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# Languages disappear before they can be discovered

**By: TIFFANY STEVENS**

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A language disappears approximately once every two weeks, according to a linguist who will show a documentary today tracking the survival of languages.

K. David Harrison, author of "When Languages Die" and producer of "The Linguists," has been researching endangered languages for a number of years.

There are 7,000 languages worldwide, approximately 80 percent of which are undocumented, Harrison said in a phone interview Monday.

Due to the wide array of languages in various regions, scientists are often unaware that some languages even exist before something can be done to sustain them.

## THE LINGUISTS

**When:** 7 p.m. today

**Where:** Tate Center theater

In the documentary, Harrison traveled to regions home to native speakers of endangered languages in Siberia, India, Bolivia and Arizona.

"In each of these places ... we interview people who are speakers of the language," he said. "In Arizona, actually, we interviewed the last speaker of [a] language, and he was a very eloquent speaker."

Harris said scientists do not attempt to "save" languages that are fading but rather hope to assist a community in sustaining their language.

"The village in Siberia asked us to make a book because they've never had a book [in their language] before," Harrison said. "It became a point of pride among the villagers."

"There are communities that have made a strategic decision to keep their languages, and often times they're doing it through new technology, through the Internet, through text messaging, and even through hip hop," he said.

The extinction of languages is a result of colonization, educational policies, institutional forces and social forces, Harrison said.

"Kids make a decision. They're very sensitive to social forces, so if there are two languages in a culture, they will realize that one language is valued over the other," he said. "But people can be bilingual, and with a change of attitude some of these languages can be saved."

Harrison said while some may argue it would be better for the spoken word to move toward a global language, there is an intellectual value in language that can be lost through translation.

"There are values that can't be expressed in English or some other language," Harrison said. "You begin to understand how imprecise translation is and how languages organize knowledge in different ways ... We get so stuck on this debate of English or English versus Spanish, but there are so many Native American languages that were here first and are struggling for survival and we need to appreciate that."

Harrison also said he believes students will take a natural interest in the topic.

"People care about cultures and languages and you just need to give them the opportunity," he said.

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