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TELEVISION REVIEW

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'Linguists' explore a world of words

By Sam Allis, Globe Staff | February 26, 2009

"The Linguists" should really be called Dave and Greg's Excellent Adventure. It's a hoot. Ethnographers David Harrison and Greg Anderson mix passion with undergraduate humor in their serious work traveling the globe to record near-extinct languages before they're gone.

Both are skilled scientists. Anderson directs the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages. Harrison is an associate professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College. Both speak a number of languages, but Anderson can pick one up without breaking a sweat. They wander around in Swarthmore and Phillips Exeter T-shirts and baseball caps and grotty clothes, a refreshing change from the roster of sober scientists in Orvis outfits we normally see.

There are more than 7,000 small languages in the world, and one disappears every two weeks. Experts travel to "hot spots," where a language is almost gone. In the documentary, airing at 9 tomorrow night, they start in a tiny Siberian village, move to another in India, and a third in Bolivia.

Anderson has a method for learning an old language on the run. He points to a tooth, an ear, colors, numbers - and gets a word back each time.

Things go fabulously wrong. The man who is supposed to speak Kallawaya, in Bolivia, doesn't know a word of it. They then wait 48 hours for an appointed meeting with a Kallawaya-speaking healer. Rather than speaking, the healer casts an astonishing mix of cocoa leaves, llama fat, llama wool, and llama fetus to read the patterns. He tells Harrison and Anderson they're too impatient.

In India, they try to film dancers and singers of the Sora language, but are abruptly stopped by villagers. A guide explains that such music is highly regulated.

The pair arrives in the Siberian village where a native language called Chulym is still spoken by a few ancients. The first man they question is nearly completely deaf. His wife turns out to be almost as bad. This is funny.

"Chulym was viewed as a gutter language," says a guide in Russian. "We were forbidden to speak it." Today, there are a handful of Chulym speakers left. Linguistically, Chulym is simple. "Anything can be a verb," Anderson notes. " 'I want to go out moose hunting' is one word."

Colonization is the culprit behind the extinction of languages. The language of the conqueror always becomes the lingua franca of the conquered. It happens everywhere. Russian killed Chulym, Spanish killed Kallawaya, English killed Sora.

In India, boys at boarding school receive a good education. In English. This comes at the expense of native tongues like Sora. The situation is similar to, but far less brutal than, the boarding schools of the late 19th century in the American west, where Native American youths were brought to erase their religion, language, sense of self.

Harrison and Anderson live for the kick of the unknown as much as linguistic sleuthing - anything to keep them away from prosaic daily life. "I don't see spending your career on the syntax of French when you can use your skills for languages going extinct," says Anderson. ■