



NEWSLETTER



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Can you think of an Andean indigenous language? For most people, usually one comes to mind first: Quechua. Although increasingly threatened through language shift to Spanish, Quechua speech can indeed still be heard spoken at tourist markets for craftgoods sold in Otavalo in highland Ecuador, cramped with 10 other people (and a not much lower number of chicken) in a minibus *colectivo* going from the Andean slopes to the city of Huaraz in Northern Peru, or on the chacras of the *comunidades campesinas* of Southern Peru and Bolivia as people go to work. With such wide extension, no wonder that Quechua is the quintessentially Andean languages in the minds of many.

However, we're really dealing with a language family of several mutually unintelligible varieties, and speakers from the abovementioned places couldn't readily communicate with one another. On top of that, there are unrelated languages, such as Aymara, spoken in southern Peru and widely in Bolivia, as well as still less known languages. Have you heard of Chipaya, the language of fisherfolk living on the harsh chilly plains of highland Bolivia?

As one looks not only at linguistic diversity today, but also at languages that once were part of the original linguistic ecology but have ceased to be spoken, it becomes clear that Quechua, and other surviving languages, are just the tip of the iceberg of a once massively diverse linguistic landscape. When the first Spanish *conquistadores* set foot into the Andes in the early 16th century, the situation was approximately as depicted in the map on the righthandside, showing that surviving languages were part of a complex linguistic ecology, especially in what is today Northern Peru. Many of the now dormant languages were isolates – languages for which we can't show that they belong to any language family.



The Inca ruler Qhapaq Yupanki deliberating with the mountain deity Pacha Yachachiq – in Quechua, one presumes (from a 16th century chronicle by Martín de Murua).

If indeed the first, or only, language that came to your mind when you thought about Andean languages was Quechua, you're in good company: also when you ask professional linguists, it is usually Quechua, and perhaps Aymara, that dominate their mental landscape of Andean languages. Of course, work is also done for other languages, but also when it comes to linguistic history these are still very much in the focus. Alongside today's dominance, there are culture historic reasons for this that continue to play a role: the Inca, who crafted the greatest empire ever seen in the Andes and indeed all of the Americas, used a Quechua variety as a vehicular language for administration, and thus the cultural splendor of the Inca is associated with Quechua in the minds of many scholars (though locally, the language may enjoy very low prestige in present).



In the research group “The Language Dynamics of the ancient Central Andes”, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) through a grant to Matthias Urban in its Emmy Noether Program, we develop more inclusive perspectives on the linguistic and cultural history of the Andes of Peru and Bolivia that take more seriously the original linguistic diversity. This also involves a shift of perspective: instead of focusing on the expansion of language families like Quechua, we’re focusing more on processes of language contact and language shift. We know that many languages ceased to be spoken as the Inca expanded as speakers shifted to Quechua. To reconstruct earlier linguistic distributions, we must find ways to “undo” these processes. Complementary perspectives with a contact-based approach also allow us to bring isolates, whose history can’t be theorized the same way as that of families can, into the general panorama.

One region on which our work focusses is the Chachapoyas region of Northern Peru (black arrow on the map). Located in one of the world’s biodiversity hotspots on the Eastern slopes of the Andes, the stunningly beautiful cloud forests host a diverse flora and fauna that the Quechuan speakers who came to the Chachapoyas had no name for – but local people did, and knowledge about them surely was part of the vocabulary of their pre-Quechua language. In such situations, designations from the original language are often borrowed by speakers of the newly arrived language for want of a name, and thus “survive” processes of language shift. And for linguists, they can then be crucial witnesses of the deeper linguistic past of the region. Fieldwork by Dr. Aviva Shimelman with some of the last speakers of Chachapoyas Quechua targeted specifically the documentation of flora and fauna vocabulary and possible pre-Quechua elements therein.



Chachapoyas cloud forests with the waterfall of Gocta (from Wikimedia Commons).



A *chos* fern (foto by Aviva Shimelman)

For instance, the word *chos* is used for certain types of ferns, such as that on the picture to the right. That word is not found in other Quechua varieties. Importantly, it also doesn’t *look* Quechuan, being shorter than a typical Quechua word and featuring a vowel [o] which is unknown to Quechua – so *chos* is almost certainly a survivor from the earlier language of the region. This and other evidence –in particular placenames of the region such as Gocta, that don’t look Quechuan (or Spanish, for that matter) either, gives us material to work with in trying to find out more about the identity of the original language of the region. In this particular case, some of the Chachapoyas material turned out to be explainable through the languages once immediately spoken to the south: Hibito and Cholón (red arrow on the map). This suggests that a closely related language was once spoken throughout the Chachapoyas region. And that, in turn, means that a language grouping that looks quite modest in extension and of little importance today can

be the remnants of much larger distributions in earlier times.

For more information on the group, please visit www.langdynand.org

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Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen
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Verantwortlich: Prof. Dr. Katerina Harvati-Papatheodorou; Prof. Dr. Gerhard Jäger

Redaktion: Marisa Köllner (Tel. 07071 / 29-72139, marisa.koellner@uni-tuebingen.de)

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