

Seed Magazineabout

SEEDMAGAZINE.COM May 26, 2009

The Amazing Race

Entertainment and Media by Anthony Kaufman / February 25, 2009

The Linguists depicts an around-the-world race to make audio recordings of dying languages, giving us a glimpse of how technology can promote language diversity.



Ironbound Films, Inc.

Of the world's 7,000 languages, 40 percent are on their way to extinction, with the last fluent speaker of a language dying once every two weeks. *The Linguists*, airing on PBS on February 26 at 10 p.m ET, traces two insatiable researchers, K. David Harrison and Greg Anderson, on a journey to the ends of the Earth to meet the speakers of some very remote languages — Chulym in Siberia, Sora in eastern India, Kallawaya in Bolivia, and Chemehuevi in Arizona — and to document them with audio recordings. The Indiana Jones-like adventures of Harrison and Anderson, whether avoiding Maoist guerillas in India or trekking through the Andes, often dominate the film, yet *The Linguists* also brings to light the role of technology in preserving language diversity and the knowledge contained within them.

Harrison and Anderson, both linguists, run the Oregon-based Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, a nonprofit that devotes much of its efforts to building searchable “talking” online dictionaries of rare and endangered languages. By studying these “real

outliers,” as Harrison calls them, he says we get incrementally closer to understanding how language itself works.

The results of the research are not only on view in the documentary, which premiered at Sundance in 2008, but samples of the audio recordings of Kallawaya, taken during filming, also already [appear](#) on the Living Tongues Institute website. Moreover, Anderson has built online dictionaries with accompanying audio devoted to the Siberian language of [Tuvan](#) and the North American Indian language of Siletz Dee-ni, which is password-protected: Only members of the tribe can access it. Currently, the institute is building a new online library of the Indian Munda “[Ho](#)” language, a sister language to Sora, one of the languages featured in the film.

Harrison says his goal is to “assist small and underrepresented languages in crossing the digital divide.” Recording the languages and giving them a presence on the Internet helps maintain and grow the number of speakers, he says, and lends some “prestige” to speaking a minority language.

In a particularly powerful moment in the documentary, Harrison and Anderson use a laptop to show elderly Chulym speakers video footage of themselves speaking that they’ve edited together via iMovie software. While sitting around the computer as if it were a campfire, the Chulym speakers express a sense of delight at seeing and hearing their recorded voices for the first time. “To see themselves represented in a high-tech way,” says Anderson in the film, says to them that “maybe our language isn’t so backward; maybe I have a knowledge that really is special.”

Audio: Endangered Languages

The following sound clips are provided by the [Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages](#). They are used with the consent of the speakers and communities who are the owners of these languages.

Tofa; Central Siberia, 35 speakers

[Listen to mp3](#) | Tofa song, untranslated

Ho; eastern India, 1 million speakers

[Listen to mp3](#) | Translation: “new moon”

Kallawaya; Bolivia, 100 speakers

[Listen to mp3](#) | Untranslated

Chulym; Siberia, less than 10 speakers

[Listen to mp3](#) | Translation: “Where are you going; where are you from; I’ve never seen such stupid people.”

For Harrison and Anderson, documenting languages doesn’t always involve Bolivian healing ceremonies with live chicken sacrifices, as the film might suggest. In fact, Harrison says, “it’s much more effective, rather than have an outsider linguist going in, to train local people” to do the documentation. With that in mind, the Living Tongues Institute has so far given two communities “language technology kits,” which include a laptop computer, a digital camera, a digital audio recorder, and a still camera. A University of Oregon graduate student went to the University of Ranchi in eastern India to work with speakers of Ho, recording thousands of words from elders that will feed into its corresponding online language dictionary. Another kit went to a team of researchers at Gauhati University in Assam, in northeastern India, to document students in their linguistic department, who speak dozens of indigenous languages.

The tech tools of recent decades — like text messaging, web pages, chat rooms, and YouTube — are finding use among speakers of indigenous languages, says Anderson. Margaret Noori, a colleague of Anderson’s and a professor of literature and linguistics at the University of Michigan, is part of a network of Native American Ojibwe speakers who have Facebook networks, a website ([Ojibwe.net](#)) with easy-to-download language lessons, and who share Ojibwe words with each other using the Zephyr application for iPhone.

Anderson says he hopes their documentation efforts will also become a tool to test out linguistic theories. “One of the things that I see myself being able to do,” he explains, “is provide detailed and adequately confirmed phenomena to the general linguistic community and say, ‘here’s some data, now come up with a new theory to explain this data.’”

During filmmaking, Harrison and Anderson discovered an interesting feature of Sora: Its speakers can incorporate definite and specific nouns into a verb, to create, for example, the single-word *jo-me-bob-dem-te-n-ei* (“I will anoint my head with oil,” or, literally, “smear-oil-head”). This structure goes against prevailing linguistic models, which argue that the incorporated part of the word (i.e., “oil”) should not be available to the external syntax of the phrase, in which the verb is embedded. “Since 80 percent of the world’s languages aren’t documented,” Harrison says, many of the languages they encounter “confound current [linguistic] theories in interesting ways.”

“The fact that these languages are disappearing,” Harrison says, gives him a sense of urgency. “The tipping point has passed for many languages. There’s only one option for them: Record what you can before they disappear.”