



GOOD Q&A: The Linguists

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linguistheader GOOD Q&A: The Linguists

Greg Anderson and David Harrison are chasing dying languages around the world.

Our planet is currently home to 6,192 languages, half of which might become extinct by the end of this century. And while the potential disappearance of a seemingly far flung language like Siberia's Chumlym might not concern the average speaker of English or French or Mandarin Chinese, it means quite a lot to its remaining speakers—and to scientists like K. David Harrison and Gregory Anderson. Harrison, of Swarthmore College, and Anderson, of The Living Tongues Institute, are the stars of Ironbound Films' *The Linguists*—an exciting and edifying documentary that follows their quest to document (and save) some of the world's many endangered languages. GOOD phoned these two intrepid linguists to hear their takes on the importance of language revitalization, the value of intellectual diversity, and the sometimes humbling experience of adventure science.

GOOD: Half the world's languages are at risk of disappearing. Why is it important to maintain or revitalize them?

GREG ANDERSON: From [an indigenous people's] perspective, it's extremely important to maintain a language because their identity is tied up in it. Humans have always gathered themselves into different groups and said "We're us and you're you" based in large part on a set of cultural practices of which language is a very core one. From the perspective of an average person on the street, the answer might be slightly more difficult to accept or process, but it basically boils down to the fact that languages encode most of what people have ever known and thought about throughout time.

DAVID HARRISON: Languages represent the greatest repository of human knowledge in existence. Every language contains some unique knowledge, some unique observations, some unique results of human adaptation to a particular ecosystem. But they're mostly undocumented, so we're losing this vast knowledge base that might contain the secrets of how we're supposed to survive and we don't even know it.



G: Was that the impetus for *The Linguists*?

DH: Well, that really [came] from the filmmakers. They got interested in the topic, started networking with linguists, and met me. I invited them to come along to Siberia on a previously planned trip with Greg and myself. They filmed that segment and made a

20-minute rough cut, and used that to apply to the National Science Foundation. They got full funding after a year or two.

G: Where did you go from there?

DH: The film focuses on four [languages and] locations: Chumlym in Siberia, Sora in India, Kallawayá in Bolivia, and Chemehuevi in Arizona. It tells the story of this global trend of language extinction and this really fascinating and vibrant global movement on the part of indigenous communities to reclaim and revitalize their languages.

G: And that's where the adventure comes in?



DH: Yeah, I mean, we go to very remote locations: rural India, the high Andes in Bolivia. You have visuals of us trekking through forests and crossing rivers. There's a road trip style and an adventure component—it's an intellectual adventure for us—but

we're just going to people's homes, basically. What's amazing and awe-inspiring is that people have thrived in those really harsh environments. They've been able to solve problems and that knowledge is contained in their languages.

G: So it was your task, upon getting to these places, to find ways to document the language?

DH: Yes, but we've got to do ethical science, so we can't just go in and extract data. We wanted to help create a healthy habitat for the language itself. Even if you make thousands of hours of recordings and dictionaries and grammars, you haven't fully captured the essence of the language. The only real, natural habitat for a language is a speaker community that uses it in all possible situations on a daily basis.

G: By engaging with the language, can you help revitalize it?

GA: Yes. Instances where revitalization has been quite successful are instances when there are not zero speakers, but a very small number of speakers left, plus some significant community and state support that has allowed it to regenerate.

G: And in those cases, you're helping to preserve intellectual diversity?

DH: Exactly. I would argue that intellectual diversity is not just a buzz word or slogan. It really might help salvage the future of mankind—and it's contained in these languages.

The Linguists was produced and directed by Seth Kramer, Daniel A. Miller, and Jeremy Newberger of Ironbound Films. It airs on PBS nationwide on February 26 at 10 p.m., (check local listings).

Header: Gregory Anderson (left) with Oranchu Gomango, a speaker of the endangered language Sora (India). Second image: David Harrison (right) with Nina Tarlaganova, one of the last speakers of Chulym (Siberia). Film stills and poster image courtesy of Ironbound Films.