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## **When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World's Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge**

Bernard Spolsky

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gant consumption, gossip, slander—are deeply familiar to us, so familiar, in fact, that this book feels at times like a clever projection of the present onto the past. Mitigating this charge, however, are the diarists and poets, philosophers and merchants, politicians and priests, whose voices fill Thomas’s pages with a strong sense of historical specificity—of there and not here, of then and not now.

— *Ramie Targoff*

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**K. David Harrison, *When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World’s Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 292 pp.**

While mainstream theoretical linguists following Chomsky continue to hunt for what is universal and innate in some of the world’s 6,912 remaining languages, there are others who seek, as Harrison does, evidence of uncommon knowledge, divergent ways of organizing linguistically terms for species, time, space, number, kinds of talk, and other concepts. Interviewing last surviving speakers like the Tofa reindeer herders or the Tuvan nomads of South Siberia, the Wayampi hunter-gatherers in the rain forests of French Guiana, the few Karaim in the Lithuanian village of Trakai, the Ifugao rice farmers in the mountains of the Philippines, or the Ho-Munda tribals in Orissa State in India, he salvages shreds of a dying language and culture from elderly people who no longer have anyone to speak it with. Harrison’s goal in this book (and in the stunning sixty-minute video “The Linguists” viewable at [www.babelgum.com](http://www.babelgum.com)) is to show the urgency of recording or saving the 3,000 or so languages projected to disappear this century and the human knowledge they incorporate.

— *Bernard Spolsky*

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**Elizabeth Farrelly, *Blubberland: The Dangers of Happiness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 219 pp.**

Recently, the French government’s attempt to curb the *jouissance* of smoking claimed another victim. Alain Delon is now a nonsmoker, his cigarette digitally extinguished from popular culture—his thumb now resting on his chin in a superfluous manner—the fingers slightly parting where the cigarette once dangled casually. The war against excess demands the re-creation of narratives and