

I began conducting linguistics research on the Miskitu language in 2001, working with archival materials and a native speaker who lived in the Bay Area. I later did fieldwork and studied the language in Nicaragua in 2004 under a Fulbright award, and returned for brief field visits between 2005 and 2007. I am now preparing to conduct my dissertation research on the language, looking at contact between Miskitu and other indigenous languages of the Moskitia, which occupies the northeast corner of Nicaragua and the southeast corner of Honduras.

One of my goals for this trip was to familiarize myself with the current situation in the region. In particular, I was interested in learning about existing research activities, since I have been out of that 'research loop' for the past 8 years. I was eager to make contact with researchers who are currently active in the region, and to learn about recent publications which might be relevant to my own research. In addition, the Nicaraguan Moskitia has been experiencing significant territorial pressure from non-indigenous farmers who are migrating from the Pacific side of the country, which has resulted in violent conflict and physical displacement of indigenous communities in certain parts of the region. Because of this, I also wanted to assess the socio-political climate in the region, to evaluate the feasibility (and risk) of conducting my research there, and in particular to identify field sites that would be minimally impacted by these conflicts. Finally, I needed to brush up on my Miskitu language skills, investigate reports of accelerating language change and shift towards Spanish, and familiarize myself with recent research on Miskitu and other languages of the region.

I began my two-month trip by spending a week in Managua, Nicaragua, where I fortuitously connected with a Miskitu anthropologist who I had previously met when she was studying in the US. Through her, I learned that another anthropologist who we both knew, who had done her dissertation on Miskitu children's use of language in a multilingual, multiethnic community, was in Managua on a Fulbright and was giving a talk at the university where she was teaching. At that event, and at a dinner following it, I was able to make contact with many other linguists and anthropologists who work in the Moskitia.

From Managua I travelled to Costa Rica, where I had been invited to participate in a week-long workshop on motion predicates, with a focus on developing a standard elicitation methodology and typology of motion predicates. Other participants in this workshop included Miskitu and Mayangna linguists, as well as linguists from Mexico and Costa Rica. This workshop was beneficial for a number of reasons: it advanced my understanding of a complex and under-described aspect of Miskitu grammar; it allowed me to spend time with a native-speaker linguist whom I have known for many years, but with whom I have not had an opportunity to collaborate before now; and it inducted me into a long-term research project that will broaden my own research skills and expertise on the language.

The day before this workshop ended, and I was scheduled to return to Nicaragua, I received notice from the University of Kansas, which was sponsoring the Miskitu language program I was enrolled in, that the State Department had issued a Travel Alert for US citizens travelling to Nicaragua. This alert warned that the Nicaraguan government was becoming increasingly sensitive to criticism of its political, human rights, and environmental activities, and had denied entry to or expelled academic researchers, journalists, missionaries and activists from the US and Mexico. The message urged us to avoid publically writing or speaking about the upcoming presidential elections, the proposed interoceanic canal, or any politically sensitive topics. This caused a great deal of anxiety among many of my fellow researchers who work in the Moskitia, since any work with indigenous or minority populations in Nicaragua is

unavoidably politically sensitive. Fortunately, I had no trouble crossing back in to Nicaragua, nor did any of my colleagues.

Upon returning to Nicaragua I began a 6-week Miskitu language course, which occupied the remainder of my time in the country. During the first week of the course we were in Granada, Nicaragua, taking language classes and meeting with local researchers. We had an unexpected and wonderful experience during that week when an archaeologist from Canada, who runs an archaeology field school every summer in Nicaragua, was called in to examine human remains unearthed during construction of a municipal basketball court near Managua. He invited us to visit just two days after it was discovered, while his very lucky field school students excavated the site, which turned out to be at least two thousand years old, and was unlike anything previously discovered in the country. He was certain it would represent a major advance in the understanding of Nicaraguan prehistory.

The final five weeks of my language course took place in Puerto Cabezas (Bilwi), on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. The language course was excellent, and the other students in the course were mostly graduate students who – like me – were preparing to do their dissertation research in the Moskitia. My Miskitu language knowledge also improved, both in my speaking ability and my awareness of aspects of the language that require further exploration. The other students provided a great opportunity to learn about and discuss current research, and we collectively had a wealth of knowledge and perspectives on the region and on past research from a variety of disciplines. It was also fortunate that several of these students were focusing their research on the Honduran Moskitia, a region that I have not yet explored and where I hope to do part of my dissertation research.

A significant downside to the part of the trip was that I – and my classmates, our local teachers, and a large portion of the population of the region – became very ill during our first week in Puerto Cabezas. Despite going to the most respected clinic in the region, it was three weeks before I was back on my feet, and I hadn't fully recovered until two weeks after I returned to the US. This made it very difficult to meet with local researchers, and impossible to travel to remote communities that I had identified as potential field sites. However, I was able to visit several nearby and more accessible communities, including my previous field site, and speak with people from remote communities who were visiting Puerto Cabezas.

I was exceptionally fortunate in being able to meet with several researchers while I was in Puerto Cabezas, including linguists, who live in or where visiting the region. As will the researchers I met with in Managua at the beginning of my trip, many of these were new contacts, and several I had met previously but had not been in contact with for years. I discussed my dissertation plan with these individuals and received useful feedback that I believe will improve the final project.

I did identify some potential field sites, but I will need to return to the region to determine which of these would be optimal – or even possible – for my research. I also realized that the political tensions in the region are likely to have an impact on the selection of a field site, and may force me to alter my research questions and methodology. My health experiences reinforced my conviction that my dissertation field research should take place during the dry season whenever possible, to reduce the risk of illness and to facilitate ease of travel. My new understanding of the inadequacy of existing descriptions of the language will also influence the kinds of questions I will attempt to answer in my dissertation research.