ELF Awards 10 Grants in 2001

The Endangered Language Fund is pleased to announce the grants awarded in 2001. Thanks to the generosity of our members, we were able to fund ten of the sixty proposals that we received this year. The selection was harder than ever, as more and more worthy proposals are submitted. We hope to be able to expand our fundraising so that a larger proportion of these efforts can be funded.

Two projects were funded for work in Oklahoma, thanks to the generosity of the Kerr Foundation. As in the previous year, the Foundation’s grant allowed us to promote work in this language-rich portion of the U.S. One grant, spearheaded by Joyce Twins, will allow the Cheyenne-Arapaho tribe to record materials for the teaching of Cheyenne. Another grant will allow Justin Neely, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, to apprentice himself to the some of the last truly fluent speakers of Potawatomi. Both of these projects will result in the collection of material that will soon be irreplaceable.

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Editorial: We Don’t Speak Their Language

D. H. Whalen, President, Endangered Language Fund, and Bobby Winston, Editor, “Bay Crossings.”

FBI appeals for Arabic and Farsi speakers to staff hastily created intelligence positions highlight an important national security shortcoming in the United States. Our nation has woefully neglected the learning of languages, particularly those of the third world. As a result, our law enforcement and military intelligence people are truly flying blind as they grope to understand the people and cultures fostering attacks on America.

It is imperative that we strengthen our study of foreign languages, and not just to make sure our military intelligence services are properly staffed. Billions of non-English speakers around the world bridle at our complacent, and perhaps mistaken, assumption that the emerging global economy will be open to English speakers only. This resentment contributes to the anti-American feeling held by many people of the third world. To deal with this root cause of anti-Americanism we must learn how to communicate with these peoples in, quite literally, their own terms.

The issue of rapidly disappearing languages must also now be addressed with greater urgency than has been the case up to now. Language is the way every culture, including our own, remembers and passes on traditions and values. Without these ties, disruption is inevitable. Community leaders in smaller cultures around the world are fighting a valiant battle to maintain community stability by stressing the importance of heritage languages. But the onslaught of American culture, so readily and seductively available via Hollywood movies and the Internet, is overpowering. Indeed, it is predicted that over half the world’s approximately 6,800 languages will be extinguished in the next fifty years. Unmooring millions from the stability of their cultural heritage, as we have so painfully learned, is dangerous business.

Taking a tolerant attitude toward people speaking a different language is a good start in becoming more tolerant in general. Rather than calling for “English First” legislation, we could try encouraging speakers of minority languages. This seems like an issue for other countries until you realize that there are still around 200 Native American languages being spoken in this country—all of them endangered. Perhaps you can go beyond tolerance, and try to learn one of these languages yourself. Or, as we always hope here at The Endangered Language Fund, you could help us support efforts to preserve those languages.

Tolerance is not the only need. As Lamin Sanneh pointed out recently, “Oddly enough, what most inflames anti-American passions among fundamentalist Muslims may be the American government’s lack of religious zeal. By separating church and state, the West – and America in particular – has effectively privatized belief, making religion a matter of individual faith. This is an affront to the certainty of fundamentalist Muslims, who are confident that they possess the infallible truth.” (New York Times, 23 September 2001). Yet tolerance for others is the hallmark of successful civilization from Sumer and Egypt to the present. Linguistic variety is a proud badge of that tolerance. We encourage you to help us preserve it.
Obituary for Noted Linguists

It is with great sorrow that we note the passing of two giants in the field of endangered languages, Ken Hale of MIT and Stephen Wurm of the Australian National University.

Ken was a scholar of wide-ranging influence. He spoke many languages of his native Arizona, but he also generated a great deal of work on Australian languages and, later, Nicaraguan languages. His theoretical writing and fieldwork was outstanding, but his ability to give his attention to students and scholars was exceptional as well. Ken had asked that any donations in his memory be made to the Navajo Language Academy. The NLA is an organization of Navajo scholars who were trained and inspired by Ken. It is dedicated to various educational activities designed to help Navajo bilingual teachers in their efforts to maintain the Navajo language. Checks made out to the Navajo Language Academy, Inc. may be sent to Peggy Speas, Treasurer, c/o Dept. of Linguistics, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA 01003.

An obituary can be found at http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/nr/2001/hale.html. A tribute from the WCCFL meeting can be found online at http://web.mit.edu/linguistics/www/ken/posted/wccfl.html.

Stephen was one of the first to work on the Papuan languages of New Guinea. He was instrumental in getting UNESCO involved in endangered language work, and his atlas of language contact is a work of art as well as of scholarship. He was founder of the Department of Linguistics in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University.

We will miss them both.

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Justin T. Neely (Citizen Potawatomi Nation), Potawatomi Language Preservation and Apprenticeship Program

The Citizen Potawatomi Nation is centered at a reservation in Shawnee, Oklahoma. Neely will apprentice himself to two elders fluent in the language. These master-apprentice programs have been among the most successful for continuing a language tradition when the youngest generation has not learned the language from childhood. Eventually, his efforts will be recorded and used as a basis for language instruction material. It is hoped that this work will strengthen the bonds that exist between the six bands of Potawatomi and lead to further collaboration on language preservation.

Mary D. Stewart (Stó:lo Nation), Preservation and Revitalization of the Upriver Halq'emeylem Dialect Language within the Family Entity

Upriver Halq'emeylem (Halkomelem) is a Salishan language of the Central Coast branch. Only five elders still
fluently speak the language. The present project will bring together words and phrases into interactive language resources that will be designed to bring young children (birth to age 6) into contact with the language through the entirety of the family unit. Materials will be collected in five subject areas: clothing (with seasonal variants), dinner table, daily events, labeled areas of the classroom, and greetings. Audio tapes will be created for each theme, and there will be instruction booklets geared toward children and parents.

Angela M. Nonaka (UCLA), Saving Signs from Bhan Khor: Documentation and Preservation of an Indigenous Sign Language in Thailand

Although the typical language is spoken, sign languages make use of the same language ability and share many of the same complexities. The social circumstances that allow a sign language to flourish are relatively rare, and sign languages have likely come and gone with regularity in human history. The similarities and differences between spoken and signed languages, and the progress of their endangerment, are relatively unexplored in linguistic science. The present proposal will study the Bhan Khor Sign Language, which is used by about 1,000 people in remote areas of northeastern Thailand. It was develop from Thai Sign Language about 60-80 years ago. A basic grammar and lexicon (recorded in video format) will make further assessment of the language and its endangerment possible.

Mildred Quaempts (Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation), Umatilla Immersion Camp

Umatilla is one of the three languages spoken by the confederated tribes (Cayuse and Walla Walla are the others), and they are spoken fluently by fewer than 60 people. Quaempts is one of the fluent second-language learners of Umatilla, and she will conduct an immersion program for sixteen tribal members of various ages. Several elders will be available for a five-day, intensive language experience. Much of the interaction will be recorded, and some of that will be used to help create new language teaching materials. This first immersion program will help give guidance to future versions.

Paula L. Meyer (Claremont and San Diego State), Baja California Tiipay Comparative Dictionary

Baja California Tiipay is a Yuman language closely related to U. S. versions of Tiipay (also called Diegueño) but still considered by its speakers to be a separate language.

There has so far been no extensive description or dictionary work. Only a handful of elderly people still speak the language, as the parents have been convinced that knowing the language is detrimental to success in modern society. The present project will therefore focus on a dictionary, to retain the last vestiges of a language that is bound for extinction. When possible, two consultants will be used at once, which often allows for a better flow of information about different words. While the language is not being revived at present, a successful dictionary will be an invaluable resource if the descendants ever decide to try to revive the language.

Marina Dmitrievna LUBLINSKAYA (St. Petersburg U.), Collection of Audio Material in the Nganasan Language

Nganasan (along with Nenets and Enets) belongs to the Northern Samoyedic group of Uralic languages. Although the size of the speaking population seems never to have exceeded about 1,500, at present only about 50% of the population (and 15% of the children) speak the language, indicating that the language is on the decline. There are at present no audio recordings, and time is running short to record the truly fluent speakers. Lublinskaya will record words, phrases, texts and folklore for transfer to CDs which can be distributed to the community. Although there are written materials in the language, the culture is still largely oral, so this method of presenting the material will be the most appropriate. The 4,000 word dictionary already created will be supplemented with pronunciations, increasing its usefulness greatly.

Kristine Stenzel (U. Colorado), The Wanano Project

The speakers of Wanano hope that the bilingual education that is guaranteed by the 1988 Brazilian constitution will someday become a reality. To help make that possible, Stenzel will help produce written material for this Tucano language. She will also record conversational data to help understand the complex situation of life with many languages that is so typical of Brazil. These little-studied languages have many unusual linguistic features, such as the simultaneous interaction of two noun categorization systems, the coding of up to five evidential categories, and a possibly unique tonal system.

Kenny Holbrook (Capitol, CA), Instruction in Northeastern Maidu

Only a few speakers of Maidu survive, and one of the best hopes of continuing the language is for young language learners to apprentice themselves to those speakers in order to gain a sufficient degree of fluency that they can keep it

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going. The main teacher in this case will be somewhat unusual, in that he is not a native speaker. But William Shipley, emeritus from UC Santa Cruz, learned Maidu from Holbrook’s grandmother over fifty years ago. He has done substantial work on it since, and is now poised to pass on that knowledge to a descendant who was not able to learn the language as a child. All of this will make the substantial corpus of written material more useful and accessible for future generations.

Zarifa Nazirova (Tajik Academy of Sciences), The Vocabulary of the Traditional Culture of the Ishkashim Language

The layer of language that deals with the spiritual life of a people is of interest to linguists, ethnologists, art historians and members of the heritage community. The present project will collect as many lexical entries in the cultural domain as possible. Tracing the influence of the various languages of contact (other Pamirian languages and various Tajik languages) will be explored even as the cultural significance is recorded as extensively as possible. The cultural heritage—and the paths of cultural evolution—will be available permanently thanks to this effort.

Joyce Twins (Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma), Cheyenne Pedagogical Materials

Cheyenne is an Algonquian language spoken in western Oklahoma and Montana. At this time, the Chenne and Arapaho Tribes have undertaken an ambitious language program that uses telecoursing to put the Cheyenne language into four area high schools in western Oklahoma. However, there is a severe lack of teaching materials at all levels. A single teacher is charged with the responsibility of developing all material for the current courses. The present project will help alleviate this problem, especially in the use of sound recordings of fluent speakers to give life to the written materials that predominate now. Marcia Haag (U. of Oklahoma) and Laura Gibbs (Talking Leaves consortium) will lend their expertise to this project as well. Creating this material while there are still native speakers with us is of the utmost importance. While many tribes are recreating their languages from historical records, those still blessed with native speakers can create a much more usable curriculum with modern technology, which lets us preserve the sounds of language in addition to writing it down.