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**Title: Preserving words - A Swarthmore professor, worried that so many languages are dying out, undertook a rescue mission to Siberia.**

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K. David Harrison made two tiring plane flights over an ocean and a mountain range, a daylong car ride on a rutted dirt road, and two river crossings by barge, all in the search for . . . words.

And he wasn't sure the words even existed.

Finally, in a handful of tiny log-cabin villages in central Siberia, a day's drive from Tomsk and more than 2,175 miles east of Moscow, the Swarthmore College professor found the Ös - a cluster of people last visited by researchers three decades earlier, who spoke a language that no academic linguist had ever recorded. Some even doubted its existence.

Harrison, a Swarthmore linguist, found that only 35 of the 426 Ös (pronounced oos) people still spoke their native language, Middle Chulym, fluently. But several were deaf. Others were in their 90s and unable to speak well. Ultimately, only a dozen Ös could work with Harrison to record Middle Chulym (pronounced CHUL-um) for posterity. Middle Chulym is going extinct; as the nomadic people came under Soviet domination, Russian became the primary language.

Now, Middle Chulym will be preserved on videotapes in a digital archive. And, at the Ös tribal council's request, Harrison will produce the first book ever published in Middle Chulym, a children's book of Ös folklore. Harrison presented his research on the language recently at the American Association for the Advancement of Science's annual meeting in Seattle.

About 500 years ago, humans spoke 13,000 languages. Today, only about 6,500 languages remain. In a few centuries, there could be as few as 500.

That alarms linguists, who are scurrying to record languages and describe their grammar before they are lost for good.

"If we let them go extinct, valuable knowledge will be lost," Harrison said. "Many preliterate cultures have immense knowledge, which they hand down by way of their language."

Harrison said the Ös have developed unique phrases to impart information to one another about medicinal plants, history, folklore and religious beliefs.

Theodore B. Fernald, a fellow linguist at Swarthmore, agreed: "Every language is a piece of the puzzle about who we are."

Tofa, another Siberian language that Harrison has studied, provides an example. He said Tofa-speaking reindeer herders have devised a highly efficient way of sharing information about their herds. They have an individual word for every conceivable combination of attributes to describe a reindeer. Using just a single word, a Tofa speaker could describe, say, a 2-year-old, brown, castrated male reindeer.

Languages also impart something else, less tangible. They reflect different perspectives on life and the physical world.

The English words snake and fish indicate no perceived connection between these living things. But in Tofa, the word for snake is translated as ground-fish. An interesting choice - it helps an English speaker see the similarity between how a fish moves in water and the slithering of a snake over land.

Harrison, 36, is in his third year at Swarthmore and the third year of a five-year grant from the Volkswagen

Foundation. "To get a major grant - that's quite a coup at his stage in this field," Fernald said.

Fernald, who was on the committee that hired Harrison, said he stood out for "the quality of his research and his sense of social service."

Harrison grew up monolingual in Indiana, the son of a Baptist preacher. He majored in political science at American University in Washington, and when he tried to learn a foreign language - French - he fared poorly.

Unsure about a career, he traveled around Eastern Europe and grew fascinated with its minority groups. He also discovered that out of the classroom, he actually did have an aptitude for languages - he tackled Polish with success.

That sent him to Yale, to pursue his doctorate as a linguist. Ever since, he has made repeated trips to Siberia and Mongolia, spending splendidly isolated summers with yak herders and reindeer breeders.

Outside his spare campus office hangs a poster for the Endangered Languages Project, based at the University of London. The poster, with a picture of a New Guinea highlander tribesman, asks, "What's on his mind? You may never know."

Nearby is a brochure for the Endangered Language Fund, based at Yale, which has preserved texts written in Kuskokwim (Alaska), Jingulu (Australia), Maliseet (Maine), Yei (southeastern China), Yuchi (Oklahoma), Shabo (Ethiopia), Ongota (Ethiopia), and other endangered languages, and has funded dictionaries in Comanche and Tohono O'odham (both American Indian).

The Siberian languages Harrison works on are dying out because their native speakers were politically repressed during the era of Soviet rule. "The speakers were made to feel ashamed of their ethnicity and languages, and their children were in many cases sent to boarding schools where they were forbidden to speak their native language or punished for doing so," he said.

In cases where there is no active repression, speakers may abandon a language because they perceive it to be small, backward, or not useful in the modern world. Harrison said linguists still don't fully understand the process by which native speakers abandon their original language. "They never call a meeting and say, 'Let's switch.'"

The decision is often made by the children in a minority community, who feel peer pressure to fit in with a majority culture. Once made, the decision tends to be irreversible.

Harrison uses a separate office to phonetically transcribe his tapes of native speakers. A bookshelf sags under binders bearing labels that read "Yoruba" (Africa) and "Kirundi" (Australia).

Against another wall, an old metal filing cabinet bears a sign: "Wires, microphones and headphones (oh my!)"

For his stay last summer with the Ös, Harrison and his collaborator, linguist Greg Anderson, brought a video camera and solar-powered laptop.

They would often start by asking a native speaker to count, or recite body parts. Then they would ask the Ös to say specific sentences. The goal is to collect enough taped samples to identify rules of grammar.

Harrison also listened to the Ös' everyday spoken exchanges. "We'd learn more that way because they would use sentences we would never have thought to ask them about."

One of his favorites was uttered by an Ös woman in her garden: "The worms have eaten my cabbage."

He traveled with the Ös in their dugout canoes, fished with them, and heard their tales about bear hunting. A PBS documentary crew tagged along for a show that is in production.

Harrison said native writing systems are rare. The Ös never devised a written form of Middle Chulym. Luckily for Harrison, one Ös man decided to keep a hunting journal, and devised his own alphabet, based on Russian. When he told friends, though, they ridiculed him. Ashamed, he destroyed the journal.

With this man's help, and using his home-grown alphabet, Harrison is putting Middle Chulym to paper.

When he returned to Swarthmore in the fall, he made copies of his videotapes, then sent the originals to a linguistic institute in the Netherlands, where they are archived.

"The language belongs to the native speakers," Harrison said. "I'm just the curator."

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#### More Information

To listen to a sound clip of the language, view a slide show and more:

<http://go.philly.com/language>

Endangered Language Fund: [www.ling.yale.edu/~elf](http://www.ling.yale.edu/~elf)

Endangered Languages Project: [www.hrelp.org](http://www.hrelp.org)

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