Warao

Stefanie Herrmann

SFB 441   University of Tübingen

Nauklerstrasse 35, 72074 Tübingen

Germany

herrmann@sfs.uni-tuebingen.de

Note

Please note that in examples of Warao the Spanish based official spelling will be used and that the letter "j" therefore corresponds to "h" for English speakers. Hyphens are intended to clarify the structure of a word. This article uses a number of cited publications as sources as well as data from a year's field-work in a Warao village from 1998 to 1999 collected by the author.

Region and Speaker

Warao is an Amerindian language spoken in the Orinoco Delta and adjoining areas in northeastern Venezuela and Guyana. Its speakers, the Warao, are the aboriginal population of the Delta, who have been present for as long as 9 000 years (W. Wilbert 1995: 336).

Nowadays they have an estimated population of about 30 000 which is increasing. Although they form the second largest indigenous group in Venezuela, given that the total indigenous population of the country comprises only 1,5 %, they are clearly a minority.

The latest reliable official census rates 90% of the Venezuelan Warao as speaking their indigenous language and 48% of them as being bilingual in Warao and Spanish (Venezuela 1993). Especially in the central part of the Delta, missionary boarding schools have had the - albeit unintended - effect of language loss. There are therefore a growing number of monolingual Spanish speakers in this area and in the slums found in Tucupita and Barrancas.

The estimated 1000 Warao on the Guyanese side are all in close contact with wider Guyanese society so that all of them can be assumed to be English speaking. Some being bilingual Warao-English or even trilingual including Spanish. There is however the tendency to give up Warao (Forte 2000).

Social and political status of the language

Up to now Warao is a language with no genuine writingtradition. Nevertheless recordings mainly of myths have been written down and published by anthropologists (J. Wilbert 1970, Heinen 1988), missionaries and linguists (Osborn 1966a, 1966b, 1967, Lavandero 1991, 1992).

The diversified oral tradition includes different styles of speech and various genres. It differentiates for instance between *"denobo"* (< *deje nobo*: old stories) mythology on the one hand and *"deje jiro"* (new stories) or "*deje kwamotane abane*" which contain recent stories, gossip and jokes on the other hand. In addition, there is special language use during ritual as in shamanistic curing sessions and wailing for the dead (Briggs 1993).

The large majority of Warao speakers are living in communities which are exclusively Warao. Outside these communities there is no social space for the usage of the indigenous language. In Guyana there has been no bilingual education so far (Forte 2000). In Venezuela, indigenous languages were authorized for school education by a presidential decree in 1979 and official alphabets for most of them including Warao were released subsequently. Nevertheless due to lack of political support these regulations were never put to practice on a larger scale (Villalón 1994). Warao language and culture are subject to strong pressure by the Spanish and English speaking majority urging them to assimilate into the national Criollo or Creole culture of the respective countries. The awareness amongst the Warao concerning their language and culture as being endangered is just starting to rise, but still the future of their whole cultural heritage has to be regarded as most uncertain.

Dialects

There is no reliable information concerning the number of dialects. Some authors claim that there are none (Romero-Figeroa1997); others have suggested that there are only slight regional variations (Osborn 1966a: 108f.). Warao speakers for their part claim not to be able to understand speakers from certain other groups. Due to Delta internal migration the situation has become regionally complex. Nevertheless at least 4 major linguistic and cultural variants have been assumed by most researchers (Weisshar 1982). Certainly the different Warao groups are for ecological and historical reasons culturally quite heterogeneous (Heinen and Garcia-Castro 2000).

Genealogy

Because of lack of historical information it is impossible to prove membership in a language family for Warao and it has therefore to be considered an isolate (Weisshar 1982). Certain resemblances with other languages have to be attributed to the phenomenon of a "linguistic area", where languages of a certain region (in this case the Amazon and neighboring areas) show similarities across the boundaries of different language families.

Typology

Typologically speaking Warao shows characteristics of an "agglutinating" language. Languages of this type tend to have one morpheme (smallest meaningful unit, which can be a word or a part of a word) per grammatical function. Larger words are then composed of a basic word or root and these morphemes. In the case of Warao most of them -suffixes- occur after the root although some of them -prefixes- are attached in front of it. For example the phrase: "*ine najoro-turu-ae*", structurally: "I food+almost-would-have+completed-action", equals the English expressions: "I almost ate".

Word classes

The categories of adjective and noun are not clear-cut. A word can function as noun or adjective according to its place in a sentence and the suffixes it combines with. Nouns and adjectives do not have gender.

There are furthermore "noun-verbs" (Osborn 1967). Normally verbs and nouns can be distributionally differentiated according to the suffixes and prefixes (classed together as affixes) that can occur with them. Some roots, however, can combine with verb and noun affixes alike.

To give an example: the root *"najoro"* (food) alone is a noun that can combine for example with the suffix "-*noko*" (place/instrument) to form *"najoro-noko"* (place of the food/ instrument for eating). On the other hand in the construction "*najoro-ya* " (literally: food+durative aspect): "is/are eating" the same root functions as part of a verb combining with a verb suffix.

Tense, mood and time

In Warao a wide range of such notions as tense, aspect and mood are marked on the verb. The above mentioned morphemes accomplish this task mainly suffixed to the basic verb form.

In order to clarify this point there is a non-exhaustive list of examples given below. However as there is no consistent labeling in the literature for these forms, I will limit myself to give an approximate translation into English:

najoro-kitane (to eat)

i-najoro-kitane (to cause someone to eat/ to feed someone)

najoro-kitia (going to eat immediately)

najoro-te (probably going to eat in the future)

najoro-ya (is/are eating at that moment/will surely be eating in the future)

najoro-ae (ate)

najoro-ya-ja (eating)

najoro-kuna (could eat)

najoro-turu-ae (was/were about to eat)

najoro-mejerei (in order to have him/her eat)

najoro-moana (has/have not yet eaten but should have done so)

najoro-komoni (cannot eat)

najoro! (eat!, singular)

najoro-kotu! (eat!, plural)

najoro-na-ja (is/are not eating)

najoro-na-tan-ae (has/have not eaten)

najoro-naka! (don't eat!, singular)

najoro-naka ja-kotu! (don't eat!, plural)

In this last example "*jakitane*" (to be/to have) functions as an auxiliary verb taking on the imperative plural ending "*-kotu* " because it is impossible to attach it to the preceding suffix " *-naka*". "*jakitane*" together with "*tikitane*" (to say/to do) and "*takitane*" (to be/to do) form an interesting group. They can not only be used as auxiliaries and as suffixes but also as clause introducers. As in "*ta-kore*" (literally: this being so): then/when.

Analysing *"najoro-na-ta-n-ae"* (has/have not eaten) from the above list, "*ta-n-ae*" really is the root of the verb " *ta-kitane*", followed by a marker for singularity of action " *-n-*", followed by the suffix expressing completeness of an action: "food+not+do+singularity of action+completed action.

Discourse markers

In addition, there are morphemes that allow the modification of verbs, nouns and adjectives and have sometimes range over the whole sentence: So for instance "*-yama*" is a citation marker specifying that something is known from hearsay: *najoro-ae-yama* (it is said/someone told that he ate). It is prevalent in storytelling.

Other morphemes like "*-kore*" or "*-rone*" which mean "while/if" and "although", respectively, play the role of conjunctions connecting sentences or phrases: *nojoro-ya-kore dani mi-ae* (while I was eating I saw my mother); *najoro-ya-rone dani mi-ae* (although I was eating I saw my mother). For questioning a sentence the suffix "*-ra*" is attached to the last word of that sentence.

Sentence structure

As regards the "basic" or unmarked word order in Warao, there is no general agreement. Some take a SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) word order to be basic (Osborn 1966b) others argue in favor of OSV (Object-Subject-Verb) (Romero-Figeroa 1997). All that can be stated safely is that Warao is a "verb-final" language.

In a lot of languages the copula "to be" (as in an English sentence of the type: "I am Warao") is not obligatory. The same holds true for Warao. Thus "*ine warao*" (literally: I Warao) would be the equivalent of the English sentence.

The direct complements of a verb (subject, object) do not have case marking or gender and are often omitted, especially when they have been mentioned previously or are assumed to be known. Besides there are stylistic reasons for omission. Nouns can take on suffixes (*-si/-ma /-to*) that specify that they are not the subject of a sentence: *dima-si konaria* (he takes father along) as opposed to: *dima konaria* (father takes something/someone along).

A study of the "pivot" in Warao is yet lacking. In languages with nominative and accusative case marking, the nominative (case of the subject of an intransitive and a transitive sentence) functions as the pivot. Thus two sentences are connected having a common subject: "the man ate an apple and smiled". In ergative languages, however, which show the same case for the subject of an intransitive sentence and for the object of a transitive one, this juncture would be impossible. "The man ate an apple and smelled good" would hence mean that the apple smelled good, not the man. In Warao storytelling such connections are frequently made. This gives rise to the question whether this language is syntactically ergative.

Person, number and plurality of action

Basically there is no agreement for person and number on the verb, although interestingly singularity or plurality of the action itself can be marked and thus emphasized. Compare for example "*boro-te*" (will be jumping) with "*boro-bu-te*" (will be jumping repeatedly/ a lot of people will be jumping). Here the morpheme "-*bu*-" underlines that the action is performed repeatedly either by one person or simultaneously by many.

The case of a morpheme that depicts singularity ("-n-") is more complicated as some verbs exist both with and without this morpheme and others only occur in one of these forms. An example of alternating verbs would be: *ine oa-e* (I grabbed several things) in opposition to "*ine oa-n-ae* " (I grabbed once/one thing). It is not clear whether or not " *-n-*" is still a productive morpheme.

With respect to number marking on nouns, there is a suffix "*-tuma* " that is often regarded as plurality marker. But it is not obligatory and especially when used with people, rather expresses the idea of "the-ones- belonging-to" as in "*Maria-tuma*" (Maria and her friends/family).

Possession and article

The possessive construction has the form "possessor possession-marker+possessed-item": *dima a-janoko* (father's house, literally "father his-house").

There is no definite or indefinite article in Warao. But person markers used in possessive constructions function like a definite article. In the following text recorded by the author, definiteness is assured in this way:

Tau-tuma manamo ja. Ta-kore a-raiba a-rajia tane.

two womenfolk is/has. Then her older sister her younger sister so (literal translation).

There were two women: an older and a younger sister (free translation).

Future of the language

Clearly a most interesting language with phenomena awaiting to be investigated, Warao presents a challenge to linguists. Unfortunately like most Amerindian languages the future vitality of Warao is not assured.

Further Reading

Briggs, Charles L., "The Pattering of Variation in Performance," in *American dialect Research*, edited by Dennis R. Preston, Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1993

Forte, Janette, "Amerindian Languages of Guyana", in *As línguas amazonicas hoje*, edited by F. Queixalós and O. Renault-Lescure, Sao Paulo: Instituto Socioambiental, 2000

Heinen, Dieter, *Oko Warao: Marshland People of the Orinoco-Delta* , Münster: Lit, 1988

Heinen, Dieter and Alvaro Garcia-Castro, "The Multiethnic Network of the Lower Orinoco", *Ethnohistory,* vol 47, 2000

Lavandero , Julio Perez, editor, *I Ajotejana, Mitos* (Myths from Ajotejana), Caracas: Hermanos Capuchinos, 1991
- *II Ajotejana, Relatos* (stories from Ajotejana), Caracas: Hermanos Capuchinos, 1992

Osborn, Henry, "Warao I: Phonology and Morphophonemics", *IJAL* 32 (1966a)
- "Warao II: Nouns, Relationals, and Demonstratives," *IJAL* 32 (1966b)
- "Warao III: Verbs and Suffixes," *IJAL* 33 (1967)

Romero-Figeroa, Andrés, *A Reference Grammar of Warao*, München, Newcastle: Lincom, 1997

Vaquero, P. Antonio, *Idioma Warao. Morfología, sintaxis, literatura* (Warao language. Morphology, syntax, literature), Caracas: Estudios Venezolanos Indígenas, 1965

Venezuela, Oficina Central de Estadística e Informática, *Censo Indígena de Venezuela 1992, Tomo I,* (Venezuelan Indigenous Census of 1992, Part I). Caracas: OCEI, 1993

Villalón, María E., *Educación para indígenas en Venezuela: Una crítica razonada* (Education for Indigenous People in Venezuela: a Reasoned Critique), Caracas: CEVIAP, 1994

Weisshar, Emmerich, *Die Stellung des Warao und Yanomama in Beziehung zu den indigenen Sprachen Südamerikas nördlich des Amazonas: Studien zur genetischen und areal-typologischen Klassifikation* (The Position of Warao and Yanomama in Relation to the Indigenous Languages of South America North of the Amazon: Study in Genetic and Areal-Typological Classification), University of Tübingen: Dissertation, 1982

Wilbert, Johannes, 1957.
- *Folk Literature of the Warao Indians. Narrative Material and Motive Content* , Los Angeles: Latin American Center University of California, 1970

Wilbert, Werner, "Conceptos etnoecológicos Warao," in *Naturaleza y Ecología Humana en el Neotrópoco / Nature and Human Ecology in the Neotropics,* (Scientia Guaianæ. No 5), edited by Dieter Heinen, José J. San-José and Hortensia Caballero-Arias. Caracas: Instituto Venezolano de Investigaciones Científicas, 1995