

Quechua 101

I was sitting on a bench in Sucre's Plaza 25 de Mayo, waiting to meet Jürgen for lunch, and fell into conversation with a gnarled old indigenous man. Quickly identifying me as a foreigner, he asked why my hair isn't blond. Apparently, this guy hadn't met all that many *gringos*...



The man had lost the use of his hands due to an an undefined "accident". Since he was from a village near Potosí, I imagined mining and/or dynamite was involved, but before I could press for details, he had launched into a diatribe about the trials of life. He and his wife had been in Sucre for 30 days, trying to sell their vegetables. They had grown up illiterate, speaking Quechua in a village without a proper school, and only learned Spanish as adults.

I asked him to teach me a little Quechua, and he was happy to oblige. *Arí* is "yes". *Manan*, "no". Alright, that's not so hard! But then: *Yusulpayki* = "thanks". *Allillanchu* = "How are you?" My head was starting to hurt after just four words, and I was relieved when Jürgen arrived to interrupt our impromptu lesson.

Quechua is spoken by approximately eight million people in and around the Andes. It was the language of the Incas, who spread its use in order to homogenize their vast kingdom, and today is the primary language of over two million Bolivians, about 20% of the population. To be precise, "Quechua" refers to a family of languages. In Bolivia, the form spoken is Southern Quechua.