

FIVE SUFFIXES WITH UNIFIED SPELLINGS FOR SOUTHERN QUECHUA

-mi/-m -pa/-p -pti- -chka- -chik

On this page we look at the five **suffixes** of Quechua for which there is a single unified spelling proposed for all **Southern Quechua**: **-mil-m**, **-pa/-p**, **-pti-**, **-chka-** and **-chik**, to explain why these particular spellings have been chosen as the unified ones. Certainly, they **might at first seem a little odd** to people in some regions, including Cuzco and southern Bolivia; but on the other hand there are also big, big advantages of using these particular spellings in order to be consistent and to achieve more unity among Quechua speakers from all regions, as we shall find out on this page ...

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Spelling and Sounds, Spelling and Grammar

Our main texts on pronunciation and spelling discuss only the proposed unified spellings of **individual sounds** like [q] or [m] wherever they occur in a word. There is a quite separate issue where a unified spelling is proposed for certain **specific suffixes** of Quechua. These include well-known and much argued about spellings such as:

- the unified spelling *-chka-* proposed for the ‘progressive’ suffix in *purichkani* (*I am walking*), for which many people prefer to use their own regional spellings like *purishani* or *purisani*;
- the unified spelling *-pti-* proposed for the ‘*if/when*’ suffix in *munaptinqa* (*if/when s/he wants*), for which many people prefer to use their own regional spellings like *munaqtinqa*.

The reason we have not covered these in our main section on pronunciation and spelling is because in these cases the unified spellings have to do not just with sounds but with both sounds **and grammar**, since the suffix is not just any old sound but a distinct **unit of grammar and meaning**. The technical term that linguists use for this type of unit is a ‘**morpheme**’, i.e. a grammatical building-block of a longer word. Don’t be put off by this technical term though: you will easily be able to identify morphemes in Quechua for yourself. As an example, take a typical long Quechua word like *Yachachiwankichu?* (as it would be said in Southern Quechua), meaning *Are you going to teach me?* Breaking this word up into the five different units of meaning (‘morphemes’) that it is made up of is of course quite straightforward: first is the root (*yacha-*, *know*), then come four suffixes *-chi-wa-nki-chu*.

Where suffixes have to do with spelling is in that in some cases **the same morpheme can have different pronunciations** in different regions and/or in different places within a word. One pattern of alternation that is particularly common in Quechua, as we’ll soon see, is that the same morpheme (suffix) has one pronunciation when it comes after a vowel, but a different pronunciation when it comes after a consonant. In such cases, the simplest solution for spelling is very often what is called the ‘**morphemic spelling principle**’: a simple, consistent rule that says that the same morpheme should always be spelt the same way, even if it has different pronunciations.

This is why unified Quechua spelling proposes that, as well as the basic spelling and reading rules, there are also certain specific Quechua suffixes – five in particular – for which it is best to use a special spelling, the same in all regions.

But Isn't It Really Strange to Spell These Suffixes in the Unified Way?

Certainly, at the start it can look strange to spell as <chka> a suffix that to you in your region may sound more like [sha], [ska] or [sa]. As so often with spelling and pronunciation, though, this is really just a question of habit. In fact, unified suffix spellings are actually **not unusual at all**: very many languages around the world use precisely this ‘morphemic spelling principle’, precisely because once you’re used to it, the same spelling for the same suffix actually makes spelling much simpler, more consistent, and much easier to unify when different regions have different pronunciations of the same suffix.

It so happens that in Spanish grammar there is little need for morphemic spellings, because unlike in Quechua there is relatively little variation in the pronunciation of particular suffixes. In this case, the situation in Quechua is more like that of English or French, which do indeed use the morphemic spelling principle for several important suffixes. So let’s put things in context by looking first at a very well-known example of unified spelling for a single suffix, in English.

An Example of a Unified Suffix Spelling in Another Language: English

In English, the way you show the **past tense** of a regular verb is by the suffix that is **always spelt <ed>**. Here are some examples:

MEANING		PAST TENSE			PAST TENSE SUFFIX	
		spelling		pronunciation	spelling	pronunciation
<i>wait</i>	<i>esperar</i>	<i>I waited</i>	<i>esperé</i>	[wərtɪd]	-ed	[ɪd]
<i>kill</i>	<i>matar</i>	<i>I killed</i>	<i>maté</i>	[kɪld]	-ed	[d]
<i>look</i>	<i>mirar</i>	<i>I looked</i>	<i>miré</i>	[lʊkt]	-ed	[t]

As you can see here, the past tense suffix is **pronounced in three quite different ways**: [ɪd], [d] and [t]. In fact, these pronunciations vary even more, because they are different again in different regions and countries too (the first one, for example, is pronounced not [ɪd] but [əd] by some speakers in some

areas). Yet despite all of these different pronunciations, there is a very simple rule: this suffix is always spelt the same <ed>.

It is true that there are many complexities and irregularities in the spelling of English, but none of them are anything to do with the spelling of <ed>. Quite on the contrary: it makes everything **much simpler** **not to try to spell all sound differences**, and just to use a unified, single spelling instead. This ‘morphemic’ spelling <ed> is one of the simplest spellings of all in English, one that almost nobody ever has any problems with.

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Unified Suffix Spellings: More Complicated, or Simpler?

So, one thing is very clear: accepting a single unified spelling for a suffix is not in itself complicated, on the contrary it can make things a lot **simpler**. It is also particularly useful when the same suffix has many *different regional pronunciations*, which is exactly the case in Quechua with the five suffixes we talk about here. This, of course, is precisely why a *unified spelling* has been proposed for them.

As always then, even though a unified standard spelling may at first seem strange, it is really a very simple question of just **getting used to it** – which as usual means forgetting your Spanish spelling habits, because this is Quechua, and a different language needs its own different spelling and reading rules. That’s it.

So even if you in your region do find the unified spellings unusual to start with, please do have a little **patience** and a spirit of **solidarity** with people in other regions who pronounce these suffixes differently to you. Without any regional favouritism, then, let’s now look into these suffixes in a bit more detail, to see which particular spellings will actually work best in practice so that people in *all* regions can *recognise* everyone else’s suffixes easily and without any confusion. Because it’s this, of course, that is the big, big advantage of using these particular spellings: in order to be consistent and to achieve more unity among Quechua speakers from different regions, as we’ll now see...

The Five Main Suffixes With a Unified Spelling

The ‘Assertive’ Suffix: -mi or -m

Let's take first the ‘assertive’ suffix *-mi* or *-m*. Speakers from every other Quechua-speaking region throughout Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador will immediately recognise this suffix too, but only provided that it is spelt as in the unified spelling, i.e. *-mi* after a consonant, as in *pay-mi (it's) him/her*; and *-m* after a vowel, as in *paykuna-m (it's) them*.

Speakers from Cuzco will notice that while you too pronounce the *-mi* in the original way, in your region the *-m* variant after a vowel is now pronounced more like [n]. But, if we were to use your Cuzco regional spelling of *-n* for this second variant, for speakers from all other regions this would cause serious confusion between this suffix and the very different *-n* suffixes for *his/her*, as in *wasi-n his/her house*; and for *he/she* as in *puri-n he/she travels*.

Bolivian speakers of Quechua in fact rarely use the *-mi/-m* suffix at all. So with the spelling *-m*, they can know that they can safely ignore this suffix *-m*, or replace it with the *-taq* suffix that they often use instead of it. Again though, these speakers will only be able to recognise this if we use the unified spelling *-m*, rather than Cuzco regional spelling *-n* which would be more confusing for them. What's more, in any case it's more **consistent** to use the letter *m* in both forms, both before a vowel and before a consonant.

The ‘Possessor’ Suffix: -pa or -p

A similar case is the ‘possessor’ suffix *-pa* or *-p*. Again, speakers from every other Quechua-speaking region will immediately recognise it, but again only provided that it is spelt as it is here, i.e. *-pa* after a consonant, as in *pay-pa his/hers*; and *-p* after a vowel, as in *paykuna-p theirs*. With this suffix too, speakers from Cuzco and southern Bolivia will notice that while you too still pronounce the *-pa* in the original way, in your regions the *-p* variant after a vowel is now pronounced more like [q] (or technically, [χ]). But once more, if we used this spelling it would create serious problems for readers from all other Quechua-speaking regions, because they would confuse it with the ‘agent’ suffix, as in *puklla-q (player)*, which is *-q* in all regions. So while in Cuzco and Bolivia these two suffixes (possessor *-pa/-p* and agent *-q*) are pronounced the same, in all other regions they are very different! Again, it's also more consistent to use the letter *p* in both forms, whether before a vowel or before a consonant.

The ‘If/When’ Suffix: *-pti-*

The same goes for the letter *p* inside the ‘if/when’ suffix *-pti-*, as in *muna-pti-n-qa* (*if/when s/he wants*), recognisable to all Quechua-speakers everywhere in this unified spelling, although its *pronunciation* has changed – but **only** in Cuzco and southern Bolivia – to something more like [q̃ti] (or technically, [χ̃ti]).

The ‘Progressive’ Suffix: *-chka-*

The ‘progressive’ suffix, as used in *puri-chka-ni* *I am travelling*, is complicated in a rather different way: because it has very many different regional pronunciations. Cuzco speakers know that their pronunciation of *-chka-* is now actually [sha], while people in Cochabamba use [sa], and other regions use [ska] or [sỹa]. All of these, though, are just regional variants of the **original, full pronunciation** [chka], which is still used in very many areas, including the Apolobamba region in Bolivia, in Ayacucho, and in most other areas north of Cuzco. The simplest spelling for everyone to **recognise** – though of course as ever you keep **pronouncing** it exactly as you always did in your region! – is like the full, original variant, *-chka-*.

In fact there are a few other suffixes, too, for which the best unified spelling is one that reflects the full, original pronunciations. So we always write the **past tense** suffix, for example, as *-rqa-*, as in *muna-rqa-n* *s/he wanted (to)*, even though it’s well known that in some regions it’s also possible to pronounce this just [ra].

The ‘Inclusive *we*’ Suffix: *-chik*

There is similar very wide regional variation in the *-chik* suffix – used both in ‘**inclusive *we***’ forms such as *nuqa-n-chik* *we* and *ri-pu-sun-chik* *let’s leave*; and also in *you* plural forms like *mama-yki-chik* *your mother* and plural imperative *ripu-y-chik!* *go (away)!* Again, across the extensive southern Quechua area there is not one single pronunciation, but a range of different ones from region to region: Cuzco [chis], Cochabamba [chex], and so on. The form [chik], however, was the original pronunciation, and as such is also the one that is by far the most widely used and immediately recognised in all areas north of Cuzco/Bolivia, including Ayacucho and even as far as Ecuador. This is why [chik] is again the best choice for a *unified* spelling.

Which Region's Spellings are the Unified Ones?

Finally, some people are suspicious that the unified spellings are designed to make them speak Quechua like people in other regions. Some speakers in Cuzco, for example, claim that unified spellings are trying to force people in Cuzco to speak Quechua like the Ayacuchanos. This is simply **not true!**

Please remember that unified spelling is **not** a question of asking **only** Cuzco or Bolivian Quechua speakers to use a few spellings that they might find unusual at first. It's just that the only spellings that you personally *notice* as unusual are the differences compared to *your* own regional spellings. There are plenty of other spellings, such as *qara* (*skin*), *kay* (*this*) and *chawpi* (*middle*), which all look completely normal for people from Cuzco and Bolivia: but remember that these can indeed seem unusual at first for people in other regions. People in Ayacucho, indeed, might initially prefer *hara* as their own regional spelling, but they are asked to use unified *qara* because that way it's much easier for Cuzqueño and Bolivian speakers to read. Likewise, people in Ancash are asked to follow the standard spellings *ay* and *aw* in words like *kay* and *chawpi*, even though they might initially prefer different regional spellings of their own, because their regional spellings would make it harder for speakers everywhere else to recognise the words.

So people in other regions too are asked to recognise standard spellings for the benefit of speakers in Cuzco and Bolivia, just as much as the other way around. In unified spelling, **no region is favoured** above any other. Unified spelling is **not** Ayacucho spelling: absolutely on the contrary, it has been designed as the best all-round compromise for **all** regions! This the whole idea of *unified* Quechua spelling. For more on this subject, click to see our [other page on this](#).

Three Vowels or Five?

The other main issue in the unified Southern Quechua spelling system is that to represent the various **vowel** sounds of Quechua, it only actually needs to use **three** letters: *a*, *i* and *u*. Once you've learnt the simple reading rules for the letters, you'll soon see that the Spanish (or to be more accurate, Latin) letters *e* and *o* are never really **needed** in Quechua words, except in some Spanish loanwords. You can always tell the pronunciation in any case: the letters *qu*, for example, are **automatically** read and

pronounced [qo], and the letters *qi* as [qe]. This issue of the vowels is covered in depth on our other pages on **Sounds and Spelling**, specifically in the section on **Three Vowels or Five?**, so please click on those links for full details.

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