

Investigating the world of languages

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As this week marks European Day of Languages some of us may harbour thoughts about brushing up our French or perhaps even taking on German, but for a group of Surrey academics every day is a languages day. The Surrey Morphology Group is committed to investigating the diversity of the world's languages – the intellectual infrastructure of our world.

Some languages are familiar and accessible whereas some more exotic languages, whose structures can tell us a great deal about our world and ourselves are harder to come by. This is why over the last year, three members of the Surrey Morphology Group have conducted field trips in unusual parts of the world.

In January and February, Dr Bill Palmer went to Bougainville, a Pacific island recovering from civil war. He was investigating a rare and theoretically significant grammatical construction in Torau. This is a highly endangered language spoken by just 1000 people, so time was limited. During his visit, Dr Palmer collected the crucial data he needed which will provide new insights into sentence structure.

For the last three summers, Dr Marina Chumakina has gone to Archi, a small group of settlements in the highlands of Daghestan, Northern Caucasus, Russia. During her trip she worked on the Archi language, which has a very complex sound system and spoken by only 1200 speakers.

Dr Chumakina is now creating a 21st century dictionary, with sound files

and digital pictures of cultural objects. The dictionary will be finished by February 2007 and will be published in both printed and electronic formats. The project has met with a lot of enthusiasm from the Archi people, who are very proud of their language, which is exotic even by the local standards as the population of Daghestan is just over two million and there are about forty languages spoken there.

Dr Chumakina comments, ‘ The most rewarding result of the project was when young Archi people started talking to their elders, asking about the old ways of life, the meanings of old words, stories about old times. They are becoming more aware of the treasure that their language and culture represent which was wonderful to see’.

During the summer, Dr Alexander Krasovitsky went to the remote region of Archangel in Northern Russia where he studied the sound system and sentence structure of one of the most archaic dialects of Russian. He has previously made four similar expeditions to East Siberia and Kamchatka where a few small outposts of old settlers preserve the lifestyle and the language of their ancestors. Based on substantial data recording that Dr Krasovitsky has recorded during his expeditions he has shown how unrelated languages may influence each other.

On the Net: www.surrey.ac.uk/LIS/SMG/

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