Remote fieldwork:
conducting language documentation during COVID

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One of the many consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic was that most language documenters lost the capacity to conduct linguistic fieldwork on-site. In 2020, researchers living far away from their fieldsites were cut off from the possibility of visiting the language communities they worked with, or from launching previously planned projects which required international travel.

This talk focuses two possible approaches to remote language work: (1) work with a speaker via online conferencing software; and (2) 'fieldwork by proxy': collaboration with an academic colleague based in the country where the language is spoken. Combining these two approaches, in late 2020, I was able to launch a successful remote fieldwork project to document two Quechuan languages spoken in Ecuador.

This talk aims to describe both online and 'by proxy' fieldwork in detail allowing for their potential replication. I provide a step-by-step overview of how both these approaches were implemented in my project. I focus, in particular, on how working relationships with local collaborators were established, and how project-related tasks are distributed among the different project members (myself, native speakers, local academic collaborators). The descriptions of both remote fieldwork modes also include their respective workflows, details of training provided to collaborators, and administrative and logistical issues encountered in the process. Finally, I provide a list of conditions which I consider necessary and sufficient for online and 'by proxy' fieldwork to be implemented successfully in contexts beyond my own fieldsite.

The talk concludes with a brief reflection on the relationship between remote and on-site fieldwork, and on remote/by proxy fieldwork as a potential new addition to the language documentation toolkit. In this attempt to theorise remote fieldwork, I focus in particular on what Grinevald (2003: 53) considers the very foundation of language documentation: 'the human relations between linguists and speakers of the languages they set out to document.'

References

Grinevald, Colette. 2003. Speakers and documentation of endangered languages. In Peter K. Austin (ed.) *Language Documentation and Description,* vol 1. London: SOAS, 52-72.