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*THEIR TASK is to record and document endangered tongues and to develop written forms to help preserve them.*

WASHINGTON In half a dozen fishing villages in a remote part of central Siberia, the Middle Chulym people are losing their language, one of hundreds of tongues likely to vanish around the world during the next half century.

Among the Middle Chulym, who survive by ancestral ways of hunting, gathering and fishing, only about 40 of 426 people continue to speak the native language, according to K. **David Harrison**, a linguist at Swarthmore College who traveled to the region last year to document two Turkic languages in imminent danger. He found that no one younger than 52 can speak Middle Chulym fluently, and the rest speak only Russian.

"Each language that vanishes without being documented leaves an enormous gap in our understanding of some of the many complex structures the human mind is capable of producing," Harrison said.

Number systems, grammatical structures and classification systems can be lost, along with knowledge about medicinal plants, animal behavior, weather signs and hunting techniques.

### Siberian language in peril

Another Siberian language called Tofa also is threatened, with 35 of 600 in the community able to speak it. When such native languages die, Harrison said recently at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, villagers lose an oral history as well as detailed knowledge of the local environment.

The Tofa people are reindeer herders, Harrison said, and their language has special ways of describing

reindeer by sex, age, fertility, color and ease of riding. Such descriptions do not translate easily into Russian, he said.

"Human languages are vanishing as we speak," said Harrison, who argues that the rate of loss is every bit as disturbing as the extinction of animal species.

Stephen Anderson, a Yale University linguist, estimates that "probably 40 percent or more of the world's languages will cease to be spoken within the next 50 to 100 years."

Ethnologue, a database maintained by SIL International of Dallas, lists 6,809 languages worldwide. That number is subject to debate, say Anderson and others.

Laurence Horn, a Yale linguist, said the number of languages sometimes is influenced by politics as much as linguistics. Cantonese and Mandarin are distinct languages, he said, but the Chinese government prefers to consider them dialects. Horn cited the oft-quoted comment, attributed to Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich, that a language is "a dialect with an army and a navy."

Harrison said languages begin to decline when native speakers view them as less prestigious or not accepted as widely as the dominant language in a region. That has been the case with Middle Chulym, Harrison said.

#### Native languages

Of the indigenous languages of North America, Anderson said, only eight have as many as 10,000 speakers. Navajo is the largest, with about 160,000 speakers, he said. But many young Navajos no longer are learning the language as their first tongue, he said.

"Once young children don't learn it as a first language," Anderson said, "then it has only as many years to go as the life expectancy of its current native speakers."

Language-maintenance efforts are under way in American Indian communities, he said, but studying the language for a few hours a week in school is not sufficient to rescue a threatened language.

Some elementaries, including one on the Mohawk reservation in northern New York, teach the traditional tongue as a first language in immersion programs aimed at preserving language and culture.

The loss of languages is not inevitable, Anderson said. Linguists such as Harrison have been trying to record and document **endangered languages**, help foster interest in them among local populations and develop written forms to help preserve them.

Whenever a language dies, Anderson said, "it's a human tragedy and one of the few human tragedies that linguists can do something about."

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