



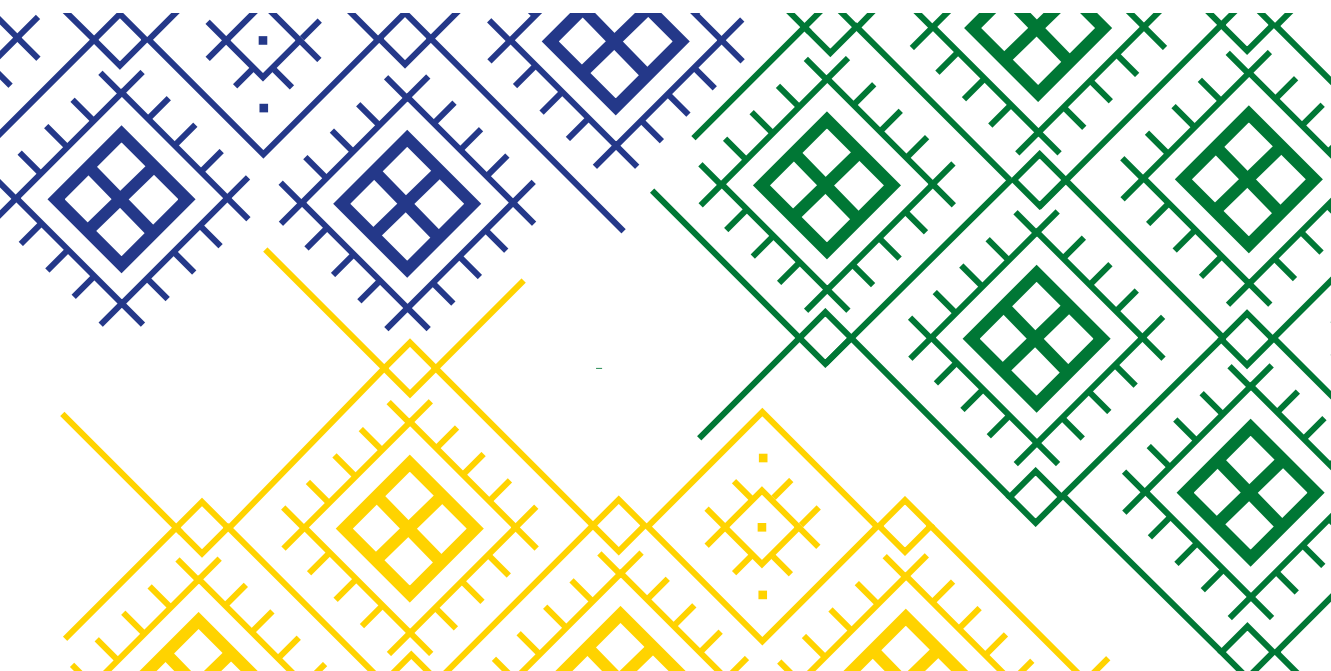
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Initial Observations on Mundurukú Language Use and Vitality in Urban Settings

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Abstract

Rural-urban migration may be a big challenge for Indigenous language preservation worldwide. In Brazil, the 2022 Census shows that the urban Indigenous population now outnumbers the rural one. This study examines urbanization's impact on the Mundurukú language in Jacareacanga, Pará, based on data from 75 households (21.5% of the city's Indigenous population). Findings suggest that while urbanization increases bilingualism, threatening Mundurukú's exclusive use at home, and education policies accelerate the shift towards Portuguese, social interactions, village visits, and community ties help sustain the language. The study emphasizes the urgent need for bilingual education and initiatives to strengthen Mundurukú in urban areas.

Keywords:

Mundurukú, urbanization, bilingualism, Indigenous language, language vitality

Introduction

Migration is defined as “the movement of persons away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border or within a State” (Sironi et al. 2019, 137). In recent times, various factors such as climate change, natural disasters, conflict, and food insecurity have driven large-scale population displacements (McAuliffe & Oucho 2024). Indigenous populations have also faced internal displacements due to these and other challenges, including limited access to essential services such as education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. As Trujano (2008, 24) points out, “rural-urban internal migration is perhaps one of the most pressing issues affecting Indigenous peoples around the world today.”

Migration among these communities can take multiple forms, including rural-to-rural and rural-to-urban migration, urbanization, displacement, forced removal, and return migration (Trujano 2008, 21). This phenomenon is evident in Brazil, where recent data from the 2022 Census (IBGE 2024) reveal significant shifts in the distribution of the Indigenous population. For the first time, most of Brazil’s Indigenous people reside in urban areas: in 2022, approximately 53.97% (914,746 individuals) lived in cities, while 46.03% (780,090 individuals) remained in rural areas. This increase in the urban Indigenous population cannot be attributed solely to recent migration but is also linked to changes in census methodology and identity recognition (Bello 2024). Since 1991, when “Indigenous” was first included as an explicit category for racial/ethnic self-identification, and more recently with the addition of questions about ethnic affiliation and language (IBGE 2024), the number of individuals reclaiming their ancestral identity has increased as they

attempt to reconnect with their historical origins.

The integration of Indigenous peoples into urban life has some implications for their cultural practices, social structures, and language use (Peters & Andersen 2013). In urban contexts, the preservation and transmission of ancestral languages can be challenging, especially when opportunities for communication with other speakers are limited. For instance, a study on Mundurukú undergraduate students in Santarém, Pará state, found that Portuguese is predominantly used in public spaces (Carneiro & Batista 2020). Of the 27 participants in the study, sixteen neither understood nor spoke Mundurukú, two had some comprehension but were unable to speak it, and only nine were bilingual. These bilingual students had migrated from the Mundurukú territories in Jacareacanga to Santarém, specifically to pursue higher education. They reported using their language among themselves, but Portuguese remained the dominant language in other domains.

In this study, I examine the impact of rural-to-urban migration on the vitality of the Mundurukú language (Tupí family), focusing specifically on the urban area of Jacareacanga, Pará, which remains understudied. Although 59% of the municipality’s population is Indigenous, and 14% of them reside in the urban center (IBGE n.d.), little attention has been given to how this demographic shift influences language use and transmission. In the officially demarcated Mundurukú territories in the rural areas of Jacareacanga, the language remains the primary means of daily communication. However, as migration to urban areas increases, bilingualism has become more common, with many individuals now equally proficient in both Mundurukú and Portuguese. This raises important questions about the future of the Mundurukú language in urban environments and the key factors influencing its maintenance and

intergenerational transmission. Preliminary results of this study indicate that strong social ties and connections to rural villages support language preservation, while long-term residency in the city and education can pose threats to it.

The Mundurukú: territory, population and language use

The Mundurukú (endonym *Wĩyĩũyũ*) are a Tupian nation primarily located in northern Brazil, in the states of Pará (PA) and Amazonas (AM). According to the Instituto Socioambiental (ISA n.d.), they inhabit ten officially recognized territories (see Table 1), with the majority of the population concentrated in three: Sai-Cinza and Mundurukú in Pará, and Coatá-Laranjal in Amazonas.

population now at 24,042 residents, Indigenous individuals account for 59% of the municipality’s inhabitants. It is therefore reasonable to infer that most of the Indigenous people in Jacareacanga, which includes the main Mundurukú territories—Sai-Cinza and Mundurukú—are probably members of this community, including those living in urban areas. In these two territories, the ancestral language is used in everyday life, acquired by children as their first language, spoken by many—particularly elders, women, and children—as their only language, and spoken fluently by people of all ages, ensuring its continued vitality in the region. In other territories, Portuguese tends to be the dominant language, or families are linguistically mixed, with some members speaking the ancestral language and others not.

State	Indigenous territory	Municipality	Other nations	Indigenous residents
PA	Sai Cinza	Jacareacanga	—	1,653
PA	Munduruku	Jacareacanga / Itaituba	Apiaká and uncontacted peoples	9,257
PA	Praia do Índio	Itaituba	—	158
PA	Praia do Mangue	Itaituba	—	180
PA	Sawre Ba’pim	Itaituba	—	d.n.a
PA	Sawré Muybu	Itaituba / Trairão	—	d.n.a.
PA	*Munduruku-Taquara	Aveiro / Belterra	—	213
PA	*Bragança / Marituba	Belterra	—	200
PA	*Planalto Santareno	Santarém	Apiaká	d.n.a.
AM	Coatá-Laranjal	Borba	Sateré-Mawé	4,115

Table 1. Main territories of the Mundurukú people (ISA, n.d.) and total number of residents in each territory (IBGE, 2022). Notes: Asterisks (*) indicate territories with recently claimed ancestral ties. “d.n.a.” stands for data not available in the IBGE census.

According to the 2010 Brazilian Census (IBGE 2012), the Mundurukú were among the 15 largest Indigenous nations in Brazil, with a population of 13,103 individuals. While detailed data on individual Indigenous nations from the 2022 Census has not yet been released, the Indigenous population in Jacareacanga, where this research was conducted, has reached 14,216 (IBGE n.d.). With Jacareacanga’s total

Studying the Mundurukú’s linguistic situation in urban areas is crucial for several reasons. First, as Indigenous populations increasingly migrate to or integrate into urban areas, patterns of language use may shift, often leading to increased bilingualism and, in some cases, language loss. Thus, understanding how the Mundurukú language is maintained or weakened in urban settings can provide

valuable insights into the factors that support or disrupt its transmission. Second, urbanization presents both challenges and opportunities for Indigenous language vitality. While exposure to Portuguese-dominant environments may accelerate language shift, urban areas can also serve as spaces for cultural and linguistic activism, education, and policy development. Finally, examining the dynamics of Mundurukú in Jacareacanga contributes to broader discussions on Indigenous language preservation in Brazil, particularly in regions where Indigenous people form a significant portion of the population. Identifying the mechanisms that enable the continued use of Mundurukú in urban settings may allow for strategies for its long-term preservation, both in Jacareacanga and beyond.

Methodological approaches

I began working with the Mundurukú and their language in the late 1990s and have since witnessed significant changes in the community's cultural and linguistic practices. Today, bilingualism is far more common than it was back then, and a growing number of Mundurukú individuals now reside in urban areas. However, these changes are not necessarily negative, particularly in the realm of education. Over time, the Mundurukú have increasingly pursued higher education, which unfortunately often necessitates relocating to larger cities, as was the case with the Mundurukú students in Santarém, previously mentioned. Many young Mundurukú have already earned university degrees, expanding their opportunities and influence. As a result, many choose to settle in urban areas to secure employment, further contributing to their integration into city life. In fact, better education was one of the major reasons cited by participants in this research for choosing to live in the city of Jacareacanga, as we will see later.

Another key factor driving their integration into urban centers and non-Indigenous culture could be activism. The fight for their rights and the defense of their territories has compelled them to learn Portuguese in order to participate in political movements. As they engage in activism and advocacy, their use of Portuguese intensifies, as political discourse and negotiations demand some fluency in the national language. Consequently, while activism strengthens their political presence, it also reinforces the linguistic shift toward Portuguese in urban settings.

To explore these hypotheses further, a study was conducted in December 2024 in the city of Jacareacanga, located in the state of Pará, Brazil. The primary data collection instrument was a sociolinguistic questionnaire adapted from the *Guia de Pesquisa e Documentação para o Inventário Nacional da Diversidade Linguística* (INDL), published by the Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional (IPHAN 2016a-b). This instrument allows for a comprehensive understanding of the language practices and attitudes within the urban setting, in other words, the investigation of various aspects of the dynamics of the Mundurukú language, including:

- Demographic composition and language use: identification of the demographic composition of the urban population, analysis of different generations of speakers, and examination of the use of the Mundurukú and Portuguese languages both inside and outside households, as well as the linguistic attitudes of community members.
- Intergenerational transmission: evaluation of the process of language transmission to younger generations, with special attention to the absence of transmission, which may indicate signs of linguistic decline.
- Influence of Portuguese: investigation of the degree of influence of the

Portuguese language, allowing the identification of patterns of linguistic change and adaptation.

- Variation across social domains: analysis of language use variations in different social contexts, such as family, school, work, and other environments, to understand the domains where the language is more frequently used and how this reflects its vitality and status.

The survey was conducted with the authorization and collaboration of the Pusuru Mundurukú Association, based in the same town.¹ The teachers Auriciana Dace, Edilene Kirixi, Rosaleide Akay, Rosiane Kaba and Eliza Akai Wiui played an active role in the interviews, which were primarily conducted in person, often using a door-to-door approach, with responses recorded on printed forms. I am deeply grateful to these collaborators for their invaluable contributions.

Data were collected from 75 households, comprising 431 individuals and accounting for 21.5% of the city's Indigenous population, which totals 2,002.² This enabled us to gain a comprehensive understanding of the status of the Mundurukú language in urban settings, with a focus on identifying key factors for its preservation and strengthening.

Characteristics of Mundurukú families and households in Jacareacanga

The Mundurukú families residing in the city who participated in this study are not concentrated in a specific neighborhood but are dispersed across various areas, primarily in the peripheries. Most live in simple

homes, typically wooden houses, with limited access to sanitation. Their financial situation is also precarious, with many relying on financial assistance from government programs to meet their basic needs.

Additionally, Mundurukú families tend to be larger than the national average, a trend that is even more pronounced in urban settings. In Jacareacanga, the average household size is 4.69 residents, significantly higher than the national average of 3.32 (IBGE, n.d.). In our sample, the average Mundurukú household consists of 5.7 residents. This disparity highlights the unique demographic characteristics of urban Mundurukú families and the potential challenges they face in terms of housing and public services.

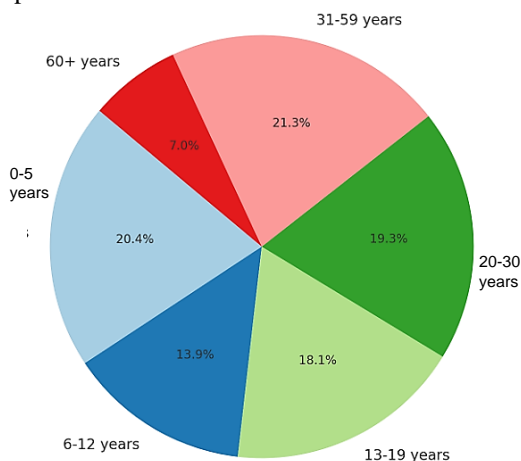


Fig. 1. Percentage distribution of the Mundurukú in Jacareacanga by age groups.

Turning now to the sociolinguistic questionnaire, Mundurukú household residents were categorized into the following age groups: 0-5 years, 6-12 years, 13-19 years, 20-30 years, 31-59 years, and

¹ In May 2024, a research proposal was presented to the Mundurukú people during a meeting involving the author, representatives of the Association, and members of the community. The research objectives and procedures were explained, and the community granted authorization by signing a consent form. They expressed agreement with all aspects of the study and provided support, including personnel to assist with the interviews.

² As previously pointed out, there is no information on whether the Indigenous inhabitants of the urban area of Jacareacanga belong to the Mundurukú nation, but they are certainly the majority.

60 years or older. Figure 1 illustrates the percentage distribution of the Mundurukú population by age groups, highlighting differences in age composition. This demographic information is crucial for understanding language transmission patterns across generations, as younger individuals may exhibit different linguistic behaviors compared to older generations.

In Jacareacanga, the largest age groups are those aged 31-59 (21.3%, or 92 adults) and 0-5 years (20.4%, or 88 young children), indicating a relatively young population and a significant proportion of adults in their productive years. The 20-30 years age group also stands out, accounting for 19.3% of the total population living in the city (83 individuals). Children aged 6-12 years (13.9%, or 60 individuals) and adolescents aged 13-19 (18.1%, or 78 individuals) show a considerable distribution, albeit lower than the younger and adult age groups. In contrast, the elderly population (60+ years) is the least represented, comprising only 7% of the total (30 individuals). The higher concentration of individuals under 60 years of age may be attributed to the two main factors driving people to stay in the city: education and work.

The Family domain and language use: preliminary results

Fishman (1965) introduced the concept of domains of language behavior to examine how individuals and communities make language choices in multilingual settings. These domains—family, religion, education, employment, and friendship—reflect some social spheres where language use varies (Fishman 1972).

This section presents some results regarding the use of Mundurukú and Portuguese in family settings, relating them to the length of residence in Jacareacanga (see Table 2). The questionnaire included a question about the primary language used in family interactions, offering the options: “mostly

Mundurukú,” “mostly Portuguese,” or “both languages.” For the length of residence in the city, three time-frames were established: less than 5 years, between 5 and 10 years, and more than 10 years. Out of the 75 households surveyed, 22 families had lived in the city for less than 5 years, 17 families for 5 to 10 years, and 36 families had resided in Jacareacanga for over 10 years. Mundurukú was the predominant language in family interactions in 31 households, while 41 reported using both the Indigenous language and Portuguese, and only three showed a predominance of the national language, Portuguese.

The survey reveals interesting tendencies in language use among the Indigenous families in Jacareacanga:

- Recent residents (0-5 years): Among families who have lived in the city for less than 5 years, the native language, Mundurukú, remains dominant in family interactions. This suggests that recent arrivals are more likely to maintain strong ties to their linguistic heritage.
- Intermediate residency (5-10 years): For families residing in the city between 5 and 10 years, there is a noticeable increase in bilingualism (53%), and a decline in exclusive use of Mundurukú (29%). This indicates a gradual integration of Portuguese into daily communication.
- Long-term residency (10+ years): Among families living in Jacareacanga for over a decade, bilingualism becomes the predominant pattern (64%). While the use of Mundurukú remains significant, there is a clear shift towards incorporating Portuguese, reflecting the influence of extended urban residency.

The graph below provides a clearer visualization of the relationship between language use and the length of residence in the city. The proportion of families exclusively using Mundurukú declines with longer residency, dropping from 59%

among those living in the city for less than five years to 31% among residents of over ten years standing. At the same time, there is an important increase in bilingualism and the use of both languages in family interactions, rising from 41% among recent residents to 64% for long-term residents. Encouragingly, the exclusive use of Portuguese remains low across all groups. While Portuguese is becoming a part of daily life, it does not entirely replace the native language.

The family domain, a crucial space of interaction, is typically characterized by informal/intimate communication among family members. The growing preference for Portuguese in these private settings raises concerns about the vitality of the Mundurukú language in the city. In other words, this variation in linguistic behavior draws attention to the impact of urbanization on linguistic practices and poses challenges for the intergenerational transmission of the ancestral language.

Length of residence in city	Mostly Mundurukú	Mostly Portuguese	Both	Total
0-5 years	13	0	9	22
5-10 years	7	1	9	17
10+ years	11	2	23	36
Total	31	3	41	75

Table 2. Use of Mundurukú and Portuguese by length of residence in the city.

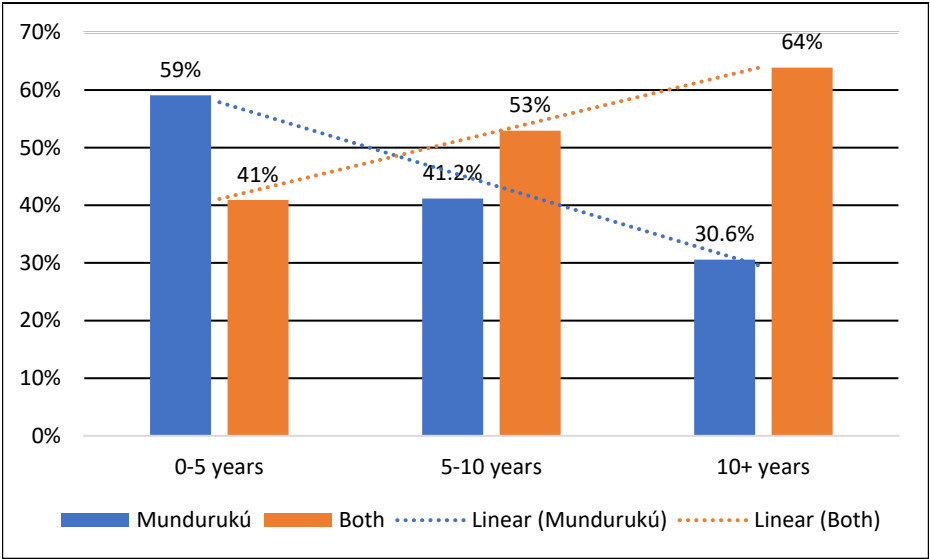


Fig. 2. Relation between language use and length of residence in the city

The findings show that the language choice undergoes changes over time among Indigenous families in Jacareacanga. While Mundurukú continues to play a vital role in their cultural identity, extended residency in the city is associated with increased bilingualism and a gradual shift toward the majority language, Portuguese.

Language acquisition and intergenerational transmission

The results so far indicate an increase in bilingualism as families spend more time in urban areas. Additionally, the questionnaire offers insights into the languages spoken across different age groups and their relationship to households where the Indigenous language is predominantly used.

even in urban settings, Mundurukú appears to remain the first language learned at home, at least for the majority of Mundurukú families.

Among adolescents aged 13-19 years, the total number of homes where both languages are spoken remains similar (47 out of 51), but the proportion of households predominantly using Mundurukú drops to

Age groups		Mundurukú	Portuguese	Mostly Mundurukú	%
5-12 years	55	50	43	18	32.7
13-19 years	51	47	47	14	27.5
20-30 years	49	48	47	13	26.5
31-59 years	49	46	42	15	30.6
60+ years	21	20	12	6	28.6

Table 3. Languages spoken by age groups and use of Mundurukú at home.

As shown in Table 3, among the 75 households surveyed, 55 included children already of school age (5-12 years), 51 included adolescents (13-19 years), 49 included individuals aged 20-30 years, another 49 included individuals aged 31-59 years, and 21 included elders aged 60 years and older. The table also highlights the total number of households where we can find Mundurukú or Portuguese speakers in different age groups, and compares these with the number of households where Mundurukú was the primary language for daily communication.

In households with children aged 5-12 years, Mundurukú is spoken by children in 50 homes (out of 55), while Portuguese is also spoken in 43. However, only 32.7% of these households (18 homes) predominantly use Mundurukú for family interactions, corroborating the prevalence of bilingualism within this age group. This high rate of bilingualism among children is largely attributed to their entry into school. Respondents reported almost unanimously that school is the primary source of Portuguese learning, whereas Mundurukú is acquired at home with the family. Thus,

14 households (27.5%). This could reflect a shift toward greater use of Portuguese during adolescence, potentially influenced by increased exposure to other social and educational environments.

The pattern continues in the 20-30 age group, where the proportion of households primarily using Mundurukú further decreases to 26.5% (13 homes out of 49), despite a consistent number of households where we find speakers of both languages.

Interestingly, in the 31-59 age group, the percentage of households predominantly using Mundurukú rises slightly to 30.6% (15 homes out of 49). This could be attributed to older adults in this age range maintaining stronger ties to traditional practices and cultural identity, balancing bilingualism with a continued commitment to preserving the Indigenous language.

Among elders aged 60 years and older, 21 households included family members from this age group, but only 28.6% (6 homes out of 21) reported Mundurukú as the primary language. While the use of the Indigenous language appears to remain relatively stable among older generations—who speak it in

20 households—these elders do not seem to play a decisive role in establishing Mundurukú as the predominant language within their families. This is important despite the possibility that some elders may still be monolingual, as fluent Portuguese speakers in this age group were reported in only 12 households.

Overall, the data suggest a gradual decline in the exclusive use of Mundurukú among younger age groups, potentially influenced by schooling and other external factors. Nevertheless, the continued presence of bilingualism and the use of Mundurukú across all age groups highlight the language's resilience and cultural significance, even in urban settings. However, its future remains at risk without the implementation of policies aimed at reinforcing its use in these environments.

The Friendship domain as a key factor contributing to the preservation of Mundurukú

The shift toward Portuguese in family interactions within the home raises concerns about the long-term vitality of the Mundurukú language in urban settings. However, other forms of engagement, such as social interactions, visits to home villages, and hosting visitors from those communities, play a crucial role in preserving the language and mitigating the risk of complete assimilation. These dynamics can be understood from the perspective of Fishman's (1965, 96-97) framework, which identifies four key sources of language variance and choice: media variance, role variance, situational variance, and domain variance. Of particular relevance here are the last three.³

The role variance source indicates that when multilingual speakers resist language shift, "inner speech remains most resistant

to interference, switching and disuse of the mother tongue." (Fishman 1965, 78) Situational variance indicates that language maintenance or shift differs across levels of formality (more formal, e.g. religion and work; less formal and intimate communication, e.g. friendship and family), with more intimate settings showing greater resistance to "interference, switching or disuse of the mother tongue." (Fishman 1965, 79) This study presents findings related to less formal and more familiar forms of communication, specifically focusing on intra- and inter-family social interactions. Finally, domain variance has to do with how language maintenance or shift varies across different domains of interaction, reflecting broader socio-cultural factors such as power dynamics, community structure, and influence.

In the case of the Mundurukú in Jacareacanga, three key factors help sustain their language despite the urbanizing pressures that favor Portuguese. First, frequent social interactions among Mundurukú families in the city, such as visits, phone calls, and casual encounters, serve as a strong mechanism for language preservation. Regardless of how long they have lived in urban areas, over 90% of respondents report using the Mundurukú language in these social exchanges. This aligns with Fishman's notion that less formal and intimate community-based interactions—where speakers feel a strong cultural connection—are more resistant to language shift.

Second, the practice of hosting visitors from Mundurukú villages also reinforces language use. During these visits, over 90% of respondents stated that they communicate in the Indigenous language with their guests, helping to sustain its use in urban households. These visits represent situational contexts where the use of

³ On media variance, Fishman (1965, 78) says, "Where literacy has been attained prior to interaction with an "other tongue" reading and writing use of the mother tongue may resist displacement longer than speaking usage."

Mundurukú remains the norm, supporting Fishman's argument that different communicative settings influence language maintenance.

Third, visits by urban residents to their home villages also contribute to preserving the language, though their frequency tends to decline with prolonged urban residency. Among long-term urban residents (over 10 years), fewer than 40% report always traveling back to their villages, compared to approximately 44% of medium-term residents (5-10 years) and over 60% of short-term residents (less than 5 years). In the case of stays of over 30 days in rural villages, the proportions are relatively consistent, with participation rates of 39% for long-term residents, 38% for medium-term residents, and 45.5% for short-term residents. These visits play a crucial role in reinforcing domain-specific language use, as interactions in the village setting are conducted almost exclusively in Mundurukú.

These initial observations suggest that maintaining strong social networks, fostering connections with village visitors, and ensuring continued mobility between urban and rural areas are key to language preservation.

However, as the duration of urban residency increases, the frequency of visits and extended stays in the villages tends to decline, which may pose challenges to language maintenance in the future, particularly concerning younger generations. For those who have lived in the city from an early age, these connections to their ancestral villages may not be as strong as those of older generations.

To safeguard the intergenerational transmission of Mundurukú, proactive measures are necessary. Strengthening cultural and linguistic ties between urban-born children and their home villages,

supporting community-led language initiatives, and implementing policies that promote bilingual education can help sustain the language across future generations.

The Education domain and its impact on Mundurukú language use

The primary factor driving language assimilation among the Mundurukú is the same one that motivates migration to urban areas: **education**⁴. Unfortunately, the current educational system primarily uses the majority language, Portuguese, as the medium of instruction, thereby excluding Mundurukú language and culture. This approach creates linguistic barriers and undermines positive attitudes toward the native language.

In Jacareacanga's urban schools, Portuguese is not taught as a second language; rather, Mundurukú children acquire proficiency in Portuguese at an early age. As previously shown (Table 3), in 43 households (78.2%), children aged 5-12 years are already fluent speakers of Portuguese. Thus, there is urgent need for mother-tongue education, which could preserve linguistic heritage while promoting academic success.

Despite Jacareacanga being the municipality with the second-largest Indigenous population—comprising more than 50% of its residents (IBGE, n.d.)—bilingual education for Mundurukú students has not yet been implemented. Implementing bilingual education is essential for reversing language shift and ensuring that the Mundurukú language thrives alongside Portuguese both within and beyond the school environment.

Granting the Mundurukú language **co-official status** in Jacareacanga could

⁴ Other reasons were mentioned, such as employment and medical treatment; however, education was cited most frequently in the responses.

represent a significant step toward promoting its linguistic and cultural recognition. Co-official status grants Indigenous languages the same legal standing as the national language within municipal education and public services. This legal recognition could encourage the continued use of the Indigenous language in daily life, contributing to language maintenance and revitalization.

Additionally, co-officialization strengthens the cultural identity and pride of Indigenous communities and improves access to public services for speakers who may not be fluent in Portuguese. In Brazil, this is already a reality in certain municipalities, such as São Gabriel da Cachoeira in Amazonas, where Indigenous languages like Nheengatu, Tukano, and Baniwa are recognized as co-official. Extending co-official status to Indigenous languages in other municipalities fosters cultural diversity and helps ensure that urbanization does not come at the expense of linguistic heritage.

Final remarks

Urbanization, combined with the absence of supportive language policies, has introduced new dynamics to the use of the Mundurukú language, as bilingualism has been accelerating in the city, posing risks to its continued use in family and community domains. The findings presented here call for an urgent implementation of bilingual education and the development of public policies aimed at strengthening and promoting the Mundurukú language in Jacareacanga, Brazil. The absence of such policies has contributed to the growing dominance of Portuguese and the gradual erosion of the Indigenous linguistic heritage.

Bilingualism is predominant among long-term urban residents, with Portuguese integration increasing over time. Encouragingly, exclusive use of Portuguese remains low across all groups. The results also highlighted age-specific language

patterns. Mundurukú remains the first language for most children, acquired at home, while Portuguese is learned at school. However, its dominance declines as children grow older, influenced by external environments. Some factors preserving Mundurukú in urban contexts are social interactions among urban Mundurukú families, hosting visitors or traveling to home villages, and maintaining traditional activities and language use.

Acknowledgements

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