Kukama is first known to have been written down in 1681, by the Jesuit priest Juan Lorenzo Lucero (Rodríguez 1684, cited in Maroni 1988[1738]:224) – 335 years later, Rosa Vallejos' grammar of the language joins a growing body of high-quality reference works of languages of the region: Fleck (2003), Olawsky (2006), Overall (2017), Peña (2015), among others. The grammar is a revision and expansion of Vallejos' (2010) PhD dissertation – which continued previous study of the language (Cabral 1995; Espinosa Pérez 1935, 1989; Faust 1972) – and combines with a stellar dictionary (Vallejos Yopán and Amías Murayari 2015) to form the most significant contribution to the study of Peruvian indigenous languages of the last several years.

Kukama-Kukamiria, along with its sister language, Omagua, is an outlying Tupí-Guaraní (TG) language originally spoken on the lower Ucayali River in the Loreto region, home to some nine language families and five language isolates. Rodrigues (1984/1985) suggested that, due to their divergent lexical and grammatical features, Omagua and Kukama are not genetically classifiable, a proposal furthered by Cabral (1995): she proposed that Omagua and Kukama are creole languages that originated in colonial-era Jesuit mission settlements (Sp. reducciones), but Michael (2014) has demonstrated, based on early linguistic evidence, that this cannot be correct. Nevertheless, the divergent lexical and grammatical features of these two languages are striking, and Vallejos' research immeasurably improves the historical understanding of these languages and allows linguists to more precisely delineate the patterns of lexical and grammatical change relative to more prototypical TG languages.

Begun in 1997 – 440 years after Kukamas first came into contact with Europeans – Vallejos' extensive documentation and description of Kukama-Kukamiria is a testament to the
perseverance of the Kukama people in the face of innumerable social, cultural, and physical obstacles first put in place by Catholic missionaries, and later by the Peruvian state and powerful extractive oil and rubber industries. Despite the disastrous effects of these activities on the Kukama population, the language still boasts some 1,000 native speakers; they are all elderly, and as such the language is severely endangered. Vallejos' commitment to the broad inclusion of many Kukamas in her research is admirable both from both a community-oriented and a scientific perspective: she collaborated with 43 language consultants from 18 communities in 6 river basins. The result is a grammar of impressive scale that is sensitive to dialectal variation (Kukamirias are concentrated on the Huallaga River and Kukamas in the other river basins) and that will be useful to linguists of many sorts.

Based on a database of 36 texts, the grammar relies principally on naturally occurring language data and is built around a core of 15 chapters focused on: phonetics and phonology; morpheme types; nouns; noun phrases; verbs; stative verbs and adverbial words; clause structure; postpositional phrases; non-verbal predication; complex predicates; sentence types; clause combining; clause linking; co-ranking constructions; and topics in the syntax-discourse interface. Two appendices provide biographical information on language consultants, as well as four transcribed, segmented, glossed, and translated texts. Kukama is a relatively isolating language with little affixal morphology and SVO word order in information-structurally unmarked transitive clauses. Person is the only obligatory verbal category; the nominal domain exhibits no obligatory categories and lacks areally common properties such as categorization by gender, animacy, and/or alienability. Person is marked by one of three pronominal series. Optional verbal categories include three tenses, aspect, and direction. Sentential moods are marked by sentence-initial particles (e.g. yapai JUSSIVE) and second-position clitics (e.g. =tipa INTERROGATIVE); and modality and evidentiality are expressed by second-position clitics (e.g. =taka DUBITATIVE). Word order, pronominal series, demonstratives, and the enclitic =pura
Some typologically notable features include: genderlect distinctions in pronouns (Rose 2015), demonstratives, nominal plural marking, and adverbs; exponence of frequently nominal and verbal categories via NP- and VP-final enclitics (e.g. number, spatial relations, tense); complex differentiation of purpose clauses (Vallejos 2014); word order covariant with progressive aspect; and extensive use of spatial postpositions in clause linking.

The segmental phonology of Kukama is relatively simple, but interesting morphophonological alternations and prosodic phenomena warrant more attention throughout the grammar. Although stress is discussed in the important context of defining word boundaries and in the description of vowel syncope, it would ideally include a more explicit discussion of syllable weight that could more directly inform the analysis of the phonemic status of diphthongs (and vowel hiatus more generally) and clarify typologically less expected statements such as that syllables with complex onsets are treated as prosodically heavy. A pervasive property of the rightmost grammatical morpheme in a word is that its final syllable undergoes apocope. Although this final syllable is restored in most contexts in which a bound morpheme occurs additionally to the right, this process appears to be conditioned by certain metrical requirements on the resulting word. Final syllable apocope is nowhere discussed, which at times leads the reader astray, especially when such syllables are segmented but not glossed. And because all examples in the grammar consist only of lines of segmentation, glossing, and translation – but not surface representation –, these processes are rarely self-evident to the non-specialist outside of the phonology chapter. This representational issue interacts with one of occasionally inconsistent segmentation and glossing of one and the same morpheme, which reduces the usefulness of examples.

Vallejos' grammar is an invaluable contribution to linguistics that comes at a crucial moment in the well-being of Amazonian indigenous people and their languages. Within Peru, the
Kukama language has only recently begun to be heard outside of the greater Huallaga, Ucayali, Marañón, and Amazon basins, in the form of music videos developed by the Kukama young people of Nauta under the auspices of Radio Ucamara. Long held, racist views of indigenous Amazonians have the potential to change rapidly, and the ability on the part of Kukamas to point to serious academic studies of their language that complement their efforts in linguistic and cultural reclamation – in order to show that their language is as complex, nuanced, and rich in cultural history as any other – will be an indispensable component of their agency in these changes in the decades to come.

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