



CHICAGO JOURNALS

The  
Wenner-Gren  
Foundation

For Anthropological Research, Inc.

---

Books That Live and Die (Evans's Dying Words: Endangered Languages and What They Have to Tell Us) Books That Live and Die (Hagège and Gladding's On the Death and Life of Languages)

Author(s): N. J. Enfield

Source: *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (February 2011), pp. 129-131

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of [Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/657928>

Accessed: 23/02/2011 05:13

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucpress>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



The University of Chicago Press and Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Current Anthropology*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

youth who used it as a pilgrimage site and hated by others as a marker of failure, and 20,000 people came to witness its material destruction, its death. Van der Hoorn likens the event to the performance of a ritual sacrifice that liberated the structure but did not necessarily resolve ambivalent feelings. Six Viennese *Flaktürme* (towers) built in 1944 by Hitler but never used, are considered “monsters” because of their association with the Nazi regime. Although Berlin and Hamburg eliminated their *Flaktürme*, Vienna seems unable to dispose of them despite numerous proposals to do so over the past 60 years. Van der Hoorn discovers in the unrealized proposals the towers’ role in constructing national identity, which evolved from portraying Austria as a victim of Nazism to recognizing its complicity in the regime.

The fate of undesired buildings depends on assessments of their value to society, which draws van der Hoorn to theories of consumption cycles and the potential for creatively transforming these durable eyesores. People’s consideration of buildings as rubbish, even temporarily, provides a temporal frame during which contradictory and ambivalent meanings become embodied in architecture. The deteriorating Kalkar nuclear power plant on the Dutch-German border was built in 1986; never commissioned, it opened as an amusement park in 1995. Although the power plant’s cooling tower was playfully transformed into a climbing wall, it could not completely hide its original purpose, which many locals continued to hate. In the 1990s, East Berlin’s *Plattenbauten*, high-rise minimalist socialist housing with a negative image, attracted young artists, who “merchandised” their apartments as hip in commercials and exhibits. Long-term residents, however, felt differently. Van der Hoorn asks who has the right to change the image by promoting creative consumption and transforming the meaning of material culture. Van der Hoorn also examines the role of physical “fragments” of deteriorating East German holiday resorts, which locals appropriate as metonymic symbols of the larger history of which the buildings were a part, and the successful incorporation of fragments in rebuilding efforts, or the “reconstitution” of early twentieth-century building façades.

Van der Hoorn’s work, which was also her doctoral dissertation, is a provocative contribution to the anthropology of architecture and material culture. It is also an ambitious work. The author examines numerous architectural cases in diverse settings across large historical time frames. Because the particular meanings embodied in buildings are quite different, requiring distinct theoretical and data collection approaches, the entire work seems fragmented and lacking in sufficient ethnographic depth to support some of her interpretations. To her credit, van der Hoorn confronts researchers’ discomfort with contentions that material objects have agency by arguing that in narratives people both ascribe “humanlike traits” to buildings and perceive humanlike influences from them (p. 207). Public buildings, however, have many users and decision makers, not all of them equally motivated to ascribe or perceive agency. In choosing controversial eyesores,

van der Hoorn is able to tap into the intensity of sentiments but is less clear about systematically linking diverse opinions to social distinctions among building observers. By focusing attention on the humanlike traits ascribed to buildings, rather than the humans doing the ascribing, the work sacrifices ethnographic depth for architectural breadth. Studies like these could also benefit from a more precise use of architectural descriptors (e.g., “structurally complete” is insufficient for characterizing the extant physical condition of the Kaiserbau Hotel before its demolition) and more illustrations, such as photographs, site plans, and maps, to help the reader better understand the materiality of the subject matter. These criticisms aside, *Indispensable Eyesores* suggests many new ways to think about human relationships with the built environment and more critically understand not only *what* buildings mean but also *how* they mean. It also promises to challenge and inspire productive debate and encourage much fruitful research.

## Books That Live and Die

N. J. Enfield

Language and Cognition Group, Max Planck Institute Nijmegen; Radboud University Nijmegen; and Donders Institute for Brain, Cognition, and Behaviour, PB 310, 6500 AH, Nijmegen, The Netherlands (nick.enfield@mpi.nl).  
8 IV 10

*Dying Words: Endangered Languages and What They Have to Tell Us.* By Nicholas Evans. Indianapolis: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

*On the Death and Life of Languages.* By Claude Hagège, translated by Jody Gladding. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009.

Imagine that the books on your shelf had their own lives and that you could consult them only when they were not busy doing other things, such as working in their yam gardens, hunting for dugong, or taking care of their grandchildren. Imagine that they were sometimes too tired or drunk to let you read them. Worse, imagine that all your books *died*. Not just your personal copies but every copy in existence, so that you could never read them or even see them again. Your novels, biographies, and reference books: extinct. Picture your despair at those titles you had bought and often admired expectantly on the mantelpiece but had never got around to actually reading.

This parable of the book that lives and dies is no fiction. Most of our reference materials on meaning in human life—dictionaries, grammars, ethnographies, literature—are encoded not in writing but in the minds and bodies of living people and in their social interactions. Mostly, the cumulated knowledge of languages and cultures persists only because this knowledge is passed on personally through generations

by the living and dying archives that walk the world's village paths and plazas. If languages and cultures are our data, people are their renewable medium of storage.

The fatal interruption of cultural transmission that results in language extinction is increasing dramatically, now at a rate of a language gone every 2 weeks (Crystal 2000:19). For any linguist, the permanent loss of a single language should be hard to take, but for a linguist who has carried out fieldwork on that language—that is, for one who has worked with its last speakers—the loss is like losing a mother or a brother, bringing with it the same tragic discovery of finality that a death in the family brings: the discovery that no more questions may be asked.

This deep sense of grief—and the outrage that comes with it—is readily felt in the growing literature on language endangerment. These two welcome and readable additions add new data and flavor to the arguments introduced by predecessors, making the case that (1) language endangerment is happening, (2) it is rapidly and dramatically reducing the world's linguistic diversity, and (3) this is a very bad thing. While the first two are indisputable facts, the third is a matter of judgement. It is the toughest sell for a language-diversity advocate, especially when defending against a common view that the global multiplicity of languages is a curse, as the Babel myth would have it. The argument is that languages must be allowed to live or that they must at least first be scientifically described before speakers choose for themselves. But there are no knockdown arguments, just as there are no knockdown arguments that abortion must be stopped or that animal testing must be allowed. These are ethical questions, and while they may be driven by reason, they are fueled by passion.

Why is language endangerment a bad thing? There are many answers: because language extinction reduces diversity, and diversity is good; because there is culture-specific knowledge encoded in languages, and this knowledge is useful, even profitable; because the causes of language loss are the causes of other things, such as environmental destruction, and these other things are bad; because language loss has implications for human rights, and human rights should be upheld; because languages represent human heritage, and our heritage should be fostered and protected; because language diversity provides data we need for science, and science should go on. Each reason appeals to what is good and is therefore a morally grounded reason. Each argument points ultimately to how we ought to live and is therefore an ethical argument.

These arguments in defense of linguistic diversity are motivated by deep convictions stemming from both professional and personal experience. These authors put their scientist personae forward, mobilizing all the reason they can muster in sustaining their arguments for how we ought to behave in response to the crisis of language loss. Kant argued that in a world where we are above the animals, our faculty of reason alone should determine what ought to be done. But in *this* world we are animals, and so the reality is as Hume put it:

reason “can never oppose passion in the direction of the will” (Hume 1994 [1739]:118). As in the best scientific work, it is passion that sets these authors' compass. The game is to use reason to show why our way is the right way. These two books are primarily concerned with the negative effects of language extinction for the science of linguistics.

One aim of field research is to infer information that is embodied in people's fragile brains and fleeting behavior and to transform this information into a durable and accessible form that anticipates the questions of future scientists of language. Technically speaking, a perfect description of a language—were one possible—would make further field trips unnecessary and should render the language's speakers obsolete. The image of people as archival media storage devices raises the specter of the “selfish meme.” Do people accumulate languages, or is it as Aaron Lynch (1996) might have put it, that languages accumulate people? This would make our living books merely carriers for the viruses of language, our object of study. A linguist will say *No*, that our language consultants are people, and that we do not and must not think of them as an inconvenient storage medium for their languages. True, but once we focus on them as people in this way, we are in a political and moral game and no longer in the science of linguistics. Neither Hagège nor Evans ventures as far as Nettle and Romaine (2000), who advance bold political statements addressing not only human rights but also how the social inequalities that lead to language loss are caused by the same political and economic abuses that cause environmental disaster. With ethical arguments often having little directly to do with linguistics, Nettle and Romaine submit that the changes required to halt the decline of linguistic diversity are the same changes we need to make anyway, for other important reasons (ultimately, for biological survival). From this standpoint, language loss is an unhappy symptom, and its reversal would be a happy by-product.

Will Evans and Hagège succeed in convincing those who are not already on board? One challenge is to get the tone right. On writing about loss of diversity in nature, biologist Josef H. Reichholf (2009:170) says that to focus on “losses and catastrophes” is to “spread an atmosphere of doom” and is unlikely to help. If this is correct, then Hagège's book, while perhaps stirring for the already converted, will turn others off with its recurring war and genocide metaphors for language loss. Reichholf's rhetorical antidote is to foreground diversity and thereby accentuate the positive. Encouragement is what is needed, and why? Because there is no technical solution to this crisis. The technological advances for language recording reviewed by Evans—from stone inscriptions to wax cylinders to handheld camcorders—are real improvements, but they do not solve the problem. For linguistic diversity, just as Reichholf (2009:170) argues for biodiversity, the solution must be “a cultural achievement.”

This positive spin is the one offered by Evans. He suggests, and I think demonstrates, that it is possible to educate people on what is important about linguistic diversity. This is why

Evans's unfortunate title *Dying Words* misses the mark that his book otherwise strikes squarely. According to its subtitle, the book is about "endangered languages and what they have to tell us," but in fact it is about *languages* and what they have to tell us. Evans's book is one of the most penetrating and insightful works we have had on language for years. It does not deserve to be relegated to a specialist literature on language endangerment when its subject is the very essence of human language and its diversity: the life and growth of languages, not their death and demise. The task for this literature is not to convince readers that dying languages should not die. It is to convince them that living languages are invaluable and should live. The rest will follow.

So is the loss of linguistic diversity a bad thing? Well, if you are already inclined to think so, yes. And if you are a linguist, it is very bad, both professionally—because your ability to carry out your work is increasingly compromised—and personally—because the thing you love is being destroyed. Hagège's assessment is that "the decline in the diversity of languages is, in the long run, the decline of linguistics itself" (p. 201). For neighboring disciplines, the knock-on effects are enough that language extinction will at least be truly unfortunate. Evans and Hagège each makes a powerful case. Will the greater audience be convinced? Some, perhaps many, may doubt the presumption of an inherent good in scientific work that forms the main moral basis for these authors' arguments. Should research on minority languages be a priority? Or is it a counterproductive distraction and a misplacement of funds needed for more important things: water, sanitation, health, transport, education? The issue is raised by David Kaiser (2009:19) concerning the extraordinary expense of particle physics research: "Why spend billions of euros to smash subatomic particles together?" His explanation—that the physicists need to find a framework through which seemingly arbitrary yet powerful facts about natural forces should seem natural—essentially translates into the career needs of the physicists and the delight they gain from exploring these questions. It is interesting to ask why this is supported, or at least tolerated, by the taxpayer.

At the core of it is our innate fascination with the idea that truth can be very different from what it seems. Particle physics shows us that mass is actually 95% nothing, which is intriguing because it is so counterintuitive. If true, it means that the messages we get from our dearly trusted senses of vision, hearing, and touch do not, in fact, reflect how the world really is, or at least, that if we had different sensory apparatus we would see that our truth is just one version of the way things really are. Whorf's work in the 1930s and 1940s raised this possibility for language, a possibility hinted at by Hagège and explored systematically in Evans's book: the possibility that learning another language gives us a new set of spectacles for beholding and understanding the world, an alternative to the one supplied by our own familiar native language. Whorf recommended studying Native American languages as a way of opening up our minds to the subjective nature of our own

native version of things, not only in order to learn other ways of construing the world but also to bring into view the normally overlooked peculiarities of our own trusted conceptual systems. Because of the radical ways languages can differ, he argued, none of us is "free to describe nature with absolute impartiality" (Whorf 1956:214). The study of linguistic diversity gives us a way out, delivering nothing less than a balanced view of reality: "The person most nearly free in such respects would be a linguist familiar with very many widely different linguistic systems" (Whorf 1956:214). Hence Evans's dictum for devotees of diversity (p. 155): "we study other languages because we cannot live enough lives" (a phrase adapted from literary critic Harold Bloom [2000:19], who said, "We read . . . because we cannot know enough people").

Our sense of wonder at what we learn from the physicists is evidently enough to garner our support for their expensive pursuits. To expect the same in the domain of language will similarly require the large-scale creation of wonder. Evans and Hagège contribute handsomely to this project, shoring up foundations laid by recent predecessors. While technical solutions like affordable recording equipment and archiving technology are immensely convenient for the work that needs to be done, they are neither necessary nor sufficient for solving the scientific problems of language endangerment. If there is any hope of arriving at the cultural solutions needed, it is through fostering a modern tradition of marvel at linguistic diversity.

## References Cited

- Bloom, Harold. 2000. *How to read and why*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Crystal, David. 2000. *Language death*. Cambridge: Canto/Cambridge University Press.
- Hume, David. 1994 (1739). Reason and passion. In *Ethics*. Peter Singer, ed. Pp. 118–122. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kaiser, David. 2009. Gremlin fireworks. *London Review of Books* 31(24):19–20.
- Lynch, Aaron. 1996. *Thought contagion: how belief spreads through society*. New York: Basic.
- Nettle, Daniel, and Suzanne Romaine. 2000. *Vanishing voices: the extinction of the world's languages*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Reichhoff, Josef H. 2009. *The demise of diversity: loss and extinction*. London: Haus.
- Whorf, Benjamin Lee. 1956. *Language, thought, and reality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

## Paleoindian Archaeology and Archaeologists

David G. Anderson

Department of Anthropology, 250 South Stadium Hall,  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee 37996, U.S.A.  
(dander19@utk.edu).

12 VII 10