

Hands, fingers, feet, and toes? Oh, brother. The numeral system in Iquito

Recent work on endangered numeral systems has shown that numeral systems are not only highly susceptible to language contact (Comrie 2005), but can also be used to chart language contact within a region (Epps 2006). This paper describes the numeral system in Iquito, an endangered Zaparoan language spoken in the northern Peruvian Amazon, and discusses the evidence for language contact found within this numeral system.

Three numeral strategies can be identified within the Iquito system: basic lexical terms for the numbers 1 and 2, analyzable lexical terms for 3 and 4, and a large set of numeral expressions for quantities of 5 and higher. Spanish numerals are also used: speakers frequently use Spanish numerals for 5 through 20 and almost exclusively for quantities greater than 20.

But how “Iquito” are the Iquito strategies? Limited data from Iquito’s sister languages suggest that the terms for 1 and 2 can be reconstructed for Proto-Zaparo, but that 3 and higher can not. Although no synchronic derivation exists for the terms for 3 and 4, I propose that 3 and 4 are analyzable diachronically as ‘fraternal’ forms (cf. Epps 2006), where 3 correlates with not having a sibling and 4 correlates with having a sibling. While such a strategy is considerably rare as a numeral strategy cross-linguistically, at least one fraternal form is found in a number of Amazonian languages, including three of the Nadahup (Maku) languages, all of the Tukanoan languages, Tariana (Arawak), and several Witotoan/Bora languages. Epps (2006) attributes the prevalence of this strategy to areal diffusion from Tukanoan. The geographical proximity of Iquito to the Western Tukanoan languages makes areal diffusion a likely source for these terms in Iquito as well.

The third strategy found in the Iquito numeral system is also likely to be a result of areal diffusion. This strategy is a type of tally system involving the hands, fingers, feet, and toes. It is used for the numbers 5 through 20. (It can also be used for quantities greater than 20, but most speakers resort to Spanish numerals for these quantities.) The extreme variability with which speakers express these larger numerals, often using multiple forms for the same numeral within the same elicitation session, suggests that speakers are in fact creating these expressions in real time, and not relying on a lexicalized form or set of forms. This type of numeral strategy is much more common cross-linguistically than the fraternal strategy, and it is also attested in several Amazonian languages, including the Tukanoan family.

I argue that the presence of both the fraternal strategy and the body part tally strategy in Iquito is a result of areal diffusion initiated by Tukanoan, which broadens the area (and direction) of the diffusion as initially proposed by Epps (2006). I will also discuss some possibilities for how these strategies entered into Iquito from Tukanoan, as well as underscore the need for additional research in this area.