

Quechua in Peru: Divergent Trends in Language Transmission and Identity

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Abstract

Objective

With the United Nations' proclamation of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032), the sociolinguistic and demographic trajectories of Indigenous languages worldwide warrant sustained attention. For assessing the vitality of South America's major indigenous language family Quechua, two factors are especially salient: intergenerational transmission and ethnocultural self-identification. This study compares trends in Quechua language transmission and self-identification in Peru.

Methodology

We analyze representative data from the 2017 National Population Census conducted by Peru's National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (INEI). From the census, we extracted age-specific counts for (a) individuals who reported Quechua as the language with which they learned to speak and (b) individuals who self-identified as Quechua. We compared these two measures numerically and graphically at the national level and for Lima Department and the first seven Andean departments with large Quechua-speaking populations: Ayacucho, Apurímac, Cusco, Huancavelica, Puno, Ancash and Huánuco. For Lima, we further distinguished between individuals born and/or raised in the department ("Mother lived in the same district") and residents who were born and raised elsewhere ("Mother did not live in this district").

Results

We find two clear and opposing trends. Across successively younger cohorts, the number of native (L1) Quechua speakers declines, whereas the number of individuals who self-identify as Quechua increases. Nationally, in the youngest observed cohort (age 12), approximately twice as many children self-identified as Quechua as reported Quechua as their first language. This pattern appears in the Andean departments as well but is most pronounced in Lima. Among those born and dwelling in Lima, rising Quechua self-identification is especially marked and most decoupled from native-speaker prevalence.

Conclusions

These findings have important implications for understanding the current vitality of Quechua. While ethnocultural self-identification is strong among younger generations—likely fueled by activism and empowerment—native-speaker prevalence is declining, because parents have not transmitted the language to their children. Consequently, a growing cohort of young descendants of Quechua speakers—heritage learners in particular—value the language but probably lack fluency. Language revitalization and maintenance initiatives should therefore target not only current speakers but also heritage learners and descendants: first, by supporting their development of fluent Quechua proficiency, and second, by providing guidance and resources for effective intergenerational transmission to their (future) children.