

# The Intergenerational Perception of the Causes and Effects of Language Loss in the Pijao Community of Natagaima, Colombia

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## **Abstract**

The Pijao language was lost sometime during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and exactly how the language was lost has yet to be discerned. Using data from an investigation that examined perceptions of the causes and effects of the Pijao linguistic genocide among focus groups of different ages in the Pijao community at Natagaima, Tolima, this article examines two themes that came out of the focus groups – how the language was lost and how the community has suffered since the loss of the Pijao language. The results show how loss of their native language has disadvantaged the Pijao as a result of pervasive linguistic essentialist attitudes pervasive in the country. At the national level, the Pijao have problems in terms of recognition from other indigenous groups, with many refusing to recognize the indigeneity of the Pijao on the grounds of lack of language, and at a local level with mestizos arguing the same. Additionally, the author offers a tentative hypothesis for the loss of the Pijao language in the south of Tolima – that the creation of indigenous reserves may have hastened the loss of the language.

**Key words:** linguistic genocide; ethnolinguistic identity; indigenous identity; Pijao.

## Resumen

### **La percepción intergeneracional de las causas y los efectos de la pérdida de la lengua Pijao en la comunidad Pijao de Natagaima, Colombia**

La lengua pijao se perdió en algún momento durante la última mitad del siglo XX y aún no se ha discernido cómo se perdió. Usando datos de una investigación que examinó las percepciones de las causas y efectos del lingüicidio del pijao, entre grupos de enfoque de diferentes edades en la comunidad pijao en Natagaima, Tolima, este artículo examina dos temas que surgieron de los grupos focales: cómo se perdió la lengua y cómo la comunidad ha sufrido desde su pérdida. Los resultados muestran cómo la pérdida de su lengua materna ha perjudicado al pijao como resultado de las penetrantes actitudes lingüísticas esencialistas que prevalecen en el país. A nivel nacional, los pijao tienen problemas en términos de reconocimiento por parte de otros grupos indígenas, muchos se niegan a reconocer la indigenidad del pijao por razones de falta de una lengua propia y, a nivel local, con mestizos que argumentan lo mismo. Además, el autor ofrece como hipótesis tentativa para la pérdida de la lengua pijao en el sur de Tolima el hecho de que la creación de reservas indígenas puede haber acelerado la pérdida del idioma.

**Palabras clave:** lingüicidio; genocidio lingüístico; identidad etnolingüística; identidad indígena; pijao.

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## Résumé

### **Perception intergénérationnelle des causes et effets de la perte de la langue Pijao dans une communauté de Natagaima, Colombie**

La langue Pijao a été perdue au cours de la dernière moitié du 20ème siècle. La cause de cette perte n'a toujours pas été l'objet d'une discussion. En se servant des données d'une enquête qui cherchait à examiner les perceptions des causes et des effets du linguicide Pijao parmi des groupes de discussion de différents âges dans la communauté de Pijao à Natagaima, Tolima, cet article analyse deux thèmes issus des groupes de discussion - comment la langue a été perdue et comment la communauté a souffert depuis la perte de la langue Pijao. Les résultats montrent que la perte de leur langue maternelle a désavantagé le Pijao en raison des attitudes essentialistes linguistiques omniprésentes dans le pays. Au niveau national, les Pijao ont des problèmes de reconnaissance par d'autres groupes indigènes, beaucoup parmi eux refusant de reconnaître l'indigénéité du Pijao pour des raisons de manque de langage, et au niveau local avec des métis affirmant la même chose. De plus, l'auteur propose une hypothèse provisoire pour la perte de la langue Pijao dans le sud du Tolima – d'après lui, la création de réserves indigènes a pu accélérer la perte de la langue.

**Mots-clés:** linguicide ; le génocide linguistique ; identité ethnolinguistique<sup>1</sup> ; identité indigène ; Pijao.

## INTRODUCTION

Language loss is an important issue for modern day linguists and no single reason has yet to be identified - language loss, while always occurring, occurs in different places in different ways and at different rates (Crystal, 2000). It is not a phenomenon restricted to smaller, less powerful languages either, as even large powerful languages are no longer spoken e.g. Classical Latin and Sanskrit (Mufwene, 2006). Key reasons among the many include the need for people to adjust to new linguistic environments for economic reasons, the influence of media, educational pressures and government imposition (Crystal, 2000). In all cases, there is a crucial argument as to the degree of agency that the community has in the loss of its language. Ladefoged (1992) asserts that languages and varieties disappear and surge frequently with speakers adapting to conditions that favor them. However, Dorian (1993) in a direct response to Ladefoged, argues that groups that lose or give up their language are more than likely to be disadvantaged and thus unlikely to be real agents in terms of language choice. Dorian also notes that the effects of language choice are often felt in later generations which feel the ethnolinguistic loss with regret or resentment, thus indicating that even if there is immediate benefit to one generation, the ethnicity as a whole suffers from the loss. It is important to note, however, that, while language loss is generally analyzed in terms of government action, the causes may often be different – urbanization, deforestation, desertification and epidemics can force populations to move and integrate with other populations with different languages (Krauss, 1992).

In mainstream Colombia, the Pijao are often depicted as an extinct nation of river-faring goldsmiths who waged a relentless war against the Spaniards. However, this is not entirely the case - the Pijao still are very much alive and while they may not command their territory as they once did, they still live in the arid south of the central Colombian department of Tolima. The majority of the surviving Pijao live in the lower center-south east of Tolima in a vastly reduced territory compared to the one they once commanded that was divided into the highland Pijao and the lowland Pijao. Today only the lowland Pijao survive and number slightly under 59,000 within 205 registered communities (Ministerio del Interior, 2013) and like many other Colombian ethnicities, have completely lost their language (Simons & Fennig, 2018). The Pijao lost their language relatively

recently with the last speakers being heard in the 1950s (Simons & Fennig). The Pijao were targeted, like all other Colombian indigenous groups, in the Colombian Constitution (1886) which decreed the unification of race, religion and language to be executed in all of the country. To enforce this, it empowered the military and the church to crush indigenous languages and practices, and to replace them with Spanish and Catholicism (Areiza, 2010; Pineda-Camacho, 2005). This campaign led to the forced peasant lifestyle of the Pijao and placed them in conflict with power brokers who used the laws to take land for themselves. However, the Pijao fought against this constitution, its anti-indigenous campaign and for their land which was being colonized at an alarming rate and as a result, obtained the first indigenous reserves in the country (Ministerio del Interior, 2013; Universidad del Tolima, 2010). However, the reserves, before the new constitution of 1991, were not exempt from the linguicidal nature of the 1886 constitution – and those close to urban centers were censored in terms of language. The result of which was that come 1950, Pijao only had a handful of L1 speakers remaining and by 1960 none could be found (Durbin & Seijas, 1973). The language had been successfully killed by the Colombian government.

## LITERATURE REVIEW: LANGUAGE, INDIGENEITY AND LINGUICIDE

Indigeneity tends to be difficult to define as there exists friction between self-recognition, academic recognition, and institutional recognition (Corntassel, 2003). Self-recognition boasts a wildly varying set of criteria, depending on the group in question. For the Yaguará of Colombia, indigeneity means descent from the first inhabitants (González-Vélez, 2011), whereas for the Xocó of Brazil indigeneity doesn't require descent but the practice of traditional customs (Hoffman-French, 2004). In contrast, the Camëntsá (also of Colombia) require territory, traditional memory, and authorities, the practice of traditional customs, and social parameters governing social behaviors and graces (Jamioy, 2005). Academic recognition bases indigenous identity on cultures with pre-colonial traditions (Wilmer, 1993), descent from the original inhabitants (Alfred & Wilmer, 1997), certain roots in a territory (Anaya, 1996), and resistance to colonial identity and practices (Green, 2009). Finally, institutional recognition runs the spectrum from ambiguous definitions of the United Nations (2007, 2014) to extremely strict guidelines established by the World Bank Group (2001) governing income type, lifestyle, beliefs, institutions, territories, and language. Interestingly, although the Colombian government abides by the UN definition of indigeneity, it lacks a legal definition of its own. The absence of indigenous language from most official criteria (including the

Colombian definition) for indigeneity comes into direct conflict with the views of many indigenous peoples. Gregory (1995) writes how the use of a non-native language (in his case English) as a Native American serves as a constant reminder of the conquest and loss of his traditional culture. Jamioy (2005) states that without an indigenous language one cannot truly claim the identity of an indigenous person. Tökölyová (2009) also agrees, stating that the loss of the Māori language was one of the most important steps in their loss of identity as a people. Finally, Shaw (2001) writes that many First Nation people feel as though they are 'nobodies' without their own language and that as a result of not having their own language they are unable to claim a real title for themselves.

The loss of indigenous languages among indigenes is often the result of linguicide (Zwisler, 2017). Research into linguicide using the term linguicide is limited since, as previously mentioned, the term 'Linguistic Genocide' is generally used. Linguistic genocide is rightly identified as an act of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1997) - an act by a dominant force to impose its language at the cost of the other. The erasing of a language has as its purpose the eradication of culture, resistance, and group identity. This can be performed overtly and covertly - overt linguicide being where all use of the language is prohibited, and covert linguicide being where, even though the language is not explicitly prohibited, the use of another language in education or media results in unstable diglossia and language shift. Groups that have suffered overt linguicide feel a range of negative emotions ranging from anger at colonists and a deep disconnection from society (Gregory, 1995), to a sense of emptiness (Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010) to a sense of cultural regret (Delgado-Olson, 2014). While language revitalization is often the key step for groups that have experienced covert linguicide (Reyhner, 2010), groups that have experienced overt linguicide will often have no written record of their language nor any spoken record. What do such groups do? This is the case of the Pijao - their language was prohibited in totality and no grammatical record of the language was ever made.

In terms of the Pijao language itself, very little knowledge is concrete as the language was last heard publicly spoken in the 1950s (Durbin & Seijas, 1973; Simons & Fennig, 2018) and very few sources about the language remain. This lack of sources has resulted in contradicting claims about Pijao. The language has been classified as three different languages (Pijao, Coyaima, Natagaima) (by Contraloría, 2012; Lucena-Salmoral, 1963 and Simons & Fennig, 2018) while other sources describe it as one language (Ramírez-Sendoya, 1952; Loukotka, 1963; and Durbin & Seijas, 1973). In terms of its linguistic family, several place it in the Carib family (Loukotka, 1963; González & Rodríguez, 2000; Ramírez-Poloche, 2012; Simons &

Fennig, 2018), while others have preferred to keep it unclassified (Durbin & Seijas, 1973). At the moment of this project, the only source of Pijao words was an unreliable dictionary of indigenous words from Tolima (the Ramírez-Sendoya, 1952) which cannot be separated into their languages of origin (be it Panche, Pijao or Pantagora), thus rendering it a useless source, and a list of 30 words from Loukotka (1963). To further the loss of the language, there is also no record of the morpho-syntax of the language, thus rendering rescue of the language impossible.

While the constitution of 1991 recognized indigenous languages and Law 1381 (Ministerio del Interior, 2010) sought to further protect them, this all came too late for the Pijao language – the language had disappeared 50 years beforehand. The loss of Pijao has yet to be studied in depth. Legally, this can be considered the result of the 1886 constitution, which ordered the destruction and prohibition of indigenous languages in all 'civilized areas' in an effort to unify the country under race, religion and language – which for the Pijao language, this constitution meant destruction at the hands of the church and military. However, there have always been a plethora of factors in Tolima that could have hastened the loss of the language (e.g. the era of '*La violencia*', *guerillas*, etc) and no study has yet to examine the causes through the voice of the community itself.

## METHODOLOGY

### Design

To understand the dynamics of generational indigeneity and language use, this study examined the opinions and experiences of 4 generations of Pijao collected in the municipality of Natagaima, Tolima. Natagaima was chosen as, among the various municipalities of Tolima, it is probably the most famous for its reserves (governmentally recognized semi-autonomous areas of land under indigenous control), is the most removed from the capital cities and was the center of Pijao culture.

It was decided that focus groups would be the strongest approach as the group dynamic may provoke ideas and comments that an interview or survey may not have produced. It was also decided that each group would contain 6 people (3 men, 3 women) so that the groups were not too small to provide a variety of answers but not too big as to make communication cumbersome. To get a grasp of generational differences since the linguicide, the generations were divided into the age groups 18-35, 36-50, 51-65, 65+. The age groups were divided thus based on the

idea that the 65+ group would have known of or had contact with the language speakers present in the 1950s, the 51-65 most likely would not have and would be the first or second generation without the language. The succeeding age groups would never have had access to a fluent speaker or text.

With that decided, three basic lines of questioning were created to explore language loss and indigeneity. These were:

1. Indigenous identity.
2. Language loss and identity.
3. Is having an indigenous language important to being indigenous?

### **Recruiting**

The prospective project was first presented to the Senior Council of the Regional Council of Indigenous Peoples of Tolima (CRIT). Upon their approval of the project, a second meeting was made in Natagaima in the reserve of Anchique to explain the project to the leaders of the reserves in the municipality of Natagaima and to ask them to provide volunteers for the different age groups. Given that I would be working with self-identified indigenes, I asked for no more criteria than reserve membership and the willingness to volunteer. Once this was explained and volunteers obtained, dates were set for the different focus groups. Note that although different locations were set for the focus groups, all are within Natagaima and the changes were due to the unavailability of a single venue for all dates. The dates and locations for the focus groups can be seen below in Table 1 below.

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**Table 1.** Focus group dates and locations

<b>Date</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b>Location</b>
July 6, 2015	65 +	Bateas
July 10, 2015	18 - 35	Anchique
July 11, 2015	51 - 65	Nanurno
July 11, 2015	36 - 50	Yacomolana

### **Conducting the focus groups**

The focus groups were conducted by meeting with the volunteers and first explaining the project to them. The participants were then given explanation forms and asked to read carefully before signing a consent. After responding to any questions or doubts, the conversations began. A recording was made of a group

conversation about the three themes.

Once the focus groups were conducted (each taking between 1.5 – 2.5 hours), the recordings were transcribed – replacing names with number codes and thus ensuring that the identities of the participants were protected. Two types of transcription were made - a technical transcription that would form the base for data manipulation and a simplified transcription which would be shown to the participants. Once the transcriptions were complete, I then traveled again to Natagaima (on the 25<sup>th</sup> of July) and showed a copy to the volunteers so that they could revise it and approve their continued participation.

### **Data Coding and Interpretation**

Once permission was granted to continue using the transcriptions, the technical transcription was coded. The coding was performed by first dividing the dialogue into spoken segments and then analyzing the text for segments that contained information about one or more of the three central themes. These segments were then coded by group and theme. Coded segments were then either compared or contrasted to find the intra- and inter-generational patterns regarding indigeneity, language loss and identity, and current language use.

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## **RESULTS: THE EXPERIENCES OF THE PIJAO IN NATAGAIMA**

The focus groups provided interesting insights into the nature of the Pijao language loss, indigenous identity in general, indigenous identity maintenance and the role of indigenous language in the production of indigenous identity. While answers within the groups were not always unanimous, a clear trend does appear – the loss of the Pijao language was the result of government action, indigenous language is important for indigenous identity and in absence of the indigenous language, other linguistic means are used to create a separate identity. Thus, Pijao indigenous identity was not lost through language loss, though it was affected. Table 2 below shows the generalized results from the focus groups.

**Table 2.** Generalized results

Line of Questioning	Main Findings
Language Loss and indigeneity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Older age groups indicated a strong link to speaking an indigenous language and being indigenous.</li> <li>• Older age groups indicate strong desire to recuperate language and leave Spanish.</li> <li>• Intermediate age groups show a desire to learn language as a means of strengthening indigenous identity.</li> <li>• Intermediate age groups express a sense of being incomplete without the Pijao language.</li> <li>• Intermediate age groups ask another group to 'borrow' their language, which was denied.</li> <li>• Indigenes that work other groups indicate being stigmatised as 'white' by other groups due to lack of language.</li> </ul>
Linguicide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Older age groups indicate that the army enforced linguicide.</li> <li>• Older age groups indicate that language use was punished.</li> <li>• It is hinted that some elders may have substantial knowledge of Pijao but refuse to speak due to trauma with the past.</li> <li>• Younger age groups indicate that while government was the principal actor, the older generation should have maintained secret language use.</li> </ul>
Current Language Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants note that they have stronger Spanish intonation than mestizo speakers.</li> <li>• No elision of final [s] typical in local dialects.</li> <li>• Use of Spanish address terms reserved solely for indigenes.</li> <li>• Older age groups incorporate Pijao words into their Spanish where possible.</li> <li>• Younger age groups have fewer Pijao words.</li> <li>• Younger age groups express desire to strengthen ethnolect.</li> <li>• General expression of the need to increase the prestige of Pijao words.</li> </ul>

Note that for an in depth analysis of current language use in the Pijao of Natagaima, see Zwisler (2018).

## Language and indigeneity

The first step in the focus groups was to gauge the Pijao's view of indigeneity and language. There was a general trend towards weaker views of indigeneity. The older age groups mentioned ceremony, direct descent from community, maintenance of territory, and cultural knowledge, whereas the youngest group mentioned that only descent and staying in the territory were important. In terms of whether or not it is important for indigenous people to have an indigenous language in order to be considered indigenous, every member of the 65+ and 51-65 focus groups emphatically answered 'yes' and then reiterated the importance of having a native language during the conversations that followed:<sup>1</sup>

*Pues es una, es una cuestión de, es una cuestión de la identidad de nuestro pueblo. Si nosotros no perdiéramos nuestra lengua como tal, la lengua, nos vería de una forma diferente. Pero no lo tenemos y por eso, nos ven de otra manera.*<sup>2</sup>

(Male participant, 51-65 years)

Members of the third generation expressed not only that language was important but that without language, indigenous identity is incomplete - however not everyone agreed: one member of the group responded with an unsure no; however, pressure within the group restricted further answering from her. While group pressure prevented further insight into this dissent, the expression of this dissent showed that in this group, the importance of language had begun to fade.

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*Si sacas una partecita, ya no somos completos. Los Pijaos somos indígenas, pero nos falta eso (la lenga Pijao) para ser completamente, netamente indígenas.*<sup>3</sup>

(Male participant, 36-50 years)

In fact, members of the third generation went as far as to say that they had asked another indigenous group if they could use their language (the Nasa). Their request was denied, however, as the Nasa maintained that their language was part

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1 The participant quotes appear exactly as they were produced in the data – without modifications or corrections.

2 Well it is a, it is a question of, a question of our people's identity. If we hadn't lost our language as such, the language, we would be seen differently. But we don't have it and that's why we are seen differently (translation by the author).

3 If you take out a small part, then we are not complete. The Pijaos are indigenous but we lack that (the Pijao language) to be completely, wholly indigenous (translation by the author).

of their unique identity and that could not be shared. What we can see from this is that those members of this generation who do believe in the importance of having a native language are willing to learn other Colombian languages to replace Spanish so that they can keep being indigenous in the eyes of others.

*Nosotros de (OMITTED) si reunimos un conjunto de trabajo con el consejo para ver si no era posible recuperar la lengua, que nos acogeríamos un dialecto de otros que tenemos a nivel del departamento. Queríamos que el dialecto Páez, lo, lo, lo asumiéramos nosotros los Pijaos. Si somos capaces de aprender el inglés que nos imponen en las escuelas, hombre ¿cómo no vamos a ser capaces de aprender un dialecto que tenemos aquí en el mismo departamento? Eso fue una propuesta que estábamos mirando pero al fin quedamos en unas conversaciones con los Páeces y estaban como que sí que no. Lo que pasa con ellos es la connotación religi-, la connotación espiritual que tiene ellos. Es que cada dialecto tiene una connotación espiritual.<sup>4</sup>*

(Female participant, 36-50 years)

230 After this struggle to find a language of their own in the third generation, a strong difference can be seen in the next generation. When asked the same question, the youngest group answered with straight no's. Language, they attested, was not a requisite for being indigenous; it would be nice to have one but it is not important. This sharp decrease in the importance of language in those born at least 40 years after language death was predicted by those in older generations, who noted that younger generations were showing less and less interest in the customs and language of their ethnicity.

The groups were then asked whether language revitalization would be important and what effect a recovered language would have on the Pijao. This line of questioning also showed generational differences. The older generations (65+, 51-65) expressed that it was a necessity - that language recuperation should be a priority for the Pijao. The third generation expressed doubts as to whether it would

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<sup>4</sup> We from (OMITTED) did form a working committee with the council to see whether, were it not possible to recover the language, we would take a dialect from another group that we have at departmental level. We wanted the Paéz dialect, that, that, that we assume it as Pijaos. If we are able to learn English, which is imposed on us at school, man – how are we not going to be capable of learning a dialect that we have here in the same department? It was a proposal that we were examining but at the end we agreed on conversations with the Páeces and they said yes and no. What happened is that with them, there is a relig- spiritual connotation that they have. Each dialect has a spiritual connotation (translation by the author).

be possible to recover the language but said that it should be done as it would allow them to recover their identity as indigenous people:

*Sería importante porque ya nosotros no usaríamos el español. Ya se dedica a los nativos. A recuperar toda la parte cultural y enseñar a nuestros hijos y a todos que vienen cómo es que se tiene que comportar con el dialecto Pijao.*<sup>5</sup>

(Male, 51-65 years)

*Recuperaría la identidad, que lo más básico en el resguardo. Qué es recuperar la identidad como cabildo, como resguardo, como lo que nos identifica como indígena.*<sup>6</sup>

(Female, 36-50 years)

The generational trend continued into the youngest group who did not show the same fervor for language restoration as the older groups and merely responded that it would be a good idea. One member of this group did, however, remark that language loss is responsible for the loss of customs among the Pijao and therefore may be behind this decay in criteria for indigeneity.

*De pronto ha ido perdiendo las costumbres por no poder hablar esa lengua.*<sup>7</sup>

(Female participant, 18-35 years)

The desire to recover an indigenous language is deeply entrenched in the idea that indigenous language is a strong part of being indigenous and is supported by questioning about how the language loss made them feel both as a group and individually. While the youngest group felt no impact from language loss (this correlates to their neutral attitude regarding language revitalization), the other three generations felt strong emotions relating to language although the emotions they felt were different according to the group. The oldest generation also held themselves partly responsible for the loss as, even though language transmission was illegal, they did not learn what they could have from their

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5 It would be important because we wouldn't use Spanish. We would dedicate ourselves to the natives. To recover the cultural part and teach our children and all that come how one must act with the Pijao dialect (translation by the author).

6 It would recover identity, which is the most basic part of the reserve. Which means recovering identity as a council, as how we identify ourselves as indigenous (translation by the author).

7 Perhaps we have been losing our customs because we can't speak that language (translation by the author).

parents and grandparents, thus adding guilt to their amalgam of feelings, regret being that they had not rescued the language when they could have done so.

The shame felt by many participants was also mentioned in relation to dealing with other indigenous groups. All the age groups agreed that without a language of their own they felt ashamed and at a social disadvantage when dealing with other indigenous groups. All groups affirmed that when dealing with other groups they were seen negatively and that some groups (particularly the U'wa) refused to regard the Pijao as indigenous as they lacked a language of their own. This indicates that at least at a national level, indigenous people are expected to speak an indigenous language for them to be so.

*... en la parte de la comunicación. Uno va a otros sitios y no hablamos la lengua y estamos en desventaja.*<sup>8</sup>

(Female participant, 18-35 years)

232 *Cuando he estado en capacitaciones con otros departamentos. Ellos si hablan la lengua. Y yo nada que hablo porque no lo conozco. Entonces si me ha afectado eso. Es como en una reunión en el Cauca. Estaban los Páeces, los Inga, los Embera-Chami, los Wayuu, los Embera-Kativa y ellos si hablan la lengua. Y yo como representante del municipio no... y eso me hizo sentir mal.*<sup>9</sup>

(Female participant, 36-50 years)

*Debido a la pérdida de la lengua, los otros, los otros grupos no nos identifican como indígenas. Por ejemplo, nuestros compañeros de la Sierra Nevada dicen que nosotros los Pijaos no somos indígenas. Por la forma en que no tenemos una lengua... Por eso, ellos dicen que el pueblo, que nosotros los Pijaos no somos indígenas.*<sup>10</sup>

(Male participant, 51-65 years)

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8 ... in the part of communication. One goes to other places and we don't speak the language and we are at a disadvantage (translation by the author).

9 When I have been in training in other departments they do speak the language. And I can't speak at all as I don't know how. So it has affected me. It's like in a meeting in Cauca. The Páez, the Inga, the Embera-Chami, the Wayuu, the Embera-Kativa were all there and they do speak their language. And I, as the representative of the municipality, don't (0.5) and that made me feel bad (translation by the author).

10 Owing to the loss of the language, the others - the other groups don't identify us as indigenous. For example, our companions in the Sierra Nevada say that we, the Pijao, are not indigenous. By means that (0.5) we don't have a language. For that, they say that the people, that we the Pijao are not indigenous. (translation by the author).

As seen in the interactions of the Pijao with other indigenous groups from around Colombia, language among other indigenous peoples in Colombia is an important part of their identities as indigenous peoples. A member of the 51-65 generation, who had had substantial contact with the indigenous group the Nasa, attested that this group was deeply protective of its language and of who uses it. Another participant, this time from the 36 - 50 group, also claimed a long history of working with the Nasa and was part of the group that sought to 'borrow' the Nasa language (Nasa Yuwe) for use by the Pijao. The Nasa, according to the negotiations over language use, regard their language as an important part of their social identity and have given religious significance to their language. This experience was repeated by those who had had dealings with the Wayuu, the Arhuacos, the Embera Chami and the Uwa. Each of these groups, in their dealings with the Pijaos, had made it quite clear that their language was an integral part of their indigeneity. What's more, they made it clear (especially clear in the case of the Uwas) that without an indigenous language, the Pijaos are not to be considered indigenous and that many are considered to be pretending to be indigenous to gain benefits from the government.

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*Yo fui y los que fuimos ahí, fuimos como cuatro personas, y ahí el compañero me dijo 'tú no eres indígena. Usted sí y usted sí' pero a mí no. Y yo pregunté por qué y me dijo 'tú eres blanca.'*<sup>11</sup>

(Female participant, 36-50 years)

### **The Loss of the Pijao Language**

Participants were then asked to give their account of how the language was lost. The two oldest groups identified the government as the agent of language loss. In both cases, the groups expressed that the government had decreed against the use of Pijao and the armed forces had punished people found to be using the language.

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<sup>11</sup> I went and those that went, we were four people, and there the companion said to me 'you are not indigenous. You yes and you yes' but not to me. And I asked why and he said to me 'you are white' (translation by the author).

*Mis papas me dijeron que no podían hablar la lengua. Que tenían que hablar en reuniones secretas por las noches, y aun así llegaba el ejército.*<sup>12</sup>

(Male participant, 50-65 years)

*No (0.5) lo podías hablar. Te castigaban. Hasta murieron personas.*<sup>13</sup>

(Female participant, 65+ years)

*'Los otros grupos pudieron esconder, escabullirse. Tenían montañas (0.5) bosques (0.2) donde esconderse. ¿Y nosotros? Nosotros siempre estábamos ahí, ahí en la vista del gobierno. No pudimos huir. No pudimos esconder. Nuestros territorios siempre estaban muy visibles.'*<sup>14</sup>

(Male participant, 50-65 years)

The two younger groups provided slightly different visions of how the language was lost. The 36-50 group expressed that the government was the primary actor in the loss of the language but that the older generations could have passed on the language in secret. They even supposed that the generation that is currently dying may contain someone who knows the language completely but given that that person never went public about their knowledge, the language is as good as dead. The youngest generation also noted that the government was the principal cause of the language loss but also indicated that the older generations perhaps could have done more to covertly pass on the language – that perhaps the language didn't really die when everyone said it did, and that because of the shame associated with speaking Pijao, they were afraid of passing it on.

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## **DISCUSSION: ON THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF THE PIJAO LINGUICIDE**

The opinions expressed regarding the loss of the Pijao language approximate the argument between Ladefoged (1992) and Dorian (1993), and demonstrate the murkiness of the debate regarding agency in language loss. The level of

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12 My parents told me that they couldn't speak the language. That they had to speak at secret meetings at night, and even then the army would come (translation by the author).

13 No (0.5) You couldn't speak it. They would punish you. People even died (translation by the author).

14 'The other groups could hide, run away. They had mountains, (0.5) forests, (0.2) a place to hide. And us? We were always here, here in the sight of the government. We couldn't run. We couldn't hide. Our territories were always very visible' (translation by the author).

government versus Pijao agency in the language loss correlates to the quantity of Pijao words available to the age group. The older generations all have a greater command of Pijao words and directly blame the government, church and armed forces for the loss of the language. Similar to the views expressed by Dorian, they assert that the language was lost as a result of armed coercion and that they had no agency in the act. As a disadvantaged group, they expressed the choice of losing the language or speaking the language and suffer reprisals. However, the younger groups cast that into doubt. These groups have increasingly limited knowledge of Pijao words and level the accusation that even though the government did prohibit the use of the language, the older generations have a knowledge of the language that is not being passed on and even during the time of the governmental reprisals there was choice involved (similar to the argument made by Ladefoged, 1992). These younger groups do, however, acknowledge that the older groups have serious inhibitions about sharing the language, given their traumatic involvement in the enactment of the Pijao linguicide; but assert that this needs to be overcome for the greater good of the Pijao people.

This leads to a tentative hypothesis regarding the loss of the Pijao language in Natagaima. Many of the older participants made reference to the other indigenous groups of the country maintaining their language through their ability to either hide from the authorities or through the benefit of geographic distance from major population centres – a luxury not afforded to the Pijao. Prior to 1991, as mentioned earlier, speaking an indigenous language was prohibited in all but the most remote areas of the country. However, Tolima, being in the centre of Colombia, is not at all remote and while it does have mountains and forests, it is largely a grassy valley. The geography of Tolima, in tandem with the Pijao Confederation's relative proximity to major urban centres such as Ibagué and Neiva, means that the Pijao could never have been regarded as residing in a remote section of the country. Thus, they were at no moment exempt from the linguistic legislation of the era, and this means that they were to be targeted by linguicide. While the Pijao were able to resist the brunt of the linguicide for quite some time, thanks in part to hiding their language in the more remote parts of Tolima (e.g. the mountains of Ortega and the more remote parts of Rioblanco) but generally due to the constant warfare they maintained with the government of the day; the Pijao language was lost during the middle to late 20th century. This coincides with another extremely important event in the event of the Pijao – the creation of the reserves and recognized indigenous communities.

The reserves of Pijao were first conceded in the river plains near Ortega, Coyaima and Natagaima. This gave the Pijao a linguistic disadvantage as they

could no longer hide their language use and were under the constant eye of religious and military authorities. The participants attested that military authorities would visit reserves and communities, even late at night, to ensure that the language was not being spoken. This would insinuate that the creation of the reserves in reality was something of a double-edged sword for the Pijao. While they (finally) began to gain legal control over their ancestral lands and apply some degree of autonomy, the Pijao in the reserves and recognized communities would have been in the direct eye of the government and as such in direct aim of the linguicidal policies of the day. The oldest participants argued that the reserves were not safe from governmental interference and that the church and military (as per the linguistic policy of the moment) were constantly monitoring language use. Thus, it would seem that the very creation of the indigenous reserves around Natagaima aided in the loss of the Pijao language by putting the Pijao in the direct gaze of the government.

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The principal effect of the Pijao linguicide was a weakening of the cultural identity of the Pijao people, which represents a challenge for them in terms of their recognition as indigenous people and in their participation in national indigenous affairs. It was noted that, as a result of the linguicide, the situation in terms of indigenous recognition was precarious and there existed a general fear for the future of the reserves. Modern literature and Colombian society tends to regard the Pijao as a dead ethnicity (Universidad del Tolima, 2010; Universidad del Rosario, 2014) and this has extremely negative effects on the Pijao when non-indigenes question the validity of Pijao indigeneity on the basis of Pijao language death. This exists as Colombia tends to have a very essentialist attitude in terms of language (Zwisler, 2018). This attitude holds that without a certain language, certain identities cannot exist and indeed this seems to be the reigning attitude behind pre-1991 Colombian legislation. Careful reading of the laws shows that the belief that the death of indigenous language meant the death of indigenous identity, and that this would unify the character of the nation (Areiza, 2010). While this did not occur, and the varied identities available in Colombia today are a point of pride for the nation, the attitudes associated with these laws are still very much present in society and present a constant nuisance to the Pijao in terms of their identity as indigenes when in contact with mestizo Colombia.

While one would expect other indigenous groups to be supportive of the Pijao in their linguistic plight, this has not been the case. All generations indicated that other indigenous groups (that still have their indigenous languages) in Colombia regard the Pijao as imposters without an indigenous language. However, in stark contrast to the essentialist beliefs of other indigenous groups,

there are clear indications that the Pijao are able to linguistically mark themselves as indigenous without having access to the entirety of their heritage language and there are efforts to reverse the cultural effects of the *linguicide*. The future of Pijao identity is directly linked to education - an education strategy that respects the remaining Pijao words and their use in Spanish as being on par with 'standard' Spanish in terms of prestige, and with Pijao practices as equal to those of mainstream society (a view reflected in the revitalization efforts in North America (cf. Reyhner, 2010). Thus the Pijao people recognize the need to use linguistic means to maintain if not recover their identity as an indigenous people and the most viable option is via an *etholect*.<sup>15</sup>

In reference to promoting a Pijao *etholect*, there exist differences in the attitudes towards the actual availability of the Pijao lexicon in the community. It is true that the younger groups do not have the same linguistic knowledge of Pijao as their elders do and are often ignored on the national level by other indigenous groups, yet they are able to mark themselves as indigenous at least at the local level and this is an important point to make – the loss of an indigenous language does not result in the complete loss of indigenous identity. While the indigenous identity of the youngest generation as an indigenous people is considered weaker than the older generations perhaps would like, the Pijao themselves have observed that there are actions which will help them maintain their *ethnolinguistic* identity. A member of the fourth and youngest generation (18-35 years) noted that for their *etholect* to survive (even without Pijao words) a positive attitude to the language is required so that parents and grandparents are willing to teach and children are open to learning. As noted above, the Pijao elders are (or at least have been) particularly reluctant to impart their linguistic knowledge to younger generations based on their experiences with the armed forces and the church. However, the entry of further Pijao words into the lexicon of the youth requires that these elders overcome their inhibitions and develop a positive attitude towards the Pijao language and thus pass on their linguistic knowledge to younger generations.

## CONCLUSION: WHERE TO NOW?

In the wake of the *linguicide* committed by the Colombian government, the Pijao have been rejected by other indigenous groups as being pretenders to indigeneity on the grounds of not having a language of their own and the Colombian government and its agencies have refused to acknowledge the Pijao nation on

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<sup>15</sup> An *etholect* is a variety of language used by a certain ethnic group (Clyne, 2000).

many occasions on the same grounds. The aim of linguicide is to eradicate resistance to the regime by destroying indigenous identity via language and the Colombian government's linguicide of the Pijao almost achieved just that via the weakening of external recognition of the indigeneity of the Pijao. However, even without an indigenous language, the Pijao are still able to identify themselves as indigenous but that indigeneity is in question by other indigenous groups. In the many countries that literature on language endangerment has focused on, (such as Australia, the U.S., and Canada) indigenous languages and groups have suffered equally: language loss is common and even those languages that survive in the present day are often endangered. However, for the Pijao, the experience is vastly different: they exist in a context where native languages are on the rise and taking back their place in society. This means that for the Pijao, the topic of having an indigenous language is an important point in the negotiation of their identities as an indigenous people and given that complete language revitalization is not on the cards, the creation of a stronger ethnolect seems to be the most viable solution.

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## **CÓMO CITAR ESTE ARTÍCULO**

Zwisler, J. J. (2018). The Intergenerational Perception of the Causes and Effects of Language Loss in the Pijao Community of Natagaima, Colombia. *Lenguaje*, 46(2), 220-241. doi: 10.25100/lenguaje.v46i2.6581