

Uncovering linguistic prehistory: insights from toponymy and oral tradition

Martin Kohlberger (University of Saskatchewan)

Although the study of toponymy does not currently play a central role in linguistics, many documentary linguists have highlighted the importance of toponymy for the study of lesser-documented languages (Adelaar 2007). Particularly in areas of the world where there is a limited historical record, toponymy can shed a crucial light into the ethnohistory of a region and can be highly informative of linguistic patterns and contact phenomena (Aikhenvald 1996). This presentation will convey the initial findings of a long-term study on the toponymy of Ecuador which aims to combine cartographic data with insights from the documentation of endangered knowledge amongst speakers of Indigenous languages in the region.

Spanish is the national language of Ecuador and is spoken by the vast majority of its 17 million inhabitants. Kichwa is the largest Indigenous language of the country and is spoken by around 600,000 people (INEC 2010). The other 14 indigenous languages of Ecuador are collectively spoken by less than 100,000 people. But despite the current dominance of Spanish and Kichwa, toponymy in Ecuador tells a different story: roughly 45% of Ecuadorean toponyms originate from an indigenous language other than Kichwa. In fact, the majority of those toponyms stem from languages that ceased to be spoken around the time of the European invasion of South America. Toponyms in Ecuador allow us to track historical distributions of languages in cases where no historical record is available. This, in turn, can uncover cases of language contact that were not previously known about. Although studies of Ecuadorean toponyms exist (e.g. Jijón y Caamaño 1940-1945), there has been no major work in this area for over 60 years.

The first part of this presentation will outline the creation of a new database of Ecuadorean toponyms, based on 487 highly detailed (1:50,000 scale) maps created by the Instituto Geográfico Militar. The database includes city/town/village names, river/stream/lake names and mountain/hill names, along with topographic information. For toponyms which do not have an identifiable modern-day source language, this database can be used to explore the geographic distribution of phonotactic patterns which are highly indicative of historical language distributions.

The second part of the presentation will focus on the importance of interpreting the toponymic evidence in the context of traditional Indigenous knowledge. Many Indigenous communities in Ecuador are interested in documenting their knowledge about toponyms and their surrounding geography, and they are adamant that this be a part of any linguistic documentary endeavour. This task is urgent given that in some communities toponymic knowledge is endangered and not being transmitted to younger generations anymore.

By combining traditional Indigenous knowledge with detailed cartographic data, fascinating insights into can be achieved. I will show that prehistoric language distributions, for example the hypothesised presence of Chicham-speaking people in the central highlands of Ecuador, is supported both by toponymic evidence as well as by traditional knowledge documented amongst speakers of Ecuadorean Indigenous languages today.

References:

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