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May 26, 2009

Arts & Entertainment

Saving Dying Languages In 'The Linguists'[Listen Now](#) [7 min 56 sec] [add to playlist](#)

Nina Tarlaganova (left) is one of the last speakers of the Siberian language of Chulym. Linguist David Harrison is working to preserve such endangered languages. Ironbound Films

Weekend Edition Saturday, February 21, 2009 · There are more than 7,000 languages in the world, and if statistics hold, two weeks from now, there will be one less. That's the rate at which languages disappear. And each time a language disappears, a part of history — a subtle way of thinking — vanishes too.

A new documentary called *The Linguists*, airing Thursday on PBS, follows ethnographers David Harrison and Greg Anderson as they race to document endangered languages in some of the most remote corners of the world.

From the plains of Siberia to the mountains of Bolivia to the tribal lands of India, Harrison and Anderson have hopped the globe, but they sat down for a moment with NPR's Scott Simon to discuss their race to capture the world's endangered languages.

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Harrison, a linguistics professor at Swarthmore College, specializes in sounds and words; Anderson, who directs Oregon's Living Tongues Institute, is the verb expert. Together, they speak 25 languages.

Languages are rich in the history and taxonomy of a place, says Anderson, reflecting subtleties that can be lost in translation. When the last keepers of a language die off, so does the fluent understanding of that particular environment.

“The people who live there are the experts on the environment they live in, whether it's Siberia or the Bolivian Andes. They know more about the ecosystem, the plants and animals, than scientists typically do.”

"The people who live there are the experts on the environment they live in, whether it's Siberia or the Bolivian Andes," he says. "They know more about the ecosystem, the plants and animals, than scientists typically do. And it's not just a list of things they know; it's a hierarchy of knowledge, how things fit together."

Harrison and Anderson say they have encountered some strange languages in their travels, including an East Indian dialect called Birhor — which, in English, sounds a lot like "beer whore."

"But all languages are strange from a certain point of view," says Harrison. "English is pretty strange."

Linguist Greg Anderson

The Linguists follows Harrison and Anderson on their "adventure science" expeditions — and finds them in some unexpected situations.



Non-Hindus engage in Hindu prayer at a boarding school for tribal children in India. Linguists David Harrison and Greg Anderson traveled to India to chronicle tribal languages. Ironbound Films

"We do encounter inconveniences," says Harrison, laughing. "Getting to a very remote place, finding people and convincing them to talk to you on a camera. There are roadblocks, both literal and figurative." And surprises, like the wedding they were called to dance at in a remote village in India.

The film also offers context on the question of why languages die out.

"The big umbrella term is globalization, but you need to break that down. There are economic forces, ideology, social attitudes," says Harrison. "Many people have been presented with a false choice, that they have to give up their native language in order to succeed, and [speak] a global language like English or Spanish exclusively. But more people are realizing that you can be bilingual, that you have access to more knowledge by being bilingual. There are these pressures as we get increasingly urbanized, but people are successfully pushing back."

Recent First 



[Daniel G \(NicanTlaca\)](#) wrote:

I'm grateful that someone out there is recording and researching these unique languages and bringing it to our attention! Perhaps NPR (or other organizations) can focus in on our back yard the "Americas". There are hundreds of Indigenous "Native American" languages which are soon to be extinct as well. Maybe showing which ones are more prevalent and which ones have influenced or are part of our current language (whether in English, Spanish, Portuguese, etc)...I'd like to know, and I think it would be very interesting!

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[Leonard Chianese \(ldchian\)](#) wrote:

alan, you're right. what was i thinking? from now on no more seriousness, gloom and/or doom.

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[Alan Morgenstern \(Schmice\)](#) wrote:

What is there to be in a dither about? What was so moronic about Scott Simon's interview? He is a very good interviewer whose style makes interviewees comfortable and expansive on the subject matter. I suggest that you extract that poker from your rear ends and just enjoy a professional doing his job. All is not seriousness, gloom or doom, you know.

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[dingzhou meng \(dreaming\)](#) wrote:

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[Leonard Chianese \(ldchian\)](#) wrote:

i agree with jeanjacques dethier. i too was in a dither when scott simon giggled on the air because of the words 'bilabial fricative'. in fact, it made me think. from now on, i shall strive to be adult in every way. no more laughing at farts, no more south park, no more weiner jokes.

adult. from now on.

Sat Feb 21 13:45:45 2009

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