

Loanword adaptation in nineteenth-century Yahgan

Bridges between Bristol and Tierra del Fuego

Following the death of its last fluent speaker, Cristina Calderón (1928–2022), the Yahgan language (YAG, aka Yamana) is now classed as dormant. Traditionally spoken by the nomadic sea-faring peoples inhabiting the Straits of Magellan to Cape Horn, Yahgan is considered the southernmost native language in the world, as well as a linguistic isolate. While there is some contemporary descriptive work on the language (Aguilera 2000, Salas and Poblete 1997, Salas and Valencia 1990), the bulk of our data were recorded in the late 19th century. This was primarily the work of Rev. Thomas Bridges, a Bristolian Anglican missionary who compiled a 30,000-word dictionary (1965[1933]), a brief grammar (1894), and translations of the gospels (1881, 1883, 1886) using a bespoke version of Ellis' (1848) phonetic script. A near-native speaker of Yahgan, Bridges acquired the language as a teenager on the Falkland Islands and Tierra del Fuego and lived most of his life among the communities who spoke it.

In this paper, I examine the Yahgan vocalic system as evidenced by the substantial English borrowings in the historical and contemporary corpora. I compare the 16-vowel system described by Bridges to the 6 and 7-vowel systems of present-day works. In particular, I survey the vowel qualities reported for contemporary Yahgan in words such as [fata] 'fat' and [kiata] 'cat', or [kuk] 'kook' and [huka] 'hook', considering the availability of closer English equivalents in Bridges' transcriptions, such as <a> (IPA [æ]) and <ω> (IPA [ʊ]). Indeed, we find native elements in Yaghan that are transcribed as having the sounds [æ] and [ʊ] in the 19th-century materials: <yamana> [jæmænæ] 'man', <agωlu> [agulu] 'leap'. Given these unexpected discrepancies, I will consider to what extent they can be attributed to the documentation processes at both historical stages; to the degree of contact and acquisition of English among the Yahgan speakers; or to processes of language change. I will ultimately argue for the latter explanation, particularly as a result of extreme loss of vitality in the final stages of documentation. In other words, this is a key example of phonological change in a context of community-level language shift (cf. Dressler 1972). In this case, the massive borrowing of English vocabulary evidences a contact situation that immediately precedes the final asymmetric contact situation, where Spanish becomes the dominant language and the target for shift.

References

- Aguilera, Óscar. 2000. En torno a la estructura fonológica del yagán. *Fonología de la palabra. Onomazein* 5. 233–241.
- Bridges, Thomas. 1894. A few notes on the structure of Yahgan. *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 23. 53–80.
- Bridges, Thomas. 1965[1933]. *Yamana-english: a dictionary of the speech of tierra del fuego*. Mödling: Missionsdruckerei St. Gabriel.
- Dressler, Wolfgang. 1972. On the phonology of language death. In *Papers from the Eighth Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*, 448–457. Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society.
- Ellis, Alexander J. 1848. *Plea for phonetic spelling, or the necessity of orthographic reform*. London: Fred Pitman.
- Salas, Adalberto and María Teresa Poblete. 1997. *Fonemas yamana (yagán). Estructura fonológica de la palabra*. Concepción: Artículo para Proyecto de Investigación de la Dirección de Investigación de la Universidad de Concepción "Dos fonologías fueguinas chilenas: el alacalufe (kawésqar) y el yagán (yamana)" 1994-1997.
- Salas, Adalberto and Ana Valencia. 1990. El fonetismo del yamana o yagán. una nota en lingüística de salvataje. *Revista de Lingüística Teórica y Aplicada* 28. 147–169.