

# MORE DETAILS ABOUT QUECHUA

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## Regional Differences in Vocabulary & in Grammar

This *Sounds of the Andean Languages* project, and our main page on the [Origins and Diversity of Quechua](#), look only at differences in **pronunciations** from one region to the next. But these are far from the only types of difference that can be found between the various regional varieties of Quechua.

The Quechua in different regions also differs in **vocabulary**. Some regions use different words for the same meaning, for example. Take the number *four*: as you can see on our word comparison page for this meaning, the Quechua in Ecuador, Northern Peru and parts of Central Peru uses a word based on *çusku*. All other regions, meanwhile, use *tawa*, as in *Tawa-nti-n Suyu*, the Cuzco Quechua name of the Inca Empire, which literally means something like *the Four (tawa) Regions (suyu) Together (-nti-n)*. In this case it is not really known with certainty where the two words come from, though it may be that *çusku* was a loanword from another language into the Quechua of some regions.

Quechua regions can also have differences in **grammar** too. Compare how to ask the question *Is there any?* and respond *There isn't any* in our two example regions of Chavín and Cuzco:

Chavín:        *Kan-ku?*            – *Mana-m kan-tsu.*

Cuzco:         *Kan-chu?*            – *Mana-n kan-chu.*

*Kan* means *there is*, and *mana* means *not*. As you can see, to ask a yes/no question in Cuzco Quechua you add the suffix *-chu?*, and you also use a suffix that looks exactly the same, *-chu*, in order to make a sentence negative, in combination with the *not* word *mana*. In Chavín, however, the suffixes for questions and negation are not at all the same as each other: *-ku?* for questions, and *-tsu* for negation with *mana*. (Note also that Cuzco has changed the original [m] sound on *mana* to [n] at the end of a word.) There are many other regional differences like this in how others of Quechua's suffixes are used from region to region.

Here in *Sounds of the Andean Languages* we concentrate only in differences in pronunciation, not vocabulary or grammar. So for most of our example words we have chosen vocabulary for which all Quechua-speaking regions share the same word for the same meaning, even if they pronounce those words quite differently. There are only a few exceptions like the meaning *four*, where different regions use radically different words like *çusku* and *tawa*. Also we have normally chosen basic word roots, not grammatical suffixes.

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## [Languages, Dialects, Regional Varieties?](#)

Our main page on the [Origins and Diversity of Quechua](#) illustrated in detail just a couple of example words as they have come to be pronounced now in different regions. But the more words one looks at, the more one sees that the relationships, similarities and differences between one regional variety of Quechua and

another are often very complex, on all levels: sounds, grammar and vocabulary. The result is that it is not very clear-cut how we should classify and name all these different regional varieties.

For example, some people talk of *Cuzco-Collao Quechua*, as if this is the name of one single regional form of Quechua. In reality, though, the Quechua spoken in Cuzco is by no means exactly the same as in various parts of the ‘Collao’ region, such as around Lake Titicaca or further south in Bolivia. Indeed in some parts of Bolivia the Quechua is significantly different from the Quechua in Cuzco, so much so that people there do not always understand Cuzco Quechua perfectly.

The same goes for the term *Ayacucho-Chanca Quechua*, often used to refer to the Quechua of the Ayacucho region, as far north as Huancavelica, as if it were clearly separate and distinct from *Cuzco-Collao Quechua*. In fact, many people from Cuzco can communicate better with people in Ayacucho province than with some Quechua-speakers in Bolivia...

Similarly, there isn’t just one *Ecuador Quichua*, because there are plenty of differences between different regions within Ecuador – especially between the highlands and the Amazon, but also even between different highland regions like Otavalo and Saraguro.

Things are actually quite complicated, then, in how similar one region’s Quechua is to another’s. The watchword is that everything is relative. Looking into these differences, at least on the level of pronunciation, is exactly what this *Sounds of the Andean Languages* research project is about, a way of helping all of us understand more about the differences and similarities between the various regional forms of Quechua.

The good news is that in reality in many cases it does not really matter exactly where we draw the boundary lines between different regional varieties of Quechua, or what we call them: *languages, dialects*, whatever. It’s true that one often hears people talk about Quechua *dialects*, rather than regional *varieties* or different Quechua *languages*.

We prefer to avoid the term *dialect* here, firstly simply because it is not very clear. More importantly, many people typically use the word *dialect* quite wrongly in a critical way. That is, many people use it as if to suggest that Quechua, or the Quechua of one region or another, is “only a dialect” and “not a proper language”. This is nonsense, just as much as it would be to pretend that Spanish is “only a dialect” because it is “not proper Italian”! In *Sounds of the Andean Languages*, then, we prefer just to keep talking about Quechua as the *Quechua family*, and about its various *regional varieties*, however similar or different they are to each other.

Since the classifications of Quechua varieties are not always clear-cut, the best policy when talking about it is to be careful about just one thing: to be specific to mention exactly which country and region(s) you mean in each case. Here, then, we will always specify if we’re talking about *Ancash Quechua* or *Cuzco Quechua* in Peru, *Cochabamba Quechua* in Bolivia, *Tena Quechua* in the Ecuadoran Amazon, and so on.

## What About Borrowing Words from Spanish?

What about borrowing? Some people also say that if Quechua has borrowed words it is somehow “bad Quechua”. Isn’t a language ‘less pure’ if it borrows lots of words from another?

Here we have to face another ‘fact of life’ for languages: just as all languages change, so too **all languages borrow words from each other**. This is completely normal, no language can escape it. English and French, both famous literary and so-called ‘cultured’ languages, have borrowed huge numbers of words from each other, but does this really mean that they no longer ‘proper languages’? And is Spanish worthless, ‘bad Latin’, just because the history of Spain resulted in Spanish borrowing lots of words from Arabic (including almost all words that start with *al-*)? Is it ‘wrong’ or ‘impure’ Spanish to say *almuerzo*? Or *bus* or *televisor*, invented from Latin and Greek? Or *llama*, *cóndor*, *puma* or *cancha*, *huayco*, *huayno*, *huaca*, and hundreds of others, borrowed from Quechua? And another thing to remember is that when Quechua ‘borrows’ a word like *televisor* or *bus*, these are not really borrowed from Spanish, because they are very international words that were never originally ‘Spanish’ in any case.

It is true that when borrowing reaches truly massive proportions, it can be dangerous for a language, and it is always useful to keep using as many native words as possible in a language, which helps maintain its wealth of vocabulary. Provided you safeguard native words too, adding new words from other languages helps actually increase the vocabulary, and keeps the language flexible in response to the changing world. A few years ago, Spanish had no need for a word like *escáner*, but it does, and has borrowed one from English (*scanner*). This hardly means Spanish is a poor, corrupt and impure language, just because it borrows words from another language! OK, Cervantes never said *escáner*, but that’s only because he didn’t have one! He certainly did need his *almuerzo*, and he probably liked his *aceitunas* and slept with an *almohada*, even though all those words come from Arabic. Or to be more accurate, the origins of the first of the three words, *almuerzo*, are more complex still, and serve to illustrate that you simply cannot think of languages in terms of ‘purity’ at all. For even this single word is a hybrid, a combination of one part Arabic (the article *al-*) and one part an original Spanish (*i.e.* Latin!) root. *Almuerzo* is not ‘pure’ anything, neither pure original Spanish (Latin) nor pure Arabic. But this hardly means it’s not a ‘proper word’!

As anyone who looks at languages knows, “the only language that does *not* borrow words is ... a dead language”.

## How Do We Know What Original Quechua Was Like?

We said in our page on the [Origins and Diversity of Quechua](#) that in Original Quechua the word for *three* was pronounced [kimsa], not [kinsa], and *you* was [qam] not [qan]. We said too that these words have kept their original [m] sound in Huancavelica, the Ecuadoran Amazon and Chavín, but in Cuzco and Bolivia it has changed to [n] and [ɲ]. (To hear the difference between these two types of <n> sound, listen to them on our [symbols](#) page.)

There is one big question here, though. Most people tend to assume that Quechua they know in their home region is the ‘original’ one, and ask how we know what was the original pronunciation. How do we know it was this way round? Could it not have been that on the contrary Original Quechua was [kinsa] with [n] and [qan] with [ɲ], and that it was in Huancavelica, the Ecuadoran Amazon and Chavín that it changed to [m]? Some people in Cuzco, for example, object like this, because they assume that Cuzco Quechua ‘always’ keeps the original pronunciations. In this case, their assumption is actually simply wrong, and if you study the linguistics it is very clear why. So let’s have a look.

Firstly, we know that no region automatically keeps the original pronunciations of all words. All languages change at least some pronunciations. So we can’t assume that even Cuzco Quechua will always have the original pronunciations of all words in any case.

More specifically, there is one very important thing about language which does indeed allow us to work out which direction particular sound changes happened in, and thus which were the original pronunciations. This is that **changes in language are not random**. On the contrary, if you look at many languages from all over the world, you can see very similar changes happening time and again, and they almost always happen only in one direction, not in the other. This example with [m] and [n] is a very common one. So before we look at this sound change in Quechua, let’s have a look at what happened in a completely different language family, while Latin was changing into Spanish, for example.

- Think of the Spanish word for *with*, *con*. This is known to come from the Latin word *cum* (which also meant *with*). So precisely the same sound change has happened here, from original Latin [m] to [n] now in Spanish: *cum* [kum] → *con* [kon]. Here this happens *at the end of a word* too, exactly as with Original Quechua [qam] → Cuzco Quechua [qan]. For a more recent example, take the word *Telecom*, which is spelt with <m> at the end, but which Spanish-speakers actually pronounce as [telekon], with [n] or [ɲ] instead.

- In [kimsa], meanwhile, the [m] → [n] change happens in the middle of the word. This too has happened from Latin into Spanish: the original Latin word *cumsequi-* has changed into modern *conseguir*. Here again, Spanish has changed the [m] into [n]; in this case because the next sound is a [s], which also causes this change. And again this is just what happened to Original Quechua [kimsa]: here too after the [m] the next sound is an [s], and again Cuzco and Bolivian Quechua have changed this to [n], hence their [kinsa].
- Notice that in *other* positions [m] does not change: if the next sound is a [p], also made with the lips just like [m], then this stops the [m] changing and it remains as [m], as in Spanish *comprender*, and *pampa* in Quechua in all regions (including Cuzco). There is also no change where any vowel comes after the [m], either at the start of a word as in [mayu] *river*, or in the middle as in [uma], *head*.

As you can see, what happens to even one sound like [m] is actually pretty complicated, and yet even all the details are repeated identically from Latin to Spanish (and Italian, French, and so on), just as they are from Original Quechua to Cuzco and Bolivian Quechua. We are 100% certain that the original sound in Latin was [m], because Latin was already written two thousand years ago, and indeed some Roman writers were already ‘complaining’ about people pronouncing [m] as [n]! We also have a great deal of information and examples from all the very well-known languages that Latin turned into. In countless other language families too, the more languages you look at, the more times you will see this type of change, but you will not find the reverse process. For all these reasons we can be very certain that in Quechua too, the original sound was [m], not [n]: Original Quechua was [kimsa] and [qam], not the pronunciations [kinsa] and [qan] now heard in Cuzco and Bolivia.

All of these details are the basics of the science of language – *i.e.* linguistics – and specifically the branch of it known as comparative and historical linguistics. Here is not the place to go into all the details of all the rules: discovering them all is something that takes years of linguistic study and experience of languages from all over the world. The important facts to remember are these: it is certain that *all* languages change, and that when they do, they change in ways that we can see *repeated* in different languages all over the world. (Changes in pronunciation often happen because speakers sense that they make words a bit ‘easier to pronounce’.) Because of this, the science of linguistics has been able to identify ways in which languages typically change, and if linguists look at the differences between modern regional varieties of Quechua, we can be very sure of what the language was like in its original form, and how it has changed in the different regions to become like it is today. This is why we are so interested in comparing the *Sounds of the Andean Languages* in this research.

There is no plot or trick in all this: to anyone who really looks into the issue, it soon becomes very obvious that the Original Quechua pronunciations must have been [kimsa] and [qam], and in this case not the modern Cuzco pronunciations. Linguists have no other reasons, no ulterior motives, for claiming what the Original Quechua pronunciations were. It’s simply the obvious truth.

## *Why Did Quechua Change?*

We've seen *that* languages change, and a few examples of *how* they do, but we haven't yet asked *why* they change... There can be various reasons.

Sometimes it's because one language gets influenced by another one, usually because the people who speak the two languages move into the same areas, mix and interact with each other, also in language. We can certainly tell that the languages of the Aymara family had a very big impact on Quechua, especially in the regions where Quechua and Aymara were or still are both spoken together. Today this 'language border' is around Lake Titicaca, and again further south in Bolivia around Oruro and in the Potosí region. In earlier times, though, Aymara and Quechua were spoken together across many regions, including in and around Cuzco – think, for example, of the province in southern Peru that is *now* Quechua-speaking but is still called 'Aimaraes'. Both languages have had a very big impact in creating certain changes in each other. Similarly, when people in Ecuador learnt Quechua, their original native languages had an impact in changing the Quechua they were learning. Quechua is also interacting with Andean Spanish, and again each is changing the other.

In other cases, it is less clear why language changes. Certainly, language is really just a tool for society to communicate about things that are important to it, and those things themselves change as new ones are invented, old ones abandoned; new people are born and others pass away, and so on. Languages change with people, too, and this explains some of the changes. Nonetheless, even though we are able to investigate in great detail exactly *how* a language changed, in many cases we cannot be so confident in saying exactly *why* it happened to change in that particular way at that particular time.



## What About Cuzco Quechua? Isn't it the Original Quechua?

Because the Quechua from different regions is so different, many speakers tend to 'prefer' the Quechua of one region to that of another. And not surprisingly, the Quechua they prefer is usually the one they are most used to: the Quechua of their own region.

It's important to remember that this is really just personal preference, nothing more, because one sometimes hears people from one region claim that they speak Quechua 'better' than how people speak it in other regions, usually claiming that it is *their* region only that speaks the 'proper' or 'original' Quechua. To be honest, though, when people say this it's really only because it is their personal form of Quechua and the one they are used to, and they just assume automatically that theirs is 'right', when they actually do not know at all which pronunciations are truly the original ones. Their opinion of what is 'better' is nothing but a personal preference that depends on where you come from, it is not an objective judgement of how much a language is worth. That a language is spoken in **different** ways in different regions does **not** mean that it is '**better**' or '**worse**' in any region.

In particular, if people try to claim that their region's Quechua is better *because it is the Original Quechua*, they are obviously wrong. Remember from our [Origins and Diversity of Quechua](#) page that **nobody**, in any region, now pronounces all Quechua words exactly as in like in Original Quechua. This includes Cuzco, whose Quechua is in truth no more original or authentic than the Quechua in other regions.

Original Quechua was spoken more than a thousand years ago, long before the Incas, and in a part of the Andes whose original location was actually almost certainly not Cuzco (and actually probably a lot nearer Chavín). On the contrary, it seems clear that the linguistic heritage of the Cuzco region involves several of the great languages of the Andes spoken there in earlier times, including Aymara and perhaps Puquina, long before Quechua reached the area. Modern Cuzco Quechua is not the Original Quechua, then. In any case, it cannot possibly be, and nor can the Quechua of any other region today. Cuzco Quechua too has changed, just like the Quechua everywhere else, and just like every language everywhere: no language can escape change.

There is, though, one thing about Cuzco Quechua that we *can* say with confidence: that yes, it certainly *is* one of the modern varieties that is **most similar to how the Incas spoke**. However, just the same can be said for much of the Quechua in Bolivia too. In fact, if we really search for the region whose pronunciation seems to have remained closest to the Incas' Quechua, then it is probably the Apolobamba region in Bolivia, to the south-east of lake Titicaca (the province of Norte de la Paz). And in some other respects, the



Quechua of the Ayacucho region today remains closer to how the Incas spoke than does the Quechua of modern-day Cuzco.

Firstly, the Quechua language in any case has kept on changing in the almost five centuries since the time of the Incas. So while it may be still similar, **the Quechua spoken in Cuzco now is no longer *exactly* the same as the Quechua spoken by the Incas.** If people who speak Cuzco Quechua today read some of the old Quechua plays like *Ollanta*, composed in their own region a few centuries ago, they will hear some words and expressions that now seem old, unusual or even unknown. This is just like Spanish speakers who read Cervantes today: they come across certain words and expressions in his Spanish that sound 'old' and are no longer said exactly like that. In fact, some original Quechua words have been lost in Cuzco Quechua, but are still normal in other regions: to say *bathe* the original Quechua word *armakuy* is now rarely heard in the Cuzco region, but many other regions like Ayacucho still do use this Original Quechua word.

Secondly, **even the language that the Incas spoke was already no longer Original Quechua anyway!** This may be surprising to many people, but we have seen how much older Original Quechua was than even the Inca Empire. Nor does it make any sense to claim that the Incas' Quechua was in any sense 'purer' or more original than the Quechua of any other region. If anything, the Quechua spoken in the Cuzco region has been much *more* affected by historic contacts with Aymara than has the Quechua in many Central and Northern regions such as Chavín. So if you want Quechua unaffected by other languages, you will not find it in Cuzco Quechua nor even in Inca Quechua...

One well-known example is the word for *water*: in Cuzco the word is *unu*, in other regions it's *yaku*. Almost everyone's typical reaction is to automatically assume that it must be *their* word that is 'right' and original. Many Cuzqueños, for example, assume that their *unu* must be 'right', and *yaku* 'wrong'. But how do they *know* which is original, rather than just assuming it because it's the word that they happen to use in their region? What does the real linguistic evidence indicate?

Well, in all the hugely diverse varieties of Quechua everywhere north of the Cuzco region, everyone uses *yaku*, and it is only the far south that is the exception to the normal Quechua rule and uses *unu* instead. All the evidence points to *yaku* as the probable original basic word for *water*, and suggests that it was old Cuzco Quechua that changed the word to *unu*, and thus took it into Bolivia too. In any case, both *yaku* and *unu* are now Quechua words, and neither is uniquely right or wrong, they're just different.

So any Quechua-speaker from any region who tries to claim that his or her variety of Quechua is the only 'right' or 'proper' variety is simply wrong, on two counts. Firstly, we have seen that they are just wrong factually, as anyone who looks scientifically at the regional varieties of Quechua can soon see. Secondly, think of what it actually means to pretend that one region's Quechua, even that of Cuzco, is 'better' than another region's... Remember how most of the Europeans who invaded the Americas treated all indigenous languages, including Quechua, claiming that they were not 'proper, worthy languages'. This is pure linguistic nonsense, founded on nothing but simple arrogance (and the same goes for the few crazy

people who still believe this today!). Just as Spanish is no 'better' or worse than English, so neither is any better or worse than Quechua, or Aymara, or any other language. Don't forget: the Incas were perfectly able to organise a vast civilisation using ... Quechua.

In exactly the same way, to claim that Cuzco Quechua is the only, proper Quechua language is just as wrong and just as arrogant as it was for the Europeans to claim that Quechua was not as 'good' or 'proper' a language as Spanish.

One thing should be clear: in saying all this, we do not criticise Cuzco Quechua whatsoever, not in the tiniest measure. Utterly on the contrary: the author of this website loves the city and region of Cuzco, where he has spent a great deal of his time researching Quechua, and it is the Cuzco variety of Quechua that he knows best himself. It is just that it's an obvious fact that Cuzco Quechua is not better, nor worse, neither more nor less original, than any of the other Quechua he has heard in regions throughout the Andean countries.

One thing that is certainly to be said for Cuzco is that thanks to its worldwide renown as the cradle of a great civilisation, the former capital of the Inca Empire is in a privileged position to promote and help the status of Quechua everywhere, perhaps more powerfully than any other region. The rest of the Andes need Cuzco's status to help lead a Quechua renaissance, but this cannot happen on the basis of arrogant, false claims that only Cuzco Quechua is the 'proper' Quechua. The people of Chavín de Huantar have every right to be equally proud of the astonishing civilisation that their own homeland produced, and they have every right to be equally proud of their home region's form of Quechua, no less worthy than that of Cuzco. All regions can and should be justly proud of their own Quechua, of their own inheritance from Andean civilisations, and together, of their profound diversity. The Quechua of Cuzco is one wonderful part of that inheritance, but no less is the Quechua of Chavín, Bolivia, Ecuador or any other part of the Andes.

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## [How and Why Did We Choose Our Fourteen Sample Regions?](#)

Another question that one might ask about our *Sounds of the Andean Languages* project is why we chose the particular fourteen regions and villages whose recordings we present here.

Firstly, our choice was nothing to do with politics or modern nations. The author of *Sounds of the Andean Languages* who made all these recordings is not from South America at all, so he is **not biased!** Our only

aim was to cover a broad range of varieties, and in particular a sample that would illustrate as well as possible both the unity of all Quechua speakers within the same language family, and also the diversity within that family. This, and nothing else, was the priority for our linguistic research in our choice of regions.

So, the reason why we chose nine regions from Peru, but only two from Ecuador and three from Bolivia, is nothing to do with a preference for any one country. We did this because we were faced with the simple fact that it so happens that there is considerably more variation in the Quechua across the regions of Peru than across those of Ecuador or Bolivia. Just listen in our word comparison tables to Huancayo and Chavín Quechua from Peru and you will see just how different they are from the Quechua of all other areas not only in Peru but also in Ecuador and Bolivia.

Secondly, the time available for this research project was limited, so we could not cover all of the regions that we would like to ideally. This is why, unfortunately but unavoidably, we have not yet been able to include other important Quechua regions, such as those in Argentina or Colombia, more regions within Ecuador, and within Peru the regions of San Martín, Chachapoyas, Junín, Yauyos, Huánuco and Pacaraos, for instance. It goes without saying that we have already earmarked all these regions as priorities to cover for a later edition of *Sounds of the Andean Languages*. We plan to add them as soon as we have been able to travel to them to collect recordings for them too. If you're using the CD-ROM version, then, remember to connect to the internet and check up on [www.quechua.org.uk/Sounds](http://www.quechua.org.uk/Sounds) from time to time, to see the latest edition which may have more regions included than your CD-ROM version.

For a full explanation of our choice of regions, see [this webpage](#).

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## [How to Find Out More](#)

### *Books and Websites About Quechua*

There are plenty of websites on Quechua, many of them with texts in Quechua itself, so if your computer is connected to the internet, [click here](#) to see a list of the best of them.

There are also a number of very good books about Quechua, but unfortunately most of them are intended for people who are trained in linguistics. What we have tried to provide here is information more accessible to everyone, particularly speakers of Quechua themselves.

If you are happy to delve into serious but certainly very reliable books on Quechua, then these are the ones we would most recommend.

- The best single general book about Quechua is *Lingüística quechua* by Rodolfo Cerrón-Palomino, first published in 1986 but recently reprinted in 2003.
- The same author has also produced an equivalent *Lingüística aimara* published in 2000, and a very useful direct comparison between the two language families called *Quechumara: estructuras paralelas de las lenguas quechua y aimara* (published 1994).
- For Peruvian Quechua, there is a series of twelve books, a dictionary and a grammar for six regional varieties of Quechua in Peru. These were published in 1976 jointly by the *Instituto de Estudios Peruanos* and the Peruvian Education Ministry.

For more details on all of these books, and many others, and on how to obtain them all, see [this website](#).

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