



Luca Ciucci with two Chamacoco indigenous leaders



Zamucoan: Unveiling the heart of darkness of a tropical language family

“Êhe, yok sêhe tikiraha ishîr ahwoso!” replies Luca Ciucci if asked whether he can speak Chamacoco. Chamacoco is an endangered language spoken by approximately 2,000 people in the department of Northern Paraguay in Paraguay. The real name of the language is ishîr ahwoso (lit. ‘the words of the Chamacoco’) and it is one of the languages Luca Ciucci, a research associate at the Language and Culture Research Centre (LCRC), is investigating under the direction of Distinguished Professor Alexandra Aikhenvald and Professor R M W Dixon. Speaking Chamacoco is not a skill one generally puts on a CV, but here something more important is at stake: documenting the language in order to save an important part of the world cultural heritage for future generations.

Luca Ciucci’s passion for languages began under the Tuscan sun, close to the leaning tower of Pisa in Italy. Until two millennia ago, the language spoken there was Etruscan, now regarded as a mysterious language owing to the loss of most of its historical documentation. “Actually, I would like to know something more about the language of my ancestors” admits Luca. In the case of Etruscans, the loss of the language made it impossible to answer the question on who they were and where they came from, but the same could happen to a myriad of underdescribed languages in the world, particularly in the tropics.

Indeed, Chamacoco has a long history. It belongs to the Zamucoan family, along with Ayoreo, another endangered language, and Old Zamuco, already extinct. Before these three languages split some millennia ago, these populations used to speak what we call Proto-Zamucoan, which Luca is reconstructing at JCU. This is revealing a quantity of interactions between Zamucoan people and other surrounding populations, interactions which were believed to have left no trace and so far have never been noted in any genetic study. When Luca left Pisa to spend some time living

with a family of Chamacoco speakers, this language and its family were still black spots on which there was little reliable linguistic information. At that time, he did not know about Cairns or the Great Barrier Reef, but he did know about the Language and Culture Research Centre which is an important reference point for linguistics all over the world. (“For many people studying humanities, linguistics the first thing they associated with Cairns, but curiously local people seem to be unaware of this” he comments).

(Continued on page 6)



Chamacoco ritual mask



Fieldwork with a Chamacoco speaker



Zamucoan cont.

(Continued from page 5)

During the Pisan period, Luca also did fieldwork with the Ayoreo, one of the last populations in South America to abandon their traditional way of life, under the supervision of Professor Pier Marco Bertinotto. Such an exploration led to unexpected results: in the Zamucoan family a number of rare linguistic features have emerged, for instance, the system of suffixes used on nouns and adjectives is something which has never been described for any other languages of the world and is a unique characteristic of this language family. Another interesting feature is that these languages have no grammatical tense. The way Chamacoco express temporal information despite the lack of tense has fascinated one of the greatest contemporary Italian writers, Claudio Magris, candidate for the Nobel prize in literature, who refers to Ciucci's grammatical studies on Chamacoco in his last novel.

In the meantime, Luca's first book, *Inflectional morphology in the Zamucoan languages*, considered the most detailed morphological description of a South American language family, has just appeared (CEADUC). Here Luca analyses the internal structure of words—what could be considered the DNA of the language. This will also serve to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between Zamucoan and the languages of the other neighbouring populations, some of which were met by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the travels recounted in his masterpiece *Tristes Tropique*. At the same time, fieldwork is also associated with the philological study of old documents collected by missionaries in the past centuries, in order to analyse language evolution. Curiously, when Western people first had contact with Zamucoan groups in the 17th and 18th century, Australia was indicated in the maps as Terra Australis Incognita, the unknown southern land. Now JCU is playing a major role in contributing to remove the word 'unknown' from our linguistic maps.

There are still features of Chamacoco and Ayoreo which are waiting for a scientifically-oriented linguistic description: the ultimate goal is writing a descriptive grammar of these languages, but more importantly, describing a language and its development goes much beyond collecting and analysing data: it is giving back to many populations the dignity and the self-confidence that for a long time has often been denied in the name of pseudo-scientific prejudices. Such cultural emancipation has important consequences in education, in the general attitude towards language minorities and diversity, so that in the long term it has the potential to greatly improve the quality of life of entire nations.

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Luca Ciucci with Ayoreo people