THE LINGUISTS


With: Gregory Anderson, David Harrison, Vasya, Nora Vasquez, Johnny Hill Jr., Manideepa Patnaik, Mr. Panda.

By JUSTIN CHANG

A two-man mission to document the world's endangered tongues becomes a fleet-footed study of human communication and its limitless structural and functional possibilities in "The Linguists." Proceeding from the alarming reality that a language goes extinct every few weeks, this involving if somewhat scatter-shot travelogue sheds a well-intentioned light on how smaller native communities and their systems of speech are often marginalized by the dominant cultures around them. Cable-ready docu could easily be trimmed to a broadcast-friendly hourlong format and exported to viewers in any language.

Speaking an impressive combined total of 25 languages, David Harrison and Gregory Anderson make an engaging globe-trotting duo as they locate seven surviving speakers of Chulym in Siberia (two of whom had died by 2007); interact with speakers of the little-known Sora tongue in tribal India; and track down the few remaining Bolivians fluent in Kallawaya, a mysterious language linked to the practice of healing rites. Fascinating insights about the many uses and varieties of human tongues spoken by native communities that are either scattered or dying out. This becomes a powerful study of the suppression of rural cultures by urban institutions such as boarding schools -- compensate for pic's structural approach and sometimes too-swift editing. Tech package is OK.

Camera (color, DV), Kramer, Newberger; editors, Miller; music, Brian Hawk; music supervisor, Brooke Wentz; sound, Miller, James David Redding III. Reviewed at Wildscreen screening room, Los Angeles, Jan. 10, 2008. (In Sundance Film Festival -- Spectrum.) English, Russian, Chulym, Chemehuevi, Hindi, Sora, Quecha, Kallawaya dialogue. Running time: 65 MIN.