Grants to fund rare language research

BY RAYLIEN DENDY
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

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 $40,000 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. 11, will sponsor him and Language Landscape, a landmine-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’s Transnational Education Partnership Program, which will award him approximately £4,000 over two years, will aid fieldwork in the Himalayas so Turin can collaborate with students at Kamerun International University (KIU) in Gilgit, Pakistan to develop a linguistics curriculum for the university.

While some “quite small” grants, Turin says he hopes to show that a significant amount of money is not necessary to affect 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’ central role in documenting 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 cataloging decades of linguistic research.

WOLP’s data currently includes over 50 collections from 15 countries across five continents from the 1930s 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 to find a sensitive way to represent the world’s linguistic diversity in a way that currently is not possible with Google Maps interface, which uses pixels 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 he has collected at Turin’s WOLP, and will easily allow researchers and native speakers to input new data in the future to “show where and how their languages are spoken,” he said.

Turin’s British Council grant, which will involve more typological 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 a part of the project, Turin will take advantage of KIU’s many master’s students who come from the Himalayan 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 do 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 being involved.”

The group hopes to assemble online 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 the Himalayas and the principal researchers from KIU will travel twice to New Haven or to the United Kingdom.

Alena Little ‘11, who works as Turin’s student researcher, said Turin’s recently awarded grants will fund important and necessary linguistic 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 to the study of “traditional ivory towers” to more practical work that can be useful for native languages.

“More is less linguistics research,” Turin said. “The field has developed to a critical stage that will sit in universities 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’s first came to Yale in August.

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Africans week aims to inspire you

BY DILLON RANCKY

Students at the African Student Association’s annual Africa Week, which runs from Nov. 1 to Nov. 10 and was themed “Culture Shifters of the African Renaissance,” among speakers with Adelbeyi, the week’s lime were social events, such as film screenings and lectures from artists, public health officials and economists.

YASA President Yamileh Bankuyo ‘14 said the week’s organizers made an effort to choose speakers who could relate to college students and inspire them to become involved with African development.

“Africa is transitioning into a new Africa,” he said. “The students here are inspired to think and do something.”

Africans Week will end with an “Africa Night” show at the International Student Center.

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BY THE NUMBERS

Bone Marrow

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On Tuesday, 70 percent of the bone marrow donors at the International Student Center’s biannual bone marrow registry drive at Yale School of Medicine, 70 percent of the donors were African Americans, which means African-Americans face a harder time securing a match for an African American mismatched donor.

Women in Science at Yale (WiSci)

Panel discussions.

Consuelo Escandon, former NSF director, will present “Bias Persists for Women of Science, a Study Finds,” and Meg Urry, a Harvard astrophysicist, will present “Science of Science Communication.”

Free admission. Seats are limited, so reservations are required.

For reservations and more information, visit http://www.yale.edu/opinion/wisci/