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## Babble On, Say Researchers In 'Linguists' Documentary

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Doesn't your life seem like a daily adventure in linguistics? Americans today routinely encounter more languages from more continents than at any time in the past century. Whether you're getting a meal or a clean shirt or a cab, or visiting a university or a hospital or simply walking through the mall, it's easy to think you're living in the golden age of language diversity.

But apparently, you would be wrong.

Languages are dying by the hundreds -- the thousands -- all over the world as you stand there trying to figure out the menu on Wilson Boulevard. And before you can be churlish enough to say, yeah, and the problem with that would be what? -- wasn't life better before the [Tower of Babel](#)? -- here comes a movie to set you straight that is so au courant, if you know what we mean, that it was shown at Sundance.

Called "The Linguists," it is basically a home movie with better than average production values -- which, come to think of it, may be a useful definition of indie movies -- that could have been subtitled "Dave and Greg's Excellent Language Adventures."

These guys travel to parts of Siberia, Bolivia and India so truly godforsaken that the film of Arizona Indian country looks cosmopolitan. All in the service of warning us that half the world's 7,000 languages are going extinct. These include Gta', in India, which features words that efficiently capture concepts at which English flails. Such as:

- "Goteh," which means "bring something from an inaccessible place with the help of a long stick";
- "Nosore," which means "to free someone from a tiger"; and
- "Poh," which means "to kill lice by pressing them under your nails."

It also turns out that in the Bella Coola/Nuxalk language of Canada, you can find such words as "stshlh" for "afterbirth" or "stsnts" for "transsexual/hermaphrodite."

We know what you're thinking. You want to buy a vowel.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

[National Geographic](#) is hosting a multi-culti [All Roads Film Festival](#) at its headquarters at 17th and M

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streets NW tonight through Sunday, and "The Linguists" is the opening-night attraction. Its success on the indie circuit is no small accomplishment. Even the film's director, Daniel A. Miller, acknowledges the challenge of dealing with linguists.

"My wife's friend at Berkeley was a linguistics major and we privately called her Data -- as from 'Star Trek: The Next Generation' -- because of her monotone recitation of mostly emotionless observations," he writes in his director's notes.

When the filmmakers first met a young researcher in endangered languages, K. David Harrison, "he seemed like the perfect protagonist. He was as young as we were in 2003 yet looked better on camera. At the same time, he was a bit of a control freak."

His co-researcher, Gregory Anderson, "was Oscar to David's Felix. We found out in time that Greg was a recovering Deadhead, the father of two and both a huge fan of extreme fighting and a black belt. He also spoke close to 20 languages and had founded with David the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages."

Thus does the movie strive to make an adventure out of seeing all the ways the human mind can make sense of the world with language. The trailer's eloquent sell asks who "will circle the planet to hear the last whispers of a dying language, racing against time to hear words rarely spoken before they're never heard again?"

Ask why we care about recording a language that only three people speak, and Harrison replies, "If we were to give a rationale purely for selfish reasons, it would be, after those speakers die, we'll have a scientific record of the language."

But in addition, "science is playing catch-up in many respects to the people who have lived there for thousands of years and know about that ecosystem," says Anderson. "So since all of these ecosystems are under collapse now, it would behoove us to not just throw away this knowledge that people have accrued over the millennia."

And their knowledge doesn't translate out of their language?

"There are approximations that can be made, of course," says Anderson. "Which is why you're capable of reading Dostoevski even if you don't know Russian."

Languages divide as well as unite -- ask Canada. The luxury of embracing global language diversity is palatable in part because the world has succeeded in creating a lingua franca, a universal language -- English. A quarter of the world's population speaks it, according to David Crystal, author of the Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language. Four or five times as many people speak English as a second language as do those who consider it their first.

"The Linguists" visits a boarding school in India where parents eagerly send their kids to learn a way to make a living -- running a sewing machine, for example. These kids speak 60 home languages, but as often as not they are taught in English because, the film acknowledges with some rue, it is the most efficient way to give them a good education.

If these parents are more concerned with their kids' economic futures than they are with the preservation of

their tribal languages, what's wrong with that?

"English won the competition for languages," says Anderson. "The English-first laws are all inane because it's a *fait accompli*." And all those other languages he records? "We serve the heritage communities of these languages," he says.

"There's really a global movement going on right now for language revitalization," says Harrison. "A lot of it looks dire and depressing and the trend is downward, but people have realized that they were presented with a false choice: that they had to give up their identity, give up their language, become part of a homogenized melting-pot culture. People are pulling back from that and reasserting their roots, their ethnic identity, their multiple identities, their heritage languages and affiliations.

"There's a better attitude nowadays where people don't just pay lip service to the idea of diversity, but they understand that diversity does actually strengthen a society, strengthens us intellectually, strengthens us socially."

Weren't things better before the Tower of Babel?

"I was raised in a religious tradition that views multilingualism as quite literally a punishment from God," says Harrison. "It was intended to 'confound' -- that was the exact word that was used. But there are alternative mythologies. There are still societies today" -- in New Guinea and South America -- "that actually require their members to marry a person who is a speaker of a different language. Diversity has a survival value."

"Yeah," chimes in Anderson, "they call it hybrid vigor in biology."

H. Russell Bernard is a grand old man of endangered-language research, having devoted four decades to it. The chairman emeritus of the [University of Florida](#) anthropology department and the former editor in chief of the *American Anthropologist* takes the long view about disappearing language diversity.

"We're conducting this experiment where we had 35,000 years of language proliferation. About 500 years ago it started contracting, since the age of discovery and conquest and colonialism. We know that the proliferation of languages was the natural order of things for a very long time. Modern *Homo sapiens* is conducting an experiment to reduce that, to maybe one. It's hubris, but why shouldn't we do that -- translate it all into one?

"If I had 20 to 30 planets on which to conduct this experiment, in which some proliferate and some stay the same, and I could monitor it for 2,000 or 3,000 years, and could tell what the consequences were, I would not be so concerned about whether the experiment we're conducting is good or bad for humankind.

"Without that comparison," however, Bernard says, experimenting in language extinction "seems to me utterly reckless."

Meanwhile, you ask Anderson and Harrison whether they realize they are causing their National Geographic publicist to pound her head against her desk.

What a great opportunity, she thought. Language diversity! She promptly started to line up interviews with Spanish-language media. That's when she learned that of the 25 languages the two could speak, none of

those was Spanish.

Twenty-five languages and none of them is Spanish? you say to the boys, incredulously. Aren't you ashamed?

"Yeah, I know," says Anderson.

"We're terrible."

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