

ANTHROPOLOGY

What's Lost When Languages Are

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Partly due to a historical development marked by worldwide colonialism, urbanization, and globalization, in the course of this century humankind is likely to experience its most extreme cultural loss. As K. David Harrison notes in *When Languages Die*, “The last speakers of probably half of the world’s languages are alive today.” Their children or grandchildren are pressured (at times, by law) to speak only the dominant language of their community or country. Under one estimate, more than 50% of the 6900 or so languages identified nowadays are expected to become extinct in a matter of a few decades.

The precise criteria for what counts as a distinct language are controversial—especially those regarding closely related linguistic systems, which are often inaccurately referred to as dialects of the same language (1). The problem is complicated by the insufficiency of studies about the grammar (formal structure) of many of the world’s endangered languages. In addition, from a cognitive standpoint any two groups of individuals whose languages are mutually intelligible may in fact have distinct mental grammars (thus, distinct languages, as established for instance on the basis of distinct parameters of grammatical variation in generative linguistics).

As a cognitive system, a language shows dynamic properties that cannot exist independently of its speakers. This is the sense in which the Anatolian languages and Dalmatian are extinct. Therefore, language preservation depends on the maintenance of the native-speaking human groups. Unfortunately, the most accelerated loss of distinct languages takes place where economic development is rapid, exacerbating the breakdown of minority communities that speak different languages. In this perspective, a language often begins to die long before the passing of the last speaker: New generations may start using it only for limited purposes, increasingly shifting to the community’s dominant language. In this process, knowledge of the dying language erodes both at the individual level (language attrition



Still speaking their native tongue. Antonio Condori and Illarion Ramos Condori, Kallawayá speakers, with David Harrison in the Bolivian Andes.

or incomplete acquisition) and at the community level (language death).

Just as an ecosystem becomes less rich by the extinction of a species, so too does a society with the extinction of a language. Presenting many case studies, Harrison (a linguist at Swarthmore College) argues that the extinction of a community’s language entails major loss of knowledge of its cultural heritage

(e.g., history, folklore, literature, and music) and of its understanding of the local flora, fauna, and ecosystem. Still, although these close ties do exist, the maintenance of a language and of other aspects of cultural heritage are not always mutually dependent. Cultural change can sometimes be the best guarantee that a group will be able to maintain its language and

even survive. Major world languages (including English, French, Hindi-Urdu, and Spanish) achieved dominant status partly because of their speakers’ ability to overcome, by means of cultural or technological change, the challenges and threats from their environment, including other peoples.

Linguistic diversity itself may be the worst loss at stake, because it may be the most promising and precise source of evidence for the range of variation allowed in the organization of the human cognitive system. For instance, Harrison discusses many strategies for manipulating quantities across languages, often endangered ones (2). Certain linguistic phenomena are only rarely

encountered in the world’s languages. Ura-rina, an Amazonian language spoken by fewer than 3000 people, possesses the exceptionally rare object-verb-subject word order.

Click sounds are common only in the Khoisan languages spoken in southern Africa. The rapid loss of such diversity substantially hinders comparative investigation about the multiple ways in which a single cognitive domain can be organized. Linguists are well aware that their efforts alone cannot prevent this loss. Community involvement, especially with government support, has proven essential in slowing or even reversing language loss in different cases (e.g., Basque and Irish). Crucially, endangered languages must be acquired by new generations of speakers. Here the biological metaphor adopted by Harrison applies appropriately—documentation of dead languages is akin to a fossil record, providing only partial clues about complex cognitive systems.

Nevertheless, our faculty of language naturally gives rise to innovation. As individuals acquire a language, they are bound to introduce changes into their grammars, thus creating new linguistic systems over time (3). This is a sense in which Latin and the unattested Proto-Indo-European did not die, but evolved into many new languages. Given such continuous innovation, one could ask why the impending disappearance of many languages should be so dire. Several factors make the losses irreparable: Current language diversity likely arose over tens of thousands of years. Despite the limitations of historical linguistic reconstruction (4), with sufficient data it can provide important clues about the path of development of human groups across the planet (5). Lastly, no amount of innovation over time will exactly restore current language diversity. As Harrison discusses, it was enabled mainly by the relative or complete isolation among human groups over centuries, circumstances that may never occur again. Rich in details yet surprisingly easy to read, *When Languages Die* shows what we are losing.

References

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When Languages Die
The Extinction of the
World’s Languages and
the Erosion of Human
Knowledge

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