Kawésqar (Chile) — Language Snapshot

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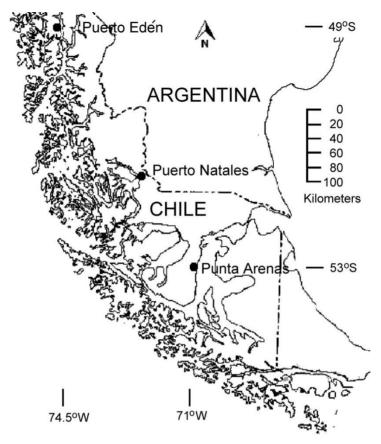|	
Language Name:	Kawésqar (also known as Qawasqar, Alakaluf)
Language Family:	Alacalufan or Kawesqaran
ISO 639-3 Code:	alc
Glottolog Code:	qawa1238
Population:	about 10
Location:	-49.00, -74.5
Vitality rating:	EGIDS 8b (Ethnologue)

Summary

Kawésqar is a language isolate spoken in Puerto Edén, Wellington Island, in the southernmost region of Chile. Puerto Edén, only accessible by sea, is a small village with approximately 100 inhabitants, a minority of whom are Kawésqar. Kawésqar people were nomad canoeists in the past, but since 1936 their life style and subsistence strategies were changed by contact with the Chilean institutions. Over the last forty years a considerable amount of research has been carried out on the language, allowing access to a substantial body of data about both the language and the culture. These studies include brief dictionaries, translated traditional narratives, a pedagogical grammar, two teaching handbooks, and a sound archive. However, the number of speakers is critically low, while conversational communicative events remain mostly undocumented.

Map: Location of places mentioned in the text (© 2019 Rodrigo Becerra)

1. Overview

Kawésqar is a language isolate spoken in a small village, Puerto Edén, Wellington Island, region of Magallanes, Chile, 13 hours by ferry from the nearest town on the mainland (see Map). It belongs to the Kawesqaran, also called Alacalufan, family (Campbell 2012). As a revision to Greenberg's (1987) Southern Andean subgroup, a possible phylogenetic relation between Kawésqar and Yaghan has also been suggested (Viegas Barros 1994), however, this possibility has not been further explored. According to Viegas Barros (1990), the language had at least three dialects, which could perhaps also be considered as three related languages, spoken in the archipelagos and fjords from the Gulf of Penas (-47 lat) to the southwest of the Strait of Magellan (-54.5 lat). Among these varieties, the only one still spoken is

Kawésqar, the northernmost; Tawóqser is the central variety, and Alakaluf the southernmost (Viegas Barros 1990; Aguilera 2001).

As sea nomads, Kawésqar people traditionally moved throughout a vast territory. The population underwent a dramatic demographic reduction from the end of the 19th century, when they were deported to a religious facility to be 'civilized' (Emperaire 1963:76). In 1936 the community was compelled by the Chilean government to settle in Puerto Edén, where a Chilean air force base was established. Three decades later a school and a police station were built (Aguilera 1978). Due to the poor sanitary conditions, the population continued to fall. In addition, Kawésqar people underwent multiple sociocultural changes, due to:

- exile from their original communities;

- characteristics of the settlement, which prevented them from exploiting traditional economic resources and did not provide them with good-quality jobs;

- co-habitation with a majority of non-Kawésqar people, who denigrated the language;

- adoption of Western marriage patterns;

- initiation of contraception practices by Chilean officials;

- establishment of compulsory education in Spanish; and

- imposition of other Western institutions (Emperaire 1963; Clairis 1972).

The first written attestation of the Kawésqar language dates to 1688, when the buccaneer La Guilbaudière compiled a list of 225 words. More than twelve short lexical lists were recorded in the 19th and 20th centuries (see Aguilera 1978). More in-depth studies have been undertaken since 1970, when two linguists, Christos Clairis and Óscar Aguilera, started to work in the area. Publications on the language, mainly by these two authors, include ethnographic descriptions, brief dictionaries, traditional narratives, a pedagogical grammar, and two teaching handbooks (see e.g. Clairis 1972, 1985; Aguilera 1978, 2001; Aguilera & Tonko 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2009). It is worth noting that narrative texts, brief dictionaries, and short self-instruction manuals have received the largest attention; they are now readily available online.

Kawésqar is currently a highly endangered language, listed as *critically endangered* by the Endangered Language Project (Catalogue of Endangered Languages [ELCat] 2019), and *nearly extinct* by Ethnologue (Eberhard, Simons & Fenning 2017). According to the last Chilean census, 955 people self-identify as Kawésqar in the region of Magallanes, mainly in the two

biggest cities of Puerto Natales, and Punta Arenas (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas [INE] 2017). Puerto Edén, on the other hand, has about 100 inhabitants (INE 2017), a minority of whom are Kawésqar, however, it continues to be considered the heart of the Kawésqar territory, language and culture. Currently, the number of Kawésqar speakers is less than 10 (seven, according to ELCat 2019).

Indigenous Law 19.253, enacted in Chile in 1993, recognises the existence and rights of ethnic populations, and establishes public policies for their development, including a bilingual intercultural education system (EIB for its Spanish acronym), which has started to be established in areas of high concentrations of indigenous people. In this context, the community, in collaboration with Aguilera, have been working on a unified orthography, dictionary, pedagogical grammar, and manuals for teaching and learning the language (see Aguilera 2001; Aguilera & Tonko 2005, 2006a, 2006b). However, despite having already been implemented with other indigenous groups (e.g. Mapuche, Aymara, Quechua, and Rapa Nui) and demanded by the Kawésqar community (see Comunidad Kawésqar Residente en Puerto Edén 2017), there are not yet any educational curricula for the Kawésqar language.

The best documented Kawésqar oral traditions are animal tales and songs. These genres used to be performed accompanied by a studied pantomime, with voice modulation reflecting the animals' character and behaviour, ranging from the imitation of whales and foxes to different kinds of birds. A few years after their settlement in Puerto Edén, Kawésqar elders were described as 'refined and expressive, with a sense of poetry lost by new generations'[1] (Emperaire 1963:207). Part of this tradition has been recently published (Aguilera & Tonko 2006c, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2009).

2. Current research

Most of the recently published works on Kawésqar include examples of words in context, especially in narratives and descriptive texts, which allows for construction of a corpus of language in use. However, an important linguistic task for a significant part of the published materials is the addition of interlinear morphemic glosses, which would further facilitate the analysis, and potential mobilisation of these texts in the EIB curriculum.[2]

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[1] The translation is mine.

[2] My work on Kawesqar is part of a project on typological comparison concerning the grammar of negation in languages spoken in Chile. I am exploring grammatical patterns produced in narratives since they could illuminate forthcoming efforts to revitalize the language.

In addition, an audio-visual collection has been created and deposited in Chile, as well as at The Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America (AILLA) at the University of Texas at Austin (Aguilera & Tonko, n.d.). This collection contains published and unpublished manuscripts, and about 170 hours of audio-visual files, only a minority of which have been transcribed. There are few recordings or publications focused on conversational interactions, so this would be another crucial area to build on, especially considering that documentation of everyday speech acts is of vital importance in order to provide materials that can be maximally useful to the community in their efforts to revitalize the language.

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