A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF DISFLUENCIES IN A CORPUS OF TIKUNA LANGUAGE RECORDINGS

with special attention to fillers and placeholders
Thanks to…

My Tikuna collaborators in San Martín de Amacayacu (Colombia)
Research questions & outline

How are disfluencies typically manifested and dealt with in Tikuna (western Amazonia, isolate)?

In particular, what kind of fillers and placeholders does the language make use of, and how are these used from a morphosyntactic perspective?

Introductory remarks

Disfluencies: exhaustive analysis of a 23-min sample

Fillers and placeholders

Other uncertainty markers
Introductory remarks
What is Tikuna?

About 60,000 speakers

Peru, Colombia, Brazil
along Amazon & Putumayo rivers

Language isolate (?)
Introductory remarks

Basic typological information

Heavily tonal, which makes it hard to interpret intonation (e.g. to distinguish genuine interrogative sentence from declarative sentence containing a placeholder)

Tikuna displays 5 Nominal Agreement Classes (NAC) or “genders”:
- F feminine
- M masculine
- N neuter
- S “salientive”
- NS “non-salientive”

Mix of head-marking (for nuclear arguments) and dependent-marking (for non-nuclear participants)

Basic word order can be said to be SOV
Introductory remarks

I’ve collected the corpus used in this study in the Tikuna community of San Martín de Amacayacu (Amazonas, Colombia) between 2015 and 2018 (for details, see my PhD dissertation, Bertet 2020)
Disfluencies: exhaustive analysis of a 23-min sample
Disfluencies: analysis of a 23-min sample

Detailed annotation (in Excel sheets) for disfluencies of a 23-min sample from my corpus, with recordings by 3 different speakers, both monological and dialogical.

My primary goal was to be able to roughly evaluate the proportion of occurrences of fillers and placeholders among disfluencies in general, and to attempt to grasp the difference in terms of interactional effect between fillers, placeholders, and other types of disfluencies.

Tentative definition (problematic in that it relies on subjective judgment):

Disfluency: any non-meaningful alteration in the rhythm of an utterance (lengthening, interruption by a glottal stop or aspiration, and/or pause); meaningful rhythmic phenomena (e.g. lengthening and/or pause due to topicalization, or pause before afterthought) are not considered as disfluencies.
Disfluencies: analysis of a 23-min sample

A number of methodological issues

But at least two reliable results:

• a great majority of disfluencies are of the “delay” type (i.e. lengthening of last vowel and/or glottal stop or aspiration and/or pause, but with no corresponding alteration at the morphosyntactic level):

“Nâ âkû tûrû nû-î– # tâ’úâkû– # châ’û nâ-ñai’ê’e’û?” Ñâ’û gá # fêñûêkû
“But what is it that... won’t let me... look after them?” said the... hunter’ (JSG)

• fillers and placeholders account for a very small percentage of all disfluencies (=> rare in practice, but more easily surveyed in a corpus not designed for analyzing disfluencies, since in most cases they have a lexicalized phonological form of their own)
Fillers and placeholders
I define them as disfluency markers with a **specific phonetic or phonological form** (as opposed to an alteration of the phonetic realization of the last item, or mere silence)

- **Filler:** not syntactically integrated (or parenthetical)
- **Placeholder:** syntactically integrated

Rough estimate of rate of placeholders in my whole corpus (ca. 10 h = ca. 35 000 words): 4,5 to 5 per thousand words (compare Podlesskaya 2010:12)
Fillers and placeholders attested in my corpus are:

• all of them interrogative-indefinite words (i.e. identical to these from a morphological perspective);

• except for ākū’ū, a lexical item specialized for placeholder function

Note that not all interr.-indef. are conversely attested with filler or placeholder uses (e.g. ňù’gù ‘when?’, ňù’ākū ‘how?’, ĝè’tā ‘where?’, are not attested in these uses). This could in practice be due to the limited size of my corpus.

Fillers such as eh, mh do occur but they seem to be extremely rare.

At this stage, I don’t think any other kind of items than the above (e.g. demonstratives, about which more will be said at the end of the talk) can be analyzed as placeholders in Tikuna.
# Fillers and placeholders

Summary of uses attested in my corpus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Interrogative-indefinite meaning</th>
<th>Filler</th>
<th>Placeholder for…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>åkū</td>
<td>what? (NAC=NS) (entity, occasionally a process)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>NP representing an entity (NAC=NS) OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>predicative phrase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>åkū’ū</td>
<td></td>
<td>–</td>
<td>NP representing an inanimate entity (NAC=F?/M/N/S/NS) or an animate entity (NAC=NS) OR predicative phrase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+other forms agreeing for NAC</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tè’e</td>
<td>who?/what? (animate, NAC=F/M/S) (entity)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>NP representing an animate entity (NAC=F/M/S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+other forms agreeing for NAC</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ñù’ré</td>
<td>how much? how many? (quantifier)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>quantifier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ñù’ ŋâ’ū</td>
<td>what activity? what discourse? (process)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>piece of discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tükū</td>
<td>do what? be how? (predic. phrase)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>predicative phrase</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fillers and placeholders

Åkū (NAC=NS, i.e. the default NAC)

- As a filler:

  (1) nâpe’e tū-ú gá ā’a ņátãgù’ū, åkū...: “Tâu tā i nū’ū pē-dâu’ū!”

  åkū

  ‘he came in front of them and said, uh...: “Don’t touch him!”’ (MVG)

- As a placeholder for a NP (animate or inanimate, NAC=NS):

  (2) Ngéámá åkūwâ… Cahuima nàèwâ

  åkū-wa

  PH-LOC1

  ‘[Where did your father work? –] Over there **on PH**, on the upper Cahuima river’ (HGA)
Fillers and placeholders

Åkū (NAC=NS, i.e. the default NAC)

• As a placeholder for a predicative phrase:

(3) tū’ū ná-åkû… chî’e’ū mé’e tūmàmà’ ná-ügû
ná = åkû
3.SBJ=PH
‘they PH-ed her… did bad things to her I guess’ (IGS)
Fillers and placeholders

Åkū’ū (NAC=NS), åkūkū (NAC=M, perhaps also F?), åkūnè (NAC=N), åkū’è (NAC=S)

Curiously, this specialized placeholder is derived morphologically from åkū ‘what?’ through suffixation of the relativizer (which agrees for NAC)

Just as though åkū ‘what?’ were a predicative phrase, which it is not (as it cannot receive any morphology of the finite predicative phrase)

Compare: pōrā ‘be strong’ > pōrā’è ‘strong.S (lit. that is strong)’
åkū ‘what?’ > åkū’è ‘PH.S’

At least two other Tikuna morphemes likewise appear to take the relativizer although they are not predicative phrases (ĝē’ū ‘which?’ and -rû’ù’ū ‘kind of’)
Fillers and placeholders

Akú’ū (NAC=NS), åkùkù (NAC=M, perhaps also F?), åkùnè (NAC=N), åkù’è (NAC=S)

• As a placeholder for a NP (inanimate, NAC=F?/M/N/S/NS; animate, NAC=NS):

(4) tá-ngĕ’má yá... åkùkù... åkùnèmá’a mé’e... remocaspímá’a tôë’è
åkùkù       åkùnè-má’a = mé’e
PH.M          PH.N-COM=DUB
‘there’s people who plant with PH... with PH... with remocaspi (a tree sp.)’ (LAR)

(5) nûmà tàă elección ná-úgú gá åkú’ū káná... encargadosgùí’á gá ngémà Comité del Bienestarârû
åkú’û = káná
PH.NS=REINF
‘they organized the elections themselves, the PH... those in charge from the Comité del Bienestar’ (IGV)
Fillers and placeholders

Åkú’ũ (NAC=NS), åkûkũ (NAC=M, perhaps also F?), åkûnè (NAC=N), åkû’è (NAC=S)

• As a placeholder for a predicative phrase (only the form åkú’ũ with NAC=NS):

(6) chí wi’á cauchito i, náwá châ-åkú’ũ... úkùchí
   châ = åkú’ũ   úkùchí
   1SG.SBJ=PH.NS   put.in
   ‘and then a rubber band, I PH it... put it in it’ (RCA)
Fillers and placeholders

\textit{Tè’è} (NAC=S), \textit{tè’è} (NAC=F/M)

• As a placeholder for a NP (animate, NAC=F/M/S):

\footnotesize{(7) kū-chî ā’a gá tè’è mé’e… nãkû ò
\hfill tè’è = mé’e
\hfill PH=DUB

‘the PH... the tapir stood up’ (LAR)\normalsize
Fillers and placeholders

Ñù’ré

• As a placeholder for a quantifier:

(8) hace como ñù’ré mé’e… tā’ré yá yū’ü yá mārū úpétūkū
ñù’ré = mé’e
PH=DUB

‘about PH... two weeks ago’ (JSG)
Fillers and placeholders

\(\text{ñù’ ŋâ’ú} \) (morphologically a subject relativization with NAC=NS: lit. ‘that does what activity?’, ‘that says what?’)

- As a filler:

\[\text{(9) ngemà tò i chómùkù rù ŋù’ ŋâ’ú mé’e... nô’řĩ kôr̥ĩ nû’nà gû’gù rù ŋû-ânēkü̊r̥ar’ú ŋù’ ŋâ’ú = mé’e} \]

‘my other colleagues, how to say (lit. ‘(smth) that says what?’)... when they get new tourists, they get shy’ (JGS)
Fillers and placeholders

Ñù’ ŋâ’ũ (morphologically a subject relativization with NAC=NS: lit. ‘that does what activity?’, ‘that says what?’)

- As a placeholder for a whole proposition (in practice, a piece of discourse):

(10) ngě’má’ũ i tô’ i ŋâ’ũ ērũ, kánã ŋù’ ŋâ’ũ…: “Wawawawawawa wawawawa!”

ñù’ ŋâ’ũ

PH do.thus-REL.NS

‘there’s another one [a song] that goes like this, like PH: “Wawawawawawa wawawawa!”’ (GRA)
Fillers and placeholders

*Tūkū*

- As a placeholder for a predicative phrase:

(11) llamado de Dios gá chāná-tūkūʾēʾe
    \[ chā = ná = tūkūʾ-ʾēʾe \]
    1SG.OBJ=3.SBJ=PH-CAUS
    ‘God’s call PH-ed me [i.e. calmed me down?]’ (ANO)
Fillers and placeholders

It seems that all of the forms presented so far (perhaps to the exception of tighest), whether employed as fillers (if available) or placeholders, may (and often do) take one or both of the following enclitics (if both, then in the order below):

• káná ‘REINF’

• mé’e ‘DUB’

Examples of attested combinations:

–placeholder:  åkū  åkū káná  åkū mé’e  åkū káná mé’e
  åkūnè  –  åkūnè mé’e  åkūnè káná mé’e
Fillers and placeholders

- káná ‘REINF’: a pragmatic marker that underlines curiosity on the part of the speaker. It is almost always used in disfluency contexts, but also in a few cases in self-directed interrogative contexts, as in (12):

(12) wí’á profesor gá ng... ngémkú, Tarapacáráµú. Ákú káná mé’í náégà…? Núcháráµ-gúmàégà márú.

‘a teacher from th… there, from Tarapacá. What’s his name again…? I’ve forgotten his name’ (IGV)
Fillers and placeholders

- **mé’e ‘DUB’: an epistemic marker that signals partial lack of knowledge** on the part of the speaker.
  It is used about as often in disfluency contexts, as in uncertain declarative contexts (as in (13)) or self-directed interrogative contexts.

  (13) **mārū nārū cabeza rù ñânárūgù, ná-yawé mé’e**

  \[ \text{ná = yawé = mé'e} \]

  \[ \text{3SBJ=be.mad=DUB} \]

  ‘her head was like this (i.e. crazy) now, she was probably mad’ (IGS)
Any of the forms presented so far, when employed as placeholders, may receive morphology proper to the constituent they stand for (in practice, morphology of the NP or the predicative phrase):

• case marker on a placeholder standing for a NP:

(14) ŋyâčí yûmè ãkûnèmà’â… Dĕ’tù’ũmà’â nû-ĭ ī tânà-dè’è’ã
  ãkûnè-mà’â
  PH.N-COM
  ‘and then, with a PH… We whisk it with a whisk’ (TVJ)

• causative suffix on a placeholder standing for a predicative phrase:

(11) llamado de Dios gá chañà-tûkû’è’e
  châ = ná = tûkû’-è’e
  1SG.OBJ=3.SBJ=PH-CAUS
  ‘God’s call PH-ed me [i.e. calmed me down?]’ (ANO)
If *káná* is present, then case markers are attested after it in my corpus (is this placement obligatory?):

(15) *wa ă’a gá âkū kánágu... Êwàrègú ă’a*  
*âkū = káná-gù*  
PH=REINF-LOC2  
‘and it landed in PH... in Eware’ (JSG)
Fillers and placeholders

In a vast majority of cases, a filler or placeholder is immediately followed by the delayed information (or at least an attempt at retrieving that information).

In a small minority of cases, the delayed information is separated from the placeholder by one or several constituents:

(16) åkú’ũ káná mé’e yà-chù’èwèchìgū’ũ, múrénũ
    åkú’ũ = káná = mé’e      múrénũ
    PH.NS=REINF=DUB         fly
    ‘some PH would bother him along the way, some flies’ (JSG)
Fillers and placeholders

In another small minority of cases, the speaker does not appear to even intend to provide the delayed information:

(17) tānā-... ákūnèwā... tānā-kā rù nānà-ū̀̀te’érā’ā
    ákūnè-wā
    PH.N-LOC1
    ‘they… they crushed it in a PH and it became like grains of flour [no clarification comes next]’ (GRA)
In fact, I wonder whether an analysis of fillers and placeholders as such is necessary.

It certainly makes sense to consider placeholders as such in the case mentioned in the previous slide (i.e. in cases where no clarification ever occurs, or even seems to have been intended). In these cases, an analysis of the placeholder as a self-directed question probably makes little sense, since there would apparently be no intention to provide an answer.

It probably also makes sense to treat ţakú’ă, which apparently never occurs in interrogative contexts (although perhaps in echo questions?), as a filler and placeholder, since it is specialized in this function.
Fillers and placeholders

In all the other cases, however, perhaps an analysis as self-directed questions would be sufficient, since they seem to be formally identical to actual echo questions, as in e.g.:

(17) tūmārū ākū... hamaca

PH/what?
‘her PH/what?… hammock’ (IGS)
Other uncertainty markers
Other uncertainty markers

These markers do not go along with disfluencies, but they manifest likewise that access to the information by the speaker is currently inaccurate.

- "mē'e "DUB" (already discussed for its uses in declarative contexts where disfluency is not involved)
Other uncertainty markers

• (endophoric) demonstratives in recognitional use:

(18) fiebre amarilla, \textit{ngēmā dē’āchím’ā} nà-ūgū’ū
\textit{ngēmā}
MED.ENDOPH.NS
‘yellow fever, that thing they call \textit{dē’áchí}’ (JGS)

Such demonstratives can be combined with placeholders:

(19) nārū \textit{ngēmā} \textit{âkú’ū}... nā’gū’ū
\textit{ngēmā} \textit{âkú’ū}
MED.ENDOPH.NS PH.NS
‘its \textbf{this PH}... sap’ (JGS)

Note: in this example, the demonstrative occurs after the genitive phrase, instead of before it, which is extremely unusual. This is probably due to the fact that the demonstrative serves more as an uncertainty marker than a true demonstrative here.
Summary
The majority of disfluencies in San Martín de Amacayacu Tikuna are simple delays (i.e. have no consequences whatsoever on morphosyntax). Fillers and placeholders are a tiny minority of disfluencies.

Most fillers and placeholders are formally identical with interrogative-indefinite words, except for one ākú’ū (< ākū ‘what?’ + ‘REL’). This is unsurprising, as cross-linguistically placeholders have been shown to be often “recruited from […] indefinite or interrogative pronouns [or other kinds of words]” (Podlesskaya 2010:12-13).

However, one may wonder whether such fillers and placeholders necessarily are to be analyzed as such, or whether they could not be interpreted in certain cases as merely forming self-directed questions.