

# NOVA *Above the Fold*

Northern Virginia Community College

Northern Virginia Community College's Student Newspaper

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## THE LINGUIST

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Posted on [May 28, 2014](#) | by [Yash Shevde](#)

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The NVCC Loudoun campus had the honor of hosting Dr. K. David Harrison, who holds a doctorate in Linguistics from Yale University, on April 14. The event hosted multiple discussions with students and a showing of the "The Linguists," a documentary which follows Harrison and Dr. Gregory Anderson as they frantically race to record and study dying languages around the world. As an Assistant Professor of Linguistics at Swarthmore College and Director of Research for the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, Harrison has done extensive research on languages throughout the world. His work has involved vast amounts of fieldwork, which gives him a unique perspective of various people and cultures around the world.

Where is the closest river to your current

### ABOUT US

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location? What is the direction of the flow of the water and in what direction is your motion relative to it? We would probably take a few minutes to answer these questions, if we can answer them at all. However, if you are a Tuvan nomad in central Asia, you will instantaneously use this information to select which of the five words for “go” you will use in the Tuvan language. Harrison learned this the hard way when he lived with such a group of nomads for a year. Relegated to the job of a dung-collector during his stay with them, he also learned the various names of the stages of the manure leading to its conversion to fuel for cooking food. “I had a list of these names in my notes,” he laughed. “One hundred words for ‘shit.’”

While visiting Professor Stacy Rice’s Honors English class, he brought a fresh perspective of the meaning of language. “Language is not just grammar, but also landscapes, rivers, plants, metaphors, time and space,” he said. This information is packaged in unique ways. For the aforementioned nomads, the details of the closest source of water (rivers and streams) are essential to their sustenance and survival. Every community stores such priceless information in a variety of fields such as medicine and navigation in the form of their language. For example, in Micronesia, the knowledge and techniques behind their exemplary sea-faring skills can be understood through their words for imaginary islands, which they use as waypoints in their navigation across vast distances without the aid of modern technologies.

There are 7,120 languages in the world, of which over half are endangered. Harrison’s work makes

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a pioneering effort to learn as much as we can from these languages before they die. He explained the significance of this task while speaking to a group of students over lunch, saying, "Every time a language dies, a unique way of seeing the world is lost."

Languages are endangered when the younger generations cease to speak it. This gives rise to a language shift, where the children become passive speakers, i.e., they can only understand their inherited language, but can both understand and speak an adopted language. In a diverse and multi-cultural region such as Washington metro area, we can see this phenomenon in action all around us. In immigrant populations, it often happens that the parents speak a language that their child can only understand. In many regions throughout the world, this has given rise to "language hotspots," a model Harrison adopted from the concept of bio-diversity hotspots. These hotspots occur where there is a high diversity of languages, where the languages are from related language families and where there is a low level of scientific documentation.

Among these factors, the only one within our power to change is the last condition: the level of scientific documentation. Anyone who studies languages has the ability to understand and possibly record the vast reservoirs of knowledge that cultures hold in their languages throughout the world. "Why study French which has millions of speakers, when the skills you have can help document a language that may go extinct in your lifetime?" Harrison asks in "The Linguists."

While collecting data for languages, Harrison and his team remain aware of the fact that the rightful

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owner is the community, not the scientist. Harrison has developed an online database for dying languages in the form of dictionaries and recordings.

“Many times people abandon their language because they think it is useless in the modern world,” Harrison said. Showing people recordings of themselves reciting words and stories adds a uniquely human touch to this enterprise. Harrison often does this for people who may have never used a computer or for those who have no knowledge of the Internet.

Harrison showed Rice’s class a recording of a Tuvan storyteller who maintained an oral tradition by memorizing epics and poems as long as 10,000 lines. He poignantly reminisces the words of the storyteller when he showed him the recording of his story and explained how anyone and everyone can access it via the Internet and YouTube. “This makes me immortal,” said the storyteller, who has since passed away. And with him, an ancient tradition of storytelling may have died as well.

In his study of languages, Harrison finds that being a participant observer of a culture and its language is the most efficient way to study it. “You have to be inside a culture to understand it,” he said. His colleague, Anderson, agreed. Being caught in a throng of dancing Sora villagers in India has taught them that there is more to learning a language than classrooms and interviews in a room with elders in remote parts of the globe.

“You have to breathe it in. Go out and dance with the people, that’s how you can learn it faster,” Anderson said.

For more information, visit [talkingdictionary.com](http://talkingdictionary.com), [livingtongues.org](http://livingtongues.org) or visit Harrison's YouTube channel, Enduring Voices.

On Campus

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