



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE  
**Humanities**

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

### **Parts of a Successful Application**

The attached document contains the narrative portion of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and applicants are urged to prepare a proposal that reflects their unique project and aspirations.

Prospective applicants should consult the application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/program/dli-del-fellowships> for instructions.

Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Research Division staff well before a grant deadline.

This attachment only contains the narrative, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

**The application format might have been changed since this application was submitted.** You must follow the guidelines in the currently posted Notice of Funding Opportunity (see above link).

**Project Title:** *Conversations of the Meskwaki People: Today's Voices Recorded and Published with Audio*

**Institution:**

**Project Director:** Yolanda Pushetonequa

**Grant Program:** Dynamic Language Infrastructure - Documenting Endangered Languages (DLI-DEL) Fellowship

## Narrative

### Significance, impact, and endangerment

Meskwaki, an Algonquian language, is spoken by the Meskwaki tribe of Iowa. Meskwakihaki, or *Red Earth People*, originated from the St. Lawrence River Valley in Canada, migrated through the Great Lakes, and settled in present day central Iowa. The language is closely related to Sauk and Kickapoo, and is said to be the language most similar to Proto-Algonquian. Meskwaki has one of the most extensive collections of text corpora (26,000 pages at the National Anthropological Archives), resulting from manuscripts created by fluent speakers one hundred years ago. The texts are in narrative form, and are not accompanied by audio recordings; hence, there is a significant gap in documentation. A few publicly available audio recordings of Meskwaki exist, but these are also in the single-speaker narrative form. Notably, some of the historical narrative texts were dictated by another speaker and even adjusted by the researcher when it was believed appropriate, thus further overwriting details of natural speech. (Michelson, 1918: 28) I propose to fill this gap in documentation by audio recording conversations between fully fluent, first language speakers of Meskwaki. Naturalistic conversations among first language speakers will yield a richer variation in linguistic phenomena not found in current publicly available audio recordings.

Meskwaki is severely endangered, with a small and diminishing number of aging fluent speakers. Out of 1,400 enrolled tribal members, fewer than 200 are fluent or nearly fluent. Most first language speakers are in their 60s or older, some in their 50s, and just a few strong language users are in their 40s. In 2020, 8% of respondents to a tribal survey identified Meskwaki as their primary language. Employing UNESCO's Language Vitality factors, Meskwaki averages 2.5 of 5 points with *use appearing in dwindling domains, limited access to literacy, and a proportion of 6-10% of community members identified as strong speakers*. The youngest generation to experience intergenerational language transmission is the grandparent generation. Virtually no school aged children have a fluent first language speaker for a parent.

With this fellowship I will conduct fieldwork to digitally record, document, and archive conversational Meskwaki language as it is spoken today. Recorded conversations between fluent first language speakers will reveal previously undocumented phenomena unique to the modern speech community. Meskwaki has a number of discourse-based components only observed in connected speech, such as conversations. For example, Meskwaki uses *obviation*, a distinction between third persons, to highlight which third person is the main character. This assignment of focus varies by story, event, or sentence. I will look for this and other discourse-based features in my recordings.

Language and culture are highly intertwined. In addition to linguistic knowledge, cultural and historical knowledge are at risk. Through these recorded conversations I will pursue overarching content themes of Meskwaki life and experiences, cultural contexts, values, resiliency, and the spirit of survival which Meskwakihaki are known for. I aim to capture information of social and historical significance, while demonstrating that the community still thrives. Cultural contexts could include clan roles, gender roles, moiety birthright division, traditional harvesting (maple sugar, flint corn, trees, heirloom seeds, wild game, or foraging), and life cycle practices (birth and naming, coming of age, courtship, or end of life ceremonies). Topics could also include place and experiences shaping the social landscape (e.g. land issues like origins, ties, migration and ownership; boarding school life; economic changes; the traditional value placed on the language itself). While conversations cannot be precisely controlled, my intention and effort will be toward creating a dynamic resource with in depth linguistic and cultural knowledge for current and future generations of tribal community members and researchers.

### **Organization, concepts, and methods**

My project is inspired by the book, "Autobiography of a Meskwaki Woman" (Goddard 2006), a first-person narrative about the life of a Meskwaki woman in the early 1920s, based on manuscripts written by an anonymous woman. For each line of Meskwaki text, the book contains: a text transcription, transliteration from the syllabic manuscript, interlinear glossing, and English free translations.

With this fellowship project I will provide a follow-up to the earlier Meskwaki Autobiography. I will record conversations in Meskwaki between fluent first language speakers to capture naturalistic, linguistically-rich interactions. I will select a sample of the conversations and publish them in a book which will include an audio accompaniment. The sampling of intergenerational conversations will be used to develop a modern-day equivalent of the "Autobiography of a Meskwaki Woman," demonstrating linguistic and social changes (or similarities) in ways of life among the Meskwaki today versus a century ago. Remarkably, many traditional lifeways are still observed. This project can provide data to help determine whether this continuity also exists for the Meskwaki spoken language over the past century. Based on my recordings, the book will contain the same set of information as the 2006 Autobiography with the exception of interlinear glossing, which I will save for a future project. One question of interest is whether change has taken place since text documentation was collected a century ago.

Having been raised in the tribal community, I am personally acquainted with many fluent first language speakers of Meskwaki. I will draw on my extensive personal connections to recruit and select participants from naturally occurring, pre-existing groups of speakers who have strong kinship or friendship relations. Speaker groups may include the relations of: parent-child, husband-wife, siblings, cousins, and friends. The small size of my tribe affords me the ability to identify most speakers, thereby giving me a strong chance to select a wide variety of participants.

Approximately six groups of speakers will be selected. A target of approximately 10-12 hours of recordings will be collected. The recordings may exceed 12 hours; however, all excess will be archived for future analysis, and selected recordings will be translated for this project. A sampling of the translation will then be selected for publishing in book form. All data produced by the project will then be deposited for long term archiving and access, as discussed in the final section.

Some methods I will employ to produce the recordings include relationship building and discussions with potential participants. I will provide them presentations describing the purpose, goals, and outcomes of the project. I will also explain the importance of maintaining open conversational flow. I will employ props such as cultural items and old community photos which I will bring to recording sessions to spur conversation. As listed above, certain topics will be aimed for. At times I will use Meskwaki language to initiate topics and sometimes I will provide a written topic to one speaker to initiate conversation. Prior to the funding phase of my project, I will carry out preplanning activities that will ensure a well organized foundation for the project. See the Work Plan for more detail.

The impending loss of Meskwaki speakers in the next two to three decades renders it crucial to carry out as much documentation as possible, by and for the community itself. The current number of living Meskwaki speakers and the highly limited, linguistically rich, publicly accessible recordings provides a very brief but immense opportunity to amass a wider trove of naturalistic language data for the tribal community and researchers.

### **Competencies, skills, access**

I have an MA in Linguistics, for which I conducted field work on Meskwaki and Malay. My thesis provided an analysis of Meskwaki phonology and a critique of the current orthography, including suggestions for updates to our writing system so that literacy can expand beyond its current limits. I

recorded multiple fluent speaker narratives, transcribed and translated their texts, and completed some morphemic glossing.

As former director of the Meskwaki Language Department on the Meskwaki Settlement I collaborated closely with the tribal community on a number of language projects. I frequently worked directly with over a dozen fluent speakers over two years. We held weekly *language tables*, informal meet up sessions open to the community, to facilitate intergenerational language exploration and learning. I conducted personal recordings and elicitations of many of these sessions. My work and research at that time was greatly enhanced by academic coursework in linguistics, which I began while still director. Another project of the Meskwaki Language Department was the inaugural Meskwaki Immersion Program. Our department developed a pilot early-childhood immersion-based classroom experience for three-year-old students at the PreK-12 Meskwaki Settlement School. For the pilot immersion program we recruited fluent speakers and trained them in immersion teaching practices and curriculum development. The inaugural summer session was immediately integrated into the regular school year for all three and four-year-old students at the Meskwaki Settlement School.

I also served as tribal linguist for the Sauk Language Department of Stroud, Oklahoma. I developed a work plan for fieldwork documenting verb conjugation in Meskwaki and held elicitation sessions with fluent speakers of Meskwaki. (It should be noted that Meskwaki and Sauk are mutually intelligible; therefore, this fellowship project will also be a crucial resource for the even more critically endangered Sauk language).

### **Final product and dissemination**

I will digitally record and document conversations in Meskwaki between fluent first language speakers. I will select a sample of the conversations and publish them in a book which will include an audio accompaniment.

The conversations will first be audio recorded then transcribed using both the community's standard writing system and an orthography with more adequate phonemic representation. The transcriptions will then be translated to English-free translations. I will select a time-aligned software such as ELAN to carry out transcriptions and annotations. Selected recordings and translations will be printed in a self-published book with accompanying audio, and made available for purchase at cost. I've chosen to self-publish to make the resource as accessible as possible to the Meskwaki community, and as soon as possible. Prior to print, I will provide drafts to peer and senior colleagues for comments, edits, or suggestions.

All recordings, translations, data and analyses resulting from this project will be deposited for permanent archive at the American Philosophical Society. Items not culturally sensitive will be made accessible to the general public for researchers as shown in the attached Data Management Plan. As noted in the plan, culturally sensitive items may be placed on restricted access available only to Meskwaki community members. Protocol specifics will be generated during the project with commentary and input from Meskwaki tribal members and in collaboration with the APS.

The mixed-media format book produced by this fellowship will ensure that the project becomes a seminal community resource of this type for Meskwaki. This book will be a reliable account of cultural, historical, and social information as told by the Meskwaki people. It will benefit future generations of Meskwakis and other researchers who wish to study, celebrate, and reflect upon the social and linguistic heritage of the Meskwaki people.