To travel in the Sierra Norte is a challenge. Finding someone who owns a truck, and who's willing to trek into the highlands, proves difficult; the condition of the roads is punishing, especially during the rainy season, when even the scantiest upkeep to the narrow dirt roads is near impossible. After two days on a bus and in the backs of various pickup trucks that took me from Mexico City to San Pedro Tres Arroyos, I arrive dirty and exhausted. Nevertheless, my language consultant, Antonio, and his family, are all thrilled to see me, and I them. Antonio and I have spent countless hours together in previous summers documenting his language, and I've come back to Tres Arroyos, or *lechi usyá'*, to continue the task.

Half of the world's languages are expected to disappear within the next century. A language is considered endangered if it is at risk for being one of those languages lost. As a field linguist, two of my goals are to learn as much as possible about a language before it is lost, and to simultaneously try to prevent that loss from ever happening. My work takes me to the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, Mexico, and to a language called Choapan Zapotec, or *di'idza xí'ídza'*. Choapan has about 12,000 speakers, though fewer and fewer children are learning the language — one sign of language endangerment.

As part of the expansive Oto-Manguean language family, the language of Choapan Zapotec has roots in Mexico that go back at least 4,000 years, probably longer. Though Choapan Zapotec itself is much younger than that, the linguistic and cultural ancestors of Zapotec speakers were among the earliest people in Mesoamerica. Today, speakers of Zapotec and other indigenous Mexican languages are vastly outnumbered by Spanish speakers, despite the language's relatively short history in the country — and the continent.

Like our previous field seasons together, Antonio and I will work on writing the Choapan Zapotec dictionary, which now totals about 6,000 entries. With most of the entries already created, our work this summer will focus on checking everything that's already been done. This job is simultaneously tedious and exciting: to go through every entry in a dictionary and check pronunciation, figure out the part of speech, review all the verb conjugations or noun possessive markers, and collect an example sentence, is slow work. But when a new word comes up, or I learn a different way to make a question, or Antonio teaches me something I didn't know about Choapan Zapotec culture, it's thrilling. 'New' (to me) discoveries mean more information I can preserve; recording a language means recording a tiny sliver of all human experience.

Language governs everything; it is important to almost every task we perform throughout the day, even the most minute. How could you order your morning coffee without language, or greet your significant other, or even think? Though not all thoughts depend on language (you can be angry without thinking "I'm so mad", for example), an idea with any sort of complexity is usually conceived of with words. Linguistic relativity, the idea that language shapes the way people conceptualize the world, originated in the 19th century, but is still debated by linguists today. While many agree that the language one speaks influences one's thoughts, the extent to which this is true is still unclear.

If language is intertwined with thought and experience, then what is slipping away as the world's languages become extinct? As any bilingual will tell you, a story is not the same told in English as in Mandarin, for example. To lose entire world-views, entire systems of expression and thought, worlds of knowledge about history, and art, and nature — this is what we face. Linguists from all over the world are fighting to stop language loss and to document endangered languages before the last speakers no longer walk with the living.

Though Choapan Zapotec is fortunately far from being on its last speakers, it is by no means safe. In the town where I work, Tres Arroyos, children no longer speak the language, an unhealthy sign in terms of language vitality. Other towns, even more difficult for outsiders to access than Tres Arroyos, still have children who learn Zapotec from infancy. The fear of every field linguist is that towns like these will soon stop being dominant in the indigenous language and switch over to the more prestigious dominant language, whatever that happens to be in the area.

This switch, which is often gradual, is often heralded by modernization. Antonio, my consultant, tells me about a time, less than 50 years ago, when his village didn't have lights, or roads navigable by truck, or modern beds. They used wooden blocks as seats, or sat on the ground, and didn't use tables, he says. People slept on *petates*, woven reed mats, which were simply placed on the floor. Things like metal roofs were much harder to get, since the closest town with such amenities was at least three days' walk away. Since roads have made accessing *lechi usyá'* easier, things like metal roofs and tables are commonplace in the town. However, these modern conveniences mean more Spanish and Spanish speakers in the town, and thus, more rapid language loss.

All modernization doesn't necessarily mean language death, however. Technology like improved recording capabilities, online dictionaries, and analytical linguistic computer tools can all contribute to language documentation, revitalization, and preservation. Organizations like Living Tongues (livingtongues.org), in partnership with National Geographic's Enduring Voices project (http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/enduring-voices/), work to document endangered languages, initiate or improve language revitalization projects within communities, and to increase awareness about language loss. Here at Berkeley, the linguistics department has been a leader in language documentation since its inception in 1901. Many of my colleagues and professors continue this tradition, and their work, at field sites all over the world, from South America, to Papua New Guinea, to Africa, to right here in California, is inspiring. Through projects like creating online language databases, practical orthographies, effective language teaching systems, and even simply by encouraging speakers to keep using their language, linguists can enact change.

Change is not easy to come by, however. One of the challenges a linguist faces while documenting a language is the sheer volume inherent to the task. In my time working on Choapan Zapotec, I am continuously overwhelmed: how do you document everything that could possibly be said? Language shapes our realities; how do you write down an entire world? It will never be enough: of all the books that there are written in English and about the English language, these will never amount to the collective knowledge contained in the minds of the speakers of the language. If there are only ever a handful of books written in Zapotec or about Zapotec, the responsibility of choosing what goes into some of those books, of what will be preserved for posterity, is humbling.

This humility is made no less by the fact that Choapan Zapotec speakers trust me with, as my consultant Antonio put it, "nuestro idioma que nos regaló Dios"— the language that God gave them. Antonio tells me that some community members, whose ancestors spoke Zapotec, but who themselves do not speak it, have prejudiced attitudes towards the language: "They say it's a worthless language, that we shouldn't bother speaking it anymore. Why don't we only speak Spanish? It's better than Zapotec, they say." Ideas like these are almost always present in cases of language loss; indeed, language prejudice is one of the factors in language loss and death in the first place. If everyone makes fun of the way you talk, or for that matter, the language you talk in, there's little incentive to keep talking that way.

For Choapan Zapotec, and other closely related Zapotec languages, there's still hope. Linguist- and community-initiated programs are becoming more common, and educational efforts gradually increase the prestige of Zapotec in the communities where it was always spoken. The situation is at a balancing point: if the right steps are taken, devastating language loss can be avoided, but without proper measures, Choapan Zapotec's days might be limited. In communities throughout Latin America and the rest of the world, situations are similar, and often times more dire. My documentation work of Choapan Zapotec is immediately important to me, my consultant, and the Zapotec community, but language loss is an issue that concerns, or should concern us all.