

Fieldwork report: The Mawayana ‘Frog People’ in Suriname, South America.

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I would like to start by expressing my gratitude to the Gesellschaft für Bedrohte Sprachen for granting me the funds to carry out fieldwork among the Mawayana in February/March this year. I was just in time. The Mawayana were delighted to see me, I had told them last year that I would be back, but seeing is believing. First, some background information on the Mawayana and their language.

Present ethnographic situation

Mawayana is a moribund Arawakan language spoken in Kwamalasamutu, a predominantly Trio (Cariban) village in the south of Suriname. There are four fluent speakers of Mawayana, all well over 70, and four more who have a good passive knowledge of the language. These latter are the children of the four old speakers. The Mawayana speakers are all bilingual in Mawayana and Waiwai (Cariban) since they lived among the Waiwai group in the neighbouring country Guyana. At present their day-to-day language in the Trio village is Trio. In the 1960s, these Mawayana speakers – three speakers and their wives and children - were brought to Suriname by an American missionary to help to evangelize the Trio and other native people of Suriname. When their task was done, they remained in Suriname, among the Trio, and their children’s children were raised speaking Trio, which quickly became the dominant language of the area – there are approximately 1200 Trio speakers in Suriname spread over four main villages. For a sociolinguistic profile of the Trio group, itself an amalgamation of smaller groups, see Carlin (1998) and Carlin and Boven (in press). Given that the Mawayana have lived among Cariban groups for most of the past century, their language exhibits many Cariban features such as past tense marking on nouns to name but one.

The Mawayana community itself now comprises approximately 60 people. The oldest generation, that is, those original Mawayana from Guyana, who were bilingual in Mawayana and Waiwai, all speak Mawayana among themselves; they speak Waiwai (and sometimes Mawayana) to the generation immediately below them, that is, those who are roughly between fifty and sixty years of age, including their children, and they speak Trio in their daily and intense interaction with the Trio and with the younger generations of Mawayana who are monolingual Trio speakers. Thus the children of the four fluent speakers have a passive knowledge of Mawayana, but they refuse to speak it, feeling more comfortable with Waiwai in which they are fluent, and all of whom are fluent speakers of Trio, with just below native speaker competence in Trio. In contrast to other dying languages with such few speakers, the four speakers are highly competent speakers who form a close-knit mini-speech community.

There were reports about three years ago that there were still two old Mawayana speakers in Brazil, across the border from Guyana, these were apparently imperfect speakers since the elicited data were uneven with several gaps for words they could no longer remember.¹ There are still some ethnic Mawayana in Guyana among the Waiwai, who, however, are reported to speak Waiwai and not Mawayana. Already in the late 1950s – early 1960s ethnographers studying the Waiwai groups noticed the speed at which the Waiwai were absorbing the smaller groups such as the Mawayana; they predicted that the language of the Mawayana would disappear within a short period of time. This has happened in Guyana but apparently it was the migration of those few missionary Mawayana to Suriname that has saved the language thus far, making Kwamalasamutu the only Mawayana-speaking community of importance left, a veritable godsend thus. It is also not unimportant in this context that those native missionaries who were brought to Suriname by the American were the leaders of the Mawayana community, one being the leading shaman.

1 I would like to thank Sergio Meira for sharing his Mawayana data with me .

The fieldwork

On arriving in Kwamalasamutu, the main informants, Mr. Japoma and his wife, were decidedly eager to get started. The language of contact was Trio. I soon realized how lucky I was with these informants since Mr. Japoma was the one person who had the entire history and mythology of the Mawayana at his fingertips.²

In order to build up a corpus, and taking into account that this language is imminently endangered, I asked to record stories of different genres. I recorded several texts and with the help of the informants transcribed and translated five of these texts into Trio. On the basis of these data I was able to elicit paradigms and check meanings and pronunciation. As with the Trio storytellers, Mr. Japoma took the business of telling the stories very seriously, and insisted we sat inside the house at a table, after which he and his wife would retire outside to a hammock while I sat beside them and with their help transcribed the recorded material. Almost every day some Trio would pass by the house and stop a moment to observe us. Just to underline the fact that they were not real Trio but very important ‘other’ people, namely Mawayana, while we were translating the stories, the Mawayana would ask the Trio for the proper way to say a given phrase in Trio. The delight they had in doing so was almost tangible. I should perhaps add that the Trio are the dominant group, and that they undifferentiatedly refer to the Mawayana, and two other ethnic groups, namely Tunayana and Katuena, all of whom came from living among the Waiwai, as Waiwai. Since actively working on their language, the Mawayana have gained a new dimension. What really clinched the matter was the fact that I was able to write down their language. In fact, over the next few years I shall be working closely with Mr. Japoma’s son, who is a male nurse in the local health clinic, on an acceptable orthography for Mawayana.³

Mawayana has implosive phonemes, /b/ and /d/ and great was the excitement when, in order to check these sounds, I asked to feel the informants’ Adam’s apple (especially with men it is easy to feel the downward movement of the larynx when producing implosive sounds). They couldn’t believe it, they had special sounds, and such beautiful symbols with which to depict them, namely b and d! With every day their confidence grew and it was clear that

2 I would like to express my deep gratitude to Mr. Japoma and his wife Saana, his brother, and sister-in-law, and his son, Susumi, for helping me work on their language.

3 I would like to point out that my current research on Mawayana (till 2005) is being financed by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). The fact that I had received a grant from the GBS to carry out the initial fieldwork among the Mawayana in February this year strongly contributed to NWO’s decision to fund my Mawayana project over the next three years. Again, thanks GBS.

they realized how important their language was, not only for me, but also because it raised their standing within the Trio community. While such a boost in confidence is often reported for speakers of endangered languages simply by the presence of a linguist, and I have experienced this before (e.g. Uganda, and among other Amerindian groups in the Guianas), this was the first time that it became almost physically tangible. To give just one example: the house where I lived was on the side of the airstrip (the Trio villages can only be reached by airplane), and one evening as I was about to get into my hammock, I saw in the candlelight a snake slithering past my rucksack. After the initial seconds of realizing that I didn't know the slightest thing about snakes (e.g., whether they react to noise), I went hurtling out of the house, across the airstrip shouting 'I need a man, I need a man!' I admit that in any culture that sounds quite desperate when shouted by a whitewoman in the middle of the night! I could see the light of some torches approaching, and three young boys appeared. I told them about the snake which they subsequently caught and killed, it was of the bushmaster family. The following day, as several villagers gathered outside my house to wait for an airplane to arrive, the three young boys commented on what had happened the previous night. At this point, Mr. Japoma's wife started to ask me in Mawayana about the snake and what had happened. The Trio watched in disbelief as we discussed the details of the events in Mawayana. From then onwards, every time I walked through the village I had a chorus of people saying 'Eithne, say something in Mawayana!' The language of the Mawayana had come alive in the minds of the Trio.

An intense consciousness has grown among the speakers and indeed the entire ethnic group that this is the only chance left to document their language, and concomitantly the cultural residue as reflected in the language. The informants themselves and their children realize that this work must be completed within the next one or two years given the old age of the speakers. Members of the ethnic group want to help me write as detailed as possible a book about the Mawayana and their language and culture (especially the former, premissionary way of life of this group of people), including both audio and visual material.

What I first perceived as a drawback for doing fieldwork among the Mawayana was the fact that the main informant Mr. Japoma is very deaf. However, it soon turned out that this was an advantage since his wife had to shout everything at him, articulating very clearly. Therefore it became easier for me to distinguish phonetic features, and also to listen to normal

spoken text. Since the Mawayana are not used to anyone else understanding their language, they were communicating quite freely, thus I often left the taperecorder running during our transcription and translation sessions.

Like many Amazonian peoples, the Mawayana like to crack jokes and be witty, and they have great admiration for people who are verbally adept. And believe me you don't need to be a master speaker of a foreign language to manipulate it. As an example, the first greeting in the morning in Mawayana is *kaubai* 'are you awake?', the usual answer being *kaubana* 'I'm awake'. Since I learned this relatively quickly, it became boring so after a couple of weeks, I sometimes added the frustrative marker *-muku* to form *kauba-muku-na* which is actually a playful but not entirely appropriate answer to the greeting: this is socially speaking on a par with A greeting B with 'guten Morgen' and B replying 'Ist es ein guter Morgen? Da bin ich mir nicht so sicher'. The form with the frustrative marker expresses early morning feelings before a cup of coffee as in 'I'm up but I'm not awake yet'. Such processes are also indicative of how dynamic Mawayana still is. While the language is imminently endangered, it has not become fossilized in the minds of the speakers, creative processes are still present.

The next step

At present I am continuing with my analysis of the text and elicited material. Each word of the texts is being entered into a data base as the basis of a dictionary. My first action when I return to Kwamalasamutu is to work with Mr. Japoma's son on an orthography; the speakers' children and some of the grandchildren are literate in both Waiwai and Trio. Since the material culture of the Mawayana (featherwork, weaving) differs greatly from that of the surrounding Trio groups, I shall take a video camera on my next fieldwork trip to record these differences. The documentation of Mawayana will result in a grammatical description (in English) of the language for scientific purposes, and a dictionary, and a collection of texts with glosses. For the Mawayana themselves, we will produce a grammar and text collection with translations into Trio. Since I have recorded the texts on mini-discs, these will be copied to CDs to be included in both the linguistic and the Mawayana/Trio books.

The story of the sun

The following is a translation of the first part of a story told by Mr. Japoma in February 2002. All the texts I recorded have large numbers of sound symbolic words, which I have left here in the original marked by italics. One interesting instance was the call of the owl *mīrokoko kwa kwa kwa*: the Mawayana name for the owl is *tabobo*, and the Trio name is *mīrokoko*. My housemate in Kwamalasamutu, a young Katuena, was fascinated by Mr. Japoma's stories, and especially by the ideophones he used. Since it was the time of the lunar cycle for this particular owl species, he offered to wake me if he heard the owl. A few nights later, he woke me, and I couldn't believe it, there was the owl calling *mīrokoko kwa kwa kwa*.

*Japoma's text*⁴

Etaana kamu n-kīwa-dē kamu. Rī-ḡaa-de-suku'a kamu. Ndzakarasuku'a? Taamata-suku'a kīmīnika kamu. Saruuka-ḡa'a-koso rī-taamata kamu. Saruuka-koso naatsa. Ndzakarasuku'a r-urudasī. Bītse ekari-waadā-dzanu suku'a-koso rīyaadā. Ekaanu saaruka(koso) nawaatsadā-muku. Barukiyasa-kwe, taure unnī, rīra tībī' rabanaanisi.

Nawaatsadā-muku barukiya, nawaatsadā-muku barukiya. Kaa-tīna iike saruuka wa-saruuka-esu? Masīke wa-inke kaa-ko tamaate? Kaa-ko kuwī-ḡa tamaate? Rī-ma-koso saruuka wesoro. Kaa-muku-watsese tībo-kororo rī-yaa-dē-kwe? Rī-makoso.

Iiya ii-biikosī ii-tso ma-i-towaa-ta. Nde rī-ma kodokodōrī-'i. Rīra kodokodōrī tsaka saruuka wena-biki. *Sīi tīhpē* tīd-a. Nna niya-koso kodokodōrī wiitsa kakud-e tībadi *kwa kwa kwa*. Na mīne-suku tsadanu tod. Towasī kodokodōrī-kwe, na ekaanu kaa ba'a-suku, ekaanu rī-me-ke. Ekaanu ri-yaadā *saaa saaa, hpeee*. Mekenu-koso rī-kaanakiyasī *saaa, tsitsyu*. Tsukada saruuka-tsawiki *tsitsyu*. ToksuBai a-kīwīdī-koso risuka, kīwīdī-koso-muku ku-re, kīwīdī-kura-muku. Mekenu tuku rīkanakiye, *saaa, subai* kīrīkī rimatsa-koso. Saruuka-tsikuki *hputēbo suBai pereru* (sound of fish slipping into the water). *Dododododo toksai kuruku*. A-kīwīdī-koso rī-keidzaku, *toksai saaaa saaa* rī-tota-koso, *hpe* ekaadēba-koso ri-yaadā saruuka wesoro. “Ndzesī maa-tsika mawadza?” “Muadza barukiya-kosokwe.” “Ī-wadza-muku masī-tsikakwe.” “Towa-na.” “Kaa-tīne itowa?” “I-biikoya n-saruuka' mamuku i-'ikwa.” “Kaa iikesī' mmamuku. Kaa-tīne i-towa?” nasintsakoso kadokodōrī. “Nkosī towa-nakwe” rī-ma-koso kodokodōrī.

“Na kaa-tīna masī-towe-kwe? Nsaruuka roro ri-inke asī. Na ri-tanasī” rī-ma-koso tabobo'i,

⁴ The vowel /i/ is a high central vowel; /ë/ is phonetically the schwa; hp is a bilabial fricative.

tabobo'i rīnotse. "Iitanaasi mai-towe" rī-makoso tabobo'i, "iitana iibikoda nsaruuka wasi tii-boko iwizata!" "Nde miiyasi," rī-ma-koso tabobo "miiyasi, n-tsake-ya saruuka tsukukiku." Saruuka tsukukiku-a *taai*. Rī-koso dzawidza, rī-widzanikoso, ekaḁanu *saaaa* ekaanu. "mirokoko kwa kwa kwa, mirokoko kwa kwa kwa, mirokoko kwa kwa kwa".

Saaaaa rī-ma-koso *mirokoko* dzakwe *saaaa*, *tstitsu toksudai hponkirik* tabobo rewīdzuka-koso rītsa a-kīwīdī. "Atsamuna-suku" rīma-koso, *taai* tabobo *hponkirik* *taai*, rī-rewī dzuka-koso rī-tsase tī. Awa(i)ntsa-koso tabobo ahatanamako nakesī, rī-koso rahpiya saruuka. *Subai peruru dododododo suBai*. Na n-sodzadesī rī-ma-koso *suuu ahpe*-koso. Rī-sudza rīnadakosī rī-sudza, rī-nadakosī, aboya-koso dza saruuka *hputēbo* suup. *Toksai hpe hpe hpe* tabobokoso. Nakaasi-koso bo arakuda *nsihpi*. "okwe adzuka n-kīwīdī adzuka n-kīwīdī?" Unnī-siki-koso rīkataba *top top top*. Tsika-koso-kwe okwe "ekadīna-kwe" *top top top*. "Tsi-ka-koso-kwe ukuki tana-suku tsika-koso-kwe, wakadīki tanaa-suku tsika-koso-kwe." Tsaka-koso tabobo nakaasi te ahaasi.

Translation

Now I'm going to tell a story about the sun. The sun was, maybe you could say, wild, hostile. What else was he like? Well, maybe he was a thief, long ago. He used to steal fishtraps. People made fishtraps, they know all about it. Well, he came down from on top of the sky and he went to see the fishtraps. The river was high so the water was deep. He went to see the fishtraps and turned them upside down and emptied them. 'Who is taking our fishtraps, who is eating from them? We have nothing to eat, so who is stealing from them? Who is stealing our fish?' said the fishtrap owners. 'Who can guard our traps at night when he comes?' they said. 'Hey you, guard our fishtraps, because you don't sleep at night!' they said to Toad (*kodokodori*). "O.K." said Toad, and off he went to sit on the palm strands of the fishtrap. Slowly *sīīī*, it got dark *tīhpē*. So Toad started to talk there '*kwa kwa kwa*'. Right into the middle of the night. Then unfortunately Toad fell asleep, it was exactly at what time, towards dawn. Towards dawn the sun came up *saaa saaa*, it spread *hpee*. It covered everything with light *saaa*, it arrived *tsitsyu*. The sun stood by the fishtrap. He took off his hat, it was like a headdress, a beautiful one, like a hat (although it wasn't really one). He makes everything bright. He hung it over a pole. Then he took the fishtrap and dragged it along the water, he put it *subai* into the water *hputēbo*, letting the fish slip into the water. He killed the

fish *dododododo* till they were all dead *kuruku*. Then he lifted out the fishtraps again. He took his hat. After dawn the fishtrap owners came: ‘where is he? did you see him? Did you find him?’ they said. ‘Unfortunately before I could see him he had emptied them’ said Toad. ‘So you guarded in vain’ the fishtrap owners said. ‘I was asleep’ said toad. ‘Why were you asleep? “Watch my fishtrap”, I said to you in vain. “Who is eating from it?” I said to you in vain. Why were you asleep?’ they asked Toad angrily, pushing him about. ‘I couldn’t help it, I just fell asleep’ Toad said feeling embarrassed.

‘Well, who doesn’t fall asleep then?’ the fishtrap owners said in despair. ‘Every day he eats from our fishtrap’. ‘Maybe that one instead’ they said, meaning Owl (*tabobo*). So they said to Owl ‘you, maybe you don’t sleep, watch our fishtraps at night!’ ‘All right, I’ll give it a try’ said Owl. So off he went to sit on top of the fishtrap, he arrived there and stood on it *taai*. Then this one (Owl), he started to talk: ‘*mïrokoko kwa kwa kwa, mïrokoko kwa kwa kwa, mïrokoko kwa kwa kwa*’ That was how he spoke.

Then dawn came, *saaa*, towards dawn, Owl was saying ‘*mïrokoko*’, dawn came *saaa*, it became light, *saaa*, it arrived *tsitsyu*. He (the sun) took *toksubai* his hat and put it on top of Owl *hponkirik*, he put it around Owl’s neck. ‘What’s this, tree maybe?’ Owl thought. It (the hat) was standing straight up *taai* on his neck. Owl fell silent, and he (the sun) took the fishtrap. He poured out the fish, they went *peruru*, and he killed them *dododododo*. Then he (gently) put the trap back into the water *suuu ahpe*. He put one in and out, and went to get another, and another, till there was one fishtrap left, he submerged it *hputibo suup*. In the meantime Owl flew off *hpe hpe hpe*. The sun submerged the fishtrap, and came out of the water. It was dark, still night. ‘Where is my hat?’ he said? ‘Where is my hat?’ He fumbled around searching for it *top top top* in the dark. ‘Oh dear, dawn is coming, dawn is coming upon me’ he said. ‘Where is it? Maybe it’s upstream, no it isn’t, oh dear. Maybe it’s downstream, no it isn’t, oh dear.’ Owl had taken it far away.

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