

“Language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about.” —Benjamin Lee Whorf

Section B

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The recovery of dying languages

Visiting scientist screens documentary about linguistics

Today, the Department of English and the College of Arts and Sciences are sponsoring a screening of the acclaimed film from the Sundance Film Festival “The Linguists,” (2008) which discusses dying languages.

The movie will be introduced by one of the stars of the documentary, K. David Harrison. Harrison and fellow professor and ethnographer Greg Anderson traveled to remote countries in search of languages that are nearly extinct on the planet. The three languages they searched for are Chulym, Sora and Kallawayaya.

The pair set out to South America, Siberia, India and Arizona in the United States with a camera and sound equipment to document and interview the last speakers

of these languages. According to the documentary, the spread of global languages is increasing the endangerment of ancient languages. In hope to revitalize these dying languages, Harrison and Anderson dive into to the cultures of the languages they seek.

When trying to salvage Kallawayaya — a pre-Incan language originating in the Andes mountains — Harrison and Anderson must participate in a ritual that will reveal the truth behind the ancient healing practices of the culture.

While desperately trying to track down one of the final speakers of Kallawayaya, they lose hope. After participating in the ritual, they realize Kallawayaya was a language only used and taught to young men and elders to communicate the healing practices of the culture.

With a vast knowledge of language and linguistics, a hardy set of video and sound

equipment and a lot of serendipity, Harrison and Anderson were able to construct a monumental documentary. “The Linguists” is not only a testimony to the effect of global languages, but it is also a saving grace for a few of the world’s languages that were in danger of never being heard or spoken again.

“The Linguists” is an inspirational film for anyone studying language, English, film or ethnography. It is equally scientific and artistic as a humanitarian documentary. Harrison and Anderson’s mission is motivational for teachers and students and advocates the ability to change the world.

—“The Linguists” will be screening today at 6 p.m. in the Memorial Field House Auditorium with an introduction by Harrison. Harrison will also deliver a lecture on Friday at 4 p.m. in the Driscoll Auditorium. Both events are free and open to the public.



Photo courtesy of Ironbound Films

“The Linguists” is a documentary tracking two ethnographers as they travel the world trying to shed light on three of the world’s dying languages.