Words are powerful little things.

Most of us take advantage of the ability to connect with others through speech, to convey our thoughts through writing and to express our emotion through song.

But what if one day, the language we use ceased to exist? How would we be able to define our culture?

For many Native American cultures, this is becoming a frightening reality — one that UA Regents' Professor of Linguistics Ofelia Zepeda is working to prevent.

Zepeda, who speaks and teaches the Tohono O'odham language, was one of the co-founders of the UA's American Indian Studies program and now directs the UA American Indian Language Development Institute, which provides training to indigenous language teachers. In addition to being an author and poet, she also actively advocates for maintenance and preservation of Native American languages and cultures.

On Thursday at 5:30 p.m., Zepeda will give a talk about the significance of her work as part of the 2015 MacArthur Fellows Speaker Series. An initiative of the MacArthur Foundation, the MacArthur Fellows Program awards unrestricted fellowships to talented individuals who have shown extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits.

Lo Que Pasa spoke with Zepeda about her work and upcoming talk.

**When did you first become interested in linguistics?**

Some of it initially started when I was in graduate school. ... Most of my graduate training was figuring out how how language worked, even though I spoke the language. Most people who speak a language are not necessarily concerned with the organization of it.

**How did some Native American languages become endangered?**

The language situation in tribes across the U.S. started to shift to English for a lot of different reasons. It wasn't until the mid-1990s that we saw a huge shift, and we started talking about the idea that languages were becoming endangered. They (tribes) were not producing any new speakers. The way that you normally produce speakers is in the home, and that wasn't happening anymore because too much English was being used.

**What are the effects of losing a language, and how can it be prevented?**

It's really maintaining a lot of the languages, and certainly promoting them as much as
possible. One of the important reasons for maintaining these languages is that Native American languages have certain information that can only be carried by the language. You need that language to continue? to propagate? that kind of information, practices or knowledge. When you lose a language, you're not only losing a form of communication. You're losing a great deal of traditional knowledge, spiritual knowledge, medical language and a great deal of information. That's why it's important to keep these languages as active as possible.

**What will you discuss during your MacArthur Fellows Speaker Series talk?**

The primary focus of my MacArthur Fellowship award was because of my work with language maintenance and revitalization, in addition to the writing, poetry and other things that I've done. So I think I will primarily talk about the situation of endangered languages and the different challenges that are there, along with the successes that we've had over the years.

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_The MacArthur Fellows Speaker Series talk by Zepeda will take place from 5:30-6:30 p.m. tomorrow, in Room 111 the Cesar E. Chavez Building, 1110 E. James E. Rogers Way. Click here[3] for more information on the series._

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