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# **SOUTH AMERICAN INDIAN LANGUAGES**

*Retrospect and Prospect*

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## **20. Indigenous Languages of Tierra del Fuego**

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"According to our thinking the language of these people barely merits classification as an articulated language." Thus, the great English naturalist Charles Darwin, in his diary dated December 17, 1832, described his first contact with the Fuegians. Darwin's reaction is characteristic of the attitude, generally negative, shown towards Fuegian languages. Most important is the fact that Darwin considered himself authorized to formulate such a decisive opinion about the language, even though he had no professional background on the subject. Surprisingly such an attitude towards a language can readily be discovered even in our own times; the assumption being that since all individuals are able to speak, all people should consider themselves capable of pronouncing judgments about speech. Although it would be difficult to find a linguist who promotes a theory of physics or of biology, etc., the opposite occurs frequently. Even today one can encounter individuals who believe that indigenous people are unable to communicate with words and are convinced that these people produce only inarticulate grunts, similar to those of animals. These same critics also bestow upon themselves the right to civilize, christianize, kill,

enforce labor, etc. This is indeed a peculiar attitude on the part of the white man!

With these comments about attitudes, both past and present, as a background, we are now going to focus on Amerindian languages spoken in that part of South America which is south of the Southern latitude of  $40^{\circ}$ . This is, in effect, the area in which the Fuegian languages are spoken. The term Fuegian linguistics, suggested by André Martinet, is a broad term that includes the languages spoken on the Island of Tierra del Fuego, as well as those spoken in the territories adjacent to Patagonia.

Today in this vast territory of some 800,000 square kilometers, no more than several dozen survivors of the old autochthonous inhabitants remain. Of these, those who live to the west, by the Magellan Channel, belonged to the group called Canoe Nomads, while those who live to the east, on the Argentine Pampas, were Pedestrian Nomads.

Throughout the history of the region, there has been considerable confusion between the identification of specific indigenous groups and the languages attributed to them. For example, people have discussed the Chono language -- and still do so today -- even though there is not a single linguistic fact available about this putative language.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not the Chono existed as an ethnic entity may be an historic and/or an ethnological problem; but to posit the existence of a language for which there is no data is almost a logical contradiction -- unless one is dealing with linguistic reconstructions or protolanguages.

The proliferation of several terms to designate the same linguistic realities derives in large part from this initial methodological confusion, and is tied furthermore to the lack of work done by bona-fide linguists.<sup>3</sup> By using materials that refer only to the Qawasqar language, the confusion which reigns in nomenclature can best be illustrated. In the following citation, three names are attributed to the same entity:

Olivier van Noort, who in 1599 had a bloody encounter with those Indians, took away several captives, with whose assistance he obtained the various names of tribes, places and animals. Different authors suppose that the Enoo, which is what these natives call themselves, were the Alakaluf of the group named Pesherai in the eighteenth century (Hammerly Dupuy 1952:140).

We are now sufficiently advanced in our research to understand the reason for these three different terms. First, the Dutch traveler, van Noort, whom the Indians must have asked for things, uttered the expression xeno "give it to me" repeatedly; therefore van Noort considered it appropriate to give them the name Enoo. Later Bougainville became impressed by the cries pescewe pescewe "stranger" made by the same group, and therefore called them Pesherai. Fitz-Roy, in turn, first called a coastal promontory Alakaluf and subsequently, by exten-

sion, gave the people who lived around it the same name (1839). As to the origin of the term Alakaluf, Speggazini, towards the end of the 19th century, maintained that it derived from a Yahgan expression meaning "clam eaters," which the Indians attributed to their neighbors to the north.<sup>4</sup> Many other designations have been utilized to name this group of canoe people, but the use of the term created by Fitz-Roy predominates.

In his 1952 work, Hammerly Dupuy also suggested that a group "Kaueskar" existed, which spoke a language called "aksanas," a language which not only differed from, but was located further south than Alakaluf. Hammerly "discovered" the "Kaueskar" by comparing 50 words of a vocabulary collected in 1698 by the French pirate Jean de la Guilbaudière with a vocabulary that he himself had collected (Marcel 1982a,b). The "proof" which he offers us is that he has judged these two vocabularies to be different. It is sufficient to examine just the first word of this comparative list in order to get an idea of the inevitable errors of this type of "method." Taking the word "water" for which la Guilbaudière noted arret, Hammerly listed Cafalai. Here, one is dealing with an error made by la Guilbaudière. He showed the Qawasqar a bucket of water so as to obtain the equivalent in their language and did not notice that their response was to the receptacle and not to the content. Thus, aret means "container of liquid."

It would not be necessary in this essay to comment on Hammerly if he had not had an important

it the same term Alakaluf in the 19th century. A Yahgan example of the Indians' orth.<sup>4</sup> Many tried to name this the term

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supporter. Vlastimil Loukotka, who apparently never visited the area, trusted Hammerly's analysis and thereby perpetuated the myth of the existence of the aksanas language by regarding it as an isolated language different from Alakaluf (1962, 1963, 1968). The right of groups to choose their own name led me to propose to the VI Congress of Chilean Archaeology, in October 1971, that the name Qawasqar be used for the group as well as its language and that the term alakaluf, which is nothing more than a bibliographic fiction,<sup>6</sup> be avoided.

Languages which, in one way or another, are attested to in the territory located south of the 40° parallel are the following: Qawasqar or Alakaluf, Yahgan or Yamana, Selk'nam or Ona, Haush or Manekenk, Tehuelche or Patagon or Aonikenke, Teushen or Tehues, Gununa Kune or Gennaken or Pampa. One may also cite, although it is outside the category of Fuegian languages, Mapudungu (the language of the Mapuche), which is spoken further north in Chilean territory, in the region called "La Frontera" between the Bio-Bio and Toltén Rivers. (See also the article by Croese in this volume.) Due to a historical phenomenon, which took place in the 17th century, known by the term "araucanization" and which consisted of a Mapuche migration towards the southeast, we have today several thousand Mapuche located in Patagonia, especially in the region of Neuquén (in Argentina). This migration also has had linguistic consequences to the extent that the Mapuche language pushed back the Tehuelche language.

We will try now to provide some details about the geographic location of the languages we have cited. The publications on Fuegian languages are to be found in the extensive bibliography, which is located at the end of this essay.

Qawasqar: The habitat of these speakers extends from the Gulf of Penas to the Straits of Magellan and the coastal islands of Chile. As of 1972 the last 47 Qawasqar had regrouped at the small bay of Puerto Eden ( $49^{\circ}08' S$ ,  $74^{\circ}26' W$ ) on the east coast of Wellington Island. There they inhabit a location where the only access is by sea, at a distance of more than one day's sailing from the nearest town. The best known designation of this group is alakaluf. A modern study on the Qawasqar has not yet appeared; however, a description by this author has been completed and is soon to be published (see Clairis 1982).

Yahgan: It is the southernmost language of the world. Its traditional territory included the southern coast of the Island of Tierra del Fuego, the Hoste, Navarino, Picton, and Wollaston Islands, and extends to Cape Horn. Today no more than 6-8 individuals, who have maintained their language, remain on Navarino Island.

One of our informants protested recently against the term yamana, usually used to designate that language, arguing that yamana means "man" in that language and that women speak it also. It is, therefore, preferable to use the term yahgan which was proposed by the missionary Thomas Bridges based on a toponym. There is no an indigenous term to

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designate the language or the people in question. The compound word inčikut, which speakers sometimes use, has as its first element the English word "Indian"; the second element, from Yahgan, means "speech, to speak," from which is derived "speech of the Indians."

The people who spoke Qawasqar and Yahgan can be differentiated from other Fuegian people by their physique and life style. Those belonging to the groups in question are of small physical stature. They live in their canoes and practice maritime nomadism. By contrast, the other peoples of the region are known for their great height, a fact which, very likely, is the origin of the term Patagon; their natural setting is no longer the sea, but the pampas, where they are nomadic hunters.

Selk'nam: This language was spoken in the largest part of Tierra del Fuego, especially in the northwest part of the Island. One aged speaker can still speak the language, but there is not a single person left who speaks Haush, which was once spoken at the extreme southeast of the same island.

Patagonian languages: Three languages are found in continental Patagonia. Before designating them with a specific name, it would be perhaps a good idea to recall that from an ethnological point of view, the group of inhabitants of this territory, from the Rio Negro to the Straits of Magellan, have been referred to frequently by means of the generic term of Patagonians or Tehuelches. Parallel to other cases already cited, an infinity of other terms have been utilized in order to characterize

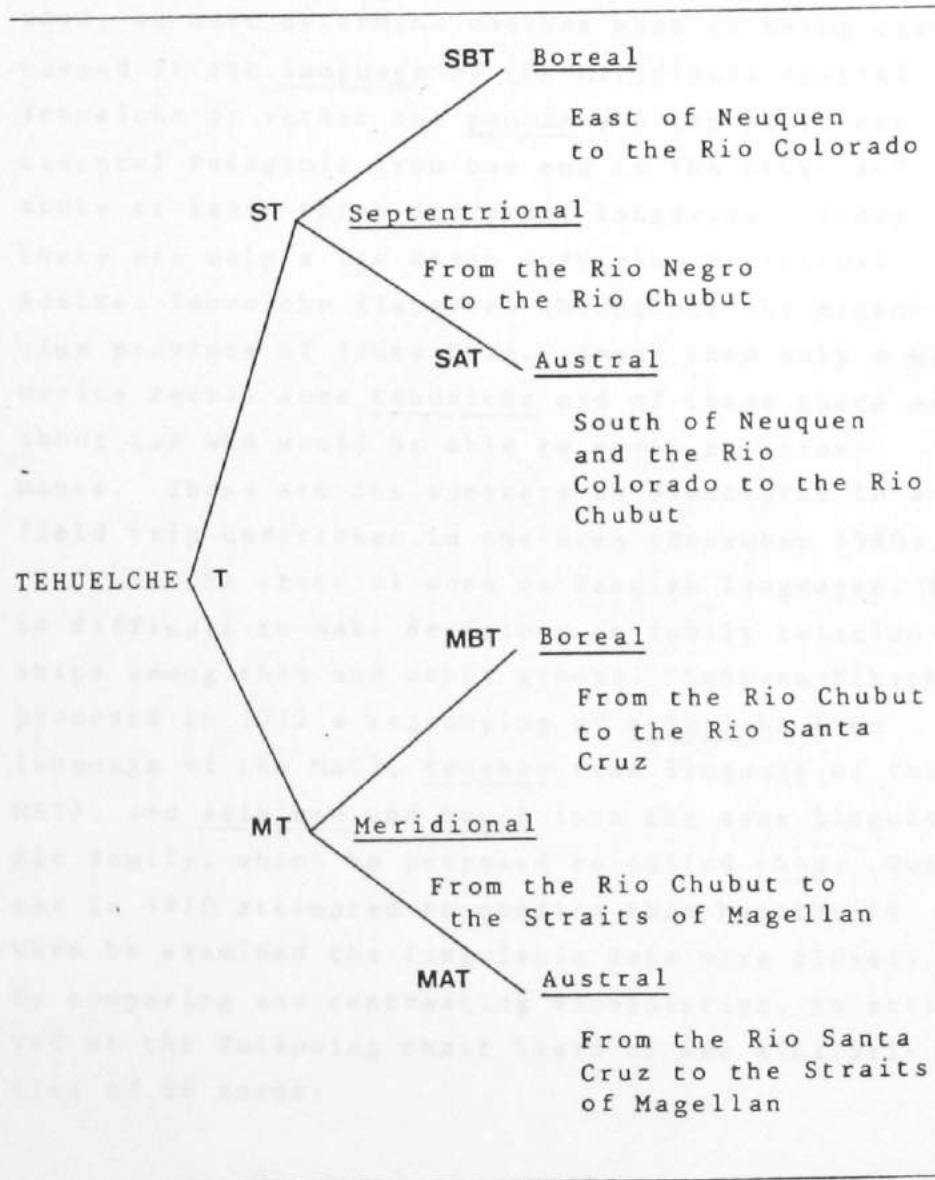
some even smaller groups. We cite, as an example, the term aonikenke which means "people of the south" and by extension the language spoken by them. It is obvious that this term which is opposed to peenkenke "people of the north" never has the same referent, given the fact that its meaning depends on the geographic position of the person using it.

We owe the attempt at classification of the inhabitants of continental Patagonia shown in Table I to Rodolfo Casamiquela. Of the four ethnic groups defined, the Septentrional Boreal Tehuelche (SBT) disappeared towards the middle of the last century without leaving any trace of their language. Of the three other groups, the only one still extant is that of the Meridional Austral Tehuelche (MAT). The linguistic data available for these three ethnic groups, however, permit us to maintain that each group constituted a distinct community, speaking a language completely different from the others.

The language spoken by the Septentrional Austral Tehuelche (SAT), has been termed gününa künè, gen-naken or pampa, while the language spoken by the Meridional Boreal Tehuelche (MBT) is referred to as teushen or 'tehues and disappeared during the last ten years.

I have left for last the language of the Meridional Austral Tehuelche, which is the only one known by the name of Tehuelche. Among the other names by which it is called we still have patagon and aonikenke. Therefore each time the term tehuelche is

TABLE I. Classification of Patagonian Inhabitants



used, we must determine whether what is being discussed is the language of the Meridional Austral Tehuelche or rather the people who inhabited continental Patagonia from one end to the other and spoke at least three different languages. Today there are only a few dozen surviving Meridional Austral Tehuelche dispersed throughout the Argentine province of Santa Cruz. Among them only a minority recall some tehuelche and of these there are about ten who would be able to serve as informants. These are the speakers we discovered in a field trip undertaken in the area (December 1980).

Given the state of work on Fuegian languages, it is difficult to make decisions on family relationships among them and other groups. Lehmann-Nitsche proposed in 1913 a regrouping of tehuelche (the language of the MAT), teushen (the language of the MBT), and selk'nam and haush into the same linguistic family, which he proposed be called chon. Suarez in 1970 attempted to confirm this hypothesis when he examined the linguistic data more closely. By comparing and contrasting vocabularies, he arrived at the following chart based on the similarities of 88 terms:

	Haush	Selk'nam	Tehuelche
Teushen	22.72%	27.27%	55.68%
Tehuelche	28.18%	29.54%	
Selk'nam	35.22%		

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Using 145 comparable items from gününa küné (material taken from the grammar of Casamiquela) and from tehuelche (material gathered by us), we are able to recognize 10.27% of related words, which is not greater than the other languages (see chart), but which seems proportional to the geographic distance between the languages in question.

Together with Mary R. Key, in 1976, we formulated an hypothesis -- which we still have to test -- regarding the relationship between Qawasqar and the languages of the Chon family. We think, however, that more time is needed to define the small language families before comparative work can reach a more satisfactory level.

More recently, Mary R. Key presented a hypothesis, about possible affinities between the Uto-Aztecán languages of North America and Mexico, on the one hand, and Quechua, Aymara, Mapuche, Moseten (Bolivia), Tacanan (Bolivia), Panoan (Bolivia and Peru) and the Fuegian languages on the other (1981a). This hypothesis will provide new perspectives for study and discussion.

#### NOTES

1. Cited by Lipschutz and Mostny (1950:25).
2. The only "evidence" for this language consists of the three words collected by Fitz-Roy and the "chono or wayteka" vocabulary of 95 words, published by Samitier (1967) which consists of an unspecified mixture of first-hand data gathered by him in a hospital of the Regiment of Comodoro

Rivadavia in 1937, from one -- according to him -- chon informant. This individual spoke the "wurk-wur-we"! language. Samitier added to these forms "a few rare words noted by former travelers, because it was not possible to find a chon vocabulary anywhere" (1967:165). We simply can not take this seriously.

3. These issues are discussed in greater detail in Clairis (1977b, 1982, in press).
4. This hypothesis is probably correct, because in the work of the French Scientific Mission we found oualo "to eat sea urchins or anything else which must be cracked" and arhoup "a type of mussel, the most common found on the beach." We encountered this same arhoup, listed as aruf, in Thomas Bridges' Yamana-English Dictionary (1933) translated as "mussels generally; specially that sort which are usually gathered on the shores, being left by the tide."
5. Aksanas in Qawasqar means "man (as an antonym of woman)". Hammerly arbitrarily proposed to designate the language in this way, perhaps believing he was applying by analogy a concept which occurs in other Amerindian languages. The reality is, however, that the Qawasqar not only call themselves Qawasqar, but also refer to their language by the same term.
6. I have chosen to spell the word according to the phonological notation.
7. This chapter was translated from the original French by Harriet E. Manelis Klein.

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