

# Researchers reveal relationships between rare languages in the Colombian Amazon

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The only linguistic data available for Carabayo, a language spoken by an indigenous group that lives in voluntary isolation, is a set of about 50 words. This list was compiled in 1969 during a brief encounter with one Carabayo family. Frank Seifart of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany, and Juan Alvaro Echeverri of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Leticia, Colombia, have now analysed this historical data set and compared it with various languages (once) spoken in the region. The analysis showed that Carabayo shares a number of similarities with the extinct language Yuri and with Tikuna, a language still spoken in the region nowadays. From the results of their study the researchers conclude that the Carabayo – directly or indirectly – descend from the Yuri people whose languages and customs were described by explorers in the 19th century, before they took up voluntary isolation.

According to Survival International there are around 100 uncontacted indigenous groups worldwide, a few dozen of them living in the Amazonian rainforest. One of them, the Carabayo, lives in voluntary isolation in the remote upper Puré River region in the Colombian Amazon rainforest. The most recent evidence of the Carabayo's persistence are aerial photographs of their roundhouses taken in 2010 which were published in the book *Cariba Malo* by the Colombian researcher Roberto Franco.

In early 1969, a military commission on a rescue mission, made violent contact with the Carabayo and took one family hostage. "While this

family was held captive, speakers of all living languages of the region tried to communicate with them but failed", says Frank Seifart of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. "Researchers thus concluded that Carabayo was not related to any living [language](#) in the region."

Frank Seifart and Juan Alvaro Echeverri have now compared the Carabayo words with historical wordlists of extinct languages of the region that were documented by explorers in the 19th century. "Our comparison of the Carabayo data revealed that a number of Carabayo forms match corresponding Yuri elements, but none match forms of the other languages", says Seifart. The researchers identified four Carabayo forms – a first person singular prefix, and the words for 'warm', 'boy' and 'father' – to match corresponding Yuri forms well. "The strongest evidence for a link between Carabayo and Yuri comes from the first person singular prefix", says Seifart. "Personal pronouns are known to be especially resistant to borrowing which is why their similarity indicates a genealogical link, rather than language contact."

The researchers then compared Carabayo to languages spoken in the Colombian Amazon area nowadays and found a number of very good matches between Carabayo and Tikuna, but not with any other living language of the region. "What adds credibility to these matches is that they exhibit regular sound correspondences: For instance Carabayo g corresponds to Tikuna ng in a number of words. That can hardly be a coincidence", says Seifart. The researchers conclude that Yuri, Carabayo and Tikuna are genealogically related, with Carabayo somewhere in the middle between Yuri and Tikuna, but probably closer to Yuri. "The ease with which Carabayo data could be interpreted by a native Tikuna speaker additionally suggests that these languages are relatively closely related and may even form – or have formed in the past – a dialect continuum", says Seifart.

**More information:** Frank Seifart, Juan Alvaro Echeverri, Evidence for the identification of Carabayo, the language of an uncontacted people of the Colombian Amazon, as belonging to the Tikuna-Yurí linguistic family, *PLOS ONE*, 16 April 2014

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