

January 29, 2004

## Saving the last words of a dying language

FROM JEREMY PAGE IN MOSCOW

AN AMERICAN linguist says that he has discovered a unique language spoken by a dwindling ethnic minority in the depths of Siberia — but it is on the verge of extinction.

The language of the Middle Chulym, descendants of nomadic Tartars who lived by hunting, fishing and gathering in the forests of western Siberia, is now spoken fluently by only 35 people, according to David Harrison, Assistant Professor of Linguistics at Swarthmore College, in the United States. The youngest of them in a community of 426 is aged 52.



Swamped by Russian settlers, forced to abandon their nomadic lifestyle in Soviet times and with no education in their native tongue, the rest have all switched to Russian.

Dr Harrison and his colleagues are striving to document Middle Chulym and publish the first books in the language — a grammar primer and a collection of children's stories — to preserve it for posterity.

“Every time we lose a language without documenting it, it leaves a huge gap in our understanding of the complex structures the human mind is capable of producing,” Dr Harrison told *The Times*. “And the Chulym will lose their oral tradition, their religious beliefs, stories, songs — all the accumulated knowledge of countless generations.”

Middle Chulym is one of a growing number of languages facing extinction as speakers abandon their native tongues in favour of a few dominant world languages.

Without urgent action, some academics predict that half the world's estimated 6,800 languages could be extinct by the end of this century.

For the Middle Chulym, the process began more than 350 years ago. They were one of the many nomadic tribes in Siberia subjugated by the Russians in the 16th and 17th centuries as the Tsars expanded their empire eastwards.

Yet it was Joseph Stalin, the Soviet leader, who did the most lasting damage. In the 1930s, the Soviet Government forced Siberian minorities to give up their nomadic lifestyles and join collective farms. At the same time, a ferocious campaign against religion and traditional culture was launched. Russian was the language of the new order.

Then, with a flick of a bureaucrat's wrist, the Middle Chulym officially ceased to exist. When the Government carried out a census in the 1950s, they were simply listed as part of a larger ethnic group and their language a subset of another language, although the two were mutually almost incomprehensible. "For reasons of political and bureaucratic convenience, their language was mistakenly classified and lumped in with something else," Dr Harrison said.

Dr Harrison, who has been researching the languages of Siberia since 1996, made his discovery on a trip there in July. He flew to the western Siberian city of Tomsk, about 3,500 km (2,175 miles) east of Moscow, and then travelled for a day by road and crossed two rivers by boat before he found the Middle Chulym.

"We went looking for a language we weren't sure even existed," he said.

He found the Middle Chulym living in a cluster of six villages in Teguldet district, where they practise their traditional livelihoods of hunting, fishing and gathering with the more recent addition of small-scale vegetable farming and animal husbandry.

Their native language reflects their nomadic roots. It has an abundant vocabulary to describe flora and fauna, hunting, gathering, fishing, family relations and the weather. Its number systems and grammatical structures are unique.

Yet for everything connected with settled life, it takes on words from other languages, most of them Russian.

Middle Chulym has also never had an official written script. However, one member of the community did devise his own system of writing and used it to keep a hunting journal for two years, the first book ever written in the language.

Dr Harrison is now using the script as a basis to develop an official orthography, which he will use for the grammar and children's stories. "The role of a linguist is that of a minor catalyst, but in cases of impoverished remote communities, the

very fact of interest by outsiders may foster renewed interest by the younger generation and thus lead to revitalisation efforts,” he said.

Dr Harrison’s work with the Middle Chulym is the subject of a forthcoming American television documentary called *Vanishing Voices*.

## HEAR THIS

- Writing began about 7,900 years ago; the origins of language are much earlier
- A dialect is defined as a variety of a language spoken by a group of people within a speech community
- More than 6,000 languages are spoken today
- Roughly 120 languages have at least a million speakers and about 60 per cent are spoken by fewer than 10,000 people
- All but 600 are at some risk of extinction, threatened in particular by Chinese, English and Spanish
- Mandarin Chinese is spoken by more than one billion people, twice as many as English
- Pite Saami is spoken by fewer than 50, mostly in the Swedish region of Lapland
- The island of New Guinea has 1,100 distinct languages
- Endangered languages can be saved from extinction. Hebrew and Faroese, threatened at the end of the 19th century, are now vibrant national languages