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Discovering Chylum

May 21, 2006 6:36 AM PST

Discovering Chylum: Swarthmore Professor David Harrison traveled to Siberia to learn about **Chylum**, a previously **undiscovered** local language that reflects its population's culture of hunting, animistic belief system, and bear worship. [More Inside]

posted by [gregb1007](#) (17 comments total)

3 users marked this as a favorite: [nomis](#), [moonbird](#), [youarenothere](#)

Harrison has also done some video recordings of the language as spoken by locals and plans to publish a Chylum primer and a children's storybook. Harrison's work will be profiled on the PBS Documentary vanishing voices and also featured in an **Ironbound Films documentary** *Last Speaker*.

Harrison has already been interviewed by NPR. **The interview's archived** on NPR's website.

An interesting issue raised by the article is the Soviet-era government repression of indigenous languages and the way such policies engendered feelings of shame towards the languages and therefore discouraged their use.

posted by [gregb1007](#) at **6:48 AM** PST on May 21

Great post. Thanks for the heads up for the upcoming documentary. Incidentally, I've had K. David Harrison in class and he too is great.

posted by [youarenothere](#) at **7:26 AM** PST on May 21

Isn't that the language where pronunciations change unexpectedly?

posted by [weapons-grade pandemonium](#) at **8:08 AM** PST on May 21

I don't mind ads per se. But it would be nice to link to a page that consists of more than 30% of relevant material.

posted by [sluglicker](#) at **8:15 AM** PST on May 21



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gregb1007, **It's** an intriguing story. I liked the NPR interview. Between 35 to 40 speakers and a man who is 52 is thought to be the youngest speaker of Chulym, a shrinking **Tower of Babel**.

posted by **nickyskye** at **8:48 AM** PST on May 21

While I'm always glad to see language-related posts on MeFi, I'll burst the bubble a little by pointing out that Chulym is neither "previously undiscovered" nor some sort of linguistic isolate with a unique grammar and worldview. It's a **Western Turkic** language quite similar to Tatar (and all the Turkic languages are much more similar to each other than, say, the members of the Indo-European family); it was "discovered" centuries ago, along with the rest of the Turkic dialects of Southwestern Siberia, and what Harrison is saying is basically that it was wrongly analyzed by Soviet scholars. There's excellent discussion of the topic from various informed parties (including Harrison himself) in my LH **post** (from February 2004, ahem); Harrison says there:

Middle Chulym (the native name is "ös") is most definitely Turkic, and most Turkic languages are fairly closely related. It was previously wrongly lumped together (both in Russian bureaucracy and in Soviet era ethnography) with Shor, and later with Xakas, two neighboring but quite distinct Turkic languages. The Middle Chulym were even dropped from the census as a distinct ethnic group for over 40 years. They recently regained their ethnic status and registered as a 'tribe' with 426 members (only 35 to 40 people still speak the language fluently).

The Middle Chulym [ös] language is unique and distinct enough from Lower Chulym (the next closest language) to warrant its own Ethnologue entry. I will be communicating with the Ethnologue editors shortly to make the case for this and to send them exact statistics on the number of speakers and the state of the language.

I note that Ethnologue has still not corrected their **entry**, but I guess they have other priorities.

posted by **languagehat** at **9:03 AM** PST on May 21

Thanks, languagehat. I had a bunch of questions in mind at the beginning of the thread--you've pretty much answered all of them.

posted by **gimonca** at **10:02 AM** PST on May 21

cough

The Chulym story starts on **this page**.

The point of the article (read from the beginning) is that they're trying to document these languages before they become extinct. There's a very interesting thesis about a language containing a map of the

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interconnected knowledge of a people (such as fishing, in this case). It's not entirely clear to me how you preserve that if nobody fishes anymore, though.

posted by [dhartung](#) at **11:42 AM** PST on May 21

languagehat: *It's a Western Turkic language quite similar to Tatar (and all the Turkic languages are much more similar to each other than, say, the members of the Indo-European family)*

For what it's worth, the **numbers 1 to 10** in...

Chulym: pir' igi üts tört pesh alti jedi segis toghus on

Turkish: bir iki üç dört bes, alti yedi sekiz dokuz on

Tatar: ber ike öch dürt bish alti jide sigez tugiz un

posted by [sour cream](#) at **12:50 PM** PST on May 21

languagehat, apologies for calling the language undiscovered: neglected would probably have been more appropriate.

posted by [gregb1007](#) at **1:17 PM** PST on May 21

For what it's worth, the numbers 1 to 10

Yeah, like I said, all the Turkic languages are pretty similar to each other. Don't fixate on the voiced/voiceless variations (b/p, d/t, g/k)—the choice of letters to represent the phonemes of the language can be a whim of the individual transcriber.

gregb1007: No need to apologize; you're just going by the reportage, which naturally emphasizes anything that could be construed as NEW! and dramatic. And of course 99% of all languages are neglected, so it's nice to see the occasional one get some publicity, even if overblown. If this leads to the Chulym Tatars getting a break, hooray for Hollywood!

posted by [languagehat](#) at **1:46 PM** PST on May 21

languagehat: *Don't fixate on the voiced/voiceless variations (b/p, d/t, g/k)...*

No, of course.

Actually, I find all three of them to be so similar that I wonder if they are mutually intelligible. That would be surprising given the geographic distance, but on the other hand, they seem to be closer than, say, English, Dutch and German.

posted by [sour cream](#) at **2:40 PM** PST on May 21

I should add that I still think that this was an interesting post and the linked article was a good read.

Actually, if I'd have no financial worries, no daytime job and no family etc., I'd probably do what Prof. Harrison does and go out into the field and try to record dying languages for posterity.

posted by [sour cream](#) at **2:46 PM** PST on May 21

I've gotten different reports on mutual intelligibility, and you have to be suspicious of political agendas on both sides (pan-Turkic types emphasizing it, Soviet-era divide-and-conquer types minimizing it). But all of them (except the outlier Chuvash) are extraordinarily similar, despite the distance (even Yakut, which is way off in eastern Siberia).

posted by [languagehat](#) at **2:47 PM** PST on May 21

Building on [sour cream's post](#), [historical linguists](#) establish relationships among languages using the [comparative method](#). They build up lists of cognate words, which are words in separate languages that have a common historical parent, usually using basic words like numbers or body parts. Then they use those cognates to find systematic correspondences between the languages. Sorry for the wiki focused links, but they provide decent background info on the process.

posted by [formless](#) at **2:47 PM** PST on May 21

Bear worship, eh? Colbert isn't going to like that...

posted by [five fresh fish](#) at **7:20 PM** PST on May 21

Sour Cream: The Turkic languages are all very similar, with much less deviation than the Indo-European languages, but they aren't all that intelligible to each other. In Turkey there are a lot of villages of Crimean Tatars resettled around Ankara, and the older generation speak Tatar when they don't want the kids to understand. I've spoken standard Anatolian Turkish to Uzbeks and Bulgarian Tatars and [Gagauzi](#) and they had no problem understanding me (not the case with me understanding them...)

As somebody who makes a living running around Europe singing in a [langauge](#) that very few understand, I can attest that a culture loses an awful lot when it loses its language.

posted by [zaelic](#) at **2:44 AM** PST on May 22

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