Introduction

About 90% of all languages that were spoken in the world in 1990 were, at that time, predicted to not survive the 21st century (Krauss 1992). Sanapaná is one of these endangered languages. It is the native language of around a third of the people of the indigenous Sanapaná group of Paraguay, and it is only transmitted to children in two small villages – La Esperanza and Anaconda (Table 1).

My dissertation research focuses on describing the grammatical system of Sanapaná including case studies of social variation, especially as caused by the situation of language endangerment and contact with Spanish and Guarani.

Data Collection and Methodology

The dataset on which this grammatical description will be based will be a comprehensive documentation of Sanapaná, collected over 29 weeks (and running):

- Video and audio recordings of multiple genres (30 hours, see Figure 1, Van Gysel 2021)
- Transcriptions and translations (around 8 hours)
- Rich sociolinguistic metadata

Recordings are mostly collected in La Esperanza. Hypotheses about grammatical structures are established based on elicitation with multilingual consultants (e.g. translation of Spanish sentences into Sanapaná), and tested on the corpus data. For case studies on social variation, tokens in the corpus are coded for the relevant variable (e.g. formant frequencies of vowel productions) and sociolinguistic characteristics of the speaker (e.g. age, multilingualism). Mixed-effects regression models are created to investigate the impact of these social factors on language production.

Case Study 1: Sanapaná Vowels

Endangered languages often show:
- increased phonetic variability (Bird 2008)
- phonetic convergence with the contact language (Campbell & Muntad 1999)

In Sanapaná (11 speakers):
- /e, o/ by multilinguals is more similar to Spanish /e, o/; tongue higher in the mouth
- This effect is stronger for speakers immersed in a Spanish-speaking environment

Contact with Spanish and decrease in Sanapaná use affects the language even when people still speak it fluently

Case Study 2: Sanapaná Verbal Morphology

As opposed to English (and many other Indo-European languages), Sanapaná has agglutinative morphology. Many different meanings can be expressed as parts of a single word, including person, gender, and number of the subject or object; negation; desiderative (“want to”); causation of the event; location of the event; motion during the event; and time at which the event took place. Figure 3 diagrams the maximal structure of a Sanapaná verb as used currently.

Some of this structure is exemplified in example 1a) below, where the following meanings are all expressed as discrete parts of a single verb:
- There is an “emerging” event: -tep
- Someone caused the emerging event: -kes
- The ones who caused the emerging event were men: apk
- Multiple things were caused to emerge: -elen
- This event took place habitually: -kam
- This event happened in the past: -Ke

References


Funding Acknowledgments

This work was funded by Endangered Languages Documentation Project Small Grant 0251, a Student Field Research Grant from UNM’s Latin American and Iberian Institute, and the Foundation for Endangered Languages.