

New film tracks dying languages

THE LINGUISTS

One tongue disappears every two weeks

BY ADAM McDOWELL

Seth Kramer knew he had to make a film about dying languages when he witnessed people blithely treading (in a sense) on the grave of his ancestral tongue.

He was in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius shooting a Holocaust documentary for PBS. "Vilnius at one point was the culture heart of the Yiddish language and culture," explains the filmmaker over the phone from his home in New York state. "By the time I got there with my crew there was almost no trace of Yiddish. In fact, the only place I saw Yiddish was in an area of the city where tombstones had been used to pave the sidewalk. This was emotional for me because this is the language that had been spoken in my family for generations

and no longer was."

Kramer's research revealed that, despite its retreat, Yiddish is actually relatively healthy compared to thousands of other languages around the world. One of humanity's 7,000-odd tongues disappears every two weeks or so, says K. David Harrison, one of two linguists featured in Ironbound Films' documentary *The Linguists*.

"We're losing something like half of humanity's linguistic knowledge and we don't even know what's there. It hasn't been documented," Harrison says. "Of all of this,

we had no idea. How did I get to be into my thirties without being aware of the great diversity of languages in the world?" wonders Kramer.

The issue is not as widely known as say, species extinction or climate change, perhaps in part because there's never been a movie about language loss until now. Kramer and his partners and co-creators, David A. Miller and Jeremy Newberger, now have one to sell, having spent about four years chronicling the globe-trotting efforts of thirtysomething U.S. linguists Harrison and his colleague Gregory D.S. Anderson.

Harrison is attending a lunchtime screening and discussion of the film at the Uni-

versity of Toronto today. What viewers will see is more of a road movie or a buddy picture than a talking-heads doc. "It's sort of like an adventure movie," Kramer says.

To hear endangered languages, one often (though not always) must travel far from major centres into isolated pockets where minorities tend their weakening flame. *The Linguists* follows Anderson and Harrison as they study the Siberian language Chulym (fewer than 25 speakers remaining), the Bolivian tongue Kallawaya (fewer than 100 speakers) and Sora (with fewer than 300,000 speakers, a blip in its home country of India).

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Arguments and a faux pas: a linguistics adventure film

LANGUAGE

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Travelling the back roads, they encounter stammers and hiccups — arguments, illness and what Kramer now euphemistically calls a “faux pas” in a remote Indian village — keeping the film from getting bogged down in the discipline’s notoriously technical details.

“We wanted to capture these first moments because that’s really the unique aspect of what these guys do. They’re not looking for dinosaur bones. They’re looking for humans,” Kramer says. “That interaction when they finally encounter that human to get what’s in that person’s brain is really unique.”

Despite difficulties selling the concept, Kramer says PBS will give the film a prime time airing some time in 2009. The Garrison, N.Y.-based Ironbound is now looking for international broadcasters. Most of the people who have seen *The Linguists* up to now have done so at film festivals, including Sundance, or at university screenings.

Canadians should not assume the issue in question is remote from them. “I would

argue that almost all of us in North America live near one of these communities,” Harrison says. “I would bet Toronto is home to a number of speakers of endangered First Nations languages.”

Besides donating to Harrison and Anderson’s Living Tongues Institute, Harrison says, “What the average person can do is help contribute to a shift in attitudes.” The reasons for language death are complex. Most waning tongues lose ground when they fall in prestige against the planet’s dominant languages — from English and Spanish to Mandarin and Hindi. Deliberate government policy often plays a role (think residential schools).

The last word, Harrison says, should go to the speakers of these languages themselves. “What does it feel like,” he asks, “to be the last speaker of a language?”

■ *The Linguists* screening and discussion runs today from noon to 2 p.m. at the University of Toronto’s Bahen Centre, 40 St. George St., in Room 1160.

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IRONBOUND FILMS

The Linguists’ Seth Kramer.