

**Note:** Linguistic and cultural marginalization in *Las Niñas Quispe*: A Sapir-Whorf approach.<sup>1</sup>

**Nota:** Marginación lingüística y cultural en *Las Niñas Quispe*: un enfoque desde la hipótesis Sapir-Whorf.

### Abstract

This note presents a review of the film *Las niñas Quispe* (Sepúlveda, 2013) through the lens of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Based on the true story of three Colla sisters in the Chilean highlands during the 1970s, the film portrays a world marked by silence, illiteracy, and limited interactions and communicative resources that restrict the characters' ability to imagine alternative futures. The film reveals how symbolic exclusion operates beyond material deprivation, constraining not only expression but also access to broader worldviews. From a moderate interpretation of linguistic relativity, it can be observed that language does not strictly determine the sisters' tragic fate, but it does profoundly shape their ways of perceiving and engaging with reality. Ultimately, the film stands as a powerful metaphor for how the impoverishment of language can narrow the horizon of what is thinkable, turning silence into both a survival mechanism and a forced choice.

**Keywords:** Linguistic relativity, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Sebastián Sepúlveda, Colla.

### Resumen

Esta nota presenta una revisión de la película *Las niñas Quispe* (Sepúlveda, 2013) a partir de los postulados de la hipótesis de Sapir-Whorf. Basada en la historia real de tres hermanas de la etnia colla en el altiplano chileno durante la década de 1970, la película retrata un mundo marcado por el silencio, el analfabetismo y los recursos comunicativos limitados que restringen la capacidad de los personajes para imaginar futuros alternativos. La película evidencia cómo la exclusión simbólica opera más allá de la carencia material, limitando no sólo la expresión, sino también el acceso a cosmovisiones más amplias. Desde una interpretación moderada del relativismo lingüístico, es posible observar que el lenguaje no determina estrictamente el trágico destino de las hermanas, pero sí condiciona profundamente sus formas de percibir y relacionarse con la realidad. En última instancia, la película se erige como una potente metáfora de cómo el empobrecimiento del lenguaje puede estrechar el horizonte de lo pensable, convirtiendo al silencio en un mecanismo de supervivencia y, al mismo tiempo, en una forzosa decisión.

**Palabras clave:** relativismo lingüístico, hipótesis de Sapir-Whorf, Sebastián Sepúlveda, Colla.

### Introduction

This brief review is presented as an exercise within the framework of an ongoing study of twentieth-century linguistic theories. From this standpoint, the review emerged with the aim of establishing a link between such theories and identity-related aspects of Chilean culture and history portrayed in the film *Las niñas Quispe*, directed by Sebastián Sepúlveda (2013). The review also intends to foreground the relevance of language—not merely as a medium of communication, but as a symbolic system that shapes perception, identity, and the horizon of possible action. While

<sup>1</sup> Este trabajo se deriva de un ejercicio de reflexión en el marco de la asignatura de Teorías Lingüísticas del Doctorado en Lingüística de la Universidad de Concepción.



*Las niñas Quispe* has been analyzed from sociocultural and political perspectives (e.g., Bortignon, 2019; Navarro-Daniels, 2018) little attention has been paid to its linguistic dimension. This review, therefore, seeks to contribute to the body of studies on the film by examining it through the lens of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, insofar as language influences the thought of its speakers and shapes their possibilities for agency and transformation.

The work of the linguist and anthropologist Edward Sapir developed within the framework of American structuralism in the early twentieth century. Unlike European structuralism, which was more theoretical and abstract in orientation, American structuralism adopted an empirical approach, focused on the description and analysis of Native American languages (Kristeva, 1988). In this context, collaboration between anthropologists and linguists was essential for the study of the oral languages spoken by various Native communities in the United States and Canada (Robins, 1997).

Sapir's approach, in contrast to the formalist rigor of Leonard Bloomfield, was characterized by an interdisciplinary outlook influenced by anthropology, literature, and psychology (Robins, 1997). Inspired by the thought of Boas and Humboldt, Sapir adopted a holistic perspective on language, considering languages to be deeply connected to the cultural contexts in which they develop (Leroy, 1969). This conception motivated a theoretical systematization that would consolidate a distinctive line of research within American linguistics (Kristeva, 1988).

With regard to the conception of language, Sapir (1921) argued that it constitutes an exclusively human faculty, one that does not stem from biological instincts but rather manifests as a cultural and voluntary act sustained by a system of symbols used for communication. He expressed this in a fundamental definition: "Language is a purely human and noninstinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols" (p. 7). From this perspective, Sapir distances himself from an innatist view of language, noting that language acquisition is determined by the social environment; thus, he maintained that a child, in the absence of social interaction, may learn to move about, but not to speak (Sapir, 1921).

In the same line of thought, Sapir views language not only as a tool for expression but also a structuring element of thought. He suggested that thought can be understood as the highest latent content of speech—that is, what is obtained by interpreting each linguistic element at its fullest conceptual value: "From the point of view of language, thought may be defined as the highest latent or potential content of speech [...]" (Sapir, 1921, p. 13). Consequently, language is not merely a vehicle for thought but is intrinsically bound to its formation and unfolding. Sapir even goes so far as to question whether thought can exist in any meaningful way without linguistic mediation. This relationship is encapsulated in one of his most cited statements: "Once more, language, as a structure, is on its inner face the mold of thought" (p. 21). From this conception, the author delineates his study of language as an analysis of its underlying and abstract structure, and of how this structure directly influences cognitive processes and the ways in which human beings organize their experience of the world, noting that "It is this abstracted language, rather more than the physical facts of speech, that is to concern us in our inquiry" (p. 21). In this context, Sapir's theory would hold that language can determine the modes of thought of its speakers (Gil, 2001).

Sapir's postulates found continuity in the work of his disciple Benjamin Lee Whorf, with whom he shared an interest in the relationship between language, culture, and thought. As a result of research in this vein, linguistic relativism—also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis—emerged, according to which the structure of a language influences, and may even determine, the

thought of its speakers (Kristeva, 1988). This formulation gave rise to a wide linguistic debate that, according to Gil (2001), has led to a moderated version of the hypothesis: language does not determine the thought of its speakers but rather conditions it. From this latter distinction, and as a reflective exercise in the Chilean context, it becomes relevant to examine how the relationship between language and thought is manifested in the case of the protagonists of the film *Las niñas Quispe*.

## The film

*Las niñas Quispe* (2013) is based on real events that took place in Chile in 1974, when three sisters from the Colla Indigenous group, who worked as shepherds, were found dead in the Atacama highlands in what was determined to be a collective suicide. Their story unfolded during a period marked by the military dictatorship, agrarian reforms, and the forced displacement of indigenous communities—all of which deepened their sense of isolation and vulnerability (Navarro-Daniels, 2018; Bortignon, 2019). In this sense, although fictionalized, the film appears to reflect the lived experiences of Colla Indigenous groups, who have historically been documented as shepherds inhabiting the rural highlands of northern Chile. Research also indicates that the original language of the Colla communities has roots in Quechua, incorporating variations shaped by their daily practices and natural surroundings (Mercado Guerra & Gundermann Kröll, 2022). The film itself is presented in Spanish.

Set in the vast and arid hills of the *altiplano* (highlands), the film opens by portraying the laborious routine of the Quispe sisters—Justa, Lucía, and Luciana—as they struggle to sustain their herd of goats, their main source of food and livelihood. Through long shots of the barren landscape, repetitive tasks, and sparse dialogue, the film conveys not only the harshness of rural life but also the sisters' limited means of expression. Within this silence, Luciana, the youngest, emerges as the figure who most visibly resists emotional confinement. Unlike Justa, who imposes silence as a survival strategy, or Lucía, who replicates her model, Luciana expresses a timid but persistent desire to express and know more—about her family's past, about men, and about the world beyond the hills. Her gestures of curiosity and longing for connection expose the emotional cost of repression and highlight the fragile possibilities of agency in a context of harsh rurality, illiteracy, and solitude. Yet her attempts at openness find little room, absorbed by the daily struggle for subsistence. Their lives thus become consumed by work, effectively replacing conversation. As Bortignon (2019) notes, keeping the family focused on tasks is a defining trait of the Colla people, and the film effectively represents this as the sisters' brief interactions are interwoven with the natural sounds of the landscape. In this sense, silence is not simply a cinematic choice but reflects a historical and cultural adaptation to solitude, as documented by Bujes (2008).

In one of the brief exchanges with the outside world, a vendor informs the sisters of a national reform that threatens the elimination of their herd. This shocking news leaves the Quispe girls uneasy and in deep uncertainty about their future. With no neighbors around and faced with an uncertain future—marked by the military dictatorship, displacement, and urban life—the sisters see no alternative but collective suicide. In this way, the director Sebastián Sepúlveda constructs a metaphorical narrative in which the Quispe sisters prepare for their first, yet final journey, carrying as their only proof of citizenship their identity cards, in a definitive farewell to a world that, in their eyes, seemed to be vanishing.

## Review

From the perspective of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language not only reflects reality but also shapes the way individuals perceive and structure the world. In *Las niñas Quispe*, this is expressed through two interconnected dimensions—linguistic and cultural marginality—that condition the protagonists’ possibilities of thought, agency, and transformation.

In terms of linguistic marginality, this dimension is evidenced in the poor expression and limited expression mechanisms of the Quispe sisters. The film shows how this restricted interaction becomes normalized, particularly through Justa’s example. Recent studies on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (e.g., Natsir et al., 2025) suggest a strong connection between language and personality, implying that repeated behaviors eventually shape identity. From this perspective, silence emerges as a recurrent practice in the sisters’ lives which—together with illiteracy and fragmented orality—transforms them from resilient adult women into fragile girls unable to fully express their emotions or imagine alternative futures. Deprived of discursive tools, they also lack symbolic resources to process pain, fear, or desire. As a result, their emotions and thoughts become encapsulated in routine gestures and resigned gazes that, day after day, reproduce an existence without horizons. Their lives, thus, become absorbed in work, effectively replacing conversation. According to Bortignon (2019), maintaining the family focused on tasks is one of the defining characteristics of the Colla Indigenous group, which the film successfully represents, as the sisters’ brief interactions are interwoven with the natural sounds of the landscape. Moreover, this scarcity of communication is not merely a fictional device but has been documented as a historical and cultural adaptation to solitude—a defining trait of the Colla people, as noted by Bujes (2008).

Regarding cultural marginality, the sisters’ lives are shaped by geographical isolation, exclusion from modernity, and a social environment where symbolic silencing prevails. Bortignon (2019) highlights that this isolation arises as the story unfolds between two cultural frameworks: the world the sisters know and the outside world, which remains largely unknown to them. Justa is the only one of the three who has briefly experienced life beyond the Colla community, though marked only by negative experiences. As a result, the sisters act with caution and avoid imagining a life outside the arid hills. This exclusion becomes more evident when they realize that they might be forced to sell their goats and move to an urban setting amid military control. At this point, it is clear that the protagonists inhabit a world without words to demand, narrate, or dream. The lack of appropriate tools of expression, compounded by geographic solitude and lack of formal education, deepens their fear of men and of the world beyond the hills and their herd. Within this framework, suicide emerges less as a tragic outburst than as a logical consequence of a universe where no alternative narratives can be constructed. Navarro-Daniels (2018) argues that the Quispe sisters’ suicide can also be interpreted as a deliberate act of resistance to national reform. Nevertheless, the film suggests that this outcome may equally reflect minds trapped in a mold of thought imposed by linguistic and cultural marginalization which leads them to find no alternative solutions.

In this sense, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis gains a dimension: limiting language, or its development, restricts not only communication but also access to a broader worldview, leaving the Quispe sisters confined in a silence that shapes their tragic fate. Silence in the film is not merely the absence of words but the symptom of a broader system of exclusion, where illiteracy, geographic isolation, and cultural marginalization converge to reduce the sisters’ capacity to construct alternative narratives about their lives. From this perspective, linguistic poverty becomes

both a personal constraint and a collective condition that reflects the historical position of indigenous groups in Chile. The absence of discursive tools not only weakens the sisters' ability to express emotions or desires but also limits their participation in wider cultural and political frameworks. Based on this, it can be argued that, although language did not absolutely determine the fate of the Quispe sisters—as a strong reading of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis might suggest—it is evident that contextual, cultural, and symbolic factors profoundly shaped the configuration of their possibilities for action and thought. Linguistic poverty and cultural marginalization conditioned the possible ways of imagining alternatives to their reality. Thus, *Las niñas Quispe* tells not only a story of material exclusion and the harshness of rural life faced by an indigenous group of sisters, but also of symbolic exclusion, where the impoverishment of language and social interaction narrows the horizon of what is thinkable.

## Conclusion

In sum, *Las niñas Quispe* is a film that makes it possible to understand how linguistic and cultural marginality transcends the individual to become a form of symbolic exclusion that conditions thought, agency, and the possibilities of transformation. From a moderate reading of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the film shows that although language does not absolutely determine the protagonists' fate, it does shape and constrain the frameworks through which they can interpret their reality and envision possible futures. Thus, silence, illiteracy, and a limited communicative repertoire not only express a material deprivation but also emerge as symbolic barriers that hinder the construction of alternative narratives in the face of adversity. In this sense, Sepúlveda's work not only documents a historical event in Chilean reality but also challenges the audience to reflect on the profound implications of access—or lack of access—to a language and interactions that enable individuals to name, question, and transform realities, particularly in the case of isolated or marginalized communities.

For linguistics, the film serves as a reminder that language is not merely an abstract system but a lived resource whose presence—or absence—shapes human agency, cognition, and social belonging. By analyzing *Las niñas Quispe* through this lens, the study contributes to broader discussions on how linguistic deprivation impacts the ways in which communities experience and interpret the world.

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