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Review: Anthropological Linguistics: Harrison (2007)

Editor for this issue: Randall Eggert <randy@linguistlist.org>

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1. Randall Eggert, Review: Anthropological Linguistics: Harrison (2007)

Message 1: Review: Anthropological Linguistics: Harrison (2007)

Date: 12-Sep-2007

From: Randall Eggert <randy@linguistlist.org>

Subject: Review: Anthropological Linguistics: Harrison (2007)



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Announced at <http://linguistlist.org/issues/18/18-318.html>

AUTHOR: Harrison, K. David

TITLE: When Languages Die

SUBTITLE: The extinction of the world's languages and the erosion of human knowledge

PUBLISHER: Oxford University Press

YEAR: 2007

Lameen Souag, Department of Linguistics, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

DESCRIPTION

If you regard the lexicon as the least interesting part of a language, and cultural differences as a distraction from linguistics, then *When Languages Die* provides reasons to reconsider; if you are already interested in semantics and anthropological linguistics, it points to a variety of interesting topics, including a number drawn from the author's own fieldwork with Turkic minority languages of Siberia. This book is an introduction for the general reader to how languages encode the environmental knowledge and cultural practices of their speakers, and how language endangerment worldwide threatens this.

The first chapter, "A World of Many (Fewer) Voices", discusses linguistic diversity, why so many languages are in danger of disappearing or have already disappeared, and why it matters. To the latter question, he gives three answers, expanded on throughout the book: languages encode valuable knowledge about the natural world and how humans interact with it; when a language disappears, a rich heritage of verbal arts goes with it; and every language potentially casts light on human cognition, and tests claimed linguistic universals. Aside from these, he points to the human tragedy of language endangerment – children beaten for speaking their own languages, parents regretting too late that their children don't speak their language – and the ties between language endangerment and broader issues of colonialism and coercion.

The second, "An Extinction of (Ideas about) Species", addresses the ecological knowledge embedded in human systems of naming and talking about living things. He emphasizes that this is not just a matter of learning to distinguish different species and inventing names for each. Rather, over generations a language comes to incorporate valuable information about different species' characteristics in its very vocabulary, and develops concise ways to package important information about them, both aiding the transmission of this

information in a society without writing. It should be obvious to anyone who has learned the technical vocabulary of (say) phonetics, or syntax, or computing, that a concise, standardized way to refer to and differentiate entities commonly encountered in a given field is essential for working in, or even thinking clearly about, that field; while the particular names chosen may to some extent be arbitrary, the organization of a technical vocabulary and the differentiations it chooses to make are not. By that token, the tens of Tofa words for different colors and ages of reindeer (e.g. *_chary_* '5-year-old male castrated rideable reindeer') that the author describes are not merely an interesting fact about Tuvan vocabulary, but an important part of the technology of living off reindeer herding. Likewise, an animal name, or its classification in a folk taxonomy, may convey information about its habits or uses, not just its appearance (let alone its deduced ancestry, a factor that in theory trumps all others for taxonomists but is rarely of practical interest for others). Thus the Wayampi classify six species of toucan and a hawk together as *_tukāpewar_*, the toucan family, because the hawk eats the same food as the toucans – wild fruits which are also edible to humans. One might imagine that such technical vocabularies could readily be retained in the course of language shift; but in reality, language shift is generally accompanied by significant lifestyle changes, and these classification systems are even more endangered than the languages that host them. Among the Bari, a people of the Venezuelan rainforest, the loss of ethnobotanical knowledge was found to be about 40 to 60 percent in just a single generation.

The next chapter, "Many Moons Ago: Traditional Calendars and Time-Reckoning", describes some of the "ecological calendars" to be found in many parts of the world, viewing them not as crude attempts to approximate the calculated calendars developed in urban civilizations but as ingenious tools encapsulating knowledge needed for survival. In these systems, a month may be not only named for but defined by an observable annual event, such as the blooming of a flower or the snow falling on the mountains. Knowing the months implies knowing an event characteristic of each; defining at least one by its event allows the lunar calendar to be re-synchronized with the solar one without any need for calculations or day-counting. Shorter units of time, such as 'four days hence' or 'the time it takes a kettle to boil', are also discussed.

Chapter 4, "An Atlas in the Mind", discusses the linguistic encoding of geographical knowledge. Few skills can be more essential for a mobile group than the ability to keep their bearings; and the author argues that language plays an important role in this. Concepts which can optionally be encoded in English, such as whether movement is uphill or downhill, are seen to be obligatorily encoded in languages such as Lolovoli, where any kind of movement must be specified as 'up' (i.e. hard to go, easy to come back), 'down' (vice versa) or 'across' (no difference in difficulty either direction). Within even a single hut with a level floor, movements will be specified as 'up' or 'down' with reference to the slope outside; and trans-island travel is 'up' or 'down' depending on whether it goes against or with the prevailing winds. In many of the languages discussed, place names are exceptionally numerous and are often transparent, with anatomical metaphors or mythical significance making them more memorable; equally important, geography is a regular topic of conversation.

"Silent Storytellers, Lost Legends" takes a slightly different turn, looking at oral narrative and how it differs from the written kind, including all sorts of improvisations and gestures that are not captured by a transcription or a publication. He examines several cases of verbal arts in practice, and an indigenously developed orthography he came across in his own fieldwork.

In "New Rice, Old Legends", he moves to local biological knowledge and its erosion under the pressure of international agricultural methods. While this chapter is perhaps the least linguistic one in the book, he once again emphasizes the diversification of semantic fields relevant to a traditional way of life and their likely impoverishment as that way of life changes; in this case, that semantic impoverishment corresponds to a genetic impoverishment, as hundreds of local strains of rice or millet are replaced by a handful of major types produced abroad.

"Endangered Number Systems" goes beyond the usual discussion of different bases to examine a significant part of the diversity of number systems across languages and cultures, from body part counting systems that go beyond our twenty digits to cover elbows and nostrils to languages that express integers between the tens as motion towards the next ten, rather than using addition or subtraction to reach the number from another ten. Inevitably, he briefly addresses the Pirahã question, but more as part of a wide range of possibilities than as a unique special case. He also looks at Greenberg's typological universals of number systems, and a few exceptions to them, and notes that, with borrowing or pattern copying particularly common in this domain, number systems are in many cases even more endangered than the languages in which they are embedded.

The final chapter, "Worlds within Words", departs somewhat from the book's

overall theme of semantics to examine typological diversity in general. Even here, semantics is never far away, with discussions on such issues as counter and classifier systems and obligatorily encoded politeness systems; but a variety of less semantic topics are rapidly touched on, from phonological diversity and uses of reduplication to language change and the (so far unanswerable) question of whether one language can be more complex than another. He notes that without examining a variety of threatened languages we would never even be likely to suspect that certain structures (be they syntactic, phonological, or semantic; he gives examples of each) are possible in human language. If we had no data on a handful of Carib languages with very few speakers, for example, we would still be attempting to explain the imagined impossibility of basic word orders in which the object precedes the subject.

Between each of these chapters is a brief case study recounting a personal experience with speakers of some particular endangered language, illustrating and bringing home the points in the previous chapter.

EVALUATION

I found the book engaging and non-technical enough to arouse the interest of non-linguists, but wide-ranging enough and well-sourced enough to appeal to linguists as well. There are details that might be quibbled with, such as what he acknowledges to be the inherently dubious efforts to count languages in the first chapter; and to some linguists its extensive discussion of diversification within semantic fields may seem more like anthropology than linguistics. But overall, the book makes a good case that the study of vocabulary casts light on both cognition and culture, and underlines the urgent need to document more endangered languages better and to fix the social inequalities that usually play a large role in making them endangered.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Lameen Souag is a doctoral student at SOAS (London). He is examining, and seeking to explain differences in, the effects of long-term morphosyntactic contact on two geographically isolated languages of the Sahara: Korandje, a Songhay language spoken in the Algerian oasis of Tabelbala, and Siwi, a Berber language spoken in the Egyptian oasis of Siwa. He will begin fieldwork in late 2007. He maintains a linguistics blog, Jabalal-Lughat (<http://lughat.blogspot.com>).

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