LANGUAGE DEATH ACCELERATING WORLDWIDE

“The Last Speakers of Half of the World’s Languages Are Alive Today”
-K. David Harrison, author, WHEN LANGUAGES DIE

“The extinction of ideas we now face has no parallel in human history, and most of the world’s languages remain undescribed by scientists. So we do not even know what it is that we stand to lose. This book explores only a tiny fraction of the vast knowledge that will soon be lost, an accretion of many centuries of human thinking about time, seasons, sea creatures, reindeer, edible flowers, mathematics, landscapes, myths, music, infinity, the unknown, and the everyday. By demonstrating the beauty, complexity, and underlying logic of these knowledge systems, I hope to motivate more people—speakers, language-lovers, and scientists alike—to work harder to ensure their survival.”

-WHEN LANGUAGES DIE, preface excerpt

Language death is a sad and startling crisis sweeping throughout the world with seemingly little attention to prevent it. As the ever-increasing pace of globalization continues to excel, speakers of thousands of indigenous languages are switching to speak English, Hindi, Russian, and other global tongues. The last speakers of probably half of the world’s languages are alive today.

WHEN LANGUAGES DIE: The Extinction of the World’s Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge (Oxford University Press, January 2007) is a passionate treatise on why language death matters and what can be done to prevent permanent extinction. As a language is the most massive, complex constellation of ideas we know, the accretion of thousands of years of a people’s science and art, humanity is on the verge of an unparalleled catastrophe. Language death is, in a very literal sense, a massive erosion of the human knowledge base.

Author and linguist K. David Harrison is well aware of the problem and, because of his unique on-field experience, understands it has a very human face. He has formed close personal friendships with last speakers of many languages and he is extremely knowledgeable of a variety of indigenous languages. In WHEN LANGUAGES DIE, Harrison shows that the disappearance of a language is not only a loss for the community of speakers itself, but for our common human knowledge of mathematics, biology, geography, philosophy, agriculture, linguistics, etc. WHEN LANGUAGES DIE is the first book to examine the question of “knowledge death” – the true impact of language death.

WHEN LANGUAGES DIE

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Dr. K. David Harrison, Ph.D., is a linguist and a specialist in endangered languages. He has spent many months in Siberia and Mongolia working with nomadic yak herders and studying their language and traditions. He has also worked in India, the Philippines, the United States, Mongolia and Lithuania with members of the last generations of speakers of endangered languages. His work includes not only scientific descriptions of languages, but also storybooks, translations, and digital archives for the use of the native speaker communities. He teaches Linguistics at Swarthmore College and is currently working with the National Geographic Society to develop a list of global language hotspots. He is available for interviews.