

Hieber, Daniel W. 2008. Review of *When languages die: The extinction of the world's languages and the erosion of human knowledge*. Unpublished manuscript.

“Why should people care about endangered languages?” In the linguistic community, the prevailing answer to this question has been concerned with the study of human cognition and the advancement of linguistic theory. Steven Pinker says in *The Language Instinct*, “For linguistics and the sciences of mind and brain that encompass it, linguistic diversity shows us the scope and limits of the language instinct. Just think of the distorted picture we would have if only English were available for study!” And this answer has satisfied the linguistic community pretty much since its inception.

David Harrison is one of the first to speak out energetically against this, by declaring this answer no longer acceptable. In his book *When Languages Die*, Harrison argues passionately that the value of endangered languages goes far beyond their scientific appeal. His central aim, he says, is to ask “What is lost when languages die?” However, the book is primarily a defense of the continued existence of endangered languages. The question is not “What is lost?” but rather, “Why should we care?” The two are obviously connected, for if losing endangered languages means losing vital worldly knowledge, we ought to be concerned when languages die. And Harrison gives us plenty to be concerned about.

In his opening chapter, Harrison outlines three main arguments for the preservation of endangered languages. He continues to trace these threads throughout the book, each chapter focusing on a different – and often exotic – aspect of indigenous language/culture. In so doing, Harrison shows us what stands to be lost when we lose indigenous languages. Chapter 2 discusses indigenous plant and animal taxonomies, and shows how they are not just unique, but useful and extremely accurate as well, being informed by centuries of handed down knowledge. In Chapter 3 Harrison shows the flexible ways in which native peoples conceived of calendars and time, and that this flexibility better allowed them to keep track of important seasonal events and monthly cycles. Chapter 4 is a fascinating look at the varied ways in which native language can (and often must) interact with the environment, and shows how certain directional words and environmental features can be coded into a language, as well as what these linguistic strategies abet us. Chapter 5 focuses on oral history and storytelling, and Chapter 6 introduces a diverse array of counting systems in the world's languages, from counting to ten on your fingers to counting to a hundred on your entire body, to counting to two and then calling it quits. These number systems, Harrison says, are rapidly vanishing keys to unlocking human cognition. The topic of human cognition and language as ‘a window on the mind’ is the focus of his final chapter, in which Harrison makes his argument that languages can and does force us to pay attention to certain aspects of our world, and in that way affect our cognition.

Harrison's first defense of endangered languages – and the one most predominantly emphasized throughout the book – is that when we lose indigenous languages, we lose indigenous knowledge as well. Interestingly, this is also the most controversial of Harrison's arguments, for in order to prove his point, he must show that knowledge is not simply transmitted through language, but is actually coded *into* it. Yet he makes a strong argument, focused around the concept of information packaging. In his own words:

*At its core, all human cognition may be fundamentally the same no matter what tongue a person speaks. This has been the prevailing view in cognitive linguistics for at least thirty years. But some people are beginning to recognize that languages can package knowledge in radically*

*different ways, thus facilitating different ways of conceptualizing, naming, and discussing the world.*

Harrison does an excellent job demonstrating the cultural link between language and knowledge. Indigenous cultures have by far the most intimate relationship with their local environments, garnered from millennia of observations and interactions. Those facts which are deemed vital for survival become coded into the language over time. Names for months in many cultures help regulate their seasonal activities by conveying certain information, such as the Tofa people, who have names for months like 'hunting month' and 'good birch bark collecting month'.

The Tabulahan people of Indonesia live in a hilly maze of a landscape, where it is impractical to talk about direction in simple terms like 'north' or even 'going'. Are you going downhill, uphill, or straight across? Inland or seaward? All this gets coded into the language, for a point may be only two miles apart, but the difference between uphill or downhill will be a significant factor in deciding how much time to allot for the journey.

Harrison next argues from the human perspective. It is not just these languages which are being lost, but entire native cultures, typically oppressed and ostracized by larger, more modern communities for their 'quaint' ways. The book is rife with first-person accounts of speakers being struck or punished for using their native tongues in school, and how the lingua francas of the world – and the cultura francas as well – are destroying the indigenous societies which have been the mainstay of human existence for so many millennia. While some might object that the cultural defense is perhaps the least relevant when discussing *language* preservation, one point becomes exceedingly clear from Harrison's book – when these cultures die off, it is not just names for various plants and animals which are lost, it is entire systems of knowledge accrued by local peoples over millennia of inhabitation. And the fact that non-indigenous languages both represent a culture of oppression and are inept at talking about local knowledge, ensures that such knowledge will die with the language in which it is traditionally communicated.

Harrison's third central argument for the preservation of languages is in fact the traditional argument: endangered languages are keys to human cognition. Interestingly, Harrison sees this as his least relevant argument, intentionally placing that chapter last in his book. Despite this, he uses this chapter to focus on his strongest argument – information packaging. The amount of information we associate with any particular word, and the type of information it signifies, tells us what is most salient to the speakers of that language. Furthermore, the study of endangered languages enhances our knowledge of linguistic universals, facts like "no known systems ... call all yellow objects 'blue' on Tuesdays but 'yellow' the rest of the week." This may seem trivial, but it says something about how humans process the world, and what things we perceive as constant around us. Harrison also pays tribute to the great contributions made to historical anthropology via the study of endangered languages.

If one is to believe Harrison, then it would seem this book is less about the preservation of endangered languages, and far more relevant to the preservation of endangered cultures. Indeed, his book often wavers on the line between a linguistic argument for the preservation of language, and an anthropological survey supporting the preservation of endangered cultures. But then, that is part of the

point Harrison is trying to make: ultimately, one cannot study language without studying culture. And if we allow indigenous cultures to die, we lose abundant knowledge regarding human cognition, valuable local plant and animal species, human prehistory, theoretical linguistics, and entire schemas of seeing the world. Thus while *When Languages Die* perhaps shouldn't be seen as a 'purely linguistic' argument for the continuation of endangered languages, it does succeed in answering Harrison's driving question – what we stand to lose when they're gone. After reading Harrison's book, one will find it difficult *not* to care what happens to the varied cultures which stand on the brink of extinction around the globe. So in this vein Harrison succeeds at his central ambition, in a writing style that is lucid, thoughtful, and would well to be read by anyone with even a passing interest in endangered languages.