American Indian Sign Language (AISL) Digital Corpus Project
Presented by Jeffrey E. Davis
4th International Conference for Language Documentation and Conservation
(paper submitted August 2014, accepted October 2014, to be presented 2/27/15)

This presentation features a digital collection of American Indian Sign Language (AISL) lexical signs, grammatical features, and discourse genres developed with support from the NEH and NSF's Documenting Endangered Languages (DEL) program. The project involves the first fieldwork in over fifty years to focus on the linguistic status of AISL, today classified as a highly endangered language variety. The project brings together sign language linguists and members of the AISL signing communities to make sign language studies more accessible. It is incorporating emergent documentary linguistic technologies and using captions, voice-over, slow motion and careful explanation to share the AISL digital corpus with scholars and community members for linguistic and cultural studies and for language revitalization; thus, drawing attention to an important, yet sometimes overlooked part of American Indian cultural and linguistic heritage.

A hallmark of the AISL digital corpus is that it encompasses two major types of data: historical linguistic legacy material and language documentation based on contemporary ethnographic fieldwork. Hence, the digital corpus includes both signed and spoken languages, spanning different cultural and geographic areas, and encompassing multiple linguistic modalities. It shows how indigenous sign language serves as an alternative to spoken language, how it is acquired as a first or second language, how it is used among deaf and hearing tribal members, as well as being used internationally as type of lingua franca. It brings attention to the urgent need to document both signed and spoken indigenous languages and for linguists and other scholars to collaborate with Indian communities where sign language continues to be learned and used. The project involves expert signers from different American Indian nations (Blackfeet/Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Crow, and Assiniboine, among others). It provides descriptions of indigenous sign language patterns of use and lexical-grammatical features. In this manner, the AISL project's digital corpus encompasses more than one endangered language and demonstrates that language spans multiple linguistic modalities: written, spoken, and signed.

In brief, the presentation addresses the challenges that sign language linguists encounter to effectively make information on sign languages available and comprehensible to hearing non-signing audiences. For instance, the AISL project is utilizing linguistic technologies for transcription, translation, annotation, subtitling, and voice-over; as well as following best practices for documentation, description, and revitalization. This approach contributes to the training of students from multiple fields of study, offering individuals and audiences the first-hand opportunity to explore the linguistic forms and properties of indigenous sign language.