

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# LATIN AMERICAN LANGUAGES

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**Overview** Latin America has a tremendous level of linguistic fragmentation, in large part because of mountainous terrain and isolation, and also because of the mysterious disappearance of the main monument-building cultures (Maya, Tiwanaku) where everything seemed to disappear except the vestiges of language and also oral traditions. The indigenous languages persist in pure form in communities, and in assimilated form in the words and forms of expression that are found in Spanish, Portuguese and in English.

### ANCIENT PERIOD

**Maya:** Maya is a living language with at least 6 million Maya speakers in southern Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras. The language has at least 30 separate languages in overall family, with hundreds of dialects. The Spanish priests burned all but four of the Maya codices, Nevertheless, with the Latin alphabet, the Maya were able to preserve their myths, history, poems, and prophetic accounts.

**Aymara:** Still spoken by more than a million speakers in the Andes, Aymara is found in present-day Bolivia, Peru, and Chile. It has been assumed that the inhabitants of Tiwanaku spoke a dialect of Aymara, but it is not certain. It is certain that Aymara speakers have benefited from a rich body of oral stories, poems, and songs.

**Quechua:** Today, only about 500,000 people speak Quechua, and they are primarily located in the Andes and highlands of South America. Peruvians, Bolivians, Chileans, and some Ecuadorians speak Quechua. Quechua is unique in that it was the language of the Inca empire. Quechua words have entered the English vocabulary, and they include condor, jerky, llama, poncho, puma, and guano.

**Tupi-Guarani:** Spoken by people in Paraguay, southwestern Brazil, eastern Bolivia, and northern Argentina, Guarani is unique in that it is spoken by indigenous and non-indigenous peoples alike, thanks in large part to the Jesuit priests who came to Paraguay in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and published a written grammar of Guarani called *Tesoro de la lengua guaraní* (*Treasure of the Guarani Language*). Guarani is an expressive language which allows noun agglutination, which are compound nouns. For example, a blonde may be referred to as a “honey-hair”. This highly concrete and describe nature makes Guarani deeply treasured by its speakers as uniquely poetic. In recent years, politicians who wish to endear themselves to a large block of voters speak to the crowds in Guarani (the language of hearth, home, and mother love) rather than in the more aseptic Spanish.

### POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

**Nahuatl:** Nahuatl is considered a group of languages within the Uto-Aztecan language family, found primarily in central Mexico, but with linguistic influence extending to the Pacific coast. As opposed to many languages of conquered peoples, Nahuatl was converted into a written language with the advent of the Latin alphabet. Thus, it happened that poetry, administrative documents, historical chronicles, and codices were written in Nahuatl after the Conquest. Many Nahuatl words appear now in Spanish and English. They include tomato, avocado, chocolate, coyote, and chili.

### EARLY MODERN (Colonial, and Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries)

**Spanish:** Spanish is the language of the Conquistadores, and thus became the “lingua franca” of all of Latin America. That said, there are wide variations regional usage. Colombia became the enforcer of a standard Spanish, and maintained its continuity and consistency. Perhaps the most pronounced regional variations occur in Argentina and also in the Caribbean, where a kind of “creole” can be found. In Argentina and Uruguay, the “castellano rioplatense” is spoken. It utilizes elements of archaic Spanish (“voseo”) and its intonation bears a resemblance to Neopolitan Italian, from which a number of the inhabitants immigrated.

**Portuguese:** Because of the relative isolation of Portugal from its colony, and the fairly independent administration, the language was able to morph into a very distinctive dialect which has pronunciation patterns quite different from Portugal, or of African colonies' Portuguese, for that matter. Brazilian Portuguese has been an important literary language as Brazil produced a great number of poets, novelists, essayists, and philosophers.

**French:** French is spoken in the former French colonies, particularly in Haiti. French has been influenced by African languages, as well as voodoo culture, resulting in a Creole dialect that can be quite difficult for outsiders to understand.

**English:** English was the language of colonies settled by English pirates, adventurers, and plantation owners. English is the original language of Belize, Virgin Islands, and other islands. It is closer to British English than American English.

**Dutch:** Spoken in former Dutch colonies, which include Aruba, Sint Maartens, and Suriname, Dutch continues to be an important conduit for government, economic assistance, tourism, and resource development (offshore oil and gas development, for example).

**German:** Spoken in Argentina, Paraguay, Chile, Mexico, Brazil and in other countries where mining engineers and Mennonite settlers decided to live and contribute to society. In some cases, due to being cut off from Germany itself and becoming peripheral isolates, the German spoken by the cut-off groups can be quite archaic.

#### Discussion/Questions

1. The way that Quiche Maya relate to the world has a great deal to do with the way that they speak, and the words that they use to address the phenomenal world. For example, the language has built in it the idea that everything has a living spirit, and also can, under special circumstances, change forms. Many poems are in the form of incantations which as inanimate things such as brooms to come alive and help. Contemplate the Quiche Maya worldview and discuss how that might result in different worldview than the Western scientific world.

2. Spanish is spoken throughout Latin America, but that does not mean that it is necessarily equally understandable in all parts. Some areas use a vocabulary which is quite different than other areas. Describe the reasons for differences between the Spanish of Mexico and the Spanish of Argentina.

3. The Tupi-Guarani of the southeast subtropics of South America lived primarily in wood huts in the forests and savannahs. Their language is one that incorporates many mythical creatures, and it also uses compound words, which build descriptive adjectives in terms of two concrete nouns. For example, "blonde" is "honey-hair." Describe how knowing Guarani might help individuals develop a poetic imagination.

4. There are subgroups in Latin America that fiercely preserve their special languages, and the languages within their languages (idiolects). For example, the Mennonites in Mexico, Ecuador, Peru, and Paraguay speak an archaic German that helps them communicate as w=frpu. Explain how language groups may have a unifying impact on a group.

#### Readings

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