


# Chapter 1

## How the Perceived Language Status of Brunca Affects Resource Allocation in Costa Rica: Policy vs. Reality

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### ABSTRACT

*Beginning with the conquest and colonization of the land that now comprises Costa Rica, the Indigenous peoples and their cultures have suffered great losses. One of the greatest losses is to their languages. One language in particularly grave danger is Brunca. While Indigenous languages are being acknowledged worldwide and within Costa Rica, the Costa Rican government has not provided the necessary resources to maintain them. This chapter incorporates recent field research on Brunca's language vitality into a discussion on the disconnect between government rhetoric and the actual linguistic situation of Brunca.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Indigenous peoples of what is now Costa Rica have suffered great losses, including to their languages. All of the six remaining Indigenous languages in Costa Rica are threatened (Rojas Chaves, 2002). The one in the gravest danger is Brunca (Brúncakjk), the territories of which are in the southern central part of Costa Rica, in Puntarenas province. While the cultural value of Indigenous languages has been recently recognized both worldwide and within Costa Rica, the government of Costa Rica has not yet provided the necessary resources to maintain these languages. Unlike members of the other Indigenous communities in Costa Rica whose languages are still spoken today, and for whom Spanish is not universally known, one hundred percent of the Brunca people speak Spanish. This is crucial because universal command

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of the Spanish language renders maintenance of this heritage language less necessary for daily life, and therefore, in more danger of extinction.

Considering the vitality of a language a simple matter of the number of native fluent speakers and not including efforts of revitalization, Castro (2010) pronounced that the Brunca language became extinct when the last native fluent speaker died in 2003. She wrote that those who said they could still speak Brunca at the time of her study could not produce sentences or even phrases in the language, leading to her rather damning designation. Earlier, Castro (2008) had proposed that the reason for Brunca's decline was partially that the Brunca people have been open to the many 'outsiders' who have taken up residence in their community. With less than half of the people in Boruca not of Brunca heritage, Castro (2008) claimed that the reason for the language decline was this close relationship they have had with people from other groups. Regardless of the reasons for its decline, the Brunca language is perceived as not vital enough to be supported by the government.

Costa Rica legislation passed in the 1980's made it legal for the Brunca language to be taught again. Stemming from a call from the community, Brunca is now taught in the three elementary schools in the Indigenous territory as part of the obligatory curriculum. However, there is little support from the government for these efforts. There are nine teachers of the Brunca language who rotate among the three schools to teach all six grades of students twice a week for an hour at a time. In addition to these classes, key community members have contributed in various ways to maintain the language, which led Seibert Hanson (2019) to conclude that the language is not extinct in actuality, as was previously documented by Castro and others, but present in the community and in the process of being revitalized. The current chapter builds on this research by arguing that the outdated perception of the extinction of the Brunca language has continued to negatively affect the efforts by the Brunca people to maintain and improve the state of the language. The repercussions of this have also been felt beyond the realm of the language, in the realm of the community's rights to their land and their other basic human rights.

Multiple methods were employed here for gathering data on the status of the language and the policies affecting its revitalization. First, background will be presented on the Brunca language and its written documentation by linguists, which was collected and analyzed at the U.S. Library of Congress, the University of Costa Rica, and via resources on the Internet. Following this, there will be an overview of the government policies in place to recognize and prioritize Indigenous languages in Costa Rica. Then, the Brunca teaching methods and materials in the elementary schools, as observed by the author, will be described in order to show the discrepancy between the aforementioned policies and the reality that community members face when working to sustain their language. Finally, recommendations are made for further advocacy for Indigenous peoples' rights in Costa Rica.

## **BACKGROUND**

The first documented mention of the Brunca people was in 1562 when Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, a Spanish invader, encountered and wrote about them (Vázquez de Coronado, 1977, p. 10). In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, for the ease of missionary work, civil and ecclesiastical authorities attempted to fuse Boruca and surrounding villages into one (Fernández, 1889, p. 171). Boruca was along the route between the colonial capital of Cartago and Panama City, making it a perfect stopover for travelers. Due to the treacherous terrain surrounding it, but mostly due to the strong character of the Brunca people, the Spanish settlers found it difficult to dominate and pacify the Brunca at first. In 1711, the bishop Garret y Arloví

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