

NEWS

Grants to fund rare language research

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Yale linguist and anthropologist Mark Turin plans to preserve some of the world's most endangered languages by enlisting the help of native speakers.

Turin was recently awarded roughly \$70,000 for two different projects which will document these rare languages. A \$20,000 grant from the Google Earth Outreach program, which was awarded to him Oct. 31, will sponsor him and Language Landscape, a London-based team of programmers, in creating an online interface to map the geographical distribution of the world's languages. Another grant from the British Council Transnational Education Partnership Programme, which will award him approximately \$50,000 over two years, will aid fieldwork in the Himalayas so Turin can collaborate with students at Karakorum International University (KIU) in Gilgit, Pakistan to develop a linguistics curriculum for the university.

With these two "quite small" grants, Turin said he hopes to show that a significant amount of money is not necessary to effect change in the humanities and social sciences.

He said the prices of documentation technology, such as cameras and recorders, have fallen in recent years and emphasized the native speakers' excitement for wireless and internet technologies — a recent change in their lifestyle.

While teaching at the University of Cambridge in January 2009, Turin founded the World Oral Literature Project (WOLP) to "collect, protect and connect" the world's endangered languages by digitizing and cataloguing decades of linguistic research.

WOLP's data currently includes over 30 collections from 15 countries across five continents from the 1920s to the present, he said.

The Google grant, formally awarded to the Turin's WOLP and Language Landscape, will help cover the costs of programming a new online interface for the next year.

Turin said the main programming challenge will be finding a sensitive way to represent the world's linguistic diversity in a way that currently is not possible with Google Maps interface, which uses points and polygons to represent data.

"We don't yet know the outcome or how we're going to do it, but we know we're going to do something," Turin said. Key to the interface will be the understanding that communities are often multilingual and different languages are used in different ways, he added.

The new interface will take advantage of the data hosted by Turin's WOLP, and will easily allow researchers and native speakers to input new data in the future to "show how and where their languages are spoken," he added.

Turin's British Council grant, which will involve more typical field research, also puts an emphasis on giving native speakers the tools and technologies to document their own languages. He will work with scholars at KIU to document rare and endangered languages in the Himalayas, a region containing one-sixth of the world's spoken languages.

As part of the project, Turin will take advantage of KIU's many master's students who come from the Himalaya region and are themselves native speakers of endangered languages.

"[We're going] to train master's

students in the techniques of language documentation so that they can go and document their own languages and cultures," Turin said. "There's far too much work to be done. I have the pleasure and privilege of supporting them."

The group hopes to assemble easily usable language surveys and field documentation kits to help students with their documentation, Turin said.

Over the course of the two-year grant, Turin will travel twice to Pakistan and the Himalayas, and the principal researchers from KIU will travel twice either to New Haven or to the United Kingdom.

Alexa Little '15, who works as Turin's student assistant, said Turin's recently awarded grants will fund important and necessary linguistics research. Since these rare languages are in danger of disappearing forever, she said research should be conducted immediately to preserve language skills for future generations.

"This is the critical time period to preserve these languages before they disappear," she said.

With the advent of technology, Turin said he has noticed a shift in the field of linguistics from documentation stuck in the libraries of "traditional ivory towers" to more practical work that can be useful for native speakers.

"No longer [is linguistics research] just terse grammatical descriptions that will sit in university libraries," he said. "Increasingly we are writing in partnership with [native] people."

Turin said native people are often cited as full co-authors on published papers.

Turin first came to Yale in August.

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