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MIND Reviews: The Linguists **Recommendations from *Scientific American MIND***

By Corey Binns

The Linguists

Order the DVD at www.thelinguists.com

There are 7,000 languages in the world—and one dies every two weeks. With it goes cultural knowledge built for generations as well as an irreplaceable piece of the puzzle that is the human brain's affinity for words. In an effort to record the most endangered languages before they disappear, Swarthmore College ethnographer David Harrison and linguist Greg Anderson of the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages in Salem, Ore., embarked on a journey around the world. *The Linguists* chronicles their adventures and challenges, many fit for Indiana Jones. Some of the most nerve-wracking and humorous moments of the documentary happen when the scientists try to communicate with the surviving elderly speakers: one of the last 25 people who speak Chulym in Siberia is nearly deaf; another alternates between swearing at the researchers and confessing her love for them.

When people stop speaking in their native tongue, we miss out on unique insights into the diverse ways the brain can work. Anderson and Harrison come across an unknown numerical system near its death in rural India, and their surprise and joy at the discovery are infectious. Harrison asks Orenchu Gomango to count in his native language, Sora. “When he said 13,” Harrison explains, “he repeated the word we had just heard for 12 and added the word ‘one’ to it.” Unlike English, which uses 10 as a base, Sora appears to use 12 as its base. Until Gomango counts to 30, which translates to 20–10. “Now he’s using 12 and 20 as a base. So, then, as he counts higher, which one is he gonna use? It turns out he’s going to use both of them. So you get to 32, and that is 20–12.” The linguists determine that the Sora word for 93, which translates to 4–20–12–1, is one of the most complicated numbers we might ever see in a language.

Back in Siberia, the researchers work with local children to create a storybook, the first book ever published in Chulym. “It’s hard to really explain the satisfaction you can have watching people reconnect in essence with their history,” Anderson says. But we sense he has little time to enjoy this small success. By the end of the film, we learn that half the Chulym speakers Anderson and Harrison interviewed have already passed away.

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