

## Project Report for GBS Bulletin

### Documentation of a critically endangered Amazonian Language: Oro Win

Joshua Birchall  
Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen  
Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi  
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The Oro Win language, a member of the Chapacuran family, is spoken by a small tribe of people in the Brazilian state of Rondônia, part of the southwestern region of the Amazon river basin. Of the approximately eighty Oro Win who currently live among three villages in the upper portions of the Pacaás Novos river, only six can be considered fluent speakers. The tribe suffered greatly from the incursion of rubber tappers into their territory during the middle of the last century. This invasion resulted in disease, massacre and enslavement, and ever since these sad times, the use of their language has been on the decline.

The severe endangerment of the language made the need for documentation work extremely urgent, especially since almost no work has been previously carried out on it. After meeting the leader of the Oro Win in a city near their territory, he invited me to go to the village and work on documenting their traditional stories and developing language materials for use in the school. With the support of the GBS, I was able to return to the area and make two long trips up the winding river to work with the language in its natural setting.

The first trip into the village was focused primarily on documentation. Every day I would visit the eldest man in the village, Ti'omi Oro Towati', a functionally monolingual octogenarian who was already a grandfather before permanent contact. We would record traditional stories, in both audio and video, while his daughter-in-law, the youngest fluent speaker, sat in on the sessions. Afterwards, she would provide a translation of the story into Portuguese. Together we were able to record a total of twenty seven traditional narratives in Oro Win, covering topics such as the origins of the people, the discovery of their traditional foodstuffs and the creation of the animals. We were also able to record a few biographical accounts as well as some natural conversations among the few remaining speakers. Four of these stories have been fully transcribed and glossed so far.

The second trip into the village had a different focus than the first. As the youngest full speaker was in the nearby city, we shifted our attention more towards the creation of language materials and further developing the grammatical analysis. Working with the Oro Win school teacher, we developed a short language primer that showcased the newly redesigned practical orthography and included a number of grammar lessons for use in the classroom. Also, working with another couple of fluent speakers, we used visual elicitation tools to further explore the structure of the language.

Each visit to the village included a community language and culture workshop. The first workshop focused on building consensus within the village on the adoption of a practical orthography, and deliberating over the details of how such a system should look and function. One of the elder men in the village helped to give lessons on the language and traditional music. The second workshop focused more on the presentation of materials that had been developed and the progress of the project, along with many of the other events from the first workshop. Both workshops culminated in a traditional style dance that has been recorded and turned into DVDs for the villages.

In terms of documentation, the project produced approximately sixteen hours of audio recordings and ten hours of video. A selection of these were turned into a collection of edited DVDs and CDs with cover artwork from one of the teenagers in the village. Samples of these materials have been given to the GBS.

Beyond the documentation aspects of the work, the project was able to collect critical data for comparative studies of the Chapacuran language family, as well as ethnographic and historical information. The time in the village was used to conduct a sociolinguistic survey that recorded not only biographical information but also data on language comprehension and production in Oro Win, Portuguese, and Wari'. The latter of which is a neighboring Chapacuran language that many Oro Win also speak. Much of the data and information that was gathered during the project is currently being put to use in a variety of publications, both academic and for larger audiences. The documentation data have all been deposited at the host institution, the Museu Goeldi in Belém, in order to ensure that the data is always accessible from within Brazil.

The bulk of funding for this nine month project was provided by a study grant from the US Fulbright Commission. However, since this fellowship did not include fieldwork funding, the support from the GBS was used for the more documentation specific aspects of the project, including:

- Consultant compensation (approx. €300)
- Recording and storage media (approx. €170)
- Two community workshops (approx. €75 each)
- Materials production (approx. €100)

Without the support of the GBS, such a project would not have been possible. While there is still much work to be done, this project was able to fulfill a huge gap in the study of this language, namely, by the production of audio and video documentation resources and the development of community language materials. It is a personal hope that this project was only the beginning of my work with Oro Win and the Chapacuran languages.