

Choice

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Review of "When Languages Die"

Over the past few years a growing number of linguists have called attention to the disappearance of indigenous languages. No one has made such an elegant and memorable case for recording them as this book does. Written by a veteran field linguist who has worked with endangered languages in remote areas around the globe, notably South Siberia, the chapters read more like a good travelogue than a linguistic survey. By introducing words and structural features from dozens of the most geographically and typologically diverse languages imaginable, Harrison vividly portrays the incredible richness of what is being lost. These include rare patterns that illuminate the human language ability, taxonomies that capture local facets of nature still poorly understood by modern science, unique storytelling and mapping traditions, as well as unusual systems of counting or calendar reckoning. The reader embarks upon a wondrous trip through uncharted linguistic space to gain a sense of why languages are disappearing at such an unprecedented rate and what linguists are doing about it. Every library should own this thoughtful, fascinating, and eminently readable assessment of the worldwide crisis of vanishing indigenous languages and cultures.

-Edward J. Vajda