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“Fighting Against a Hydra”: Jesuit Language Policy in Moxos

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Introduction: Language and Politics

In February 1767, King Carlos III signed the royal decree banishing the Jesuits from all the Spanish dominions. In the American colonies as well as the Iberian Peninsula the king's order was quickly executed, and by the middle of the next year the majority of the Jesuits had been deported from the monarchy.

In the Moxos region, a remote corner of Spanish South America, a newly-appointed governor, government officials, and clergymen took over from the Jesuits one of the most prosperous missions in the colonies (see Figure 1 of my article in Part 2).¹ There they found splendid churches decorated with silver-work, storehouses with plenty of foodstuffs, workshops of all kinds, fields of cotton, sugarcane, chocolate, and so on, and stock farms with tens of thousands of cattle and horses. The native inhabitants of the mission were generally docile and well instructed in the Christian faith, usually much better instructed than the clergymen who had been hastily ordained to fill the posts vacated by the Jesuits (Figure 1).

As for language, the Spanish officials and clergymen had great difficulty finding someone who could serve them as an interpreter. In fact, very few people spoke Spanish, and to make matters worse the natives spoke at least seven different languages. A Spanish governor who arrived in the region in 1786 reported, “all of a sudden, I found myself in a Babylonia from where I could not get out without hard work”.²

For the Spanish officials and clergymen, the Jesuits were to blame for this troublesome situation. According to their theory, the missionaries deliberately did not teach Spanish to the natives and kept intact their linguistic diversity. The Fathers prohibited the use of Spanish and even punished those who dared to speak it.³ Their purpose was to keep separated the different ethnic groups and to isolate the entire region from the rest of the world. In fact, this is the secret of the Jesuits' political success. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a Spanish governor wondered:



Figure 1. Native inhabitants of Moxos (D'Orbigny 1847/VIII).

Two centuries ago, the Mojo Indians were reduced to a common, monastic life, all subjected to a government with the same priests, the same religion, and almost identical habits and customs. It is very strange that they did not become identical in their language. The slaves have always spoken like their masters and the conquered people have lost their tongue and have learnt that of their conquerors. Almost the entire Europe and America bear witness to this truth. Only the Mojo Indians are an exception; they present a very rare phenomenon in this respect (Carrasco 1832: 5).

For the Spanish governor, to solve this mystery was not difficult. As astute politicians, the Jesuits found it convenient to leave alone the multiplicity of language. The governor continued:

There was indeed much fear that, if savage, ferocious peoples mutually understood and communicated each other, they would recognize their chains and break them very quickly. This was the surest fear of the liberation of the Mojo Indians. The Jesuits knew this secret and the risk of its discovery. Here is the real reason for the diversity of language that has been so detrimental to the peoples of the province (Carrasco 1832: 6).

In this statement, we can clearly see an echo of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, according to which, linguistic diversity is a hindrance to the progress

of the human intelligence; it serves as an instrument of despotism, an example of which is the mission regime the Jesuits built among the Native Americans. The Spanish governor declared: "if all the peoples of the world had a universal language, the human intelligence would probably have approximated to its ultimate perfection" (Carrasco 1832: 6). Is it really true, however, that the Jesuits intentionally maintained the diversity of language in Moxos?

In this article, I attempt to answer the Spanish governor's question in a different way. It is my intention to show that the Jesuits also regarded the multiplicity of language as a hindrance to the propagation of the faith and the formation of good customs. Though they did not teach Spanish, they certainly did make serious efforts to reduce the number of languages spoken in the region. The fact that only seven languages were spoken at the time of their expulsion clearly testifies to the success of their efforts because, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, a missionary counted no less than thirty-nine different languages (Orellana 1755: 102).

Linguistic Diversity and its Reduction

The Society of Jesus undertook its missionary activities in Moxos in the 1670s.⁴ The first missionaries who arrived in the region invariably stressed its seemingly unlimited linguistic diversity. It is true that in Europe they spoke different languages, but in Moxos so many languages were spoken in a relatively small area and these apparently had nothing in common. A missionary reported: "every step, every village, and nations, there are different languages and it seems like the confusion of Babel spread over this land".⁵ Another missionary pessimistically admitted: "usually the difference of these languages is like that of Spanish and Greek or even more".⁶

The linguistic diversity in Moxos seemed so unnatural and abnormal to the missionaries that some of them saw the Devil's hand in it. A missionary affirmed: "it is quite credible that so much variety of languages is a trick of the Devil, who wanted to place one more obstacle in the way of the promulgation of the Gospel and, by this means, make the conversion more difficult" (Orellana 1755: 102-103). The Devil's chief aim is "to make impossible or disrupt the conversion of thousands of pagans, or at least to make the beginning very difficult for the new missionaries" (Mayer 1972: 369).

The references to the Tower of Babel and the Devil's trick suggest that, for the missionaries, the linguistic diversity was not just a technical problem that made their task difficult, but also a sign of the moral degradation of the local population. In their way of thinking, the multiplicity of language was closely related to the social fragmentation. In Moxos, the missionaries found so many ethnic groups and so many villages jostling with each other in a small area. There was no political unity and different ethnic groups and villages were constantly at war. The Devil sowed seeds of antagonism among them, urged them to make war upon each other, and reaped the souls of those killed in the war.

Even inside each village and each family, fragmentation and antagonism reigned. The village chiefs lacked authority, the wives did not obey their husbands, and the children were left alone to do as they pleased. As a result, fighting and killing were frequent, adultery and divorce were the norm, and infanticide went unpunished. A missionary lamented: "one of the peculiarities of these Indians is that of being separated: division always pleases them in everything".⁷ In the missionaries' view, this state of "being separated" was the root of all evil and the diversity of language was making it even worse.

Before setting about the task of evangelization, the Jesuits had to tackle this social disorder. For this purpose, they adopted the colonization policy that had already been implemented by the Spanish authorities in Mexico and Peru. A keyword that captures the gist of this policy is "*reducir*" or "reduce" in English. This Spanish word has several meanings: reducing a large number, unifying many things, putting chaos in order, overpowering something recalcitrant, and so on. In relation to the conquest and colonization of America, this word means subduing enemies and rebels, concentrating a widely dispersed population in a large town, converting pagans to Christianity, leading barbarians to civility, and the like.

With respect to the language policy, the word "*reducir*" means two things.⁸ First, it means the unification of languages. Everywhere in Spanish America, the colonial authorities chose the most widely used indigenous language and referred to it as "*lengua general*" or "general language". Nahuatl in Mexico, Quechua in Peru, and Guaraní in Río de la Plata are notable examples. The missionaries used a general language to instruct the natives in the Christian faith and encouraged those who spoke minor languages to learn a general one. Second, "*reducir*" means regularizing the use of a language by writing it down in alphabet and composing its grammar. The Spanish generally regarded all the American languages as "*lengua bárbara*" or "barbarous language". By means of letters and grammar, however, a barbarous language can be transformed into a "*lengua política*" or "polite language". Once this is done, an indigenous language becomes capable of expressing complex, abstract ideas concerning the

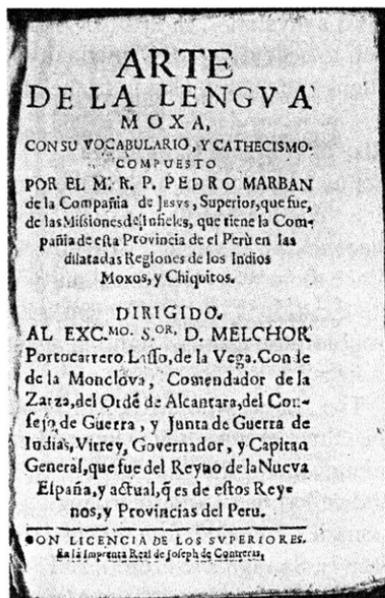


Figure 2. Title page of the *Art of the Mojo Language, with its Vocabulary, and Catechism* (Marbán 1702).

Lord’s mysteries. In Spanish America, at least in theory, it was out of the question to accommodate Christianity to a local language. It was the language that ought to be remodeled to fit the ideas.

Rise of General Languages

Let us take a closer look at the process of language unification in Moxos. The first thing the Jesuits had to do was to concentrate the extensively scattered villages and to create towns with a sizable population of one thousand or more. Since there was no political unity in the region, the missionaries had to negotiate conditions of resettlement with each village. A missionary described this troublesome task as “fighting against a hydra with as many heads as there are Indians”.⁹

The Jesuits who arrived in Moxos in the 1670s first came into contact with the ethnic groups of the Upper Mamoré River. Since the majority of them spoke a language of the Arawak family, the Jesuits regarded them as a single nation and called them and their language “Mojo” or “Moxo”. In this area, the missionaries founded four towns: namely, Loreto (founded in 1682), Trinidad (1687), San Ignacio (1689), and San Javier (1691) (see Figure 2 of my article in Part 2). In these towns, the Mojo Indians occupied the majority and the Mojo language was chosen as the lingua franca. The missionaries made every effort to learn it and Father Pedro Marbán composed its grammar, vocabulary, catechism, manuals of sacraments, etc. His manuscript was sent to Lima and was published in 1702 as a portable book of octavo format (Marbán 1702) (Figure 2).

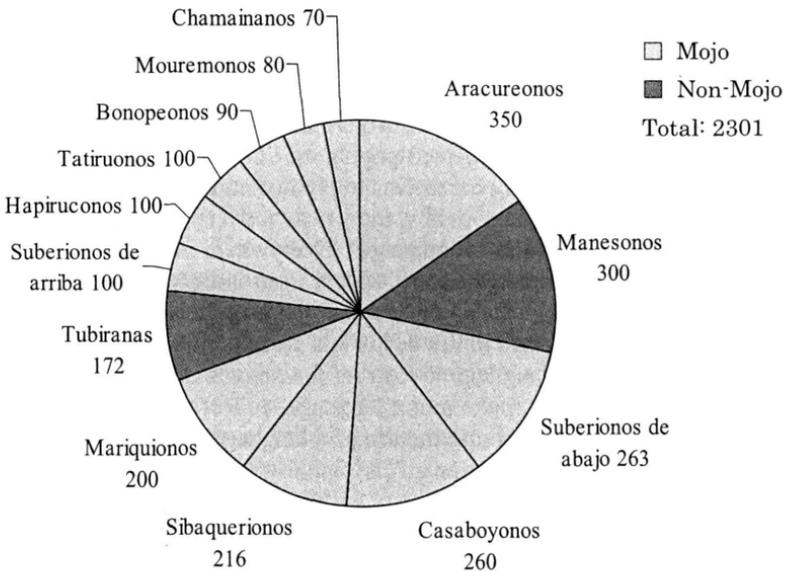


Figure 3. Thirteen ethnic groups of Loreto and their languages.

| | | | |
|------------------------|----------------|----------------|--------------------------------------|
| Punuanas: | Mojo | Paraboneonos: | The same language as the group below |
| Caunamanas (Chanucos): | Mojo | Comobeonos: | The same language as the above |
| Areboconos: | Mojo | | |
| Mounobeonos: | Mojo | | |
| Oboropeonos: | Mojo | | |
| | | Phoeboconos: | Language related to the group below |
| Casabeonos: | Corrupted Mojo | Carrigirionos: | Language related to the above |
| Tauriboconos: | Corrupted Mojo | | |
| Uruonos: | Corrupted Mojo | | |
| | | | |
| Cayupinas: | Docuicuna | Furinaboconos: | Distinct language |
| | | | |
| Churimanas: | Movima | Chuseboconos: | Distinct language |

Figure 4. Sixteen ethnic groups of San Ignacio and their languages.

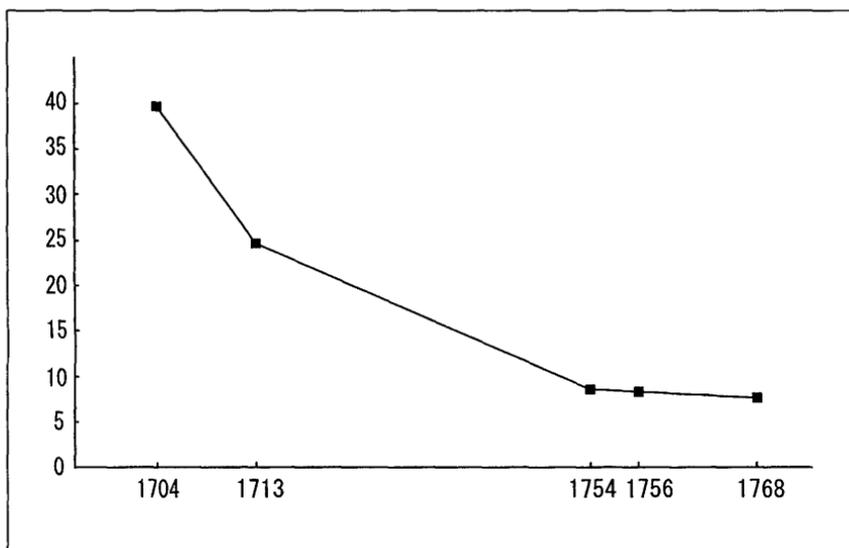


Figure 5. Number of languages spoken in Moxos.

In the four mission towns, the Jesuits preached in Mojo, taught catechism in Mojo, confessed in Mojo, and administered sacraments in Mojo. A choir was organized and choristers sang Mass and hymns in Latin, Spanish, and Mojo. In a building adjacent to the church, a school was opened and children learnt to read and write in Mojo. Father Marbán composed a Mojo primer and had it printed as a chapter of his grammar and also as an independent pamphlet. Of this latter form, eight thousand examples were printed and distributed among children (Altamirano 1979: 93-94).

How successful were the Jesuits in their attempt to unify languages? At an early stage, it is likely that the degree of their success varied significantly from town to town. Let us examine, for example, the case of Loreto, the first town founded in 1682 on the right bank of the Mamoré River. Thirteen ethnic groups were resettled there and the population amounted to almost two thousand and three hundred (Figure 3).¹⁰ Of the thirteen groups, only two spoke a different language and approximately seventy-nine percent of the population spoke Mojo. The linguistic unification was perfectly feasible.

On the other hand, the case of San Ignacio, the third town founded in 1689 on the savannah west of the Mamoré River, was not so promising. There Father Antonio de Orellana resettled sixteen ethnic groups (Figure 4). Of these, five spoke Mojo, three spoke "*la lengua moja corrupta*" or "the corrupted Mojo language", one spoke Docuicuna, and one spoke Movima. As to the remaining six groups, two spoke the same language, two spoke related languages, and the other two spoke distinct languages. In total, at least eight languages were spoken in San Ignacio.¹¹

From the early 1690s, the mission started to expand beyond the territories of the Mojo Indians and, with this expansion the possibility of linguistically unifying the entire mission was lost. The missionaries were confronted with an almost infinite variety of languages and were forced to content themselves with the town-level unity. On the Lower Mamoré River, they chose, as general language, Canichana in San Pedro, Movima in Santa Ana, and Cayubaba in Exaltación. On the western savannah, they chose Movima in San Borja and Maropa in Reyes. On the northeast forest near the border with Portuguese Brazil, the missionaries encountered another large linguistic group of the Arawak family. They called them "Baure" and, with them, founded Concepción, San Joaquín, San Martín, and San Nicolás. In a nearby town of Magdalena, Itonama was used as the lingua franca.

Creation of Christian Languages

What is the long-term effect of the Jesuit linguistic policy in Moxos? We can say that the Jesuits eventually proved successful in reducing the number of languages spoken in the region (Figure 5). The missionaries' reports bear testimony to this: In 1704, thirty-nine languages were listed; in 1713, twenty-four;

in 1754, ten; in 1756, nine; and in 1768, only eight.¹² After the expulsion of the Jesuits, the number of languages that appeared in official reports were fixed at seven: Mojo, Canichana, Movima, Cayubaba, Maropa, Baure, and Itonama.¹³ Of the original thirty-nine or so, why did these seven survive? The answer is simply because these were the general languages of the surviving towns. In other words, an outcome of the Jesuit linguistic policy was the survival of the languages chosen as *lingua franca* and the disappearance of all the others.

Though the Jesuits did not unify the entire mission linguistically, they did achieve unification at town level. If we consider the excessive linguistic diversity of the region, the reduction to seven does not seem bad at all. Their success, however, has an ironic by-product: the town-level linguistic diversity. Before the arrival of the Jesuits, different ethnic groups spoke different languages. The Jesuits concentrated these groups in towns and integrated them socially and culturally. After the Jesuits were gone, different towns spoke different languages. Thus it can be said that what the Jesuits really did in Moxos is simply to replace one type of diversity with another.

As we saw, the reason the Jesuits did not extend the use of the Mojo language to the entire mission was practical. Even if they had wanted to, the great linguistic diversity of the region would not have permitted them to do so. After all, for the missionaries, the choice of language was secondary to the message it conveyed. What really mattered for them was that the indigenous people attended Mass, prayed, sang hymns, confessed sins, received sacraments, and so on, whatever be the language they used.

The general languages are not the same as their autochthonous counterparts. Father Pedro Marbán's Mojo language, carefully restructured on the model of Latin grammar, is a far cry from the tongue of the Mouremonos who originally tutored him. It is an artificially created Christian language. Father Marbán declared in triumph:

The confused labyrinth of such barbarous voice is reduced to the method and precept of an art; the intricate forest of their words is restricted to a well ordered and digested vocabulary; and all the things necessary to instruct in the faith and to educate in piety and Christian customs the innumerable souls, who every day are converted from the blind paganism to Christianity, are compiled in an opulent catechism (Marbán 1702: vi).

Mojo, Canichana, Movima, and so on, were all artificially reconstructed and made suitable to express the Lord's mysteries. Once this is done, their difference mattered little. In the same way as the missionaries reduced the barbarians to civility, they reduced the barbarous languages to polite languages. The hydra that the missionaries were fighting against was, in a sense, the confusion of language that God inflicted on men as a punishment for their arrogance (Genesis 11: 1-9). After the Tower of Babel, all the human languages became some-

what barbarous. As a result, communication with God was interrupted and men went astray. The missionaries' task was to pick up each of these confused tongues scattered all over the world and fix it so that it might work once again as a medium of communication with God.

Language and Identity

In Moxos, the town-level linguistic diversity reached a much deeper level than the Jesuits had expected. After their expulsion, the Mojo language evolved into four distinct dialects, each of which is now spoken in one of the first four mission towns. Thus, in Loreto, they speak the Loretano dialect; in Trinidad, the Trinitario dialect; in San Ignacio, the Ignaciano dialect; and in San Javier, the Javeriano dialect.¹⁴ Moreover, their speakers also evolved into four distinct ethnic groups: namely, the Loretanos, the Trinitarios, the Ignacianos, and the Javerianos. Except for the Loretanos who disappeared recently, these groups still exist today and continue to speak their dialects.

Historical sources show that the town-based collective identities emerged in the late eighteenth century while, unfortunately, we know next to nothing about the process of creation of the four Mojo dialects. We should not forget, however, that the use of the general language was mainly liturgical and that, outside the church, the natives continued to speak their mother tongues (Eder 1985: 42). We know that the Mojo language had wide dialectical variations, and these probably ended up as the four distinct dialects.¹⁵

Whatever the case may have been, this fact clearly indicates a close connec-



Figure 6. Camp on the bank of the Mamoré River (D'Orbigny 1847/VIII).

tion between language and identity. Throughout the world, language serves as an important marker of social identity and the Amazonian lowlands offer an extreme case with a large number of different languages spoken in a relatively small area. There the ethnic groups are often marked off on the basis of linguistic characteristics. It is likely that, in the late eighteenth century, the inhabitants of the four mission towns actively differentiated their languages in the process of the town-based identity formation.

In fact, some evidence suggests that the native inhabitants of the mission towns were well aware of their linguistic differences and sometimes showed them off to each other. Here I quote a description of the French naturalist Alcide d'Orbigny about a yearly expedition that the natives undertook to the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, to deliver their products to the national treasury. On May 15, 1832, more than six hundred people, distributed on more than forty canoes, left the town of Loreto and went up the Mamoré River. After dark, they set up an enormous camp on a large sandbank (Figure 6). D'Orbigny remarked: "there they spoke almost all the languages of the province, but the nations never mixed. All the white men got together in the center while, distributed by group, the Baures, the Itonamas, the Movimas, the Cayuvavas, the Canichanas, and the Moxos chatted in their different dialects" (D'Orbigny 1844/III: 148-149). The evening prayer after the supper was a real spectacle:

After the supper, following their customs, all the Indians gathered by nation to pray together. These religious chants had often caught me by surprise in these regions of solitude. This time, however, the different nations all at once started singing their prayers in a different tone in their own language, so I had to escape to spare my ears from the strange cacophony that resulted from the mixture of all the discordances (D'Orbigny 1844/III: 149).

This "strange cacophony" that disgusted the Frenchman is unmistakably an outcome of the Jesuit linguistic policy. "The Baures, the Itonamas, the Movimas, the Cayuvavas, the Canichanas, and the Moxos" who appeared in his description were not the autochthonous ethnic groups. They were the townspeople of Concepción, Magdalena, Santa Ana, Exaltación, San Pedro, and Trinidad; therefore they were products of the resettlement and the linguistic unification carried out by the Jesuits. Though they spoke different languages, they were identical in their act of praying and in their prayers' content. If the Jesuits had been present on that occasion, they would have certainly applauded this "cacophony" as music of beautiful harmony that praised the name of the Lord.

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NOTES

1. On the Spanish secular rule in Moxos after the expulsion of the Jesuits, see Block 1994: 125-148; Chávez Suárez 1986: 339-499; Parejas Moreno 1976; René-Moreno 1974: 11-85.
2. Informe del gobernador Lázaro de Ribera sobre el estado actual de la provincia, San Pedro, 24/IX/1792, ABNB, AM-GRM, v. 10, f. 318r.
3. Informe del gobernador, San Pedro, 24/IX/1792, ABNB, AM-GRM, v. 10, f. 317v.
4. On the history of the Jesuit mission in Moxos, see Barnadas 1985; Block 1994: 33-124; Chávez Suárez 1986: 187-312; Saito 2007; Vargas Ugarte 1964.
5. Copia de la relación que envió el P. Cipriano Barace sobre la conversión de los infieles, Mojos, 7/V/1680, ARSI, Perú 20, f. 233r.
6. Descripción de los mojos que están a cargo de la Compañía de Jesús en la provincia del Perú, año de 1754, APTCJ, leg. 3, no. 7, f. 1v.
7. Descripción de los mojos, 1754, APTCJ, leg. 3, no. 7, f. 5r.
8. On the Spanish linguistic policy in the Americas, see Durston 2007: 51-178; Heath 1972: 15-55; Mannheim 1991: 61-79; Solano 1991: XXIII-XC.
9. Carta del P. Antonio de Orellana al P. Provincial Martín de Xáuregui, Loreto, 18/X/1687, ARSI, Perú 17, f. 104r.
10. Copia de la relación de los PP. de la misión de los infieles mojos, pueblo nuevo de los mojos, 12/VII/1679, ARSI, Perú 20, ff. 228r-229v; Carta del P. Antonio de Orellana, Loreto, 18/X/1687, ARSI, Perú 17, f. 107r; Libro de bautismo de la reducción de Nuestra Señora de Loreto, 1701-1766, APBCJ, MM, no. 0039; Castillo 1906: 294-301.
11. Descripción de los mojos, 1754, APTCJ, leg. 3, no. 7, ff. 3r-4v.
12. Breve noticia del estado de las misiones el año de 1713, AHLPL, LB, no. 329, ff. 6v-7r; Relación de las misiones de los mojos de la Compañía de Jesús en la provincia del Perú el año de 1713, ARSI, Perú 21, f. 175r; Descripción de los mojos, 1754, APTCJ, leg. 3, no. 7, f. 2r; Beingolea 2007: 127; Orellana 1755: 102; Quintana 2005: 151-152.
13. Informe del gobernador Lázaro de Ribera sobre el desastroso estado en que se encuentra su provincia y los medios que él considera oportuno para remediarlo, San Pedro, 22/II/1788 & 15/IV/1788, RAH, Mata Linares, 9/1664, ff. 560r-561r; Informe del gobernador, San Pedro, 24/IX/1792, ABNB, AM-GRM, v. 10, f. 317v; Carrasco 1832: 5.

14. On the Trinitario dialect, see Gill 1993; Gill n.d. On the Ignaciano dialect, see Olza Zubiri, Nuni de Chapi & Tube 2004; Ott & Burk de Ott 1983. Becerra Casanovas 1980 is the only comparative study of the four Mojo dialects, but unfortunately it is saturated with errors. For an evaluation of whether these four are dialects or languages, see Rose n.d.
15. Carta de los PP. que residen en la misión de los moxos para el P. Hernando Cavero de la Compañía de Jesús provincial de esta provincia del Perú en que se le da noticia de lo que han visto oído, y experimentado en el tiempo que ha que están en ella, provincia de los moxos, 20/IV/1676, ARSI, Perú 20, f. 202r; Marbán 1702: 13, 53.

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