Introduction


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Since there is scarcely any co-operation between the different disciplines working in the Andes, and since linguists, ethnologists, ethnographers and archaeologists proceed unaware of each other, there has been no attempt to establish an overarching vision that might help us better evaluate the import of isolated discoveries in any particular domain.

Gerald Taylor, À la recherche des “proto-quechuas”

There is little clearer explanation of the rationale behind this book than the citation above. Scholars of various stripes all seek to uncover the “same” Andean past, each with their different data sources and methods that in principle should richly complement each other; yet the lack of co-operation between them is flagrant. This volume targets linguists and historians specifically, for the period since Columbus—or rather, Pizarro. A similar cross-disciplinary conversation on the pre-Columbian era can be found in our companion volume: Archaeology and Language in the Andes (see below).

Taylor’s point is not just that it is a disappointment in principle that scholars with such common goals have not engaged with one another more. Most seriously, it limits how far any one of our disciplines can progress toward our shared end of a richer and more coherent understanding of the past. Or to put it in a more optimistic light: the potential gain from cooperating is all the greater, for the cross-disciplinary whole should be greater than the sum of its isolated disciplinary parts. We hope that this book will provide the proof of that simple, win-win arithmetic.

The contributions here open in similar vein to Taylor. Gabriela Ramos, herself a historian of her native Peru, effectively restates the case for this book, and in no uncertain terms:

Historians have paid scant attention to so significant a question as the relationship between language and society. [D]espite the understandings
gained [in many other fields of historical inquiry], the thorny problem of language and intercultural communication has been addressed only in the most general of terms. There is a paradox in how as historians we so rarely imagine the people we are concerned with in our research actually partaking in the basic act of communicating with each other... Work on this [the relationship between language and society] by historians themselves is still almost entirely lacking.

This shows not only admirable self-appraisal of one's own discipline, but keen cross-disciplinary perspicacity with it. For Ramos here is putting words on the key lament among linguists of the Andes, who do indeed wonder at their peers in other disciplines. How is it that they do not with much greater insistence ask themselves a question so central to the identity of the people they study as what language(s) they actually spoke? Nowhere more so than in the post-Columbian Andes, surely, has language tracked through both time and geographical space the impacts and interactions of Spaniards and Native Americans. To this day, language serves as a bellwether of identity and indeed aspirations, as Tim Marr so strikingly puts it in his contribution here.

Andean linguists are all but dismayed, likewise, by how little awareness there seems to be outside their field of even some of the most fundamental and long-standing findings of their discipline, and the scale of the repercussions that they should hold for others, if only they were recognized. Beguiling simplicities die hard, it would seem. For many, Quechua is a monolith that can safely be explained away in just a line or two, in terms as plain as John Howland Rowe’s: “the Inca... impose[d] their own language...in the whole extent of their dominions.” Yet it is entirely unrealistic to imagine all Quechua as simply the Incas’ fiat; witness the failure of the similar colonial decrees in favor of Spanish centuries later (Ken Andrien, this volume). It is anachronistic, too, for much of the spread of Quechua dates back to long before the Incas, indeed to times when it was not even yet spoken in Cuzco. Nothing is more at fault here than the hopelessly misleading term “dialects,” so easily dismissed by non–linguists as a detail beneath their concerns. Which historian of Europe would ignore as trivial the differences between Portuguese, Spanish, Catalan, French, and Italian (and whether and where they spread across the Americas and Africa), or confuse, in seeking to explain them, the impact of Rome with that of Charles V? Failing to perceive the true nature of Quechua as a whole family of languages (plural), akin to the collection of Romance languages in Europe, glosses over and does violence to an entire repository of rich data on the past—origins, differences, and patterns throughout the Andes—that lie precisely in Quechua’s very diversity.

Perhaps, though, linguists have themselves as much to blame, for remaining too cozily within the familiar bounds of their own discipline,