The on-going documentation of Tilapa Otomi: A critically endangered language of Mexico

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In my talk, I present the type of documentation work I carry on Tilapa Otomi, which is an Otomi language spoken in the village of Santiago Tilapa, State of Mexico, Mexico. The language is critically endangered, as it is only spoken fluently by less than twenty old people. Otomi is a shallow linguistic family of the Oto-Pamean branch of Oto-Manguean and consists of at least seven different languages. In the family, Tilapa Otomi stands as the most conservative one with the most complex inflectional system, and it provides essential clues to understand the grammar of Old Otomi; the old language spoken in the XVI century at the time of the Spanish Colony of the New Spain.

The documentation of Tilapa Otomi is an on-going project that started in 2007. The goal of the project is to collect as much natural data of the language as it is possible through the recording of spontaneous and traditional narratives as well as through conversations. I have my own approach to language documentation, which is one that works for me, basically aimed at achieving high-quality data for high-quality grammatical descriptions. In my approach, one must rely on natural textual usage to illustrate grammatical phenomena to be described, while at the same time, one must rely on elicitation as a necessary tool to obtain efficient clues to shed light onto the distribution and limits of those phenomena. However, my techniques for actual data collection and transcription remain idiosyncratic. For example, although aware of its advantages, I do not use conventional documentation software tools such as SIL Toolbox or MPI Elan; my main tools at present being MS Excel, Transcriber (a French developed tool for assisting the manual annotation of speech signals) and WavePad. I show in the talk the different methods I use to work on the language as well what the results look like.