

My circum-Brazil border research

Over a period of several years, I have made recordings of L2 Portuguese as spoken in communities straddling the border between Brazil and neighboring Spanish-speaking countries. In all instances, the speakers were natives of and lived in the respective Spanish-speaking countries.



Uruguay: Rivera (~Santana do Livramento, Brazil)

This dry open border community was the site of the original ground-breaking “Fronterizo” studies of Rona and Hensey, and is still characterized by an amazing variety of language-contact phenomena.



No barriers separate the two cities/countries; vehicles and pedestrians freely move between the two nations with no border controls; “calles” change to “ruas”, but there are few other visual indications.

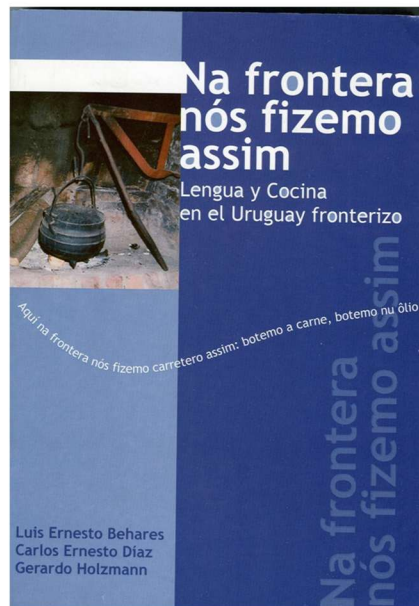


I collected data in Rivera on two separate occasions, taking advantage of contacts given to me by colleagues at the national university in Montevideo where I was giving seminars. I stayed in a

proletarian hotel frequented by truck drivers and *obrer*os, which gave me immediate contact with a variety of Uruguayan Portuguese/Fronterizo speakers.



The hybrid language of northern Uruguay appears in some serious publications.



The Rivera artist Eugenio “Chito” de Mello has a number of CDs in “Portuñol,” including some humorous “lessons” on how to speak this variety. In Rivera none were sold in stores, but I bought some (probably contraband) from street vendors. I heard that a couple of them could be obtained in a small bakery, and when I went there I was able to buy them. Later he posted them on his website; after his death (2020), some are available on YouTube.



Uruguay: Chuy (~Chuí, Brazil)

Another open/dry border in northern Uruguay separates the small town of Chuy from the even smaller Brazilian town Chuí. In an article by the Brazilian creolist Hildo do Couto, he mentions that in Chuí Brazilians often speak Spanish, which is exceptional given that in other border communities, only Spanish speakers acquire L2 Portuguese but Brazilians never learn or speak Spanish. In 2012 I was invited to a creolist conference in São Paulo, Brazil and I took advantage of the proximity to Uruguay to purchase a ticket to Montevideo. A Uruguayan colleague at a U. S. university gave me a contact with some school teachers, who invited me to visit. I rented a car at the Montevideo airport and drove along the coast to Chuy. My hotel was on the main street that separates the two cities/countries, and as in Rivera/Livramento, there are no visible indications of a border. The Uruguayan side of the street is lined with duty-free shops, and people driving from Chuy into the interior of Uruguay have to clear a customs inspection. The day before my departure I took my laptop and recorders to show them that they were used and not purchased locally, since I would be driving out very early the next morning.







Unlike most other trans-Brazilian border communities, Chuy is larger than its Brazilian counterpart, and has the local fire station and hospital as well as a larger school, which may account for local Brazilians' frequent use of Spanish. In Chuí I met the mayor and some other folks at the city hall, all of whom spoke both (very good) Spanish and Portuguese. Altogether a very noteworthy sociolinguistic environment, well-deserving of further study.



Paraguay: Pedro Juan Caballero (~ Ponta Porã)

While doing research with the Afro-Paraguayan communities, I wanted to explore the linguistic situation along Paraguay's long and mostly dry border with Brazil. A colleague in Asunción put me in contact with a well-connected person in Pedro Juan Caballero, the largest city on the Brazilian border. I contacted him and he graciously offered to help. Pedro Juan Caballero shares a completely open dry border with the Brazilian city of Ponta Porã.



BRAZIL

PARAGUAY



PARAGUAY

BRAZIL



BRAZIL

PARAGUAY

Unlike in northern Uruguay, few residents of PJC speak Portuguese as a home language, but most have at least some L2 competence. I had recently obtained a visa for Brazil (the previous

one had expired), and the conditions were that a first entry into Brazil had to be made within 30 days or the visa would be invalidated. Since there are no border controls between Pedro Juan Caballero and Ponta Porã (which would be my first entry into Brazil with the new visa), my friend accompanied me to the Ponta Porã police station, where border matters were handled. I explained my situation but the officer told me that he could not stamp my passport for just walking across the border, but only for people who had traveled well into the interior of Brazil. Since the officer knew my friend (who had secured soccer game tickets among other favors), he obligingly told me to come back later in the day, ostensibly returning from the interior (but in reality just from across the street); I did return that afternoon and he stamped my passport, validating the visa.

Paraguay: Capitán Bado (~ Coronel Sapucaia)

On my second trip to Pedro Juan Caballero, my friend drove me to the town of Capitán Bado, which shares a dery open border with Coronel Sapucaia, Brazil (note the higher military rank for the Brazilian town). As in Pedro Juan Caballero, there are no border controls or visible marking of the border, except for small *hitos* in a few green spaces.



PARAGUAY

BRAZIL



BRAZIL

PARAGUAY

I was also welcomed by the mayor of Capitán Bado.



On the way back we stopped at the roadside community of Zanja Pytã, with Paraguay on the left side of the road and Brazil on the right. I made a few L2 Portuguese recordings on the Paraguayan side.



PARAGUAY

BRAZIL

PARAGUAY

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Zanja Pytã



Paraguay: Bella Vista Norte (~Bela Vista, Brazil)

During the same trip, my friend and his family drove me northward to Bella Vista Norte, which is separated from Bela Visa, Brazil by a small river with a bridge for pedestrians and vehicles.





I am standing in Paraguay; Brazil is across the river.

Paso de los Libres, Argentina (~Uruguiana, Brazil)

The small city of Paso de los Libres, Argentina is connected by a bridge across the wide Uruguay River with the larger city of Uruguiana, Brazil. During one of my first trips to the Paraguay-Misiones-Uruguay corridor I spent a few days in Libres, conducting interviews and exploring this zone.

Paso de los Libres (Argentina) /Uruguaiiana (Brazil)

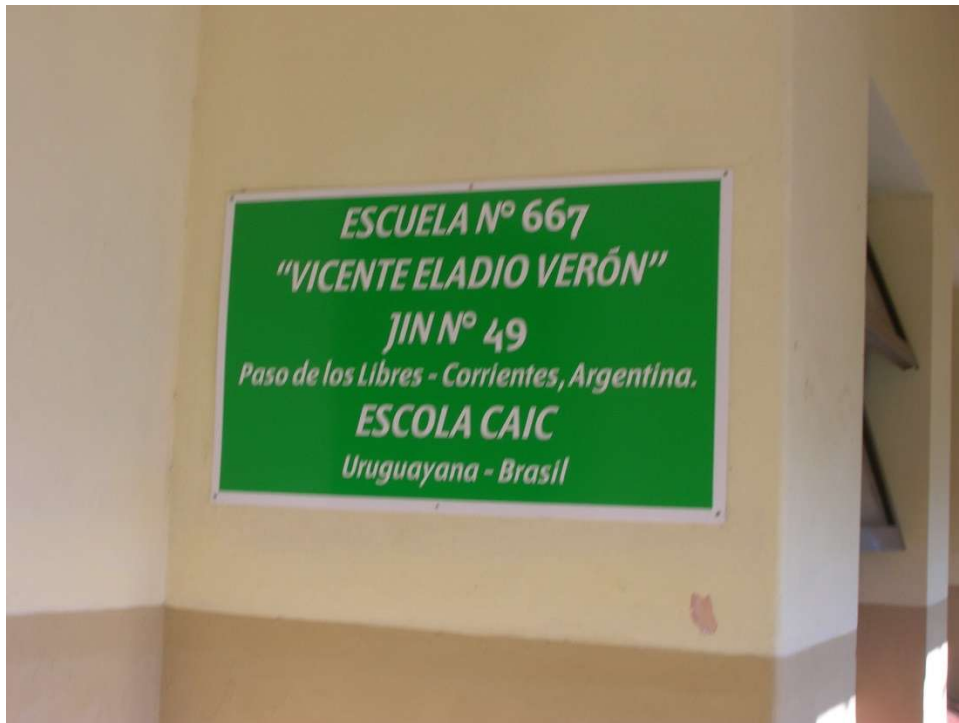




ARGENTINA

BRAZIL

Although strictly speaking Libres is a border community, most residents have little or no contact with Brazil. Prices are higher in Brazil, and while the bridge crossing is free, only vehicles are allowed, not pedestrians. Numerous Brazilians enter Libre's small duty-free shopping zone, and it is here that most L2 Portuguese speakers are found. There is a "bilingual" school in Libres paired with an institution in Uruguaiiana, but the school in Libres is situated in a working-class neighborhood with little interest in Brazil. Some of the teachers at the school expressed the cynical sentiment that the school was chosen for the experimental agreement so that if things failed, there would be no influential (i.e. wealthy) families to protest. I also visited the partner school in Uruguaiiana, situated at the farthest extreme of the city from the river, in an equally working-class neighborhood. Attempts to teach Portuguese in the Libres school and Spanish in the Uruguaiiana school had little chance of success, since few students would ever be in a position to utilize the "other" language.



Leticia, Colombia (~Tabatinga, Brazil [~Santa Rosa, Peru])

Colombia has a dry open border with Brazil in the Amazon city of Leticia, which borders on Tabatinga, Brazil (and with Santa Rosa, Peru across the Amazon River). In order to investigate

the linguistic situation in Leticia, in 2010 I took advantage of a research trip in San Basilio de Palenque and took a flight to Leticia. The city cannot be reached by land from elsewhere in Colombia (flying over the dense Amazon rain forest no roads can be seen), and only along the Amazon River from other cities in Peru and Brazil.



I had no contacts in Leticia, but the folks at the bed and breakfast where I stayed helped me get started. Leticia is quite small and all points can be reached on foot.



The open border with Tabatinga, Brazil has a check point for vehicles (taxis cannot usually cross the border), but pedestrians move freely between the countries without any formalities.





BRAZIL COLOMBIA

I made a number of L2 Portuguese recordings in Leticia, then out of curiosity, I took a small motor launch across the relatively narrow Amazon River to the Peruvian island of Santa Rosa. It is only a few blocks long, mostly small *comedores* serving the people who live on or near the river.











Back in Leticia, a family from Sweden were staying at the bed and breakfast, and while we were chatting over breakfast they told me that the one big tourist hotel in Leticia had a show displaying an anacoxonda. Since they spoke very little Spanish, they invited me to come along and help interpret. We ended up doing more than that (the snake handler is on the right).



The Amazon region around Leticia is home to numerous indigenous communities, who have the right to live in Colombia, Brazil, or Peru without restriction or documentation. The main ethnic groups are Tikuna and Huitoto. A young woman who worked at the b&b invited me to visit a school for indigenous children just outside of Leticia (she rode her bike, I took a local bus). There I met numerous students, several of whom invited me to visit their communities.



Over the next few days I was able to visit some Tikuna and Huitoto communities and speak with shamans, caciques, and other community leaders. As with indigenous communities elsewhere, they are faced with the task of maintaining their ancestral languages and cultures as young people increasingly turn away from the old ways and embrace modern Colombian society.







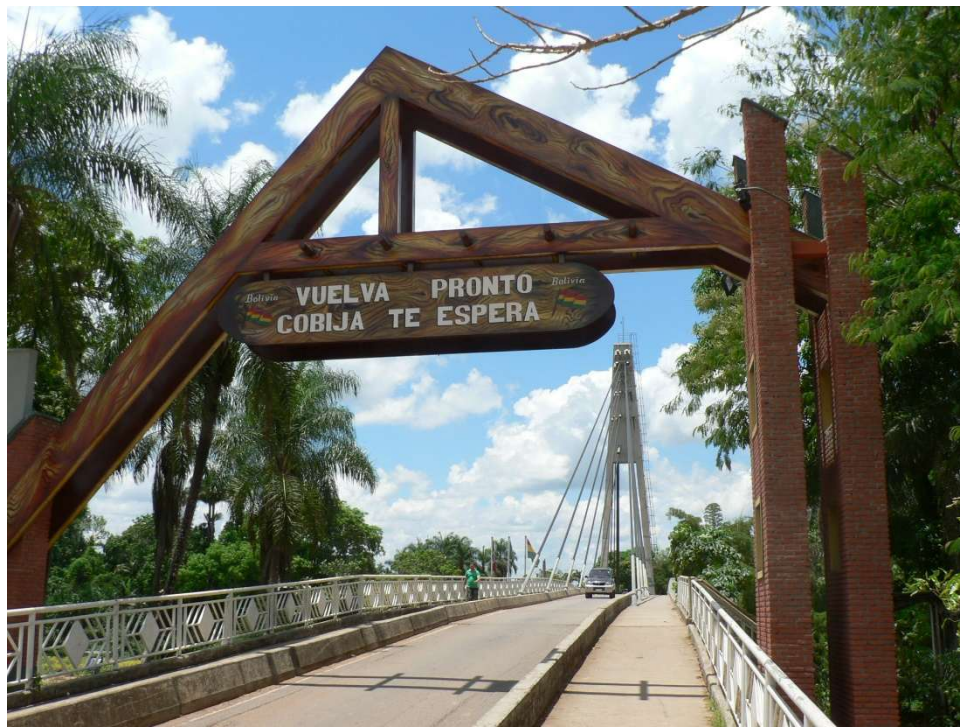
An amazing and totally unexpected dividend, the opportunity to get a glimpse of the intricate Amazon society.

During the week that I moved freely among three countries, the only time I had to show identification was at the airport for my departure.

Brazil: Cobija (~Brasília, Brazil)

While conducting research with the Afro-Bolivian communities, I decided to explore Bolivia's (almost) dry border with Brazil in the city of Cobija, separated by the narrow Acre River from Brasília, Brazil.





I asked several colleagues in La Paz for information about Cobija and I was finally sent to an employee from that region of the department of Pando who worked in a government office. He called a journalist friend in Cobija and she agreed to show me around and help me get started with interviews.



Given the close proximity of Brazil (a narrow bridge for pedestrians and vehicles separates the two countries), most residents of Cobija know at least some Portuguese, and the local variety of Spanish is sprinkled with loan words and calques from Portuguese.

Bolivia: Guayaramerín (~Guajaramerim, Brazil)

I also wanted to explore another Bolivian border city, Guayaramerín, situated across the broad Mamoré River from its Brazilian counterpart Guajaramerim. None of my colleagues in Bolivia had any contacts there, so after poking around on the internet, I found the web site of the city government, and from my office at Penn State I called and explained my interest. The receptionist put me in contact with a municipal employee and he offered to help me. On my next trip to work with the Afro-Bolivian communities and flew to Guayaramerín. Brazil can be reached by motor launches, but the river is wide and turbulent, and prices are higher in Brazil, so few Bolivians cross over. Brazilians on the other hand make duty-free purchases in Guayaramerín, so I interviewed individuals involved in commerce with Brazilians. Residents who do not usually meet Brazilians speak little Portuguese.







I also traveled to the nearby village of Cachuela Esperanza, another “border” town engaged in informal commerce with Brazil.







Peru: Iñapari (~Assis, Brazil; Bolpebra, Bolivia)

Peru has an interesting triple-border configuration with the small town of Iñapari, situated across the narrow Acre River from Assis, Brazil, and across a narrow creek from the tiny Bolivian outpost of Bolpebra (BOLivia-PERu, BRASil). During one of the visits when I was invited to teach a seminar at San Marcos university in Lima, I decided to explore Iñapari. I flew to Puerto Maldonado. At my lodging I was put in contact with a driver who would take me at least part of the way to Iñapari.



To begin the trip, we had to cross the Madre de Dios River in a small ferry.



I had no contacts in Iñapari, but once I found lodging, I went to the municipal building and introduced myself. The folks there were very helpful in getting me started with interviews with speakers of L2 Portuguese. Iñapari is a relatively new town, and many of the residents are indigenous Quechuas from the highlands.







A bridge for vehicles and pedestrians connects Iñapari with the larger city of Assis, Brazil. There are no checkpoints or other border controls.









The border with Bolivia is marked by a narrow creek, and since there is only a symbolic presence in Bolivia (a few houses and a military outpost), few Peruvians cross over.



BOLIVIA

PERU



I had not intended to cross to Bolivia since I did not have a visa (since my work with the Afro-Bolivians, Bolivia was now requiring a visa with many conditions for U. S. citizens), and I was only going to walk over to Assis to satisfy my curiosity. Things changed when a dentist I met at the hostel invited me to walk down to the little sandy beach along the Acre River. It was a hot day and the river was very low, and many people were playing in the water.





(Bolivia upper, Peru lower)



(Brazil, top; Bolivia, middle; Peru, bottom)

I took off my shoes, rolled up my pants, and joined in.



While we were standing on a sand bar in the middle of the river, we met a young Peruvian man who was living in Assis. When I told him about my interest in the linguistics of border communities, he said “you must be John Lipski”! It turns out that he had taken linguistics classes at San Marcos and was familiar with my research.



They convinced me to walk over to Bolpebra, assuring me that no one would ask me for documents (and this turned out to be true; in fact there was almost nobody about). Bolpebra is just a point on the map, with a symbolic Bolivian presence (as in Cobija and Iñapari, many indigenous residents from the highlands).









We then crossed/waded over to Brazil and our friend took us on a walking tour of Assis, then invited us to his apartment for coffee. This triple-border environment deserves further study.







Venezuela: Santa Elene de Uairén (~Pacaraima, Brazil)

Venezuela's Amazon region has a long border with Brazil; the most accessible community is Santa Elena de Uairén, in the spectacular Gran Sabana region of Venezuela. In 2012 I decided to explore this border environment to add to my comparative research on communities just

outside the borders of Brazil. A colleague from Venezuela who knows people from all over the country put me in contact with a person in Puerto Ordaz, who in turn gave me the name of a woman who worked in the government book store in Santa Elena de Uairén. I called her from my office at Penn State and after I explained my interest, she offered to help me.

Getting to Santa Elena was no easy matter. At the Caracas airport, there were already signs of the country's economic deterioration, with even police officers offering to change dollars at much more than the official rate. After changing money very discreetly, I took a flight to Puerto Ordaz, the main area of the twin-city complex now known as Ciudad Guayana. The next day I took a taxi to an improvised open-air "terminal" in San Félix, the older and smaller half of Cd. Guayana. There I boarded the first of a series of *carros por puesto*, informal taxis that take passengers from one town to the next. When we emerged from the forest into the Gran Sabana (Amazon highlands), the contrast was striking.



I took the last leg of the journey in a local bus, since in one town there was a roadblock and I had to get out of the car and walk several blocks around the obstruction to find a bus.



Santa Elena de Uairén is a very small town (less than 25,000 inhabitants), and all points can be easily reached on foot.









The person I had been in contact with helped me get started. I conducted numerous L2 Portuguese interviews in a travel agency, a radio station, stores, and the cultural center.

Venezuela has a dry open border with Brazil in this region, but Santa Elena de Uairén is not right on the border, but several miles away, with some indigenous communal lands in between.



We took an informal taxi to the Brazilian town of Pacaraima “La Línea”. There was a sort of customs post at the entry, but there were no formalities and we entered freely.



There were many shops that catered to Venezuelans, and I did some interviews in L2 Spanish of the merchants.







Back in Santa Elena, I walked to the adjacent Pemón indigenous community of Manak-Krü





I started a conversation with people outside of the house seen above, and they welcomed me and introduced me to community leaders and gave me a walking tour of the community. We talked about the dilemma of ancestral language revitalization. As in so many other indigenous

communities, younger residents want to speak only Spanish and enter the dominant Euro-mestizo economy.



I then hiked up the mountainside and got some spectacular views of the area.







On the way down from San Félix, I noticed a sign on the highway pointing to El Callao, where I knew that the Venezuelan calypso could be found. It is a gold-mining town that received many immigrants from the Lesser Antilles, speakers of Creole French and Creole English, and I knew that at least some speakers could probably still be found. A colleague at the Santa Elena cultural center called up an acquaintance in El Callao, who offered to show me around.



I got of the *carro por puesto* at a parking lot on the main highway, then took a small van to El Callao, where French Creole was prominently displayed.









I spent a couple of days in El Callao, learning about the Carnival preparations and other cultural events. I met and interviewed two of the last speakers of Creole French (they spoke *patois* and I spoke basic Haitian Creole adding the modifications that I knew separate HC from Lesser Antilles French Creole. We communicated with no problem.



I also met and interviewed a couple of the remaining English Creole speakers.



This was my last trip to Venezuela. Previously I had taught seminars in Caracas, Maracaibo, and Mérida and done fieldwork in the Barlovento region around Curiepe, but unless the current situation unexpectedly improves significantly, I won't be going back to this beautiful country.

- Cobija (Bolivia):
 - Ingard Miauchi
- Guayaramerín (Bolivia) :
 - Kelly Gamboa
- Pedro Juan Caballero, Capitán Bado, Bella Vista Norte, Zanja Pytã (Paraguay):
 - Derlis Torres
- Paso de los Libres (Argentina):
 - María Silvia Chichizola de Ezama
- Leticia (Colombia) :
 - Pedro González Segura
- Iñapari (Perú):
 - Celso Curi Paucarmaita, Alberto Cardozo, César Ochoa, Jorge Quispe, Narciso Paricahua
- Santa Elena de Uairén (Venezuela):
 - Celia Cisneros y Elba Wolf
- Rivera (Uruguay):
 - Graciela Barrios, Selva Chiricó, Adolfo Elizaincín y Magdalena Coll
- Chuy (Uruguay):
 - Lidia Vidal, Raquel Puig, Mirta Costa Fernández, Alice Lucas y María Irene Moyna