

No speakie the language

They run around the world documenting little-spoken languages before they become obsolete. And if their work helps keep a tongue alive a little longer, all the better

By David B. Green

It's hard to say if "The Linguists" is a happy film or a sad one. Clearly, it is exhilarating, beginning with the opening credits, which are interspersed with colorful and vibrant street shots from the countries visited in the movie – India, Russia and Bolivia – all overlaid with a cheerful Punjabi song with an infectious, driving rhythm. And this documentary's two title characters, Gregory D.S. Anderson and K. David Harrison, American scholars who travel the world documenting endangered languages before they have disappeared entirely, are certainly appealing and energetic figures. We can see they are having a ball, but they also bring respect, dedication and high professional standards to their subject – as well as the knowledge of 25 different languages between them.

It's the directors of "The Linguists" (which screens at the Jerusalem Film Festival on July 12 and 13), though, who say that making it was a sobering experience. One day in late June, the three of them – Seth Kramer, Daniel A. Miller and Jeremy Newberger – gathered around a speakerphone in their Garrison, New York office to talk with *Haaretz*.

They are proud of their film, which had its world premiere last January at the Sundance Festival to unanimously enthusiastic reviews, but they also see it as source of melancholy. The world has some 7,000 living languages, it tell us, and linguists estimate they are dying off at a rate of one every two weeks. The killers are cultural imperialism, economics (young people concerned about making a living are rarely sentimental about give up an ancestral language for that of the dominant surrounding culture) and even boarding schools. In Orissa state, in India, for example, Anderson and Harrison visit a "tribal school" that accepts young people from 60 different indigenous groups in the region, each of which has its own language, and it teaches them English and a trade.

"The theme of these trips," said Jeremy Newberger, "is that we were seeing information and heritage not being passed on between generations, and that is a source of sorrow." Add to that the fact, he continued, that, "generally, the places where languages are in greatest danger are usually areas that are the most poverty-stricken," and often the speakers are members of a derided minority group who face steady pressure to give up their unique linguistic heritage.

Take, for example, Vasya Gabov, the taciturn man who drives the linguists around southwest Siberia as they attempt to establish whether anybody still speaks Chulym, long considered a "gutter language" among the region's Russian-speaking majority. The handful of Chulym speakers the Americans do turn up are all ancient, and generally hard of hearing, which is how it happens that Vasya, a relatively spry 56-year-old who looks a bit like Bob Hoskins, finally breaks down and lets on that he himself is a speaker. Understandably, Harrison and Anderson are grateful to have the assistance of a Russian- and Chulym-speaking local whose hearing is intact.

Compared to Chulym; or Chemehuevi, a language of a Native American tribe in



Top: Linguists Harrison and Anderson conducting an interview in Siberia.
Bottom: Filmmakers Kramer, Miller and Newberger.

Photos courtesy of Ironbound Films

Since Chulym doesn't have a written form, Vasya invented his own, employing Cyrillic letters. But when he showed what he'd written to a Russian speaker, he was told it was 'offensive.' 'I felt ashamed and threw away the papers,' Vasya says.

Arizona that is now being kept alive largely by the efforts of 53-year-old Johnny Hill, Jr. (efforts that include speaking it to himself); or Kallaway, which is employed by native healers in the Andes Mountains, but which Bolivian linguists believed was no different from a tribal language called Quechua until the Americans played them a recording of it – Yiddish may seem to be veritably thriving. But it was a realization that he could not speak any of the tongue that his grandparents knew fluently and even his parents knew partially, that first set Seth Kramer to thinking about making a movie on the subject of dying languages.

Earlier this decade, Kramer made a documentary for PBS called "Resistance: Untold Stories of Jewish Partisans," and while he was shooting in Vilnius, he was shown a public square that had been paved with headstones from a Jewish cemetery. He realized he couldn't understand the Yiddish inscriptions on the stones. In 2003, he discussed the idea of making a film about endangered tongues with his business partner, Miller. He says that at the

time, "we had no idea what an endangered language was. We just knew we had lost the connection with Yiddish – after shooting in Europe, and seeing where it had once been spoken on every street corner."

Kramer acknowledges that it's a far cry from Yiddish to "a language that has only five speakers left," but says "there is still something basic that we thought we could share with other people who had lost that connection."

"The Linguists," however, is hardly a tear-jerker. Its appeal begins with its title characters, David Harrison, 41, an assistant professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College, outside Philadelphia, and Greg Anderson, also 41, the founding director of the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, in Salem, Oregon: Both are funny and open, and idealistic too, in a familiar American way that when let loose abroad can lead to both miracles and disastrous misadventures.

The film has not just humor and irony, but also some danger. There is, for example, a scene in India, in which residents of one of the last villages where the language

Sorra is still spoken put on an impromptu performance of traditional dance for their visitors, and then, drunk on palm wine, make it clear they don't at all appreciate the cash gift the linguists have given them for their efforts – without making it clear just what was unacceptable about the gift. Added to the fact that Orrisa is plagued by political violence, and outsiders need special permission to travel in certain parts of the state, and one can understand the anxiety working there entails.

Sometimes, it's the locals who want to preserve their heritage who face the hostility. Vasya from Siberia, explains to the researchers that as a boy he kept paper and pencil in the forest where he hunted, and would steal away when interesting things occurred, to write about them in his native tongue. Since Chulym, like most endangered languages, doesn't have a written form, Vasya invented his own, employing Cyrillic letters. Once, when he showed his pages to a Russian speaker, he was told it was "offensive." Vasya says, as his eyes appear to moisten up, that he too "felt offended, and I stopped writing. I felt ashamed and threw away the papers."

But as if responding to a human version of the uncertainty principle, which says roughly that a subatomic particle in motion can't be observed without its being affected, the very fact that Greg and David travel to these remote locations to talk with people about their dying languages and cultures – can lead to a rekindling of interest among the speakers of that language.

'White people with crazy ideas'

Daniel Miller, who served as soundman during shooting (Kramer and Newberger manned the cameras), and later wrote the script of the 65-minute film (which was edited from 200 hours of tape shot over three years), compares Anderson and Harrison to "reverse missionaries." This can surprise people in the towns they visit. "Few of these communities have not been touched by missionaries," he said. "The idea of white people with crazy ideas is not new to them. But rather than trying to roll out Christianity, these guys are trying to 'roll back' the people's own culture to them." This includes sharing copies of their recordings and the other data they collect, which can serve as a basis for further local efforts to preserve a language that had just been about to flicker out.

Thus, by the end of the film, Vasya is not only enthusiastically helping Harrison and Anderson with the interviewing process, he also commits a Chulym folk story to paper. At the instigation of the visitors, he then shares that story with local children of Chulym heritage, who are encouraged to illustrate it. The Americans promise to publish the pictures and texts as "the first Chulym storybook."

So, is "The Linguists" cause for optimism, or is it yet one more source for lament and worry? Of course, it is both of these: We're inspired and moved by the dedication of these scholars, as they venture so far afield from the ivory tower, at the same time we know that they're running a losing race against time and cultural erosion. But it's hard not to be struck as well by the dedication of the filmmakers, who also schlepped themselves over the Andes, through Siberia, and deep into insurgency-plagued India. The kaleidoscope of faces, and colors and sounds of their film serves as a welcome reminder that not everyone in the world looks the same, eats the same, thinks the same, listens to the same music and reads the same books. Not yet, at least.