

Indigenous languages in Patagonia: an exhibition

Sandra Murriello¹

CITECDE, UNRN, Bariloche, Argentina

Marisa Malvestitti

IIDyPCA-UNRN-CONICET, Bariloche, Argentina

Máximo Farro

FCNyM, UNLP-CONICET, La Plata, Argentina

Anahí Rayen Mariluan

IIDyPCA, Bariloche, Argentina

Introduction

Patagonia, the southern region of Argentina and Chile, is the ancestral territory for several indigenous communities nearly lead to extinction in the last centuries. As a consequence, many of their languages almost disappeared and were replaced by Spanish tongue for communication purposes. In some cases, we only have as historical records written vocabularies -many of them never published- documented in their territories by colonial agents such as explorers, missionaries and state officials. Besides, in Argentinian museums and current exhibitions on indigenous people, their languages are rarely mentioned so nowadays they almost remain unknown for the occidental society. Nevertheless, the surviving indigenous communities, i.e. the *Mapuches*, still speak their original language, the *Mapuzungun*, and are trying to revitalize and refunctionalize it, a process also observable in other smaller speech communities of *Tehuelche*, *Selk'nam* or *Qawesqar*.

As part of a research program lead by linguists, anthropologists, historians, musicians and science communicators², we are planning a travelling exhibition about these languages, in order to display their structures, sounds, meanings and relations, set up in a collaborative way with the speech communities. The aim of the exhibition is to make visible the process of documentation and communication of these languages in the foundational period of Argentina and Chile as nation-states (ends of 19th century and beginning of 20th), when the agents mentioned above played a central role, as well as some indigenous mediators and translators who helped them to record the languages.

¹ Corresponding author, email: smurriello@unrn.edu.ar

² Research Project (PICT) "*Tecnologías de papel. Patrones para la documentación y comunicación científica en los estudios de lenguas indígenas de Patagonia y Tierra del Fuego (1860-1930)*".

One of the project's goals is to take this exhibition through the Patagonian museums, universities and cultural centers. In this communication, we describe our idea as a work in progress. The exhibition will be developed during 2019.

The research

In the framework of the process to consolidate de Argentinian and Chilean nations in the end of the XIX century, military, exploratory and scientific campaigns were carried out in the areas where the indigenous communities lived. Within the interaction with the indigenous people, many explorers and missionaries, as well as scientific institutions and amateur researchers, compiled numerous linguistic data, mainly lexical. In this way, the indigenous languages were recorded and studied as part of the same process that intended to acculturate and extinguish their speech communities.

The current research analyzes this set of linguistic inscription practices and interactions developed among actors that inhabited diverse social worlds. We emphasize in the practical and material dimensions of linguistic knowledge-making process, departing from “working objects”, such as vocabularies, phrase-lists and toponymies, understood as a “paper technology” that was instrumental to the assemblage of an archive that transcended the life span of the same agents who had compiled it (Daston 2017, Farro, 2018). In fact, our project proposes as a focus of inquiry a corpus of unpublished handwritten documentation on Fuego-Patagonia indigenous languages developed between 1860 and 1930. In this period *the selknam, tehuelche, teushen, gñnün a iajüch, haush, alakaluf* and *mapuzungun* languages were documented, analyzed and published through different stable schemes of bilingual and comparative vocabularies (Malvestitti, 2015).

This work was mainly the product of specific missionary and scientific enterprises. The former include the activities developed by the Anglican South American Missionary Society since the 1850's in Keppel Island, Tierra del Fuego and Santa Cruz (Theophilus Schmid, Johann Friedrich Hunziker, R. Rau and Thomas Bridges, among others) and the Salesian Congregation since the 1880's in permanent and regular missions in Continental Patagonia and also in Our Lady of Candelaria and San Rafael in the islands (Domenico Milanesio, José María Beauvoir, Giovanni Zenone, Maggiorino Borgatello, Fortunato Griffa and sor Rosa Gutiérrez). Among the latter, the *Museo de La Plata* (founded in 1884) stands out, through the works by Francisco P. Moreno (1852-1919), Samuel Lafone Quevedo (1835-1920) and Robert Lehmann Nitsche (1874-1938). In the 1870's Moreno (1879) traveled extensively through Patagonia and published a Spanish-tehuelche vocabulary alphabetically arranged (Fig.1). Lately this lexical list was taken as a model to elicit linguistic data in the field by museum's travelling naturalists, such as Carlos Ameghino and Carlos V. Burmeister. In the 1890's Lafone Quevedo, head of museum's Linguistic Section, used the same vocabulary in order to establish a comparative basis for his broad South American ethnographic classification works based on languages relationships. Besides, he recorded words and phrases in *tehuelche* and

günün a iajüch through interviews in La Plata with indigenous consultants. He also collected unpublished manuscripts on Fuego-Patagonia languages, for instance those borrowed from the Italian mycologist Carlo Spegazzini and Bartolomé Mitre. Following the approach established by the contemporary German ethnologists, Lehmann Nitsche, head of museum Anthropology Section between 1898 and 1930, researched on some of the languages (*selknam*, *tehuelche* and *günün a iajüch*) using standardized tools. In addition, he recorded a huge amount of *Mapuche* texts in urban, peri-urban and rural settings with twenty-six interlocutors and researched on *Chon* and *Alakaluf* languages from a comparative point of view (Malvestitti, 2012). Finally, many European scientific missions that went along the coasts and across the territories, collected wordlists as well as natural objects (i.e. Louis Martial, Otto Nordenskjöld and Henryk Arctowski)

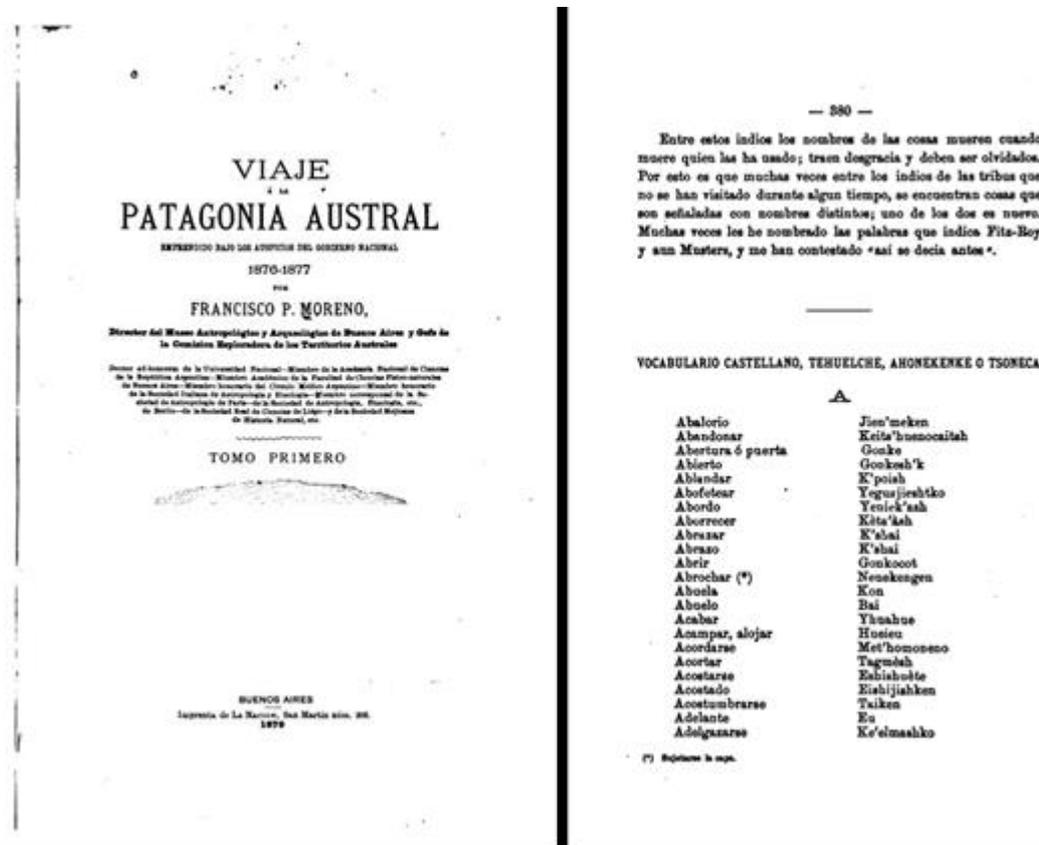


Fig. 1: *Tsoneca* or *Tehuelche* Vocabulary in Francisco P. Moreno
Viaje a la Patagonia Austral (1879)

On the other hand, it should be noted that part of this linguistic corpus was the product of local-knowledge activities developed by independent researchers, i.e. rural teachers or non-metropolitan amateurs residing in Patagonia connected both to local indigenous peoples and to Buenos Aires and La Plata scientific circles and institutions.

In order to systematize, edit and contextualize these documents, our team has been working for some years on several institutional repositories in Argentina and abroad: *Museo de La Plata* (Fig.2), *Museo Mitre*, *Museo Etnográfico*, Ibero-American Institut and diverse Salesian Archives, as well as provincial historical archives and folklore repositories.

To sum up, the recovery and analysis of these materials is an element of unique value for current linguistic research for several reasons. First, these sources involve multidimensional devices that provide access not only to linguistic-communicative data and different patterns of documentation but also to the scientific communication mechanisms that transcended the time in which they were generated. Secondly, from an ethnographic perspective its study enable us to inquiry about the situations and social practices in which the records were made, as well as to historicize the networks constructed among the intervening subjects, evidencing the mediators and the actors that were foregrounded as well as those who were omitted or suppressed.

Finally, as we are currently in a period in which different initiatives are expanding the possibilities of revitalization and maintenance of Fuego-Patagonia indigenous languages, our research project allows the oral tradition replenishment through little known documents that constitute their cultural heritage, facilitating its reappropriation by contemporary interlocutors.

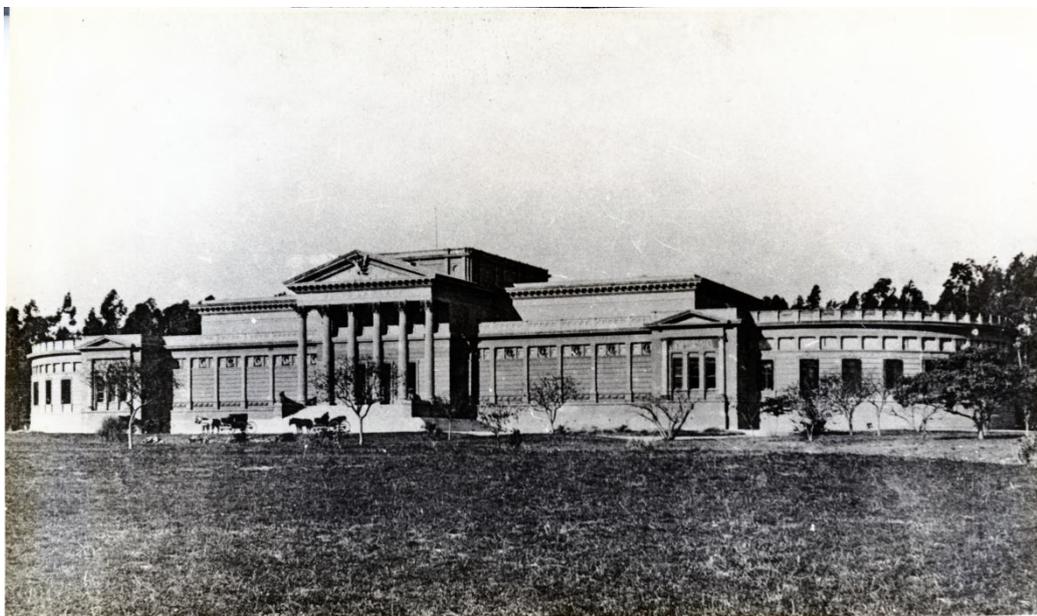


Fig. 2: Museo de La Plata at the beginning of the 20th century

The exhibition proposal

As it was explained above, to visualize our research about the native languages of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego in the indicated period we are planning an exhibition which aims to contribute to the appraisal of these languages and the reinforcement of their revitalizing process. We also look to unveil the mechanisms of registration and the linguistic documentation agents during the state territorial expansion processes. With this purpose the lexical records, texts and recordings of that period as well as the surveying instruments used will be exhibit and the logics and procedures for registering languages shown (actors, instructions, intentions of the collector, etc.). The relationship languages-peoples-territories will be the base to understand the existing languages in that period.

Considering the exhibition as a vehicle for an intercultural dialogue (Bodo, *et al*, 2009) it will offer an approach to past and current Patagonian linguistic diversity and pretend to be a space of interaction with the indigenous communities, and other social groups of the region interested in these subject. As Hooper Greenhill says, the purpose is “to be able to produce an exhibition that offers visitors from a range of interpretive communities the opportunity to put their interpretive strategies into operation” (1999:10).

It's worth to say that native languages are practically absent in historical and anthropological exhibitions and museums in our country. In consequence we have the challenge of musealizing these languages and we plan to carry out this task together with the current communities, heirs of these languages, in such a way that their voices would be reflected in the exhibition.

The target audiences will be educational communities from the different levels of formal education, residents in Patagonian region, people interested in indigenous and linguistic issues and native communities. For each group we will offer different kind of activities and proposals as educational programs to articulate with the school *curricula*, training spaces for student teachers, access to thematic materials and information, etc.

The proposal is to develop a travelling exhibition so it should be simple and economic to transport and adaptable to different spaces. Patagonia is a huge territory with distant and small localities and we intend to visit them with this exhibition in order to reach the geographical space in which these indigenous communities live.

The museographic proposal should be flexible to be adapted to different kind of physical spaces and will use diverse resources (texts, images, audios, videos and installations) that appeal to all the senses of the visitor: it will be informative while still appealing to sensitivity. The purpose is not only give information about the past and the strategies used for studying indigenous languages but put the visitor in contact with the living communities and their actual voices.

References

- Bodo, S., Gibbs, K., Sani, M. (2009). *Museums as places for intercultural dialogue: selected practices from Europe*. London: the MAP for ID Group
- Daston, Lorraine (ed.) (2017). *Science in the Archives. Past, Present, Futures*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press
- Farro, M. (2018) "Ciencias del archivo, lenguas indígenas argentinas y tecnología del papel: las bibliotecas personales como espacio de producción erudita en la antropología argentina, 1860-1910", en Aguirre, C y Salvatore, R. (eds.) *Bibliotecas y cultura letrada en América Latina, Siglos XIX y XX*, Lima: Editorial PUCP, pp. 225-250.
- Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1999). *Museums and interpretative communities*. Musing on Learning, Australian Museum <https://australianmuseum.net.au/uploads/documents/2004/paper2.pdf>
- Malvestitti, M. (2012) *Mongeluchi zungu. Los textos araucanos documentados por Roberto Lehmann-Nitsche*. Berlin: Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut / Gebr. Mann Verlag. 336 S. p.325. ISBN: 978-3-7861-2663-8
- Malvestitti, M. (2015) Chaanpen, gūta, es decir, palabras. Los vocabularios como instrumentos de documentación de las lenguas originarias de Tierra del Fuego. *Revista argentina de historiografía lingüística*, VII, 1, 39-53
- .