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## He hopes film is the talk of Sundance

**Premiere will costar a Phila. expert on vanishing languages.**

By Kathy Boccella  
Inquirer Staff Writer

Linguist K. David Harrison is comfortable speaking five languages and has studied dozens of others, but next week he will need to learn the singular vernacular of Hollywood as costar of a film premiering at the Sundance Film Festival.

"I have a conference call today with the filmmakers just to talk about the publicity stuff," Harrison said from his Center City home, sounding mystified.

*The Linguists* follows Harrison and his colleague Greg Anderson around the world as they document the last whispers of endangered languages and try to understand the forces threatening their extinction.

They are word archaeologists, probing the recesses of the planet for hidden tongues instead of buried artifacts. To preserve their treasures, the linguists record the last speakers of the dying vernacular.



Ironbound Films Inc.

K. David Harrison, a Swarthmore College professor featured in "The Linguists," appears with Nina Tarlaganova, one of the last speakers of Chulym in Siberia.

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Originally intended for PBS, the 70-minute documentary

will be shown in the same star-making noncompetitive category as Morgan Spurlock's latest, *Where in the World is Osama bin Laden?*, and 2006's *An Inconvenient Truth*.

As an academic used to trekking to remote locations, Harrison wasn't too keen on traveling to the celebrity-studded indie festival in trendy Park City, Utah.

"I was a little blasé about it, but the filmmakers were like, 'No, no, David, you don't understand. This is a major coup,'" he said on a morning that he was to return to Swarthmore College, where he teaches, after a year filled with expeditions.

Sundance's lore is almost as famous as the fur-hooded faces that will pack the Western ski resort during the festival's run Thursday to Jan. 24. Robert Redford started Sundance in 1985 with 50 film submissions. This year it received more than 8,000, having morphed from a rogue and independent event to an industry extravaganza that can change the lives of aspiring filmmakers.

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Harrison, 41, said he hoped the hype would spread the word about what he calls the language extinction crisis.

Of the estimated 7,000 languages spoken today, nearly half are threatened and likely to disappear this century, falling out of use at a rate of about one every two weeks.

In the film, the linguists travel to far-flung Siberia, India and Bolivia to find indigenous speakers, penetrating bureaucracies, gaining the trust of the communities, even crashing a wedding and nearly causing a riot when they tried to pay for a just-performed dance.

"Gift-giving in another culture has all kinds of taboos that we can't possibly know about," Harrison said, explaining that he had given a large single bill to the town elder instead of spreading the payment out. "I clearly had done something wrong, and I didn't know how to fix it."

In Siberia, fewer than 25 elderly people know Chulym, spoken for generations by hunters and fisherman in small villages. In Bolivia, Kallawayá, a language of healers to the Inca emperor, is on the verge of extinction, with fewer than 100 speakers today.

It has been called a secret language, meaning it was not learned from birth but taught to young men who practiced medicinal arts. What Harrison and Anderson learned is that the language is used not only for healing but also for everyday conversation.

"What we don't know," said Harrison, who made unique recordings of Kallawayá speakers, "is why the language survived."

Why languages disappear is easier to discern. Often, complex political and social pressures extinguish languages. In Siberia, for instance, the Russian government banned people from speaking native languages.

One of the directors, Daniel A. Miller, said the linguists' passion for their work came through in the film.

"They're not the sort of scientists who approach a community like David Attenborough, the all-knowing anthropologist who explains what's going on to the audience," said Miller, whose codirector Seth Kramer originally set out to make a film about the dwindling number of Yiddish speakers.

Harrison, who speaks Russian, Polish and three Siberian languages, discovered his love of languages in the early '90s while living in Eastern Europe, where he went after studying political science at American University. When he returned to pursue a graduate degree in Slavic languages at Yale University, he took linguistics and was captivated.

After he arrived at Swarthmore in 2001, he and Anderson founded the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages in Salem, Ore., and developed a "hot spot" map that pinpoints the world's vanishing languages, much like biodiversity maps show where plants and animals are disappearing.

The hot spots are northern Australia, central South America, North America's upper Pacific coastal zone, eastern Siberia, and an area that includes Oklahoma and the Southwestern United States. All are occupied by native people speaking a variety of languages.

Oklahoma, for instance, has 43 endangered American Indian languages. Bolivia has seven languages unrelated to any other, more than in all of Europe.

Harrison and Anderson offer technical help to communities to preserve their languages but only if they want it. They also make word lists and dictionaries.

"They own the language," Harrison said, adding that recordings can help future generations resurrect the tongue if they desire.

"We're losing ideas. We're losing knowledge that is absolutely unique, and isn't written down anywhere," said Harrison, who on this day seemed an unlikely adventurer in gray slacks, blue shirt, striped tie and Marine-short hair.

Indigenous languages contain information about animal species, ecosystems, healing and medicines. Once they are gone, that information is lost.

Since releasing the hot-spot map in the fall, Harrison has been a linguistic luminary, appearing on *Today* and *The Colbert Report*, upending the impression of the staid scientist with his enthusiasm and easygoing charm.

"They're young and energetic, and you really get a sense of their passion and their concern and their dedication to what they're doing," said Valentine Kass, program director for the National Science Foundation, which funded the film. It's the foundation's first film to premier at

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As weird as the festival may be for the scientists, it's just as unreal for the filmmakers, who have made decidedly un-Hollywood films about the reconstruction of the World Trade Center and engineering.

Just like the linguists when they encounter a new language, "we're entering this new domain, popular culture instead of the documentary niche market," Miller said. "The hardest part is how unreal the whole thing seems."

Go to <http://go.philly.com/linguists> for an interactive map on language hot spots and more.

Contact staff writer Kathy Boccella at [kboccella@phillynews.com](mailto:kboccella@phillynews.com) or 610-313-8123.

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