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Imbuing words with power: Linguistic diversity and identity politics among the Murui-Muina of the Colombian Amazon

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Abstract

Indigenous identity politics in South America increasingly mobilize language as a resource for political visibility, cultural continuity, and resistance to homogenizing state agendas. While many Indigenous movements pursue linguistic standardization, the Murui-Muina people of the Colombian Amazon advance an inverse project: they emphasize internal differentiation, maintaining four ethnolinguistic groups (Murui, Mika, Minika, Nipode). Drawing on long-term ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork, this article examines how Murui-Muina speakers construct and sustain these distinctions through ideologically charged lexical contrasts ('flag words') that function as shibboleths of subgroup identity. Situated within histories of violence, Indigenous language politics, and Northwest Amazonian multilingual ecologies, the analysis shows how minimal linguistic differences become imbued with cosmological significance, social meaning, and political value. The Murui-Muina case challenges structuralist definitions of 'language', demonstrating that what ultimately counts as a language depends on local approaches to language itself, offering a broader insight into how linguistic diversity is lived, valued, and reproduced. (Indigenous identity, linguistic diversity, language standardization, Murui-Muina, Northwest Amazonia, Colombia)

Introduction

Indigenous identity politics in South America have increasingly foregrounded language as a central domain of resistance, revitalization, and cultural affirmation. Across the region, many Indigenous movements have sought to strengthen their political visibility through efforts to unify and elevate their languages, often in collaboration with state institutions. Yet these efforts are far from uniform. In some contexts, such as the Andes, projects of standardization have been promoted by governmental and academic bodies, even as they remain ideologically contested within Indigenous communities themselves. In Peru, for example, Quechua was declared an official language in 1975, and institutions such as the Academia Mayor de la Lengua Quechua have promoted a standardized norm. However, as numerous scholars have shown, the ideological and practical consequences of Quechua standardization are

complex: speakers frequently value their local varieties (including those shaped by long-term contact with Spanish) over externally promoted ‘pure’ or standardized forms (Coronel-Molina 2016; Grzech, Schwartz, & Ennis 2019). Comparable tensions arise in Ecuador, where the Unified Kichwa variety is used in intercultural bilingual education, yet many Amazonian Kichwa speakers understand their own speech, not the standardized form, as the most ‘authentic’ (Grzech et al. 2019; Limerick 2020; Limerick, Schissel, López-Gopar, & Huerta Cordova 2024). These examples illustrate that language unification, while symbolically powerful, can also obscure internal diversity, provoke debates over linguistic legitimacy, and impose models of language that do not always align with community practices or ideologies.

In contrast to these unification-oriented processes, the Murui-Muina pursue an almost inverse strategy. Whereas Quechua and Kichwa standardization initiatives seek to reduce internal variation in order to consolidate a shared linguistic identity, Murui-Muina speakers actively cultivate internal differentiation. Rather than converging toward a single linguistic norm, they emphasize the distinctiveness of four ethnolinguistic dialectal groups (Murui, Mîka, Mînika, and Nîpode) and treat even small lexical contrasts as meaningful signs of subgroup affiliation. This approach reflects a long-standing ideology in which linguistic multiplicity is not a problem to be solved but an essential expression of origin, ancestry, and social belonging. These contrasts often hinge on small but socially meaningful lexical items (‘flag words’) that index subgroup identity and express fine-grained ethnolinguistic boundaries. The result is an internal, polycentric linguistic landscape in which differentiation (rather than unification) operates as a valued expression of identity.

These contrasting strategies (state-supported standardization on the one hand, and locally embedded differentiation on the other) highlight the diverse ways South American Indigenous communities engage language in processes of identity formation. Standardization may strengthen political mobilization and public visibility but can also marginalize local forms, reify particular varieties as ‘authentic’, and obscure internal diversity. Conversely, Murui-Muina linguistic differentiation sustains subgroup integrity but complicates efforts to frame a single collective language in political or educational arenas. This tension invites broader questions about the relationship between linguistic diversity, identity, and Indigenous language politics in Colombia.

This article examines how Murui-Muina speakers construct and maintain ethnolinguistic identities through subgroup-specific linguistic distinctions, situating these practices within broader South American debates on language, identity, and policy. It integrates historical, linguistic, and political perspectives to show how Murui-Muina differentiation is shaped by language ideologies, internal cultural models, and the legal framework governing Indigenous linguistic rights in Colombia. Following the theoretical framework and methodological overview below, the article addresses: (i) regional language policies and Indigenous rights, (ii) the multilingual ecology of Northwest Amazonia, (iii) the history and cultural dynamics of the Murui-Muina, (iv) Murui-Muina processes of cultural and ethnolinguistic boundary-making, and (v) the role of small lexical contrasts in constructing Murui-Muina identities. The article concludes by synthesizing the findings and outlining the study’s broader contributions.

Interpreting linguistic differentiation: Concepts and collaborative methods

Understanding why small lexical contrasts (referred to as ‘flag words’ in this article) carry such social weight among Murui-Muina speakers requires an analytical approach that attends to the cultural and ideological processes shaping linguistic evaluation. This section develops the theoretical foundations for the study, drawing on concepts from linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics (language ideology, indexicality, enregisterment, shibboleths, authenticity, stance, and boundary-making) to account for how these contrasts become recognized and mobilized as ethnolinguistic markers.

Language ideology forms the core of this framework. Language ideologies are culturally embedded systems of belief that connect linguistic forms to social structures, power, and identity (e.g. Woolard & Schieffelin 1994; Kroskrity 2000). They operate as a ‘much needed bridge’ between micro-level communicative practices and macro-level political constraints (Busch & Spitzmüller 2021). As Kroskrity (2000) emphasizes, language ideologies are multiple, interest-laden, and shaped by the sociopolitical goals of particular groups. Irvine & Gal (2000) show how these ideologies produce linguistic differentiation through semiotic processes such as iconization, fractal recursivity, and erasure. These models help explain how Murui-Muina speakers evaluate linguistic forms as authentic, correct, or belonging to either Murui, Minika, Mika, or Nipode, despite high mutual intelligibility between these linguistic variants. Studies from the Andes similarly demonstrate how ideologies shape speakers’ understandings of linguistic purity, legitimacy, and identity (Coronel-Molina 2016; Grzech et al. 2019), and comparable dynamics inform Murui-Muina differentiation.

Indexicality provides a conceptual basis for understanding how linguistic forms become socially meaningful. It refers to the ways in which linguistic features point to social identities, relationships, and positions within interaction. Indexical effects operate at multiple levels: they may be linked to individual signs, or they may emerge from the patterned co-occurrence and sequencing of forms within discourse (Agha 2007). Linguistic items may index basic deixis, but they can also acquire socially saturated values that come to signal stereotypic characteristics of speakers or groups (Eckert 2019). Crucially, indexicality is embedded within ideological frameworks. Ideological constructions reanalyze indexical associations as inherent or ‘natural’, thereby stabilizing particular linguistic features as markers of group identity (Irvine & Gal 2000).

Building on indexicality, enregisterment further explains how linguistic forms acquire socially recognized meanings. Enregisterment refers to the sociohistorical processes through which patterns of speech become associated with social personae and recognized as part of specific registers (Agha 2007). This process involves both discursive and somatic dimensions through which linguistic differences are circulated, evaluated, and embodied (Busch & Spitzmüller 2021). Enregistered forms (or emblems) become widely recognized as indexing stereotypic characteristics of particular groups, enabling even small lexical items to serve as salient social signs (Agha 2007).

Closely related are shibboleths, which are indexically loaded, referentially minimal differences used to demarcate membership and exclusion. Shibboleths operate as ‘invisible borders’ (Derrida (1986/2005), functioning at discursive, performative, and experiential scales (Spitzmüller, Busch, & Flubacher 2021).¹ Their biblical origin demonstrates how formally arbitrary distinctions can become socially consequential and, historically, even life-threatening (Busch & Spitzmüller 2021). Contemporary examples such as the Serbian/Bosnian/Croatian affricate contrasts show how shibboleths continue to operate as ‘tests’ of belonging, where failure may result in stigma, insecurity, or exclusion (Busch & Spitzmüller 2021).

Authenticity and stance further shape how linguistic distinctions are evaluated and enacted. Authenticity is an ideological construct concerning what counts as ‘proper’ or ‘real’ speech, often tied to purism, legitimacy, and ancestral norms (Coronel-Molina 2016; Grzech et al. 2019; Busch & Spitzmüller 2021). In Indigenous contexts, including Murui-Muina communities, authenticity is closely connected to origin narratives, collective identity, and respect for elder speech (Hornberger 1996; Espe 2007; Wojtylak 2020). Stance (the moment-by-moment positioning taken toward linguistic forms, interlocutors, or propositions) structures how individuals align themselves with or against particular variants (Agha 2007; Busch & Spitzmüller 2021) and contributes to the social evaluation of linguistic differences.

Together, these mechanisms underpin boundary-making and ethnolinguistic differentiation: linguistic contrasts are recognized, mobilized, and ideologically rationalized as markers of group identity, and enregisterment and indexical processes naturalize these distinctions (Irvine & Gal 2000; Busch & Spitzmüller 2021). Comparable patterns are documented across Amazonia. In the Vaupés region, strict separation of languages and resistance to mixing maintain ethnolinguistic boundaries despite widespread multilingualism (e.g. Sorensen 1967; Aikhenvald 2002; Epps 2018). Tukanoan clanolects tie linguistic variation to ethnic origin, rank, status, and metalinguistic judgement (Epps 2021). Amazonian Kichwa communities also differentiate themselves through local linguistic ideologies that resist state-imposed standardization (Grzech et al. 2019; Limerick 2020; Limerick et al. 2024). These cases demonstrate that mutual intelligibility does not preclude ethnolinguistic differentiation, an insight central to Murui-Muina linguistic practice.

These local Amazonian dynamics must be situated within broader Indigenous language politics in Latin America, shaped by colonial suppression, postcolonial monolingualism, and contemporary tensions surrounding standardization and authenticity (Hornberger 1996, 2008; Guerrero 2009; Zavala 2014; Lopera-Mesa 2024). Standardization initiatives affecting Quechua and Kichwa have often produced new internal divisions and debates over purity, legitimacy, and ‘authentic’ representation (Coronel-Molina 2016; Grzech et al. 2019; Limerick 2020; Limerick et al. 2024). These wider patterns help explain why Murui-Muina speakers emphasize differentiation: linguistic variation is ideologically meaningful, tied to historical narratives, and mobilized in the ongoing negotiation of political identity. In this context, Murui-Muina flag words function not as meaningless lexical variants but as socially potent semiotic resources that construct and maintain ethnolinguistic boundaries.

Together, these concepts (language ideology, indexicality, enregisterment, shibboleths, authenticity, stance, and boundary-making), situated within the history of

Indigenous language politics in Latin America, form a coherent theoretical foundation for analyzing how lexical contrasts operate as ethnolinguistic markers among the Murui-Muina people.

Fieldwork practice and approaches

This article draws on long-term ethnographic and linguistic work carried out among Murui-Muina communities between 2011 and 2024. Over this period, I spent extended periods living and working with families across the region, returning regularly to maintain relationships and continue collaborative research. Altogether, the study reflects approximately three years of residence in the field (southern Colombia, northern Peru). Fieldwork took place primarily in remote settlements along the Caraparaná River (especially the village of Tercera India, Murui) and the Igaraparaná River (La Chorrera, Minka), complemented by shorter visits to neighboring Murui-Muina communities. Additional work was carried out with Murui-Muina families living in Leticia's urban settlements (Colombia), which include speakers of all four groups: Murui, Minka, Minka, and Nipode.

The research data is grounded in long-term, trust-based relationships with speakers across these communities. Over the years, I worked closely with elders, ritual specialists, political leaders of *cabildos*, a number of Murui language teachers in Leticia and San Rafael (Caraparaná), and younger speakers, also those who had migrated to urban centers. This represents a broad range of social, ritual, and political roles within Murui-Muina society. Key interlocutors included Murui and Minka traditional healers and community authorities in Tercera India and La Chorrera, as well as women of different age groups from the Caquetá-Putumayo region. Nipode speakers living in Leticia and Minka speakers from San José (Caraparaná) also participated in various parts of the research. Many interlocutors were bilingual in Spanish and their respective Murui-Muina variety. Although most participants identified as Murui or Minka, speakers from all four subgroups contributed to observations on dialectal differentiation and identity.

The materials on which this study draws include recorded interviews (both semi-structured and open-ended), conversational interactions, origin narratives, participant-observation notes, political and ceremonial speech, lexical and grammatical elicitation sessions, and community-generated materials. The corpus comprises more than 800 pages of transcribed and glossed texts, 1,500 pages of field notes, and over 200 hours of recordings. Many interactions were translated in situ, particularly during work in *mameaderos* 'coca yards', *chagras* 'jungle gardens', and community gatherings, where spontaneous explanations and commentaries formed an important part of the collaborative research process.

Data emerged through everyday engagement (walking, gardening, preparing food, participating in rituals, attending meetings) rather than through predetermined sampling. No fixed criteria were used to identify speakers for dialect comparison; instead, variation surfaced naturally through interactions across villages and families. Flag words were identified over the years both through explicit metalinguistic commentary (speakers frequently pointed out forms associated with particular subgroups) and through comparative lexical elicitation undertaken with speakers from different communities.

Analytically, the study combines approaches from linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, ethnography, and comparative lexical linguistics. My positionality as an external researcher with long-standing relationships in the region shaped all stages of this work. Although not a native speaker, I have developed a high level of fluency in Murui and Minika through years of immersion and daily use (see e.g. Wojtylak 2020), which allows me to participate fully in everyday interactions and follow nuanced conversational dynamics, including dialectal contrasts. This long-term engagement provided the grounding necessary to interpret how subtle lexical forms operate as markers of identity, authenticity, and belonging within Murui-Muina social life.

These fieldwork practices and methodological principles form the basis for the analysis that follows, beginning with an examination of the legislative structures governing Indigenous linguistic rights in Colombia.

Legislative frameworks and Indigenous linguistic rights in Colombia

Colombia formally recognizes Indigenous linguistic rights, and the 1991 Constitution designates Indigenous languages as official within their territories, guaranteeing bilingual education and cultural protection. Subsequent legislation, including Law 1381 of 2010, further affirms the state's responsibility for documentation and revitalization (Guerrero 2009; Lopera-Mesa 2024). Yet, as numerous scholars observe, these frameworks often function symbolically rather than substantively: they acknowledge linguistic diversity while continuing to privilege Spanish as the language of governance, education, and mobility (Hornberger & King 1996; Echeverri 1997; Cely Betancourt, Zea Jaimes, Bohórquez Quesada, & Gil Rodríguez 2023; Wojtylak 2027b; and others). This symbolic orientation reflects a long-standing assimilationist logic dating back to the colonial era, when linguistic pluralism was perceived as an obstacle to evangelization, governance, schooling, and economic extraction.²

For Amazonian peoples, including the Murui-Muina, these state policies provide opportunities for political advocacy but rarely support the complex multilingual ecologies that characterize everyday life. Programs for bilingual education are chronically underfunded, lack trained teachers, and seldom address internal linguistic variation. Crucially, in the Murui-Muina case, the legal frameworks do not specify which dialect (or which of the four Murui-Muina varieties) should be used in schools, leading in practice to the dominance of Spanish and the erosion of intergenerational transmission. In this way, national language policy intersects with local dynamics but does not govern them; Indigenous communities navigate these frameworks according to their own goals, constraints, and ideological orientations.

Legal recognition coexists with a strong local emphasis on internal differentiation rather than consolidation. Whereas state policy presupposes a single named language corresponding to a single ethnolinguistic group, Murui-Muina speakers mobilize legal spaces to assert four distinct groups, each linked to a distinct linguistic variety. Their engagement with state frameworks thus illustrates a broader pattern in Latin American Indigenous politics: official recognition provides a platform for asserting identity, but the substance of linguistic differentiation emerges from local ideologies, practices, and histories rather than from state-imposed categories. The next section examines the Northwest Amazonian region, where these dynamics unfold within a deeply multilingual and multiethnic landscape.

Indigenous multilingualism in Northwest Amazonia

Multilingualism has long been a defining feature of Northwest Amazonia, in stark contrast to the relatively monolingual tendencies of the Andean region (see e.g. Sorensen 1967; Aikhenvald 2002). Prior to European contact, small Indigenous societies routinely maintained bi- and multilingual repertoires, and mutual intelligibility across neighboring groups facilitated dense networks of interaction and exchange (Epps 2018, 2021; Aikhenvald 2022). Crucially, no ideology of a single, standardized language existed. Instead, linguistic diversity was understood as a natural condition of social life: each group spoke its own variety and understood the varieties spoken around it. This system was supported by widespread multilingual competence, flexible communicative norms, and ideologies that valued differentiation rather than homogenization.

European missionaries, colonial administrators, and later linguists introduced new language ideologies rooted in standardization and monoglot norms. These ideologies relied on the belief (critiqued by e.g. Lippi-Green 2007) that languages should be abstract, homogeneous, and regulated by institutions. Such assumptions shaped missionary strategies across the Amazon, in which particular speech varieties were selected for orthography development, schooling, and Bible translation. *Língua Geral Amazônica* (referred to as *Nheengatú*) is a well-known example: originating as a semi-creolized variety of Tupinambá in the seventeenth century, it was promoted as a lingua franca for interethnic communication and missionary work until its suppression in the eighteenth century (da Cruz 2011). These projects, however, did not replace the region's deep tradition of multilingualism; rather, they introduced competing ideologies that framed linguistic uniformity as a desirable goal.

The demographic and political upheavals of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries (rubber extraction, epidemics, enslavement, and missionization) led to the disappearance of many groups and the reconfiguration of others (for Caquetá-Putumayo, see Echeverri 1997). New communities often emerged through regrouping of survivors from different ethnolinguistic backgrounds, as documented among the Yucuna (Fontaine 2001). These reorganizations, accompanied by boarding schools and the influence of church- and state-centered 'pilgrimages' toward regional capitals (Echeverri 1997), produced new forms of political leadership and collective identity. Contemporary Indigenous leaders frequently include individuals with formal schooling or professional training, who navigate between local expectations and national bureaucratic systems.

In the late twentieth century, identity politics transformed the sociolinguistic landscape of Amazonia. For many communities, language became a political resource for claiming rights, visibility, and recognition, and some groups elected to unify and standardize their speech varieties to strengthen political representation. However, as Andean cases such as Unified Kichwa demonstrate (see the Introduction), standardization is neither neutral nor universally accepted, often clashing with local understandings of 'authentic' practice and foregrounding debates over legitimacy and purity (Grzech et al. 2019; Limerick 2020; Limerick et al. 2024).

Northwest Amazonia offers thus a contrasting multilingual model: one in which linguistic differentiation, not ‘unification’, has historically been central to social organization. As Aikhenvald (2002) and Epps (2018) show, multilingualism in the Vaupés and surrounding regions is ideologically maintained through strict boundary-making practices that treat language as an emblem of descent, identity, and social position. Mixing languages is often discouraged or ridiculed (Aikhenvald 2002), and even small differences in pronunciation or lexicon can index group membership. These processes operate through the semiotic mechanisms, indexicality, enregisterment, and shibboleth-like differentiation, and help explain why linguistic diversity persists even where mutual intelligibility is high.

Having outlined the broader multilingual ecology of Northwest Amazonia, the next section turns to the Caquetá-Putumayo region, the traditional home to the Murui-Muina, where they (along with their neighbors) articulate linguistic identity within a distinctive historical and cultural context.

The Caquetá-Putumayo region: A multilingual and multiethnic landscape

The Caquetá-Putumayo (CP) region of southern Colombia and northern Peru constitutes a long-standing corridor of Indigenous mobility, interaction, and exchange (see Figure 1 below). The area is home to several language families (Witotoan, Boran, and Arawak) as well as the linguistic isolate Andoke. Historically, these groups formed a densely interconnected network that relied on multilingual competence

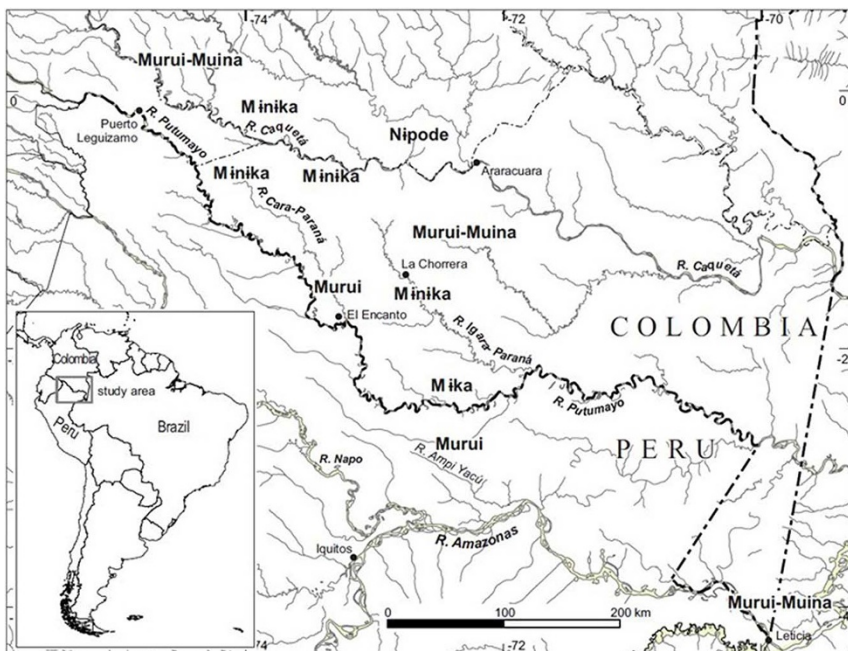


Figure 1. The current location of the four Murui-Muina groups in the Caquetá-Putumayo region in Northwest Amazonia (Wojtylak 2020).

rather than linguistic uniformity (Wojtylak 2027a), consistent with the broader Northwest Amazonian pattern. The region was designated as an Indigenous reserve (*resguardo*) in 1988, but its sociolinguistic landscape has been shaped by centuries of colonial intervention, missionary presence, violence, and shifting state policies (Echeverri 1997).

Indigenous peoples of the CP area have historically engaged in migration, trade, alliance-making, and warfare, generating complex patterns of multilingualism and ethnolinguistic differentiation (Echeverri 2011; Wojtylak 2020). The Rubber Boom, missionization, and later conflicts—including the Colombia-Peruvian border conflict at the beginning of the twentieth century (Echeverri 1997, 2013), as well as subsequent guerrilla activity—intensified community fragmentation and displacement. Spanish came to dominate education and interethnic communication, prompting widespread language shift (e.g. Wojtylak 2025). Yet, despite these pressures, several CP groups, including the Murui-Muina, have actively maintained, and in some cases amplified, internal linguistic distinctions as meaningful social and political resources.

The Murui-Muina and the multilingualism of the CP region

The Murui-Muina constitute the largest Witotoan group, with an ethnic population of approximately 6,000–8,300 (Fagua Rincón 2015; Wojtylak 2020, 2027a), but fewer than 3,500 fluent speakers. As elsewhere in the region, ethnicity and language do not coincide neatly: the majority of the Murui-Muina individuals now speak Spanish as their primary language, while identifying as speakers of one of the four Murui-Muina ‘languages’ (see also Wojtylak 2027b).

The broader Witotoan family also includes Ocaina (~50 fluent speakers; population ~380) and Nonuya (four partially competent speakers; population ~100) (Fagua Rincón 2015; Romero Cruz 2015). Earlier Witotoan languages (Miranha Carapaná-Tapuya and Coëruna) disappeared by the late nineteenth century (von Martius 1867; Echeverri, Fagua Rincón, & Wojtylak 2027; Wojtylak 2027a).

The CP region of Northwest Amazonia has long been characterized by historical multilingualism. Recent work (Wojtylak 2025; Wojtylak 2027a) shows that this multilingualism was both widespread and uneven: larger and politically dominant groups (the Murui-Muina and the Bora) tended to have more restricted multilingual repertoires, whereas smaller groups such as the Andoke and Ocaina historically maintained broader multilingual competence, often speaking up to four or five languages. Today, these multilingual practices have largely disappeared, accompanied by significant language loss since the 1940s. Importantly, however, these demographic shifts have not resulted in linguistic consolidation among the Murui-Muina. Instead, as shown below, they have intensified ideological commitments to internal differentiation.

Historical trauma, displacement, and the restructuring of identity

The Amazonian Rubber Boom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries imposed extreme violence, coercion, and forced labor on CP groups (e.g. Hardenburg 1912; Casement 1913; Rubio 2024). Debt-peonage practices and later phases of fur and coca extraction resulted in population collapse, dissolution of patrilineal clans,

and the formation of new mixed communities (Echeverri 1997, 2022). The Colombia-Peru border conflict (at the beginning of the twentieth century) further reorganized settlement patterns, transforming many Murui-Muina into riverine peoples living near Capuchin schools and emerging state authorities.

Missionary boarding schools (e.g. La Chorrera, Igaraparaná River) played a decisive role in language shift. Children were prohibited from speaking Indigenous languages, a punishment enforced harshly (Echeverri 1997; Wojtylak 2020; cf. Bonilla 1972). In response, Murui-Muina children developed an avoidance-name register, based on systematic syllable reduction and transposition, to communicate covertly among themselves (Wojtylak 2020). This register remains used by many elders, illustrating the persistence of enregistered communicative strategies developed under coercive conditions.

These historical processes created new social alignments and accelerated language shift, while simultaneously suppressing many of the long-standing linguistic ideologies characteristic of Northwest Amazonia. Under conditions of demographic collapse and forced aggregation, these ideologies did not disappear; rather, they were partially obscured and later reasserted as communities rebuilt themselves. In this context, native linguistic ideologies reemerged, and linguistic distinctions came to function as powerful markers of continuity, descent, and clan identity, allowing Murui-Muina speakers to reaffirm pre-existing patterns of differentiation within radically altered social landscapes.

Murui-Muina linguistic differentiation and its ideological basis

The Murui-Muina are internally organized around four ethnolinguistic groups: Nipode (Glottolog code *nupo1240* and Ethnologue ISO-693 code *hux*), Minika (*mini1256*, *hto*), Murui/Bue (*murui1274*, *huu*), and Mika (*mika1243*, no ISO code). As already noted in the Introduction, speakers explicitly frame these varieties as distinct ‘languages’ (in the political sense), rather than dialects. This aligns with their origin narratives (particularly the foundational myth of Muruima and Muinama) and embodies a form of iconization (in the sense of Irvine & Gal 2000): linguistic differences (words such as *bue*, *mika* *minika*, and *nipode* meaning ‘what’) are naturalized as expressions of ancestral essence, territory, and social identity. Historical accounts also recall additional dialects, among which Binika and Niuoti (Petersen de Piñeros 1994; Griffiths, Coleman, & Morales 2001), suggesting that present divisions represent a reduced subset of earlier variation.

Murui-Muina linguistic differentiation operates through several interrelated processes. First, language ideologies link particular forms to proper identity, ancestry, and communicative norms: elders’ speech is treated as authoritative, while youth innovations are evaluated through descent- and authenticity-oriented ideologies (Wojtylak 2020). Second, specific lexical variants function as indices of group membership, so that even small lexical and phonological differences serve as cues locating speakers within the polycentric Murui-Muina landscape. Such forms are enregistered as emblems of subgroup identity: they circulate in discourse as recognizable markers of Murui (Bue), Mika, Minika, and Nipode. These minimal contrasts operate as shibboleths (or flag words) acting as internal boundary markers that are

socially significant despite their limited linguistic scope, and thereby contribute to ongoing boundary-making within the current four-group system.

Contrary to Indigenous groups who have pursued linguistic standardization as a means of strengthening political representation, the Murui-Muina mobilize internal differentiation as a deliberate strategy. They assert distinct ethnolinguistic identities at the national level by framing their four principal varieties as separate languages, while simultaneously reinforcing internal cohesion through the normativization of many clanolectal varieties (see Echeverri 2022:308 on Murui-Muina clans, past and present). This approach also enables them to resist state-driven pressures toward linguistic unification that risk effacing historically and ideologically significant distinctions, and to preserve regionally specific ecological knowledge, ritual lexicons, and oral histories embedded in particular speech forms. In this sense, linguistic diversity is not a residue of past fragmentation, but a resource aligned with Murui-Muina political goals.

From cultural identity to ethnic identity

The Murui-Muina origin story

Among Murui-Muina communities, the origin narrative provides a foundational account of how cultural, linguistic, and territorial differentiation came into being. The Murui-Muina trace their emergence to the mythical ‘Hole of Humanity’ (called *Komimafo*) on the Igaraparaná River (Agga Calderón ‘Kaziya Buinaima’, Wojtylak, & Echeverri 2019). The first humans, enclosed in a cave and lacking voices, emerge into the world and open their eyes with the radiance of a lake. This initial stage reflects a shared cultural identity before linguistic distinctions are introduced.

Differentiation emerges with the actions of the two founding ancestors, Muruima and Muinama. Having descended to the lake, they utter their first words meaning, “What [is this]?”: Muruima saying *bue*, Muinama saying *minika*. These two forms, central to Murui-Muina metalinguistic discourse today, are locally recognized as classic flag words: lexical contrasts that index subgroup membership and anchor wider systems of ethnolinguistic classification.³ In theoretical terms, the myth of origin encodes differentiation through indexicality (each word points to a distinct ancestral line), enregisterment (these contrasts become emblematic of social identities), and boundary-making (the first divergence is explicitly linked to riverine orientation, upriver–Murui vs. downriver–Minika). Thus, the myth provides a culturally grounded model for understanding why seemingly minimal contrasts remain socially consequential.

Subsequent narrative events explain the emergence of further differentiation. As all people bathe in the lake, their placentas and umbilical cords transform into an anaconda (a central mythical figure in Northwest Amazonian cosmology) that must be defeated. After the serpent is killed and its body torn apart, its blood and flesh become sources of power from which additional groups and clanolects arise. This segment of the narrative not only links linguistic differentiation to powerful substances and ancestral action but also locates the proliferation of linguistic forms within a cosmological logic of dispersal throughout the CP region. Here, the origins of Mika, Nipode, and the numerous clanolects

are established, mirroring contemporary Murui-Muina understandings of linguistic diversity as ancestral, necessary, and socially meaningful rather than accidental or fragmentary.

In this way, the Murui-Muina origin story does not merely recount mythic events; it encodes a native ideology of differentiation that aligns with wider Northwest Amazonian patterns. Mutual intelligibility coexists with meaningful distinctions because differentiation is cosmologically grounded, socially valued, and transmitted through narrative as an essential feature of peoplehood.

Rejecting the exonym ‘Witoto’: Linguistic identity as political self-definition

The Murui-Muina’s contemporary rejection of the exonym ‘Witoto’, by which they were previously known (see work on the ‘Uitoto, Huitoto’ language by e.g. Minor & Minor 1982; Burtch 1983; Petersen de Piñeros 1994; Petersen de Piñeros & Becerra 1997; Petersen de Piñeros & Patiño Rosselli 2000), reflects a broader process of ethnolinguistic self-determination. The term *Witoto*, of Carib (Carijona) origin, historically carried derogatory connotations such as ‘enemy, cannibal, slave’ (Carlin 2006; Wojtylak 2020).⁴ For this reason, Murui-Muina organizations (such as OIMA 2008) explicitly oppose its use. The preference for ‘Murui/Mika/Mínika/Nípode’, and for the collective ethnonym ‘Murui-Muina’ (or closely related variants such as ‘Murui-Muinai’ or ‘Murui-Muinane’, see Echeverri 2022; Wojtylak 2027b) in Colombia reflects an insistence that naming must align with ancestral narratives and internal classificatory systems, rather than with external labels imposed during periods of colonial violence.

Murui-Muina speakers frequently emphasize that their origin story never mentions the word ‘Witoto’. In the excerpt below, Murui elder Lucio Agga Calderón underscores this point through a subtle yet firm ideological stance (Agga Calderón ‘Kaziya Buinaima’ et al. 2019): if outsiders continue to repeat the exonym, it is because they ignore the foundational narrative in which the ancestral names *Muruima* and *Muinama* anchor the legitimate basis for ethnolinguistic identity (Wojtylak & Lupinski 2025).

- (1) *Kai mei beno Muruidikái. Ie baie jamai birui ua Constitución anado bite, antropologo aki taaino yua, maiyomona aki ‘Uitotona’ kai joonega aki. Ie ia baiñede. Kai mamekiñedeza, koni kai mameki Murui!*

‘We here are the Murui people. Today there is a constitution, [but] the anthropologists lied. They called us “Witoto”. That does not [correspond to] us. That is not our name. Our name is Murui!’

Lucio Agga Calderón, Murui elder and traditional authority (my translation)

This rejection is reinforced in the origin-story framing, given in (2).

- (2) *nümei akidino mei ua naie jiyakino, akie iñedena nia ua ‘Uitoto’ rairaina, iemei nia oni oñegadi, ‘Uitoto’ mei ie origen iñededí!*

'This is the story of the place of origin. If it is not told, [they] will continue saying 'Witoto'. And so, even today, [that name] has not yet been removed. 'Witoto' has no [place in] our origin.'

Lucio Agga Calderón (my translation; Agga Calderón 'Kaziya Buinaima' et al. 2019)

Rejecting 'Witoto' is therefore far more than a lexical preference; it constitutes a political act of boundary-making, an assertion of authenticity, and a refusal to allow external ideologies to overwrite internally grounded cosmological and classificatory systems (Wojtylak 2027b). In theoretical terms, this aligns with the processes of enregisterment: the names 'Murui', 'Mika', 'Minika', and 'Nipode' function not only as labels but as socially recognized emblems indexing territorial origins, ancestral narratives, and moral authority. The rejection of the exonym is thus an ongoing practice of reclaiming ethnolinguistic identity within national contexts where Indigenous groups must continually negotiate externally imposed categories. Building on this, the following section explores how specific lexical contrasts function as shibboleths that index subgroup belonging in everyday speech.

Shibboleths of identity and belonging among the Murui-Muina

The linguistic differentiation becomes most visible in the everyday use and evaluation of flag words, that is, highly salient lexical contrasts that function as shibboleths of subgroup identity. While Murui, Mika, Minika, and Nipode varieties are structurally very close (see Table 1 below), speakers consistently mobilize small lexical differences as markers of belonging, authenticity, and alignment. This section examines how these contrasts operate semiotically and socially.

Structural closeness, social distance

Although comprehensive historical-comparative work is still underway (e.g. Wojtylak & Echeverri 2026; Echeverri et al. 2027), field observations indicate that the Murui-Muina varieties share extremely high lexical and grammatical overlap. Differences are concentrated in a relatively narrow set of socially salient lexical items.

Murui-Muina varieties differ only in a few phonological, prosodic, grammatical and lexical features. Murui and Mika are particularly close (more than 95% lexical and 99% grammatical overlap); Minika stands apart through incipient lexical tone/pitch-accent and a number of lexical items; and Nipode exhibits more divergent consonantal patterns and most lexical differences (but still relatively high overlap within the Murui-Muina dialect continuum). Grammatically, all varieties share near-identical systems with only a handful of differences (such as few classifiers and aspectual markers on verbs). What carries social weight, therefore, is not broad structural differentiation but a small cluster of socially marked lexical items. Table 1 summarizes patterns of similarity and contrast. The percentages are approximate, reflecting broad tendencies observed across long-term fieldwork rather than exhaustive comparative counts.

As noted during fieldwork, metalinguistic commentary frequently centers on these contrasts. Speakers often state explicitly that someone 'speaks Minika, not

Table 1. Fieldwork-based approximations of lexical and grammatical similarity across the four Murui-Muina varieties.

		Mika-MURUI	MURUI-MiNIKA	MURUI-NiPODE	MiNIKA-NiPODE
LEXICAL	SIMILARITIES: COMMON WORDS	95%	90%	80%	85%
	DIFFERENCES: FLAG WORDS	5%	10%	20%	15%
GRAMMATICAL SIMILARITIES		99%	95%	90%	95%

Bue [Murui]’ (*minika uai raiya, bueñede*) or that a given form ‘is not ours’ (*kaiñede*) even when the communicative differences are formally minimal.

In sociolinguistic terms, these minimal contrasts of the flag words create an ‘invisible border’ distinguishing insiders from outsiders (Derrida 1986/2005; Busch & Spitzmüller 2021). Their social salience far exceeds their structural role. These items enact and evoke histories of origin, territorial orientation, and ancestral authority, making them these distinctions socially audible and ideologically charged. Their enregisterment is reinforced through explicit commentary, correction, and teasing, as speakers evaluate who ‘really belongs’ to the Murui, Mika, Minika, or Nipode ancestral group.

The examples in Table 2 illustrate these flag words, indicating that these items carry indexical salience. They include verbs meaning ‘to speak’, the interrogative ‘what’ (cf. names of the Murui-Muina varieties), and evaluative adjectives (such as ‘good’, ‘fine’)—all domains where speakers most often identify and comment upon differences.

Table 2. Examples of socially salient flag words distinguishing the four Murui-Muina ethnolinguistic varieties.⁵

	COMMON WORDS	FLAG WORDS		
	‘I exist’	‘I speak’	‘good’	‘what’
MURUI	i-ti-kue exist-LK-1 SG	ñai-ti-kue speak-LK-1 SG	mare	bu-e? who-CLF.G
Mika	i-ti-ke exist-LK-1 SG	doo-di-ke speak-LK-1 SG	mare(fo)	mi-ka? what-FOC
MiNIKA	i-ti-kue exist-LK-1 SG	úri-di-kue speak-LK-1 SG	figo, mare(fodo)	mini-ka? what-FOC
NiPODE	íi-di-kue exist-LK-1 SG	dai-di-kue speak-LK-1 SG	ñue(ra)	nipó-de? what-LK

The lexical difference is substantial: *ñai-/doo-/úri-/dai-* for ‘to speak’, or *bue/mika/minika/nipóde* for ‘what’.⁶ These are precisely the forms embedded in the origin narrative, where *bue* and *minika* index the first moment of ethnolinguistic divergence. The narrative also uses distinct verbs for ‘say’ to specify who tells the story, that is, ‘we [the Murui/the Minika] say/speak’, explicitly linking speech forms to particular ancestral lines (without mentioning the groups). Contemporary evaluation of these forms therefore reflects cos-

mologically grounded indexicality: the words themselves are understood to embody the ancestral split between upriver (Murui) and downriver (Minika) peoples.

Some cases also show semantic divergence with symbolic consequences. For example, *úridikue* means 'I speak' in Minika but 'I am quiet/calm' in Murui, a contrast that Murui speakers often comment on. These semantic misalignments sharpen the sense of 'our way vs. their way,' even within otherwise closely aligned varieties. These are classic cases of enregisterment (in the sense of Agha 2007): repeated pointing-out, commentary, and metalinguistic evaluation 'thicken' their meaning, making them culturally potent signs.⁷

Other socially salient contrasts include a range of nouns (e.g. 'nephew': Murui *enaize*, Minika *komoma*; 'center': Murui *moto*, Minika *kigi*; 'urine': Murui *boyika*, Minika *choi*), verbs (e.g. 'shake (liquid)': Murui *gigitate*, Minika *guáite*), adverbials and adjectives (e.g. 'little': Murui *janore*, Minika *due*; 'yesterday': Murui *naare*, Minika *navi are*; 'there': Murui *bai*, Minika *fei*), as well as certain plant and animal names (e.g. 'a type of edible tuber': Murui *jogiño*, Minika *fogiño*). Additional examples are listed in Burtch (1983). These items are not discussed in detail here because they do not figure prominently in metalinguistic commentary and lack the cosmological embedding characteristic of the flag words that function as shibboleths within Murui-Muina identity practices.

Why these contrasts matter? Sociolinguistic functions of Murui-Muina shibboleths

Murui-Muina flag words perform various sociolinguistic functions that extend far beyond their referential meaning. These processes highlight the centrality of language ideologies in shaping how Murui-Muina speakers interpret micro-variation as socially meaningful.

First, these forms operate as indexical markers of subgroup identity. Lexical contrasts such as *ñai-* in Murui and *úri-* in Minika 'to speak' (Table 2) immediately locate a speaker within one of the four ethnolinguistic groupings, indexing territorial, ancestral, and social origins, particularly in situations where identity is foregrounded (e.g. ritual discourse, political gatherings, or interactions involving outsiders). Their indexical force is reinforced through constant metalinguistic commentary, which naturalizes the association between particular forms and specific ancestral lines. Indexicality therefore underpins how flag words come to simultaneously signal authenticity, lineage, knowledge, and belonging.

These contrasts simultaneously contribute to the maintenance of internal boundaries. Although the varieties are highly mutually intelligible, speakers routinely emphasize separation by attending to micro-variation, echoing the broader Northwest Amazonian ideological preference for differentiation. Statements such as 'they speak Minika, not Murui' articulate this stance overtly and help reproduce a social landscape in which four distinct ethnolinguistic identities are continually reinforced through everyday linguistic practice. This pattern parallels broader Northwest Amazonian cases in which micro-variation is ideologically amplified as

descent information, such as clan-based differentiation among Tukanoan groups (e.g. Epps 2021).

Flag words also function as performative markers of authenticity, indexing proper socialization, lineage, and local knowledge. Correct usage is evaluated not merely in terms of linguistic proficiency but as evidence of cultural legitimacy. Murui speakers attempting to speak Minika, for example, are frequently told that their speech has a ‘Murui flavor’, especially when they do not use lexical tone/pitch-accent. These evaluations are classic examples of stance-taking, where speakers position themselves socially (and morally) through linguistic judgments.

Beyond these identity-related functions, flag words operate as shibboleth-like boundary markers. Minimal contrasts carry high social consequences (‘invisible borders’ in Derrida (1986/2005)), detectable only to those with the appropriate social knowledge. Through stance-taking, speakers reinforce enregistered distinctions and evaluate whether particular forms or speakers count as ‘authentic’, ‘proper’, or ‘knowledgeable’. These evaluations play a key role in internal differentiation. Mastery of these forms signals belonging, while mispronunciation may index outsider status, insufficient socialization, or questionable lineage. This aligns closely with the dynamics described by Busch & Spitzmüller (2021), where shibboleths condense broader ideological distinctions into micro-linguistic cues.

Finally, these forms serve as emblems of group pride and linguistic awareness. Speakers frequently point them out with humor or emphasis, treating them as culturally significant signs that encapsulate ancestral narratives, territorial affiliations, and clanolectal histories. In this way, flag words stabilize internal diversity as a valued heritage rather than as deviation or fragmentation. They are central not only to how Murui-Muina speakers recognize and differentiate one another, but also to how they celebrate the multiplicity embedded in their linguistic landscape.

In sum, the Murui-Muina flag words or shibboleths demonstrate that identity in small-scale multilingual societies is actively constructed through selective attention to micro-variation, not through structural divergence alone. The social potency of these forms emerges from enregisterment: through repeated commentary, correction, and stance-taking, these items acquire metapragmatic value that far exceeds their structural linguistic role.

Conclusion: What counts as a language?

This article has examined how the Murui-Muina (Witotoan) peoples from Northwest Amazonia articulate linguistic identity through a model that foregrounds differentiation rather than unification. Although the four varieties (Murui, Mika, Minika, and Nipode) are linguistically extremely close, speakers treat them as distinct languages tied to distinct ethnolinguistic groups and their ‘place in the world’. This case demonstrates that broader questions of contemporary linguistic diversity—particularly ‘how many languages there are’—cannot be answered through structural comparison alone. Instead, they require attention to social practice, ideological valuation, and political history, an insight with wider implications for Amazonia and for sociolinguistic theory more generally.

The Murui-Muina challenge the common assumption that mutual intelligibility implies linguistic unity. Their dialects differ mainly in a small set of highly salient lexical items that function as shibboleths. These forms carry indexical force because they are embedded in origin narratives, enregistered through repeated commentary, and mobilized in everyday interaction as markers of authenticity, descent, and belonging. In this way, even minimal lexical contrasts become socially powerful signs. The Murui-Muina case thus shows that linguistic boundaries are maintained not through structural linguistic divergence but through ideologies of differentiation that value micro-variation as an expression of ancestral Indigenous identity.

More broadly, the case illustrates why linguistic classification is not a neutral act. Global estimates of the number of living languages—ranging from Ethnologue’s 7,164 to Glottolog’s 7,788 and UNESCO’s 8,324 (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig 2024; Hammarström, Forkel, Haspelmath, & Bank 2024; UNESCO 2026)—vary not only because of methodological differences but also because classifications reflect institutional agendas, political assumptions, and shifting identity politics. As Watters (2019:283), observes, ‘the addition and subtraction of ethnicities and languages has as much to do with government policies and the rise of identity politics as it does with actual cultural and linguistic diversity’. Dixon (2010) further critiques such figures, arguing that counts often inflate linguistic diversity due to missionary agendas and inconsistent criteria for distinguishing languages from dialects. In Amazonia, where traditional multilingual ecologies, shifting identities, and historical ruptures complicate any one-to-one mapping between ‘language’ and ‘people’, such numbers obscure more than they reveal (Wojtylak, Olko, Otwinowska-Kasztelanica, & Dolińska 2026).

Within this landscape, the Murui-Muina demonstrate how communities actively shape linguistic categories. Their resistance to the exonym ‘Witoto’ and their insistence on four ethnolinguistic identities reveal the centrality of Indigenous agency in determining what counts as a language. These distinctions matter: in Colombia, where the constitution and subsequent legislation formally guarantee bilingual/intercultural education for Indigenous communities, but Spanish remains dominant in practice, official recognition of linguistic diversity carries political consequences for cultural autonomy, resource allocation, and educational policy. Naming is therefore a form of political action, not merely a descriptive choice (Wojtylak 2027b).

The Murui-Muina case also contributes to wider debates on Amazonian multilingualism. Like other Northwest Amazonian groups, the Murui-Muina amplify micro-variation as descent information. Their model shows how linguistic multiplicity can function as a strategy of continuity and resistance, rather than as a sign of fragmentation or loss. Shibboleths such as *bue* and *minika* condense histories (of migration, of rupture) while simultaneously indexing present-day political identities.

Ultimately, the Murui-Muina demonstrate that what counts as a ‘language’ is shaped by who gets to decide. Structural linguistic similarity may suggest a single language (or dialect continuum treated as a single language), but for the Murui-Muina, the meaningful distinction lies in the cosmological and historical (in addition to the current political) significance of differences. Their case invites a broader

rethinking of how linguistic diversity is defined, counted, and valued, especially in contexts where micro-variation carries deep cultural meaning.

Future research should examine the implications of emerging standardization efforts within Murui-Muina communities, particularly how written norms may reinforce or attenuate clanolectal distinctions in Amazonia. Comparative work across other Caquetá-Putumayo groups would further elaborate how internal differentiation operates as a strategy of cultural continuity in multilingual, post-trauma Indigenous societies. Longitudinal studies of youth language practices are also needed to trace how shibboleths evolve in contexts of mobility, digital communication, and increasing Spanish dominance.

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Notes

1. The term *shibboleth* comes from the biblical account in Judges 12:5–6, where members of the Gileadite army used the pronunciation of the word *shibboleth* to identify fleeing Ephraimites, who could not pronounce the initial [ʃ] sound and said *sibboleth* instead. This minimal phonological difference marked group membership and led to life-or-death consequences, an early illustration of how linguistic forms can act as powerful social boundaries.
2. Uribe-Jongbloed & Anderson (2014) discuss the challenges faced by Indigenous and minority languages in Colombia, noting that despite legal recognition, practical implementation is often lacking due to various structural barriers.
3. The use of content question words as distinguishing features between dialects is not unique to the Murui-Muina. Among the Uruwa peoples of Papua New Guinea, dialects spoken in the Uruwa River valley are often identified by the form of the word ‘what’. For instance, Nungon dialects are named after the word *nungon* ‘what’, while the related Yau language uses *you* for ‘what’. These forms demarcate varieties within a dialect continuum, despite high mutual intelligibility. In the village of Sindamon, *yanu* serves as the marker word for ‘what’, again functioning as a dialectal identifier (Sarvasy 2017).
4. Carlin (2006) notes that in Trio, the word *witome* ‘a human being’ can mean ‘manifestly but not inherently a human being’, as when a spirit manifests in human form’. The term extends semantically to ‘enemy’, ‘cannibal’, or ‘slave’ (see also Wojtylak 2020).
5. Grammatical glosses: 1: first person; CLF:G: classifier generic; LK: linking morpheme; FOC: focus marker; SG: singular.
6. The form of the interrogative root (which, in itself, is a bound form, followed by other makers) in Murui is *bu-* ‘what’, while in Mika, Minika, and Nipode it appears as *mi-* or *ni-* (Wojtylak 2020). From the perspective of historical linguistics, this phonological divergence provides evidence of early dialectal splits within the Murui-Muina dialect continuum.
7. Such contrasts exemplify what Labov (1972:314) calls stereotypes, that is, linguistic features whose social meanings become explicit, circulated, and objectified.

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