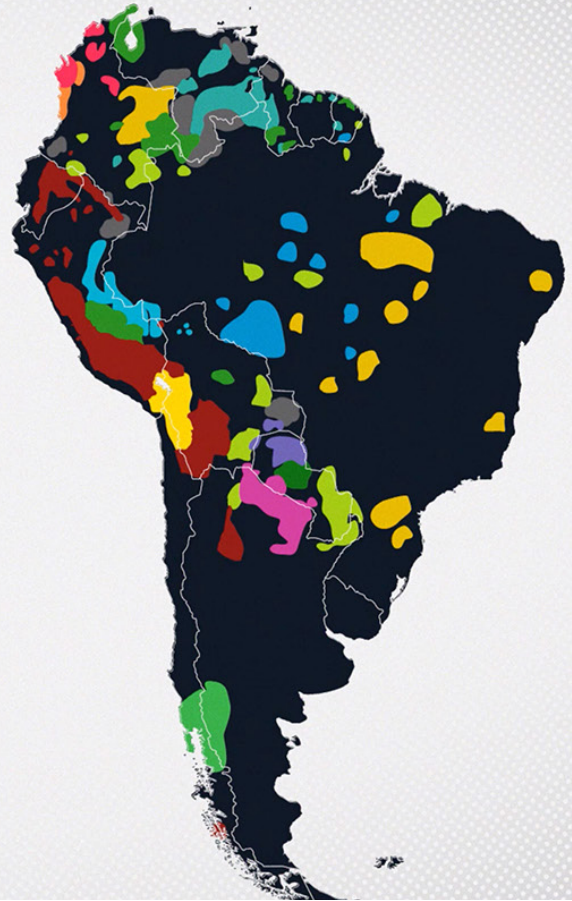


Quechua and Other Indigenous Languages of Latin America



Language Networks and Social Life

What were the first networks that connected human communities, tying together bands of foragers in trade and relationships? These networks were probably based on a shared language that allowed them to communicate with each other. In fact, it turns out that language is very important to forming and shaping connections between people, both historically and today. In this video, three historians help us to understand how these kinds of networks formed and worked.



00:01

Trevor Getz, PhD, San Francisco State University

Hello, my name is Trevor Getz. I'm a professor of history at San Francisco State University and I'm here today to talk to three of my colleagues, Craig Benjamin, Bob Bain, and Sharika Crawford, about some of the earliest human networks: language networks.

The language network is the first kind of network we introduce in this course. But what is a language network?

00:30

*Sharika Crawford, PhD, United States Naval Academy
Craig Benjamin, PhD, Grand Valley State University*

CRAWFORD: Basically, a group of people who share a symbolic or a spoken language. It could be the symbolic language that they, they know early on from, you know, infancy, or one in which they've adopted in their later life.

Yeah, a language network is fundamental to human history. It's a way whereby ideas can be shared, passed on, built upon and so on. Without language, without some means of effectively communicating within their group, then the rest of human history becomes impossible.

01:00

Text bubble: How did language networks grow?

A photo of the Arch of Constantine in Rome, Italy – the archway features statues of men and an Latin inscription

GETZ: How do you think language networks grew larger? How did a person join a language network, for example?

BENJAMIN: Language networks grew through a variety of means, I think. In some cases, it just made sense for those who were on the outside of a network to join it, to learn that language, particularly to facilitate trade and exchange of different types. As some more powerful states emerged later and began to impose themselves politically and culturally on larger regions, so that language also began to spread, sort of imposed from elite levels, if you like.

01:30

Bob Bain

GETZ: How did being in a language network bigger than just your family group change how a person lived or their experiences?

BAIN: If you think about the ways in which I interact or you interact with different kinds of language communities, that each time you interact with someone that speaks a slightly different language or has different experiences that they've developed through their language, your experience and your understanding of the world grows. And so,

A very early artwork depicting humans

I've got to imagine that that's what life was like for our earliest ancestors. As they interacted with other people, they began to figure out the ways to communicate, and therefore they shared a language or they created a third space—neither this language nor that language but the third language in there that allowed them to communicate. That they began to share not just words but ideas, experiences, how to use material objects, how to solve problems that they shared, individually and collectively.

02:30

Text bubble: Do language groups change how people live?

BENJAMIN: We belong to many, many language groups and when we're in a particular group we're experiencing the world differently for sure. I also play jazz, I'm a jazz musician. When I'm hanging out with my jazz friends, we use a very different language to the sort of language I'm using now or that I'd use in the classroom. And this allows us to communicate more effectively, experience the word differently in that network to when I'm in a different network.

Text bubble: How does language shape our world?

03:14

Text bubble: How does language shape our world?

GETZ: Does language shape the way we experience and describe the world around us?

BAIN: You know, there's a long-standing argument amongst linguists who study language about this question about, are the words that we use just ways to represent our experience or does the words we use shape our experience? And I'm more on the side of the words we use shape our experience.

CRAWFORD: I often think about my own experience. I am a member of multiple communities. As an African American, I belong to an African American Midwestern community, and I often am surprised and I think about how my husband teases me when he talks about the way I try to communicate with my parents or my relatives or my friends. He often has a difficult time kind of understanding the nuances.

Scholars have called African American kind of linguistic networks "Ebonics" or the black vernacular, kind of ordinary speech. I'm able to use that with those members of my community. But then I walk away from that and I belong to a professional community. I'm a historian, right, so I use an academic language. Today I think we talk about that as code switching.

04:00

Photo of a famous fortress in Puerto Rico

But I'm also a historian of Latin America, so I also speak Spanish, I studied Portuguese. So when I'm here in Puerto Rico, for example, or if I'm in Columbia, where I do my research, I can transfer from English into Spanish and talk to those communities. The Spanish in Columbia is very different than the Spanish in Costa Rica versus Puerto Rico. And then my husband, who is originally from West Africa, from Ghana, speaks his own native language. And I've spent time learning that language, so I can speak to my relatives there, my in-laws, and so I'm then immersed into another language community. And I often mix all of those languages together in my household.

04:36

GETZ: How can we see the impact of language networks? If we looked at the map of some languages today, for example, in different parts of the world, how might we see how they have affected history over time?

An animated map of the African Continent, showing the spread of all of the different languages that exist in the region

For example, I'm a historian of Africa. When I look at a map of sub-Saharan Africa, I see these big groups of related languages in the middle of the continent, what we call the Bantu languages, and I think, how did those languages spread? Were they the result of wars and conquests, or the migration of people, or just of people sharing their culture and language with their neighbors? What do you see when you look at language map?

05:17

Another animated language map, this time of South America

CRAWFORD: As a modern Latin American historian, I'm looking at the current map of the languages on the South American continent. Two things strike me. You'll notice that there are areas on the map,

particularly on the eastern half of South America from the north, looking at places like Guyana or Suriname, Venezuela, portions of Brazil, even down to the southern, kind of eastern portion of Brazil,

that there are numerous language networks or groups of people who are speaking very distinct languages. Which we might call indigenous languages or non-European languages. They're numerous and they're clustered together in particular formations, sometimes in forested areas, sometimes in lowland areas.

05:57

A map depicting the Amazon River Watershed

A language map depicts the numerous indigenous languages spoken in Latin America

For me, I think about how those smaller and numerous language groups might reflect the geographical environment, the climate that might have allowed those language groups to stay clustered together-- the Amazon being a perfect example where you might find numerous groups of language speakers who might share some words or some shared kind of symbolic expressions, but they do have distinct languages and that might be because the Amazon is such a vast river. It may have made it difficult for people to actually kind of become in contact with one another, versus on the western side of South America when you think about the language of Quechua, right? That is in the modern world history period where we talk about the rise of the Inca empire. The Incan empire was very extensive, had very extensive infrastructure, which have allowed more language speakers to share that common language of Quechua.

06:48

Text bubble: Can language networks disappear?

GETZ: So language networks come into being and they exist and they change. Could they also disappear? And how might that happen?

BAIN: So language has a purpose. And if the purpose is less important than it used to be, then it may decline and eventually die out. And I can give an example of... Yiddish is a great example. So once upon a time, Yiddish flourished as a language amongst Jewish people in Eastern Europe. And it was taught and spread throughout most of Eastern Europe. And when Eastern European Jews migrated to the United States, there was a time period at the turn, probably the last century, Yiddish was alive in cities like New York City, and cities like Cleveland, and Pittsburgh.

07:30

*A piece of colorful, semi-modern art (perhaps a postcard) featuring the Statue of Liberty in NYC and Yiddish text
A photo of a Yiddish newspaper
Image of a modern-day teacher, teaching Yiddish with a chalkboard*

But then, as people developed, their generations developed, their fluency with English and the American society welcomed people more, there became less of an interest in maintaining Yiddish as a network among second or third generation of American Jews. And as a result, the language kind of declined. Yiddish newspapers died out, Yiddish theater died out. On the other hand, there's a revival and often people will revive a language. And we see that, for example, again with Yiddish, where we're beginning to see new Yiddish theaters or classes where a second and third generation of American Jews are wanting to take up Yiddish. So there can be this waxing and waning of a language network.

GETZ: Thank you all for your time today. This was fascinating, I certainly learned a lot about language networks.