Acoustic Analysis of Voiceless Segments and Nasal Harmony in Desano

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Desano (DES) is a language of the Eastern branch of the Tukanoan family spoken in Northwestern Amazonia. DES is spoken by approximately 1,500 people in Brazil and 2,000 in Colombia. DES, as other Eastern Tukanoan (ET) languages, is well-known for its nasal harmony. In this paper, I report on an acoustic study of intervocalic voiceless stops in oral versus nasal contexts in DES that tests theoretical claims about their status regarding nasal harmony. Studies of nasal harmony in ET languages have been of theoretical interest, for example, with respect to issues such as transparency of voiceless segments, nasal spreading and blocking across morphemes, and the interaction of nasality with metrical structure. The focus of the present study is the transparency of voiceless segments in nasal harmony. This is the first instrumental phonetic study of DES that has been undertaken. The results of this study present some implications for theoretical claims about how to analyze nasal harmony in DES and the status of voiceless stops and nasal harmony in general.

Wilson Silva is a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Utah. His research focuses on the linguistic description and documentation of Desano – an Eastern Tukanoan Language of Northwestern Amazonia. Silva is a member of the Committee on Endangered Languages and their Preservation (CELP) of the Linguistic Society of America.