

**Newsweek**

# Say It Loud, Say It Proud

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The first eureka moment in "The Linguists," a PBS documentary airing on Feb. 26, comes from an unexpected source. Our scientist heroes are in a remote Siberian village, searching for speakers of a dying language called Chulym. They try, and fail, to interview some deaf, toothless nonagenarians and a wobbly woman who alternately curses and coos. Then, out of nowhere, their driver, Vlasya, a barrel-chested Slav in his 50s, overcomes decades of shame and begins speaking flawless Chulym. It had been buried since childhood, we learn, when he was sent to a Russian boarding school and was forbidden to speak his village's "gutter language."

Vlasya is one of only nine remaining speakers of Chulym, and he's a prize for Swarthmore professor K. David Harrison and Gregory Anderson of the Living Tongues Institute, who travel from Siberia to India to Bolivia hoping to document obscure languages before they disappear for good. As they go, it becomes clear that their mission is about more than words. Every two weeks, one of the world's 7,000 languages vanishes; most belong to indigenous communities that have been stamped out and homogenized by colonialists. One of the film's final images is an ironic reminder of the inadequacy of the very words the scientists are chasing—for there are none to describe the look on Vlasya's face as his mother tongue, once a source of shame, becomes a language he speaks again with pride.

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