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David Harrison on the scarcity of language

- *Author:* Bobbie Johnson
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There are 7,000 languages spoken in the world. This, argues linguist K David Harrison, represents the greatest repository of human knowledge ever assembled - but it's rapidly eroding, and this will be terrible. We're not only losing information, but we're losing ways of understanding the world.

Why are they going extinct? Where? And why does it matter?

There are two pyramids which exist in opposition to each other, he says. On the one hand, most of the world's thousands are languages are spoken by a handful of people. On the other hand, a tiny proportion of languages are spoken by billions of people.

Languages are going extinct at a faster rate than animal species - some people have estimated that we're losing a language every two weeks or so. But, just as biologists haven't even classified most of the species that are going extinct, in many cases we don't even know what languages we're losing.

Why can't all of the information which is being lost simply be translated into English? Well, it's possible - but languages are the result of millennia of evolution and taxonomy.

Harrison has developed the idea of "language hotspots" - examining where the highest diversity of languages are, where the danger is most and where knowledge that is not widely known exists. It turns out that Siberia is a hotspot. So is Bolivia. So is Oklahoma.

We're losing all that knowledge, all that experience, for nothing. There is no reason for people to give up their languages, he argues. We'd all be better and smarter if the world remains multilingual.

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- *Geeta Dayal* (Blogger-in-Chief)
- *Michelle Riggen-Ransom* (Contributor)
- *Bobbie Johnson* (Volunteer Contributor)
- *Alexis Madrigal* (Volunteer Contributor)
- *Sage Dilts* (Volunteer Contributor)
- *Peter Deitz* (Volunteer Contributor)
- *Ashni Mohnot* (Volunteer Contributor)
- *Tim Leberecht* (Volunteer Contributor)

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