

I'm the last speaker of my language

I come from Chile and I've always been interested in my country's history and culture. It all started when I was about eight and I started to learn about the country's indigenous inhabitants. When I first found out about the native people of Patagonia, in the far south, I had no idea that my mother's family was from there and that her grandfather had been a Selk'nam. The last speaker of Selk'nam died in 1974. I really wanted to learn Selk'nam, so relatives on my father's side who live in Punta Arenas, the southernmost town in mainland Chile, sent me dictionaries. **(1)**..... But I had no idea what these sounded like.

Then, when I was about eleven, I saw a television programme about the Yagán people who lived on the island of Tierra del Fuego, the southernmost tip of South America. The programme interviewed two sisters, Cristina and Ursula Calderón, and said they were the only two speakers of their language left. **(2)**..... Only later did I discover that the two languages are quite different; that the two peoples couldn't communicate with each other.

One day, my mother told me that although she was born in the capital, Santiago, her grandfather was a Selk'nam from the north of Tierra del Fuego. Nobody had ever told me anything about this before. When I asked why, she said that when she was young she had been teased for looking different, and so she had just kept quiet about it.

When I was thirteen, I went to the south for the first time on my own to meet Cristina Calderón. **(3)**..... I discovered that there used to be four thousand Selk'nam in Tierra del Fuego. They were hunters of wild cats and foxes. The Yagán lived further south and travelled by canoe all the way down to Cape Horn, but the Selk'nam moved on foot.

Settlers from the north arrived in the nineteenth century and introduced diseases like measles and typhoid, which affected the local people very badly. Now, there's no way back. I got hold of some recordings of a Selk'nam shaman from the 1960s

and started to study them. (4)..... Gradually, however, I began to understand how the words sounded and began to reproduce them.

The Selk'nam express themselves using lots of prefixes and suffixes, and the sounds are guttural, nasal and tonal. (5)..... For example, it has lots of different words for the weather. The hardest thing in Selk'nam, however, is the verbs – they all sound a bit the same. There are some English loanwords, such as 'bread' and 'money'. Others are descriptive: 'read' translates as 'playing with words' and 'drum' as 'vibrating leather'. Then there are words for modern things – for 'telephone', you have to say 'speak from afar', and 'car' is 'go on four wheels'. I speak the language well now. Cristina's husband spoke Selk'nam and apparently I sound just like him.

Because music is something that reaches lots of people, I started composing traditional songs in Selk'nam and formed a band with two friends. This meant that they had to learn some words, too. (6)..... I need to teach my language to more people because if something happened to me, it would die out all over again.

- A** I felt a sudden desire to learn that one too.
- B** It was slow because I had no one to talk to.
- C** Yagán is quite different, however, because it has more vocabulary.
- D** This meant that I was able to start learning words, verbs and expressions.
- E** This was good because I didn't want to be the only one.
- F** These turned out to be rather hard for me to pronounce, however.
- G** The trip seemed the best way to find out about my roots.