

# QUECHUA ORIGINS AND DIVERSITY

## HOW AND WHY IS QUECHUA DIFFERENT IN DIFFERENT REGIONS?

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## Regional Differences in Quechua

It is well known that Quechua is spoken widely in several countries in the Andes, particularly in Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, but also in northern Argentina and by small numbers of people in other countries. It is also well known, though, that Quechua is not by any means the same everywhere. The Quechua in one country or region can be quite different, sometimes very different, to the Quechua spoken in another country, or even in another region of the same country (especially in Peru). Let's start by listening, on your computer, to a couple of examples of the differences between the Quechua spoken in different regions.

We'll begin with the Quechua spoken in just two particular places in Peru, which happen to illustrate the differences well. It so happens, too, that both of them have been designated by the United Nations' Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as 'World Heritage Sites', in recognition of their great importance in the history and culture of the Andes. These two places are:

- Cuzco, the old Inca capital in Southern Peru;
- Chavín de Huantar, in the Ancash department of central Peru, home to one of the oldest cultures in the Andes, many centuries before the Incas.

[For more details on any of the regions we talk about here, including photos of each one, go to our [Quechua Regions](#) page.]

To hear how people who speak Quechua in each of these regions would say their Quechua words for *three* and *here*, just move your mouse over any of the [blue links](#) below (or if you don't hear anything, try clicking on them).

[three](#)   [Cuzco](#)   [Chavín](#)

[here](#)   [Cuzco](#)   [Chavín](#)

\* **If you can't hear anything** on your computer, click for tips on [how to play sound recordings](#)

As you can hear straight away, these words are pronounced very differently in these two different regions of Peru. If you speak Quechua from another different region or country, then your own form of Quechua may be either similar or different to either or both of these. Most Quechua speakers in Bolivia, for example, do pronounce these words in a very similar way to Cuzco. Here are the pronunciations in the Sucre region of Bolivia, for instance:

[three](#)   [Sucre](#)

[here](#)   [Sucre](#)

In most of Ecuador, meanwhile, such as in the Chimborazo province in the central highlands, and in many other regions of Peru like Ayacucho and Huancavelica, the word for *three* sounds slightly different to Cuzco and Bolivia, though the word for *here* is pronounced the same:

*three*    Chimborazo    Huancavelica

*here*    Chimborazo    Huancavelica

You can already hear that there is a lot of diversity here. In fact, as we look at more and more words, the relationships between the different regional forms of Quechua become more and more complicated: in which words they pronounce the same and which they pronounce differently, in exactly how similar or different their pronunciations are to each other, and so on.

One useful way to think of these different regional varieties of Quechua is to compare them to a human family. We can consider that Quechua of Cuzco and Sucre are ‘sisters’ of each other. Ecuador Quechua, though, is more different, because it is only their ‘cousin’, not another sister. The Quechua varieties of Central Peru like Chavín are more different again, because they are even more distant ‘cousins once removed’ within the very big, extended Quechua family. More on this soon below.

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## Is Quechua One Language, Or Many?

Let’s go back to the biggest difference we’ve met so far: the pronunciation of *here* in **Cuzco** and in **Chavín**. In fact part of the difference here is not just in pronunciation, but in grammar. The first part of the words is just a question of pronunciation differences in the word for *this*, [kay] vs. [kee]. The second part is a ‘location’ suffix, to turn *this* into *in this place* (i.e. the meaning *here*), and for this Cuzco uses *-pi*, whereas Chavín uses *-çaw*, which it now pronounces [çoo]. These are not just different pronunciations of the same suffix, they are quite different suffixes in any case. (You can see this because Cuzco Quechua does still actually has both forms, because it still uses *-çaw* in a few words like *pun-çaw day*, and in fact both occur alongside each other in *çaw-pi middle*.)

People in Cuzco and Chavín can still understand quite a lot of each other’s words, so long as they happen to be ones that are not pronounced too differently, such as for example the words for *hand*, pronounced pretty much identically [maki] in almost all regions: as you can tell here for **Cuzco**, **Chavín**, **Sucre**, **Chimborazo** and **Huancavelica**. They might even be able to understand occasional short phrases in each others’ Quechua, but certainly they cannot understand complete conversations. There are simply too many differences between these two regions, in the **pronunciation** of a great many words, and on other levels too, in **vocabulary** and in **grammar**. (Obviously, in *Sounds of the Andean*

*Languages* we concentrate on the differences in pronunciation. If you wish to learn about differences in vocabulary and grammar too, then go to our [More Details About Quechua](#) page.)

In the end, there are so many differences between Cuzco Quechua and Chavín Quechua that the people from these two regions cannot really understand each other well at all when each of them is speaking his or her own native variety of Quechua. In fact, the forms of Quechua spoken in these regions are so different that we can't even properly call them varieties of the same single Quechua language. So to be strict it is more accurate to talk of Quechua instead as is a 'family' of several different *related* languages.

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## What is a 'Family' of Languages?

What does it mean to call Quechua a 'family' of related languages? The first thing to notice is that it is entirely *normal* for a language to belong to a wider family: most languages in the world are like this. A well-known example is the language of another great civilisation, Chinese. This too is not really one language but a family of related languages, such as Mandarin Chinese (spoken in the capital, Beijing), Cantonese (spoken further south in Hong Kong), and so on. The same goes for Arabic, which is also really more of a language family than a single language: the Arabic spoken in Morocco in North Africa is very different from that spoken in Saudi Arabia, for instance. In fact, almost all languages known today are members of one language family or another.

The second important point is that when we say that languages are *related* to each other in a *family* of languages, this does *not* just mean that they are similar in any old way. One can often find languages that appear to be similar in *some* respects, especially in their structure, but which are not actually *related* at all. One good example is Aymara and Quechua: these are very similar in some aspects of the structure and their pronunciation, but they are probably not related at all. Even Quechua and Spanish can be described as 'similar' in one way, in that they have borrowed lots of words from each other: Spanish has borrowed Quechua *puma*, *kancha*, *llama*, *waka* ('*huaca*'), and so on; and Quechua has borrowed Spanish words like *karru* (from *carro*, *car*) and *waka* (from *vaca*, *cow*). But any language can borrow words from any other; again, this does not mean that they are actually *related* languages. Quechua and Spanish are definitely not.

Related languages are by no means just 'any languages that might look a bit similar', then. To say that a group of languages are *related* means far more than that: it means that they all form the same 'family' of languages. This is something like a human family, in which the various children all have the same mother. Take Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, French, Romanian, Catalan, and others: these are quite

different languages from each other now, but originally they all started out from the same ‘mother’ or **ancestor language**: Latin. All these languages together form what is the best-known of all language families, called the **Romance** family (because their common ancestor language Latin was the one spoken by the *Romans*). Think back to how the pronunciations of the word for *three* differ from one regional variety of the Quechua family to the next; and now listen to how just the same happens for this word in the various languages of the Romance family, and of another well-known European language family called Germanic.

Quechua		Romance		Germanic	
Original Quechua	*[kimsa]	Original Romance (Latin)	*[tre:s]	Original Germanic	*[θriyiz]
Chimborazo	[kimsa]	Spanish	[trɛs]	English	[θri:]
Chavín	[kima]	Portuguese	[treiʃ]	Dutch	[dri:]
Huancavelica	[kimsa]	Italian	[trɛ]	German	[drai]
Cuzco	[kinsa]	French	[trwa]	Swedish	[tre]
		Romanian	[treiə]		

In these tables we have also written in **green text** inside **[brackets]** exactly how each word is pronounced. The normal alphabet does not have enough letters to show small differences in pronunciation, so to be more exact we use some special ‘phonetic symbols’. To see and hear the exact sounds that the various symbols represent, [click here](#).

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## What Is ‘Original Quechua’?

Quechua is very similar to Romance, then: it is not just one single language, but a family of closely related and very similar languages. What this means is that at one time in the past, there used to be a single ‘**Original Quechua**’ language (the one that linguists call by a technical name, *Proto-Quechua*). We’ll be talking a lot about Original Quechua here, trying to see whether we can answer the questions about where and when it was spoken, and who by. For now, let’s be careful, and not jump to

conclusions. It is better to start off by *not* automatically assuming that the answers must be Cuzco and the Incas. Yes, the Incas spoke a form of Quechua similar to the Cuzco Quechua of today, but they certainly weren't the first civilisation to expand through the Andes, and nor is there anything to say that they were necessarily the first or the only people ever to speak Quechua either. The mystery is a deeper one...

First of all what matters is to understand that wherever and whenever it came from, over many, many centuries the Original Quechua gradually 'broke up', and turned into the many different Quechua varieties and languages that are now spoken in different regions throughout the Andes. This is completely normal, and exactly what happens in almost all languages. Compare how the original Latin spoken in Spain, Italy and other regions of Europe eventually turned into quite independent modern languages (if highly similar ones): Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and so on. In exactly the same way, in Chavín and in Cuzco the Original Quechua has by now turned into two different but closely related modern languages, which for now we will call just *Chavín Quechua* and *Cuzco Quechua*.

Obviously we have no recordings of Original Quechua because nobody now speaks it, so I have recorded my own voice pronouncing all the Original Quechua words exactly as linguists have worked out that they sounded. Also, when we mention Original Quechua words here, we put an asterisk \* in front to show that it is not a modern pronunciation, but one that linguists have worked out, such as Original Quechua \*[kimsa].

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## [How Did Original Quechua Change?](#)

So, how did these changes happen, the changes that made Chavín Quechua, Cuzco Quechua, and all the other regional forms of Quechua, so different from each other today? As the centuries went by, two things happened. First, the Original Quechua began to **expand** to other regions outside its homeland, but second, as it did so, the Original Quechua also **changed**.

Certainly, all Quechua varieties started out from the same Original Quechua, but for language it is a 'fact of life' that without exception **every language changes** over time, through the generations of the people who speak it. Latin could not escape changing into different languages like Spanish and Italian; nor could the Original Quechua, so it too began to change through the centuries. And it **changed in all regions** where it was spoken.

The crucial fact that created Quechua diversity is this: **in the different regions, the Original Quechua changed in different ways**. The result is that from a single Original Quechua, we now have a changed

form of Quechua in one region, and in another region we have a form of Quechua that has also changed, but in a different way.

Let's look at exactly how this happened in our example word for *three*. The **Original Quechua** word was \*[kimsa]:

- In the **Chavín** region the Original Quechua \*[kimsa] changed pronunciation by losing the [s] sound completely, so now this word is pronounced just [kima] in **Chavín**.
- In the **Cuzco** region, the Original Quechua \*[kimsa] changed by changing the [m] sound into [n], hence the pronunciation [kinsa] in **Cuzco**.
- In **other regions** neither of these changes happened, and this word didn't change at all, so it is still pronounced with both [m] and [s], as in Original Quechua, [kimsa], in regions like **Huancavelica** and most of Ecuador, such as **Chimborazo**.

The table below summarises these sound changes:

Region	changes to the [s] in *[kimsa]	changes to the [m] in *[kimsa]	so here it is now pronounced...
Chavín	[s] is lost	no change	[kima]
Chimborazo	no change	no change	[kimsa]
Huancavelica	no change	no change	[kimsa]
Cuzco	no change	[m] → [n]	[kinsa]

But if Original Quechua is no longer spoken, how can we be so sure about how words were pronounced in Original Quechua? How can we be sure that Original Quechua was pronounced [kimsa], like in Ecuador and Huancavelica now, and not like in Cuzco, Bolivia or Chavín? How do we know it is was not the other way around: couldn't the original sound have been [n], and couldn't it have been Ecuador and Huancavelica that changed it to [m] instead? This is an important issue, and quite a complex one, so we explain exactly how linguists can work this out on our [More Details About Quechua](#) page. For now, though, we recommend you finish this introductory page to see a few more examples of changes first.

So take the word for *you* (singular), which in **Original Quechua** was \*[qam]. The pronunciation of this word too has also changed, but again **in different ways in different regions**:

- This time it is **Chavín** and other regions especially in Central and Northern Peru that do not change the pronunciation at all, and keep to the Original Quechua pronunciation [qam], as in **Chavín**.
- In the **Cuzco** region, just like in \*[kimsa] → [kinsa], the [m] has changed again, hence [qan] in **Cuzco**.



- In **Huancavelica** the [m] has not changed, but there has been another change instead: the Original Quechua [q] has changed to [χ], a sound like the pronunciation of the letter spelt <j> in Spanish. Hence [χam] in **Huancavelica**.
- In **Chimborazo** too the [q] has changed, only it has not changed in the same way as Huancavelica. Rather, the original [q] has changed to [k] instead. Also, the [m] has changed in the same way as in Cuzco, to [ŋ], hence [kaŋ] in **Chimborazo**.

Again, the table below summarises these sound changes:

Region	changes to the [q] in *[qam]	changes to the [m] in *[qam]	so here it is now pronounced...
Chavín	no change	no change	[qam]
Chimborazo	[q] → [k]	[m] → [ŋ]	[kaŋ]
Huancavelica	[q] → [χ]	no change	[χam]
Cuzco	no change	[m] → [ŋ]	[qaŋ]

The most important things to notice are:

- **All the regional varieties have changed** in one way or another. Chavín has not changed \*[qam], but it has changed \*[kimsa], to just [kima]. Neither Huancavelica nor Chimborazo has changed \*[kimsa], but both have changed Original Quechua \*[qam]. Cuzco, in these examples, has actually changed both words, to [kiŋsa] and [qaŋ].
- Also, not only do they change different words, but **different regions change the same word, but in different ways**. Indeed different regions can even the same sound in different ways: Huancavelica has changed the [q] in Original Quechua \*[qam] to [χ] as in [χam], and Chimborazo has changed it too, but in a different way, to [k] as in [kaŋ]. Chimborazo has also changed the [m] to [ŋ] in the same way as Cuzco Quechua.

The result of the Original Quechua changing in different ways in different regions is that the Quechua now spoken in each of these four regions has become different to the Quechua in every other region. No two regions, of the four we have looked at here, now pronounce **both** of these words the same. Chavín has [kima] and [qam]; Chimborazo [kimsa] and [kaŋ]; Huancavelica [kimsa] and [χam]; Cuzco [kiŋsa] and [qaŋ].

(For more explanations and examples of how pronunciations change, then go to our [More Details About Quechua](#) page.)



## [So What Became Of Original Quechua?](#)

The other important thing to notice from looking at the tables above is that even if in *some* regions *one* of the words is still pronounced as in Original Quechua, **nobody**, in any region, now pronounces **both** words like the Original Quechua. So in fact, **no region anywhere now speaks Original Quechua**.

Again, all this is completely normal, if we compare Quechua with languages like Spanish and Italian. It was the ancient Romans, two thousand years ago, who spoke the Original Latin, but now nobody anywhere speaks like the Romans spoke any more, neither in Spain nor Portugal, nor France, nor Romania – nowhere. Even the people in Rome itself by now speak a language that after two thousand years of changes has become very different from the Original Latin – in fact, it has changed into the ‘new’ language that we now call ‘Italian’, and modern ‘Romans’ no longer understand the ancient Romans.

It is exactly the same with Original Quechua: it used to be spoken once, but only many, many centuries ago. If any Quechua speaker alive today – from Cuzco, Chavín, Bolivia, Ecuador or anywhere – could travel back in time to meet somebody from thousands of years ago who spoke Original Quechua, the two of them would actually have pretty big problems to understand each other properly! You would need to travel a long way back in time, too: the last time that the ancestors of all today’s Quechua speakers all spoke exactly the same Original Quechua was almost certainly *at least* a thousand years ago, and probably a lot earlier still (we’ll see more below on how we can tell this).

Original Quechua is no longer spoken anywhere, then. It does remain very important, though, for us to understand the similarities and differences between all the modern regional varieties of Quechua, since they all started out from this one same original form. And because it takes us back to what the Quechua from all different regions used to have **in common**, Original Quechua can in some cases help us find which ways of spelling Quechua are most useful so that people from those regions can all **spell** their language **in a standard way**, so that it is easier for them all to read each other’s Quechua – while still always **keeping to their own regional pronunciations**, of course! For more on this, see our [spelling](#) page.

Since nobody now speaks it as their native language, Latin is often called a ‘dead’ language, though really Latin lives on, just changed, in each of the different modern languages descended from it: Spanish, Portuguese, French, and so on. Each of these languages is just a very changed form of Latin, each changed in different ways. Original Quechua too is now ‘dead’, but only in this sense that nobody anywhere speaks exactly like that any more. Really it too lives on, though changed, in every single one of the many different regional varieties of Quechua, all descended from it. That is, **every one of these**

regional varieties of Quechua has its own true inheritance all the way back to Original Quechua, just as much as all the other regions.

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## [So Which Region Speaks 'Proper' Quechua Now?](#)

On the other hand, none of those regions still speak the *Original* Quechua. As we've already seen with our example pronunciations of the words for *three* and *you*, all regions have changed from Original Quechua, and all in different ways. Original Quechua is not spoken anywhere like it used to be, and all the regional varieties of Quechua spoken today are now quite different to it. So **no region anywhere can claim to speak the 'Original Quechua'**: not Bolivia, not Ecuador, not Chavín, and yes, **not Cuzco either**. Nowhere. In fact, it is simply *impossible* for any region still to be speaking the Original Quechua, because all languages change through time.

Importantly then, none of the different regional varieties of Quechua now is really any more 'original' than any other. Quechua has changed everywhere, and it is most important to accept that this includes the Quechua in Cuzco, because people all over the Andes have a lot of confused ideas about Cuzco Quechua (which we'll come back to later). As you can hear with the words for *three* and *you*, Cuzco Quechua, overall is no more nor less original than Chavín Quechua, or Ecuador Quechua, or Ayacucho Quechua, or Bolivian Quechua, or any other regional variety of Quechua.

It is obvious that it simply makes no sense at all to claim that one region's Quechua like Cuzco is 'better' or 'more original' than another: this would be just as silly as to complain that Spanish is 'bad' because it's "not proper Italian" or "not proper Latin"! Spanish is not better or worse than Italian, or French, or Portuguese, and so on, they are **all just different** descendants of Latin, and none of them is still the Original Latin.

Exactly the same goes for Quechua. The different varieties of Quechua spoken in different regions are not better or worse than each other, they are all equal descendants of Original Quechua, and **they are all just different!** It is much better to enjoy this diversity, and to be proud of being part of it, than it is to be arrogant – and wrong! – by pretending that one regional form of a language (usually, your own!) is 'better' than any other.

## Which Regions' Quechuas are Most Similar and Most Different to Each Other?

This is not to say that all regional varieties of Quechua are all *equally* different to each other: not at all. Cuzco, Puno, Bolivian and Ayacucho Quechua are all more similar to each other than they are to Ecuador Quechua. And the Quechua of Central Peru is even more different again from all of these.

Again it will help first to have a look at the Romance language family for a comparison. Spanish-speakers find it easier to communicate with people who speak Portuguese and Italian, and more difficult to understand French and Romanian. This is because Spanish is most similar to Portuguese and Italian, and more different to French and Romanian. There are even languages that are 'in between': Catalan is 'intermediate' between Spanish and French, and Galician is intermediate between Spanish and Portuguese. This does **not** mean that they are a **mixture** of two languages, it just means that there is a 'chain' of three languages, A, B and C.

This is very common in Quechua too, where the different regions often form 'chains', so the ones in the middle are intermediate between the ones on either side. The Quechua spoken in Cuzco, for example, is like the Quechua spoken in Puno in many respects, but in a few respects it is more like the Quechua spoken in Ayacucho, and in some other respects it has special forms all of its own. In this sense Cuzco can be considered 'intermediate' between them, but it is not a 'mixture' of Puno and Ayacucho Quechua. Likewise Puno Quechua is intermediate between Cuzco and Sucre Quechua, but again it is not a mixture, it too is a separate, independent form of Quechua in its own right. In effect, as you go north from the south of Bolivia all the way up to Huancavelica and the Yauyos mountains near Lima, the Quechua changes very gradually from region to region. There is a big break between the Quechua of Huancavelica and that of Huancayo, however: these are very different, despite being close to each other geographically.

One way to help understand how the different regional forms of Quechua can be more similar or more different to each other is to compare them to a human family again. All the members of a big family are not related to each other in exactly the same way. Your cousins may ultimately have the same ancestors to you, but they are not so closely related to you as your brothers and sisters are. With your brother or sister your relationship is immediate, through your mother; but with your cousins have to go back further in your 'family tree' to find your common ancestor, your *grandmother*.

More or less the same goes for languages. The Quechua of Cuzco, Puno and Bolivia can be seen as all 'sisters' of each other. Ecuador Quechua, though, is more different, because it is only their 'cousin', not another sister. The Quechua varieties of Central Peru like Ancash, Huánuco or Huancayo are more

different again, because they are even more distant ‘cousins once removed’ within the very big, extended Quechua family.

Thinking of regional varieties of Quechua like this in terms of ‘generations’ within a family gives us an idea not only of how similar or different they are to each other, but also of how ‘old’ their relationship is:

- Back just one generation to the same ‘mother’: the regions whose Quechua is most similar to each other, *e.g.* Cuzco, Puno and Bolivia.
- Back two generations, to an earlier time and only the same ‘grandmother’: regions whose Quechua is a lot more different: *e.g.* Cuzco and Ecuador Quechua.
- Or back more generations, to a much earlier time still, only to the same ‘great-grandmother’: regions whose Quechua is very different indeed, and which cannot understand each other’s Quechua well at all: *e.g.* Cuzco and Chavín Quechua.

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## How Long Ago Was Original Quechua Spoken?

So, depending on how similar the Quechua is in one region or another, we can see which ‘generation’ within the family they belong to. This is how, by looking at the Quechua of different regions to see exactly how different they are, and the exact ways in which they differ, linguists can even get an idea of their origins and **history**. This includes working out approximately **how long ago** – how many ‘language generations’ ago – it was that people somewhere in Andes spoke the Original Quechua language from which all the modern Quechua regional varieties are descended.

We know that languages change over time, and so the more time that passes, the more different they become. So if we look at how similar languages are, we can get some idea (though not truly exact dates) of how long their ancestor language has been diverging, in order for its ‘offspring’ to end up as different from each other as they now are. In other words, through how many generations? Are the descendant languages in that family like ‘sisters’, close ‘cousins’, or more distantly related ‘cousins’?

First we need to have a look at other language families where we know for certain, from historical records, how long they have been diverging. Again the Romance languages are ideal, because we know how different they are to each other now, and we also know the historical fact of how long their ancestor language, Latin, has been diverging: that is, for over two thousand years since the Ancient Romans first spread their Latin out of Rome into new areas like Spain. The result of over two millennia of divergence is now that the Romance languages are really quite different to each other: Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, French and so on.

Let us not forget that Spanish itself has now been spread throughout the world for long enough for the process of divergence to have started again: now not everyone in the world who speaks Spanish speaks it exactly the same. Depending on where they come from, people can have a Spanish accent, a Chilean accent, a Mexican accent, a Peruvian accent, and perhaps most famous of all, a Buenos Aires accent, “*che*”. (In fact, *che* is originally a word borrowed from the indigenous Tupi-Guaraní languages, where it means *brother*.) Even within a country like Peru, for example, people can have a Cuzco or highland accent and say ‘*pollo*’ (with a full *elle*), ‘*asco*’, ‘*afto*’; or they can have a Lima or a coastal accent and say something like ‘*poyyo*’, ‘*ahco*’, ‘*apto*’ instead. In this case we also know from history how long Spanish has been spread throughout the world and had time to diverge: more or less since Columbus, *i.e.* for about five hundred years. Since the differences between the different regional and national forms of Spanish around the world have ‘only’ had five hundred years or so to develop, the result is that they are still much smaller than the differences between Spanish and Italian or French, which have had over two thousand years to develop.

Now let us compare these two cases to Quechua. It is not so easy to measure exactly how different languages are (though that is what we will be attempting in the next stage of this *Sounds of the Andean Languages* research), but we can at least say that the various regional forms of Quechua like Cuzco and Chavín are clearly much more different to each other than the various forms of Spanish around the world, and about as different as languages like Spanish, Portuguese and Italian. In other words, the diversity within Quechua is much closer to the level of the diversity within Romance than that within Spanish. So even by a rough comparison, it seems clear that the Original Quechua must have been diverging for a period of time much more of the order of the **two thousand years** of Romance, and much longer than just five hundred years like Spanish. Which means Quechua has been expanding and diverging certainly since very long *before* the Inca Empire.

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## [When Did Quechua Spread to Where it is Spoken Now?](#)

We have more evidence too, when we see that Cuzco Quechua is so similar to the Quechua of all of the regions of Bolivia (certainly much more so than to Ecuador or Chavín Quechua). The level of diversity only within the Quechua spoken from Cuzco to Bolivia is not much more than the diversity between modern varieties of Spanish around the world. Again, this comparison suggests that the Quechua in those regions does come from a common ancestor that has been diverging for not much longer than the five hundred years that Spanish has been diverging, perhaps just a century or two more. One scenario that this fits well with is of course the Inca expansion into Bolivia in the century and a half before the Spaniards arrived in the 1530s. For this and for other reasons, it seems likely that it was indeed the Inca Empire that took its own regional form of Quechua from Cuzco into much of Bolivia. On the other

hand, this only serves as even more confirmation that the much more different Quechua of Central Peru must have diverged from Cuzco Quechua long, long before then.

So, while exact details and dates are not certain, and wherever Quechua's original homeland was (which we'll come to shortly below), the overall outline from a great deal of detailed linguistic and historical research is very reliable and clear.

1. **Original Quechua** began expanding and diverging through the Andes probably something like two thousand years ago, certainly long before the Inca Empire, whose major expansion was only six centuries ago during the 1400s. Original Quechua may well be related to some much, much older culture than the Incas – perhaps even Chavín, though this suggestion is still very speculative and does take us perhaps too far back in time for the level of diversity within Quechua.
2. In any case, Quechua was already very widely spoken across much of the Andes well over a thousand years ago. In particular, it had already reached most of **Central and Southern Peru**, already in very different regional varieties.
3. Cuzco Quechua was just one of these varieties, and the Inca Empire only spread it into some new areas, especially **Bolivia**. Most areas north of Cuzco, however, had already been speaking their own Quechua for many centuries before the Incas reached them – this includes not just Chavín but the whole of Central Peru, such as Ancash, Huánuco, Junín, and Huancayo.
4. It is not certain when Quechua reached **Ecuador**, but there too it may well have first arrived not with the Incas (Ecuador Quechua is too different from Cuzco and Bolivian Quechua for this to seem likely), but a few centuries before them. Nonetheless, Quechua in Ecuador was no doubt reinforced and strengthened by the arrival of the Incas too.

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## [How Did Quechua Get to Where it is Spoken Now?](#)

Quechua not only reached the different regions of the Andes at different times, but it also reached them in quite different ways. To see how, we need to think of Quechua in its human and ethnic context. We can see that a language can spread to different regions in two main ways.

- As times changed and civilisations rose and fell, original Quechua-speaking **peoples moved, and took their language with them**, thus gradually spreading their language into other regions. This could happen either by peaceful migration and coexistence, or by conquest. In fact in the history of the Andes there are two particularly well-known types of movement of peoples like this:



- Firstly, the same people often deliberately split up into groups that moved into different areas so that their people as a whole could control various of the different ecological altitude levels from the high Andes to the Amazon jungle and the coast. This gave all of them access to each other's natural resources, native species and crops from all their different 'ecological levels'. This type of expansion may explain how Quechua reached some Amazonian areas in various countries, for example, even though Quechua has long been a predominantly highland language. (Note, though, that in earlier times it was also spoken on the Pacific coast of Peru too.)
- The Incas, during their rule, used their famous *mitma* system, whereby they deliberately moved whole tribes from region to region around their vast Empire. They did so for various reasons, sometimes to move rebellious tribes out of their homeland and implant them into areas where they would be surrounded by more loyal peoples. More important for our interest is that alternatively they moved loyal subjects, who already spoke Quechua, to settle newly conquered lands in their Empire. The Incas also constantly moved huge armies around their lands, and many of their soldiers ended up settling far away from home too, not least when the Empire collapsed with many armies still in the field throughout the Andes.

In many regions where Quechua seems, rather strangely, only ever to have been spoken in some relatively small parts of the whole region, one plausible explanation is that the ancestors of those Quechua-speakers may first have been brought there in an Inca *mitma*, and/or an imperial army. Perhaps this applies to some of the isolated groups of Quechua-speakers in the far north of Peru, such as in the regions of Cajamarca (in the villages of Chetilla and Porcón), Lambayeque (Inkawasi and Cañaris), and Chachapoyas. More generally, it may also explain how many Quechua-speakers reached southern Bolivia, 'leapfrogging' the Aymara-speakers in the north of the country.

- Quechua also reached new areas in quite a different way too: Quechua-speakers themselves did not move into a region, nobody actually moved at all. Rather, the **peoples** who already lived in a particular region **stayed where they were, but just learned Quechua**. Eventually many of these peoples came to stop speaking their own native language and preferred to speak only Quechua instead. This way their homeland too turned into a new Quechua-speaking region.

This happened especially in regions where Quechua was gradually adopted as a very useful common language (known as a *lingua franca*) to facilitate communication and trade between many different peoples who all spoke their own different languages. This happened to some extent during the Inca period, of course, when Quechua was the official language of the Empire. Indeed even for a while *after* the Spanish conquest, Quechua was recognised as one of the four 'general languages' (*'lenguas generales'*) of the Spanish-ruled Andes, and kept expanding into new areas, such as southern Bolivia and various parts of Amazonia.

In any case, though, this expansion as a *lingua franca* seems to have happened even before the Inca Empire too, when Quechua seems to have already been expanding northwards as a trading language. It looks like this happened particularly in Ecuador, where both the highland and the jungle peoples still today keep their separate ethnic identities, even though many of them now speak Quechua. Each



of them keeps their own regional varieties, though, and in fact these may still show signs of the influence of each people's original native tongue.

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## Where Did Original Quechua Come From?

We have seen, then, how by comparing even modern regional varieties of a language, and with a lot of detailed study and experience, it is possible for linguists to work out the main stages of expansion of a language family. This also helps us towards the final question: where in the Andes did Original Quechua start out from?

Many people instinctively think of Cuzco, because it was the origin of the Inca Empire. But the origin of an Empire is not necessarily the ultimate origin of a language family. In fact we already know that the Inca Empire was relatively late, it really expanded only in the 1400s, and we also know that Quechua expansion began probably a thousand years before then. It was spoken in places like Chavín long before the Inca Empire ever existed, so the question of where Quechua started out from goes back much earlier than the Incas.

To try to answer a difficult question like this, there are various types of information that researchers can use.

- Firstly there are some more principles of linguistic science that can help. One is that the region where there is the highest diversity of language varieties in the smallest area is usually the place where it has been diverging the longest, *i.e.* near its original homeland. The diversity actually seems a lot higher within the Quechua of Central Peru, such as the Ancash department and the mountainous inland provinces of the Lima department. These seem good possible candidates as possible original homelands for Quechua.
- Another valuable linguistic tool is the study of place-names ('toponymy'), because it is normal for place-names to reflect languages spoken in an area long, long ago, even if the language spoken there has changed since then. Beware: studying place-names is very difficult and it is easy to make mistakes! This task needs a lot of linguistic experience, but if it is done well it can reveal a great deal. And it actually shows that much of Southern Peru probably once spoke forms of Aymara, and that Quechua only arrived there much later, replacing the Aymara and pushing it further south into Bolivia. It is very clear from hosts of old place-names in the Cuzco region too that much of it actually once spoke Aymara, as well as – or more likely *before* – speaking Quechua. From historical documents too, it seems that even the Inca nobility themselves originally spoke a form of Aymara, but they and their people had switched Quechua before their Empire expanded.

- There are many more sources of valuable clues too: looking at the exact relationships between the generations of the Quechua family; evidence from regional forms of Quechua that have since died out (such as the one whose grammar was recorded in 1560 by the Dominican friar Domingo de Santo Tomás); studying in detail the very rich relationships between Quechua and Aymara, in different regions; and looking at archaeological knowledge about the movement of peoples to try to match it with the possible history of their languages.

Combining all of this knowledge ends up being very complex work of many specialists, all debating together, as they have done over the last few decades. But by now the outline seems clear and quite reliable, because almost all of the research points to similar conclusions. **Original Quechua was most likely spoken first of all somewhere in Central Peru, perhaps on the coast but more likely in the highland interior.** And this is where it probably started expanding from, both northwards and southwards, **at a date probably somewhere around two thousand years ago** – perhaps more, perhaps less, but certainly long, long before the Inca Empire. That last great flourish of Andean civilisation did speak Quechua too, certainly, and indeed helped expand it still further to its greatest ever extent, but the Incas' was not the only, nor the Original Quechua. Quechua is much richer and more diverse than just Cuzco, and connected to many more of the native cultures of the Andes.

Because so much has been claimed and mistakenly believed about Cuzco Quechua, it is important to be clear on exactly where it fits into all this. Yes, the Incas spoke Quechua, and yes, they spoke a form of Quechua very similar to modern Cuzco Quechua. But no, the Incas did not speak the *Original* Quechua, and they only took *their* particular form of Quechua to a few of the regions in the Andes where it was spoken today. Most regions had long had their own Quechua, every bit as original, indigenous and true as the Quechua spoken today in Cuzco. **The Quechua language does not originally or uniquely come from the Incas: it is a deeper, and even richer, part of the indigenous cultural inheritance of the Andes.**

It makes no sense to think that any region speaks some 'debased', 'bad' form of Cuzco Quechua, or of any other Quechua. The Quechua in every region is just as 'good' and proper as in all the other regions; wherever you come from, you can – and should! – be every bit as proud of your *own* Quechua as anyone else!

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This is the end of our basic explanations about the diversity and origins of Quechua, but if you want **to know more**, see more examples, and find the answers to lots more questions you may still have about Quechua, click to see the contents of our [More Details About Quechua](#) page.

As you will also have realised, the Quechua language family is closely bound up with the Aymara language family too, so we recommend you also to read our page on the [Origins and Diversity of Aymara](#).

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