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New institute
helps student
save Aboriginal
language

EMU graduate student
Jessica Boynton,
2006-07 Fulbright scholar

Institute speaks the

LANGUAGE OF LINGUISTICS

The Institute for Language Information and Technology solidifies EMU's role as the nexus for the academic field of linguistics

In a few months, EMU graduate student Jessica Boynton begins the academic journey of her life: studying abroad among Aboriginal people in the Western Desert region of Australia on a prestigious Fulbright scholarship.

Her research focuses on preserving a vanishing language spoken by fewer than 20 older adults. With her help, the remaining speakers will try to save the dialect so future generations will have a record of what their ancestors spoke.

"Helping the community is the key," said Boynton, 22, a 2005 magna cum laude graduate of EMU who majored in linguistics. "Currently, all the speakers are over age 60, and it's a moribund language."

Boynton's talents and potential as a scholar no doubt caught the eye of Fulbright screening committee members, who awarded her the scholarship in a competitive process that saw 90 percent of all applicants denied.

But the Big Rapids, Mich., native readily admits, as do dozens of other EMU graduate and undergraduate students, that her linguistic aptitude was nurtured by the professors, courses and research opportunities increasingly available at the University. Those resources, previously loosely organized under an operation named The LINGUIST List, received a financial and visibility boost this year with the creation of the Institute for Language Information and Technology (ILIT).

The origins of The LINGUIST List, and by extension the ILIT, are in the College of Arts and Sciences' Department of English Language and Literature. Led by Professor Helen Aristar-Dry, EMU has forged a role for itself in the past 13 years as the nexus for the academic field of linguistics.

"Our main job is to train students, and to do that more effectively, we need to expand our resources," Professor Aristar-Dry said. "Institute status and the guarantee of a base level of support from Eastern Michigan University will allow the Institute for



Preserving the past: "My dream is to spend my life learning, documenting and revitalizing the world's vanishing languages," said graduate student Jessica Boynton ('05).

[By Kevin Merrill]

Language Information and Technology to pursue a more robust research agenda, at the same time as it consolidates The LINGUIST List's prestige, financial resources and educational potential at EMU."

Dr. Anthony Aristar founded The LINGUIST List in 1990, and its operations arrived at EMU in 1992, two years after Professor Aristar-Dry was hired as a professor. (Dr. Aristar, husband to Dr. Aristar-Dry, joined EMU's faculty this fall.) The LINGUIST List is an internet network and research facility that has become the electronic center of the discipline of linguistics, serving as a central information resource for the field and as a laboratory for research and development of language technologies.

With 21,500 subscribers, a 100,000-page Web site and four international mirror sites, The LINGUIST List has provided visibility for its two university hosts, EMU and Wayne State University, and has been widely recognized as a leader in the burgeoning field of language technology. To date, The LINGUIST List has been awarded 12 National Science Foundation grants valued at \$4.6 million. Partly as a result of work opportunities afforded by the grants, EMU's linguistics program has grown to 16 full-time graduate students, including Boynton, most of whom go on to top-notch doctoral programs.

The goals of the new institute are to conduct applied research in language technology; provide training in language-related technologies; serve as a comprehensive source on the world's languages; develop and maintain an internet infrastructure for the discipline of linguistics; and provide a rich learning and research environment for EMU faculty and students.

The ILIT's 26 employees come from nine nations. Together, they are working on five language technology projects in addition to Web development work under contract for academic organizations across the country.

"Language can tell us immense amounts about ourselves as a human race," Dr. Aristar said. "Once you build infrastructure, there are amazing things to do with it, such as searching back into time, for example, because language gives you insight into the migration of cultures."

The presence of The LINGUIST List has played a crucial role in the establishment of EMU's new graduate Certificate in Language Technology and in the development of the master of arts program in language technology. "The institute is going to give training in the digital documentation of endangered languages, which is a discipline that is difficult to find any other place," Dr. Aristar said.

Boynton was one of 12 scholars – more than 113 applied – to receive a Fulbright award to study in Australia. In May, she attended a reception at the Australian Embassy in Washington, D.C., to honor Harriet Fulbright (widow of J. William Fulbright, founder of the scholarship) with an Honorary Order of Australia. At the reception, Boynton met Mrs. Fulbright and John Howard, the prime minister of Australia.

Her studies begin in February at the University of Western Australia. From there, she will undertake a 10-hour ride into the Australian back country in order to con-



Leading the way: Helen Aristar-Dry and Anthony Aristar are co-directors of EMU's Institute for Language Information and Technology.

duct linguistic fieldwork in documenting Tjupany, a variety of the massive chain of indigenous dialects that exists in the area. The language has only one archived resource and received little attention from field linguists worldwide.

Boynton's work will result in a general grammatical sketch of Tjupany among other resources. These materials will aid in the preservation of the language, and the culture of the people who traditionally speak it.

In analyzing the data, Boynton will compile a linguistic database for Tjupany; analyze the sounds (phonology), word structure (morphology) and sentence structure (syntax) of the language; and compare phenomena found in it with linguistic typology and language universals. She will convert the data in order to preserve it for future researchers

Her data collection will take the form of "elicitation" sessions, recorded narratives and linguistic transcription that will be done with the help of, and later be verified by, native speakers. This portion of the project can only be conducted in Australia, as native speakers of these languages do not live elsewhere.

The Australian trip will be Boynton's second research trip abroad. Last year, she traveled to Misi3n La Paz, Argentina, to document a small group of endangered languages with a small team of linguists. She worked with another student to document the endangered Matacoan language Wichí, while other researchers, including EMU Professor Ver3nica Grondona, worked with the related languages of Chorote and Chulupi.

As part of the documentation and revitalization effort, Boynton and the others recorded and transcribed elicitation sessions; transcribed traditional folklore to be compiled into a bilingual text for community use; recorded narratives for future transcription; and copied cassette tapes to be digitized into more enduring formats.

"My dream is to spend my life learning, documenting and revitalizing the world's vanishing languages," Boynton said. "This gives me the chance to study a myriad of languages and give something valuable to the world - the maintenance of cultural and linguistic diversity."

(For more information about the ILIT and The LINGUIST List, visit linguistlist.org.)