Makú grammar and language documentation

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The extinct language isolate, Máku, was once spoken by a group of people dwelling in the vicinity of the Auari river in the extreme northwest of the state of Roraima, Brazil. Documentation of this language has been sporadic, consisting of wordlists (Koch-Grünberg 1913, 1928; Faria 1927), field notes and audio (Migliazza 1965, 1966, 1978), and collaboration with the last Máku speaker (Maciel 1991).

However, very little information about this language has been presented in academic venues or beyond. This type of gap presents a challenge for some current perspectives that argue for a categorical distinction between language documentation and language description (e.g., Himmelmann 1998 and Woodbury 2003), because Máku documentation has been useless without grammatical descriptions.

This paper addresses the situation of Máku documentation and the expected outcomes of language documentation projects generally. A number of Máku grammatical properties are presented, such as consonant and vowel inventories, clusitivity, demonstratives, classifiers, verb agreement, word order, and evidence of areal contact with other languages in the region. This description of Máku legacy documentation results in new characterizations of the data-types, expected outcomes, and research designs of language documentation projects.

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