



Edinburgh Theoretical Historical Linguistics
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Theoretical Historical Linguistics & Minoritised Languages

Aldo Berríos Castillo



Guiding questions

- Why is it important to study the past of minoritised languages (MLs)?
- How can we do this using a Theoretical Historical Linguistics (THL) approach?
- How can THL give back to the ML-speaking communities?

Roadmap

- **Definitions**
- **Reasons** for incorporating ML in THL
- **An example of THL / ML intersection**
- **Conclusions**



Definitions

Discussion time

What is an endangered language?

How is it different from a minoritised language?

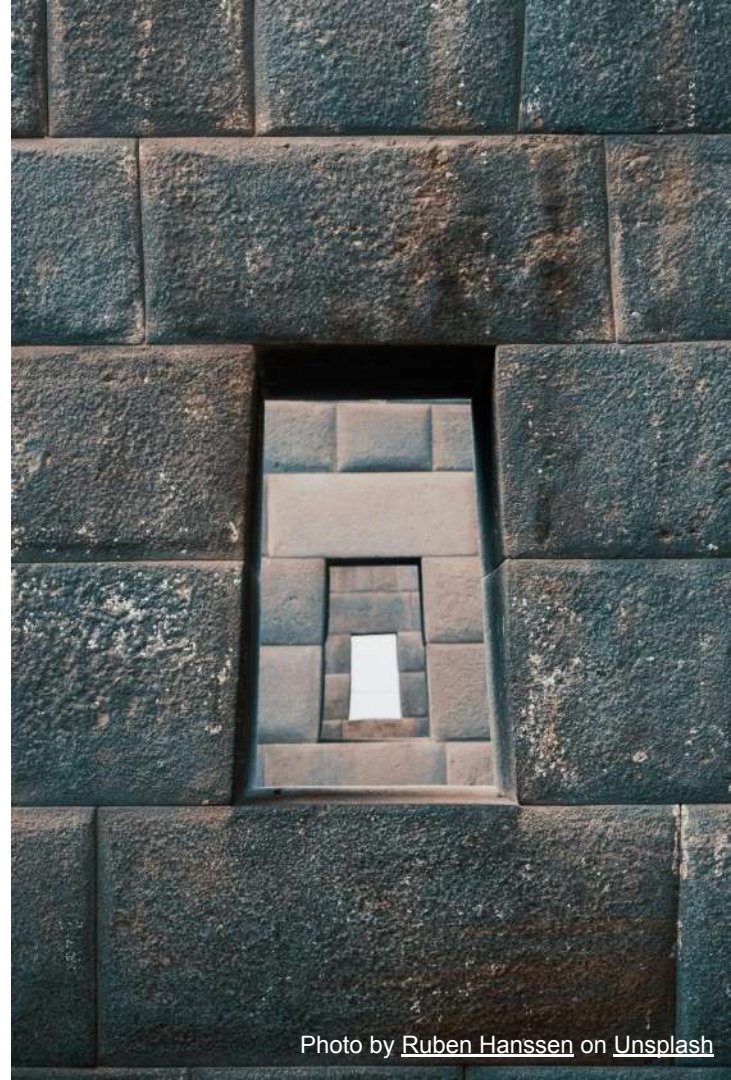
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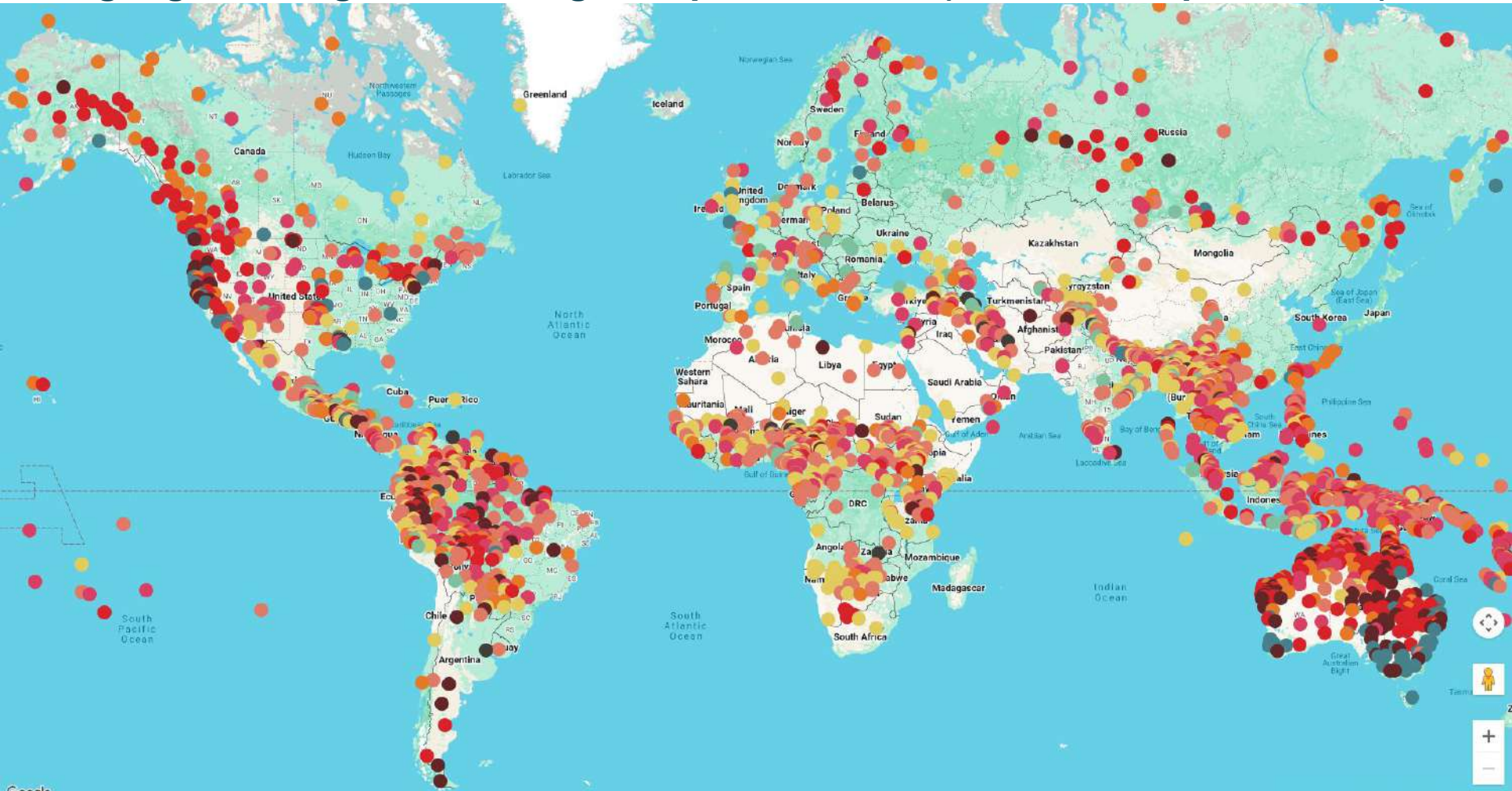
Definitions

Endangered language: When speakers no longer use the language, and younger generations do not learn it.

Minoritised language: a language whose speakers are politically and economically oppressed, leading to language attrition (restricted domains of use), loss of inter-generational transmission and language loss (in extreme cases) (Nevins 2022, Lo Bianco 2018, Hinton et al. 2018).



Language endangerment is a global phenomenon (Belew & Simpson, 2018)

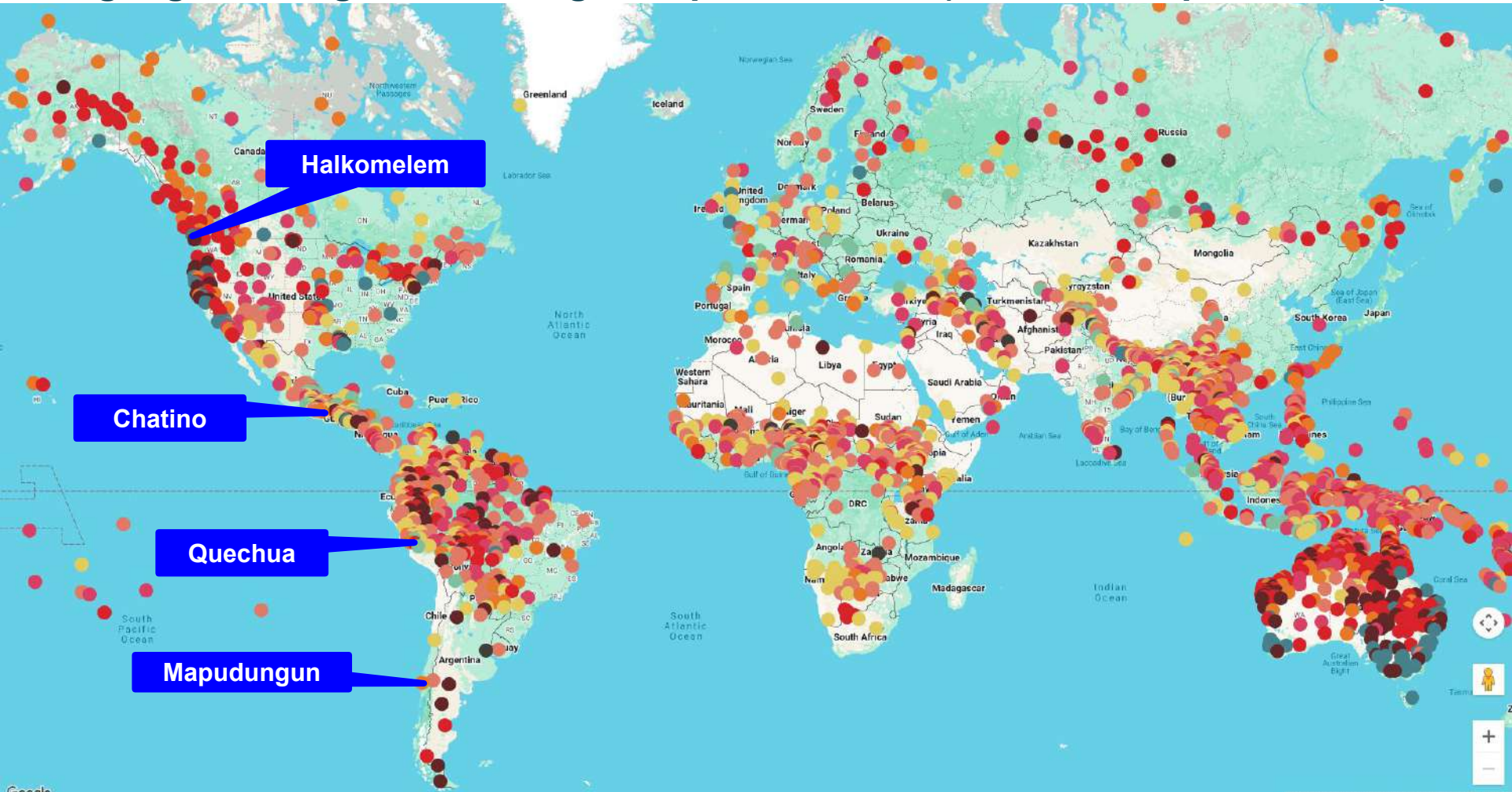


Why it is difficult to characterise endangered languages

Challenges when characterising endangered languages (Belew & Simpson, 2018):

- Counting languages is always done in terms of approximations
 - Dialect vs. language,
 - Isolate vs. small family
- Assessing levels of endangerment is also challenging due to the complexity and variety of circumstances faced by each individual language
- Paucity of information available about such languages
 - Under-described dialects

Language endangerment is a global phenomenon (Belew & Simpson, 2018)



How about THL?


Discussion time

What is Theoretical Historical Linguistics?

What is the nature of this intersection?

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“**Theoretical historical linguistics** unites areas of study that are often otherwise [...] pursued separately. It can, at its best, contribute (i) to our knowledge of how language can change, (ii) to the fastmoving world of linguistic theory construction, and even (iii) to our understanding of the initiation and patterning of particular changes in particular languages.”
(Honeybone, 2006)

THL

Theoretical linguistics (TL)

- Linguistic theory
- Analyses

+

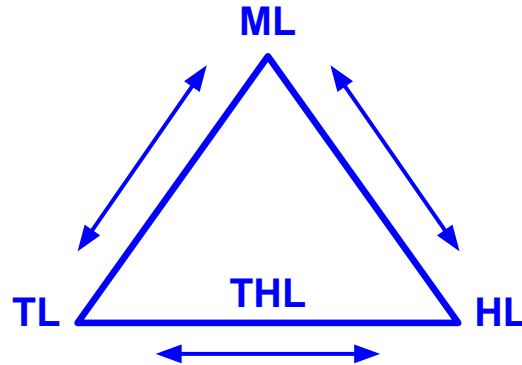
Historical Linguistics (HL)

- Reconstruction
- Diachrony (changes)

after Honeybone (ETHL25)

THL

As a first approach to the objective of this talk, when talking about the importance of including MLs in the endeavours of THL, I will be mentioning contributions to either TL or HL (TH / HL), but I will also refer to its contribution of THL as an interdiscipline (TL+HL = THL).

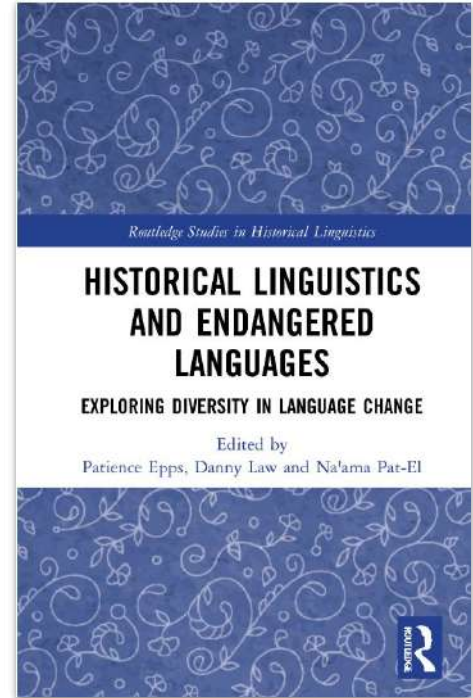


Reasons to incorporate MLs in THL

Some reasons for incorporating ML in TL/HL

There are several reasons, I will focus on 3 (Epps et al. 2022):

- Minoritised languages (MLs) enrich our theoretical and cross-linguistic understanding
- MLs provide new types of data that may challenge our theoretical frameworks
- The reverse is true! TL/HL can and SHOULD contribute to MLs

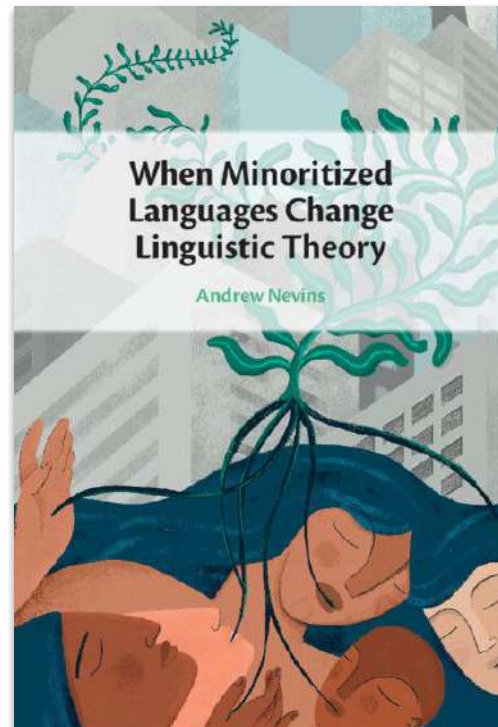


Reason 2

The study of MLs can challenge theories and models.

Minoritised languages can lead to changes in linguistic theory (Nevins, 2022) and study of language change:

- Theoretical assumptions can be disrupted from information provided by minoritised languages, thus leading to theory modification (Nevins, 2022).
- Inquiry on under-resource languages can support a more comprehensive and established historical analysis (Epps et al., 2022).



Reason 3

TL/HL can contribute to minoritised languages.

Insights from diachronic analysis can make an important contribution to the study of endangered languages, with clear implications for contemporary speakers:

- Diachronic understanding can inform orthographic and standardisation decisions
- Explanation of idiosyncratic patterns
- Deeper understanding of the language history and speakers' past



Author: Atuj Yachachiq (Wikicommons)

Some examples...

Example 1

Halkomelen and new paths of grammaticalisation

Salishan languages contain “lexical suffixes” denoting body parts (‘hand’, ‘foot’, ‘heart’, etc.). **Lexical affixation**: “bounds elements with root-like functions” (Mithun, 2010)

LEXICAL SUFFIX	GLOSS	INDEPENDENT NOUN	GLOSS
= <i>as</i>	‘face, round object’	<i>sʔaθəs</i>	‘face’
= <i>cəs</i>	‘hand, finger’	<i>celəš</i>	‘hand’
= <i>šən</i>	‘foot, leg’	<i>sšəñə</i>	‘foot’
= <i>θən</i>	‘mouth, edge’	<i>θaθən</i>	‘mouth’
= <i>eʷ</i> = <i>txʷ</i>	‘building, room’	<i>leləm</i>	‘house’

Lexical suffixes and full noun forms (Gerdtz & Hinkson, 2004)



həñqəminəh
Alphabet Cards
from Musqueam
teaching kit (MOA)

Halkomelen and new paths of grammaticalisation

Halkomelen (Salishan) (Gerds & Hinkson, 2004) innovated an applicative *-as*, whose origin is the lexical suffix *=as* ‘face’.

Applicative: “marker that increases the valency of a verb by one participant”
(Kuteva et al. 2019)

(9)	<i>ni?</i>	‘be there’	<i>nəʔ=ás</i>	‘facing away’
	<i>√qp</i>	‘be down’	<i>qp=ás</i>	‘have one’s face down’
	<i>k^wi?</i>	‘go up’	<i>k^wəʔ=ás</i>	‘facing up’
	<i>ləč</i>	‘full’	<i>ləč=ás</i>	‘full (round object)’
(10)	<i>qa?</i>	‘water’	<i>š-qaʔ=əs</i>	‘tears (=water on face)’
	<i>qít-ət</i>	‘tie it’	<i>š-qít=əs</i>	‘headband’
	<i>lič</i>	‘cut’	<i>x^w-lič=əs-t</i>	‘cut him/her on the face’
	<i>√?iχ</i>	‘scrape’	<i>x^w-?iχ=əs-əm</i>	‘scrape one’s face’

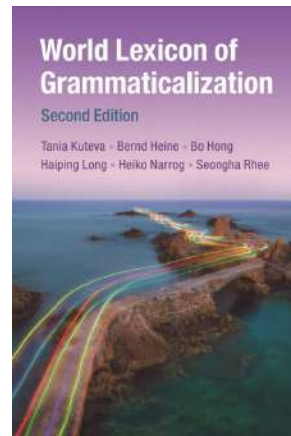
Halkomelen and new paths of grammaticalisation

Based on semantic/morphosyntactic/morphophonological evidence, Gerdtz & Hinkson (2004) conclude that the applicative use is the “natural end point” in the cline from a lexical to a grammatical element:

(59) N > compounding incorporation > classifying incorporation > classifier > applicative marker

- (24) *ʔa:m-əs-t* ‘give it to him/her’
x^wayəm-əs-t ‘sell it to him/her’
saṃ-əs-t ‘sell it to him/her’
ʔiŵ-əs-t ‘show it to him/her’
yəθ-əs-t ‘tell him/her about it’

This type of
etymon (source)
had not been
reported before.



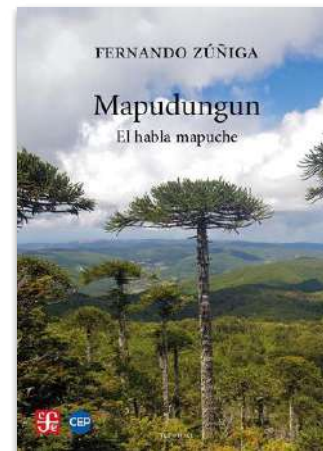
Example 2

Synchronic challenges from grammaticalization (Zúñiga, 2017)

Complexity in languages from the Americas challenge theories on morphology (Zúñiga, 2017). Mapudungun (Isolate) shows root-like elements that lose autonomy and become part of a complex verb.

- (1) Fey ütruf-entu-künu-pa-rke-i fentren fill-ke challwa.
then throw-remove-leave-CIS-REP-IND many each-NSG fish

‘Then he took many and varied fishes out [of the water], threw them [onto the shore] and left them [there], it is said’. (Salas 2006:204)



V ₋₁	V ₀	V ₁	V ₂	V ₃	V ₄	...	V _F
(varied)	root	deixis	aspect	aspect	direction		inflection

FIG. 1.—Selected slots of the Mapudungun verbal template.

No clear-cut division between types of morphemes

If the analytical tools are not sufficient, new proposals have to be made: “a refined vocabulary that we have barely started developing.” (Zúñiga, 2017)

An insight from diachrony can shed light on the synchronic variation in these languages.

	Sole root (V ₀ slot)	Other slot	Allomorphy
Default roots <i>ütrüf-</i> ‘throw’	✓	✗	✗
Fossilized roots <i>pepi-</i> ‘can’	✗	V ₋₁	✗
Pre-combinable roots <i>kim-</i> ‘know’	✓	V ₋₁	✗
Post-combinable roots			
- <i>tripa-</i> ‘exit’	✓	V ₁	gr.c. ✗
- <i>künü</i> ‘leave, set’	✓	V ₂	✗
- <i>meke-</i> ‘be engaged; PROG’	✓	V ₃	✗
- <i>müle-</i> ‘be, exist; PROG/RES’	✓	V ₃	ph.c.: (+kV)
- <i>pu-</i> ‘GO; TRANS’	✓	V ₄	✗
Hybrids <i>küpa-</i> ‘come; want; CIS’	✓	V ₋₁ + V ₄	✗
Prototypical affixes <i>-i</i> ‘IND’ / <i>-n</i> ‘INF/NMLZ’	✗	V _F	ph.c. (epe/ resyll)

FIG. 2.—Mapudungun root-like elements and prototypical affixes.

V ₋₁	V ₀	V ₁	V ₂	V ₃	V ₄	...	V _F
(varied)	root	deixis	aspect	aspect	direction		inflection

FIG. 1.—Selected slots of the Mapudungun verbal template.

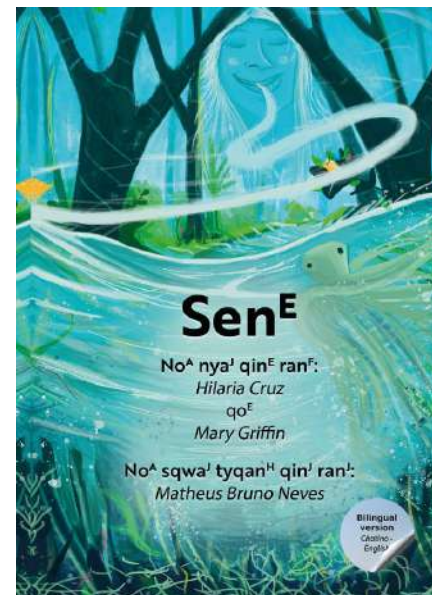
Example 3: Chatino (Otomanguean)

Diachrony feeding into orthographic standardisation

Cruz and Woodbury (2014) describe a methodology that not only describes tonal languages, but also can contribute to reducing them to writing using the comparative method.

By using cognate tone correspondences from sister languages, they “get to know tonal systems and the roles they play at a deeper level” (Cruz and Woodbury, 2014).

This is crucial because speakers are not normally conscious of the abstract categories that define the tones.



Tone description	S-H-M-L (Cruz 2011)	Numeral (Cruz 2014)	Alphabetic (Cruz & Woodbury 2013)
high	H	1	E
high-superhigh	HS	10	D
high-low	HL	14	B
mid	M	2	C
mid-superhigh	MS	20	H
mid-high	MH	32	I
mid-low	ML	24	J
low	L	4	A
low-superhigh	LS	40	M
low-high	LH	42	G
low-mid	LM	3	F

Table 2: Three alternative systems for representing the SJQ Chatino tones.

Chatino (Otomanguean)

By taking the analysis of one language which is historically related to a new variety, examples of lexical categories can be identified. Each of the lexical tonal categories are then elicited (Cruz & Woodbury, 2014).

Tone type	Tone	Examples
Level	H	kwna ^H 'snake', skwa ^H 'mole', skwa ^H 'Easter', nsne ^H 'is sprinkling'
	M	кта ^M 'flour', kwna ^M 'thief', ke ^M 'flower'
	L	кта ^L 'tobacco', yja ^L 'tortilla', nda ^L 'bean', kna ^L 'mirror', ke ^L 'rock'
Rising	M0	si ^{M0} 'turtle', kya ^{M0} 'tomorrow', ta ^{M0} 'will give'
	MH	sʔe ^{MH} 'scorpion', ke ^{MH} 'your (SG) head'
	LH	ta ^{LH} 'shrimp', ke ^{LH} '(his/her) head'
	LM	кта ^{LM} 'chepil', kwa ^{LM} 'swept'
Falling	HL	tʔwa ^{HL} 'cold', ntɛ ^{HL} 'people'
	ML	tʔwa ^{ML} 'forty', skwa ^{ML} 'six', ntyʔa ^{ML} 'will see'

Set	Gloss	Eastern Chatino			Zenzontepec
		ZAC	SJQ	PAN	
A	tortilla	kyaja	yja	tyjɔ ^M	chaja
	ate (it)	yako	yku	yku ^M	yaku
	ear of corn	tya	tya ^L	tyɔ ^M	lita
	old	kula	kla ^L	kwɔ ^M	kula
	bean	ntaa	nda ^L	ndɔ ^M	ntāā
B	turtle	nkɔ ^{L-(0)}	kɔ ^{HL-(0)}	kɔ ^M	nkoɔ
	banana	jaʔwa ^{L-(0)}	ʔwa ^{HL-(0)}	jʔwa ^M	--
	will kill	k-u-jwi ^{L-(L)}	kjwi ^{ML-(MH)}	kjwe ^M	k-u-jwi
	will take	k-o-loo ^{L-(L)}	klo ^{HL-(0)}	kwɔ ^M	k-u-lōō
	people	natɛ ^{L-(0)}	ntɛ ^{HL-(0)}	ntɛ ^{ML-(0)}	nyatɛ
will cry	k-una ^{L-(L)}	kna ^{HL-(0)}	kwna ^{ML}	k-unā	
C	was	nkwa ^{M-(H)}	nkwa ^{M-(H)}	nkwa ^{ML}	nk(a)ā
	flower	ke ^{M-(H)}	ke ^{M-(H)}	ke ^{ML-(H)}	keē
	flour	kita ^{M-(H)}	kta ^{M-(H)}	ktɔ ^{ML-(H)}	ketā
	dog	xuni ^{M-(H)}	xne ^{M-(H)}	xne ^{M-(H)}	jnēʔ
D	is heating (it)	nta ^M kwa ⁰ tsɔ ^{L-(L)}	ntsɔ ^{H-(0)}	ntsɔ ⁰	nte-katsɔ
	is sprinkling	nta ^M sa ⁰ ne ^{L-(L)}	nsne ^{H-(0)}	nsne ⁰	nte-senē
	tomato	nkwi ⁰ xi ^{L-(L)}	nxi ^{HL-(0)}	mxe ^M	nkwi ⁰ xi

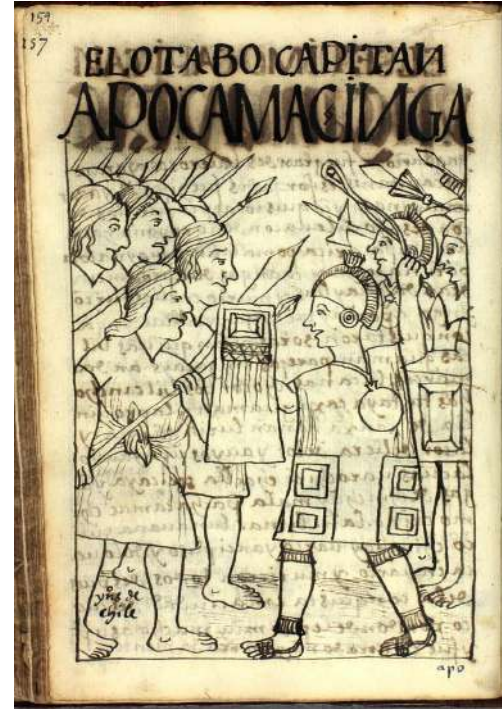
Example 4:

Quechua and Mapudungun's pre-hispanic contact

Lexical correspondences between Quechua and Mapudungun suggest at least two historical contact events.

1. During the Incan Empire conquest of the northern Mapuche territory (mid-1400s), and
2. pre-Incan one (prior to 1400s)

This is supported by the lexicon of Quechua loanwords in Mapudungun in the 17th Century record (Moulian et al., 2019) and lexical correspondences between these two languages (Pache 2014).



Five scenarios (Pache, 2014)

After analysing lexical parallels between Mapudungun and Quechua / Aymara, Pache (2014) rejected recent language contact as a possible explanation. This is important because the pre-hispanic history of these languages is not well known.

Contributing to a decolonial approach: Historical Linguistics, together with archaeological and genetic research can “enrich and complement the historical records and local narratives of the indigenous populations of southern Chile” (Arango-Isaza et al., 2023).

Huarpean languages / Mapudungun

Hasler et al (2026) provides evidence of pre-hispanic contact between Huarpean Languages and Mapudungun.

‘Bread’

—**kupi** (Allentiac, Milcayac) vs. **kofke** (Mapudungun) Cfr. **kop-üm** (to toast)

‘Light, to make bright’

—**lep-chap** ‘to burn’ (Allentiac) vs. **lüp-üm** ‘to cause to burn (Mapudungun)



MLs and TL/HL (Interim conclusions)

We see from the examples that the reasons to study MLs using TL/HL are interconnected. New data and patterns found in MLs encouraged and enrich theoretical work and understanding of cross-linguistic generalisations. Additionally this work leads to practical applications when promoting MLs.

	Example 1 Halkomelen lexical affixes	Example 2 Mapudungun verb template	Example 3 Chatino orthography	Example 4 Quechua / Mapudungun
MLs enrich theory	✓	✓		
MLs challenge theory		✓		
HL contributing to MLs			✓	✓

Historical causal explanations (TL+HL)

THL approach to language underdeterminism

When encountering idiosyncrasies that appear to be “active” in the synchrony, but cannot be resolved as generalisations, historical causal explanations are available to account for the synchronic situation (telling us “how it came to be”).

We can know about the past using theoretical directed interpretation (Lass, 1997), which can help us clarify that a pattern of alternation is not “a missed generalisation”, but a historical accident (Paster, 2017).

This is a THL (TL+HL) approach.

The right conditions for historical explanations

- Surface variation or irregularity: e.g. wife vs. wives, go vs. went
- Competing analyses for a possible reducible generalisation
 - “Analytic underdeterminism” (Bermudez-otero, 2012)
 - Fundamental Question of Morphophonology (Embick & Shwayder, 2018)
- Indications of an Idiosyncratic / Arbitrary pattern (Paster, 2017)
- Grammar-external explanation: The apparent reducible generalisation is a historical accident (Paster, 2017)
- For a historical causal explanation (non-predictive), we still need theoretically informed research (Lass, 1997).

The cases

In Mapudungun, there are several causatives.

One of them is the unproductive: **-üm (-m after Vowels)**.

- (1) **ñam** ‘to get lost’ ~ **ñam-üm** ‘(tr) to lose’
- (2) **püra** ‘to go up’ ~ **püra-m** ‘to put up’, etc.

A limited set of forms appear to be related to these causative constructions:

- (1) **lef** ‘to run’ ~ **lepüm** ‘to chase away’
- (2) **nag** ‘to go down’ ~ **naküm** ‘to put down (with force)’
cfr. **nag-üm** ‘to put down’
- (3) **pür** ‘to dye’ ~ **pütrüm** ‘a dyed textile’

The history of the [im] causatives in Mapudungun

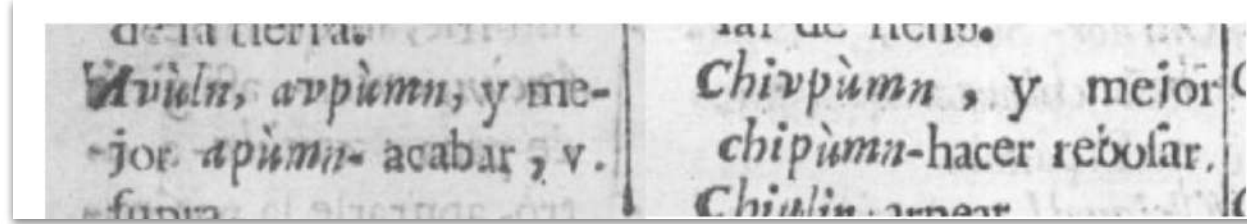
From regular phonology to lexicalisation

Aldo Berríos Castillo
University of Edinburgh

This paper describes and analyses a historical alternation in what contemporary Mapudungun has developed as a set of transitive roots ending in [Cim], where C can represent a labial stop, a retroflex affricate or a velar stop. These forms are historically related to a causativisation process formed with a root ending in what is now a fricative plus the now-unproductive suffix [-im]. An example of this pattern today is the adjective [laf] ‘(adj) flat’ vis-à-vis the transitive verb [lapim-] ‘to stretch (out)’. This paper posits that the word-internal stop consonant preceding [im] is the unaffected remnant of an ancestral fricativisation process that targeted final stops in older Mapudungun. By presenting evidence from the historical record, the trajectory of these linguistic patterns is analysed in relation to the theoretical assumptions of the Life Cycle of Phonological Processes. This work contributes to theoretical questions about what is possible in language change as well as to the internal reconstruction of this language isolate.

Keywords: Life Cycle of Phonological Processes, Mapudungun diachrony, internal reconstruction, language change, lexicalisation

Rationale

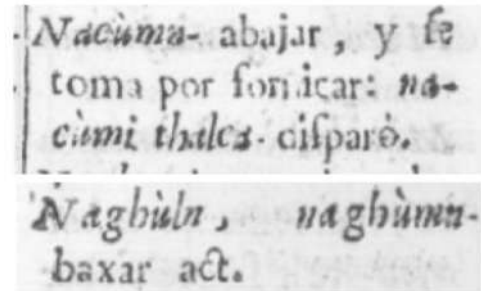


In old Mapudungun, we find evidence of doublets. While causative **-im** was still productive, canonical forms were created alongside historical ones:

- **nag** 'to go down' ~ **nag-üm** 'to put down' Cfr. **naküm** 'to put down (with force)'
- **pür** 'to become dyed' ~ vs. **pürüm** 'to dye' Cfr. **pütrüm** 'a dyed textile'

This lexicalisation was likely influenced by several factors:

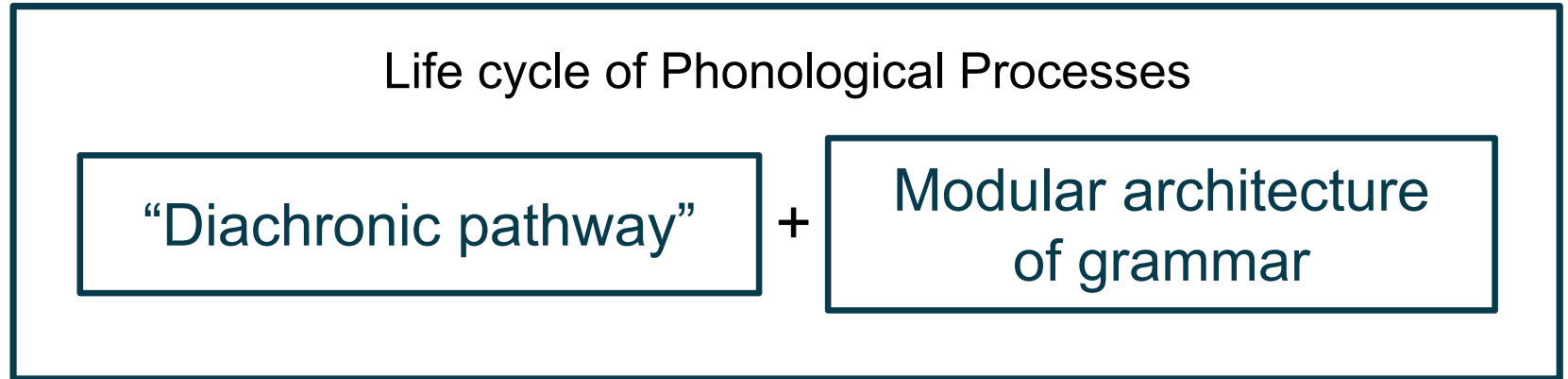
- 1) the loss of productivity of the morphological pattern
- 2) competition with another suffix with the same meaning
- 3) an increased phonetic distance between the surface forms, due to a historical fricativisation process (final p,k > f,g) .



Life cycle of a fricativisation rule

The life cycle model (Bermudez-Otero, 2015):

- a) identifies processes and patterns that are phonologically active,
- b) connects synchronic processes to diachronic pathways that have shaped the grammar (Ramsammy, 2015).



A historical fricativisation rule

Southern Map Mid-1600s

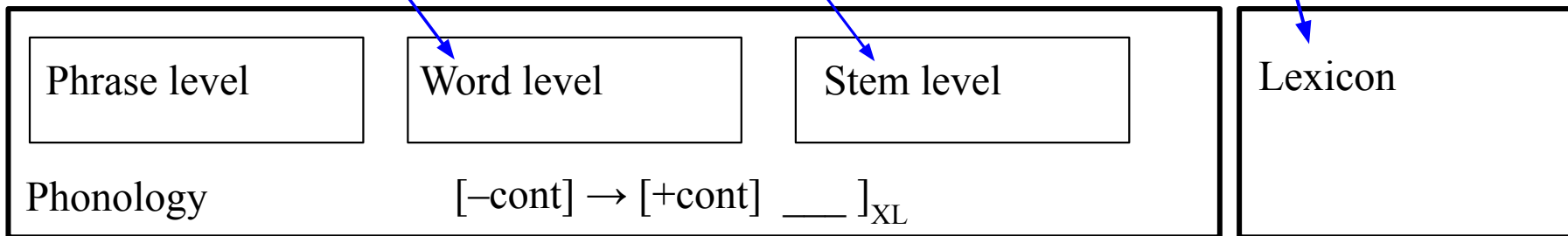
Leptoque Imperator.
Leptungei celer.

Central Map Early-1600s

¶ *Lebin,* *volar,*
¶ *Leptin,* *ojar las aues,*

Central Map Mid-1700s

Nacima- abajar, y fe
toma por fonicar: *na-*
cimi thalca- cisparò.
Naghùln, *naghùnn-*
baxar act.



time ----->>>

Conclusions

- I have shown three reasons to connect the study of MLs and the efforts of THL.
- I did this by identifying reasons in which MLs provide data to enrich and challenge theoretical frameworks and tools in both TH and HL.
- Most importantly, THL can also contribute to MLs and their speakers in issues regarding standardisation and their own history.
- Historical explanations can enrich our synchronic description by providing a possible pathway for patterns that appear to be generisable. I contend that this is a THL approach.

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Theoretical Historical Linguistics & Minoritised Languages

Aldo Berríos Castillo

aldo.berrios@gmail.com – <https://aldoberrios.cl>



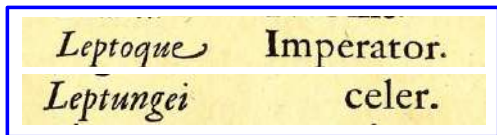
Residues from here

A historical fricativisation rule

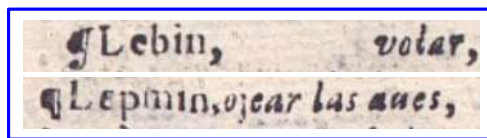
Central Map before 1600



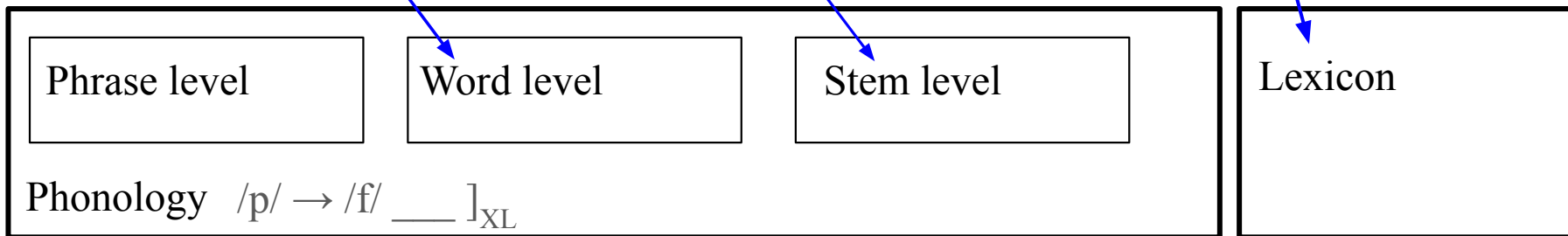
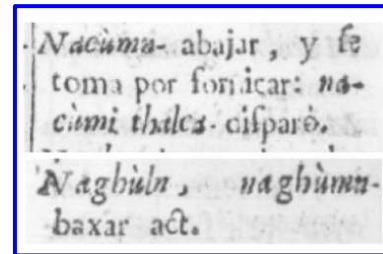
Southern Map Mid-1600s



Central Map Early-1600s



Central Map Mid-1700s



Traditional definitions of general linguistics

“[linguistics] in so far as the subject attempts to establish general principles for the study of all languages, and to determine the characteristics of human language as a phenomenon, it may be called general linguistics (see general) or theoretical linguistics.” (Crystal 2008:284)

“The linguist’s concern with all languages derives from the proclaimed aims of his subject: the construction of a scientific theory of the structure of human language. All recorded and observable instances of language serve as data to be systematized and ‘explained’ by the general theory’. (Lyons 1968)

The researcher with predominantly Essentialist inclinations aims to identify the intrinsic properties of language that make it what it is. [...] postulating universals of human linguistic structure, unlearned but tacitly known, that permit and assist children to acquire human languages [...] a preference for finding surprising characteristics of languages that cannot be inferred from the data of usage, and are not predictable from human cognition or the requirements of communication. (Scholz et al., 2025).