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The Documentation and Grammatical Description of Sanapaná (Enlhet-Enenlhet, Paraguay)

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The Sanapaná language is spoken by around 1000 people in the Paraguayan Chaco region (Crevels 2012). Only about a third of the members of the ethnic Sanapaná group still speak the language, and in five of the seven Sanapaná communities, children now learn Spanish or Paraguayan Guaraní as their native language. This makes Sanapaná one of the many languages that are in danger of disappearing. Documenting such endangered languages is of vital importance to preserving the world’s cultural and intellectual diversity, as well as a representative sample of human linguistic behaviours and their social functions. Language endangerment has also been proven to correlate with loss of biodiversity, since the same forces that cause groups of people to shift away from their ancestral language also hasten the disappearance of habitats and the species that inhabit them (e.g. colonisation, exploitation of land for natural resources). Such endangered languages often have a wealth of environmental knowledge embedded in them, and preserving them has the potential to contribute to ameliorating this harmful tendency (Hale 1992).

This poster presents two case studies resulting from a project to document Sanapaná and describe its grammatical system, as well as the types of data that are being collected in this project. Firstly, it presents the results of a sociolinguistic study which demonstrates that the vowel productions of Sanapaná speakers that live in close contact with Spanish and Guaraní are influenced by typical vowel productions in these contact languages. In other words, even when Sanapaná speakers do still speak their own language, the fact that other languages are dominant in society still leaves its traces in their language. Secondly, this poster presents a preliminary description of the verbal morphology of Sanapaná. Sanapaná verbs, as opposed to those in many Indo-European languages such as English, are composed of many different meaningful “building blocks”. Consequently, a single verb can express a complete idea, including events, their participants, motion during or before the event, and speakers’ attitudes towards such events. This latter case study showcases the linguistic diversity which we stand to lose if not for successful language documentation and maintenance efforts.