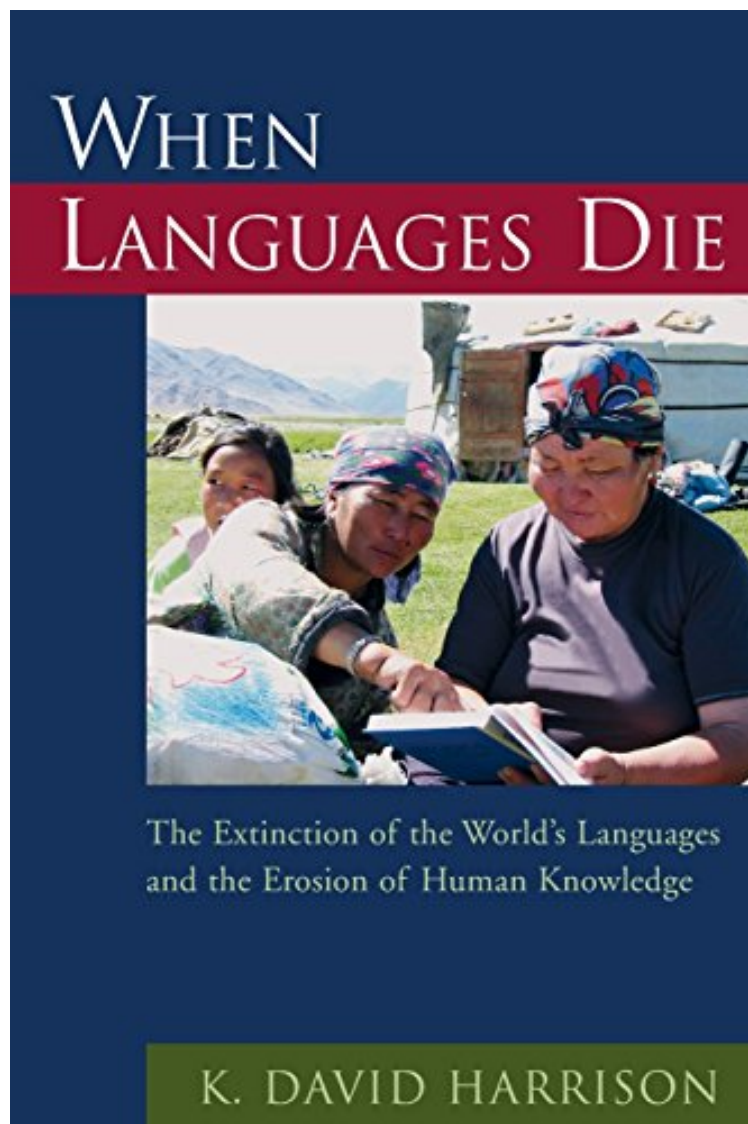


[Mobile pdf] When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World's Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge

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

K David Harrison

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#448859 in Books K David Harrison 2008-07-21 2008-07-21 Original language: English PDF # 1 6.10 x .80 x 9.10l, .94 #File Name: 0195372069304 pages When Languages Die The Extinction of the World s Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge | File size: 62.Mb

K David Harrison : When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World's Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World's Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. False Welsh example
By Mochyn
This book has a lot going for it but emphasizes the few examples from the author's field work and not more in depth coverage of the topic as a whole. He also uses an example on page 190 in a description of Welsh numbers, he gets it completely wrong. "...Welsh children were found to grasp how numbers are built of bases more quickly than do their monolingual English peers. They do so, it is claimed, because twelve in Welsh is pronounced un deg dau or literally "one ten two." First, this is the spelling of the word not the pronunciation which is "een deg dai". Welsh has a traditional counting system and a decimal system. This example is from the decimal system. Welsh has a straight forward 1-10 numbering but in traditional Welsh (used for telling age, time, dates) 11 is un ar ddeg (one on ten); 12 is deuddeg (two ten - not two tens which is dau ddeg and means twenty); 13 is tri ar ddeg (three on ten) 14 pedwar ar ddeg (four on ten) 15 is pymtheg (a separate word) 16 is un ar bymtheg (one on 15) 17 is dau ar bymtheg (two on 15) 18 is deunaw (two nines) 19 is pedwar ar bymtheg (4 on 15); 20 is ugain (separate word). When you get to 80 (pedwar ugain) you see the Gaulish influence on French. Add a noun in the counting and you get the noun after the first number (36 books is un llyfr ar ddeg ar hugain). 14th century is pedwaredd ganrif ar ddeg.

8 of 9 people found the following review helpful. Language, Culture, and Thought from Around the World
By Monty Vierra
When languages die, what do we lose? Presenting us with his research into the gradual disappearance of some 100 little-known languages, K. David Harrison answers his provocative question (p. 7) by showing us a myriad of different ways people have found to talk about concepts as simple as counting and time keeping and as complex as maps and scientific classification. When a language dies out or becomes spoken by too few people to interest most of the rest of us, Harrison argues, we miss the opportunity to hear those speakers stories and to discover their way of life, which seems intrinsically interesting to many of us simply as human beings. As an amateur linguist teaching English overseas for more than 20 years, I was particularly keen on reading what Harrison had to say about the possible relation between language, culture, and thought. I wasn't disappointed. Overall, I have given the book four stars for its writing, its visuals, its organization, and its formal support (notes, etc.). I didn't go so far as five stars, because I have some bones to pick over style and some more serious objections to his seeming reversal on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which I will discuss below. The writing is clear and precise, with each point/argument supported by language data that non-specialist readers can easily understand or by references in the notes that anyone can readily get access to either online or at a library. Visually, this book is very effective, too. Each chapter makes good use of a variety of maps, diagrams, tables, drawings, and photographs. There are so many, in fact, that the author or the publisher apparently was too burdened to make a list of illustrations! In addition, the book includes a brief but invaluable section near the end on languages devised by and for the deaf. Finally, for those who have doubts about the quality or depth of what the author has said and for those curious to go on there's a complete bibliography and a useful index for cross checking the various languages. In short, there's much to commend this book. Before I look at what I think are Harrison's shortcomings, I want to discuss an odd comment I found in the reviews here. One reviewer writes, "The author's standards for what makes the cause to honor endangered languages are extremely biased and are based on how he thinks speakers of global languages don't have the same capacity for language and are intrinsically worth less." I cannot find anywhere in this book where Harrison says or even implies anything like this. The one-star reviewer may have misunderstood the last chapter, where Harrison does argue against some conventional viewpoints. For instance, he seems to bemoan the exaggerated emphasis made by some structural linguists among the Chomskyan camp whose exclusive study of the deep structure of a handful of major languages led them erroneously to conclude that all languages are English, that is, all real languages follow the English grammar pattern of Subject-Verb-Object and all the rest are variations or break-downs on this. Except for a handful of extremists, this view is not widely shared, however. Here's what the reviewer I've quoted may have read in Harrison's book: The Chomskyan program [named after Noam Chomsky] has been unduly narrow, overly focused on large, globally dominant languages, and pre-occupied with structure at the expense of content. (page 206) A little further down, Harrison quotes another linguist, Mary Haas, who complains about these structuralists taking an atomistic approach. (This may be an in-joke among linguists and may refer to Mark C. Baker's Atoms of Language.) A couple of pages later (pages 208-211), Harrison seems either to be rebuffing or supporting a point made by John McWhorter in The Language Hoax (available on [YouTube](#)) about language complexity. Harrison maintains that we don't have any set criteria to judge such a question. Do we talk about Latin case endings or forming English past tenses (morphology), Chinese measure words (vocabulary), or word order (syntax)? Or by complexity do we mean the sound systems of various languages, some of which have a few and some of which have many? Do we include the total possible number of sounds, including tones and clicks, that people are capable of using not to mention sign language? There's no clear answer, except to say that a given language may seem complex in one way yet simple in another. It's a comparison we make with our own language. Why should we privilege our own and make that the standard? (Of course we have to use the one we know as a starting point.) In sum, I don't know where the reviewer who gave this book such a low score got the idea that Harrison thinks major languages are worth less than the languages discussed in this book; I cannot find it anywhere in Harrison's book. On the contrary, Harrison holds that we all have ways of thinking and speaking that are largely "commensurable" (a word I am taking from Baker's Atoms of Language). If we couldn't "get the measure" of each other's languages through our words and actions, then translation

would be all but impossible. The fact that we can translate and therefore learn from one another and have done so throughout our existence proves that all speakers have the 'same capacity for language.' In short, nowhere in Harrison's book can I find anything saying that people who speak a global language such as English, Mandarin, Spanish, or Russian are 'worth less' than a speaker of Tuva or Navajo. However, in the chapter before last Harrison addresses the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, an idea put forth in the last century that our language places strict limits upon [our] individual thought patterns. Speakers are trapped and their worldview is inescapably shaped by it. (p. 184) At first, Harrison seems to reject the extreme form of this hypothesis, but on the very next page he gives examples of languages that direct our attention and force us to talk about things in very restricted ways. Spanish, for instance, has grammatical gender, that is, every object as well as every person is either masculine or feminine. The English word dog is *perro* in Spanish, thus masculine, and its masculine in French, German, and Portuguese, too. Now, cat in Spanish and French is masculine, but feminine in German. The word table is feminine in all three. If some English readers wish to laugh at our European cousins, consider that English forces us quite often to choose between the words *a/an/the* when we use a noun. In chapter 6, *Endangered Number Systems*, Harrison grapples with this problem of the two-way influence of thought and language by talking about numbers and how we count. He shows that what we think is important or relevant can influence both counting and the names we give the numbers we use. He identifies three domains that constantly interact: our innate ability to count; our physical and social environments; and the way languages actually work. (page 194, and figure 6.7 on page 196) In the end, despite lots of evidence he himself offers that language seems to direct our thoughts in certain ways, Harrison states that language is to a great extent culturally determined. (page 194) Earlier, he gave an example of maps created by different groups of people living in Siberia: their culture influenced how they mentally represented landscapes. (p. 109) Unfortunately, he must have missed an edit, because on page 115 he says pretty much the opposite: What we name in the landscape may be deeply influenced by the words we know (vocabulary) and the ways we put them in order (grammar, aka morphology and syntax). But as Baker and others have shown, words are more flexible; in contrast, the fundamental structures of language seem to be limited and they are not affected in the same way by the need to come up with new words to fit changed circumstances. This kind of to and fro argument that Harrison makes through much of the book between surface features and deep structures strikes me as inconsistent and missing a key point that he himself made in noting the three domains. Had he read Baker's *Atoms of Language*, he might have been more attentive to all three and solved part of the mystery of language. In Baker (and in the Chomskyan program in general), there are two languages, the external language of words and their interactions (E-language) and the internal, or underlying, language of basic structures (I-language). When we encounter unfamiliar languages, we experience the whirligig of words swirling past in print and in the air as a confusing cacophony of difference, a Babel of disorder. But we are able to comprehend shared meaning through the limits that seem to be imposed on us by the way the brain works in dealing with the social and physical environments in which we live. Harrison's third domain is an equal partner. To bring this to a close, I will simply add that I think Harrison's work is an important contribution to linguistic science, certainly as far as the needs of non-linguists go. The stories are fascinating, and he and his colleagues have accomplished a lot on an academic shoestring. According to the Linguistic Society of America (Birner, online), By studying languages from all over the world, linguists hope to find out what properties all languages have in common, and whether those properties are somehow hard-wired into the human brain. (<http://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/faq-how-do-we-learn-language>) In short, Harrison's work, though it may differ in attitude and in details, actually dovetails with that of Chomskians like Baker. PS Readers who want more along these lines might try the fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin, in particular *The Left Hand of Darkness*, also available on . Sometimes novelists have insights into language and culture that science can learn from and non-specialist readers can enjoy.² of 2 people found the following review helpful. Harrison's style of writing isn't my favorite, and he does have a habit of repeating ...By Adriane Baklava This book provided an interesting introduction to some of the world's rarest and least heard of languages, with themed chapters about how different ideas (math, counting, time, weather, etc.) translate across languages and cultures due to geography and linguistic characteristics. Harrison's style of writing isn't my favorite, and he does have a habit of repeating the title throughout the book in order to drive home the point that many languages are on the verge of extinction. It certainly does make his point, but in a mildly annoying manner. In any case, I would still recommend this book if you're interested in learning about how other cultures conceptualize ideas.

It is commonly agreed by linguists and anthropologists that the majority of languages spoken now around the globe will likely disappear within our lifetime. The phenomenon known as language death has started to accelerate as the world has grown smaller. This extinction of languages, and the knowledge therein, has no parallel in human history. K. David Harrison's book is the first to focus on the essential question, what is lost when a language dies? What forms of knowledge are embedded in a language's structure and vocabulary? And how harmful is it to humanity that such knowledge is lost forever? Harrison spans the globe from Siberia, to North America, to the Himalayas and elsewhere, to look at the human knowledge that is slowly being lost as the languages that express it fade from sight. He uses fascinating anecdotes and portraits of some of these languages' last remaining speakers, in order to demonstrate that

this knowledge about ourselves and the world is inherently precious and once gone, will be lost forever. This knowledge is not only our cultural heritage (oral histories, poetry, stories, etc.) but very useful knowledge about plants, animals, the seasons, and other aspects of the natural world--not to mention our understanding of the capacities of the human mind. Harrison's book is a testament not only to the pressing issue of language death, but to the remarkable span of human knowledge and ingenuity. It will fascinate linguists, anthropologists, and general readers.

"At our current rate of language loss, by the end of this century the vast majority of the world's languages will be either extinct or will be spoken by only a few old people. While much effort and money are now being spent to stem the loss of plant and animal species, the human tragedy of language loss is receiving little attention. This movingly written and fascinating book tells why languages are vanishing, and what we can do to save our linguistic heritage." -- Jared Diamond, Professor of Geography, University of California, Los Angeles and Pulitzer prize winning author of *Guns, Germs, and Steel*"In this scholarly yet very readable study, Harrison writes powerfully of the value and beauty of these vanishing knowledge systems." --The Guardian"Rich in details yet surprisingly easy to read, *When Languages Die* shows what we are losing. --Science Magazine"Depending on how one counts, it is likely that half of the world's languages will be lost over the next thirty years, a dramatic change in human history. Harrison explores dying languages, how they differ from stable languages, how they encode cultural information that is lost with them, how their speakers behave, and much more. He tells a fascinating and tragic story of immense drama." --David W. Lightfoot, National Science Foundation"An important and useful book fills a valuable niche in what is now a voluminous and ever-growing collection of studies devoted to understanding reasons for and consequences of language death. Harrison's book focuses on the intellectual loss from the sum of human knowledge that such language death represents." --Journal of Anthropological Research"Harrison tackles the question of what is lost when a language dies from the vantage point of field studies with some of the few remaining speakers of endangered languages in Siberia, Mongolia, and elsewhere. *When Languages Die* reveals an astonishingly rich catalog of human intellectual heritage and scientific knowledge on the verge of disappearing as many of the world's small languages become extinct." --Suzanne Romaine, Oxford University"Written in clear and concise prose, *When Languages Die* provides a captivating account of how languages encode and categorize human knowledge and experience. Harrison brings together a wealth of examples from all over the world to illustrate just how very much is lost when a language ceases to be spoken. The book is a must-read for anyone interested in people and how we think, perceive, and understand the world we live in." --Lenore A. Grenoble, Dartmouth College"Depending on how one counts, it is likely that half of the world's languages will be lost over the next thirty years, a dramatic change in human history. Harrison explores dying languages, how they differ from stable languages, how they encode cultural information that is lost with them, how their speakers behave, and much more. He tells a fascinating and tragic story of immense drama." --David W. Lightfoot, National Science Foundation"An important book with a clear niche in the teaching of undergraduates and in alerting a larger reading public to the magnitude and consequences associated with current trends in linguistic extinction. Harrison's book succeeds in representing the potential, even perhaps the inevitable, loss of the "intellectual treasure" of linguistic diversity." --Journal of Anthropological Research

About the Author
K David Harrison is Assistant Professor of Linguistics, Swarthmore College. As a linguist and specialist in Siberian Turkic languages, he has spent many months in Siberia and Mongolia working with nomadic herders and studying their languages and traditions. He has also worked in India, Bolivia, the Philippines, Lithuania, and the United States. His work on endangered languages is featured in the documentary film *The Linguists* and was featured on the Comedy Central series *The Colbert Report*.