
		'In the communal roundhouse!'

(silence)

22	S:	↗↗↗nɨ-ko-mo?
		Q₂-CLF:COVER-LOC
		'In which one?'

(silence)

23	S:	↗↗↗uuuuu!
		INTERJ
24	V:	↗↗↗oo!
		INTERJ (answering the call)

(silence)

25	S:	↗↗↗i-tɨ-o?PRED
		exist-LK-3pl
		'Are you (there) (lit. do you exist)?'
26	V:	↗↗↗jɨɨ! ↗↗↗i-tɨ-kuePRED
		INTERJ exist-LK-3pl
		'Yes! I am (lit. I exist).'
27	S:	↗↗↗i-tɨ-kaɨPRED
		exist-LK-1pl
		'We are (lit. we exist).'

(Sandriela paddles away, saying: *Eulogio izoi naɨa* '(He) spoke like Eulogio.')

Map 1. Location of the Murui people in Northwest Amazonia