The Linguists Battles Language Extinction on Web

By Scott Thill  |
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K. David Harrison, right, documents Earth’s vanishing languages with Bolivia’s Illarion Ramos Condori, center, and his father in the The Linguists.

Photo courtesy Seth Kramer

After generating serious buzz and heat upon its release last year, language-extinction documentary The Linguists has but one territory left to explore in its quest to raise awareness of its decidedly non-blockbuster subject matter: the internet.

That ends Monday, when the acclaimed documentary premieres online at brainy video site Babelgum.
"We want the film to reach a broad audience and this is a way to do that," said K. David Harrison, associate professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College and one of the scientists featured in the documentary, "The internet, used strategically, has enormous capacity to help get the word out, and to help sustain and support small languages."

Directed by Seth Kramer, Daniel A. Miller and Jeremy Newberger, The Linguists chronicles the global adventures of Harrison and Greg Anderson, the Harvard and University of Chicago-educated co-founder (with Harrison) of the nonprofit Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, as they race to document vanishing languages from the Andes and Siberia to India and Arizona.

While some reviews have compared the cinematic sojourn of Anderson and Harrison to those of legendary tomb raider Indiana Jones, The Linguists is far from a one-sided cultural exploit disguised as popcorn entertainment.

Rather, it’s a respectful, self-deprecating glimpse into what Harrison calls "ancient systems of knowledge, in many cases more sophisticated than what science knows." Wired.com picked the linguist’s brain in an e-mail interview before the Babelgum premiere, discussing language extinction in the Twitter age and why a daily dose of coca leaves is not the same as a cocaine habit.

**Wired.com:** What did you ultimately find on your journey?

**K. David Harrison:** We found how little we know, and how vast human knowledge is. It is astonishing to encounter ancient systems of knowledge, in many cases more sophisticated than what science knows, for example, about the natural world, plants, fish, weather patterns, sea ice and landscapes.

**Wired.com:** What shocked you the most? And what gave you hope?

**Harrison:** It was somewhat shocking to find indifference in some of the very communities where languages are most endangered. But that indifference or even disdain for small languages reflects larger attitudes and pressures of globalization.

But it was also heartening and inspiring to see some people undertaking heroic efforts to sustain their heritage languages: An elderly aboriginal lady in Australia taking the time and effort to teach youngsters the names for local plants; youngsters in India performing hip-hop in a language spoken by only a few thousand people. These are signs of a global push-back against the false choice of globalization that says people have to give up small languages and speak only big ones. These provide signs of hope for language revitalization worldwide.

**Wired.com:** Newberger said you drank your weight in cocaine each day to combat altitude sickness. Do tell!

**Harrison:** No. The local and culturally appropriate drink is coca tea. The coca leaves are also chewed. And we also took altitude medicine.

**Wired.com:** You’ve been compared to Indiana Jones, but who or what would you use as a point of comparison?

**Harrison:** We have many mentors, role models and heroes who have been doing this kind of work for ages. My heroes are the elders, the last speakers like Johnny Hill Jr. in Arizona and Vasya Gabov in Siberia. They are the guardians of unique knowledge, and they possess the wisdom and generosity of spirit to share some of that knowledge with us.

**Wired.com:** What are your thoughts on vanishing language’s place in our greater Holocene extinction
Harrison: I view language as a parallel extinction process to that of species. It intertwines in some interesting ways, which I've written about in my book *When Languages Die*.

**Wired.com:** What is involved in revitalizing vanishing languages?

**Harrison:** Any language, no matter how large or small, needs a healthy habitat. That means a speaker community with people of all ages using it daily in all possible situations. Where a language has shrunk, or diminished, it can be revitalized by increasing the range of uses, and by raising the prestige and status in the eyes of the youngest speakers. Children are the deciders of whether to keep or abandon a language.

We are working to assist small and endangered language communities [by leveraging] new technologies in innovative ways to put their words and thoughts out through new media channels. We’ve built online talking dictionaries and archives for Tuvan, Sora, Siletz and Ho, all languages that previously had little or no internet presence.

**Wired.com:** Speaking of the internet, what are your thoughts on the Babelgum premiere?

**Harrison:** It’s excellent! We want the film to reach a broad audience and this is a way to do that. The internet, used strategically, has enormous capacity to help get the word out, and to help sustain and support small languages.

**Wired.com:** Is it hard to explain why language extinction is important to a culture often distracted by its personal profiles on Facebook, MySpace and Twitter?

**Harrison:** It’s not hard, really, because people are naturally drawn to this issue and fascinated by it. It’s simply that they haven’t heard of it before. I think technologies like Twitter only enhance people’s awareness of the babble that is out there, the multiplicity of voices. In fact, it might make them more receptive to the notion of multilingualism.

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**Tags:** Language, science, web/tech

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Posted by: I AN SMURSH  |  04/20/09  |  3:36 pm

I AN SMURSH! MRrrwaa I lyke two reed! An I lyke to speek!

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Posted by: K. David Harrison  |  04/20/09  |  6:42 pm

Wired editors, you did not think it was important to include the names of the native speakers of
Kallawaya pictured here, even though I provided their names along with the photo and requested they be used in the caption. As a matter of ethical attribution, I include them again here: Sr. A. Condori (left) and his son Illarion Ramos Condori (center), speakers of Kallawaya, at Chary, Bolivia.

Posted by: Snowcrash | 04/20/09 | 6:43 pm

Siletz is not a language. The Siletz Tribe is a confederation of roughly 24 tribes which originally spoke several languages. Because Federal grant money is offered for language development, the cultural department of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, being loathe to leave free money on the table, has taken tens of thousands in taxpayer dollars to study and teach the Athapascan language. Athapascan has, for many years, been well-documented on the internet and has never been a dying or endangered language.

Posted by: Michael Smolens | 04/21/09 | 1:56 am

Hi David

CAnnot wait to see the film. Why don’t we make it available using dotSUB so people all over the planet can view it?

Michael

Posted by: Frank | 04/21/09 | 5:55 am

K. David Harrison, you forget: ya don’t have to be smart to be an editor. Arrogant in just the right way, is all it takes.

Posted by: Darcee Stinar | 04/21/09 | 6:47 am

Your family is very proud of you and your film. just wish you had save some IQ points for the rest of us.