Chapter 2
Landscape Transformation and Language Change: A Case Study in Amazonian Historical Ecology¹

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Abstract The author shows the influence of European trade and colonisation on the changes in Amerindian vocabulary. He uses the analysis to reflect on the knowledge of Amazonian landscape and associated biota. Balée is concerned specifically with the case of cacao and the way in which its denominations were transformed in the Tupi-Guarani language, thanks to the importance of the commodity in the 18th century Amazonia. Balée shows that the socio-environmental picture in which both caboclo and Amerindian societies were placed was very complex, a timely reminder of the importance of a historical approach for the understanding of both.

Keywords Cacao · Linguistic change and continuity · South America · Amerindian languages · Tupi · Lingua geral

Historical Ecology and Amazonian Languages

Historical ecology is a perspective on relations between people and the environment that, in principle, envisions how historical phenomena transform landscapes and how such transformations become conditioned and understood through local knowledge, behavior, and culture over time. The current state of landscape knowledge possessed by folk (caboclo) and indigenous peoples of Amazonia is, in part, a product of history. As the landscapes have changed through time, and continue to change, that knowledge, too, shows increments in some domains, losses in others. Such losses and increments of landscape

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knowledge are reflected in vocabulary changes, just as vocabulary can be used as an index, however crude, to knowledge of the past state of Amazonian landscapes.

Knowledge of Amazonian landscapes – in the mental control of one or more people – and based on experiential data, is at least as ancient as the Early Holocene, the presumable time of original occupation. No doubt some of that original knowledge of Amazonian landscapes has persisted, but it cannot be accessed with exactitude, since linguistic reconstruction (of words, technology, biota, and concepts) is not reliable beyond about five or six thousand years (see Kaufman, 1990), given what may be considered a background rate of vocabulary loss and change similar to the more well-accepted notion of a background rate of extinction when referring to biota over long sweeps of evolutionary time.

Archaeological data alone are insufficient to probe fully ancient knowledge of Amazonian landscapes, since knowledge is more than material artifacts: it is to be sure those artifacts, but it is also behavior and cognition, which is partly reflected in real language, including written texts. Amazonia lacks written documentation, of course, before 1500, but one can utilize methods from historical linguistics in order to begin to build a model of landscape knowledge and the changes it underwent during thousands of years before the European conquest.

One can demonstrate that within a five thousand year time period, however short from an evolutionary viewpoint, many of the landscapes and the languages associated with these in Amazonia underwent transformations, sometimes of a profound character. The landscape is that portion of the environment codified in language and subject to human intervention. A landscape represents an encounter between space and time, nature and history, biotic communities and human societies, and it is central to the conceptual apparatus of historical ecology. Landscape history is linked to environmental knowledge, and in Amazonia it is marked since the Middle Holocene by two deeply transforming phenomena: (1) the development of a system of swidden agriculture and fallow forest management by indigenous (i.e. pre-European) people and (2) the reconstitution of that system by neo-European expansionism, colonialism, and commercialization of existing landscapes in the New World, including Amazonia.

The focus of this chapter is on the second of these two historical phenomena, specifically on how eighteenth century colonialism, Jesuit missionization, dissemination of a contact language (Língua Geral Amazônica), and the penetration of the European world system of commerce and finance changed native vocabulary and hence, how these contact and colonialism transformed local interpretation and knowledge of Amazonian landscapes and associated biota. In particular, the emphasis here is on a single product, one of the drogas do sertão, cacao, and how the words and concepts for cacao underwent change in native languages given the fact that cacao and cacao beans were for some time in the eighteenth centuries the principal export commodity of Amazonia.