Lost In Translation

Billions of people on this Earth collectively speak thousands of languages, many of which are endangered. As each tongue slips into extinction, a unique way of viewing the world goes with it. Along with the words and sounds, entire traditions and the cultural fabric they weave may disappear in the process.

by Soo Ji Min

Vassilij Gabov leans forward to address the ninety-six-year-old woman on the other side of the couch. In gravelly Russian, the native Siberian asks Varvara Budeeva where she’s from. There’s no answer. Gabov repeats the question. Still unable to provoke a response, the heavy-set man moves across the couch and sits directly beside Budeeva. Seamlessly switching to a different language, he shouts into her ear: “Where were you born? What clan are you from?”

Had Gabov been wearing a black suit, dark sunglasses, and shiny wingtip shoes, he might be mistaken for a mobster interrogating a recalcitrant witness. But his weathered face and soft eyes convey only the best of intentions. In reality, Gabov lives in Tegul’det, a remote village in central Siberia. The former truck driver has been hired as a guide and translator for American linguists spending ten days on a pilot language expedition in southwestern Siberia. K. David Harrison, a specialist in Tuvan and other Siberian languages, is searching for native speakers of Middle Chulym (chew-LIM), a language on the brink of extinction.

Harrison is having trouble getting started. The first Chulym speaker he and Gabov located was completely deaf; the second was incoherent. Budeeva was next on the list, and while she never does answer Gabov’s questions—because, as luck would have it, she too is totally deaf—she becomes the fourth recorded speaker of Middle Chulym when she steps outside to wave goodbye to her visitors and speaks the Chulym word for “dog” while pointing at her pet.

But it is Gabov, whose shift from Russian to Chulym surprises everyone in the room, who reveals himself as the third, and most intriguing, of thirty-five native speakers Harrison will find concentrated in six isolated villages in southwestern Siberia. Just two days earlier, Gabov spoke only Russian to Harrison. Fearing that his Chulym was deficient, Gabov kept his knowledge of his native tongue hidden, leading Harrison to a pair of older Chulym speakers instead. But spurred as much by Harrison’s quest as by the researcher’s video
camera and voice recorder, Gabov reached out to Budeeva, and made a connection through a shared language that had retreated as much from his mind as from his tongue. And in that instant he became, at fifty-two years old, the youngest known speaker of Middle Chulym.

“The way you talk identifies the group you belong to,” says David Lightfoot, dean of Georgetown University’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and a professor of linguistics. “A language essentially disappears because people choose at some level of consciousness to adopt another group’s language … it’s an act of allegiance to one culture and a rejection of another culture.”

But more than the rejection of a culture, the death of a language can be a step toward the death of the culture it expresses and embodies. Encoded in Middle Chulym, and in every language, are clues to how people lived—kinship systems, economies, livelihood, and leisure. “Language conveys evidence of cultural phenomena,” says Lightfoot. “If a language disappears then the cultural evidence disappears also, because it was only embedded in the language.”

Nearly 3,500 of the world’s languages are at risk of extinction in one lifetime—roughly half the world’s total. And there’s little stopping the dissolution of the Turkic language that originated on the upper reaches of the Chulym River in the district of Tomsk. In a community of 426, only thirty-five elders are fluent speakers. The rest speak Russian only. “It’s a moribund language,” says Harrison.

Until he arrived last summer, Harrison, who spends the school year teaching at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, says the Chulym people had not been visited by a scientist since a group of Soviet linguists came through in 1972. Even then, their language had only been written down by the scientists in a few notebooks and locked away in an archive. Unless something is done to revive the language and cultivate it within the younger generation, Chulym, and much of the culture it reflects, will completely vanish over the next thirty to forty years.

“A working language conveys so much about a culture—ethics, history, love, family dynamics—in short: the whole life of a people,” says Diane Ackerman, a visiting professor at Cornell University and author of An Alchemy of the Mind: The Marvel and Mystery of the Brain. “To lose a single language is like watching a species of animal go extinct and know it will never occur again on the planet.”

Already starting to fade from the Chulym cultural landscape are ancestral hunting stories that once were verbally shared, retold, and embellished. Tales about bears, for example, never mentioned the word “bear” directly, explains Harrison. “They would say ‘furry one’ or ‘brown animal.’” For the Chulym, the bear is a mystical animal to be both feared and respected. It is a powerful symbol, one that demands special rituals be performed to assuage the bear’s spirit. These rituals formed part of an animistic belief system, which holds that spirits inhabit inanimate objects—rocks, trees, bodies of water—as well as living creatures.

But these same tales, told in Russian, are mere skeletons of the originals. As the Russian language absorbed the Chulym speakers, these stories were relegated to the recesses of the Chulym minds and culture, weakening their animistic religious beliefs. At one time, special practitioners called qam were prevalent in traditional society. Similar to shamans, they
functioned as experts at interacting with the spirit world, and were called upon in dire situations, such as serious illness or death. Harrison discovered that at most, only two people still alive in the community might actually have seen a shamanic ritual with their own eyes—one of them being Varvara Budeeva. Shamans disappeared long ago from Chulym society because native Siberians and Russians were converted to Orthodox Christianity, which forbade Shamanic practices. “We feel that [animism and Shamanism] are two really essential elements in their culture and even though they’ve mostly been forgotten, there are little scraps left that you can look at,” says Harrison.

Recording these ancient tales on paper, however, may produce nothing more than additional cultural remnants. Lost in the transition from the spoken word to the written word is the vibrant history and oral traditions encoded in the Middle Chulym language. These codes, according to Harrison, survive only through speech. “The great majority of the world’s languages have no writing system at all, and they do just fine without it,” he says. “No writing system has ever been devised that is capable of capturing the full complexity and richness of language.” So when a language draws its last breath and disappears, Harrison worries that a unique way of seeing the world dies with it—an extinction of ideas. How the mind produces, processes, and understands language is severely compromised as languages wither and fade. In order for linguists to answer the question posed by Noam Chomsky: “What is a possible human language?” they must examine all human languages. To many linguists, the question is simply unanswerable if one looks only at major world languages like Chinese, Russian, or Spanish. Smaller, local languages often provide evidence of new types of linguistic structures or typologies. In all languages, for example, a sentence may contain a subject, object, and a verb—of which six possible configurations exist. Until recently, Harrison says, linguists had found only five of the six combinations employed in human language. The discovery of the missing link—object, verb, then subject—was made by Desmond Derbyshire, who found this usage in the endangered Amazonian language Hixkaryana.

“The languages that are disappearing are most unusual in their structures compared to the majority languages that are displacing them,” says Doug Whalen, president of the Connecticut-based Endangered Language Fund. “There is a global tendency for [majority languages] to be less complicated than [smaller languages] morphologically. English has been simplifying its morphology for centuries … ‘Thou,’ for example, has disappeared from modern usage.”

If these smaller languages go extinct without being documented, warns Harrison, “we simply will never know the full range of human cognitive capacity because many of the less likely and rarer types of complex structures will have disappeared.”

Some language experts offer translation as a modern antidote to language loss. “After all, we can translate pretty well from one language to another,” says Steven Pinker, a linguist and the Johnstone Family Professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University. “During World War II, the Navajo Code Talkers managed to transfer pretty arcane modern military secrets using the Navajo language.”

But, argues Harrison, specialized knowledge encoded in a native language and used in a particular context or setting can be lost when speakers shift from one language to another,
more dominant tongue. The Middle Chulym, for example, once relied on fishing as their primary means of subsistence. Their language would have reflected this—using detailed words to describe fishing nets and traps, a fish’s lifecycle, behaviors, body parts—and would have had a fairly complex classification system. “When the Middle Chulym switch over to speaking Russian, they lose some of this knowledge,” argues Harrison. “It’s very hard to prove, but that’s my starting hypothesis—that there are complex knowledge systems in any language, but especially in languages where people live very closely to the land and are dependent on it.”

Even in situations where a language’s structure remains, the way the native language is used changes, often taking on the speaking style and attitudes of the more dominant language. “The way we experience language is not through its structure directly, but the way its structure gets used in making continuous discourse,” explains Michael Silverstein, Charles F. Grey Distinguished Service Professor in the departments of anthropology, linguistics, and psychology at the University of Chicago. As a native language group shifts to acquiring a more dominant one, the replacing language can, over time, wreak havoc on the weaker language. “It’s the subtle ways in which a culturally distinctive communicative perspective emerges in the process of actually using language that gets very much transformed and frequently destroyed over a couple of generations.”

After recording a Chulym bear story, for example, Harrison played it back to a sixteen-year-old with some knowledge of Chulym. The young listener understood that the story had something to do with a bear, but nothing more. The key to accessing the rich meaning and history locked behind a simple tale was lost with the demise of the Chulym language.

“The kids know their grandparents speak some funny other language, but they don’t know what it is,” Harrison says, noting he found just four “passive speakers” of the language—all in their mid-thirties—in addition to the thirty-five fluent speakers. “It’s hard to imagine what it would take exactly to get them interested enough to learn it.”

Once marginalized, a language often struggles to survive, but bringing a language back from the brink of extinction takes intensive effort, money, and community support. Because the Chuvylm community is impoverished and small, the chances are good that its native language will die. “When that particular mode of communication disappears, they will be completely deprived of their own history and culture,” says Naoki Sakai, a professor of Japanese history and literature at Cornell University.

The Soviet Union’s role in the gradual demise of the Chulym language began in the 1940s when Joseph Stalin ordered Chulym and other Siberian children to attend boarding schools and prohibited the instruction of any non-Russian language. As children, Gabov and other Chulym speakers were effectively forced to abandon their mother tongue. “Chulym was viewed as a gutter language,” explains Gabov, reverting back to the Russian he is more comfortable speaking. Chulym, if spoken at all, was confined to the privacy of individual homes. Ashamed and afraid to speak Chulym in public, many hid their knowledge of their native tongue, as Gabov did when he first met Harrison.

The plight of the language worsened in the 1970s as the Soviet government implemented its “village consolidation program,” forcibly relocating the Chulym into larger,
Russianspeaking settlements—further diluting the population base and thinning the concentration of native speakers.

To some linguists, the shift from Chulym to Russian is as much evidence of a natural evolution as it is a result of sociopolitical pressure. While lamenting the potential loss of subject matter and culture, Lightfoot maintains a scholarly distance. “I don’t think linguists are in a position to say to people, ‘You should do all you can to preserve your language.’ It’s an individual choice and a Darwinian process. There’s not much we [as linguists] should do about it.”

But sometimes the true preferences of native speakers are not readily apparent to the linguistic community at large. When he found Gabov last summer, Harrison not only located a driver and a guide, he discovered a living reminder that language may be banished from the tongue, but not necessarily from the mind. Growing up in the shadow of the linguistic repression imposed by the Soviet Union, Gabov had every reason to completely discard his native tongue—fully and finally forgetting that part of his heritage. But for a three-year period in the late 1980s, he did just the opposite. Each day during the winter hunting season, Gabov made entries into a journal. A *written* journal. Developing an orthography adapted from the Russian alphabet, the same man who for days hid his knowledge of the language Harrison was seeking actually devised a system of writing it down.

Sadly, the linguistic insecurities Gabov displayed when Harrison first met him are deep-seated. When Gabov shared his creation with a Russian acquaintance, he was promptly ridiculed for his attempts. At that point, Gabov says, he threw away his journal and did not write again. Any possibility of a written record of the fading language would likely have died with Gabov’s entries had it not been for his chance meeting with Harrison. Gabov was able to reproduce his system for Harrison, who, in turn, plans to publish both a children’s storybook and an elementary primer—both written in Middle Chulym, and both at the request of the Chulym tribal council.

When the storybook is printed next year, it will include an encounter between Gabov and a moose, along with a bearhunting story and a tale of a Shamaness, as told by Varvara Budeeva. The text will be augmented with illustrations drawn by Middle Chulym children who listened to the stories as read to them in Russian.

While it may be too late to preserve the Chulym language as a medium for daily communication and repository of traditional knowledge among the Chulym people, it is not too late to record it, and in so doing make at least some small part of the knowledge available to future generations—particularly the young Chulym.
“These languages need to be documented for science,” Harrison says, “and for the native community itself.”

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The story of K. David Harrison's experience with speakers of the Chulym language will be featured in an upcoming PBS documentary by Ironbound Films, Inc. To learn more, please visit www.ironboundfilms.com.