

From ‘people’ to plural: Grammaticalization in Andoke, an Amazonian isolate

Andoke is a highly endangered language isolate spoken by some 30 speakers in the Southern Colombian Amazon. Forming part of the Caquetá-Putumayo cultural area (Echeverri 1997), Andoke maintains intense contact with other languages and cultures of the area, yielding relative cultural and possibly structural linguistic homogeneity (e.g. Wojtylak 2018). The language had received relatively little attention until the 1970s, with anthropologist Jon Landaburu first providing a comprehensive grammatical description of Andoke (Landaburu 1979) and more research being conducted by Landaburu ever since (e.g. Landaburu 1992, 2000, 2023). Until now, research on Andoke has suggested that the language is hardly using any nominal plural marking. Landaburu (1979: 323, in passim) provides examples of a bound classifier *-síłłh* evoking the notion of “plurality and collectivity”, only being used on animate nouns. This morpheme is glossed as “group” by Landaburu and does not seem to be an obligatory, dedicated plural marker; it rather appears to be primarily used in ethnonymic compounds (“people”) or in appositional noun constructions. Our research, based on both reviewing secondary literature, and conducting original fieldwork in-person as well as remotely, paints a different picture of this morpheme, which will be presented in this talk. Analyzing our data, *-síłłh* does not behave like a bound classifier occurring only with animates, but now seems to be a general plural marker, also appearing with inanimate nouns. The primary research question attached to this talk relates to the conundrum of language change versus descriptive bias: did *-síłłh* grammaticalize, or did Landaburu, as the sole researcher working on Andoke at the time, misrepresent the element and its distribution?

References:

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