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Linguists bent on saving the wor(l)d

UCLA club to screen documentary on the fight to keep endangered languages from vanishing

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Remember back in high school when it came time to pick which classes to take for the dreaded foreign language requirement?

Spanish? Yawn. French? Eh.

Perhaps you would have been more interested if the selection included choices a bit more exciting. Kallawaya and Chulym, for instance. How about Sora or Chemehuevi?

Yes, those languages actually exist, and they can be heard and experienced today at a screening of the film "The Linguists," which will take place at 2 p.m. in Ackerman Grand Ballroom.

The documentary, which has received rave reviews at film festivals, including Sundance, follows the journey of two daring linguists as they work to revitalize languages before they become extinct.

So while the above languages may seem like mere entertaining tongue twisters, their obscurity is indicative of a very serious problem throughout the world: language extinction.

According to Professor K. David Harrison of Swarthmore College, who is one of the film's two researchers and will be at UCLA to answer questions after the screening, this phenomenon is estimated to occur as often as once every two weeks.

Simply put, language extinction occurs when communities shift from speaking one language to another, and though the process may seem inevitable and even inconsequential to some, there are often deeper issues at stake for these communities and their cultures.

"It is usually not a free decision to give up a heritage language," Harrison said. "But it's a decision made under pressures of globalization, urbanization, repressive government ... policies and low socioeconomic status."

Many small communities desire to keep their languages but simply do not have the means to do so, which is where field linguists like Harrison come in. "The Linguists" features his and Dr. Gregory Anderson's work in Siberia, India, Bolivia and Arizona as they study and interact with indigenous communities.

"You start by working to raise (a language's) prestige," Harrison said. "And you may have to work to achieve better social or political recognition and status of a language."

The process of revitalization includes encouraging speakers, especially children, to use the languages more often, and, if possible, producing written materials and video recordings for the communities' usage.

"The Linguists," is rich in scenery and culture, and though the underlying matter is serious, there is a lot of fun and adventure along the way. According to Harrison, viewers can expect singing, dancing, science, suspense and more.

The screening is to be hosted by the Society of Bruin Linguists, with the goal of raising public awareness of language extinction.

"The issue of dying languages is one that not many people are aware of," said Cathryn Panganiban, a fourth-year linguistics and anthropology student and president of the society. "There's a close connection between language and culture. ... If one were to vanish, so would the other."

Harrison agrees that public awareness is key in the fight for language revitalization and preventing extinction.

"People naturally care about this issue but simply haven't heard about it. They are quite moved when they see the images of last speakers and hear their own statements about why it matters."