

New Documentary Film Tracks Languages

By Paul Sisco

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Scientists who study linguistics estimate that half the world's spoken languages are likely to disappear in this century. VOA's Paul Sisco spoke with the director of a new documentary film that chronicles the work of two scientists who are traveling the world in a race to preserve what they can.



Seth Kramer

The film is called **The Linguists**. Funded in part by the National Science Foundation, it follows the work of two scientists who are documenting and archiving languages that are dying around the world.

Film director Seth Kramer got interested in the project because his family once spoke Yiddish.

"I was interested in making a movie about what does this language mean and what does it mean now that it's not in my life and that it has sort of been removed from the vast community that spoke it at one point," Kramer said. "That sort of exploration led to the discovery by me and my fellow filmmakers that this Yiddish

language is not alone. That there are 7,000 languages or so spoken around the world and scientists estimate that as many as 90 percent of those languages might not survive the century."

The film follows David Harrison and Gregory Anderson, scientists and modern day adventurers working to preserve disappearing languages.



"We went to Siberia, following our scientists, trying to track down a language called Chulym. We went to Bolivia trying to track down speakers of a language called Kallawayaya, we went to India trying to find speakers of a language called Sora. And the last stop was at home in America, a language called Chemehuevi spoken in the southwest which is pretty much down to its last fluent speaker," Kramer said.

"I speak the Chemehuevi language and I speak it to myself 'cause there is nobody to talk to. All the elders have passed on, so ... that's

it," Johnny Hill said.

Anderson and Harrison spent months trekking to remote villages in search of dying languages. High in the Bolivian Andes, they met Max Chura, one of the few remaining speakers of Kallawaya.

Despite the dominance of Spanish in the region, Kallawaya is still spoken but only between shamans with knowledge of the medicinal value of thousands of plants and herbs.

When he's not traveling, Harrison teaches in the United States. He blames language loss on urbanization, colonialism, and false beliefs. "This is one of the false choices of globalization: that people have come to believe, or been told, that they need to give up their ancestral language to speak English or some other global language," Harrison said. "And that is simply not true."

Harrison hopes the film will send a message that when languages die and are lost, knowledge is too.

"The Linguists" premiered at the Sundance film festival this year and efforts are underway to have it released worldwide in 2009. More is available about The Linguists at www.thelinguists.com

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Kallawaya speakers



David Harrison