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The Practical Linguist by Marshall R. Childs

A "can do" attitude toward languages

In last month's column (June 19), I discussed the possibility that Japanese people's poor English ability is due to sakoku (a deliberate policy of defending against foreign intrusion). I concluded that poor English ability is not exactly government policy, but is the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy, the belief that English is difficult and possibly dangerous for Japanese people to learn.

Now I would like to describe a society in which a self-fulfilling prophecy works in the opposite direction, supporting multilingualism in all citizens. I shall describe a society in South America.

In the upper Amazon Valley, the Vaupés River drains an area about the size of Japan, located in Colombia and Brazil. Swift and 300 meters wide, the Vaupés flows east for 1,000 kilometers before entering the Rio Negro, which feeds into the Amazon. About 10,000 people live in the Vaupés area (this is the order of magnitude of the population of Japan toward the end of the Jomon Period before the development of wet rice cultivation).

To describe the culture of the Vaupés people, I rely upon linguistic anthropologist Arthur Sorensen, who lived in the area for several years and wrote an article published in 1967 in "American Anthropologist." Following anthropological tradition, I shall describe the Vaupés people in the present tense although it is clear that peoples and languages are disappearing due to the inroads of missionaries and other carriers of "civilization."

Multilingualism in the Vaupés area

The people who live in the Vaupés area have a single culture and economy, and communicate frequently with each other — but among them they speak about 25 languages representing four different language families. Area residents consider it normal for each person to be fluent in at least three or four languages.

The Vaupés people live in many small villages along the river and its tributaries. The basic political and ceremonial unit is the longhouse. A tribe is usually a series of longhouses, separated by several hours (paddling time) along the river.

A longhouse is just what it sounds like: a long house. But it is much more than a building; it is a tight-knit community. In a longhouse, each family has its own living area, and the life of the community passes before everyone's eyes and ears. (In Japan, the people who best understand this lifestyle are those who have lived in school gymnasia, as have survivors of the Hanshin earthquake and recent refugees from the eruption of Mt. Usu. In a gymnasium it is hard not to know your neighbor's business and her languages. And children, of course, pick up everything).

A longhouse has its own tribal language, inherited by the men. The rules of marriage specify that a man must marry a woman from a different tribe. Different tribe, different language. The result is that in every longhouse there are several languages — a father language and several mother languages.

Children grow up speaking both their fathers' and mothers' languages. To these are added other languages found in the vicinity. Groups of mothers who come from the same tribe naturally speak their tribal language to each other in the presence of the children. Children are encouraged to take an interest in various languages. And everybody learns Tukano because it is the one language that is spoken throughout the area (Tukano, incidentally, is a very complex tonal language).

The Vaupés people are travelers. Youths travel to seek brides. Families travel to visit relatives. And people travel simply for pleasure. The customs of hospitality are such that every traveler stays overnight at a longhouse. And there the fun begins.

When entering a longhouse, a traveler makes a speech of predictable content and sequence: he announces that he has arrived; whether he came from upriver or downriver, and from what named spot; how many days he has been traveling; the

names of his father and mother and brothers and sisters; and how they are faring. The predictability of this information helps the listeners home in on the visitor's language.

In a formal gathering such as in the men's circle in the evening when the day's tasks are over, a visitor is encouraged to speak in his home language. If someone present does not understand the language, the visitor's remarks are repeated in their entirety in the language of the longhouse. As the evening wears on and conversation grows informal, the visitor may change to the longhouse language if he knows it.

Languages are carefully kept separate, even if they are closely related. There are no cross-linguistic puns or habits of switching from one language to another. A language is a thing in itself and is cultivated on its own terms. Perhaps each language is like a new poet with a fresh view of the world.

The Vaupés people consider it normal to continue to learn new languages all their lives. Of course there are stages. As I said, children automatically learn two or three languages in the longhouse. At the same time, they usually hear two or three more languages that they are not actively learning. Sorensen noticed that "as an individual goes through adolescence, he actively and almost suddenly learns to speak these additional languages." (Bureaucrats and theorists, prick up your ears at this suggestion of an adolescent burst of language-learning!).

Vaupés people typically add languages during adulthood. Finally, as they approach old age, they strive to perfect their knowledge of the languages at their disposal.

Adult language learning

As you would expect, adult language learning starts with base-building. Because the phonologies are quite diverse, learners of a new language typically begin by concentrating on the sound. Then, often in peer groups they learn phrases and lists of words including inflected and derived forms. These "lists" are memorized, since nothing is written. Learning a new language fluently is said to require at least one or two years

regardless of language family.

Trying to speak a new language is a delicate matter. Social situations are real, not to be demeaned by imperfect speech. The Vaupés people "may make an occasional preliminary attempt to speak a new language in an appropriate situation, but if it does not come easily, they will not try to force it." They wait until they know it quite well. (Teachers might reflect on the significance of this "silent period" for their own students).

The Vaupés people take multilingualism for granted, and do not count languages as one might count pebbles or fish. "A person usually cannot enumerate how many languages he knows, and is perplexed at being asked to do so." You might as well ask a person how many ways of dancing he knows.

Dear reader, compare the Vaupés people's cheerful habit of embracing new languages with the Japanese self-fulfilling prophecy of monolingualism!

Of course Japan does not have the advantages the Vaupés people have. In the modern civilization of Japan, families live in isolated households, not in longhouses. Japanese children are more often isolated from adults and so do not naturally pick up everything adults know. In Japan, the barriers of reading and writing draw energy that might otherwise be directed at the sounds of languages. And most adults cannot set a good example of speaking other languages.

In spite of these handicaps, however, Japan would benefit from a careful review of what Vaupés people do. Perhaps even in a high-tech society language learning can be more natural and less frightening.

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This series of columns is an attempt to reconcile language teachers, theorists, and bureaucrats. Readers are invited to send letters to The Daily Yomiuri or e-mail to **mrchilds@tokai.or.jp**

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