

# 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 usually classed as dormant (Hammarström et al. 2024, Eberhard et al. 2024).<sup>1</sup> 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 (Aguilera 2000, Salas and Poblete 1997, Salas and Valencia 1990), the bulk of our data for the language 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]), translations of the gospels (1881, 1883, 1886), and a brief (1894) and a longer grammar (1895), all using a bespoke version of Ellis’ phonotypic script (1848, cf. Table 1). A near-native speaker of Yahgan, Bridges acquired the language as a teenager on the Falkland Islands and Tierra del Fuego, living most of his life among the communities who spoke it. This linguistic competence, as well as his use of the state-of-the-art in phonetic transcription, makes such resources extremely valuable, if currently underutilised.

In this paper, I examine the Yahgan vocalic system as evidenced by the substantial English borrowings in the historical and present-day corpora. These are the result of intense contact with British missionaries and settlers contemporary with Bridges’ documentation. I compare the 16-vowel system described by Bridges (Figure 1) to the 6 and 7-vowel systems of present-day works (Figure 2).

<b>A</b> a, <i>a</i> in <i>haze</i> .	<b>E</b> e, <i>e</i> in <i>men</i> .	<b>Ɛ</b> ε, <i>ea</i> in <i>each</i> .	<b>I</b> i, <i>i</i> in <i>ill</i> .
<b>ʌ</b> ʌ, <i>a</i> in <i>flask</i> .	<b>A</b> ʌ, <i>a</i> in <i>at</i> .	<b>Θ</b> θ, <i>a</i> in <i>all</i> .	<b>O</b> o, <i>o</i> in <i>ox</i> .
<b>Ʊ</b> u, <i>oo</i> in <i>food</i> .	<b>Ʊ</b> u, <i>oo</i> in <i>foot</i> .	<b>Ɔ</b> ɔ, <i>oi</i> in <i>oil</i> .	<b>Ɔ</b> j, <i>i</i> in <i>isle</i> .
<b>Ω</b> ω, <i>oe</i> in <i>hoe</i> .	<b>U</b> u, <i>u</i> in <i>us</i> .	<b>Ɔ</b> ɔ, <i>ou</i> in <i>our</i> .	<b>Ɔ</b> s, <i>er</i> in <i>herd</i> .

Figure 1: The vocalic system used by Bridges (1894: 43), based on Ellis’ Phonotypic Alphabet (1848)

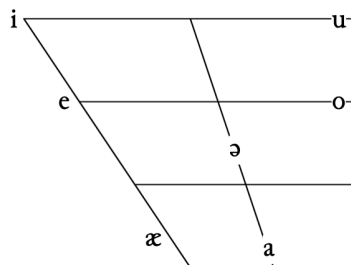


Figure 2: The vocalic system in Aguilera (2000), Salas and Poblete (1997), and Salas and Valencia (1990)

In particular, I survey the vowel qualities reported for contemporary Yahgan in nearly 200 English loanwords drawn from a variety of late 20th and early 21st century sources. These include

<sup>1</sup>For an overview of the linguistic situation and the community’s attitudes towards language loss, see MINEDUC (2022)

words such as [fata] ‘fat’ and [kiata] ‘cat’, or [kuk] ‘kook’ and [huka] ‘hook’, where phonetically closer equivalents to the English source would have been available in Bridges’ transcriptions, such as <a> (IPA [æ]) and <ω> (IPA [u]), presumably as a result of their existence in the Yahgan inventory. Indeed, we find native elements in Yaghan that are transcribed by Bridges as having the sounds [æ] and [u] in the 19th-century materials: <yamana> [jæmænæ] ‘man’, <aqωlu> [aɣulu] ‘leap’. Given the availability of what we take to be closer phonic equivalents in the recent historical record, the present-day transcriptions with [a] and [u] present an unexpected discrepancy. In this paper, I consider to what extent such discrepancies 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, Kasstan 2019). In this case, the massive borrowing of English vocabulary evidences a contact situation that immediately precedes the most recent, sustained asymmetric contact situation, where Spanish becomes the dominant language and the target for shift. We conclude with some remarks on the value of Bridges’ materials in processes of language re-awakening (Hobson et al. 2010), despite their colonial underpinnings.

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