Conducting a quantitative study of focus in a highly endangered language. The case of Ixcatec (Otomanguean)

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In this talk we will discuss the methodological difficulties that arise for the study of focus in highly endangered languages. We will take the example of the study conducted in Ixcatec, an Otomanguean language of Mexico with only four fluent speakers.

Although the analysis of spontaneous and elicited data allows for a general understanding of focus marking, experimental tasks seem necessary in order to statistically confirm some of the more qualitative-like observations. But how can researchers implement these tasks outside of the phonetics laboratory, with little-educated and generally elder speakers, as is the case for most highly endangered languages? Moreover, if repetition of the target words is relatively easy to obtain for phonetics, the study of focus is a more complex task that typically can't rely on word repetition.

We will be presenting some of the methods we tested in order to obtain a sufficient number of tokens to allow for statistical generalizations, produced in similar focus conditions to allow for comparability, while minimizing the risk that information structure effects be washed out over the course of multiple repetitions. We will also present the contribution that the results of such a study make to focus typology and theory.