Michal Temkin Martinez is a collector. But her acquisitions don’t fill up galleries, and you won’t find them tucked into boxes or stacked on a shelf. She collects language.

Dr. Temkin Martinez is director of the Mary Ellen Ryder Linguistics Laboratory at Boise State and an assistant professor of English. The lab is named for the former director of the linguistics program who died in a fire in 2008.

As a linguist, Temkin Martinez is trained in experimental and theoretical phonology, or how sounds are organized within a language.

“There is a misconception that linguists are the Grammar Police, but we aren’t,” she said. “We care about what people are doing with the language, but we don’t say you are doing it wrong. Language is a living thing, and we describe what we hear people doing and look at how they might be ‘breaking the rules’ of that language as it evolves.”

Temkin Martinez gives people clues to words or sentences she wants them to say, then documents how they say it. Their answers provide insight into how a language is being used by native speakers.

She works with colleagues Jon Dayley and Tim Thornes, along with community members and linguistics students who are taking the linguistics capstone course that immerses them in language documentation.

Prior to coming to Boise State University in 2009, Temkin-Martinez’s work was heavily focused on the Hebrew language (she grew up in Israel). With student Ivana Müllner, she currently is sifting through data collected during a linguistic experiment in Israel in 2012.

But with so few Hebrew speakers in the Treasure Valley, she also has turned to the local refugee community to discover the greatest linguistic needs.

This led to collaboration with Boise’s growing African refugee community and creation of the Boise Language Project — a big-picture project that integrates teaching with research and service. Students learn about language documentation and refugee issues, while conducting research that helps the
Boise refugee community.

Documenting African languages includes creation of the first-ever Somali Chizigula-English dictionary. Chizigula is one of a handful of languages spoken by Somali refugees living in Boise and includes sounds foreign to many Americans.

In her capstone course, native speakers are asked to describe objects or tasks in their native languages, and the students’ job is to figure out how the language works, from its sound inventory to how words and sentences are formed. Information gathered could include how to make simple plurals, how a sentence is phrased in past tense, or how verbs and nouns change according to class and gender.

Words are transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet. Later, students develop a practical orthography and begin to compile vocabulary and grammatical features of the language to help preserve it. Once the one-semester course is over, larger documentation projects are decided upon with the help of community leadership. The Somali Chizigula-English dictionary is the first large-scale project and is expected to be published this spring.

“It’s not just for refugees who are native Somali Chizigula speakers, it’s also a way to preserve the language and culture,” Temkin Martinez said. “It will include a description of sounds, words and sentences that will help preserve other information about the language and the people’s traditions.”

That preservation is a key motivation for her work.

Somali Bantu consultant Mwaliko Mberwa uses a mask to record airflow as he pronounces traditional Chizigula words. The language has a unique set of sounds involving a combination of airflow from the nose and mouth.

Because there is such a strong link between language and culture, losing a language can literally erase hundreds of years of culture and tradition.

"Research shows that about three of the world’s languages die every year when the last speaker passes away," Temkin Martinez said.

To prevent that from happening with Somali Chizigula, Temkin Martinez has worked with many members of the local Somali Bantu community as language experts on the project. As they learn more about linguistics, they are able to talk to their community about preserving their language.

While the dictionary is nearing completion, Temkin Martinez and her colleagues have several other projects underway. These include creation of a book of stories for children in the Maay language, a book of proverbs in the KiBembe language from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and a yet-to-be defined project with Tshiluba speakers, also from the DRC.

“This is a great opportunity to train our student linguists in field methods and have a product to give back to the refugee community,” Temkin Martinez said.