

A Report on the Irantxe and Myky

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Abstract

Myky and Irantxe are varieties of the same language, and both go by the Ethnologue code [irn]. Their area is in northwestern Mato Grosso, Brazil, near the jump-off town of Brasnorte, which both groups visit frequently.

The Irantxe were contacted early in the twentieth century. Due to warfare with the Rikbaktsa, they moved to a South American Mission (SAM) center east of their homeland and intermarried with various other tribes. As a result, today most of the 250 Irantxe are monolingual in Portuguese.

Due to the same pressures the Myky, a branch of the Irantxe, moved to the north and remained isolated until 1971. Although the Myky have intermarried with the Irantxe and other tribes, they still speak their own language. There are eighty-eight people in Myky village, but they are not all Myky. The non-Myky people in the village appear to be dominant in Portuguese. The NGO Operação Amazônia Nativa (OPAN) is involved with the Irantxe and Myky, but lately their influence seems to be waning. OPAN has encouraged the Myky to continue their traditional rituals, something the Irantxe have largely given up.

The Irantxe are largely literate in Portuguese. The Myky are almost totally illiterate.

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Irantxe

Myky

1.0 Introduction and purpose

From May 24 to 31, 2003, Stan Anonby, Humberto Terena, and Isaque Parecis traveled to the northwestern Mato Grosso state in Brazil. The purpose of this survey was to investigate the sociolinguistic vitality of the groups in the area, and their linguistic proximity to other language groups. This report deals with two of these groups, (1) the Irantxe (also known as Iranxe, Iranche, Manoki, and Munku), and (2) the Myky (also known as Munku, Mynky, Menku, Kenku, Münkü, and Myy). The Ethnologue code for both groups is [ira].

2.0 Geographic location of Irantxe and Myky



General location of Irantxe and Myky

The Irantxe region is at the headwaters of the Cravari River, which flows into the Sangue River, a tributary of the Jurueña in northwestern Mato Grosso. The vegetation is mostly scrub forest, with some gallery forest along the rivers. The reserve itself occupies an area of 45,555 hectares (Povos Indígenas 2000:609), and is almost completely surrounded by farms. The six Irantxe villages are near the highway, 100 kilometers south of Brasnorte, a city of around 10,000. The Myky region is on the Papagaio River, in an area of thicker forest. The reserve itself occupies an area of 47,094 hectares (Povos Indígenas 2000:609), and like the Irantxe, is surrounded by farms. The single Myky village is about fifty kilometers west of Brasnorte, on a good dirt road.

3.0 Previous Scholarship

Marechal Rondon, in his “Lectures” (1910), referred to the Irantxe and located their territory in central Brazil. Roquette-Pinto (1935), Max Schmidt (1928, 1942), João Dornstaudter (1976), Moura (1960), Pereira (1965:105), and Métraux (1942:161) all mentioned the Irantxe living in the same area. In his research in 1992, Pivetta reconstructed a list of twenty-two ancient villages

located between the Cravari River and the Sangue River. The history of the first contacts with the Myky was told by Father Thomás de Aquino Lisbôa, in the book *Entre os Índios Münkü: A Resistência de um Povo*, published in 1979 (Arruda 2003). In 2003, Rinaldo S.V. Arruda of the Catholic Pontifical University in São Paulo published an article describing the history in the online *Enciclopedia Povos Indígenas no Brasil*.

4.0 History of People

Originally, the Irantxe lived between the Sangue and Cravari rivers. Their first contact with non-Indians was with rubber tappers led by Domingos Pinto around 1900, which led to a massacre of almost an entire Irantxe village. Later on, they began experiencing attacks from two Indian tribes, the Tapayuna and the Rikbaktsa. Largely because of these attacks, the Irantxe began moving west to the South American Mission (SAM) center at Utiarity, which operated between 1937 and 1957. Utiarity is remembered today primarily as a Catholic boarding school. In 1968, the Irantxe were moved to a reservation on the west side of the Cravari River, outside of their traditional area. They did not want to move back to their original area because they were still afraid of attacks by the Rikbaktsa and Tapayuna. From 1970 to the 1980s, the area surrounding the Irantxe reserve became occupied by farmers, and most Irantxe stopped their traditional lifestyle of hunting, fishing, and slash-and-burn agriculture.

The Myky were first spotted by ranchers near the Papagaio River in the late 1960s and they were contacted in 1971 by Jesuit missionaries and two Irantxe. The initial contact was friendly, with the Myky and Irantxe striking up a lively conversation (Arruda 2003). The Myky had split off from the Irantxe near the beginning of the 20th century, fleeing from attacks by the Rikbaktsa (OPAN 2001). By 1971 they were living about 130 kilometers northwest of the Irantxe. Since the area surrounding the Myky was rapidly being cleared for agriculture, an area was set aside as Myky reserve in 1974. The Myky continue to hunt, fish, and practice traditional farming.

5.0 Social factors relevant to the sociolinguistic environment

5.1 Economics

According to the survey made by the Operação Amazônia Nativa (OPAN) in 2000, most of the money that circulates in the Irantxe villages comes from retirement pensions and, to a lesser extent, salaries earned as teachers and health agents. Another source of income comes from the men who work on the surrounding farms and ranches. Some Irantxe make handicrafts that they sell when they visit the city. They also sell a small amount of manioc flour and honey (Arruda 2003). We were told that no one had been involved in traditional slash-and-burn agriculture for about fifteen years, coinciding with the time people began receiving retirement pensions. There is little hunting and fishing activity, partially because the land is poor and the rivers are far away.

Unlike the Irantxe, the Myky maintain large traditional fields of manioc, corn, beans, yams, and peanuts (Arruda 2003). They also collect wild fruit and nuts, and keep honeybees. Although the Myky still hunt and fish with shotguns and bows and arrows, fish and game are not as plentiful as they used to be (Povos Indígenas 618). When we arrived in the village, the Myky thought we were lumbermen, and welcomed us enthusiastically. It seems then that a portion of their income comes from logging.

5.2 Population distribution

There were estimated to be over one thousand Irantxe living in twenty-seven villages before first contact. Due to wars and diseases, the number decreased to fifty by 1970. Today, the number has risen five fold to 250, largely due to intermarriage with other tribes. The Irantxe live in six villages, whose population breaks down as follows: Paredao (60), Recanto do Alipio (12), Perdiz (26), Asa Branca (24), Cravari (119), and Treze de Maio (9) (Busatto 2000:619). There are also a few Irantxe families living on ranches and in villages belonging to other tribes.

When the Myky were contacted in 1971, they numbered only 22 people (Diario de Cuiaba 13/14/97 in Povos Indigenas 2000:618) broken up into four families (Arruda 2003). Partially due to intermarriage, their population has steadily increased, and now there are eighty-eight people living in the Myky village.

5.3 Religion

The Irantxe have by and large ceased practicing many of their ancient customs and religion. For instance, their last initiation ceremony took place around 1995 (Arruda 2003). Most Irantxe are Catholic, and a priest visits Cravari village occasionally. There is also at least one family that is Pentecostal. The Myky still perform their old rituals (Arruda 2003).

5.4 Politics

The Myky area, and to a lesser extent the Irantxe, has been carefully monitored by OPAN personnel.

5.5 Education

There are two dilapidated schools on the Irantxe reserve. One of them is not operating and the other has only four students. The rest of the families have opted to have their study in Posto Mundo Novo, where they attend a regular Brazilian school. These families wake up at dawn and have their children bussed a great distance to school every day. Amanas, an Irantxe teacher, expressed a keen interest in getting primers and a bilingual professor for the purpose of reviving the language. He became particularly interested in this when he learned I represented SIL.

There is a fine school building on the Myky reserve. There is a primer developed by Ruth Monserrat, a linguist who worked in the area. To see how well they could read and write Myky, I asked people in the village to write a couple of sentences in their language. As an example, I wrote a bit in Kwak'waka, an Indian language from Canada, and explained to them what it meant. Two boys around thirteen years old, who seemed to be the experts, came up with a few words in Myky, written slowly and verbatim from their primer. When I asked other Myky to read what the boys had written, they weren't able to. I also asked people to write a couple of sentences in Portuguese, but they said they could not read or write at all in that language.

6.0 Linguistics

The Ethnologue states that Irantxe and Myky belong to the Arawakan family of languages, and to the subgroup of Southern Maipuran (Grimes 2000). Arruda disagrees with the Arawakan classification and classifies them as language isolates (2003).

The Irantxe told us there are slight differences between their speech and that of the Myky. The Irantxe have only an old primer developed by a priest who worked in the area years ago. The Myky have not accepted this primer, and asked Ruth Monserrat to help them make one of their own. The differences appear to be minor, affecting a handful of vowels and consonants, and the Irantxe and Myky are able to communicate freely.

7.0 Social Relations

7.1 Interaction with Portuguese-speaking Brazilians

The Irantxe have almost constant contact with their Brazilian neighbors. Most children attend a Brazilian school and many men work on the large surrounding farms. They maintain a group house in Brasnorte, where they stay during their visits. The Myky community has a truck and driver's license, and many come to Brasnorte about once a week to visit, shop, and sell their handicrafts. An Irantxe living with the Myky complained that they wanted to put up a barrier on the road to keep the young people from going to town so frequently. Both the Myky and the Irantxe are well liked by the people of Brasnorte.

7.2 Interaction with Other Indians

In the 1950s while they were living in Utiarity, there were twice as many Irantxe men as women. As a result, the men began to marry women from the Parecis [pab] and Nambiquara [nab] tribes. Today most Irantxe are a mixture of various tribes, including Parecis, Nambiquara, Rikbaktsa [rkb], Kayabi [kyz], Cinta Larga [cin], and others (Busatto 2000:618).

Every Myky household we visited had at least one non-Myky member living there. Most were Irantxe, but there were also Rikbaktsa and Terena. Since there is so much intermarriage, the Irantxe visit the Myky regularly, in Brasnorte and in their village. Their relationship is cordial, and the Irantxe seem to respect the Myky for having preserved their language and aspects of their ancient way of life. However, the Irantxe seem to be introducing Portuguese into the Myky homes.

8.0 Bilingualism

All speakers of Irantxe appear to be fluent in Portuguese. Some elderly Myky and some young Myky children appear to speak very poor Portuguese, but the rest of the community seem quite bilingual.

9.0 Language attitudes

Some Irantxe we spoke to were very positive about their language. However, only the teacher expressed a keen interest in getting primers for the purpose of reviving the language. On the whole, we got the feeling the Irantxe are concerned about the loss of their language and admire the Myky for having preserved theirs.

Although the language is stronger among the Myky, the attitudes are not as positive. We were told the young people would rather have schooling in Portuguese, and do not consider the Myky language to be important. It does not appear that the Irantxe's loss of their language has had any effect on the Myky's language attitudes.

As has been observed elsewhere, this apparent paradox seems to be the norm in Brazil. The stronger the language is, the less interest there is in preserving it. When language use decreases beyond revival, there is a surge of interest in it.

10.0 Language vitality

Due primarily to the high incidence of cross-tribal marriages, most Irantxe under 50 years old are monolingual in Portuguese. Also, speakers of Irantxe are isolated from each other and generally have little opportunity to use the language.

The language vitality among the Myky is much stronger. Most villagers, including the children, appear to be more comfortable speaking Myky than Portuguese. The non-Myky living in the village are monolingual in Portuguese. This seems to indicate there is a high level of bilingualism among the Myky.

11.0 Anthropological Observations

A SAM missionary to Utiarity in the 1950s noted that the Irantxe were quite enthusiastic about assimilating to the Brazilian culture. He noted how quickly they took on clothing, dark trousers, white shirts, greased hair, and learned Portuguese. The missionary commented that the Irantxe were the most acculturated of the Indians at Utiarity, and looked down on the others as uncouth.

At the time of contact, both the Myky and the Irantxe lived in longhouses. Each nuclear family had its own space delimited by hammocks, stone axes, gourds, pots, and food baskets, as well as by a suspended platform where meat or smoked fish and the circles of manioc bread were kept (Arruda 2003; OPAN 2001). Today, individual Irantxe families live in simple Brazilian-style wood houses spread out in a haphazard manner throughout their village. The Myky live in houses quite similar to the Irantxe, the main difference being a greater proportion of Myky houses have roofs of palm leaves.

Compared to the Myky, many of the Irantxe we saw were overweight, possibly because their lifestyle is more sedentary. The elders of both communities complained that the young people drank too much, although with the Myky the drinking seemed to be confined to trips to Brasnorte.

12.0 Recommendations

Given the low number of people who speak Irantxe, efforts for the literacy development of Irantxe would likely not succeed. There are more people who speak Myky, and some of them are younger. However, there is a great deal of intermarriage and there is little interest in the continued use or preservation of the language. Therefore, it is unlikely that literacy development of the Myky language would have any success. Due to the low level of literacy among the Myky and their low population, an oral approach should likely be attempted first. Possibly the best strategy would be for someone to provide training for the Irantxe so they know how to better communicate to the Myky then concepts of the outside world using Portuguese in a culturally-sensitive way. They can then help the Myky and Irantxe internalize the information.

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