

# INTRODUCTION TO THE INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES OF LATIN AMERICA

*particularly in the Andes. Origins, history, place in society, endangerment, relationships with other languages.*

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## The Languages: 'Exotic' and Different

There are three main points to get over right from the start. Firstly one must realise just how different Latin America is from the West, and secondly that in itself, Latin America is an enormously diverse place. Thirdly, when it comes to the languages spoken in Latin America today, it is Spanish, and in Brazil Portuguese, that are unquestionably the mainstream, dominant languages of the continent. Out of a total population of something like 400 million people in Latin America, probably less than 30 million people speak indigenous languages, and most of these people are in any case bilingual in either Spanish or Portuguese.

But certainly there is a good case for saying that from a Western viewpoint, it is the indigenous languages that are the most fascinating. And they are no exception to the idea of things in Latin America being very different, if not rather exotic, in many ways...

### In What They Look Like ...

[Click here](#) for a website showing the weird and wonderful 'glyphs' in which the ancient Mayas wrote their language during the heyday of their civilisation in the 5th to 9th centuries A.D.. (Guatemala and Mexico). Outside the Mayan area, however, no other indigenous language of Latin America was ever truly written before the Europeans arrived (and began attempting to write some of them in Latin script, according to Spanish and Portuguese spelling conventions of the time).

### In What They Sound Like ...

To [listen online](#) to pronunciation recordings try the [Sounds of the Andean Languages](#) website.

Even where they use the same sounds as in European languages, they can use them in different ways.

So for example one of the most distinctive traits of native Mexican languages is the use of the sound combination **tl-**, including:

- at the end of words, as in the name of the Nahuatl language itself, and Quetzalcoatl, the name of the ‘plumed serpent’ god of the Toltec and Aztec civilizations, (the Quetzal is the modern monetary unit in Guatemala)
- and also at start of syllables and words, as in many Mesoamerican placenames such as Tlaxcala (a state in Mexico).

And of course, there are in any case huge differences between the sounds that European and many Latin American languages make use of at all (what linguists call their ‘phonemic inventories’). Most of the Andean languages, for instance, have only three distinctive vowels (*i.e.* vowel phonemes). What’s more, they don’t use sounds like b, d, and g (‘voiced stops’). They more than make up for this though, by two techniques in particular:

- They make use of more places along the vocal tract to make distinctive sounds than most European languages use. With stops and affricates, English, German or Spanish make just four distinctions on the scale **p – t – ch – k** (‘place of articulation’, or ‘location of stricture’). Cuzco Quechua makes five by also using a uvular [q] (common also in Arabic, for instance), and Jaqaru adds another two, an alveolo-palatal [tʃβ] (written <tx> or <ty>, depending on the alphabet used), and a retroflex palatal [tʃʂ] (<cx> or <tr>). [To see these phonetic characters in **green** properly, you’ll need the SIL Doulos IPA phonetics font – it’s quick and easy to install: [click here](#)]
- Meanwhile, Aymara, Jaqaru and Cuzco Quechua also have three variant forms of each of these sounds, namely unaspirated, aspirated and ejectives. So the following are all different words in Quechua which mean *meeting*, *worn* and *bread* respectively: *tanta*, *thanta*, *t’anta*.

In fact, even if you’ve never been anywhere near the Andes, there’s still a fairly high chance that, even in your home country you’ve actually already heard the Andean languages Quechua and/or Aymara spoken – or rather sung, because it’s the original language of Andean music (though now often replaced by Spanish). [One brief recommendation: the CD *Hoja de Coca* by the Bolivian group *Rumillajta*].

## In Syllable-Structure and Vocabulary

Words too sound generally pretty alien to the standard syllable structure of European languages, particularly English. Even when their pronunciations have been mangled and adapted through Spanish and English, they still come out as words like: *guacamole* (from Aztec, meaning ‘avocado paste’).

As in North American languages, proper names – like *Crazy Horse*, *Dances with Wolves* and so on – almost always mean something. Here are a few sample words from the Andean language Quechua:

- A few names of Inca Emperors and gods, for example: *Atawallpa*, *Tupac Amaru*, *Pachamama*

- And some Andean placenames: *Chumpiwillkas, Ollantaytampu, Titiqaqa, Willkaswamán, Choqechaka, Cotopaxi, Allpamayu, Chimborazo, Willkamayu*

Other than the (admittedly often large numbers of) loan words from Spanish or Portuguese that have now entered many indigenous languages of the Americas, their vocabulary is essentially entirely alien to European languages. We have, however, borrowed some of the exotic, classic names of the Latin American natural environment, such as *condor, puma*, and *llama* from Quechua. In fact the word *jerky* in *beef jerky* also comes from Quechua.

## In Grammar

In grammar too, Andean languages are utterly different to European ones, sometimes in ways you wouldn't even imagine:

- For a start, just look at how **long** the **words** get. Here's a Quechua one:

*Much'ananayakapushasqakupuniñataqsunamá*

Or, broken up into its component morphemes ('building blocks'):

*Much'a·naya·ka·pu·chka·sqa·ku·puni·ña·taq·suna·má...*

Admittedly this is a bit of a concocted example, but it is grammatically feasible. Very freely translated, it means something like: *As far as I know they've always been petting each other.*

- In fact, that words can get this long is an indication that the whole **structure** of the language is quite different to most European languages (and that includes German, whose famously long words are in fact actually just compound nouns and phrasal verbs). Most Andean, indeed very many Latin American languages in general have what is known as an **agglutinating** structure, and to a certain extent even a more extreme **incorporating** or **polysynthetic** structure (Inuit or 'Eskimo' languages in particular). What this means in effect is that many meanings that in English are different words (or just not bothered with at all) are expressed just by grammatical or derivational suffixes in these languages.
- This may make it look as though these languages are particularly difficult, but in fact they are more different than inherently difficult. Indeed, along with the agglutinating structure come other things that are extremely easy. First of all, Quechua for instance is quite astonishingly **regular** by the (outrageous!) standards of European languages: there are absolutely no irregular verbs, no irregular nouns, no irregular adjectives – in fact there's almost no irregular anything.
- Moreover, Andean languages just don't bother with many things that are central to the grammatical systems of European languages. You may have heard the famous claim that Chinese, for example, has "no tense". This is actually not a good representation: it doesn't mean that in Chinese you can't express the relative time an action took place, just that you don't have to in order to be grammatically correct, and if context is enough to make it clear you can leave it out. If you've ever wondered why

European languages bother with masculine and feminine gender, Quechua and Aymara will start you wondering why even English bothers with different words for *he* and *she*, or with plurals, when context is clearly normally quite enough.

- The reverse is also true, however. That is, there are several other things that Andean languages **do** insist on mentioning explicitly in order for a sentence to be grammatically correct, but that European languages don't bother with. (In linguistics, this is known as what a language 'grammaticalises': so English grammaticalises tense because *I go yesterday* is grammatically wrong, whereas Chinese would accept this because it does not grammaticalise the difference between present and past tense. Note how English itself is more vague with the present-future distinction: *I go tomorrow*).

So in Cuzco Quechua, for instance, in pretty much every sentence you speak, you have to specify what your **source** for that **information** is, and/or how much you **personally committing yourself** to it being true: *i.e.* whether you've seen it yourself (first hand), heard or read it (second hand), are just inferring or presuming it, or are merely speculating. Quechua will also make you notice that the English word *we* is actually highly ambiguous, and start you wondering why we're so vague. Quechua even has a type of 'tense' that you have to use if you're talking about an event that happened while you were drunk, dreaming, unconscious, or in a number of other states!

These differences with European languages, particularly these last two types, are no purely grammatical, linguistic idiosyncrasies. They can be seen as far more than that. What is built into the grammar of the language (grammaticalised) can be seen as reflecting, and helping to inculcate directly in speakers, something that goes much deeper in the culture, a very different way of thinking and viewing the world.

For more details on this question, see three articles by the Jaqaru and Aymara expert, Dr Martha Hardman, about what she terms 'linguistic postulates' – *i.e.* the things that are grammaticalised in languages, such as tense or gender distinctions, source of information, and so on): [Hardman \(1972\)](#), [Hardman \(1978\)](#) and [Hardman \(1988\)](#).

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## [Who Speaks Andean Languages? How Do They Live?](#)

*Before going on to read this section you may want to have a look at my [photo pages](#) of*

[Who Speaks Quechua? How and Where do they Live?](#)

showing photos from fourteen typical Quechua-speaking villages in Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia

There is also a page of [General Photos of the Quechua-Speaking Andes](#) in the Cuzco region in southern Peru

Also very different is the life of the people who speak these languages, which to Western eyes can appear to be extreme poverty – and often truly is. Here’s a quote from the Footprint Bolivia guidebook describing the poverty and hardship of Aymara- and Quechua-speaking populations in the Bolivian Altiplano, which hits the mark:

*Bolivia has the highest percentage of rural poverty in the world. 97% of the rural population has an income below the poverty level, according to the UN International Fund for Agricultural Development. This can be seen most clearly on the Altiplano, where 70% of the rural population lives. Scenes of llamas grazing on the shores of the snow-capped Mount Illimani are misleadingly idyllic. Here, average life expectancy is 46 years, infant mortality is 172 per 1,000 live births, and family incomes average US\$11.50 a month. A former World Health Organisation representative in Africa has stated that poverty in Bolivia is worse than in Ethiopia.*

*Economic necessity has led to the growth in the number of working women and also the numbers of children working, which in turn has increased the level of drop-outs from school: under 40% of children of school age attend even though it is theoretically compulsory between 7 and 14. This explosion is most obvious in the towns with the swelling ranks of shoe-shiners (lustrabotas), lottery ticket sellers, beggars, cigarette and sweet vendors and street musicians. ... it is the rural population that has been hardest hit by the pursuit of economic stability....*

Murphy (2000: 379)

Beware though that for Westerners it’s not always easy to appreciate what comments like ‘family incomes average US\$11.50 a month’ mean in reality –certainly where such figures are quoted for incomes in US\$ they can be particularly misleading. Partly this is because the cost of living is of course very considerably cheaper in these countries than in the West, but also because most villagers in the Andes are subsistence farmers on the margins of the money economy in any case. What produce they can sell will earn them very little money in dollar terms, so they have very little cash income; the flip-side is that since they produce their own food they will not necessarily go hungry for lack of money. Living at around 4,000 metres, as very many of them do, however, means the variety of crops they can grow is very limited (mostly potatoes), leading to malnutrition in terms of very little variety in diet, even if there are plenty of potatoes for plenty of calories...

The harshness of life is also to do with the natural environment of the Andes – strikingly beautiful this may be, but especially in the remoter, high-altitude areas where most speakers of the Andean languages live, it can be a raw, harsh and forbidding climate. The thin mountain air offers precious little protection from the fierce tropical sun, which however alternates with wind, hail and snow, while through the year long droughts alternate with torrential rains. Most Aymara and Quechua-speaking *campesinos* wear worn-out clothes, and for example have no shoes other than open ‘thongs’ or sandals made out of old tyre-rubber, worn without socks.

Standards of living aside, there are of course in any case vast cultural differences between Western and indigenous Andean communities – still in many ways rooted in the ancient cultures before the European invasion.

## Origins: The Americas Before the European Conquest

A quick word about the origins of all these languages, and the peoples who speak them. Quick in part because relative to history in Europe and Asia, we actually know very little for certain about the history before the Europeans 'discovered' and invaded the Americas.

Anthropologists and archaeologists classify human societies on various different levels, the most basic classification being principally by the size and nature of the organisational units of those societies. The Americas before the European invasion had areas showing each of the three main types.

- There were two main poles of major 'civilisation' in the Americas, essentially isolated from one another and largely unaware of each other's existence: Mesoamerica and the Central Andes. Each had over the millennia seen a succession of major states which occasionally came together in single, huge, powerful Empires, including the two the Spaniards met on their arrival, those of the Aztecs and Incas respectively.
- Other areas had much smaller, single-city-states or chiefdoms, such as those of the Chibchas in Colombia, and some of the North American Indians, such as the Pueblo communities in central New Mexico and north-east Arizona.
- The rest of the Americas were occupied by even smaller tribal groups, without any real cities and often without sedentary agriculture, living as hunter-gatherer and/or fishing communities. They occupied most of North and Central America, all of Brazil and the rest of the Amazon Basin, and the southern part of South America.

## The Old World Meets the New

Such was the state of the New World when the Europeans first stumbled across it in 1492. You should appreciate just how unique an event this was in human history: a sudden, and soon violent, encounter between two worlds – in Mexico and the Andes full-blown civilisations – that previously had not even had a notion of the other's existence.

This astonishing **clash of cultures**, when the Old World found the New, happened twice in quick succession in the early 1500s. It is a heart-rendingly tragic and fascinating story, and still lies behind

much of the underprivileged social status of the Andean languages and their speakers today. Within a decade of the Spaniards meeting each of the two New World empires, they had destroyed both. In each case, just a few dozen Spaniards managed to overthrow the might of huge indigenous empires – but empires fundamentally weakened by the lack of iron, horses, the wheel, or immunity to Western epidemic diseases. The stories of the Spaniards’ mind-boggling daring and duplicity are excellently told in the following two highly recommended books:

**Hemming, John (1983)** The Conquest of the Incas *London: Penguin*

[the first 50 pages or so are particularly gripping]

**Diaz del Castillo, Bernal (1963)** The Conquest of New Spain *London: Penguin*

An eye-witness account by one of the soldiers on Cortez’s expedition to Mexico.

For the equally tragic history of the North American Indians at the hands of equally duplicitous English-speakers in times far closer to today (let no reader of this forget it!):

**Brown, Dee A. (2001)** Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee *Owl Books*

And for the same sad stories for the Amazonian Indians:

**Hemming, John (1995)** Red Gold – The Conquest of the Brazilian Indians, 1500-1760 *Papermac*

There’s also a fascinating account of some of the last indigenous peoples of the Americas to come into full contact with Western society, namely the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego.

**Bridges, E. Lucas (1947)** Uttermost Part of the Earth *London: Hodder & Stoughton*

This was written by one of the British missionaries who first settled the area, and lived at the farm at Harberton. There is a discussion in the book on the Yamana language the missionaries learnt to speak and wrote on. The indigenous peoples there are now effectively extinct: essentially because of the alien diseases the well-meaning missionaries unwittingly brought with them – anodyne colds to them, pathogens for the genetically non-immune locals.

Indeed perhaps the single greatest factor behind the conquistadors’ material superiority was not steel, nor the horse, the wheel, or writing, but the European diseases they unknowingly brought with them, to which the native populations had precious little resistance. That such a tiny band of Spaniards managed to defeat the might of the Inca Empire owes a great deal to the fact that – through no great coincidence – they arrived just at the moment when that Empire was fatally weakened by a long civil war over who should succeed after the sudden and unexpected death of the previous Emperor ... from smallpox.

Quite possibly well over half the entire population of the Americas died within a few decades of the whites arriving. We even have very little good idea of how big that population was, but about 20 million seems to be a reasonable figure. What with the conquest wars, slavery, and regular devastating epidemics, the native population took centuries to recover and start growing again stably.



Right from the start then, the relationship between the natives and the invaders was clear: conquest, enslavement, the expropriation of all the wealth and resources of the land, all within a European view of the natives as barbarous, uncivilised, and in need of conversion to Christianity to save their souls. Where the social position of the indigenous peoples was not actual slavery, it was often slavery in all but name.

In such a context, the official view of their languages could hardly have been positive. Indeed, ever since the invasion, all the native languages of the Americas have been in steady retreat in the face of the languages the Europeans brought with them, which in Latin America means Portuguese in Brazil, and Spanish everywhere else.

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## The Social Situation Today

Things have in fact changed remarkably little today: race and skin colour correlate very strongly with social and economic status. The rich and powerful strata in all countries in the Americas (with precious few exceptions) are dominated by whites; the poorest by indigenous peoples and blacks. In most Latin American countries, there are also large numbers of *mestizos* – of ‘mixed’ white and Indian ancestry – who tend to form an in-between society. This is not to say they are ‘middle class’, but they tend speak Spanish, live in towns and cities, and are generally less badly off than the indigenous villagers. Indigenous peoples still often see *mestizos* as outsiders to their own communities and identities, indeed in Quechua the loanword *misti* has this specific sense, as opposed to *runa*, as they call themselves. Language too is important in this question of identity: Quechua is often known as *runa simi*, the *language of the runa*.

Recent decades have also seen massive migration from the countryside to the cities, so there are now many ‘pure-blood’ Indians there, but who are fast adapting to more urban and more westernised lifestyles. In particular this involves them in most cases preferring to speak to their children in Spanish, perceived as more valuable particularly in urban environments, and deliberately not passing on to their children their own native languages (indeed often punishing them for ever speaking it), which are now reduced ever more to remote and endangered rural languages.

There is in some countries supposedly some sort of ‘official status’ for indigenous languages, and programmes proclaiming ‘bilingual education’. A lot of this is, unfortunately, guff, particularly in Peru. (Bolivia and Ecuador seem to be rather further than Peru on the road towards having their languages recognised in official circles as of some worth, though there is still a very, very long way to go, and very urgently.) In practice, indigenous languages are still very much underprivileged, have no real official position, are very little written, and remain the object of scorn for many *mestizos*.

Despite appearances, and figures of speakers in the millions, it can certainly be argued that all Andean languages are **in danger of extinction**. While this is not quite yet imminent for the major varieties of Quechua and Aymara, which still have a form of safety in numbers, there is no escaping that on current trends they are in steady decline, in the face of extremely powerful social forces. Unless social trends change radically in favour of indigenous languages, which seems rather unlikely, it is foreseeable that even the major ones today may not last much longer than a few more generations. Others, including many other, endangered varieties of Quechua, are quite irredeemably doomed, and will certainly die out in the next few years. For more details, see my page on [How Endangered is Quechua?](#)

There are a few great Latin American novels, in the so-called *indigenista* movement, which deal with the social situation of speakers of the native languages of the Andes. Two of the best (in Spanish) are:

**Alegría, Ciro (1941) El Mundo es ancho y ajeno**

Winner of the Latin American Novel Prize, this novel tells the tale of the struggle of an Indian community to keep its land in the face of a rapacious white landlord and a long, bitter drought. [Note that the full book is c. 500 pages long – the much shorter editions one often finds on sale in Peru are radically edited versions for schools! Make sure you get the full one!]

**Arguedas, José María (1941) Yawar Fiesta**

A much shorter novel (c. 110 pages), but another classic, again set in a highland village in Peru, including the traditional (and rather gory) Yawar Fiesta ('blood festival'). This developed out of the traditional Spanish bullfight, but transformed by the added indigenous element of a captured condor strapped to the bull's back. The symbolism is clear: the bull representing the Spaniards is defeated, and the condor representing the Quechua-speaking population vanquishes it and returns to freedom. (There have been campaigns to have this festival banned, including on the grounds of protecting the condor, though the point of the symbolism is that the condor is set free again at the end – an important 'ceremony' in itself, which attracts very considerable attention. That said, the condor is of course it is exposed to considerable danger. For a journalist's account of the fiesta on the web, in English and German, go to <http://users.rcn.com/akreye/PeruE.html>.)

Thankfully, there is one exception (though sadly only of the type that proves the rule) to the threat of extinction hanging over native languages of the Americas: the Guaraní language. This is spoken in parts of Brazil, Bolivia and Argentina, but it is in Paraguay where it really thrives. It is not only a *de iure*, but also is really is a *de facto* official language in the country, with 95% of the population bilingual in it, and this includes many of the richer and more powerful groups. Plenty of politicians, including presidents, are Guaraní speakers, and there is a fair amount of publishing in Guaraní, including some newspapers. For a brief but good introduction to the sociolinguistic situation and status of Guaraní and Spanish in Paraguay, see [Lipski \(1994\)](#).

## The Survival of Indigenous Languages

In a way it is fairly surprising that any native languages of Latin America that have managed to hold out until now. Where, and in what circumstances have they survived? The key thing that has saved them has undoubtedly been simple **remoteness** – social as well as geographical. To a certain extent this applies even to Guaraní, in the sense that Paraguay is one of the most forgotten countries in Latin America, much of it pretty remote desert.

To understand what is meant by remoteness, one needs to take a brief look at the geography and society of Latin America. There are two main types of area that can count as geographically remote, where it's the terrain and climate that makes transport very difficult, and indeed the climate also that makes it not a popular place to live:

- The wet, tropical lowlands, originally covered by **rainforest**, particularly the vast Amazon Basin. The areas that have so far escaped the rapacious advance of the logging companies remain very sparsely populated, distances are vast, communications almost non-existent, and here native groups have been more or less left alone (except by missionaries) until the logging companies cut down the surrounding forest to reach their area. The remaining areas of Amazon forest are home to dozens of very small tribal populations speaking their own languages, often only a thousand speakers or less. And there are – or at least were – a staggering number of different languages, often completely unrelated (as far as we can tell) languages side-by-side in neighbouring settlements. Language maps of these areas are a real mess, and in any case we often know very little about the relationships between the languages. Portuguese and Spanish-speakers are increasingly contacting these areas, however, and even colonising them themselves. Indigenous tribes are being deprived of their land, and with it the resources they need to continue living in their traditional communities. Many of these languages, indeed the tribes themselves, are in very real and imminent danger of extinction.
- The other areas where you are most likely to hear surviving indigenous languages are remote in a very different sense: **altitude**. Throughout the Andean countries, altitude determines very many of the fundamentals of life: climate, temperature and rainfall, seasons, vegetation, food, and lifestyles in general. It is quite possible, in a three or four-hour downhill walk, to pass from barren rock and ice, to high grasslands grazed by llamas and alpacas, to fields planted with hardy potatoes, to eucalyptus forests, to maize fields and deciduous woods, to orange groves, coffee plantations and orange orchards, to plantations of coca, then sugar cane and bananas, and finally end up in tropical rainforest or desert. A typical four or five-hour road journey can take you up and down all these climate zones several times in a row as you cross the valleys and mountain crests that run parallel north-south through the Andes.

Above all, then, do not get the impression that Latin America is all hot! It isn't at all, and in the Andean countries the majority of the population, and almost all speakers of the surviving indigenous languages, live high up in the mountains in more temperate areas.

Indeed, even within the highlands, the Andean languages Quechua and Aymara are increasingly restricted to more and more remote mountain areas, higher and higher. Indeed, the one large region where they both survive most densely is known as the *Altiplano*, literally the *High Plain*, which covers almost half of Bolivia and part of southern Peru. Locked in this basin, ringed by the main eastern and western cordilleras of the Andes, is Lake Titicaca, the highest major lake in the world, with its stunning backdrop of the snowy peaks of the cordillera Real, up to 6500 metres. The average altitude of the Altiplano is over 4,000 metres. No surprise that it's pretty cold, and indeed most of the year the altiplano is very dry, its half-barren grassland suitable for little other than growing hardy strains of potato and grazing llamas and sheep. Life is not easy. It is though, absolutely beautiful, 'a bowl of luminous light' as the guidebooks describe it.

Nor is remoteness a question of altitude alone, but also one of **terrain**. The high Andes of south and central Peru are characterised by incredibly broken terrain, vast mountain ranges riven by enormous canyons. It is no accident that the deepest two canyons in the world, Catahuasi and Colca (both Quechua names), are both in Southern Peru. Such topography makes these areas remote also simply by making transport so difficult: roads are exceptionally hard and expensive to build, and are very few and far between. Those that do exist are usually unsurfaced and in bad repair. When the rainy season comes, they can become completely impassable. A 100-km journey can easily take eight hours, after perhaps half a day's wait for a vehicle going your way. Many of the Quechua-speaking areas of south and central Peru in particular are remote in both these senses of altitude and extremely difficult terrain.

As a specific example of very endangered languages just holding out still in a remote mountain location, consider the languages Jaqaru and Kawki (closely related varieties, in the same language family as Aymara). These are spoken in just a very few villages which, while they lie only about 240 km south-east of the Peruvian capital city Lima as the crow flies, are nonetheless surprisingly remote and hard to get to (they're in the mountains of the Yauyos Province in the Department of Lima). Travel to them involves a seven-hour bus journey from Lima to the village of Catahuasi, the second half of this on an unpaved dirt road, used by a couple of dozen vehicles a day. From there it is a 20 km hike, a stiff climb of 1,700 m up a spectacular, arid gorge, through unpopulated territory to the villages of Tupe (2,880 m) and a few nearby hamlets (Aiza, Colca). The **Jaqaru**-speaking people in these villages, or rather only the women, still wear traditional dress. This is increasingly rare, but throughout the Andes it's generally a pretty sure sign of speaking a native language. Tupe is a quite fascinating place to visit, very highly recommended.

**Kawki**, meanwhile, is still spoken by just two true native speakers, both old and infirm, in the 'nearby' village of Cachuy (3,140 m). It too can be reached only on foot (a 16 km hike, climbing 1,800 m) from

the village of Canchán, near Catahuasi on the road. And clearly, the main reason these languages have survived at all is precisely because of their remoteness.

For more information on both these languages, particularly an in-depth look at the question of their endangerment and for Jaqaru the chances of long-term survival (Kawki is sadly already doomed), click to read the following article, in Spanish, by [Dante Oliva León](#): [Jacaru y Cauqui, al Borde del Silencio](#). There is also a 20-minute video cassette produced by Stef de Haan and his team from the Netherlands, about Tupe and spoken in Jaqaru – contact me for details on how to get hold of it.

A word on one more aspect of remoteness. One of the reasons so little linguistic research has been done on these endangered Andean languages is that from the early 1980s to the mid 1990s, it was simply far too dangerous to do fieldwork in almost the whole of highland and much of jungle Peru. Over half the country was caught up in vicious **civil war** between Maoist guerrillas and the Army and paramilitaries – both of whom committed widespread atrocities. Thankfully, since the early-1990s almost all of Peru has once more been quite safe to visit again.

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## [Indigenous Languages Surviving in Latin America: The Big Picture](#)

So far most of the languages discussed are those of the Central Andes – namely Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia – and these are the ones that this webpage concentrates on. Before considering them in more detail, however, a brief look at the broader picture of all the native Latin American languages that survive today.

The main point is that there are only a few major languages left, even taking ‘major’ to mean having of the order of a million speakers. (Note that even this is a very generous definition by European standards, for instance. Indigenous languages of the Americas are on a scale of what in Europe are generally considered very much ‘minor’ languages, of countries with populations the size of say Norway, Estonia or Slovenia.)

Accurate figures for the number of speakers of indigenous languages in the Americas are in any case generally very hard to come by ([click here](#) for more details on this). Those that make it to somewhere around the million mark, or above, are found in three areas:

- **Mesoamerica**, principally Guatemala and southern Mexico. These are home to **Mayan**, **Náhuatl**, **Zapotec**, **Mixtec** and many other languages – or more accurately, language families. Click to see the ethnologue language maps of [Guatemala](#) and [Mexico](#).
- In the low-lying savannahs of **Paraguay**, the only Latin American country where an indigenous language has a truly meaningful official status – namely **Guaraní**.

- In the highlands of the **central Andes**. These rugged mountainous regions are home to two language families which are quite distinct from each other, though intermixed both linguistically and geographically. **Aymara** is spoken in the northern half of the Bolivian *Altiplano*, around and to the south of lake Titicaca, including the area around the Bolivian capital La Paz, and a small part of southern Peru. **Quechua**, meanwhile, is spoken over vast areas both north and south of the Aymara region: through most of the Andes of Ecuador, central and southern Peru, and in Bolivia in the southern half of the Altiplano, down to northernmost Argentina, as well as in the far north on the mountainous border with Peru to the east of Lake Titicaca.

Most of the other languages in Latin America are considerably smaller, generally with at most a few tens of thousands of speakers, down to a just a handful. This is fairly similar to the situation of native languages in North America. Many of these can be grouped into large language families, while others are isolates of whose origins we know little or nothing for sure, in the sense that linguists have not found any other languages to which they are demonstrably related (despite some fanciful and quite unproven claims to the contrary, particularly from Joseph Greenberg).

**Amazonia** in particular is scattered with hundreds of such languages, and there remain many about which we know very, very little – and doubtless never will as they are soon destined for extinction in the face of Spanish and Portuguese. There are also a few remnants of other indigenous languages in the central Andes, such as Uruquilla near Lake Titicaca (see below), and several others in Ecuador.

Since I have concentrated here on the language families with speakers still numbering into the millions, on these pages of mine there isn't much information on other indigenous languages, particularly those of Amazonia. For some very brief information on them, try Beatriz Dukes' webpage on [Indigenous Languages of South America](#). This has a nice [clickable map](#) of the main indigenous languages of *South America* (*i.e.* Latin America minus Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean), to take you to other pages with some details on particular indigenous language families and the main languages within them, including those of Amazonia not covered here: [Tupi-Guaraní](#), [Macro-Jê](#), [Tucanoan](#) (*e.g.* the [Karajá](#) language) and [Carib](#) (*e.g.* [Hixkaryana](#)). But beware: Aymara is missing!

Even among the major indigenous languages of Latin America, in these pages the focus will be on those of the Andes, namely Quechua and Aymara. Before turning only to them, however, I'll try to give a quick introduction to the languages of the other two main areas of Latin America where indigenous New World languages survive, namely Guaraní in Paraguay, and the many indigenous languages of Mesoamerica.

## Fragmentation Into 'Dialects'

Of the main surviving Amerindian languages, Guaraní – no doubt largely thanks to it being the only one to enjoy real, meaningful real official status in a nation state, Paraguay – is the only one that can boast a big population all speaking a fairly homogenous single language, with something of a 'standard' form.

The others – the Aymara, Quechua and Mayan language families – have for centuries, if not millennia, each been splitting up into different accents, dialects and indeed varieties now so different their speakers have great difficulty in understanding each other, such that they really deserve to be recognised as distinct languages (rather than dialects of the same language).

This is of course a natural process for all languages – once the Roman Empire broke up, Latin ended up changing over the centuries, but changing in different ways in different areas, so these areas ended up with different dialects. Eventually after two millennia this has led to what we now recognise as quite distinct, even if closely related, languages: Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, French, Romanian and various minor varieties.

The same has been happening with most native American 'languages' over many centuries. The Mayan, Quechua and Aymara language families owe much (but by no means all, especially in the case of Quechua!) of their wide spread of territory to the expansionist Empires that helped spread them – namely the Mayan, Inca and (according to some theories) Wari 'empires' respectively. The existence of a political and social unity and standard form of the language can perhaps act as a brake the process of divergence of dialects, but these conditions have not often applied in the history of languages such as Quechua: much of the spread and divergence of Quechua happened centuries before the Inca Empire, and that only lasted a century or less in most areas.

So divergence into different regional forms has by now gone so far that speakers of some of the different dialects now have serious difficulty understanding each other. Some linguists have claimed that certain Quechua dialects, for instance, are as different to each other as Spanish is to French. (Trying to measure objectively quite how different varieties of languages are, is not too easy, though improving on the methods to do so is one of the aims of the [linguistic research project](#) I'm currently working on.)

So by now it is better to speak of Mayan, Quechua, and most of the other main indigenous languages of the Americas, as language **families**, each made up of fragmented collections of related dialects. Indeed since they have been declining, as Spanish is adopted by more and more of the population, the dialects are breaking up geographically too, and in many cases are now spoken only in remoter pockets, separated from each other by Spanish-speaking areas. They are also spoken predominantly by 'pure-

blood' Indians, and in rural environments, rather than in cities or large towns where Spanish is more dominant.

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## Guaraní

Guaraní, as already mentioned, is spoken primarily in Paraguay – purportedly by 95% of the population – and in small pockets in neighbouring countries, to a total of five million speakers.

Guaraní is also often talked about in the same breath as Tupi, which is the wider language family that it falls under, with minor tribes scattered across much of Brazilian Amazonia.

Under the Spanish, various Tupi-Guaraní speaking tribes in the jungle area around the Iguazu Falls (the second largest in the world), in the borderlands of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay, were brought into the famous Jesuit missionary settlements. Their haunting ruins can still be seen in Argentina and Paraguay, and the 1980s film *The Mission* gives a reasonable insight into their nature at their peak, and their ultimate deliberate destruction for enslavement when the Jesuits were expelled.

Other than this jungle area in the east of Paraguay, much of the rest of the country is flat, dry and dusty, increasingly so towards the semi-desert of the Chaco in the NW (lost in the middle of which are, amazingly enough, a few German-speaking Mennonite settlements).

You're unlikely to have come across many Tupi-Guaraní words, but there's one you cannot fail to have come across – even if by a very circuitous route. This is in the name of the famous hero of the Cuban Revolution, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. *Che* was a nickname given to him by the Cubans, since he had the classic colloquial Argentinean habit of interspersing his Spanish with the word *che*. This is apparently originally the Tupi word for *brother*, used as an informal term of address to friends, as *hermano* is in Spanish, or indeed *yo, brother!* in some forms of English.

For a brief but good introduction to the sociolinguistic situation and status of Guaraní and Spanish in Paraguay, see [Lipski \(1994\)](#).



## The Languages of Mesoamerica

There are a great many indigenous languages spoken in Mesoamerica, particularly Mexico. I hope to add a few more details on the major ones eventually, particularly Náhuatl and Zapotec, but for now just a taster, in the form of a few words on Mayan.

### Mayan

The Mayan empire was responsible for what are now some of the most astounding archaeological sites in Latin America, throughout the jungles of modern day southern Mexico (especially the Yucatán peninsula), Guatemala (especially Tikal), Belize and Honduras.

Do not confuse the Mayan civilisation with the Aztec one that the Spaniards encountered and conquered. The Mayan civilisation had long, long vanished by the time the Spaniards arrived. It peaked between 500 and 800 A.D., and then mysteriously collapsed, such that most of the major Mayan archaeological sites known today were lost in the jungle and unknown even to the locals when the Spanish arrived, and many have only been rediscovered since the 1800s, some not until recent decades, the latest in the year 2000.

The most striking thing about Mayan is that, exceptionally among languages of the New World, it had an original written form, and a fascinating and beautiful one at that. [Click here](#) for a website showing the Mayan 'glyphs', explaining the writing system, and giving more general information about the language.

Plenty of Mayan historical writings in this script survived through to the Spanish era. Indeed, one particular Spanish priest set about painstakingly collecting all the documents that he could find in this script. He then wrote a few notes on the alphabet, before burning everything as 'heretical'. Only four that escaped him have been found since, though we do have a fair few monumental inscriptions in the script, from ruins sites unknown to the Spaniards.

The mysterious 'glyphs' of the Mayan writing system were long thought to be merely idiographic symbols, but were eventually discovered to be a true writing system, an 'alphabet' (or more exactly, a syllabary). The first great breakthrough in the decipherment of this writing system was proposed in the 1960s by the Russian Yuri Knorosov, and completed in the years thereafter. Some of the 'new' texts on monumental inscriptions found at newly-discovered Mayan sites in the 1970s were vital in confirming the accuracy of the decipherment. The detective work ranks with the classic linguistic decipherments of Egyptian hieroglyphics and Minoan Greek *Linear B*, a fascinating story well told in:

**Coe, Michael D. (2000) Breaking the Maya Code London: Penguin**

As well as making for a very good read in its own right, this book gives a look into the very different nature and complexity of one of the native American languages.

Nowadays Mayan survives as a language family splintered into a collection of about seventy different dialects/languages, spoken still in southern Mexico and Guatemala by mostly 'pure-blood' Indian populations. It's reputedly a very difficult language to master, and as usual completely different to European ones.

You may have heard of the armed rebellion in the Chiapas region of southern Mexico, which has been going on for several years now, with intermittent peace talks: this is centred around a Mayan-speaking region and proclaims as one of its main goals the protection of the rights of the Mayan Indians.

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## [Quechua and Aymara](#)

Now on to the Andes, home to the other two of the major surviving languages of the Americas, namely Aymara, and the 'biggest' (by number of speakers) of all the surviving languages of the New World, Quechua.

I'll begin with a rundown of the history of the Quechua and Aymara, since it is this history that explains where they are spoken today, and the particular pattern of dialect variation within each. In all this, the discussion will be about Quechua and Aymara together, precisely because their histories, and the languages themselves, are inextricably intertwined.

There are remarkably strong, unquestioned parallels between these two language families, in their vocabulary, their sound system and their grammatical system. Certainly, it is quite clear that Aymara and Quechua have borrowed from and influenced each other hugely over centuries, if not millennia, of close and intense contacts between the peoples who spoke them. What remains quite unclear, and hotly disputed, is the great enigma in Andean linguistics: whether these parallels between Aymara and Quechua are to be attributed to the two language families ultimately stemming from the same root, or simply to 'convergence' between the two languages.

For more details, there's plenty more information on [Origins, History and Regional Variation in Quechua](#) elsewhere on this website, just click on the link to see.

## Origins: History up to the European Conquest

Other than Quechua and Aymara, and therefore the populations that spoke them, having been in intense, prolonged contact for so long, little is known for certain about the details of their relationships, or indeed more generally about the history of these languages and their speakers before the Spanish invasion. When the Spaniards arrived, they found Quechua being used the 'official' language of the Inca empire, and its *lingua franca* in most areas, though the part of the Empire that is now northern Bolivia was Aymara-speaking when the Incas conquered it, and remained so during the Incas' century or so of control there. Moreover, there were many other more minor languages being spoken throughout the Andes, most of which have since died out. For detailed information on these more minor languages, and the linguistic situation in general in the Central Andes at the time of the Spanish invasion, see [Torero \(1987\)](#).

As for who the Quechua and Aymara speakers were, various theories have been proposed, trying to tie them in to various peoples and civilisations we know of from archaeology. Again, however, there is no real consensus and little is yet certain. I'll briefly summarise the proposal I find most convincing for now, which is largely that put forward in [Cerrón-Palomino \(1987\)](#) and [Cerrón-Palomino \(2000\)](#).

It seems fairly clear that both Quechua and Aymara started out as minor languages spoken in a small areas, which through history expanded hugely. Again, there is a parallel with Latin, which started out only as the language of the area around Rome (Latium), but was taken by the empire and settlement over much of the Roman Empire (especially the Western part), and survives transformed into modern Romance languages from Portugal to Belgium to Romania.

It is not known for certain where either family originated, but Cerrón-Palomino's suggested most likely scenario is that both started out in regions near modern-day capital of Peru, Lima, *i.e.* by the coast and/or in the mountains immediately inland of the coast (these areas are very arid in the lower altitudes, excepting in the valleys irrigated by the rivers flowing down from the high Andes).

From this homeland, both languages began expanding into the highlands: Quechua first northwards, into central Peru, Aymara rather more south-eastwards. Quite when this happened is unclear, though some time during the first millennium A.D., quite possibly very early. Aymara's continued expansion later may also be thanks to the last great civilisation before the Incas to control much of the Andes, based in the sites now known as Wari and Tiwanaku, from around 600 to 1000 AD – though others dispute the identification of this culture as Aymara-speaking. It's unclear quite what sort and degree of control this so-called 'Empire' actually had, whether it was a true military/political unit, or more a purely cultural phenomenon. Whichever it was, by the time it collapsed, Aymara appears to have spread over much of southern Peru and northern Bolivia.

Thereafter there were a few centuries apparently without any overall dominant power, though linguistically Quechua seems to have got the upper hand, and began steadily spreading into much of the Aymara area, including the area around Cuzco. One of the tribes who may have originally spoken Aymara (or perhaps Puquina), but then at some point switched to Quechua, were the ancestors of the Incas. In the mid 1400s they suddenly burst on the scene, and starting out from their small state around their capital city of Cuzco, in less than a century conquered a massive empire.

Bear in mind, though, that the Inca Empire was actually pretty short-lived: much of its territory had been under Inca control for less than a century when it calamitously collapsed in the face of the Spanish 'invasion' in the 1530s.

The Incas carried their Quechua with them to much of their Empire, certainly to southern Bolivia and northern Argentina (all these areas speak the so-called 'Quechua II', 'Quechua A' or 'North-South' dialects). The Quechua presence in central Peru, however, dates not from the Incas, but from the initial expansion of the Quechua-speaking peoples many centuries earlier. So here the Incas were conquering areas that already spoke Quechua, only pretty different varieties to their own (the dialects known as 'Quechua I', 'Quechua B', or 'Central'). Indeed by today, varieties from the two main groups of dialects have become so different that it's difficult for Quechua speakers from the different groups to communicate effectively with each other. For a map of Quechua dialects, [click here](#).

The two main articles which presented the first analysis of the internal structure and history of the Quechua family, and the first dialect classifications which remain more or less the standard today, are:

**Parker, Gary (1963)** [La clasificación genética de los dialectos quechuas](#)

*in: Revista del Museo Nacional (Lima, Peru) Vol. 32: 241-252*

**Torero, Alfredo (1964)** [Los dialectos quechuas](#)

*in: Anales Científicos de la Universidad Agraria (Lima, Peru) Vol. 2: 446-476*

Their classifications are presented together, discussed, and elaborated on in [Cerrón-Palomino \(1987: ch.8\)](#).

As for Ecuador, it's not clear when and how Quechua got there. The Quechua here also falls within the Quechua II group, that is, it's more similar to the southern varieties of Quechua in Ayacucho, Cuzco, Bolivia and Argentina, than it is to Central dialects of Quechua in between (in northern Peru). However, while Ecuadoran Quechua seems too similar to Cuzco Quechua to have arrived in the first wave of expansion northwards, it also seems rather too different to have been brought as late as by the Incas themselves, unless it has changed particularly radically since. One theory is that it was something of a *lingua franca* learnt by many ethnic groups as a common trading language, without being the native language of any of them.

As you can see from all these suppositions and our remaining doubts, much more research is still needed on these questions. In fact, one of the aims of the [linguistics research project](#) I'm currently involved with is to provide some more accurate measures of the precise degrees of similarity or difference between the Andean languages and their various dialects, and some novel and more useful

ways of interpreting exactly what these figures mean for the history and relationships of these languages. This is one way in which linguistics may be able to help unravel pre-history: by looking at the historical relationships between the Andean languages, to infer from them the relationships between the peoples who spoke them.

Even if we can be sure of the exact origin of Quechua, one thing seems abundantly clear: one place it is least likely to have originated in is Cuzco. This is a popular myth, but to my mind a completely wrong-footed and uninformed one, to the point of being damaging and chauvinistic. There are various arguments to support for the theory about the original homeland of Quechua and Aymara being in the central region of Peru. One, for instance, is that this is exactly the area where the most 'conservative' varieties of both language families are still found, just hanging on today – Jaqaru and particularly Kawki being claimed to be the most conservative dialects of the Aymara language family, for instance. This fits with a general (though not exceptionless) principle of historical linguistics that the most conservative varieties of a language (family) tend to be those that have moved the least through history from the point where they all originated. The logic behind this is principally that in moving away from their homeland, speakers of a language will come into contact with different languages, which over the centuries can influence their own speech, making it change more, away from its own original form to 'converge' a little with those other languages, borrowing from them words, sounds and sometimes even grammatical traits. This happens less in the varieties spoken by the people who stay in or near to the original homeland of the language, so these more conservative varieties can be assumed to be nearest to that original homeland.

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## [History Since the Conquest](#)

Since the European conquest, the fate of the native languages of the Americas has certainly been overwhelmingly one of decline. It is true that for the major languages Quechua and Aymara there was at first also some expansion, though essentially only at the expense of other, more minor Andean languages (Quechua also made it into some low-lying jungle areas as these were colonised by Quechua-speakers from the highlands). For a bit more on these languages, and the remnants that survive of them today, see the next section below on [Minor Languages of the Andes](#).

One of the main reasons that Aymara and later especially Quechua were able to expand even under Spanish rule goes back to the mining industry that was one of the lynchpins of the Spanish colonial economic system. The way the Spaniards ensured manpower for their all-important mines (especially the vast silver mine at Potosí) was by a forced labour draft, rotating through all Indian

communities. The effect of this was to bring together many Indian communities speaking different languages from all over southern Peru and Bolivia. As a common language among their Indian workforce the Spaniards favoured Aymara, and later particularly Quechua, as more 'general' Indian languages. At least in part due to this official attitude, over the centuries following the Conquest minor languages such as Puquina (and Uruquilla?) steadily lost out to Aymara and Quechua.

Not surprisingly, there were also a number of indigenous rebellions against the Spaniards, including a huge one in 1780, following which Quechua was banned. When Peruvian and Bolivian independence finally came in 1825, it was certainly not under the control of any indigenous movement, but as in the USA a rebellion of native-born whites against the colonial system which kept power in the hands of the mother country. So national independence actually meant precious little for the native peoples, other than a slight change of masters. Native Andean languages continued as distinctly second-class, underprivileged ones, unwritten, scorned by the wealthy and powerful, and increasingly abandoned in favour of the socially far more acceptable and valuable Spanish.

This situation has largely continued to this day, though there are now incipient efforts to restore some prestige to these languages. This includes establishing alphabets and something of a 'standard' written form, at least for each of the various main dialects – here the great dialect variety in these languages, noted above, is a major obstacle. This has largely been achieved for Aymara and various forms of Quechua, though arguments rage on as to the precise alphabets to be used – for details see my webpage on [Hot Issues in Quechua](#).

There are also growing efforts to introduce native languages as languages of (at least primary) education, to have written works published in the language, and to give it a greater presence in modern media, particularly radio (there is no Quechua television broadcasting yet). Despite the efforts so far, it is doubtful whether they have really achieved much yet that will really slow the decline, let alone halt or reverse it. The opposing social factors in favour of Spanish are very powerful indeed.

For considerably more information on these issues, see my webpage on [How Endangered is Quechua?](#), which has fuller details on:

- the fate of Quechua and other Andean languages in the 20th century
- current figures for speaker populations
- the efforts in recent years to halt or at least slow their decline
- the prospects for these languages' survival in the future.

## Contact Between Languages: Quechua, Aymara and Spanish

While fragmentation into dialects has been one of the main results of the particular history of Quechua and Aymara, the other major effect of their long co-existence alongside each other in the Andes has been that they have influenced each other hugely, borrowing each other's vocabulary and even parts of their sound and grammatical systems.

For full details on the parallels between Quechua and Aymara, see [Cerrón-Palomino \(1995\)](#). For a summary of the long debate on whether such parallels should be seen as the result of contact and convergence, or ultimate common origin of the two language families, and for Cerrón-Palomino's own latest views on the question (basically, that the jury is still out), see [Cerrón-Palomino \(2000: ch.8\)](#).

Likewise, given centuries of contact with Spanish, with large proportions of the Quechua- and Aymara-speaking populations bilingual in Spanish, inevitably there have been heavy influences:

- both of Spanish on these languages
- and of them in turn on the Spanish spoken in Quechua- and Aymara-speaking regions.

Some of these features are found predominantly only in the Spanish spoken by people who are not native-speakers of Spanish, but many of them have now so permeated the speech of the Andes that they are also characteristic of even monolingual Spanish-speakers in the region who have no knowledge of any native language.

For a few details on the effects of Quechua and Aymara on the Spanish spoken in the highlands of Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador, see the relevant country chapters in [Lipski \(1994\)](#). There are a few more details and examples on my webpage on [Intriguing Aspects of Quechua](#).

## Minor Languages of the Andes

Although Quechua and Aymara are now the only two surviving major languages in the Andes, in the early years of Spanish rule the colonial authorities noted the presence of several others in areas which were later to come to speak Aymara or Quechua (as noted in the previous section), or of course Spanish. It is clear that these other indigenous languages were still spoken over fairly wide areas in southern Peru and Bolivia, particularly those that crop up most often in Spanish colonial documents:

the languages they called Puquina and Uruquilla. Whether these are to be recognised as very distinct languages, closely related ones, or just as different names given by the Spaniards for effectively the same language, has been a matter of some dispute among historians, anthropologists and linguists – as has the particular language spoken by particular ethnic groups, not least those termed the Uros. In any case, it seems clear to most linguists that there were essentially two main languages (or language families), now termed Puquina and Uru-Chipaya.

For a map of the former distribution of these languages in the lake Titicaca area and the Altiplano of southern Peru and western Bolivia see the [website](#) by a linguistic research group currently working on documenting Uru-Chipaya, which also has a short but informative text on these now highly endangered languages.

For fuller information, one good source on the minor Andean languages is an article by [Torero \(1987\)](#), which includes comments and criticism from other linguists and historians, and Torero's responses to those comments. These show clearly enough just how little agreement or certain knowledge there is on these minor Andean languages. As with the question of the relationships between Quechua and Aymara, their analysis is complicated by the fact that these minor languages too have clearly been influenced by each other, and particularly by Quechua and Aymara themselves. Just recently, research projects have begun into the main surviving remnants of them, now being studied by Andean linguists rather more intensively than hitherto, which hopefully will reveal more about them and any relationships between them. For now this introduction will follow the proposals made in [Torero \(1987\)](#), from where most of the information here has been drawn. This is not to say that they are not disputed by other linguists; what follows is just one possible vision.

Particularly intriguing are the peoples of the Bolivian Altiplano area known as **Uros** or Uros. These were almost the only native communities whom the Spaniards left essentially outside their economic and social systems. These were no Spanish invention, but had existed from well before the invasion, small ancient 'outcast' communities forbidden from holding land or animals, and who therefore had to make their living from fishing in the lakes of the Andes, living by the lakeshores. Even the Spaniards recognised their poverty, and expected them to pay a much lower rate of tribute than other Aymara and Quechua communities.

Indeed, all that is left of the **Uruquilla** (*i.e.* Uru-Chipaya) language (according to Torero) are:

- a few pockets of tiny **Uros** communities, eking out a humble existence only around the southern shore of Lake Titicaca near Desaguadero ('Uru A', the Ochosumas people in Itu-Itu or Iruitus? / Aguayamaya?), and the Muratos ('Uru B') on the western shore of Lake Poopó. Their languages are now apparently very endangered, indeed almost extinct;
- the **Chipaya** people, in the villages of Santa Ana de Chipaya and Ayparavi, north of Lake Coipasa (and its Salt Flats).

It may well be largely due to their very exclusion from mainstream social and economic life that some of these Uros communities have managed to survive to this day, and with them the last traces of Uruquilla. There were originally Uros of the other main language groups too, but without a distinct



language they seem to have assimilated into the larger communities speaking those languages. Claims were once made that these were members of the Arawak language family, but there seems little evidence to support this. There are some small exhibitions about these communities, their traditional dress, music and so on, in the Cochabamba University Museum in the town centre.

**Puquina**, meanwhile, now appears to be entirely extinct, except for certain traits of it which appear to have survived in the language of the **Callahuayas** traders, who live in the Charanzani region of the east of Lake Titicaca – theirs appears to be something of a classic ‘mixed’ language, much of it Quechua but with significant elements of another language, assumed by Torero to be Puquina.

The main points of Torero’s presentation that other linguists disagree with are:

- which of the languages spoken by these modern-day peoples are to be identified with which of the languages named by the Spaniards in historical documents;
- the true nature of Callahuaya and its relationship to Puquina;
- the social status and language(s) of the Uros communities through history.

Much further south in the Andes of southern Argentina and Chile, another native language that still survives (just) is **Mapuche**. For the following information, thanks to Juan Ignacio Strassburger of Argentina, who tells me that according to the leading expert on Mapuche (Marisa Malvestitti in her work *La lengua mapuche en la Patagonia argentina*), there are more than 28,000 Mapuche in the provinces of Neuquen, Río Negro, Chubut, La Pampa and Buenos Aires. All of them speak Spanish, but only about 2,500 among them still understand and speak, or just understand, the Mapuche language, which they use on special occasions. Nevertheless, there are many political implications and public debates on the Mapuches’ rights to land, their culture, and so on. Of course there are quite a number of inhabitants in those provinces with some Mapuche blood, but they are not considered Mapuches in the true sense in practice. In Chile numbers of Mapuche-speakers may be higher.

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*For other references, click directly on the links in this webpage text.*

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