

# Lessons to be learned from politically driven language revitalization: the case of Itonama (Isolate, Bolivia)\*

Mily Crevels  
LUCL, Universiteit Leiden

## 1 Introduction

In Bolivia, measures that require civil servants to speak an indigenous language were gradually taken under the 2006–2019 presidencies of Evo Morales Ayma, the country's first indigenous president. According to the 2009 Constitution and Law 269 (2012), candidates for the presidency, vice presidency and other public positions must speak an indigenous language, minimally at an elementary level. Furthermore, the law requires that executives of public or private companies, besides Spanish, should also speak an indigenous language. In smaller communities, the indigenous language that civil servants, e.g. school teachers, are required to speak is the local language. The main institution credited with granting language certificates to candidates to all public positions is the Plurinational Institute of the Study of Languages and Cultures (IPELC, *Instituto Plurinacional de Estudio de Lenguas y Culturas*). The IPELC was created as a specialized body for the standardization and development of indigenous languages. At the same time, 36 Institutes of Language and Culture (ILC, *Instituto de Lengua y Cultura*) have been created until today by the IPELC among each of the indigenous peoples.

Article 5 of the Constitution stipulates that a total of 37 official languages are recognized in Bolivia. These include, in addition to Spanish, the following indigenous languages: Aymara [AYMARAN]; Quechua [QUECHUAN]; Bolivian Guaraní, Guarasu'we, Guarayu, Sirionó, Tapiete, Yuki [TUPI-GUARANIAN]; Baure, Ignaciano, Machineri, Trinitario [ARAWAKAN]; Araona, Cavineña, Ese Ejja, Maropa, Tacana, *Toromona* [TACANAN]; Chácobo, Pakawara, Yaminawa [PANOAN]; Moré [CHAPACURAN]; Ayoreo [ZAMUCOAN]; 'Weenhayek [MATAKOAN]; Besiro [MACRO-GÊAN]; Mosetén, Tsimane' [MOSETENAN]; Canichana [ISOLATE]; Cayubaba [ISOLATE]; Itonama [ISOLATE]; Leko [ISOLATE];

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\* This squib is respectfully dedicated to my doctoral supervisor, Kees Hengeveld, a scholar who has contributed greatly to the development of Functional Grammar, functional typology in general, and to our understanding of complex constructions.

Movima [ISOLATE]; Yuracaré [ISOLATE]; *Kallawaya*; *Puquina*; *Uru-Chipaya*. This list is problematic for a number of reasons that I will not discuss in detail here due to space limitations. Despite repeated mentions in the literature the Toromona remain an enigma or even ghost group today. *Kallawaya* is a language or rather a linguistic variety spoken by a group of itinerant herbalists / healers from Charazani, Bautista Saavedra province, department of La Paz. There is no concrete indication that it was ever spoken as a mother tongue. A number of these official languages are no longer or barely spoken today, but references to the existence of *Puquina* speakers already disappear as early as the beginning of the 19th century (Torero 2002: 389). *Uru-Chipaya* is not a language but a language family with nowadays a sole surviving member, *Chipaya*. Furthermore, the Arawakan languages *Joaquiniano*, *Machineri*, and *Paunaka* were not included in Article 5 of the Constitution.

In Section 2, I will very briefly discuss how the new language requirements affect two domains of the grammar of *Itonama*, an Amazonian indigenous language that is no longer spoken.

## 2 The case of *Itonama*

*Itonama* is a language isolate once spoken in the northeastern Bolivian Amazonian lowlands, at approximately 90 kilometers from the border with Brazil. The *Itonama* live in the department of Beni, in the provinces of Iténez (municipalities of Magdalena and Baures) and Mamoré (municipalities of San Ramón and San Joaquín), more or less in the same area where they were first contacted by the Spaniards in the 17th century. The largest towns are Magdalena, San Ramón, and Huacaraje. Today *Itonama* is virtually extinct and barely remembered by a few elders in the town of Magdalena, who at most know a few words and perhaps a couple of phrases. At the time of my fieldwork (2000–2006) with the very last *Itonama* speakers, the language had not been spoken for at least four to five generations; moreover, there was no one in Magdalena interested in learning the language. Now that the government requires civil servants, e.g. school teachers and local authorities, to have an elementary knowledge of *Itonama*, an extremely interesting process of language revitalization can be witnessed, in which the *Itonama* are rediscovering and partly reinventing their language.

In 2014, the *Itonama* Institute of Language and Culture (ILC *Itonama*) was founded in Magdalena and on September 28–29, 2018, the first Socialization Workshop on the Proposal of the Alphabet of the Native Language of the *Itonama* Culture (*Taller de Socialización de Propuesta del Alfabeto de la Lengua Originaria de la Cultura Itonama*) was organized, in which local authorities and teachers and directors of the local schools of the municipalities of Magdalena, Huacaraje, and San Ramón participated. The outcome of this

workshop was only presented officially five years later, on September 26, 2023 (Ojopi Banega 2023). In Section 2.1, I will discuss the decisions that led to the changes that were made to the existing orthography, but in order to do so I will first give the Itonama phonemes and orthography, as presented in Crevels (2012, 2023).

## 2.1 *Phonemes and orthography*

The Itonama phoneme inventory consists of six vowels (Table 1) and nineteen consonants (Table 2). There are two falling diphthongs: /a<sup>w</sup>/ and /a<sup>j</sup>/.

Table 1: Itonama vowels (Crevels 2023: 488)

	FRONT	CENTRAL	BACK
HIGH	i	í	u
MID	e		o
LOW		a	

Table 2: Itonama consonants (Crevels 2023: 489)

		BILABIAL	ALVEOLAR	POST- ALVEOLAR	PALATAL	VELAR	GLOTTAL
OCCLUSIVE	SIMPLE	p	b	t	d	k	?
	EJECTIVE			t'		k'	
	PALATALIZED			t <sup>j</sup>			
AFFRICATE	SIMPLE			tʃ			
	EJECTIVE			tʃ'			
FRICATIVE			s			h	
NASAL		m		n			
LIQUID	LATERAL			l			
	VIBRANT			r			
SEMIVOWEL		w			j		

During the Indigenous Writers Workshop on the Alphabets of Indigenous Languages of the Bolivian Lowlands (*Taller de Escritores Indígenas de los Alfabetos de Lenguas Indígenas de Tierras Bajas de Bolivia*), held in San Ignacio de Moxos from June 20 until July 2, 2000, the Itonama alphabet was officially established. The alphabet consists of the six vowels and nineteen consonants listed in Tables 3 and 4, respectively (see also Aulo et al. 2003).

Table 3: Itonama alphabet: Vowels (Crevels 2023: 493)

PHONEME	GRAPHEME	PHONEME	GRAPHEME
/i/	i	/e/	e
/í/	í	/o/	o
/u/	u	/a/	a

Table 4: Itonama alphabet: Consonants (Crevels 2023: 494)

PHONEME	GRAPHEME	PHONEME	GRAPHEME	PHONEME	GRAPHEME
/p/	p	/k'/	k'	/n/	n
/b/	b	/ɸ/	,	/l/	l
/t/	t	/tʃ/	ch	/r/	r
/d/	d	/tʃ'/	ch'	/w/	w
/t'/	t'	/s/	s	/j/	y
/tʃ/	ty	/h/	h		
/k/	k	/m/	m		

In the workshop organized by the ILC Itonama in September 2018, the following decisions were made about the existing alphabet — especially by the Itonama teachers:

- replace <i> by <u>
- replace <w> by <gu>, since many Itonama surnames start with <gu> (e.g., Guarimu, Guasase, Guatía) and students are more familiar with this ‘letter’;
- replace <k> by <c> before <a>, <o> or <u>, and by <qu> before <e> and <i>, since <c> and <qu> are better known and more common in the education of students;
- eliminate <ty>, since it is unnecessary and confusing to those learning the language and its pronunciation is similar to <ch> anyhow;
- eliminate <h> (Tables 5 and 6 show that <h> has been substituted by [Spanish] <j>, but this is not mentioned explicitly);
- the Itonama alphabet used to have 23 letters, today it has 21.

Table 5: Itonama alphabet (ILC Itonama 2018, see Ojopi Banega 2023)

GRAPHEME	GRAPHEME	GRAPHEME	GRAPHEME	GRAPHEME	GRAPHEME
a	b	c	ch	d	e
gu	i	j	l	m	n
o	p	qu	r	s	t
u	y	,			

These decisions, inspired by Spanish orthography, are not surprising at all in view of the fact that there are no longer any speakers left and there was no trained linguist present at the workshop. None of the participants was familiar with the Itonama phonemes, let alone able to pronounce the high central [i], the palatalized [tʃ], or the ejectives [t'], [k'], and [ch']. The last point in the list above that was made about the number of letters in the alphabet indicates that the three ejectives are no longer considered to be separate phonemes. The resistance against adopting the graphemes /w/ and /k/ instead of the alternatives based on Spanish orthography is something that I already noticed in the 2000 workshop in San Ignacio de Moxos, where the Chácobo [PANOAN] — all fluent speakers and writers — did not understand why they had to change anything to

an alphabet, also inspired by Spanish orthography, that they had been using since the 1960s (see Prost 1960) and that they were perfectly happy with. Being fluent speakers of Chácobo, they knew how to pronounce every letter in context. The Itonama, however, do not speak their language and have never written it and one cannot but wonder how they will write words like *uwu* ‘river’, *wunawu* ‘village’, or *uchawu* ‘leaf-cutter ant’ in the future, or distinguish between minimal pairs such as *makaya* ‘clothes’ vs. *mak’aya* ‘strong (grip)’ for that matter.

Another interesting change in the language concerns the domain of personal pronouns, which I will discuss in the next section.

## 2.2 Personal pronouns

Itonama personal pronouns seem to be nominalizations. They can be segmented into several morphemes, including relative *-ni* and the verb suffixes *-tye* ‘CONT’ and *-ke* ‘PL’. Although *osni’ka* appears to be a female form, it was used for both 1SG.M and 1SG.F. My consultants at the time informed me that in the old days men used to refer to themselves exclusively as *osni* but that this was no longer the case; *osni’ka* actually seemed to be the preferred form in the case of male speakers and my only female consultant always used *osni’ka*.<sup>1</sup> The personal pronouns that were used by the last speakers are listed in Table 6; Table 7 shows the pronouns as they are now taught in an elementary online Itonama course by the ILC Itonama.

Table 6: Personal pronouns (Crevels 2023: 501)

PERSON	FORM	SEGMENTATION	MORPHEME-BY-MORPHEME
1SG	<i>osni’ka</i>	<i>os-ni’-ka</i>	1SG-REL-F.SG
	<i>osni</i>	<i>os-ni</i>	1SG-REL
2SG	<i>o’ni</i>	<i>o’-ni</i>	2SG-REL
2SG.F	<i>ko’ni</i>	<i>k-o’-ni</i>	F-2SG-REL
3SG.M	<i>ohni</i>	<i>oh-ni</i>	3-REL
3SG.F	<i>pini</i>	<i>pi-ni</i>	3SG.F-REL
1PL.INCL	<i>dihnitye’ke</i>	<i>dih-ni-tye’-ke</i>	1PL.INCL-REL-CONT-PL
1PL.EXCL	<i>sihnitye’ke</i>	<i>sih-ni-tye’-ke</i>	1PL.EXCL-REL-CONT-PL
2PL	<i>dihnitye’ke</i>	<i>dih-ni-tye’-ke</i>	2PL-REL-CONT-PL
3PL	<i>ohnitye’ke</i>	<i>oh-ni-tye’-ke</i>	3-REL-CONT-PL

<sup>1</sup> Note that *-ka* signals feminine singular in nouns, adjectives, demonstratives, the two native numerals, and in independent verb forms when the subject of an (in)transitive clause is a third person feminine singular.

Table 7: Personal pronouns (ILC Itonama 2024, see Ojopi Banega 2024; my segmentation and glosses)

PERSON	FORM	SEGMENTATION	MORPHEME-BY-MORPHEME
1SG.M	<i>osni</i>	<i>os-ni</i>	1SG-REL
1SG.F	<i>osni'ca</i>	<i>os-ni'-ca</i>	1SG-REL-F.SG
2SG	<i>o'ni</i>	<i>o'-ni</i>	2SG-REL
3SG.M	<i>ojni</i>	<i>oh-ni</i>	3-REL
3SG.F	<i>pini</i>	<i>pi-ni</i>	3SG.F-REL
1PL.M	<i>sijni'que</i>	<i>sij-ni'-que</i>	1PL.EXCL-REL-PL
1PL.F	<i>dijni'queca</i>	<i>dij-ni'-que-ca</i>	1PL.INCL-REL-PL-F.SG
2PL	<i>dijniye'que</i>	<i>dij-ni-ye'-que</i>	2PL-REL-?-PL
3PL.M	<i>ohniye'que</i>	<i>oj-ni-ye'-que</i>	3-REL-?-PL
3PL.F	<i>pijniye'queca</i>	<i>pi-j-ni-ye'-que-ca</i>	3SG.F-?-?-PL-FG.SG

The paradigm in Table 7 differs from the one in Table 6 in the following points:

- gendered 1SG: this gender distinction was absent in the speech of my male consultants;
- non-gendered 2SG: only the masculine form is given as a general form for 2SG;
- gendered 1PL instead of inclusive/exclusive distinction: use of 1PL.EXCL for 1PL.M and 1PL.INCL followed by the F.SG suffix *-ka* for 1PL.F;
- in the forms *dijniye'que* and *ohniye'que* for 2PL and 3PL.M a <t> is missing: *dihniye'ke* and *ohniye'ke*;
- the 3PL.F form is an innovation, since there is no gender distinction in 3PL.

The differences seem to relate to gender and the unfamiliarity with clusivity; in the case of 2PL, 3PL.M and 3PL.F they probably have to do with the fact that the ILC Itonama decided to eliminate <ty> from the alphabet. However, one would have expected that <ty> would at least have been substituted by <ch>, which is not the case here, since only <t> has been eliminated.

### 3 Lessons to be learned

The wonderful thing about the new language requirements for civil servants is that through the ILC Itonama many Itonama have been brought in contact with their ancestral culture and language, something that seemed quite impossible just a few years ago. The main question I am asking myself now is whether language revitalization efforts need linguists and I am not the only one who believes that this is not the case, since all you need is a space and some grown-ups who are willing to speak the language to some children (Speas 2009: 23). Unfortunately, there are no adult Itonama speakers left, but the ILC Itonama seems to be very active and it is slowly becoming clear to me that my skills as a linguist probably are not the skills that the Itonama community needs to

revitalize their language, be it that I hope that at a certain point in the future I may be of help.

## Uncommon abbreviations

CONT	continuative
ILC	<i>Instituto de Lengua y Cultura</i>
IPELC	<i>Instituto Plurinacional de Estudio de Lenguas y Culturas</i>

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