

Pit River Languages Project

Summary of work during August 2025

This update is late (mid-September) because we have been dealing with extraneous events. It has been a busy time indeed.

The Conference on Indigenous Languages (COIL) was held at UC Davis on 8-11 July. Paul was in attendance. He spoke with a person who is perhaps as knowledgeable as any about funding changes at the National Science Foundation. Paul passed along the word, “DEL is dead.” Consequently, I stopped being concerned with the need to develop a new proposal for the 15 September deadline.

This assessment that Paul heard at COIL was correct about DEL and NEH. The NSF program name, in full, is “NSF Dynamic Language Infrastructure - NEH Documenting Endangered Languages (DLI-DEL)”. The DEL part belongs to the National Endowment for Humanities (NEH). The funding for NEH was effectively cut. (Effort to restore that Congressional funding is in the courts.)

However, DLI is the NSF part of the program, and our current funding is in a DLI grant from NSF.

I realized this in late August when I looked at the DLI/DEL program website and reached out to the Program Directors. I got feverishly to work rewriting and updating the many files that go into a proposal.

When I went to post draft files on research.gov, and sent email about them, I included a cc to the Endangered Language Fund (ELF), who have very kindly served as fiduciary agent for my grants. Doug Whalen wrote back on 25 August that I should reach out to ELF first before contacting NSF—but I overlooked his email! He wrote again on 8 September, and referred me to the new President of ELF, Shannon Bischoff. A delightful man and a new friend. On 10 September in a very collegial zoom call, he explained ELF's growing pains.

With Doug's great success raising funds, ELF has reorganized, professionalized, and added staff. Their new Executive Director, a corporate lawyer, saw risks to their nonprofit status in Connecticut. ELF funds projects in many countries, and in the present political climate some might be 'wrong' countries, and some transfers of money might be scrutinized as potential money laundering. Potential NSF instability is seen as a risk. What would their responsibilities and risk be if NSF funding was cut for a project to which ELF had committed support? So many occasions for legal paranoia! So among the updates to their corporate policies they ruled out having anything to do with NSF, though they will continue the relationship with me for the last year of my current project ending 31 August 2026.

On learning that, I told Shannon that I would have to look for another foundation or agency to handle fiduciary responsibility. When I mentioned that Connor is written in for a PostDoc in the 2nd and 3rd years of the proposal, Shannon was very pleased to suggest involving Connor's advisor at UC Davis as co-PI. In hindsight, this seems obvious.

I contacted Connor's thesis advisor in the Linguistics Department, Georgia Zellou, and his advisor in the Native American Studies Department, Patwin Wintu linguist Lewis Lawyer. We immediately started working out what is needed to give the Pit River Languages Project a new home at UC Davis. The deadline was 15 September, but Wilson (at NSF) cut us slack to get it in as late as the 26th. Then Lewis noticed that there is a second deadline on 17 February. Given the complexity, and the timing of making peculiar demands of the UC administration just at the start of the fall term, when many demands come at once anyway, we have decided to reschedule the proposal submission.

Since I would need to be an employee, Lewis has suggested that I might be hired as a researcher at UC Davis, but working remotely. Lewis would be co-PI with me. Connor would come in after getting his degree. I should think Paul would be a researcher, but we didn't get that far. We got a pretty clear sense of Connor's objectives: He needs to shape an economically viable career path which supports recovery of language and culture in the Pit River community, and which helps to open pathways to education and career development for Pit River people, especially but not exclusively youth. His immediate grant deliverables could include a

pedagogical grammar (based on my reference grammar) and a teaching dictionary. As the basis for the latter, he would put serious time into cleaning up and organizing the lexicon view into the database. It is a ‘hybrid’ lexicon, with both roots and complex words, so headwords would include all the roots, with examples, and many of the complex verb stems in some normalized standard form, either the bare stem (*ámmi*) or the ‘infinitive’ or *t*-participle (*támmi*), with examples. We will return to working this out after Lewis and Georgia have got past the beginning-of-term on-ramp.

And that is the explanation why you didn’t get a report at the beginning this month about work that I did in August. But something of that can be said now.

I have begun writing the grammar, a major deliverable at the end of the grant term next August. The first chapter is about how complex sentences are put together with connectives, referentials, inferentials (conditional expressions), and subordinate clauses. The second chapter will also be about ‘external’ syntax, concerning the simple sentences which may be combined into complex sentences. Only then will I turn to the ‘internal’ syntax of the sentential verb in subsequent chapters.

As a consequence, changes and updates to the database have a less prominent place, more of an incidental byproduct of the work. Updates to the database may appear less frequently and less regularly on the website.

At the end of the year, the plan is to ‘repatriate’ the database, with Connor as its steward in the tribe. I will continue to be involved as a consultant, but I do not expect to add additional materials myself. There are archival materials that are not in the database. I just this month discovered some of Hans Uldall’s notebook pages digitized in the California Language Archive (CLA), including several texts. I had previously seen only “The north wind and the sun”, a standard among European linguists for elicitation, oddly translated into Achumawi. James Sarmiento has all of Shirley Silver’s notes, which we hope he will let the CLA digitize and then return the originals to him. (I talked with him about this last January at the LSA/SSILA meetings.) Shirley did a lot of work with Achumawi, in addition to the Shasta material which is James’s primary interest. I have a number of audio recordings which were never transcribed. You never know when some word or phrase will have a root which unlocks the puzzle of some previously unanalyzable word, or a construction that reveals an unforeseen derivation path in the mesh of elementary sentence differences that constitute the language.

When a subsequent proposal is funded, I expect to devote more time and attention to collaborating with Paul on the Atsugewi database. The work of comparison and historical reconstruction needs that.