

# THE SEARCH FOR HUMAN INTEGRATION OF INDIANS IN THE FIRST GRAMMAR OF QUECHUA LANGUAGE



<https://doi.org/10.22533/at.ed.828132512066>

Data de aceite: 10/07/2025

**Eduardo de Almeida Navarro**

Department of Classical and Vernacular Languages in São Paulo University, Brazil

**ABSTRACT:** The heated discussion regarding the human status of South American Indians and their aptitude for conversion to Christianity (which pitted 16<sup>th</sup> century European thinkers against one another) was greatly enriched by the publication of the first Indian language grammars, revealing that these languages were not inferior to Latin or European modern languages. In this regard, the work of Friar Domingos de Santo Thomas, author of the first grammar of Quechua, was extremely important.

**KEYWORDS:** Indian languages, grammars, Indians, Anthropology, 16<sup>th</sup> century

## INTRODUCTION

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the romance languages were gaining the status of “*high culture languages*” through a long process that started from the Latin. They then

became the “*companions of the Empire*”<sup>1</sup>, according to Nebrija (1492). At this time, the so-called “exotic languages” (i.e., those of Africa, Asia, and America) were discovered by European peoples.<sup>2</sup> In 1492, when America was discovered, until the 1640s, Europeans knew America as well as they did Africa and Asia. The linguistic question thus became much more important than it had been before. Languages with long literary traditions, such as Chinese and the purely oral tradition languages such as Tupi and Quechua were revealed to the Europeans.

The appearance of these new languages before the European culture would result in many controversies in the anthropological, religious, historical, and philosophical fields. How should one interpret the existence of so many languages that differed substantially amongst themselves? How could one support the Augustinian doctrine of the unity of the mankind, considering the vast

<sup>1</sup> E. Asensio, ‘La lengua, compañera del Imperio’. *Revista de Filología Española*, n. XLIII (1960), pp.105-120.

<sup>2</sup> Sylvain Auroux, *A Revolução Tecnológica da Gramatização*. (Campinas, 1992).

spectrum of the existing ethnicities, societies, and cultures in the world? How could realities as different as Chinese and American play a role in the European cosmovision?

Mainly in America, where the Europeans had contact with a stronger “primitivism” of existing societies, new concepts about the recently discovered languages were followed *pari passu* by discussions regarding the nature of the Indians, involving missionaries, merchants, lawyers, theologians, and wise men of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The great variety of opinions on this subject reflected the astonishment before such marvelous realities that were being revealed in the first decades of that century.<sup>3</sup>

## FRIAR DOMINGOS DE SANTO THOMAS’ GRAMMAR

One of the first grammarians of an American Indian language was the Dominican Friar Domingos de Santo Thomas. He was the first European to publish a grammar of the Quechua language.

In the preface of his *Grammatica o arte de la lengua general de los indios de los Reynos del Peru* (1560), dedicated to the Spanish emperor Filipe II, Friar Domingos informs us about this question:

My main purpose, Your Majesty, has been to make Your Majesty see, clearly and distinctly, how mistaken are those who have attempted to persuade thee that the inhabitants of Peru are barbarous people and not worth being treated with politeness and freed as thy other vassals. Your Majesty will clearly acknowledge that opinion as false on reading this grammar, by realizing the great policy of this language, that abounds in words, the adequacy to their meanings, the various and interesting ways of speaking, the soft sound to the ears of its spelling, the easiness to write it with our own characters and letters, how easy and soft it is to the spelling of our own language.

It is ordered and featured with declinations and other properties of nouns, modes, tenses, and person of verbs, and briefly many aspects and manners of speaking, so similar to Latin and Spanish: in its grammar rules as it seems that the Spaniards were fated to possess...”<sup>4</sup>

From the words of Friar Domingos de Santo Thomas, one might infer that the question of the ontological status of the Indian was followed by debate on the resources their languages contained for expressing thought. Major polemics appeared in Europe during the 16<sup>th</sup> century (particularly in Spain) regarding the nature of the Indians, which did not begin *per se*, but rather within a larger context: i.e., from the legitimacy the Spanish Crown would have in conquering the American peoples and the manner in which they should be ruled. At two levels, the question of the Indians’ natures and their conquest and political submission was discussed: at the civil government level and at the missionary system level. Here, there was a struggle between three important missionaries: Bartolomé de las Casas, Juan Ginés

<sup>3</sup> Roque Adorno, ‘Los debates sobre la naturaleza del indio en el siglo XVI. Textos y contextos’. *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, ano 19 (1992), pp.47-66.

<sup>4</sup> Conde de Viñaza, *Bibliografía Española de Lenguas Indígenas de America*. (Madrid, 1892), p. 108.

de Sepúlveda, and Francisco de Vitoria. Although the intelligence and capacity ability of the Indians and the nature of their customs were discussed, little was proposed regarding their human condition, which, for most theologians, missionaries, and jurists, was not in question. The *Sublimis Deus* bull of Paul III, promulgated in 1537, was not a statement regarding the Indians humanity, but was rather intended to establish the fact that they were free human beings.

The debate on the Indian nature increased substantially in the decades of 1530 and 1540. In 1550, under the rule of Carlos V, a famous debate between Friar Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda took place in Valladolid, which considered necessary

[the indians'] subjection to the Empire, who with [the missionaries'] prudence, virtue, and religion, shall convert them from barbarian and mere human beings into civilized people as much as possible, from criminals into virtuous men, from impious men and slaves of the devil into Christian and believers of the true God within the true religion.<sup>5</sup>

The grammar of Friar Domingos de Santo Tomás provides arguments favorable to respectable and human treatment of Indians on the part of Europeans and enlightens the debate regarding the humanity of the American man as to the possibility of his conversion. Actually, could there be a better argument in this sense other than the logics of the Indian thinking, the *"great policy this language has"*? *Policy*, in its etymological sense, means *related to the polis, civilized*, as opposed to what is barbarian, rough, and uncultured. Therefore, in the words of Friar Domingos de Santo Tomas, there is a clear intention to integrate the American man. In other words, they should be given full human status, the basic privileges of humanity. They would be neither sub-human nor men who live in the childhood of civilization, whose subjection to the stronger would point the way to reaching basic humanhood, for whom the loss of freedom would be a boon and not a misfortune.

The following words of Frail Domingos better clarify what we have adduced above:

Si cupis indorum linguam cognoscere veram,  
Et scire exoptas quae latuere diu,  
Si cupis arcanos mores hominumque recessus  
Discere, nec Priscis cognita sacra viris,  
Huc eme que brevibus arctat membrana tabellis.  
(...) Barbaricam linguam mire (quis credere possit?),  
Regula certa manet, regula certa tenet."

"If you wish to know the true language of the Indians and want to know about the things that have long been hidden,

If you wish to learn about the secret customs of men's hiding places,

<sup>5</sup> Roque Adorno, 'Los debates sobre la naturaleza del indio en el siglo XVI. Textos y contextos'. *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, ano 19 (1992), p. 53.

And not the known rites of ancient men,  
Acquire this which compresses the pages in brief frames.  
(...) Right rule it keeps, right rule it constitutes,  
Admirably, the barbarian language (who could believe it?)”<sup>6</sup>

It was a fact that many would admire (“who could believe it”) that an indigenous language (Quechua, in this case) would have “right rules.”

According to Valdeón (2014, p.136-137)<sup>7</sup>,

In the sermon that accompanied the grammar, *Plática para todos los indios*, he used paraphrases to prove the point that there were always ways of communicating Christian concepts to the Indians. Domingo de Santo Thomas was in fact more tolerant of the use of Quechua words when translating the Christian doctrine than many of his contemporaries.

There was, in fact, a tendency in missionary texts not to translate certain words into indigenous languages. The translation of the Our Father into ancient Tupi, spoken in Brazil in the 16th century, maintained in Portuguese terms such as “temptation” and “Kingdom”. Regarding the three persons of the Holy Trinity, the words *Holy Spirit* were never translated into that language.

## OPPOSING VIEWS REGARDING THIS ISSUE

Nevertheless, not all grammar missionaries of the 16<sup>th</sup> century were so benevolent to the Indians. For example, the Dominicans Friar Tomás Ortiz and Friar Domingo de Betancos stated that the Indian was unable even to receive the Christian faith. By contrast, others such as Friar Francisco de Tauste, in his *Arte y Bocabulario de la lengua dos indios chaymas, cumanagotos, cores, parias y otros diversos de la provincia de Cumana o Nueva Aparecida*, of 1680, reached similar conclusions:

“...Y supuesto que una lengua tan elegantemente traducida como la Latina y reducida a tan buen Arte, con la ayuda de tan buenos Maestros, que la enseñan y Bocabularios y otros libros que la facilitan, cuesta a un buen ingenio y estudioso gramatico dos años y aun casi tres para ser perfecto Latino y hablarle con facilidad y elegancia, quanto mas este language barbaro que aqui se enseña y escribe, se dificultará?

(...)Todo esto se enseña mejor la practica y conversacion, aunque aya repugnancia y se haga violencia al pobre misionario de tractar casi con un bruto, pero para Dios será de igual estimacion que un Angel.”

<sup>6</sup> Conde de Viñaza, *Bibliografía Española de Lenguas Indígenas de America*. (Madrid, 1892), p. 108.

<sup>7</sup> Valdeón, Roberto A., *Translation and the Spanish Empire in the Americas*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing Company, 2014.

(“...and supposing that a language as elegantly translated as Latin and reduced to such an Art, with the help of such good Masters, who teach the vocabulary and other books that facilitate it; it takes for a clever and studious scholar two or even three years to be fluent and speak it elegantly, so how much longer will this barbarian language which is taught and written here need?”)

(...) All this will be taught better by practice and conversation, although it may be repugnant for the poor missionary to deal with those who are almost beasts, although for God, he will be esteemed as if he were an angel.”)<sup>8</sup>

Even the most important defender of the Indian freedom, Bartolomé de las Casas (whom many see as the founder of the current “Liberation Theology”) admitted that “... *these people are both weak in intelligence and in ability and skills,*” but also affirmed that “...*despite this, they are not obliged to subject themselves to a more civilized people nor to adopt their way of living...*”<sup>9</sup>

In this context, where many sought to restrict the freedom of the Indians in name of the principle (found in Aristotle’s *Politics*, an important work at this time) of “empire of perfection over imperfection, of strength over weakness, of virtue over the vice,”<sup>10</sup> the grammaticalization of the American languages threw new light on the question of the nature of the Indians.

Whether or not they denied the humanity of the Indian, almost everyone, including Bartolomé de las Casas, admitted the Indian’s weakness in terms of intelligence and barbarity, although he did not see in this fact a justification for their slavery or subjection to the Spanish Empire.

## **SOME OTHER RECOGNITION SIGNS OF THE EXCELLENCE OF INDIAN LANGUAGES**

Several grammars of American languages, printed from 1558 on (The Quechua Grammar of Friar Domingos de Santo Thomas, whose prologue we mentioned above, was the third to be published), questioned the idea of the “childish intellect” of the Indian or the “lack of culture,” and fully contradicted those who denied their humanity. Although made by and for missionaries, the new conceptions about the excellence of Indian languages (and, therefore, the spiritual and cultural value of their speakers) did not affect the other sphere, that of the civil power, of the State, where one could find the “*encomenderos*” and where mercantile capitalism was evolving.

Despite this, the grammaticalization of American exotic languages reformulated deep concepts of a linguistic inferiority of the Indian, corresponding to their social and political

<sup>8</sup> Conde de Viñaza, *Bibliografía Española de Lenguas Indígenas de America*. (Madrid, 1892), p. 207.

<sup>9</sup> Roque Adorno, ‘Los debates sobre la naturaleza del indio en el siglo XVI. Textos y contextos’. *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, ano 19 (1992), p. 91.

<sup>10</sup> Juan Sepúlveda, *Democrates Segundo o de las justas causas de la guerra contra los indios*. (Madrid, 1951), p. 20.

inferiority. These languages did not lack, according to what we mentioned from the prologue of Friar Domingos de Santo Thomas prologue, “*the many things and manners to speak, so accordingly to Latin and Spanish*: in their grammar rules as it seems that the Spaniards were fated to possess (our emphasis).

The assimilation of an American language grammar to the Latin and Spanish grammar was therefore stated by Friar Domingos, giving new cultural status to an Indian language and helping to reformulate current and largely accepted anthropological concepts.

The recognition of the intrinsic qualities of exotic languages and, in particular, the Amerindian ones, took place on several occasions. Anchieta, author of the first grammar of the *Língua Brasilica* (in its best-known dialectic variants, *Tupinambá* and *Tupí*), stated that the Indian language possessed the perfection of Greek. Another implicit piece of evidence of such recognition was the creation of Quêchua, Nahuatl, and Otomi chairs in Spanish universities in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is known that:

-In 1579, a Quechua chair was created at the University of San Marcos, in Lima, the first one on the American continent. The first professor of this subject was Juan de Balboa. This chair spanned over 200 years, until 1784, when the linguistic policy of the Spanish government dramatically changed, similar to what happened in Portugal, under the rule of the Marquis of Pombal. An “*Ordenanza*” in 1579 set forth that priests could not be ordained without knowing *Quechua*, nor could licensees or bachelors obtain degrees at a University without studying an Indian language.<sup>11</sup>

- In 1642, Nahuatl and Otomi languages were taught at the Royal University of Mexico, Friar Diego de Galdo Guzmán being the professor.
- In 1662, Nahuatl was taught at the University of Mexico by D. Antonio Tobar Cano y Montezuma.
- In 1683, Nahuatl was taught at the same University by Friar Damián de la Ser-na.<sup>12</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Although not all grammarians of the American languages had had the same view as Friar Domingos de Santo Tomás regarding the Indian, it is certain that the grammars that were published in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, directly or indirectly revealed facts that the apologists for Indian slavery did not suspect, owing to the presumed human and intellectual inferiority of the Indian.

According to Porras (apud Valdeón, 2014, pp. 136-137)<sup>13</sup>,

<sup>11</sup> Porras Barrenechea, *Vocabuário de la lengua general de todo el Peru, llamada lengua Qquichua o del Inca (Prólogo)*. (Lima, 1989), pp.V-XLIV.

<sup>12</sup> Conde de Viñaza, *Bibliografía Española de Lenguas Indígenas de America*. (Madrid, 1892), pp.97, 106 and 113.

<sup>13</sup> Valdeón, Roberto A., *Translation and the Spanish Empire in the Americas*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing Company, 2014.

Domingos de Santo Thomas's interest in the features of the language transcends the merely linguistics and reflects the human qualities of the friar, who expressed his admiration for the Inca tribes and encouraged the Crown to defend the Indians from the abuse of the conquerors.

(...) For the Dominican, the natives were civilized people and he contended that only interested parties would argue otherwise, often for economic reasons. As a follower of Bartolomé de las Casas, he believed not only in Indian rights, but also in the civilized nature of their languages. Ultimately he stressed their intellectual capacities and their predisposition to accept Christianity.

That grammar, written in the heat of a controversy that pitted major names in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century against one another, are still intriguing modernity itself, in spite of all conquests of Anthropology and Social Sciences, though these conquests did not cause all men to understand the Other in his fully meaning, sentencing the latter to human and social exclusion.