

## RESEARCH

# My Life in the Clouds

By Christian DiCanio

I awake to the crowing of a rooster and sink deeper beneath the covers imagining its untimely demise. But the cold has crept into the house during the night so, shivering, I drag myself out of bed in the dim morning light. Outside I breathe in the fresh, thin air and peer through the clouds still settled over San Martín Itunyoso to watch the sun rising over the mountains.

I have been coming to this town since 2004 to do linguistic fieldwork on the local language, Trique (pronounced “tree-key”). Located in the western region of the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, San Martín Itunyoso is perched nearly two miles above sea level in a mountainous region called “La Mixteca.” Clouds do not so much cover the sky here but instead slide from mountain to valley, engulfing huge regions in their cool whiteness.

At this time in the morning, farmers are heading out to start work on their *milpas*, carrying shovels and water with them. As a linguist I feel obliged to note that “milpa” isn’t easily translated as “farm.” It is indeed a field with corn growing in it, but unlike many farms in the U.S., the herbs and “weeds” that grow around the corn don’t get pulled out. Called *quelites* in Mexican Spanish, they make up a very important part of the diet of Trique people.

When in San Martín Itunyoso, I stay at a house owned by the brother of my friend Benigno. His brother has been gone for six years, working as a migrant laborer in California. Benigno and I have been working together on his language since I first arrived in 2004. Entering the town wasn’t easy. It is not an area of Oaxaca where tourists are welcomed with open arms. It belongs to one of the poorest regions of one of the poorest states in Mexico. During my time here I have been stared at by children yelling, “*kuringúu!*” (“gringo”) and interrogated by those suspicious of my intentions. Rumors have passed through the community alleging that I was earning vast quantities of money selling Trique culture back in the U.S. Over time, I have worked to calm people’s fears regarding my presence.

For three years now Benigno and I have been writing a picture dictionary of the San Martín Itunyoso Trique language. Back in 2004, I thought, albeit naively, that we could complete the work in one summer and subsequently publish the book through the state’s public education institute. The language had never been written, so I felt that

a modest project like ours could bring some cultural pride to the community and help people to eventually become literate in their language.

During my fieldwork, I spent time observing and collecting data for my dissertation while also working on the picture dictionary. While there is a scientific method of transcribing the language’s sounds, a picture dictionary must contain a practical orthography that is accessible to its readers.

Most linguists believe that a writing system should be phonemic, where a single letter or symbol represents exactly one sound that is contrastive in the language. For instance, the sounds /l/ and /r/ are contrastive in English, in words like “lip” and “rip.” Since these words have different meanings by virtue of having a different sound, we have good evidence for distinguishing /l/ and /r/ in the language’s writing system. By contrast, there are no words in Japanese that distinguish these two sounds, so they are not written differently.

In order to figure out what letters a writing system needs, one must classify those sounds which contrast meaning in words. So, before I could develop a writing system for Trique, I had to figure out all the different sounds and tones. This required listening to different words elicited from speakers, carefully transcribing slight differences in pronunciation and then repeating the words that I thought had differences in pronunciation to see if they were meaningful. I then grouped words with similar sounds together, asked speakers how they were pronounced and noted if a word in the set sounded markedly different from the others. It was a meticulous process of careful listening, transcription and organization. Depending on the complexity of the language, it can take months or years to do. Since Trique is tonal, the process took me over two years.

A tone language is one where a change in pitch changes the meaning of a particular word. There are nine tones in Trique. Examples of five of the tones are as follows: the word *nne* with a very low pitch means “naked,” *nne* with a low pitch means “to lie to someone,” *nne* with a midlevel pitch means “plough,” *nne* with a slightly falling pitch means “water,” and *nne* with a large falling pitch means “meat.” There is no typo here. One pronounces each word with the same consonants and vowels (a long “n” and the vowel “e”),



Photo by Christian DiCanio

### San Martín Intunyoso.

but with different tones.

Once I figured out which sounds were contrastive, I devised a writing system for the language. Writing systems undergo much revision before they are ever used by speakers. If they are used, they evolve into new forms that uniquely reflect the speakers' cultural and linguistic concerns. It may be the case that the way I think Trique could be written (from a very systematic, phonological perspective) will be adopted by everyone who speaks the language, but the writing system could also develop into a modified form which retains only parts of what I have conceived it to be.

This past summer I tested out the writing system when I recorded a Trique story “Chube ngà Cha’yanj” (“The Dog and the Coyote”). Although it took several days to record the story and learn the meaning of each word and sentence, piece by piece, it was worth it. When it was complete I gave it to speakers of the language whom I work with. While it was difficult for them to read their language for the first time, a few were able to make out sentences very clearly. However, their real test was in asking me to read it (repeatedly). If they could understand me, then it had been written well.

Fortunately I passed the test. Trique people thought it was very strange that a white person was speaking their language, but they understood me.

Writing down the story and working on the picture-dictionary made me reevaluate some of my goals as a linguist. If I were only to have explored issues related to my thesis, I would have missed the opportunity to offer something back to the speakers of a language without any resources. I would not have learned as many words or gotten to know as many people in the community. Because I was able to combine my research with culturally-relevant projects, my purpose became clear to the townspeople. My obligation to Trique speakers has been to use whatever knowledge I have to give them something they might use for themselves. That way I am no longer just a strange *kuríngúu* in their town in the clouds, but a *kuríngúu* with a purpose that includes them.

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