

## When Languages Die

*The Extinction of the Worlds Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge*

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Depending on the count there are some 6000 odd extant languages in the world, the overwhelming number of which has no written form, let alone a rich literary tradition. Languages spoken by only a very limited number of speakers are on the brink of extinction, and when by only a handful actually for all intents and purposes already dead. When there is no extensive literature, not even a written form, they disappear without any trace, for ever lost to humanity. And of course even when leaving an extensive trace, such as the case with Latin, what remains is dead, more like a stuffed animal than the animal itself, because language is above all an oral thing, existing only in a social context and as a response to a certain world creating a particular cultural reality. It cannot be properly codified, every competent speaker of it capable of creating a potentially unlimited sentences, and it is in this very potentiality its essence lies, and which also makes it so fragile and evanescent, liable to disappear literally into thin air.

Now why is this great variety of tongues such a good thing? Is not the general trend towards uniformization in this global world of ours not only inevitable but very desirable as well? What is really lost beyond the quaint and the obstructive? Very many things the author point out. A death of a language means also a death to a culture, a particular way the human mind has faced survival and development. Of course this just reduces the question to why it is such a bad thing that cultures disappear, does not the same ideal of globalization and uniformization hold here as well? Of course ultimately one must posit certain values as absolute, i.e. not reducible to anything else, and being their own justification. As a linguist the main interest in languages is the various way it manifests the inherent language facility of the human species, only with a very wide sample of languages can reliable theories of the restrictions languages are subjected to be made, and indeed many of the most exotic languages have supplied counterexamples to a host of different assumptions about what is possible and not possible in the use of language.

Intimately connected philosophically to the various ways intrinsic language can manifest itself is the question of the relation between language and thought. The naive, or seemingly naive, stand is that thought is paramount and that language is only a dressing up of thought in the particular garments which happens to be available. This clearly is the way most of us 'think' about the issue, we do have personal identities - 'I's, who according to Descartes do the thinking, and our expressions of thoughts into words may or may not be adequate approximations of the subtle thoughts themselves which we struggle to convey. A contrary and radical view is that it really is the other way, language is paramount and that without language there is no thought, at least no structured thought, is it not the case that our thoughts are expressed in a running interior monologue, and without a particular language there would be no monologue and hence no thought. On closer scrutiny this approach may be termed equally naive, in addition to being much less

plausible and going against our basic intuition to boot. Yet, there certainly is a way in which structured language is a help to thought, one may only think of the way we can do complicated calculations through the manipulations of symbols, without the crunch of which we would get lost in confusion<sup>1</sup>. In fact thought is no simple thing at all, and there are thoughts at many levels, some of them appearing as automated and mechanical as the workings of our limbs, and indeed we can think of thoughts, and most of our thinking is in fact the thinking of thoughts, and the very important distinction between the thought itself and the thinking of it lies at the very basis of the confusion of various self-referential paradoxes in logic which some of us are so fond of indulging in.

But let us get down to earth, and the book is very much a matter of getting down to earth being based on a variety of case studies undertaken by the writer to various scattered tribes in Siberia and beyond. One of the most obvious ways a language influences thought is in which way it classifies objects in the world around. In principle, and this is one of the meta-theses of modern linguistics, every language can be translated into any other language, be it in somewhat cumbersome ways, at least as far as actual contents is concerned (the case of wordplay is of course quite different, and is, as the word itself suggests, but a frivolous play on language as an object among others in the world of ours). Yet depending on the particular needs of a people, there may be specific words for very specific objects or concepts, making such fine distinctions that ordinarily there would be no pressing need for. The author, due to the particular case studies he has undertaken, is particularly fascinated by the many specific words relating to reindeers at various stages of their sexual maturity, some of those languages have seen it fit to construct<sup>2</sup>. There certainly is an economy in thought to have a particular focus for a complex concept, rather than having to painstakingly clothe it in words before acting on it. Words can be seen as signs, not important by themselves, but crucial as pointers, and a specific macro so to speak, will have pre-fabricated associations connected to it to be brought into instant play when activated. On a more trivial and accidental level one may take the Swedish binary convention of naming ancestors<sup>3</sup>. To most speakers of traditional languages, one does not ordinarily make a distinction between a mother of a mother or of a father, both are referred to as grandmother or its equivalents. Of course the distinction can be made if challenged, but the point is that one can think of grandmothers as a ready made concept; while in Swedish it is impossible to speak about a grandmother without specifying which kind. Thus the general concept of grandmothers is very hard to convey<sup>4</sup>. More interesting examples are where the expression of getting somewhere necessitate for the speaker to

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<sup>1</sup> One should not understand this as if the manipulation of say mathematical symbols constitute a language on par with human ones, except in a vague metaphorical way.

<sup>2</sup> However, what is at stake is really the culture of occupation, even if the language would survive a rejection of traditional ways, much of the specialized vocabulary will go extinct anyway, and as far as obsolete words would survive it would only be metaphorically.

<sup>3</sup> 'far' and 'mor' are seen as functions, not as individuals, thus it invites compositions of arbitrary lengths, many of which will designate the same individual and actual if extended far enough back will cease to refer to individuals at all.

<sup>4</sup> There is of course a host of exotic languages, e.g. to be found among the Australian aborigines, in which there are far more precise terminologies relating to kinship

specify the direction of the process, whether climbing from below or arriving laterally.

Language is above all oral, and no doubt the neurology involved is quite different. Talking and 'listening'<sup>5</sup> are learned automatically, while writing and reading is a cultural skill. In speech there usually is no pauses between words, as there is in writing, yet the ear has no difficulty in picking up the individual words, unlike the difficulty the eye would have in interpreting a string of letters with no spaces between<sup>6</sup>. The oral nature of language puts special demands on it when there is no writing. In order for stories to be conveyed from one generation to another they have to be learned by heart. Learning by heart is now considered an obsolete skill, in fact it is considered the epitome of mindless learning and much of modern pedagogy is a reaction against such drills still prevalent in school during the first half of the 20th century; yet it is when it comes to language an unavoidable one, and the committing of long stretches of classical poetry to memory does wonder to your appreciation of language and is a much neglected tool in modern language learning. The point is that in order to be memorable the language has to be properly adjusted. This is no doubt the reason for the origin of such things as rhymes and alliterations, but also when it comes to longer pieces, a logical structure making recollection, or rather reconstruction, far more natural and easier. In fact, as the author point out, generations of retellings of a tale has involved modifications and improvements in a kind of evolutionary process in which what was not memorable was simply forgotten. Thus, the author argues, epics born out of an oral tradition are like stones polished for a long time in a stream. In contrast much of what is now written is hardly memorable and thus will only survive in a fossilized state and only be recovered accidentally if at all.

The topic of the book is endlessly fascinating as well as deeply disturbing to any reader who cares for diversity and feels a nostalgic twinge whenever ancient lineages peter out, yet the authors treatment of the same leaves much to be desired. He is a young linguist, no doubt driven by a passion, yet his prose is repetitive, laden with cliches, devoid of any really interesting, not to mention arresting, ideas. To some extent it may be inexperience, and too narrow a focus. The book is conceived too much as a popularization of his own scientific and technical writing, with countless allusions to 'science'. A humanist reader would no doubt attribute its defect to some purported natural scientific approach to language, and liken the author to a paleontologist doing field work and reporting on his finding, while dutifully straining to put them into a larger cultural context.

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<sup>5</sup> unfortunately there is no really appropriate word that stand to talking as reading stands to writing

<sup>6</sup> More fundamentally one may question whether the natural speaker conceives of language as consisting of individual words, or whether this is something we have become much more attuned to after the written codification. One may in fact argue that learning and speaking a language is not so much a matter of stringing individual words together than mastering entire phrases and paradigms with the former allowing various insertions. The author makes quite a fuss about some strange language allows not only words to be attached to the front or the end, but also being allowed to be swallowed up. Clearly he is referring to morphemes, because the process is trivially present in any language that allows extensive compounds, whose status as words or as entire quasi-sentences incidentally is an open, and maybe moot question.