Nukini: the Language and the Self-Esteem of a People

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* We would like to thank The Netherlands Organization of Scientific Research (NWO) and the Faculteit der Letteren, at the Universiteit Leiden, for their financial and logistic support, which has made possible the writing of “Learn Nukini” in 2004. This article was originally written in Portuguese. It was translated to English by Antônio João Galvão de Souza in October, 2011.
Abstract

The main purpose of this conference is to present the Nukiní group’s efforts in the recovery process of their traditional language that started in the year 2000. The language of this group receives the same name as the group, Nukini, and belongs to the Páno linguistic family. This indigenous group is located in the state of Acre, in the north of Brazil. It was found that until the year 2000, these indigenous people had no longer used their traditional language, nor did they want to share anything about it. Some bibliographies referred to the language as extinct and to the group as missing. But with the commitment of the Nukiní people, it was possible to change this situation. A recovery process of the language was started which sparked the interest of the groups Apolima-Arara and Náwa in also seeking the recovery of their own traditional language.

Key-words: self-esteem, Nukini language, recovery of a language.

Resumen

El principal propósito de esta conferencia es el de presentar los esfuerzos del grupo Nukini en el proceso de recuperar su lengua tradicional, e cual empezó en el inicio del año 2000. La lengua de este grupo recibe el mismo nombre del grupo Nukini, y ella pertenece a la familia lingüística Páno. Este grupo indígena está ubicado en el Estado de Acre, en el norte de Brasil. Se descubrió que hasta el año 2000 los indígenas ya no hablaban su lengua, ni tampoco querían informar cualquier cosa sobre ella. Algunas bibliografías se referían a esta lengua como extinta y al grupo como desaparecido. Pero con el empeño del pueblo Nukini, fue posible cambiar esa situación. Se inició un proceso de recuperación de la lengua, lo que provocó el interés de los grupos Apolima-Arara y Náwa en también buscar la recuperación de su lengua tradicional.

Palabras-clave: amor propio, lengua Nukini, recuperación de una lengua.
1. Introduction

Our main purpose in the present conference is to relate the process lived by the indigenous group Nukiní Páno in the attempt at recovering their traditional language. Among other factors, what has been proved to be more relevant in the process lived by the Nukiní group is the fact that the initiative to recover their native language started from the group itself which caused an immediate effect on the linguistic behavior of the community as a whole. Opportunely, we brought together this group’s will in recovering their native language which, as we know, had been lost, with our experience in children literacy and classroom didactics, so that we could have the indigenous to work as a group. That is, we could bring together their wish and the confidence they had on us; therefore, we succeeded on our task at recovering the Nukini language due to the value given to the group who traditionally spoke the language and also to the self-esteem of each one in the group.

This communication will be presented in eight basic parts; besides this (1) Introduction, we will also discuss the (2) Contact among indigenous and non-indigenous in the region of Acre; (3) Localization and self-denomination of the group; (4) Report of a Nukini about the history of his people; (5) The Nukini and the contact with other languages; (6) Engagement of the Nukini; (7) Sociolinguistic aspects of the Nukini; (8) Continuous collective dynamic; (9) Basic characteristics of the Nukini language; (10) The choice of letters; and (11) Structure of the Nukini didactic material. We will end with the Conclusion and References.

By the end of our presentation we hope we will have contributed to increase the knowledge about the contact history narrated by natives in the north of Brazil and, the most relevant here, state the fact that these native speakers are those who can actually protect and preserve their language, for they are central agents in its recovery. This recuperation must be done by them and to them with the assistance of a specialist, if they require so.

2. Contact Among Indigenous and Non-Indigenous in the Region of Acre

As one knows the official history and the people reports from the region of Acre, it is possible to say that indigenous people such as the Nukini, the Náwa and the Apolima-Arara, among others, have been treated with hostility since 1904, when the first contacts with the Brazilian and Peruvian non-indigenous happened.

In 1913, the latex cycle was over, but problems derived from that contact remained. The indigenous who managed to survive from the latex cycles were scattered and weakened by deceases among other dire effects from the “progress”. And if we also consider the
prejudice of the non-indigenous, all these facts made the indigenous leave behind and forget everything that could identify them as indigenous. One of these forgotten cultural richness’ was the indigenous language as well as other traditions of the group.

The non-indigenous contributed to the lack of prestige of the language and other cultural characteristics of the natives in the name of objectives, which as a matter of fact, have never been compatible with the natives’ aims, the original inhabitants of that region. This sad contribution is proved by history itself and it reveals the drastic decline in the number of speakers of oral tradition languages, as from the time of the first contacts until nowadays. It is evident that, in this contact, some indigenous communities had to bond with people from different ethnicities so that they could survive as individuals and as a group. This is one of the facts that lead us to name these communities as “indigenous groups” and not with other determinations as suggested by Solis (2010). Nonetheless, we will not broach this discussion at the moment; we only assume that many of the indigenous communities with whom we have worked are actually indigenous groups because they are formed by people who have historically belonged to more than one single ethnicity. Under this perspective, they are groups because they share language, habits, geographic space and other characteristics that unify them. It is interesting to read Poutignat (1998).

It is needless to mention and argue all the barbarities that have occurred to the indigenous in the region of Acre because they are similar to other atrocities committed against natives in other parts of America by those who regarded themselves as superior and, consequently, the owners of the right to decide on the destiny of many lives by using force. The result was people lost from their own people, without cultural references, without any value and consideration by the State actions. These indigenous people ended up concluding that if they “transformed” themselves in non-indigenous they would have a better survival perspective as a person, as a human being. Thus, the indigenous deduced that it would be necessary to forget everything that identified them as indigenous if they wanted to remain alive.

This is the current situation for many indigenous groups in the State of Acre. But, more recently, some of them have realized it is possible to give themselves a chance and be an indigenous; it is possible to be an indigenous without having their life threatened. This was the decision when the Nukini first gave the example and then the Náwa and the Apolima-Arara also decided to identify and rescue mechanisms which could give them back aspects of their traditional culture. During all the process, we started by tracing information in order to tie still existing connections about their languages.
3. Localization and Self-Denomination of the Group

The Nukiní currently inhabit a reserve that is close to the Peruvian border, in the Seringal da República, in the city of Mâncio Lima, in the State of Acre. Their population is constituted by 450 people, according to 1994 data (Aguiar, 1994b) and, in 2000, the number was confirmed at 520 people (Aguiar, 2005). Notwithstanding, it is worth calling the attention to the fact that in 2004 another indigenous group was detected and we found 80 to 100 people settled near the Azul River, also a Nukiní indigenous group. If one considers those who are in delimited lands and these others who still wait for the governmental recognition, one can say that the Nukiní are about 600 indigenous.

The Nukiní received the denomination of *Inukini* and *Inukuinin* (Castelo, 1922), *Nukuinin* and *Hunikuin* (Tastevin, no date), *Inocuini* (Linhares, 1913), *Nucuiny* (Braulino, no date) and *Nukini* (Delvair Melatti, no date).

These indigenous inhabited the basin of the Jaquirana River, in the State of Acre, when, in the last century, their settlement was invaded by extractivists of caucho, resulting in the massacre of this and other indigenous settlements. These massacres in the States of Acre and Amazonas are historically denominated *correria*. Thus, the Nukiní have been “pacified”\(^1\) since 1904, resulting in their dispersion and almost disappearance of the entire group.

According to the anthropologist Delvair Melatti (no date), the Nukiní proceed from two groups: the Ranobakavô family, who used to inhabit the Jaquirana River, and the Paribakavô family, who inhabited the Trapiche River.

Besides the massacres, the Nukiní nation suffered two severe epidemic outbreaks, one of measles, in 1914, and another one of fever, in 1925. After two massacres and the violent contact with the extractivists, from the originary Nukiní people only a few remained and so far this ethnicity has a rather reduced number of members.

Despite of all these adversities, nowadays, the Nukiní nation has a stable social and economical situation. It is a group that has overcome various barriers of all kinds. The Nukiní as a whole are proud of their settlement and reserve. Anyone who goes through their settlement realizes that this indigenous group is quite strong and resistant as people. One can say they have overcome basic health and financial problems. And it is so true that they even

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\(^1\) T. N.: According to Aguiar (2011), the term “pacified” refers to the indigenous who lost his native manners, cultural practices and language due to the contact with non-indigenous. Here we use the term as a synonym to “calm down”, as it will be read on pages 06 and 07.
assist other indigenous groups who live near them, in emergency cases. We notice this by the
support they commonly give to other groups, including non-indigenous colonizers from their
region and also to Peruvians and militaries who travel along the Moa River, between the
bounds of Brazil and Peru.

4. Report of a Nukiní About the History of Its People
The following text is a narrative almost literally transcribed. And we say “almost” because
even though it is written as it was narrated by the indigenous Paulo Nukiní we have made
some minor changes in order to leave the written text a little clearer, but its original
characteristics have been preserved. This is how Paulo narrates what he once had heard from
his grandfather.

“In the story of our forefather, says that our people left the forest and came close to
where the white were. This once was a seringal very big. My mother says it is because of a
huge conflict between the Nukiní and the Poyanáwa. The Nukiní have always been
persecuted by the other relatives: (the) Mayoruna in Jaquirana and (the) Poyanáwa in Barão.
And the (indigenous from) Barão set fire in all (the houses) from the settlements and our
people became homeless. This conflict (lasts) (for) seven days. It was between the Azul River
and the Moa River. Were killed many indigenous. Because there were already people (non-
indigenous; seringalista), they (the Nukiní) decided to surrender and start working (in the
seringa). The boss received the indigenous. That is why we became slaves and this kind of
thing.”

“Then, she (his mother, Dona Luiza, 73 years old) says they (the Nukiní) wanted to
have freedom (peace). Arrived a relative, in the house of José Verissimo, from here, from
Boca do Zulmira. (He) stayed there until he realized there was someone (there). He made
noise. This noise was made until he (José Verissimo) went down to look for it and this
indigenous (relative) held him and called him “dad, dad”. He understood what the indigenous
wanted. This (indigenous) group got bigger and no condition there was for everybody to stay
there. There was no capital (money). They went to another seringal, a bigger one. The
seringalista who had more power took from the one who had less power. The indigenous

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2 T. N.: In the translation to the English language we preserved Paulo Nukini’s oral marks from his report in
Portuguese. The parentheses used in the excerpt were originally found in Aguiar’s (2011) text.
3 T. N.: We decided to preserve the items seringa, seringal and seringalista. Different in form, they all refer to
the same basic meaning: latex or rubber. Thus, seringa is the latex, seringal is the rubber tree plantation and
seringalista is the farmer who owns that plantation and the indigenous handwork.
have always been attracted by silliness and trapped with fabric (cloth). They hired indigenous to work there because it was free.”

“In the beginning, they (the seringalistas) gave everything so that the person would ‘calm down’, as it is said. They gave clothes; they let them do all kinds of things so that the indigenous developed a deep friendship by the seringalista and so that the indigenous would work more. After, they gave nothing more and the person remained that way, with that love, with that consideration by the seringalista who was not abandoned by the indigenous any more. He suffered, this person could make bad things to the indigenous and he did not go away. The indigenous thought he would die if he left the boss. The boss possessed the indigenous, conquered the indigenous and after forgot them.”

“Here (Acre region) was forgotten by justice. And there was no justice, the other bosses from the south (from other places in Brazil) were the ones who made their justice, they were called coronéis. By that time, they arrived by ship, they arrived anywhere and if they wanted they were the ones who ordered, they did (what was) right and what was not right.”

“Some old people went to Peru, they spoke the Brazilian language. My father was one of those who went. He was a little boy, two years old, and when he came back he was already a fifteen-year old teenager. My grandfather took (to Peru) him (my father) and other siblings in that time to harvest caucho. After they came back from here (the place where they lived in Brazil). Most of the population from here went to Peru. So far (the old people) remember the Peruvian region.”

“When FUNAI⁴ is opened, we have our land delimited. We decided to stay here, we had that right and we stayed in the Republic.”

“The seringal is the Republic, where they adapted themselves. Many got used to and many did not. These went back to the forest and never calmed down. Today there are some of them who live by the Igarapé Novo Recreio. We help the Náwa because there are Nukini indigenous there.”

“The seringalistas we knew better by that time were José Veríssimo and José de Oliveira. José de Oliveira was the strongest and it was where the indigenous went to. After there was Rocha, who lives in the region of Náwa until today, his son is Rocha too. There was a widow; I do not remember her name, and others. These are all distant things. The last

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⁴ T. N.: Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI), a governmental Brazilian agency responsible for indigenous’ matters in the country.
seringal that existed was Boca do Zumira. From Serra (the Divisor) up there is no seringa, seringa is not extracted, and there was only seringa in the Boca do Zulmira.”

5. The Nukiní and the Contact with Other Languages

The Nukiní who dwell in the Nukiní Indigenous Land, localized by the region of the Juruá Valley, on the left margin of the Moa River, in the city of Mâncio Lima, are distributed in five settlements. There is only one school with Portuguese language classes, taught by people from their own community.

For the time being, these indigenous have been classified as monolinguals in Portuguese and, in part of the literature about the issue, they are cited as an extinct group (GRIMES and GRIMES, 1996).

When we first came into contact with them we could confirm that their native language had suffered some loss; but, on the other hand, we could notice that there was still some vestige of the language. And we were right about it, fortunately.

In the beginning of our efforts at recovering the Nukiní language, we met some women who were old but still lucid. These old women still had information about the Nukiní language despite of all that had happened during contacts with non-Nukiní languages.

We affirm it is possible to find ancient traces of the language still stored in religious contexts such as in songs and in prayers, as Trindade also believes, as pointed out in a Historical Linguistics classroom discussion during a course in 2011. On the other hand, we assume that the fundamental context of language particularities stored is that given through human relations, in which there is a wider complicity among the parts, speaker and listener. And this involvement will reserve even more potential the more it goes through what is taken as forbidden, as it happens, for example, with obscene expressions. We confirmed this hypothesis when an old Nukini woman relates to us that when she was young she only used the Nukini language when speaking about her intimacy with a very close friend of hers. She said: “I miss using the gira5. Godmother Cecilia and I spoke about things that no one could speak about. We said everything about our relationships.”

More recently the group has had regular contact with the Portuguese language and, occasionally, with Spanish. One observes that the youngest go to the city of Mâncio Lima, two days by ship from their settlement. Besides this, there is also the sociability with the Brazilians and non-indigenous Peruvians who live in and cross the region.

5 T. N.: Gira is a synonym for Nukini language.
And as for the Spanish language, it is known that, according to the reports of the oldest in the settlement, in the time of the first contacts, the Nukini were dismembered as a group and some of them moved out to Peru to live in that territory. They say there are cases of old Nukini people who lived in Peru as a child and only came back to the Brazilian territory after they were adults. This fact established a strict relation between the Spanish language and the Nukini, therefore contributing to interferences on their native language.

The current scenario of the language spoken by the group reflects the level of intervention suffered by their language due to Portuguese and Spanish languages. These two languages, as well as the cultures around them, left their marks in the language of the Nukini group. These marks vary according to the degree of sociability and contact that each culture had with the group.

Between the years 2000 and 2002, we verified that the Nukini only spoke the Portuguese language; that is, they had changed from monolinguals in Nukini to monolinguals in Brazilian national language, as from 1950, approximately, due to political and historical reasons, and also because the sociability with the Portuguese language had been constant and lasting.

The interference of the Spanish language occurs amongst the elderly and only in specific cases. For example, on many occasions, when we asked some of the elderly to say something in their language, they would try to remember it and, when they were to say something, without even noticing it, it was said in Spanish. In those cases, they never realized they were using Spanish to provide information. Let’s illustrate it by recollecting a situation that happened at the research field. We once asked an old man to say tapir in Nukini and he answered sachavaca. But as we know it, this is the Spanish term and in Nukini we would expect the term awá, for this is the basic form used in most of the languages in the Páno family. This fact also happened, in a minor scale, with the youngest who said a word or two in Spanish as they demonstrated they knew that language, to which they seem to attribute an important status if compared to the Portuguese.

We also realized a subtle, but insistent, influence of the Tupi language, for they sometimes substitute the term menino by kurumin, which is not expected to occur in the Páno languages. In order to comprehend this fact, a more profound study would be necessary, which is not our focus at the moment. But for the time being, we could say that a large part of the Brazilian population who occupied the State of Acre in order to work was made of those

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6 T. N.: From the Portuguese, the term menino means “boy” in English.
people from the Northeastern of Brazil, the *nordestinos*, so far the major population contingent in the region. Therefore, it is common, in its turn, for these speakers to use the tupy term *kurumin* by means of children. And this is true especially for those Northeasters who live in this region.

(6) Engagement of the Nukini

The first contact we had with the Nukini was in the city of Cruzeiro do Sul, in the State of Acre, in 1998. We were in that place for other research and we were told of an indigenous person from this group who worked in that city. He was quite young, approximately 18 years old, and he had been distant from the settlement for some time but even so he spoke about his indigenous aunt. Although we were surprised by this information, he said it was impossible to talk to her about her past because she did not like to contact her group and she did not know anything else about her indigenous culture. Even running the risk of finding nothing we decided to visit her at her house. She was not in, but there was another woman there. Then, we ended up contacting this other woman who had arrived to that city and who was responsible for the childbirth there. This woman said she “did not know how to speak anything in the language” but we were able to identify about 40 items in the Nukini language.

Two years later, in 2000, the *cacique* of the Nukini, Paulo César, invited us to visit his tribe in order to recover something from his people’s language. He alleged that an aunt of his was always sorrow for the fact that no one else cared about the past culture of the “ancient”.

This young 40-year old Nukini *cacique* demonstrated how he respected his aunt. He also told us his confidence on the possibility of helping his people to rediscover the way he saw them and the way he saw himself. He believed that being an indigenous was of a great value. It was with this perspective that he invited us to visit his people. The first aim of the visit was to find out and investigate whether it was still possible or not for these people to speak their original language, which had always been an oral tradition language, but that he himself had never heard.

We accepted to make this first visit to that indigenous reserve. As soon as we arrived we asked him to convocate the people from the Nukini communities, and the result was a reunion with almost all the members of the five communities, which are República, Gia, Paraná do Batista, Meia Dúzia and Vai-Quem-Quer.

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7 T. N.: The indigenous term *cacique* is preserved in the English version of this text. *Cacique* means chieftain.
In this reunion, the *cacique* told them about the purpose of our visit and we said that we were there to hear about the language that was spoken by their grandparents. We added up that any action that would be taken regarding their oral tradition language could only be possible if that was their will.

In the beginning of this cultural recovering process we heard narratives that really called our attention. One of them was of a woman who invited us to visit her house. The objective was that she would tell us what she remembered about the indigenous language. But when we arrived at her house she said she felt unwell: she had a headache and therefore she would not be able to remember anything. We said it was not a problem and asked if she wanted us to stay and prepare her some tea or something else.

Then, she asked us not to worry about it because she would get over it soon. In this context, subjects like plants, the history of the place and other issues that did not refer to specific linguist data emerged, but these subjects were also relevant to the research. We did not stay for too long and then went away. But before leaving, she said if we wanted we could come back any other day. And so we did. Again, we could not speak to her. This time it was because of a Nukiní person who had arrived to visit her. We went there for the third time but then we did not believe the visit would have any linguistic value. Anyway, we kept visiting the people in their houses but without the commitment of arising data about the Nukiní language.

Similar situations occurred with other Nukiní elderly. There was always something that happened so that they would not speak about the group’s past. These events reflect their reluctance in remembering the past, in talking about their own history. It became evident to us that no one had interest in recollecting that history, not only the old people but mainly the young ones. The young Nukini, by the way, wanted to strongly ignore everything that had happened to their grandparents; they wanted to erase all the vestiges from their past.

Amongst other conversations and attempts, we finally had the report of that Nukini woman, the one who said she had had a headache. After two frustrated attempts, she received us at her house. In all these comings and goings, we ended up having a close relationship. Then, by finally trusting in us, she said: “Dona Maria, I do not want to speak in the *gira* any longer. My son said this is silliness. He said that people are going to joke at me.” Very sad, she went on saying: “He is right because even our relatives from here do not want to know about it. My son said he does not want me playing the role of a fool.” Then, she reveals: “But, you know, Dona Maria, sometimes I feel like speaking in the *gira* again.”
This woman’s son was 25 years old at that time and worked in the city of Cruzeiro do Sul in 2000. It is possible that he is the first Nukiní we met in that city in 1998. But this does not matter; what is most important is what we could testify. What this young man thought was representative what almost all, if not all, the young Nukiní thought. They behave as if they wanted to forget their roots and invest on what is new and different. It seems they believe that by looking for new things they would erase the suffering in their past and, by doing so, they would have a better future, where they would be less discriminated and therefore treated with more equality by the non-indigenous. All their concerns are legitimate for they want to guarantee a more respectable life to their children. And they believe it would be possible by starting a new history in which all the traces and vestiges of their indigenous roots are eliminated.

Initially isolated, we could bond the cacique’s aunt’s interests to his engagement and therefore start a process which gave other elderly the opportunity to believe that they could review their past history. We have to mention that woman’s courage in doubting her son’s words because she wanted to believe that, by talking about her people and her language, she would not be seen as a foolish woman but, on the contrary, she would contribute to the children at school who wanted to know about the old Nukiní, besides encouraging other old people from the tribe in becoming interested in the same.

The results we reached with this community are attributed to those reasons. We could see how the attitude of these indigenous notably changed, both in relation to their language and also to their culture. Nowadays, all of them feel engaged in the task of self-identification as an indigenous group. And one of the strongest proofs to confirm this is that the children strongly occupied themselves in the process of choosing the letters which would be used in writing the Nukiní language. They were the ones who drew the first didactic material for their classroom. All the material preparation was made with the involvement of the students, teachers and the others at school, besides the old Nukiní people, who were constantly consulted by those interested in their language.

During their language recovering procedure, the Nukiní were given the opportunity, by the government of the State of Acre, to employ a person from their group to work as a teacher. This teacher worked on what we collected from their language. More recently, the State Secretary of Education of Acre published the Nukiní didactic material we had elaborated with the group.
7. Sociolinguistic Aspects of the Nukini

The Nukini population is formed by approximately 520 (five hundred and twenty) people and can be considered as a group where most are young. In terms of percentage, the Nukini are divided as follows: 80% are between 5 and 30 years old, and this age group is regarded as the schooling age for the entire region; 8% are between 31 and 59, another 8% are between 0 and 4 and 4% are 60 years old and above.

When the Nukini cacique and I promoted an occasion, which he had planned, where they could trace back the past from their memory, counting on the contribution of all of them. At that moment, a research process called collective dynamics was employed. As far as we are concerned, that process was the most appropriate for the situation we were under. And as we already expected, the collective dynamics process proved to be efficient while in the group. We heard things such as “We do not remember anything else”, “This was a long time ago, when dad was still alive”, “We were a bunch of fools” and “We did not learn anything in the right way”. We considered that more productive results would be reached through the collective dynamics, which proved to be true in the end. The process gave plenty of meaningful moments to all of us, as we will see in the next section, when details about the collective dynamics are given, which helped us to rescue the history and the self-esteem of the group.

In the first reunion, we agreed to visit each of their houses, if they so allowed. In our visits to the Nukini houses, we found out that their oral tradition language was no longer being used in their every day life and that all of them had constant contact with speakers of Portuguese.

Their contact with the Brazilian national language is something we realized would be very influential to this, and other indigenous cultures. As it is known, this happens due to historical reasons and to governmental policies. But as the current reality of the Nukini is considered, we can say that they frequently go to the city, even being distant, that is, two days by boat. They receive visits and also visit colonizers who live close to the Nukini Indigenous Land. In all these contacts Portuguese is used as a means of spoken context.

The schooling practices and the classes among the Nukini always take place in the settlement and the instruction is given by indigenous teachers. But as we have already mentioned, the classes were given in Portuguese because both the students and the teacher could only understand and express themselves in this language.

The classes were offered to the community as follows: during the day they have children education, from the first to the fourth grade. In the evening, the adults have
elementary school, adult education, and alphabetization. All these classes have many students, which proves that the Nukiní have a great interest in studying. And this is also true for many other indigenous groups with whom we had the chance of being with. Thus, in the settlement they can study up to the eight grade. These classes are attended by students between 5 and 17 years old.

All the Nukiní are really interested in studying, which is evidenced by the students’ everyday attendance in the classroom as there are few absences. They are also very interested in expanding their general knowledge. And as far as the language and the Nukiní culture are concerned there is no difference. By the way, we must acknowledge that the indigenous have effectively helped in this research and thus obtained a wider knowledge about their people. Therefore, it is clear that the Nukiní are constructing a kind of respect amongst themselves and the other groups of the region. Besides this, they became stronger as a group so they can demand respect from the non-indigenous.

In the following section, there are some explanations about the application of the collective dynamic process, which aimed at a better comprehension of the linguistic and cultural practices in the settlement. The result was a Nukini language product made for themselves, a product which implies their collective authorship, and continuous renewal and amplification, as discussed.

8. Continuous Collective Dynamic
By “collective dynamics” we imply an action of research and involvement of the community in the data collection procedures and on its continuity. More specifically, we would say the people involved are the ones that carry on the research and continue being researched. That is, the researcher starts the data collection with the elderly, who are potentially more capable of providing information, and then gives what has been collected to those who will use that collected material, the teacher and the students. The difference is that the researcher attributes the task of continuous data collection to the people involved and to the elderly, who knows that others, the students, will come from time to time to solicit their collaboration. Thus, young students and children are continually together with the old people from the tribe in order to solve their doubts and widen their knowledge.

In the case of the Nukiní, each student separately asks their older relatives to help them do homework about their language and culture. When the students arrive at the school, during the Nukiní language class, they pass on what had been learned within their families to the teacher and to the classroom. The researcher did the same during her stay in the
settlement. Everything she collected was directly passed on to the students and then they copied it down and drew in their notebooks what was pertinent to their expression.

In order to encourage the data collection and information learning by the students, we set up a game in which the student who knew more Nukiní words would win a prize. It was an idea from a non-indigenous assistant who took part in all the stages of the research and who also contributed so that the whole process would be viable.8

The didactic material was then collectively structured, involving the researcher, the students, the teachers and other members of the community. This involvement allowed research continuity even without the presence of the researcher. In order to keep their constant self-valorization and ethnic recognition, all the teachers, students and other adults are responsible for collecting new data. These data are continually shared amongst students and teachers of the settlement so that later on they will be available and finally analyzed by the linguists. Then, everybody repeats the revision process.

9. Basic Characteristics of the Nukiní Language

We can say that the Nukiní language belongs to the Páno linguistic family. And, as the other languages from this family, the Nukiní also presents the order of its constituents in the SOV form (Subject/Object/Verb). Its tonicity occurs on the last syllable of the word, for example, \( \text{[v ' naʔ]}, \text{[nu ' biʔ]}, \text{[v ' saʔ]} \).

Its syllabic pattern is CVC, and as an example of CV we would have /ni/ “forest” and /xi/ “fire”, from V /ta.e/ “foot”, /ra.i/ “anteater”, VC /is.ki.ri/ “woodpecker”, /uh.nu.pa/ “moon” and for the CVC we cite /tah.pa/ “settlement”, /vismi/ “vulture”, /asa/ “cassava”.

In the consonant phonological system, the issue of the phonological identity of the sounds [v] or [b] is at the aim of a discussion that will be taken in further studies with the Nukiní. Meanwhile, we may present the characteristics of other Páno languages. In these languages, the occurrence is of \( \text{[β]} \) for “honey” \( \text{[βa’ta]} \), for “sun” \( \text{[βari]} \); in other languages of the same family the occurrence is [b], and we have [bata] and [bari] and those in which [v] occurs, as in [vata] for “honey” and [vari] for “sun”. So, it is easy to decide which letter should be used in each of these words, but in the Nukiní language there is a [b] that oscillates with [v], that is, when some of them speak a [v] might occur, and when others speak a [b] occurs. This is something that would naturally happen due to a process of retaking sounds in their language when confronted with the Portuguese language. Notwithstanding,

8 Her name is Rose Padilha, from the Conselho Indigenista Missionário (CIMI).
phonologically, there are no conflicts. We assume that there is only one of them in the language, [b] or [v], and that in some cases [v] and in others [b] occurs only in spoken language and who uses [v] does not use [b] or vice versa. But this will be also reviewed and analyzed by them in a future moment. Next, we present the phonological chart of the Nukini assumed up to the present.

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<th>Nukini Phonological Chart</th>
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There is still a discussion on whether there are phonological nasals or not or if the vowels are nasalized. For the moment, we understand that there are only nasalized vowels [ã] /an/ instead of /â/. But, at the Nukini school, the written form they chose was ā /an/, ĭ /in/, ê /en/ and ũ /un/.

As for the minimum word form, in the context of what is known about the Páno languages, there are two groups: one of a disyllabic standard and another one that is monosyllabic. The languages of the first group accept minimum word with two syllables; and for that of the second group, the minimum word has only one syllable. The Nukini language is part of the second group, that is, its minimum word has only one syllable, for example, ni “forest”, vu “hair” and xi “fire”. In the case of words with more than one syllable, the prominent accent occurs on the last syllable, from the right to the left, that is, at the end of the word.

After an extensive discussion between the children and the teachers at their school it was decided that the Nukini language would be written with the following letters and its correspondent phones: [a] a; [b] b; [s] c (in the beginning and in the middle of lexical items) and ç (in the middle of items when before a e u); [s] s (only at the end of a syllable); [i] e; [h]
h; [i] i; [k] k; [m] m; [n] n; [p] p; [ɾ] r; [t] t; [u] u; [v] v; w and y (these two letters are assumed as consonants, that is, they only occur in the beginning and at the end of a syllable).

It is important to say that an undergraduate student under our advice (Okidoi, 2004) was given the opportunity to have access to this study. This student wrote a monograph based on the data collected in this research, which constitutes as more material available to the Nukiní people.

10. The Choice of Letters

The letters used in the process of writing the Nukiní language were chosen by the Nukiní students and teachers in the classroom. Initially, we presented our simplified phonological analysis. That is, the phonemes of the language were presented and then we asked them to suggest the most appropriate letter for each phoneme. Each one of them said which letter they thought to be the most appropriate to write the phoneme.

At this moment, the students raised relevant points in order to modify some letters and preserve others. As a result, we had 18 letters to 16 phonemes and this is justified by the position of occurrence of some phonemes. For example, when the /u/ is followed or preceded by a consonant it is represented by u, case in which it occupies the nucleus of a syllable; and when it is preceded by a vowel it is represented by w, case in which it occupies the periphery of a syllable, that is, when it occurs in the position of consonant in the syllabic structure. And the same is assumed in concern to /i/, represented by i when it is the nucleus of a syllable and by y when it occupies a consonant position in the syllabic structure. That is, it occurs before or after the nucleus of the syllable. Both of them follow this rule due to the syllabic pattern of the language.

There are some other letters which demand explanations about the way they are used. The c and the ç, for example, will be localized according to the place where they occur in the lexical item. Thus, the c can only be used in the beginning of a lexical item and the ç can only be used to start internal syllables of a lexical item, if it proceeds a and u, as stated before. This is justified by rules used in written Portuguese, which facilitates the learning of written Nukini by their speakers once they learn first how to write and read in Portuguese.

11. Structure of the Nukiní Didactic Material

The didactic material was a collective achievement, as pointed out before. The students chose the pictures and drew them to illustrate the material. A different perspective on the “Learn Nukini” material is its historical, linguistic and lexicographic contents, which can be used as
a consult source and as an incentive to its readers. It diverges from a traditional spelling book and it has a book structure because students are asked not to write on it.


The next part of the material is an open invitation made to its users to amplify the data and to share them not only with other Nukiní but also with anyone who is interested in the language. The items on this second part are (1) Research on knowing more about the Nukiní; (2) Brief list of Nukiní/Portuguese and Portuguese/Nukiní words; (3) Research proposal: Songs; Prayers; Short stories; Body paint; Alphabetical writing suggestions; Formal education. There are also four maps: the Nukiní Indigenous Land; the Moa Region; The State of Acre and Brazil. And then we finally present the names of all the students who effectively collaborated with the publication of this first material to the Nukiní indigenous school. Their names are cited as “Co-authors”.

As for the activities projected in the material, they were suggested by the Nukiní teachers and by the researcher, whose proposals were accepted. The drawings were made by the students and some others by the teachers who were so involved in drawing that they saw no difference between them and the children.

An important observation must be made. All the decisions regarding the process of writing an oral language resulted from preceding linguistic analysis and were previously presented to the Nukiní students. We had many meetings in the classroom in order to revise the material, which was finally ready in 2004. But we comprehend it represents a work that has just begun and it will go through changes as long as it is used by the Nukiní natives.

We also understand that this material is a collective production, that is, students, teachers, assistants and other members of the community were involved, and there is much more to be discussed and many data provided by the speakers still to be analyzed. Thus, we have concluded this stage of the research and here we share it with the interested on the subject. By preparing the book, it is accessible to new contributions and criticism.
Conclusions

We can finally conclude that a language can be recovered, if the ones who potentially have information about this language accept the idea of recovering it, if these people are the elderly and also if those who accept to reconstruct the language are the group interested in its recovery. The owners of the language are the only ones who can actually guarantee any possible result. Besides that, it is significant to believe in the language recovery for the group as a whole and it is also important that the group identify themselves as an indigenous group to the non-indigenous society. And this is only possible when being an indigenous is not a synonym of contempt and prejudice or even to live under the risk of persecution.

The experience with the Nukini has proved that if a certain group of people have strong will, desire and persistence they can reconstruct what might be lost to academics and specialists. It seems to us that all the techniques and theoretical strategies used in the data collection and scientific research are not as relevant as the will of these people in being successful in this process. For this reason, the recovery of a language must be done almost exclusively by the members of the group involved. The initiative must come from within, if they want to recover what is actually theirs. By the way, Chomsky (1997) contemplated this form of thinking about the language and its users when he once gave an interview about minority languages in Brazil. He even proposes that these speakers should be received by the MIT programs, which already happens. Gnerre (1983) also has a work in which the role of the indigenous as a researcher is discussed. Both these specialists agree on promoting the self-esteem and the autonomy of the indigenous.

The idea of giving conditions to the ancient owners of the language in conducted the entire process of their language recovery and keeping the scientists solely as their contributors is also valid in the cases of the Náwa and the Apolima-Arara: they also showed initiative and continued the investigations we had started with them. And in the cases of the Nukini, the Náwa and the Apolima-Arara, the indigenous knew what they were doing was for themselves and not for the benefit of the researchers. We agree that “languages do not have owners” (Wetzels, 1997). Notwithstanding, we know that there are many cases in which researchers want to posses the languages they study. And if we were to define who would be the owners of the language we would say that they are its original speakers.

If science is first used to help the indigenous groups to become more resistant, the investigations would be more successful because later on science would be able to use the results obtained by that group. We must be careful with our hurry when saying that some detail does not exist or that in certain languages it is not possible just because the academics
do not have the necessary evidence. As far as we are concerned, this would be a political position, not scientific.

We assume that the most important in the recovery of the Nukini, Náwa and Apolima-Arara languages is the fact that these indigenous people gave the first step. From there on, in the case of the Nukini, they collectively planned and elaborated the material with academic assistance. And from everything we have said so far, the most important is the group’s self-esteem. They know that all the material is addressed to them, Nukini, Náwa and Apolima-Arara, materials which are mainly directed to students and teachers of these groups. In the Nukini, the results were only possible because the material preparation and the continuous language return process depended, exclusively, on the indigenous community. As from that, the product is guaranteed to the academy as well. But, if something should change, it is the order of priority in relation to the academic work with minority languages.

We reaffirm our positions by saying that the reality in the 21st century lets us be more careful and coherent because in the case of the indigenous people they must be seen as capable beings, the ones who are more prepared to recover information for all fields of knowledge, including linguistic studies. These indigenous need support to study their language with the academics. This will help them to have more autonomy and later on they may conduct these studies, if that is their will. After this new position, they will be able to say who they are and identify the group to which they belong, without the need of any spokesperson. This is autonomy and we understand it as self-esteem.

By making the self-esteem of the indigenous group viable, through the non-indigenous academic, the university guarantees the survival not only of the group but also of their language besides, of course, reserving time to the usually desired theoretical sophistications.
References


The 2011 Symposium for Teaching and Learning Indigenous Languages of Latin America (STLILLA) was the second in a biennial series of symposia organized by the Association for Teaching and Learning Indigenous Languages of Latin America (ATLILLA). The Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame hosted STLILLA-2011 in collaboration with partner institutions.

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