

**SECONDARY LANGUAGES:**

## In the Andes, a discovery of a compromise verb tense

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**W***alichispaya.* ("Although it is doubtful, it might perhaps be O.K. *pues.*")

Without a doubt the Incas adopted Quechua as their tongue because they could not learn Aymara. This tough little race of people, the Aymará, have lived around Lake Titicaca on the Altiplano upwards of 2,500 years, according to even the most pessimistic anthropologists. This has given them a long time to develop their language. It has managed to become so complicated as to lead one Peace Corpsman to speculate that most probably they can no longer understand one another—they just pretend to. Others have commented that their lengthy conversations are a good reason for not learning the language—that once learned, it could prove a bore to listen to since no one could say interesting things for so long!

These speculations hold a good deal of Lake Titicaca water. But it's interesting to note that while professors in the United States are sometimes chided for their inability to carry out the discussion of a topic—that they might refer to point A and actually discuss it, perhaps arriving at point B, but that they never get to points C, D or E—the Aymarás can spend hours in a reunion talking above, below and around point A alone, without actually talking about it and very

often with no intention of doing so.

In many parts of the Altiplano, Aymara is the *only* language. Some youths speak a version of Spanish, but it is mainly Aymara spoken with Spanish words and Aymara pronunciation. They could not exactly be called good informants because none of them agrees with another as to proper Aymara usage, nor are they consistent among themselves.

I had always gone on the assumption that if you knew a word, you could recognize it in speech, thus the importance of learning vocabulary. The problem with Aymara is that the transliteration that appears in books is at best an approximation, because it is not a written language! And it seems that all important Aymara words defy transliteration. The vowels are particularly hard to vocalize. There is no "o," but rather a sound that floats somewhere between the Spanish "o" and "u." Their "e" performs these same peregrinations between the "e" and "i." Basically it depends on how you wake up in the morning as to how you hear it. As for the explosive consonants, the "k" sound is the trickiest. One must watch the speaker's throat. There are frontal sounds and there are "backal" sounds. Not a single Indian, however, will make it easy for you to observe. They do not pronounce their explosive consonants as well as the Seattle linguists do.

In most languages the verb is the first thing you want to master. With Aymara you try your best to avoid it. Not only is there a separate verb for the most minute alteration in any given action ("to carry in the palm of the hand," as opposed to "in the fingertips," "in the hand," "in the arms," "over a shoulder," or "on the back"—not to mention "in a sack," *awayo*, *poncho*, or "on a burro"), but there is also a host of verb forms. Two most extraordinary forms perhaps explain best this Indian's resistance to change. They are the dubitative and the potential. The one is used in cases of doubt, the other in cases of possibility. Frankly, I see little difference. There is also a compromise tense, the dubitative potential, used when something is possibly doubtful or doubtfully possible.

Then there are subtle distinctions in the more familiar verb forms. The present tense is also the immediate past, so that if you do not listen carefully, you may be giving some Aymará Indian words of encouragement to do something he has already done. The pluperfect that we learned to use for a past act, indeed very far gone, can mean something that just happened a split second ago if it happened when the one who is telling about it or those he is telling it to, or both, were (a) not there or (b) surprised to hear about it.

As if the sheer volume of verbs and their various forms were not formidable enough, some clever individuals invented a multitude of suffixes to tack onto their verb forms, for performing this action while walking or running through, around, under or over something or someone, happily, viciously, half-heartedly, on the way to give someone a gift, plow the fields, reap the harvest, or deprive somebody of something. In this way they craftily disguise the verb beyond recognition. Though the root might seem to ring a bell as you hear it go by, soon it becomes too embellished to worry about.

Questions get the most mileage in Aymara. Everybody asks them. Unfortunately you rarely know when they are being asked because there is no change in the inflection of the voice. If they repeat the statement, however, it is probably a question. Sometimes you understand the ques-

**Efik Yoruba Sara Sango Mende Temne Ibo Malayalam**

tion but find it hard to believe that it was asked. This is because the Aymara form of small talk is to ask you if you are doing what you are most unquestionably doing. If, in truth, you simply could not understand the question the first time, it helps little to ask them to repeat it. As if more voluble for the opportunity to take it from the top once again, they actually speed up and perhaps even throw in another suffix!

Some ancient Aymar<sup>á</sup> was pretty shrewd to come up with form *janicha*. Used at the end of a question, it demands a "yes" or "no" reply. This *janicha* helps avoid hours of fruitless interrogation and, surprisingly enough, no one considers it rude. In fact, they feel quite unobliged to answer a question honestly *unless* the *janicha* appears. Then they begin to consider the question.

There is also an all-purpose interrogative, *-sti*, that delightfully changes meaning according to the word to which it is suffixed. If you ask someone, "Tatamasti?" you would be inquiring innocently about the health of someone's father. If, however, you say, "Cullacamasti?" there is no doubt that you are trying to find out what kind of a piece some guy's sister is. These shades of meaning are learned strictly from experience, sometimes painful experience.

This article is bound to speak out, or perhaps even cry out, for Peace Corps souls all over the world who, used to a logical language like English, or a more logical language like Spanish or a little less logical language like French, have encountered totally illogical languages or dialects. Inevitably someone will remark, "Just because they think differently from us, does that mean their language lacks logic?" But in these moments we must think of our endless struggles to communicate and calmly reply, "yes."

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**Nyakyusa Twi**