



## Siberian Language Uncovered

By [Paul Webster](#) Feb. 5, 2004 , 12:00 AM

Scholars have found a previously unrecorded language spoken by Siberians living along the Chulym River, 450 kilometers north of Western Mongolia. Known locally as "Ös," it has also been provisionally termed "Middle Chulym." The language is thought to belong to the Siberian Turkic family of languages, which are very different from Slavic languages like Russian.

Soviet linguists last probed the region's linguistic patterns during a 1972 expedition, but their records contain no mention of Ös as a distinct language. K. David Harrison, a linguist and phonologist at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, and his colleagues followed allusions to the language in Soviet and Russian reports dating back as far as the 1880s and archived at the Library of Indigenous Languages at Tomsk State Pedagogical University. They then traveled to the remote region to try and find native speakers.

Once there, Harrison's team located 40 people who still speak Middle Chulym. (They communicated with them using Siberian Turkic and Russian.) All are members of a hunter-gatherer group that settled in six villages along the Chulym River. Until now,

Harrison says, Middle Chulym seems to have been overlooked by linguists. Harrison, who will present his findings next week at the annual AAAS meeting in Seattle, now plans to study the language with the aid of a Chulym native who has figured out how to transliterate it using the Cyrillic alphabet.

The findings suggest that Soviet researchers "lumped native languages together" as part of assimilation efforts that erased and endangered many languages across Siberia, says University of Connecticut linguist Jonathan David Bobaljik, who studies native languages in Siberia's Kamchatka region. Since the 1950s, census takers have combined the Middle Chulym speakers with the Xakas, a neighboring linguistic group. Bobaljik and Harrison both argue that Siberian linguistic records now require comprehensive updating through new field investigations in order to attempt to preserve what could possibly be numerous unrecorded, or inadequately documented, languages, along with important anthropological and ecological information conveyed through them.