

“Open Description” Impacts Documentation: A Case Study from San Juan Quiahije Chatino  
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A representative record of a language must reflect variation where it is found, not only in speakers’ performance, but in their grammaticality judgments—a demand that has historically been at odds with the tasks of the lexicographer.<sup>i</sup> As transparency is increasingly valued in all aspects of language description,<sup>ii</sup> some lexicographers have begun reflecting variation by creating ‘open descriptions,’ in which differences between consultants’ judgments are reported, and dictionary entries reflect multiple grammatical systems rather than a composite of speaker judgments.<sup>iii</sup> This shift within language description positively impacts the related activity of language documentation.<sup>iv,v</sup>

Here I present a case study that highlights this positive impact, based on primary fieldwork conducted with speakers of San Juan Quiahije Chatino (Otomanguan) in Oaxaca, Mexico. I discuss how an open approach to language description resulted in a heightened awareness of speaker variation, impacting how speech patterns were annotated in a related documentary project.

The San Juan Quiahije Chatino (SJQ) lexicon contains four *fixed bearing expressions (FBEs)*: terms that designate directions abstracted from a salient uphill-downhill line in the local topography (and from a superimposed transverse axis).<sup>vi</sup> While conducting fieldwork with SJQ speakers, I elicited grammaticality judgments from five consultants that revealed different understandings of the two FBEs, *tsuq32* and *qne1*:

<b><u>Term</u></b>	<b><u>Definition/Use Conditions</u></b>	<b><u>Consultant</u></b>
<i>kyaq14</i>	The ‘uphill’ end of the up-down axis	[all agreed]
<i>qya4</i>	The ‘downhill’ end of the up-down axis	[all agreed]
<i>tsuq32</i>	Side-hill (lit. ‘along-the-side’) for refs on the transverse axis that are: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Not saliently positioned [unmarked]</li> <li>2. Behind the speaker</li> </ol>	C1, C2, C3 C4, C5
<i>qne1</i>	Side-hill (lit. ‘in front’), for refs on the transverse axis that are: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In front of the speaker</li> <li>2. distant from the speech location</li> <li>3. Proximal to the speech location</li> </ol>	C2 C1, C4 C3

To create a transparent record of the FBE system, I wrote descriptions consistent with each speaker’s judgments in an early sketch grammar. I linked these descriptions to demographic information for the relevant speaker(s) to facilitate future sociolinguistic research in the community.

For a linked documentation project in the community, I video recorded 29 SJQ speakers giving route directions during Local Environment Interviews.<sup>vii</sup> In the 6h, 29m of collected footage, speakers produced a total of 413 FBEs with identifiable referent locations in the space surrounding the speaker. Of these, 188 were the semantically variable ‘side-hill’ terms. The earlier open description of FBEs reflected that distance and speaker orientation impact the use of these terms. To investigate, I recorded: (1) speaker locations/orientations relative to the local ‘side-hill’ line and (2) the distance of referents from the speaker.

Preliminary results from a subset of speakers show that in discourse on the local environment, speakers use the side-hill FBEs contrastively to reflect the relative distance of multiple referents. Speakers vary in their choice of which FBE marks closer referents on the transverse axis, consistent with the multiple speaker judgments originally elicited. In addition, some speakers use *tsuq32* to locate items immediately behind them, consistent with collected speaker judgments.

Including information about speaker and referent location as part of documentary process made it possible to confirm the variability in speakers’ lexical choices: a phenomenon that was highlighted using an open approach to language description. I close with a discussion of two clear benefits of open description: a more representative record of a language’s structure(s), and an impact on how collected texts from documentary projects are annotated and understood.

## REFERENCES

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