DO YOU SPEAK TIKUNA?

Learning the basics of an indigenous Amazonian language and practicing descriptive and typological linguistics based on first-hand fieldwork data

WHEN? From March 3 to June 2, 2021, on Wednesdays, 1:00–3:00PM (UTC)
WHERE? Via videoconference at https://meet.jit.si/TikunaAndTypology
TEACHER Denis BERTET (denis.bertet@univ-lyon2.fr)
TEACHING HOURS 24 in total
TEACHING LANGUAGE Spanish, English, or French

Information and registration at https://ilara.hypotheses.org
**What is Tikuna?**

Tikuna is an **indigenous language with no known sister languages** spoken in **western Amazonia**. With about 60,000 speakers—however small this figure may sound—Tikuna is the most widely spoken amazonian language. The Tikuna people live in a vast area that stretches along the Amazon river across the borders of Peru, Colombia, and Brazil. The relatively large number of speakers that their ancestral language currently enjoys ensures it a certain vitality in the medium term, but the pressure of Spanish and Portuguese (most Tikunas are proficient in both Tikuna and the national language of their country) **threatens Tikuna with replacement** in the longer term. The variety of Tikuna that this course will specifically focus on is the variety of the Colombian community of San Martín de Amacayacu, the native language of about 600 people.

**Who is this course intended for?**

For anyone interested in **descriptive linguistics** (analyzing the grammatical system of a particular language) and **typological linguistics** (situating this system within what we know about the languages of the world), and/or in the **cultural and linguistic context of western Amazonia**. The course does not presuppose any previous knowledge of the cultural and linguistic context of Amazonia. A basic training in linguistics (phonology and morphosyntax in particular) is an obvious asset but is by no means a prerequisite. Reading skills in Spanish, although not a prerequisite either, will grant a better access to the relevant literature.

**What will this course be like?**

This course is conceived as both a **language course** and a **linguistics course**.

A language course, insofar as its main goal will be to give participants a **basic to intermediate passive knowledge of the Tikuna language**. This goal will be pursued through the systematic analysis of transcribed video recordings that the teacher collected with the help of native speakers between 2015 and 2018. A detailed examination of these written and video records, supplemented with the reading of selected literature, should grant a more-than-superficial understanding of the essential grammatical structures of the language and, beyond these, of the central aspects of Tikuna culture. Although learning to “speak Tikuna” is certainly well beyond our scope, we will aim to **acquire the ability to decode corpus excerpts in the language with relative autonomy** and make sense of them from a cultural point of view.

However, except in very specific cases, achieving passive skills in Tikuna—a minority language spoken in remote areas and with no written tradition—cannot be an end in itself. **Getting directly familiarized with the language** through regular and concrete practice is meant to allow us to simultaneously approach the **description of its grammatical system from a more-than-superficial understanding of it**. This will in turn allow us to better approach this grammatical system from a **typological (or cross-linguistic) perspective**. The linguistic system of Tikuna—as well as the culture that it embodies—will further serve as an (inevitably arbitrary) reference point from which an **overview of the western Amazonian context** will be given based on present scientific knowledge. A final, minor objective will be to introduce a few techniques of field and documentary linguistics. Given such associated objectives, this course will be, to a certain extent, a linguistics course.
Note that all of the references mentioned here (except for one) are freely available online.

Epps & Salanova (2013, 27 pp.) (or Aikhenvald 2012, 67 pp.) is highly recommended as a general introduction to the linguistic context of Amazonia. Nimuendajú (1948, 15 pp.), although inevitably obsolete on a number of aspects (especially language-related ones), still is to this day one of the best ethnographical entry points into the Tikuna universe. This essential reading can be usefully supplemented by Nimuendajú (1952, 219 pp., a revised and substantially augmented version of Nimuendajú 1948) or Goulard (1994, 135 pp., in Spanish). No overall and concise introduction to the Tikuna language has been published so far. An active reading of Bertet, Ángel & Ángel (2019, 31 pp.) (English-Spanish bilingual paper) can partly compensate for this lack. This article provides the contextualized, extensive linguistic analysis of a short Tikuna recording. Anderson (1962, 431 pp., a self-teaching manual of relatively difficult use) is to this day the only available pedagogical resource on Tikuna. Anderson & Anderson (2017, 352 pp., in Spanish, a more user-friendly dictionary) is by far the best lexicographical resource currently available on the language. These last two references deal with the Tikuna variety of the Peruvian community of Cushillococha. For this reason, they will only be used occasionally during the course, which will mostly focus on the San Martín de Amacayacu variety; participants to the course are highly encouraged to briefly explore them, however. Participants curious to hear what Tikuna sounds like can already watch excerpts from the corpus of recordings on which the course will be based at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCafhTQ1bTr6vohQgjEcAw/.


Anderson, Doris, 1962, Conversational Ticuna, Summer Institute of Linguistics, Yarinacocha

Anderson, Doris & Lambert Anderson (dir.), 2017, Diccionario ticuna–castellano, Serie Lingüística Peruna n°57, Summer Institute of Linguistics, Lima

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