



RECOVERING VOICES

Seminar Series in
Endangered Languages and
Indigenous Knowledge

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NMNH, Kerby Room

***Fragments of a Language Practice:
Documenting the Chinantec Whistled Speech Register***

Speakers of Sochiapam Chinantec of Oaxaca, Mexico have historically used a whistled linguistic register for long-distance communication. Whistled speech was once such an important element of the language-culture of the community that boys who could not effectively communicate through whistles upon reaching adulthood would be fined bi-annually until developing competence. Whistled speech organized the police force, and served the general community for distance communication across the mountainous landscape—needs fulfilled today by walkie-talkies and public address systems. In 2011, an interdisciplinary research team funded by a RAPID response NSF grant worked with five remaining community members who knew how to use whistled speech. In this talk I explain how the prosodic structure of Chinantec allows speakers to perceive and recognize through the whistled channel alone nearly anything that can be said with words. I describe our two-component documentation that partnered linguistic documentation, documentary film-makers, and community members to produce a permanent on-line language archive of transcribed and translated videos of whistled conversations and a public television documentary designed to share this phenomenon with the general public and raise awareness of language endangerment. During the seminar we will view the 23-minute documentary and follow it with a general discussion.



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