The endangered language fund

language legacies

LANGUAGES CONTACTED BY LEWIS & CLARK GET ANOTHER BOOST IN 2010

The Endangered Language Fund’s Native Voices Endowment: A Lewis & Clark Expedition Bicentennial Legacy is pleased to announce the awardees from our 2010 competition. NVE grants can be awarded to tribal members or teachers at tribal universities of the tribes that took part in the Lewis & Clark Bicentennial. Projects can be for documentation or for revitalization of the Native language. Scholarships, including those for Master-Apprentice teams, are also available.

This year, six awards were made. They cover a range of projects, including dictionary making, tribal history in traditional language, and learning via the Master-Apprentice approach. All of these projects help protect the heritage encoded in indigenous languages. They covered most of the geographical spread of the Expedition, ranging from the Plains to the West Coast.

The deadline for applications for the 2011 competition is October 17, 2011. Details can be found on our website, at http://www.endangeredlanguagefund.org/NVE_request.php. Projects can be from one to three years in duration, with budgets up to $10,000 per year. The 66 tribes that are eligible are listed at www.endangeredlanguagefund.org/NVE_eligible_tribes. These are the tribes that were contacted by the Expedition and that took part in the Bicentennial activities via the Council of Tribal Advisors. We look forward to another competitive cohort of applications.

Tammy DeCoteau (Association on American Indian Affairs (AAIA) / Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate)

“Dakod lab Unspepta” (They Will Learn the Dakotah Language)

This project focuses on the Lake Traverse Reservation in northeast South Dakota and Southeast North Dakota, home of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota (Sioux) Oyate. The tribe has an enrollment of approximately 13,000 members, 4,000 of which live on the reservation. The average age of the 100 known fluent speakers of the Dakotah language on the Lake Traverse Reservation is 74, making efforts to maintain its use quite urgent. ELF funds will help support the development of a master-apprentice program aimed at teaching the language to tribal members. The program will employ a Dakotah language teacher (Dakod Unspekiya) and allow for two apprentices. One will be a new language learner (Unspekta), and the other will be one of the estimated 400 people living on the reservation that can understand but do not have a sufficient command of the language. They will be given the title Ho Iyekiyakte, meaning “they will find their language.” By giving significant command of the language to even one speaker, the tribe hopes to add an additional 25 years to the viability of the language, securing more time to move forward with revitalization efforts.
This project seeks to create high-quality audio recordings of 20,000 Lakota words published in the New Lakota Dictionary (2008). This will benefit 47 tribal schools and 6 non-tribal schools which regularly use the dictionary in both print and digital format for classroom instruction in the Lakota language, as well as 2,000 members of the international community that access the interactive version of the dictionary online. Some of those who stand to benefit from this project include Lakota tribal members, non-tribal learners, researchers, and linguists. The words will be spoken and recorded by native Lakota speaker and project manager Ben Black Bear, who teaches Lakota language at St. Francis Mission Schools in St. Francis, SD, and has extensive experience in audio recording. He has also worked on the Beginning Lakhota Text Book Project with David Rood of the University of Colorado. The present project will draw on lexical resources in several locations to make a wider range of material available easily. New lemmatizing software will allow easier searching on this highly agglutinating language.

Ben Black Bear (Lakota Language Consortium) New Lakota Dictionary Audio Recording Project

Even languages like Lakota that have had substantial previous work benefit from refinement, such as making dictionaries more useful to current speakers and learners.

Virginia Beavert and Sharon Hargus (Yakama Nation and University of Oregon / University of Washington)

Northwest Sahaptin Textual Transcription and Translation

With support from ELF, Yakama Nation member and University of Oregon graduate student Virginia Beavert and Sharon Hargus of The University of Washington will continue their efforts to transcribe and translate Northwest (Yakima/Yakama, Kittitas, Upper Cowlitz) Sahaptin recordings. Some of these recordings come from Beavert’s personal collection, which mostly consist of the recorded speech of her late near-monolingual mother Ellen Saluskin. Others have been given to Hargus by outside researchers. According to information given to Hargus, no fluent speakers remain. However, Beavert is widely acknowledged to be the one of the best of the remaining instrumental in supporting the maintenance of Salish language and culture, co-founding The Nkwusm Salish Language Revitalization Institute in 2002 which opened a Salish language immersion school for preschool and kindergarten students. He now aims to progress from high competence in the language to full fluency. He hopes to be able to interject common speech and regular manipulation of words into his vocabulary, and thereby be able to provide students with instruction at the level of proficiency that the creation of fluent speakers requires. Through further one-on-one instruction and language immersion, he hopes to gain the knowledge and proficiency required to meet his goal. Conversational and narrative language will also be recorded and analyzed to better understand the intricacies of the language. Resulting data will become part of the Adult Immersion curriculum, the Salish Grammar Project and Nkwusm’s pre-school to 8th grade curriculum, and it should also aid scholars studying Salish linguistics.

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The Shoshone work highlights the fact that languages change as they face the challenges of declining speaker populations.

Drusilla Gould and Katherine Matsumoto-Gray (Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, Fort Hall Reservation, Idaho/University of Utah)

Recent language change in Shoshone: Structural consequences of language loss

One area of research that has developed out of work in endangered language communities is the effect of language obsolescence on linguistic structure. The goal of this project is to examine structural changes in Shoshone, a language whose community is undergoing language shift. The focus for this study is two-fold: first, particular morphosyntactic structural changes in Shoshone will be examined; second, the social and linguistic forces affecting its structure will be evaluated.

Shoshone is an endangered Northern Uto-Aztecan language. During the 1960s and 70s, Wick Miller collected over 400 stories, songs, and oral histories from speakers of various Shoshone dialects. His collection is housed at the Center for American Indian Languages at the University of Utah. The availability of this collection for comparison with present-day data that will be collected makes Shoshone an ideal case for investigation of change over a period where the language has gone from relatively viable to extremely endangered.

The resources available for Shoshone at the University of Utah provide a timely test case for an initial investigation into the phenomenon on structural consequences of language loss. Future work and testing of this studies finding may add to our understanding of the linguistic processes unique to endangered languages. The Shoshone situation makes this project a perfect starting point for such a research program.
There have been several changes in the Endangered Language Fund’s Board of Directors in recent months. The Board provides overall direction to our efforts and maintains fiscal oversight. We have been fortunate to have had stellar Board members throughout our fifteen years of existence.

Stephen R. Anderson rotates off the Board

The chair of the Linguistics Department of Yale University is ex officio on our Board. Steve has filled that role for most of the past fifteen years, and is finally receiving a much deserved relief from these duties. He was instrumental in getting ELF started, arranging for us to be housed in the department and being one of our initial Board member, and he has been an ardent supporter of the Fund ever since. We owe a great debt of gratitude to Steve.

Robert Frank joins the Board

The new chair of Linguistics is Robert Frank, and he thus becomes our newest member. Bob is a theoretical and computational linguist, interested in syntax, processing, and acquisition. He got his undergraduate degree at MIT and his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. Although he has not (so far) worked with endangered languages, Bob is enthusiastic about supporting the efforts of the Fund, and we are grateful to have his support.

Durbin Feeling steps down

One of our original Board members, Durbin Feeling, has decided to step down due to increased responsibilities in his new position. Durbin is a native speaker of Cherokee and has published a dictionary and a grammar of the language. He recently moved from the University of Oklahoma to the Cherokee Nation, where he continues his language work. Durbin also recently received (along with Lizette Peter, University of Kansas, and Dylan Herrick, University of Oklahoma) a National Science Foundation Documenting Endangered Languages grant to study the prosody of Cherokee. We thank Durbin for his many years of service on the ELF Board.