The Iquito Language Documentation Project: an introduction

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Hello! Thank you for joining us this afternoon. My name is Chris Beier, and I am a fourth year student in the PhD program in Linguistic Anthropology here at UT. As you know, the topic for today's colloquium is the Iquito Language Documentation Project – which, from now own, I'll just call the Iquito Project for brevity's sake.

The Iquito Project is a long-term, community-based, collaborative language revitalization project in which four students from UT participated this past summer. Each of us four will speak to you today about specific aspects of our work with the Iquito Project. I'd like to introduce my colleagues and their topics to you:

Lev Michael, who is a fourth year student in the PhD program in Linguistic Anthropology, will be speaking after this introduction about the "Historical, social, and political context for the Iquito Project";
After Lev's talk, I'll speak about "building a lasting infrastructure for the Iquito Project."
Mark Brown, who is a third year student in linguistics, will be speaking on "Training Iquito community members as linguists";
Lynda de Jong, who is a second year student in linguistics, will be speaking about "Teaching an undocumented language: methods and challenges".

Before we begin these talks, though, I'm going to give you some basic background information to provide context for what follows.

Allow me to reiterate: the Iquito Project is a long-term, community-based, collaborative language documentation and revitalization project that is taking place in the indigenous Iquito community of San Antonio de Pintuyacu, in the department of Loreto in Peru. In fact, I think it is important to note that the project's official name in spanish, chosen by the Iquito community, is "Proyecto de Recuperación del Idioma Iquito" – a name which foregrounds the community's goal to *recuperar*, or revitalize, their heritage language, even though the members of the community recognize that documentation is the key to reaching that goal.

San Antonio is located on the Pintuyacu River about 60 miles straight-line distance from Iquitos, the largest city in northern Peruvian Amazonia. *(show map)* The trip from Iquitos to San Antonio takes 24 to 48 hours by local river transport, or about five hours by speedboat. San Antonio proper has about 200 residents, and the ethnic Iquito population in the region numbers about 500.

This year, between June 15 and August 10, we four carried out the first phase of the Iquito Project in conjunction with the community of San Antonio. We spent eight intensive weeks in San Antonio building the foundation for this project – and in many ways, we were building this project from scratch, because we know of no other project designed quite like this one. You'll learn more about the Iquito Project's design in the talks that follow.

Since you are quite possibly wondering right now, "But *how* exactly did four students from UT get mixed up in a project like this in a small community in the headwaters of the Amazon Basin?" I'll go ahead and answer that question for you.

Lev Michael and I have been involved in community-based research and humanitarian work in Peruvian Amazonia since 1995, and we have spent part of each year since 1997 in Peru, working primarily with the Nanti communities on the Camisea River. Over the years, we have developed friendships with various people who work with indigenous rights and issues of culture and language vitality in Peruvian Amazonia. While we were in Peru in 2000, Lev and I learned from several different sources that the Iquitos of San Antonio were actively engaged in efforts to revitalize their heritage language and that they were seeking outside assistance in doing so.

Now, I've often heard of anthropologists and linguists on the lookout for a great research project – but how often does one hear of a great research project on the lookout for researchers? Lev and I were very intrigued, and we resolved to visit San Antonio as soon as we could. Lack of time and money made that impossible in 2000, but Lev and I were able to spend two weeks in San Antonio in late July of 2001. The central purpose of that visit was to assess if in fact the community *was* interested in outside assistance, and if so, what kind of assistance they desired.

As you may have deduced, Lev and I were extremely well-received by the Iquito community. Community leaders, fluent Iquito speakers, and younger community members alike welcomed our offer of technical assistance in developing a language revitalization project. During our brief stay in the community in 2001, we focused our efforts on two concrete tasks: assessing the current number of fluent Iquito speakers – of whom there are 26 in and around San Antonio; and drawing up a formal agreement, or *convenio,* for a three-year collaborative project between the community of San Antonio and Cabeceras Aid Project. Cabeceras is a non-profit organization based here in Austin that Lev and I founded in 1996 in order to develop humanitarian projects supported by anthropological and linguistic research in the Amazon Basin.

In brief, then, these are the activities that Cabeceras and the community of San Antonio collectively agreed to carry out:
• First, during the three-year period covered by the *convenio*, Cabeceras agreed to send at least two fieldworkers (that is, me and Lev) to San Antonio for two months of each year – that is, between June and August of 2002, 2003, and

2004. We also agreed to recruit and bring with us other volunteer researchers each year to maximize the amount of work completed in these three years – which is how Mark and Lynda ended up in San Antonio with us. (*show image of group*)
• Second, Cabeceras committed to building and fully equipping a center dedicated to revitalizing Iquito. In May of 2002, the *Centro del Idioma Iquito* was constructed, complete with a solar power system, two laptop PCs, and a furnished classroom. *(show images of center)*
• Third, Cabeceras agreed to provide salaries and formal training in language documentation and teaching skills to a team of community members who would be responsible for the project's activities in the long-term. *(show image of formación)* Mark will be addressing in greater detail several important aspects of these training activities.
• Fourth, the community agreed to supervise and oversee all of the project's activities, on both the short- and the long-term. I will speak about these aspects of the Project at greater length in my own talk.
• Fifth, we agreed to orient all of our research activities toward creating an effective revitalization project for the Iquito community, primarily as defined by the community. This commitment has profound implications for research design and method, and you'll hear about a variety of effects of this commitment from all four of us.

To illustrate this point, within two weeks of arriving in San Antonio, we four found ourselves teaching six Iquito language classes a week to community members – three nights a week to kids and three nights a week to adults. In addition to the immense time commitment of teaching these classes, we were always just a few teeny steps ahead of our lesson plans in analyzing the Iquito language! *Why* would we be so crazy as to begin to teach a language we knew very little about? Because the community insisted that we do so! Many community members – especially youngsters between about 8 and 12 years of age – simply couldn't wait to get started learning to speak Iquito. So off we went, learning Iquito all of us together. Lynda will speak more about the pedagogical aspects of our work this summer in her talk.
• Sixth, we agreed by the end of the three-year period to produce an Iquito-Spanish dictionary, a pedagogical grammar, collections of Iquito texts, Iquito language-learning materials and other related written and recorded materials in and on the Iquito language. As I'll discuss later, these actual physical materials are, from a certain perspective, the most valuable results the project will produce, because once they are created they have a kind of permanence that neither people nor projects have.

These, then, are the major elements of the Iquito Project. In the course of the next hour, we four will share with you some of the most exciting – and some of the most challenging – aspects of fulfilling these promises.

Before I close this introduction, I would like to make explicit our overarching motivation for creating and carrying out the Iquito Project in the ways we'll

discuss today. In our assessment, there is far more language documentation work to do in Amazonia than there are professional field linguists to do it – and the common "one language, one linguist" model severely limits the amount of documentation and publication that is produced for any one language. Furthermore, the traditional model for language documentation does not foreground community-focused language revitalization efforts; in fact, researchers are criticized by indigenous communities in Peru for their "take the data and run" attitudes.

From our point of view, there are two large sets of capable and intelligent people with great potential to do direly-needed documentation and revitalization work on Amazonian languages: one set is graduate students, and the other set is members of the very communities who are interested in language documentation and revitalization.

We see the Iquito Project as a field test of two hypotheses:
• first, that the people best positioned to do long-term, high-quality, and *useful* language work are the very speakers and inheritors of that language; and
• second, that field teams of well-trained graduate students are an excellent way to begin such projects and competently teach the skills necessary to do language work.
We hope that not only will the Iquito Project succeed in and of itself for the Iquito community, but that it also might provide a useful model and perhaps even a training ground for launching other documentation projects with other Amazonian language communities.

Having only just completed the first phase of the Iquito Project, we probably have more challenges ahead of us than behind us. But at the same time, the level of success, and the *kinds* of successes that we already have achieved gives us great optimism for this project's future.

I hope you find the following four presentations interesting and informative. Since these four presentations complement one another, we ask that you jot down any questions that you may have along the way and ask them after you've heard all four presentations.