

# ORIGINS AND DIVERSITY OF AYMARA

## HOW AND WHY IS AYMARA DIFFERENT IN DIFFERENT REGIONS?

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## [Is Aymara Alone?](#)

The language that is normally called ‘Aymara’ is well-known to be spoken in much of the *Altiplano*, the ‘high plain’ at an altitude of around 4000 m that covers much of western Bolivia and the far south of Peru. Aymara is spoken all around the region of the Bolivian capital La Paz, and further north to Lake Titicaca, the famous archaeological site of Tiwanaku, and into the southernmost regions of Peru, around Huancané, Puno and Moquegua. South of La Paz, Aymara is spoken in the Oruro and Poopó regions and beyond, across the wild and beautiful border areas into northern Chile.

What is much less well-known, however, is that this **Altiplano Aymara is not alone!** A language of the very same family is spoken almost a thousand kilometres further north, in central Peru, in the semi-desert mountains of the province of **Yauyos**, not far south and inland from Lima. The mountainous slopes of the canyon of the river Cañete are home to only about one thousand speakers of **Jaqaru** and **Kawki**, two more members of the Aymara family, both of them closely related to the language spoken in the Altiplano.

For photos of all of these areas, see our [Aymara regions](#) section.

## [Aymara and Quechua](#)

To understand exactly how the Aymara in the Altiplano is related to Jaqaru and Kawki, one has first to understand what it means exactly to talk in terms of ‘related’ languages, and ‘families’ of languages. These questions are in fact already explained in detail in our page on the Quechua language family, because it turns out that Quechua too is not just a single language, but a whole family of different, though closely related languages. We recommend, then, that you first read our explanations in our page on the [Origins and Diversity of Quechua](#), and then come back to this page on Aymara. You will then be in a much better position to understand exactly what we mean when we refer to Aymara as a ‘family of related languages’ spoken both in the Altiplano and in Yauyos.

In any case, Aymara and Quechua have been so intricately bound up with each other throughout their histories that one cannot really understand either family without knowing something about the other one too. This is why in *Sounds of the Andean Languages* we cover both of them together. So whether it’s

Aymara or Quechua that you're most interested in, it will certainly be worth your while to look at our pages on the other family as well.

The reason for this is because speakers of **Aymara and Quechua have had a great deal of contact** with each other over many centuries, even millennia, all over the Andes from central Peru southwards to Bolivia. This has meant that their languages too have **influenced each other** very strongly. You can see how close and complex the relationships are between the two families by looking at our [word comparison tables](#), particularly for the numbers *one* to *ten*.

Beware, though! Despite the striking similarities between the families on many levels, and the many shared words, ultimately the Aymara languages and the Quechua languages probably **do not come from the same one original language**. Aymara and Quechua are two quite separate language families, then, and it seems that they are in fact quite unrelated to each other.

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## The Aymara Language Family

Altiplano Aymara and Jaqaru/Kawki, on the other hand, certainly *do* come from the same one original language. That is, just like there was once an Original Quechua, so too there was once an **Original Aymara** (what linguists call '*Proto-Aymara*'). It is important to realise, then, that Jaqaru/Kawki is just as much a direct descendent of this Original Aymara as the Aymara spoken in the Altiplano. Neither is 'more original' than the other.

When it comes for **names** for this language family, and for the original language from which all the modern Aymara languages are derived, things can seem a little more complicated than they really are, just because there has been some confusion over names. This is because in the past, when various linguists were first realising that the languages of the Altiplano and of Yauyos were related, some of them coined their own new terms to refer to this newly-discovered family. So you may have come across mentions of the *Aru* family (together with *Proto-Aru* as the name for the original language), or the *Jaqi* family (and thus *Proto-Jaqi*). Both these words are taken from the languages themselves: *aru* means *speech*, while *jaqi* means *person* or *people*. Note too that *Jaqaru* is just the combination of these. *Kawki*, meanwhile, simply means *where?*

In fact, it is all quite simple: *Aru* and *Jaqi* are both just different names for exactly the same family, the one that we prefer to call simply the **Aymara family**, to stick to the name that has already been well-established for centuries. All that people need to realise is that there is not only a **Southern Aymara** spoken in the Altiplano, but also a **Central Aymara** spoken in the Yauyos mountains inland from Lima.

In fact, if we try to find where the Original Aymara probably first started out from, it turns out that it was probably not in the Altiplano at all, but much closer to the more central part of the Andes where Jaqaru/Kawki is still spoken. From there it then spread southwards, and eventually reached the southern regions like the Altiplano only many centuries later. We'll come back to talk a bit more on this below.

As for names, then, all we need do is keep using the term 'Aymara', but when we are talking about only one particular region, to be careful to specify which one in each case, *i.e.*:

- Central Aymara, *i.e.* Jaqaru/Kawki in central Peru; or
- Southern Aymara, *i.e.* the Aymara spoken in the Altiplano.

Calling the whole family 'Aymara' is hardly a problem, then. This is just how everyone has always used the word 'Quechua' too, as the name of a language family, not just of one variety of it from a single region, without this causing any big problems. Using the same name for the whole family contributes to a sense of both unity, and rich diversity, among speakers of all the different regional varieties. So in the case of the Aymara family it helps remind us just how closely Jaqaru and Kawki are related to the language spoken in the Altiplano, and how they all stem from the same origin.

It is also helpful to think in terms of the *Southern* and *Central* branches of the Aymara family, not least with regard also to *Southern* and *Central* Quechua. These 'geographical' names help reflect the fact that languages from both of these families have been widely spoken alongside each other in the same regions for many centuries. In fact, one direct result of this is that there are now many significant parallels between Southern Aymara and Southern Quechua, and many others between Central Aymara and Central Quechua.

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## [‘Southern’ or ‘Altiplano’ Aymara](#)

Speakers of Southern Aymara tend to be able to understand each other with few difficulties, whichever region they come from throughout the vast area of the Altiplano from southern Peru, past Titicaca and La Paz and into south-western Bolivia and even north-eastern Chile. Nonetheless, there are plenty of minor differences from one region to the next: in pronunciation, in the particular words people use, and in some aspects of grammar too. In *Sounds of the Andean Languages*, we look only at differences in pronunciation, which you can hear in our [word comparison tables](#).

## Central Aymara: Jaqaru and Kawki

Jaqaru and Kawki, meanwhile, are the two surviving forms of Central Aymara. Most linguists have normally used these names to distinguish how people speak in two different but neighbouring areas within the province of Yauyos:

- **Jaqaru** to refer to what is spoken in the village of **Tupe**, and the nearby villages of Aiza and Colca;
- **Kawki** to refer to how people speak in the village of **Cachuy**, and now also in Canchán, Caipán and Chavín.

This is how we too use these two names *Jaqaru* and *Kawki*, but there are two very important points to note here.

First is that many speakers of these languages themselves actually use the names all but interchangeably: people in Tupe regularly call what they speak ‘Kawki’ too!

Secondly, it has been claimed in the past that Jaqaru and Kawki are so different that we should consider them quite separate languages from each other. This seems clearly exaggerated, however: as you can see from our [word comparison tables](#) here, Jaqaru and Kawki are generally very similar indeed in pronunciation, and the same goes for vocabulary and grammar too. While we were collecting our data, we worked together with native-speakers of Jaqaru and Kawki, and found that even with each speaking in their own way, they could communicate with and understand each other almost perfectly. After all, Tupe and Cachuy are only 20 km away from each other – though it is a tough mountain walk!

So it is much more accurate to consider the Jaqaru of Tupe and the Kawki of Cachuy to be just slightly different regional forms of what is really a single Jaqaru/Kawki language. To refer to them both together, then, we can call this language **Central Aymara**; this distinguishes it from the language spoken in the Altiplano, *i.e.* Southern Aymara.

## Differences Between Central and Southern Aymara

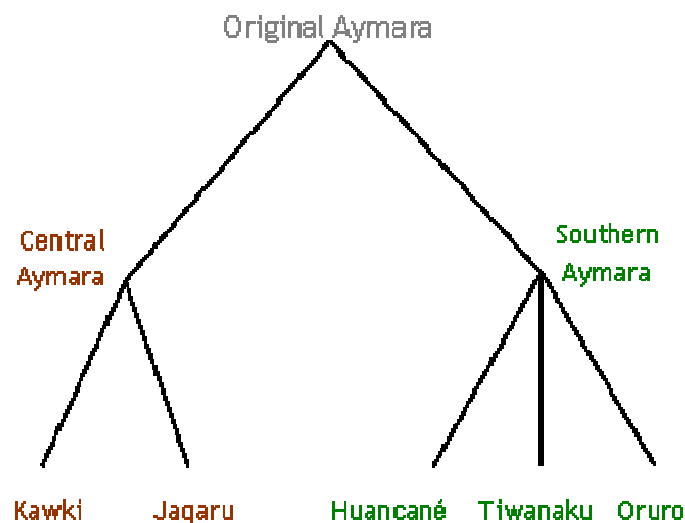
Many centuries, probably two thousand years or more, have passed since the time when Original Aymara was spoken as a single, united language. What happened to this Original Aymara was very

similar to what happened to other languages like Latin in Europe, or Original Quechua. The one original language Latin, for instance, eventually broke up into lots of different ‘daughter languages’: this explains how modern Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, French, all came to be, and why they have so many similarities to each other. It’s important to understand this process of how languages diverge out of a single common ancestor, because exactly the same happened to Original Aymara. Again, see our pages on the [Origins and Diversity of Quechua](#) for a more detailed explanation of how this happens.

Over the centuries, then, **Original Aymara expanded** from its first homeland to other parts of the Andes, and in all of these different regions it has **changed**. But it has **changed in different ways from one region to the next**, so the inevitable result has been that it has ended up being spoken in many different varieties from region to region.

Just like Latin and Original Quechua, then, Original Aymara too has become so different in the most distant regions that nowadays people in the Altiplano who speak *Southern Aymara* can no longer understand how people speak *Central Aymara* in Tupe and Cachuy – and vice versa. Certainly, they can all understand plenty of words and short phrases in each other’s language – as you can imagine from our [word comparison tables](#) – but not enough for them to converse easily. It’s a bit like Spanish-speakers trying to communicate with Italian or French speakers...

It can be useful to compare this to a human family, and indeed we can draw something of a ‘family tree’ for Aymara that is like this:



We can say that the various regional forms of Southern Aymara – as spoken in Huancané, Tiwanaku, La Paz, Oruro, and so on – are all very closely related ‘sisters’ to each other. Their relationship to Central Aymara, however, is much less close: Jaqaru and Kawki are not their ‘sisters’, but only more

distant ‘cousins’. Within their own ‘Central’ branch of the family, meanwhile, Jaqaru and Kawki themselves are very close sisters of each other.

You can see and hear in our [word comparison tables](#) plenty of examples of how these two ‘branches’ of Aymara are sometimes similar to each other, and sometimes different:

- Only a few of our sample fifty words – such as [maya](#), the number [one](#) – are pronounced identically in all Aymara regions.
- A more common pattern is that a word is pronounced in one way in all three of the Southern Aymara regions, but in a different way in the two Central Aymara areas. Take the word for the number [four](#): [pusi](#) with [s] in Southern Aymara, but [puši](#) with [š] in Central Aymara.
- Sometimes Central and Southern Aymara simply use completely different words, such as the word for [who?](#): [khiti](#) in Southern Aymara, but [qači](#) in Central Aymara.
- In some cases one branch of Aymara uses the same word as in Quechua, as with the word for [mouth](#): Southern Aymara uses [laka](#) while Central Aymara uses [šimi](#), just as in Quechua.
- Sometimes there are slight differences in pronunciation even between Jaqaru and Kawki, and also between the various regions of Southern Aymara. The word for [hair](#) is [nuk’uĉa](#) in Kawki, but [nuk’uta](#) in Jaqaru. In Southern Aymara, it is [ñik’uta](#) in Huanané and in Tiwanaku, but [ñak’uta](#) in Oruro.

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## [Is There a ‘Correct’ Aymara?](#)

With all this variation, there is one thing that it is very important to recognise: as with any language family, none of the regional varieties of Aymara is any ‘better’ or ‘more authentic’ than any other. It just makes no sense at all to imagine this. They are all **just different**.

Now of course you personally, or any other individual, may prefer how Aymara is spoken in one particular region or another, but we all have to accept that that is nothing but a personal preference. Indeed usually it’s just because each speaker is more used to his or her own home region and its particular way of speaking, but that doesn’t necessarily make it ‘better’, of course.

It’s important to get one thing clear: it is also absolutely certain that **no modern region speaks Original Aymara**. No language can avoid changing over time: Original Aymara has changed, in **all** regions, and in different ways from one region to the next. In fact, in many respects it is Southern Aymara that has changed the sounds of Original Aymara *more* than Central Aymara, which tends to be a bit more ‘conservative’ in its pronunciation. One example is with the word for [lake](#): only in Central Aymara is

this pronounced with the original [ĉ] sound as [ĉ], spelt <qutra> [ qoĉa]; in all Southern Aymara regions it has changed to [ qota] with [t]. Within Central Aymara, too, often it is the Kawki of Cachuy that is closest to Original Aymara, not the Jaqaru of Tupe.

Remember also that when you hear a word in another region that is not the same as the word that you use, this does not necessarily mean that it is *your* word that is the Original one.

- Both words might be Original Aymara words, which various regions may now use in different ways and with different meanings.
- Alternatively, one region might have borrowed the word from some other language (often Quechua), and it may well be *your* region that has done this, while the word that you do not recognise in the other region is actually the Original Aymara word, which your region has replaced with a borrowing.
- Or sometimes, *both* regions have borrowed new words, but from different sources.

Quechua- and Aymara-speakers should also realise that their languages have borrowed words from each other, and in *both* directions. So if a word is very similar in Quechua and in Aymara, it could be an Original Quechua word that was borrowed by Aymara; or it could be the other way round, that the word was originally an Aymara word that Quechua borrowed. (Linguists can often work out which direction a particular word was borrowed in, but not in all cases.)

As you can tell from all of this, there is no such thing as a ‘pure’ language, or only one ‘correct’ form of Quechua or Aymara. All languages, and all different regions that speak Aymara and Quechua, are **just different**. None is better or worse than any others. Tupe’s Jaqaru is not ‘better’ than the Kawki of Cachuy; nor is any region’s variety of Southern Aymara better or worse than any other’s. It is much better to enjoy these differences as just part of the rich diversity of your language, than to try to flatter and kid yourself that only yours is the ‘proper’ Aymara!

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## [The Origins of Aymara: Where and When?](#)

Our page on the [Origins and Diversity of Quechua](#) explained how linguists can work out *roughly* how long ago and where Original Quechua was spoken, and how and when it spread to the areas it is spoken in today. What do we find if we use the same techniques to look into the origins of Aymara?

Again, many things remain unclear in the details and exact dates, but we can say that it is most likely that the history and spread of the Aymara family happened something like this:



- **Original Aymara** did not actually start out from where Southern Aymara is spoken today, but from a lot further north in the Andes. Indeed it may even have started out not far from where Central Aymara is still spoken, **somewhere in the mountains in Central Peru**. (This was also probably not far from where Original *Quechua* too was first spoken.)
- Wherever it started out from exactly, long ago Aymara started **expanding**, particularly throughout **most of the highlands in the southern half of Peru**. It is likely that this expansion first began either around the same time as Original *Quechua* too began to spread, or indeed a few centuries *before* *Quechua*. This means that Original Aymara began to expand probably at least 1500 years ago, and quite possibly a lot earlier still.
- **By about 1000 years ago** at the latest, Aymara had already spread to cover much of the mountainous southern half of Peru (everywhere south of Huancayo) and was probably already reaching into the Titicaca area and what is now Bolivia, an expansion that continued southwards in the following centuries. Certainly, there is very clear evidence that **Aymara was spoken in many regions of south-central Peru, even as late as the 1500s and 1600s**, as indeed is recorded in many documents left by the Spaniards. This is confirmed by the detailed linguistic study of place-names too: take for example the province in south-central Peru that is still called Aymaraes, even though it is *now* a *Quechua*-speaking area. (There are indications that Aymara also expanded further north in the Andes into the Ancash region; some suggestions have even been made that it spread further north still, but the supposed 'evidence' for this is very flimsy and not convincing.)
- While Aymara was spreading southwards over the centuries, it seems that *Quechua* was hot on its heels. There seem to have been **two waves** of languages expanding southwards from their origins in Central Peru: **first Aymara**, but then **later** came **Quechua**, gradually replacing Aymara in many regions, leaving them *Quechua*-speaking today. In fact, this is what seems to have happened in the **Cuzco region** itself: it seems clear that the region was once Aymara-speaking before it later became *Quechua*-speaking. Indeed the famous original and 'secret language of the Incas' may actually have been some form of Aymara, before the Incas themselves switched to the *Quechua* that was by then becoming ever more-dominant in this region.

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## [Which Civilisations Spoke Aymara?](#)

Since the region of Tiwanaku is nowadays a very heavily Aymara-speaking area, many people often assume that the language of the great Tiwanaku civilisation was also Aymara. As we have just seen in our overview of Aymara history, however, the language spoken nowadays in a particular region is not

at all necessarily the language that was spoken there long ago in the past. There are plenty of examples: Spanish may be spoken all over Latin America *today*, but that is hardly proof that people spoke it there one thousand years ago! On the contrary, we know they did not. Similarly, even four hundred years ago, nobody in North America or Australia spoke English. So just because the Tiwanaku region is Aymara-speaking *today* does not mean that it necessarily was at the time of the great Tiwanaku civilisation, between two thousand and one thousand years ago. In fact, most linguists think it was more likely that the people of the ancient Tiwanaku culture spoke a quite different language – perhaps Puquina, which is now effectively extinct.

All this does not mean that Aymara and today's Aymara-speakers had no connection with Tiwanaku, however. Firstly, we also saw in [Origins and Diversity of Quechua](#) that a people can simply stay in the same place, but gradually switch to speaking another language. So most of the *people* who speak Aymara in the Altiplano today may well be the direct descendants of the people of the Tiwanaku civilisation – even though at some point their ancestors gradually stopped speaking Puquina and chose Aymara instead.

Secondly, the Tiwanaku civilisation was also closely associated with another of the major cultures of the Andes, the one based around what is now the enormous archaeological site of Wari, near the modern-day Peruvian city of Ayacucho. The Wari culture held sway over much of south-central Peru, including other sites such as Pikillaqta (near Cuzco), during exactly the same centuries when Aymara seems to have been very widely spoken throughout southern Peru. Some specialists have proposed that Aymara was none other than the language of the Wari civilisation.

Finally, remember that the original 'secret language' of the Inca nobility, before they adopted Quechua, may actually have been Aymara too...

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## [How to Find Out More](#)

### *Books and Websites About the Aymara Family*

If your computer is connected to the internet, you can click here to see a good general website about Aymara at [www.aymara.org](http://www.aymara.org). This includes an [introduction](#) to and a good [bibliography](#) of the Aymara language family, and plenty of texts in Aymara itself. For Jaqaru and Kawki, meanwhile, try [this website](#).

As for books, there are certainly a number of good ones about Aymara, but unfortunately most are intended for people who are trained in linguistics. There is relatively little information for non-specialists, which is what we have tried to provide here. Still, if you *are* happy to delve into serious specialist books on Aymara, then the most reliable ones which we would most recommend are these:

- The best general book about Aymara, particularly its history and origins, is probably *Lingüística aimara* by Rodolfo Cerrón-Palomino, published in 2000.
- The same author has produced a very useful direct comparison between Aymara and Quechua called *Quechumara: estructuras paralelas de las lenguas quechua y aimara*, published in 1994.
- The most detailed source of information on regional variation within Altiplano Aymara is *El Idioma aymara - Variantes regionales y sociales*, by Lucy Therina Briggs, published in 1993.
- There is also *Aymara – compendio de estructura fonológica y gramatical* by Martha J. Hardman and others, which gives a complete description of the sound and grammatical systems of Altiplano Aymara. This was published in 1988 and has recently been made available for download free on the internet in .pdf format, at: [www.ilcanet.com/aymara.htm](http://www.ilcanet.com/aymara.htm)

Do be aware, though, that unfortunately the last two books use an old spelling system for Aymara, rather than the modern, standardised and official one.

For more details on all of these books and many others, including books on Jaqaru, and tips on how to obtain them all, see [this website](#).

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