Nheengatu language

Calahan Janik-Jones
Language Profile — SPA398 — Prof. Suzi Oliveira de Lima

The Nheengatu language is an indigenous language of Brazil, and part of the Tupi–Guarani family. It is also referred to as *Língua Geral Amazônica* or *língua geral* (Moore et. al. 1993:93), or Modern Tupí (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig 2016). The precursor to Nheengatu, Tupinambá, was documented by Jesuit missionaries and was widely spoken throughout the Brazilian Amazon, but is now primarily spoken in the Upper Rio Negro region (Moore et. al. 1993:93), specifically the Içana, Lower Vaupés, and Negro river areas, and in Colombia and Venezuela (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig 2016).

Current Status

Ethnologue attests to approximately 19,060 speakers of modern Nheengatu (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig 2016), although one journalist notes as many as 30,000 speakers (Angelo 2016). Nheengatu is spoken by the Baniwa, Warekena, and Baré ethnic groups in Alto Rio Negro (Cruz 2011:18), serving as a native language for caboclo, as well as a means of affirming indigenous ethnicity for groups such as the Baré and Arapaço who have lost their native language (Povos Indígenas No Brasil 2006, Shulist 2013:38–42).

Ethnologue describes the language as "Shifting" with an EGIDS rating of 7 (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig 2016), although Nheengatu is undergoing revitalization, being recognized as an official language in the São Gabriel da Cachoeira municipality in 2002, and many teachers of the language have been trained (Rohter 2005). A textbook on Nheengatu was published in 1998 by Eduardo de Almeida Navarro, under the name of *Curso de Língua Geral* (de Almeida Navarro 2011). However, the education of Nheengatu is more or less unregulated, and there is little in the way of organized second language education training or standards (Shulist 2013:126).

History

Tupinambá, the precursor to Nheengatu, was spoken around the year 1500 along the eastern coast of Brazil from São Paulo to the mouth of the Amazon. The first impression of European colonists was that all indigenous peoples spoke the same language in the region, and the first

Jesuit descriptions of and translation into the language was motivated by the want to conquer and convert the Indian groups in Brazil (Moore et. al. 1993:94). Some of the earliest Jesuit descriptions gave rise to the name *Língua Brasílica* and later *Língua Geral* for the Tupinambá language in the 1600s (Figueira 1621).

Use of Nheengatu peaked in the 17th and 18th centuries when the language was standardized by Jesuits infused with a "mixture of Indian, Portuguese, and African words" (Rohter 2005), and saw use even in the capital of Belém (Moore et. al. 1993:95). Use of Nheengatu decreased in the later 18th century with the expulsion of the Jesuits from Brazil and attempts by the State to introduce Portuguese as the language of instruction, resulting in the persecution of Nheengatu and significant loss of the language (Moore et. al. 1993:96), although it persisted in the more remote Upper Rio Negro (Cruz 2015:421).

During the Cabanagem rebellion, Nheengatu was the language of the Cabanos, and with their decimation came further reduction in language use (Moore et. al. 1993:96). Until the later 20th century, boarding schools for Indian children enforced the use of Portuguese, forbidding and punishing use of Nheengatu (Rohter 2005), although recent initiatives in educating in Nheengatu and documenting the language look to reverse the long-term decline.

Nheengatu is descended from Tupinambá, a language in the Tupí branch (branch III) of the Tupi-Guarani family. Cruz classifies it as a South Tupi-Guarani branch, along with branches I and II (Cruz 2011:3). Nheengatu is the modern version of the now-extinct Tupinambá, heavily altered by contact with European colonists (Moore et. al. 1993:93). Nheengatu is categorized with Tupinambá as a Tupí language, and is one of the only members of this branch that has not gone extinct.

Literature

The first literature to describe Nheengatu was written by Jesuits from the 16th century onwards, beginning with Anchieta (1595) and Figueria (1621). Tupinambá was used as a *lingua franca* among Europeans and Indians in colonial Brazil and had some literary use, but this was severely reduced with the promotion of Portuguese as the sole national language.

Some collections of Nheengatu texts and amateur descriptions exist from the last two centuries (Moore et. al. 1993:93), such as Magalhães 1876, Rodrigues 1890, Silva 1945, and Michaele 1951. Modern linguistic documentation of contemporary Nheengatu did not begin until the 1980s, with Taylor (1985), Borges (1991), Moore et. al. (1993), and most recently Cruz (2011), with most documentation of the language being in Portuguese. A number of other authors listed in Moore et. al. (1993:93) also focus on the diachronic change from the earliest records of Tupinambá by Jesuits to the modern state of Nheengatu.

Furthermore, a pedagogical textbook titled *Curso de Língua Geral* (de Almeida Navarro 2011) was published in 1998 by Eduardo de Almeida Navarro, and is made publicly available on the University of São Paulo website.

Phonology

Among scholars there is a degree of disagree on the number of phonemes in Nheengatu, ranging from 16 to 22. Overall, the Nheengatu phoneme inventory bears a general resemblance to that of Tupinambá, with some changes including the introduced of a series of voiced (or prenasalized) plosives (Moore et. al. 1998:98).

Consonants

There disagreement among scholars in the description of Nheengatu consonant phonemes. Principally, Moore et. al. (1993) and Taylor (1985, 2007) describe a /w/, /j/, /j̃/, and /kw/ whereas other authors do not, and Moore et. al. also describes a /ch/ and /glottal stop/.

Cruz (2011) and Borges (1991) also differ in the description of stops in Nheengatu. Taylor describes only a series of prenasalized stops (/^{m}b/, /^{n}d/, /^{n}g/), but Moore et. al includes oral stops /b/ and /g/ in addition to the prenasalized series. Borges and Cruz, on the other hand, attest only a series of three oral stops (/b/, /d/, and /g/) and no prenasalized stops.

To contrast, the descriptions of Cruz and Moore et. al. are given below.

Cruz (2011)

	Bilabial	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar
Nasal	m	n	ɲ	
Unvoiced Plosive	p	t		k
Voiced Plosive	b	d		g
Fricative		s	ʃ	
Flap		ɾ		

Moore et. al. (1993)

	Bilabial	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Nasal	m	n			
Unvoiced Plosive	p	t		k (kʷ)	ʔ
Voiced Plosive	(b)			(g)	
Prenasalized Voiced Plosive	ᵐb	ⁿd		ᵑg	
Affricate			(tʃ)		
Fricative		s	ʃ		
Approximant	w	r	j		

The bracketed consonants in Moore's description occur much more rarely, "in words which are not obvious borrowings," such as Nheengatu /buja/ from Tupinamba /moja/ (Moore et. al. 1993:99).

Vowels

All linguists studying Nheengatu agree on the vowel phonemes present in the language. There are four vowel positions, which Cruz (2011) describes using two binary features and two unary features: [+/-high], [+/-low], [CORONAL], and [DORSAL] (Cruz 2011:54).

	[CORONAL]	[DORSAL]	
[+high, -low]	**i ĩ**		**u ũ**
[-high, -low]	**e ẽ**		
[-high, +low]		**a ã**	

This vowel system descends from the Tupinamba vowel system, which also includes /o/ and /ï/, which were lost (Moore et. al 1993:98). Moore also notes that 19th century sources on Nheengatu describe a fifth vowel, presumably /ï/ (Moore et. al. 1993:100).

Syllable Structure

Nheengatu syllable structure is (C)V(V) (Moore et. al. 1993:100), or (C)V(G/N) (Cruz 2011:62). Vowels are obligatory in a syllable, and a single consonant is optionally permitted in the onset. [-sonorant] consonants are not permitted in the coda, but nasals and glides (which according to Cruz are phonemic vowels /i/ and /u/ realized phonetically as [j] and [w] (Cruz 2011:62)) are allowed (Cruz 2011:65). Glides are only permitted in the coda when there is no syllable onset, or word-finally (Cruz 2011:62).

This syllable structure differs from Tupinamba, which allowed consonants in morpheme-final positions (Moore et. al. 1993:100).

Morphosyntax

Whereas Tupinambá had a generally free word order (Moore 2014:118) with underlying SVO (Moore et. al. 1993:106), Nheengatu is a fairly fixed SVO language, which is a feature presumably inherited from Portuguese influence (Moore 2014:118). Word order maintains a small bit of freedom through topicalization, where a noun phrase can be moved to the leftmost boundary and leave a third-person copy behind in its place.

```
(1)  [ỹãʔã yawára]_TOPIC, aʔé u-suʔú   apigáwa
     [that dog]_TOPIC       it  3SG-bite man
     'That dog, it bit the man'          (Moore 2014:131)
```

Nheengatu is typically analyzed as having eight word classes that align with European languages: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, postpositions, pronouns, demonstratives, and particulars (Moore 2014:126, Moore et. al. 1993:100, Cruz 2011:123). Within this, verbs break down into three mutually exclusive subclasses like many Tupi languages: transitive, intransitive, and stative verbs (Moore 2014:126).

Tupinambá was morphologically complex and had a high amount of agglutination, but much of the morphological complexity has been lost in Nheengatu (Moore 2014:128). A number of compound forms have been preserved in Nheengatu, however, shown below.

```
(2) N + N > N        pi-puape        'toenail'
                     foot-nail
(3) N + N > Adj      sasi-ara        'sad'
                     Pain-day
(4) V + Adj > V      kwa-katu        'think, believe'
                     Know-well
                                 (Moore 2014:128)
```

Nouns

Nouns in Nheengatu are marked for possession with a "nominal series" of pronoun prefixes, whereas verbs have a corresponding "verbal series" for inflection (Moore 2014:129). Possessive pronouns are marked as follows:

```
(5) yane-yeʔẽnga
    1PL-language
    'Our language'      (Moore et. al 1993:110)
```

Pronominal Prefixes

	Person	SG	PL
Nominal Series	1st	se-	yané-
	2nd	ne-	pe-
	3rd	i-	aẽtá-
Verbal Series	1st	a-	ya-
	2nd	re-	pe-
	3rd	u-	(aẽtá-)u-

Tupinambá distinguished between inclusive and exclusive plurals (Cruz 2015:426), but this was apparently lost in Nheengatu.

Genitives appear unmarked in Nheengatu, simply forming a possessive NP with bare nouns, with the order Genitive-Noun.

```
(6) karíwa     yeʔẽnga
    White.man language
    'White man's language'        (Moore et. al. 1993:110)
```

Plurality is marked on nouns by a suffix <-itá>, as below. This appears to be the only plural marker that Moore provides (see Moore 2014:129).

```
(7) sẽ-mbíra-itá
    1SG-child-PL
    'My children'              (Moore et. al. 1993:110)
```

Cruz (2015) proposes that the plural <-itá> and number agreement in Nheengatu developed from the Tupinambá word <etá>, meaning "many," which could be combined with nouns to explicitly express multiple entities (Cruz 2015:424). Morphologically <etá> accepted person prefixes, indicating that it is definitely an independent word, and either a noun or a stative verb. Through a process in 19th century Nheengatu where <etá> was first used for lower quantities of objects as low as two, and the inflection system in Tupinambá that <etá> patterned with was lost, the word was understood as a noun suffix and grammaticalized (Cruz 2015:425). The grammaticalization also resulted in a shift from <etá> to <itá> (Cruz 2015:425).

No analysis of Nheengatu attests to grammatical gender on nouns.

Adjectives

Nheengatu adjectives modify the noun that precedes them. Adjectives can be distinguished from nouns by the fact that they cannot accept nominal prefixes.

```
(8) se-awá-itá purãnga
    1SG-hair-PL pretty
    'My pretty hair'         (Moore et. al. 1993:110)
```

Adjectives can be attributive or predicative. Predicative adjectives take a <i-> prefix, homophonous with the nominal 3SG prefix, as a stative verb with a 3SG subject would. However, stative verbs can occur with all nominal prefixes, whereas adjectives are limited to <i-> alone (Moore et. al..

```
(9) maniáka akíra
    manioc  green
    'Green manioc'
```

```
(10) maniáka i-akíra
     manioc  PRED-green
     'The manioc is green'          (Moore et. al. 1993:101)
```

Verbs and Verbal Agreement

As discussed above, Nheengatu verbs fall into three subclasses. Transitive and intransitive verbs accept the series of verbal prefixes, and these prefixes obligatorily agree with the subject in person and number (Moore 2014:118), in a paradigm similar to Portuguese.

```
(11) marakaimbara u-yuká          kunhã
     poison        3SG.VERBAL-kill woman
     'The poison killed the woman.'      (Cruz 2011:183)
```

```
(12) ya-purasi
     1PL.VERBAL-dance
     'We dance.'                    (Cruz 2011:185)
```

While Tupinambá agreement was governed by a person hierarchy (Moore 2014:118), Cruz demonstrates that no person hierarchy exists in modern Nheengatu. The subject is necessarily the argument that will agree with the verbal prefix (Cruz 2011:184).

Stative verbs, conversely, use the nominal series of prefixes to agree with the subject in person and in number. Stative verbs all have a corresponding adjective, such *surí*, 'happy,' to correspond with *rurí*, 'to be happy,' below. However, not all adjectives have a corresponding stative verb (Moore et. al. 1993:101).

```
(13)  se-rurí
      1SG.NOMINAL-be.happy
      'I am happy.'                          (Moore et. al. 1993:101)
```

Semantics

Numerals

Modern Nheengatu uses Portuguese numerals, and retains some indigenous words for small numerals, such as *yepé* for 'one,' *mukũĩ* for 'two,' *musapa(ri)* for 'three,' and *irundi* for 'four.' Nheengatu also uses the word for 'hand,' *pu*, to represent 'five' (Cruz 2011:269, Moore 2014:127). Further numerals are generated by combining these words without any grammatical marking. *Pu yepé* means 'six,' and *pu pu mukũĩ* means 'twelve' (Cruz 2011:269). Borrowed and native numberals apparently obey the same rules in Nheengatu (Moore 2014:127).

Nheengatu numbers appear to combine with noun phrases as a "modifier that occurs inside NPs," whereas Tupinambá treated numerals as a kind of adverb (Cruz 2015:423). Cruz (2011) states that numerals obligatorily precede the noun (Cruz 2011:269), although Moore claims that numerals can occur before or after the noun (Moore 2014:127).

Numerals are able to freely combine with plural noun phrases, although Cruz describes this as a recent development in the language, as a result of the grammaticalization of *etá* from an independent verb into the *-itá* plural clitic (Cruz 2015:425). This change occurred sometime in the 19th century in the form of Nheengatu spoken along the Rio Negro.

```
(14)  ya-wasemu mukũĩ pesoa-ita
      1PL-find two person-PL
      'I found two people.'                  (Moore et. al. 1993:101)
```

Lexicon

Below is a small lexicon of some words in Nheengatu.

```
"Child,"  mbíra
"Woman,"  kunhã
"Man,"    apigáwa
"Dog,"    yawára
```

"Snake," *búya*

"Hammock," *makira*

"Banana," *pakúa*

"Food," *txĩmbiʔú*

"Blood," *tui*

"Rain," *amãna*

"Paca," *paka*

Works Cited

Almeida Navarro, E. de (2011). Curso De Língua Geral.

Anchieta, J de. 1595. *Arte de Grammatica da Lingua mais Usada na Costa do Brasil*. Coimbra: Antonio Mariz.

Angelo, C. (2016, October 31). A língua do Brasil. Retrieved July 25, 2017, from http://super.abril.com.br/cultura/a-lingua-do-brasil/

Borges, Mônica Veloso. 2006. Aspectos fonológicos e morfossintáticos do Avá-Canoeiro (Tupi-Guarani). Campinas: Tese de doutorado, UNICAMP.

Cruz, A. da (2011). *Fonologia e gramática do nheengatu: a língua geral falada pelos povos Baré, Warekena e Baniwa*. Doctoral dissertation, Tese (Doutorado em Linguística). Universidade de Amsterdã.

Cruz, A. da (2015). The rise of number agreement in Nheengatu. *Boletim do Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi. Ciências Humanas*, *10*(2), 419-439.

Figueira, L. 1621. *Arte da lingua brasilica*. Lisboa, Manoel de Silva.

Lewis, M. Paul, Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig (eds.). 2016. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World, Nineteenth edition*. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. Online version: http://www.ethnologue.com.

Magalhães, J. V. C. D. (1876). O Selvagem; Curso de Língua-Geral segundo Ollendorff. *Rio de Janeiro*.

Michaele, F. A. S. (1951). *Manual de conversação de lingua tupi: 1a. série, 20 lições* (Vol. 1). Centro Cultural "Euclides da Cunha".

Moore, D., Facundes, S., & Pires, N. (1993). Nheengatu (Língua Geral Amazônica), its history, and the effects of language contact.

Moore, D. (2014). Historical Development of Nheengatu (Língua Geral Amazônica), *Iberian imperialism and language evolution in Latin America* (108–142). University of Chicago Press.

Povos Indígenas No Brasil. Feb. 2006. Línguas gerais. Retrieved July 25, 2017, from https://pib.socioambiental.org/pt/c/no-brasil-atual/linguas/linguas-gerais

Rodrigues, J. B. (1890). *Poranduba amazonense: ou, Kochiyma-uara porandub. 1872-1887*. G. Leuzinger.

Rohter, L. (2005, August 28). Language Born of Colonialism Thrives Again in Amazon. Retrieved July 25, 2017, from

http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/28/world/americas/language-born-of-colonialism-thrives-again-in-amazon.html

Shulist, S. A. (2013). In the House of Transformation: Language Revitalization, State Regulation, and Indigenous Identity in Urban Amazonia.

Silva, P. I. R. da. 1945. *Tupi ou Nheengatu e Português — Gramática Umbueçaua Mucameençáuêra*. Manaus, Amazonas, Brazil.

Taylor, G. 1985. "Apontamentos sobre o Nheengatu falado no rio Negro, Brasil." Amérindia: revue d'ethnolinguistique amérindienne 10: 5 - 23.