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## The banana test

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WHEN LANGUAGES DIE. The extinction of the world's languages and the erosion of human knowledge. By K. David Harrison. 292pp. Oxford University Press. Pounds 17.99 . (US \$29.95). 978 0 19 518192 0.

By the year 2100, many linguists estimate, half of the world's 6,912 distinct languages will be extinct. At present, 548 of them retain fewer than ninety-nine speakers. We can expect to lose a language every ten days; and behind each of these disappearances lies a story of cultural loss, sadness and isolation. K. David Harrison embeds his accounts of linguistic decay within the experiences of individuals who must endure it. When Languages Die is not, however, a study of the pressures which extinguish languages: we can look elsewhere for an analysis of the effects of globalization, urbanization and the conformist pressures exerted by the speakers of majority languages. Harrison focuses instead on what happens as a result of language death to the cultural and ecological understanding of the affected peoples, and what these losses signify for humanity as a whole.

Harrison considers the ecological knowledge that is encoded in small, indigenous languages - the kind of knowledge, acquired over centuries, which is worth an estimated \$85 billion to those pharmaceutical companies that have mined it. He outlines the threat posed by language loss to our cultural diversity; and he argues that studying the formidable variety of small languages broadens our scientific understanding of the human mind - what he calls "the great puzzle of human cognition". Odd and unusual language structures challenge linguistic assumptions and provide crucial tests to our theoretic models. Nature and intergenerational time are greater laboratories than any we can invent.

Language, argues Harrison, evolves according to necessity and is rooted in the natural conditions of its use. Tuvan reindeer herders of Siberia have a complex vocabulary to define their livestock, while the Marovo speakers of the Solomon Islands, who depend on fishing for their livelihood, have a single word, ukaka, to describe "the behaviour of groups of fish when individuals drift, circle and float as if drunk". There is nothing quaint about such definitions: a vocabulary has evolved to encode information vital to the long-term survival of the

community. Take away the "keystone species" of words, and a people's relationship with their natural surroundings is impoverished. The terminology of ecological crisis recurs throughout *When Languages Die*; for instance, Harrison describes Alaska's indigenous languages as "small islands" that "are being submerged by a rising sea of English". It seems appropriate to compare cultural with biological extinction; but linguistic diversity is not all that's at risk: one scientist working with a tribe in Venezuela estimates that "the real loss of ethnobotanical knowledge from one generation to the next may be on the order of 40 to 60 percent".

Harrison decries the "catastrophe of cultural forgetting" in which religious and world views disappear, depriving us of alternative models of thought and potential insights into human belief. Also at stake is the survival of oral traditions. The Tuvan epic storyteller Shoydak-ool Khovalyg is not simply the repository of a culture but a living link with Homer; we may be able to transcribe some of the poems that have been refined by countless memories over centuries, but once the link with live performance is broken, our understanding of oral storytelling - how it evolves and makes itself memorable - can only diminish.

Just as interesting are Harrison's accounts of differing forms of arithmetic and number awareness. The Kobon speakers of Papua New Guinea, for example, equate numbers with body parts to a level of complexity that may seem almost comic (thirty-nine can be translated as "hand turn around go back, inside elbow other side"), while Vogul speakers in Siberia use a "movement towards" metaphor for counting, so that the number twenty-two is described as "two (steps) towards thirty". To this day, a few languages in Africa have hardly any number words. In such circumstances, arithmetic becomes impossible, yet these same peoples can estimate with precision, demonstrating the difference between the cultural (that is, learned) condition of arithmetic and the instinctive nature of human number sense.

Such cases contradict received ideas about human cognition. "Folk taxonomies", for instance, challenge our assumptions about species categorization. The Wayampi people in Amazonia classify birds according to the competition they offer for fruit; as a result, a falcon is put in the same group as toucans. In the Salish languages of America's Pacific Northwest, the world is classified by a system of prefixes into animal, thing, or people. A grammar may encode not only information about the external world, but also be conditioned according to the identity of the speaker, as with the seventy remaining Yanyuwa speakers of Australia, among whom "women and men talk so differently that their speech is really two different dialects".

*When Languages Die* is, in more than one sense, a campaigning book. Harrison criticizes what he sees as an excessively atomistic study of grammar within the field of linguistics. One must return to the field, so to speak, and focus as much on the meaningful content of a language as on its structure. Without rooting the discipline in a living culture,

linguists may be making life unduly difficult for themselves. For instance, the Tuvan speakers' words for, and sense of, direction are determined by terrain, ignoring east and west and mathematical measurements in favour of the "frictional" obstacles ahead. An experiential notion of distance - the hill that must be climbed, the river that must be forded - helps to map a location and negotiate it. Without understanding the context, what sense can a linguist make of a language?

K. David Harrison makes an excellent case for studying our disappearing languages. Intrepid and dedicated, he is committed to salvaging what he can before it is too late. Though there are minor faults in his writing, most notably the somewhat repetitious calls for action, these stem from conviction and a sense of urgency. He understands - and makes us understand - how "weird and wonderful exceptions" keep alive a sense of our possibilities. When Languages Die can be added to a growing number of books pleading for a "very different kind of world order", one that values and fosters diversity. To allow languages to become extinct - along with the culture and ecologies that they encode - is to risk an erosion of knowledge whose value, once lost, we can never quantify.

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