

Michael Erard

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## Languages as Design Objects

Linguists have, in general, done a poor job of articulating why people should care that half of the approximately 6,900 languages spoken on the planet will be extinct in a century. And despite heaping scoops of truism and sentimentality atop exoticism, journalists haven't done much better. As for me, afraid of having to dip into the sentimentality and the fetishizing of Last Things, I've kind of been repulsed by the topic and have never written about it.

Until now, that is.

A new book by K. David Harrison, a linguist at Swarthmore, titled *When Languages Die*, looks at what we lose when languages disappear. Unusual ways of counting. Unique landscape names and calendars. Specialized vocabularies for the natural and agricultural world. Fantastic rarities of grammar, such as the suffix -sig in the Siberian language Tofa that means "smelling like." Examples come from dozens of languages from all over the world. He even illustrates with his own adventuring among nomads in Siberia and Mongolia, hunting down the last speakers of atrophied cultures.

But what caught my eye was this claim by Harrison: "Languages can package knowledge in radically different ways, thus facilitating different ways of conceptualizing, naming, and discussing the world." Elsewhere he calls languages "packaged information." In systems of kinship terms, for instance, which vary dramatically among different cultures, each one is "the result is a highly compact, highly efficient system of knowledge that packs multiple bits of information into small spaces."

In other words, languages are design objects. And I thought: no one loves extinct or endangered design objects more than designers do.

Harrison stakes a few small poles of his argument with sentiment (e.g., we will be immeasurably impoverished when these languages disappear) and truism (e.g., people have a right to speak their native tongue). The big pole in his tent, though, is the cold hard trope of information packages.

Folk taxonomies have already proven useful for knowledge architects and ethnobotanists from pharmaceutical companies alike. "For efficient communication, the packaging of information is crucial," he writes. "Names for animals and the way these names fit into organizational structures, can transmit (or omit) a great deal of information."

Harrison goes even further: local calendars, such as the lunar calendar of the Natchez, provide evidence of the diffusion of non-native plants like peaches and watermelons to the lower Mississippi, which became the names for months (along with "mulberries," "great corn," and "chestnuts") by the 1750s. No one

speaks Natchez anymore. Some languages with words for categories called "classifiers" demonstrate how varied the ways of parsing the world: in [Nivikh](#), a Siberian language with 300 speakers, has 27 classifiers; in [Squamish](#), a Pacific Northwest language with 15 speakers, you use a different number depending on if you're counting humans or animals.

"Of course these languages are endangered!" someone will inevitably crow. "English or the other major languages are informationally more efficient!" This isn't true. For example, what information is encoded in the English "my nephew"? For sure, it's a male person. But (as Harrison writes) "is he related to me by blood or marriage? Unclear. Is he older or younger than me? Unclear. Is he the son of my sister or my brother? Unclear. Is he the son of an older sibling of mine or a younger sibling? Unclear. Is he a boy or a man? Unclear." Taken in absolute terms, English isn't so efficient: we'd need a separate book to list all its major inefficiencies.

One drawback of *When Languages Die* is that Harrison goes back and forth between "knowledge" and "information;" surely these are part of a folk taxonomy that every 21st century American academic should know cold. He doesn't nail the "so what?" question, either. But it doesn't really matter. This book has enough detail for a sympathetic reader to fill in the blanks.

But let me take the information-language connection to the next logical step: how do you manage a language as intellectual property? This is not as absurd as it sounds: last year the Mapuche, an indigenous group in Chile and Argentina, sued Microsoft for not consulting them when their language, Mapuzugun, was included in a foreign language pack for [Windows XP](#). Approximately 300,000 people speak the language, enough people for Microsoft to justify getting involved. There are numerous nuances to consider here, [many of which](#) have been discussed by linguists at [Language Log](#).

At one level, this is absurd. How can you protect a language, and who would own it? Yet if we grant David Harrison his argument, perhaps that's exactly what the speakers of an endangered language should do to protect it: learn how to manage their information packages better.

Michael Erard has written in *The New York Times*, *Wired*, *Slate*, and *The New Republic* about language at the intersection of technology, policy, law and science. He has an MA in linguistics and a PhD in English from the University of Texas. His book about verbal blundering, titled *Um...*, will be published by Pantheon later this year.

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You probably know about the Rosetta Project, affiliated with the Long Now Foundation and dedicated to preserving languages.

<http://www.rosettaproject.org/>

Posted by: [John C](#) on May 8, 2007 12:41 PM

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Delishious.

Hugely interesting, and well pointed out, but not very suprising; that each language contains a unique way of interpreting the world. I speak a couple of 'odd' languages... translation is terror! I simoultaneously pity and envy people who have only english (some of them say they speak another language, but when push comes to shove..)

I smiled through the whole article, many thanks- I shall surely have a closer look at Harrison's book, and your too when available.

Posted by: [ms norway](#) on May 8, 2007 12:44 PM

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I agree and can relate to Erard's points. My own native tongue of Telugu, spoken in a state in southern India called Andhra Pradesh, is one such language. While it is still spoken by many, everyday spoken Telugu continues to add more and more English words to the mix. This is not because it is an easier or more efficient language—English is just more widespread because of the power and influence of its native nations. In fact, Telugu is more precise in dealing with familial terms than English. We have separate words for big sister (akka), little sister (cheli), big brother (anna), and little brother (thamadu). The same goes for the terms for aunts and uncles, which are differentiated by mother's or father's side as well as age in relation to your parents. Some words even show a bit of our old cultural traditions and practices; for instance there are certain cousins you are allowed to marry (like your father's sister's kids, or your mother's brother's kids). These cousins have different terms than the cousins you can't marry. Pretty precise, huh? And as the saying goes, Eskimos have a hundred names for snow, so do Indians have several names for rice at its various stages, since rice is a staple crop and is embedded in our diets. Then there are some words you can never perfectly translate into English. There is a single word in Telugu which could roughly translate into "joyous chatter," or the boisterous, happy noise that wafts throughout the house when relatives and friends are visiting. Such words are an insightful look into the culture behind the language.

I was born in the US but my parents are from Andhra Pradesh, India, so I didn't learn Telugu growing up but instead worked hard to learn it as an adult. I always find it funny when I visit India and use a new word I learned from a Telugu-English dictionary, only to be met by a bemused expression and told that no one uses that word anymore. I know languages can be barriers, but there's something beautiful in the way they preserve a culture. That's why it was so important to me to learn my native tongue.

Posted by: [Swathi Ghanta](#) on May 8, 2007 01:08 PM

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I think you've got it the wrong way round. Language is not 'design', design is a language. See how linguistic theory has been

used to explain how meaning is produced and then applied to design.

The nature of languages seems to me to be accidental - nothing seems to happen 'by design' and when it does it doesn't work (see, for example, the abandoned attempt to rationalise spelling that marks US English from Real English, or Esperanto).

Turning the formula around and analysing design as language seems to make understanding design so much simpler.

Posted by: [Jonathan](#) on May 8, 2007 01:59 PM

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i tend to agree with jonathan, although the essay made me think about it for a while. i think the comparison falls apart when you consider design being intentional and language being, well, un-intentional. both, however, deal with semantics, grammars, the conveyance of meaning, but maybe that's just inherent with anything produced by humankind; we can't help but to imbue meaning in things. another way to look at it is through the lens of religion. say there is a bolt of lightning from a dark and foreboding sky - does that mean that God is angry and we should all run for cover and repent for our collective sins? does that make weather a design object?

Posted by: [Gong Szeto](#) on May 8, 2007 02:19 PM

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"I think you've got it the wrong way round."

When all you've got is a hammer, everything looks like a nail...

Posted by: [David Smith](#) on May 8, 2007 07:56 PM

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A very interesting topic, one close to my own heart. Subjectively, sentimentally, who can deny that something of value is lost when a language dies, but I feel that we may be reaching beyond design into something... else here.

point 1:

When we speak of a language "dying" what does that really mean? Is Latin dead, or could it be said that it has branched into what the Empire would have considered degenerate forms (i.e. English, Spanish, French, Portugese)

point 2:

It is difficult to take the claim of "dead languages" seriously when the language I speak and the language my parents speak, while clearly "English", is radically different. I'd further this argument by stating the language spoken 100 years ago, simply does not parse the way we'd expect it to, although it would still be intelligible. The further back one goes, the less English-like English becomes until it no longer parses at all

point 3:

Language is a living and evolving system. There's no shortage of ways to say "hello" (for example). When a language dies, keeping it alive artificially for sentimental or even historical reasons seems to me quite pointless. Who is it being kept alive for?

point 4:

In closing I'd like to advance the notion that all languages are fundamentally the same language, as per the groundbreaking work of Noam Chomsky and others. This is a notion that language is hardwired genetically into our species and that there's something like an assembly language behind the high level verbalizations & marks we make.

Language as design object or cultural artifact? In the most superficial sense, but the notion seems a bit forced from my point of view anyway. Language as a virus? Ah, now there's a tasty treat

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Posted by: [Gary R Boodhoo](#) on May 9, 2007 04:49 AM

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Made me think of an article in The Believer about creating your own Conlang:

[http://www.believermag.com/issues/200505/?read=article\\_newitz](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200505/?read=article_newitz)

Posted by: Mat on May 9, 2007 06:10 AM

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Languages - including design - are built to communicate, and sometimes, on those rare and wonderful occasions, the form of that communication makes you see the world in a very different way.

Among my favourites are the verbs of Boro: "to be afraid of witnessing an adventure", "to be about to speak and not about to speak", and the achingly beautiful "to fall in love for the last time". (more [here](#)).

None of which of course retain their full gamut of meaning when translated. Multi-linguists often will resort to words in other languages or clumsy translated phrasing in order to put a point across in a particular way - partly because cultural context enhances meaning, and partly because no single language can express the sheer fact of being as perfectly as the act of being itself. Words are imperfect signifiers to describe experience; our experiences, and our words should be as varied as possible. Homogenising language, I would suggest, in some small way helps homogenise our ways of experiencing the world.

Posted by: [Andrew Losowsky](#) on May 9, 2007 08:44 AM

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Interesting thoughts by Michael Erard on language as a design object.

On one hand (for English speaking people, at least), much of what we use daily is such a morphed conglomeration of influences that it's pretty hard to call it a *design object*. It's more of a patched-together assembly that volleys over time between pragmatic appendage and forced occupation. As Gary Boodhoo pointed out, it evolves.

On the other hand, if you look historically at any political, social, business, or religious movement, from a global level on down to

the local level, a new "language" is often introduced by proponents to identify new ways of thinking, and to identify the "true followers." In this sense, language is as much a formally designed identity element as a Pantone color and a custom corporate font

Posted by: Daniel Green on May 9, 2007 09:09 AM

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I also found the article and topic very interesting. In reference to the comments by Gary Boodhoo, very thought provoking but I'm not sure I agree with three and four. Part of the reason that it is tragic to see languages die is because they are linked to cultures. So in the Amazon or other diverse regions, there exists a multiplicity of cultures with different knowledge and ways of thinking. As they disappear, their languages also disappear. With them their knowledge, their mythologies, and often their people (or their people are assimilated, often into impoverished lives). Recently someone researched a tribe (the Piraha) of Indians in Brazil who don't count. In fact, they only have a word for one and another word for many. Indians from that tribe have difficulty learning to count and do mathematics, and draw. That is very distant from our culture, and I don't think it is fundamentally the same language as mine, although I am not familiar with Chomsky's work on the subject.

In very utilitarian terms, language and cultural extinctions are like other extinctions. We do not know what we'll miss later. And I'm not sure that there is no way to revive languages--look at Hebrew.

Posted by: Liz Wuerker on May 9, 2007 09:56 AM

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An interesting discussion. To elaborate on Noam Chomsky's theory of the universal grammar, he argued that all languages have a common structural basis. he also contended that thought only occurs with language. The groundbreaking aspect of his work was that it went against notions developed by Jean Piaget, who held a more behaviorist point of view in that languages are learned, and that thought precedes language.

i think what's missing from this discussion is the notion of power in relationship to language. "official" languages are preserved by [language academies](#) as well as media around the world. "unofficial" languages (ie local dialects, minority languages, preliterate languages, etc.) are not institutionally protected. the written word goes a long way to preserve languages, especially the development of type for a language. canonization empowers languages as dominant paradigms.

language consists of semantics, syntax, lexicon, and phonetics. in these elements exist the culture of a people, and a language exists in a context. this is why esperanto never worked; 'made up' languages aren't possible because you can't create a language without a context. languages are the reflection of a history of a people; languages do die, and their deaths are a reflection of the disintegration of a way of life. sometimes a language "survives" only in timbre, i think the english of african americans is an example of this.

Posted by: [manuel](#) on May 9, 2007 11:35 PM

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Word!

Have to ask how sound and "language" are design objects?

If a language doesn't get written -- or carved in stone -- how is it truly formal? We can look at ancient texts/glyphs/whatever. Visual representations. The language lives because someone made "multiple bits of information" that exist beyond the speakers. They are always there for us to see, touch and study. Even musicians write their sounds as notes.

Thought of the Incas throughout this piece --no writing. They left us cities, bridges, sculptures, textiles and other physical objects. But no visual document of their language. ( Or sound recordings we could listen to. )

How many languages throughout history didn't have written "alphabets" or code? Thoughts never shared.

Hope I'm not whistling Dixie. Or being overly formalistic.

Very Respectfully,

Posted by: Joe Moran on May 10, 2007 12:23 AM

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*If a language doesn't get written -- or carved in stone -- how is it truly formal?*

Joe -- Webster's first definition of "formal" says *according with conventional forms and rules*. So I would say that even an *unwritten* language can be guided by rules and standards -- albeit unwritten.

"Formal" in this context shouldn't be confused with "dimensional" form, if I'm understanding your point.

Posted by: Daniel Green on May 10, 2007 09:18 AM

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Sound is very clearly a design object. TV jingles as well as 'feedback' sounds on computer applications are examples of this.

"preliterate" languages are definitely formal languages. rules for language dont have to be written down, they just need to be shared and agreed upon within a specific context. form, whether phonetic or graphic, are objective containers through which meaning is allowed to pass from one subject to another.

this is where i believe institutional power comes in. a written language and institutional support for the preservation of a language is what allows languages survive and dominate.

Posted by: [manuel](#) on May 10, 2007 12:13 PM

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Let's think of it this way . . .

If I am remembering it correctly, Sketchers (the shoes) were originally made for serious skater types. Appropriately, they were

designed with a rugged, edgy exterior. They successfully functioned for the activity of skating and appealed to the crowd of skaters.

Of course, the skater crowd was small. The Sketchers company, looking to make it big, decided to reach out to a wider audience. They now marketed their shoes to everyone, redesigning (and re-styling) them, new commercials and ads and all. The company was again successful. Cheers.

But when the skater shoes, originally intended to function for skaters, was redesigned for the many non-skater types, true skaters were turned off and stopped buying the product. (The story continues, but I'll stop here).

Now, cultures use language to reinforce the values they adopt. To stick with just one example, a few people have mentioned the various words some languages have for family members. This example may reflect the strong familial relations heavily valued in those particular cultures. More effort is being made to acknowledge the distinctions between various family members. And, where there is a definition for each familial title, there are standards of conduct and appropriate relationships bound to the name. Here we see how family rituals and customs are reinforced by the specific language in use.

If a new language "takes over" a civilization's previous language, its culture can be critically affected. For example, If I'm unable to express in words my unique relationship with each of my siblings, my ability to express it in general is weakened. So are the chances I will continue to acknowledge those distinctions in the future. My values are changed.

It may be a rough comparison, but I think it stands: The civilization is the skater crowd (its values being skating). The threatened language is like the original Sketchers design. The infiltration of a new language is a threat to the civilization's culture just as the absence of skater shoe footwear can pose a threat to skating as an activity and the number of people willing to skate (for lack of proper footwear).

I don't think it is a relevant detail in this case that design is intentional and language is not (which isn't so clear, anyway). Nor is it relevant here that the rules of languages are fluid (so are the trends of contemporary design). The point is: design is supposed to identify with a certain community and function for one or many of that community's practices. Language does the same thing. By this definition, languages are designs.

One distinction worth mentioning: as long as there are people still interested in skating, some company is going to invest in skater shoe designs. The skater community is preserved. But not enough people are willing/able to invest in preservation of languages.

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Posted by: Dylan on May 10, 2007 03:33 PM

So I have a coo-coo clock. It coo-coos every hour. Then my visiting buddy from "coo-coo land" (where the coo-coos hunt

people) hears the coo-coo clock go off -- FREAKS OUT -- gets on his skateboard and starts singing the Oscar Meyer Weiner jingle (in his formal attire) and takes off down the street. The jingle usually wards off the offending coo-coos -- back in his land.

So he rides down the street and gets run over by a van, all because he couldn't read "STOP" on the big red sign.

And because he was the last man living from "coo-coo land" his language dies and no one else ever fears the cry of the coo-coo.

So language, sound, jingles and culture are all considered design now? In the same capacity as visual art?

Am I the only coo-coo left? Or are you guys giving me the bird?

VR/

Posted by: Joe Moran on May 10, 2007 11:39 PM

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I take it more as a potentially enlightening analogy. I doubt the article above intends to redefine "design" or "language" and prove them to be the same thing. It's only meant to show certain ways language can function like design and vice versa. Hopefully, through that analogy we can have a better understanding and greater appreciation of both. sound coo?

Posted by: dylan Greif on May 11, 2007 12:02 AM

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Aa smonone took dwon my perivous psot. Aobut etighthlenmnt. Vrey coo! Jsut gald my trmanisssion is cniomg thruogh caerlly. As is yrous. Understood. Vrey coo.

VR/

Posted by: Joe Moran on May 11, 2007 12:19 AM

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Jonathan said:

"I think you've got it the wrong way round. Language is not 'design', design is a language."

Thus proving that the word "is" has been given a different semantical value by him. He designed it in his own way. So, this depends on the tongue of the beholder ;)

Posted by: Bruno on May 11, 2007 12:53 AM

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"...languages are design objects. And I thought: no one loves extinct or endangered design objects more than designers do."

If we presume that it is so, I would say that the 'designer' is a metaphor and, in fact, we discuss about God...

Posted by: [Respiro, the logo designer](#) on May 11, 2007 05:30 PM

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I personally think it's all backwards here. Design is in fact a

language, is caught up and renewed in the means of its production, and it depends, like all languages upon the vitality of the culture or threatened with evolutionary or radical changes to the environment. . .

Posted by: [Gino](#) on May 12, 2007 11:05 AM

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While many good points have been made I am still of the opinion of "So What?"

I will agree that a language can change the way a person talks and therefore thinks and that many of the languages replacing the old ones are lacking in some areas. However are not the old languages lacking in areas as well. By switching languages are you just restricting yourself in one area while liberating another? And isn't there a good reason people are switching languages? It takes years to learn a language and decades to learn its nuances, local dialects, sayings, etc. I doubt people are switching simply to try something new and accidentally forget the old. With a few exceptions most languages die when their own people choose to stop using them and not by force.

Perhaps languages have a more practical side of them too. People use languages to communicate, express, and deliver ideas and no matter how efficient your language is if you're audience can't understand you it is worthless. You are using a language but the purpose is no longer there. Perhaps languages are like living creatures. They are created to fit an area but as that area changes so too must the languages or they go extinct.

Yes it is a shame the languages and cultures die out but that is the way everything is. So in the end I must ask "So What?" What makes this any more or less tragic than all the other things that die out, trashed or disguard and we no longer care about.

Posted by: [Joey](#) on May 14, 2007 04:11 PM

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Thanks for this rich discussion thread -- this is the main reason I love posting at *Design Observer*.

Dylan summarized the point of the post best:

**I don't think it is a relevant detail in this case that design is intentional and language is not (which isn't so clear, anyway). Nor is it relevant here that the rules of languages are fluid (so are the trends of contemporary design). The point is: design is supposed to identify with a certain community and function for one or many of that community's practices. Language does the same thing. By this definition, languages are designs.**

I hadn't intended to get at how design may be **unintentional**, but that seems like it might be a productive direction for thinking. Just off the top of my head, it seems pretty arrogant to say that design has all the intentionality and language none of it.

For one thing, if you know your Saussure you know that signs are both arbitrary and conventional. That is, they're both natural and social in character.

I also follow Bruno Latour, who encourages explanations along the social, the natural, and the discursive axes, if not symmetrically, then not blindly asymmetrically. Some people want to make language fully natural without engaging what is social about it, just as they want to make design fully social without engaging what is natural about it. To really understand both language and design, think about them along all three axes.

My main focus in writing about was a shift in discussions about why endangered languages matter. It used to be a cultural diversity issue, analogous to biodiversity; then it became a human rights issue; then it became a Romantic issue. By updating the discourse as an information issue, David Harrison is pushing an agenda in new directions, though as all of your comments show, his analogy is not unproblematic.

So here's to more fruitful discussions.

Posted by: [michael erard](#) on May 15, 2007 01:45 PM

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My mother's language is Assyrian, a Semitic language, also known as Neo-Aramaic. This language is also on the verge of extinction. I grew-up in Iran and moved to the United States in the mid 80s. Since early childhood, I remember constantly being corrected to speak Assyrian instead of Persian or English, especially if I was around family or kinships that were primarily Assyrian speakers.

I did my MFA in graphic design and focused on the aesthetics of Assyrian letterform and patterns, juxtaposing it with 20th century documentary content about Assyrian history.

The strength in the geometric form and curves of the letterforms as well as intricate detailed cultural patterns has definitely had a profound effect on my design aesthetics. I further believe that the forms of the letters have influenced the construction of meaning in my cognitive processing. Although more bi/trilingual now, when I think of the letter "Alap", its shape reminds me of the word "Alaha", whereas now "A" reminds me of "Apple" and so on...

I carry on the responsibility of investigating the form of these letters especially because this is a language on the verge of extinction. Perhaps it is due to historical and political shifts, cultural migrations or extreme repressions, from Saddam's policy of not allowing Assyrians to speak this language to today's Kurdish repression in the editing of textbooks to erase Assyrian history and rewriting it as Kurdish ancient history.

Regardless, I also find this sentence extremely interesting: "In other words, languages are design objects. And I thought: no one loves extinct or endangered design objects more than designers do."

As a point of interest, the upcoming ICOGRADA World Design Conference, "Design/Culture" will feature designers John and Ros Moriarty as keynote speakers who will address Australian Aboriginal culture's unique visual language among other topics.

See MFA sample:

[Alap Beit: Aramaic Puzzle](#)

Posted by: [sharokin](#) on May 16, 2007 02:00 PM

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I'm not exactly sure the point of English is more precision, like knowing the full details of which nephew. HTML taught us that sometimes less is more, and the way English is used as less is often a blessing. Screw formal addresses (no "Thee/Thou or Du/Sie distinctions), often times you can bludgeon a tense to no bad effect, basically the way English is used can be described as quick and easy pidgin. Not every language is so forgiving in vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, etc., though with 6900 contenders, I'd be brash to claim it's "one of the best". I simply don't know. (However, in 100 years it'll only be competing with 3500 or so, so stay tuned).

Posted by: [Desider](#) on May 21, 2007 05:33 PM

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Linguists have not done a poor job of articulating why people should be concerned about increasing death rates of languages, rather everyone has just failed to listen or care, or governments (U.S., Russia, for example) have very actively taken part in extinguishing minority languages. So, have linguists really failed to articulate it? You've said it yourself in this book review: when presented with this information people can fill in the blanks. Linguists have been producing information for years and years and years, but does anyone really listen?

Posted by: [Ryan](#) on May 29, 2007 12:51 PM

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My first thought reading several of these comments was, "I wonder if any of these people are writers."

As both a writer and visual designer, I admit I find it unfathomable that anyone would say language is not design. Unless we restrict the idea of "language" to something very simple and inflexible (or do the same for "design"), I see no reason to decry language as design. From the beautifully worded essay penned as to evoke sincere emotional reactions from readers down to the parts of speech crafted to pass information from one person to another, language (and the many ways we use it) is intentionally crafted to fill a recognized need.

Perhaps it's important to keep in mind the idea that "design" has a variety of meanings, from the structure of a chair to the careful planning of a course curriculum. If it is to convey any emotion or meaning at all, language must be designed from the words used, to the rhythm of the sentence, to the format selected to deliver the message (whether oration, poetry, narrative, etc.) All utilization of language, in any kind of thoughtful, intelligent manner, is necessarily a design process. It isn't always good design, but certainly it qualifies.

Posted by: [amber simmons](#) on June 11, 2007 01:21 PM

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