



1

Introduction

The Desano people¹ live in the southeastern part of Colombia in the department called the Vaupés and also across the border in Brazil. The majority live on tributaries of the main rivers, the Vaupés and the Papurí. Some have settled among other indigenous groups in larger communities along the Vaupés and Papurí rivers. In these communities the children generally grow up speaking the language of the dominant group rather than their own language. This is usually their mother's language since Desanos are not allowed to marry Desanos; rather, they marry cross-cousins or others from the neighboring indigenous groups who also belong linguistically to the Eastern Tucanoan language family (Waltz and Wheeler 1972:128). Those with Desano parentage (father) number around 1,000 people. Although many Desanos can speak Spanish with varying degrees of fluency, in their own villages they almost exclusively use their own language. Most small children and older adults know almost no Spanish, although they understand other Tucanoan languages because of cross marriages.

There are twenty-two Desano dialects. The names of the dialects are listed in the Desano-Spanish school dictionary (Miller, to appear). Each dialect represents a group called children of 'the name of the group'. The Desanos themselves have arranged the various groups into hierarchical order. The top group is *boreka porā* 'bass fish children', and the lowest group is *dihikērā* or *oyoa* 'servants'. In the middle of this hierarchy is a subgroup called *si?bia bāsā*. In this subgroup there are three dialect groups. They live in Brazil, and the Desanos of the other groups say that their dialects are mutually unintelligible with the rest of the

¹ The Desano people use the form *wīrā* for their language and language family. The origin of this term is not known. They use *wīrā* when referring to themselves in Desano, but call themselves Desano in Spanish.

groups. The top groups are said to be the older brother of the others, and the lower groups are called 'our grandparents'. We have made comparisons among four groups, and the greatest differences have been noted between the *boreka porã* 'bass fish children' and the *sübũperu porã* 'type of fish children' dialects. The main difference is noted in the sentence introducer word 'thus' that is very commonly used. In the former dialect it is *eropa* and in the latter *daha*. Examples in this grammar are from the *boreka porã* dialect, as is the material in Kaye's thesis.

The following is a typological summary of Desano which shows that Desano has most of the correlates of an SOV language.

Miller, Marion. 1999. Desano Grammar. Studies in the Languages of Columbia Vol. 6. Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics.