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Enduring Voices in Chile—January 2011

The Enduring Voices team travelled to Chile to assess the current status of an endangered South American language, Huilliche. We intended to find out just how endangered Huilliche is, how many speakers there are, and where they are. We also planned to observe any efforts being made to revitalize it and ask the communities how we might be able to assist.

Our findings are that Huilliche is much more endangered, at least in some communities, and the overall number of speakers lower than previously reported. We also learned that there is more than one Huilliche language spoken in the community.

We visited two different communities, Choroy Traiguen (near Pucatrihue, San Juan de la Costa, Osorno Province) and Weketrumao (near Compu on Chiloe Island). In each, we observed many traditional practices, for example gathering and preparation of medicinal plants, fishing, weaving of wool textiles, basketry, berry processing, small-scale farming (pigs, chickens, sheep, cows), gardening (vegetables and flowers). Both communities are promoting eco-tourism, have modern small-scale industries (hydroelectric power, sawmills, greenhouse cultivation), and are well connected by mobile phone networks and internet.

The two communities, as we were able to determine from comparative lexicons we collected, differ in their dialects. We conclude, based on both linguistic and socio-linguistic evidence, that there are at least two distinct languages spoken in the Huilliche community, though both are referred to by outsiders under the single label "Huilliche." They seem to lie at the two extreme ends of a Huilliche language continuum. They are to some degree hidden within the broader Mapuche ethnic group, yet consider themselves quite distinct in both language and identity.

In Choroy Traiguen—perched on a seaside escarpment—they call their tongue *Chetsungun*. In Weketrumao—in a low-lying flat part of Chiloe Island—they call their tongue *Willichesungun*. They assert that is a different language than Chetsungun. Though the two languages may share as many as 80% of basic words, we confirmed that they differ in their sounds and grammar, as well as in their ethno-lingusitic identity.

Both *Chetsungun* and *Huillichesungun* are sister languages to Mapudungun (the language of the much larger Mapuche ethnic community in Chile). Unexpectedly, Chetsungun, though it is geographically closer to Mapudungun, is less similar to it.

Both communities are aware and alarmed by the extreme endangered status of their languages. For Chetsungun, they report that there are few if any speakers under the age of seventy. Huillichesungun is also severely endangered, with no more than an estimated 8 to 12 fluent speakers. The youngest speaker, Hugo Antipani, is 40, but all the others are a generation older.

People in both communities expressed a sadness and belief that their languages will soon disappear, as well as a desire to revitalize it. In Choroy Traiguen village, speakers in their 50s and 60s used greetings and occasional words ('mother earth', 'wisdom') in their everyday Spanish as a way to assert their linguistic pride and cultural identity. They still perform rituals to a sacred rock, which they call 'shuka kura' .

Weketrumao village hosts a kindergarten that teaches children elements of the language and culture. Ethnic and linguistic pride are extremely strong in this community, as evidenced by two young hip-hop performers who rapped indigenous protest lyrics including words in Huillichesungun.

Photographer Chris Rainier carried out a comprehensive photographic documentation, including rituals, traditional farming and gathering activities, portraits of the elders, and the local environment.

Linguists and National Geographi Fellows Dr. Greg Anderson and Dr. David Harrison, assisted by Willamette University student Freddy Leon, recorded the speech of eight speakers, from four different villages, in both informal and formal settings. We noted many linguistic differences and similarities. We also recorded extended interviews in Spanish. We asked what they think will happen to it in the future, and what they are doing to sustain it. These contained many statements from speakers (and community members who are not fluent speakers) about why the language matters to them. Huilliche langugae activist Anselmo Nuyado Ancapichun asserted that language matters because it "gives access to other ways of thinking, helps combat acculturation, perpetuates cultural values, and unites the people."

We identified and interviewed several key language activists who have agreed to a longer-term collaboration with Enduring Voices. Enduring Voices has made a committment to the Huilliche community to provide training, resources, and expertise to aid their linguistic survival.

To see and hear Huilliche speakers, visit www.youtube.com/enduringvoices

1. Señor Anselmo Nuyado Ancapichun and Señora Teresa Maripan near the sacred rock site "Shuka Kura", near Choroy Traiguen, Chile

2. Anselmo Nuyado Ancapichun and Teresa Maripan peform a traditional ritual offering and blessing at Choroy Traiguen, Chile. Photo by Chris Rainier.

3. The Enduring Voices team—Dr. David Harrison, Dr. Greg Anderson, Freddy Leon—learning Chetsungun (Huilliche) words from Anselmo Nuyado Ancapichun at Choroy Traiguen, Chile. Photo by Chris Rainier.

4. Willichesungun language poster used to teach children in the kindergarten at Wequetrumao. Photo by Joanie Nasher.

5. Huilliche hip-hop artists Javier Guenteo Guenteo and Milton Nein Neipan. They perform protest songs in a mixture of Spanish and Willichesungun languages.

6. Huilliche elders Wilma and Teolinda Guenteo Rain discuss their concern for cultural survival over tea and maté. Photo by Chris Rainier.

7. National Geographic Fellow Chris Rainier composes a portrait of Huilliche cultural activist Hilda Guenteo Guenteo at Wequetrumao, Chiloe Island, Chile. Photo by Joanie Nasher.