

LANGUAGE RESCUE

Honors linguistics major Miranda Weinberg '09 joined Assistant Professor of Linguistics David Harrison this summer to work on a model to identify languages that are in danger of dying out. Named "Language Hotspots," the model is an ongoing collaborative project between the nonprofit Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, which Harrison co-founded, and National Geographic.

"Language hotspots are the areas with the greatest levels of linguistic diversity worldwide and the highest concentrations of endangered languages," explains Harrison.

Of the world's 7,000 living languages, about half of them are predicted to become extinct by the end of the 21st century, Weinberg says. Found in regions of the world with many different languages belonging to widely varying language families, most have only few speakers to pass them on to succeeding generations. And most have not yet been adequately studied or documented. "They have no writing system," Weinberg says. "so once the last speaker dies, the language dies, too."

Part of the project, she says, includes expeditions to meet with speakers of endangered languages and document, record, and film them. Harrison is spending part of

STUART WATSON



Miranda Weinberg helps provide David Harrison with data for a field trip.

the summer in northern Australia, where, Weinberg adds, there are "hundreds of undocumented languages." Although not an expedition participant herself, she helped prepare Harrison for the trip, collecting data from field reports of anthropologists and linguists as well as from census statistics and Internet resources.

Weinberg's main role has been to compile material for the project's Web site. After meeting early in the summer with other project participants in Washington, D.C., she wrote a project description, an introduction to endangered languages, facts on each hotspot, trivia about the languages, and a glossary of technical terms.

"Trying to make linguistics—not a very media-friendly field—accessible to people who have never thought of studying language (as opposed to *a* language) was quite a challenge," Weinberg says. "Some of my work included taking grant applications—the only written descriptions of the project—and translating them into more concise, gripping language appropriate for a Web site. I hope that the site and the project will not only introduce the broader public to the issue of language endangerment but also encourage people to think about language itself."

A feature on endangered languages, including a map compiled for the project showing language hotspots worldwide, will appear in the October issue of *National Geographic* accompanied by a link to the Web site (www.languagehotspots.org).