

NICHOLAS EVANS. 2010. *Dying words: Endangered languages and what they have to tell us*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. 287 pp. ISBN: 978-0-631-3305-3.

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I have several good friends — thoughtful, globally aware, with wide-ranging cultural interests — to whom I've tried to make a convincing argument that language endangerment is a problem. Indeed, my pitch has been that it's a very important problem; that language diversity is a key marker of broader cultural diversity, and that this variety we humans have spun out of our own experiences is not just a wellspring of delight to be savored for its own sake. More nuanced yet even more importantly, cultural diversity is the engine of a constant stream of ideas, both contrarian and confirmatory, that by turns provokes us out of complacency and enables us to adjust our core values to new circumstances. I've then argued to them that the world that language diversity makes is the only one in which we can realize our full human potential. The alternative, a planet dominated by just a few large languages, is an open invitation to groupthink and repression, or even a kind of emasculated, Orwellian lassitude. Linguistic diversity is a bulwark against creeping totalitarianism: that's been my closer.

Yet my arguments have had little or no effect. Like me, these friends are not linguists, but each one, in his or her own way, has more than a passing interest in languages. They are the kind of people who are primed to be receptive to concerns about trends in language use. And yet the typical response I've gotten runs along the lines of: "It's too bad that these small groups are having to give up their languages. It isn't fair, but on the other hand it is inevitable. And anyhow, the human mind is endlessly inventive. Even if there are only a few languages left in a hundred years, that will give people more than enough space for all the creativity the world could ever want."

To be honest, I feel that have I never been able to answer this adequately. First of all, it would take a linguist, examples at her fingertips, to really make the case in full. But not just any linguist: it would have to be one who combines an exhaustive knowledge of the intricacies of language diversity with an engaging — I daresay poetic — facility with words. One who can reach hearts as well as minds.

After having read, and then mulled over, *Dying words: Endangered languages and what they have to tell us*, I believe Nicholas Evans is that kind of linguist. The author deploys his impressive scholarship with a lively, even rollicking style that has the potential to entice friends like mine to undertake (and stay with) an intellectual journey through the world's linguistic variety, a trip that of necessity must include a certain amount of fearsome discussion of alveolar ejective fricatives and the like. And Evans is not just a companionable sightseeing guide; he has the poet's ability to conjure deeper truths out of the commonplaces of everyday speech. In fact, I would say that there is sometimes almost a bardic temper to his writing, and as we shall see, an important chapter in the book resonates with this quality. At the same time, *Dying words* is a fully loaded work of scholarship, worthy of the attention of any reader of this journal.

The book unfolds in five parts. The first, “The Library of Babel,” borrows its title from the famous story by Jorge Luis Borges. Echoing that story’s labyrinthine imagery, Evans begins with a description of the incredibly complex linguistic landscape of northwestern Arnhem Land in Australia, a stellar example of multilingualism and closely proximate cultural differentiation. From this opening ground, the discussion opens out to an overview of global linguistic diversity: its history and present status, where it is found, and how it compares to biological diversity. That basic chronology in place, Evans asks why it should be that humans, for most of our speaking history, have been slow to recognize the value of what other languages could teach us. The difficulty of recording the otherwise evanescent traces of spoken language is part of the answer, and Evans tours us through the many means that have been devised, from rock art to the gestures of the deaf sign language of the Ottoman court. He provides an interesting description of the work of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, whose linguistic work — mixed though it was with forced enculturation — was “the first systematic attempt by any culture in the world to understand, document, and make sense of a thoroughly alien tongue.”

Part two, “A Great Feast of Languages,” gets down to the basic question implied in my friends’ response about a few languages being plenty enough: just how different are different languages, really? The shadow of Universal Grammar looms wide and dark here, but Evans perceptively points out that for a child learning a language it doesn’t matter how “typical” it is, “and your mind must be capable of learning it, not ruling it out in advance. When it comes to universals, then, every language counts.” (This point, incidentally, can be extended to the corollary argument that every language is worth fighting to preserve, whether it’s an isolate or the 255th member of the Niger-Congo family.) Evans dwells on several examples of radical difference in small languages, from the double-strength cryptography of Navajo code-talkers in World War II (their language being both phonically and ontologically impenetrable to the Japanese) to the fascinating base-27 counting system of Oksapmin speakers in Papua New Guinea.

Then he explores social cognition in grammar — “why it feels so different to be ‘inside’ different languages.” And here he emphasizes what I believe to be a key point. My skeptical friends who feel that a handful of languages provide essentially unlimited possibilities for creativity are looking at individual languages as open systems in which it is possible to express any kind of thought. While this may be true in theory, in practice, as Evans notes (paraphrasing Roman Jakobson), “Languages differ not so much in what you *can* say as in what you *must* say. From the thousands of things we can attend to in the world around us, each language makes a different selection of what gets front-seat treatment as so-called *grammatical categories*, which speakers and hearers need to keep constant track of.” Languages, in this view, are cognitive filters that allow us to make sense of the multifarious sensory and conceptual diversity that the world presents us with. Without such filters — which are built around the grammatical categories — this diversity would overwhelm us. So in that sense languages are very far from being open systems, and the cognitive possibilities they embrace are not interchangeable. Again, Evans provides concrete examples, such as the Nepalese language Newari, where speakers must report every one of their own actions as volitional or not — a distinction which English, for example, is completely oblivious to. This leads to a discussion of languages having a more or less elaborate system of evidentials — for my money, one of the most philosophically interest-

ing facets of linguistic diversity.

The three chapters that make up the third part of the book, “Faint Tracks in an Ancient Wordscape,” look at how linguistic evidence can help us decipher human history that came before written records. Following an overview of comparative linguistics and other reconstructive methods, Evans cautions that the results of this work — reconstructed words and worldviews — tend to just waft freely through the breezy skies of theory unless they are linked with evidence from other “sciences of the deep human past” such as archaeology, genetics, and comparative ethnography. By making such links, “we can begin to localize our reconstructed word-worlds to specific times, places, archaeological cultures, and flesh-and-gene peoples.” He uses the spread of Austronesian, the world’s most extensive language family prior to European expansion, to show how different lines of scientific evidence can be used to reconstruct the migrations that brought these languages out of Taiwan and across vast archipelagos and expanses of ocean, from Madagascar to Easter Island. This part of the book concludes with a chapter on how endangered (but still living) languages can be used to decipher scripts of ancient tongues that would otherwise remain forever beyond our understanding.

The fourth part, “Ratchetting Each Other Up: The Coevolution of Language, Culture, and Thought,” consists of two chapters that explore how language coevolves with the rest of culture. First comes everyday language: how does it condition the way cultures think about space, time, activity, contemplation — about everything? The short answer is that each unique language stocks the wider culture with certain patterns of thought that are not just different names for the same concepts, ready to be universally translated into any and all other languages. Evans gives the example of the Australian language Kayardild, which requires its speakers to orient virtually every movement to its compass direction: “Move your chair a little to the south.” This is absolute spatial orientation, as opposed to the relative way orientation is handled in English: “Move your chair a little to your right.” It’s a major cognitive difference.

Then Evans turns to a subject that is too little discussed in the context of language endangerment: poetics. There at least two reasons why it is important to understand how endangered languages express themselves in poetry, storytelling, song, and other linguistic arts. It is a natural way to enlist the interest of the general public in the fate of other languages; people are interested to know that every language can have its Shakespeare (and Evans makes this metaphorical connection explicitly in discussing the story of Anna Nelson Harry, an extraordinarily inventive user of her Alaskan native language, Eyak). In addition, it demonstrates again the point that the restrictions each language uniquely places on how things can be said do not, in practice, cripple creativity. Quite the contrary: through the example of the complex alliterative rules imposed by traditional Welsh poetry, Evans demonstrates that these particular restrictions “can lead poets to compressed mnemonic densities which they may not have found in the slack comfort zone of free form.” In other words, linguistic restrictions — which is to say linguistic uniqueness — can set us free to create what we would not have been able to otherwise. The more languages there are, the more potential uniqueness, and the more potential creativity. Despite my friends’ beliefs, creative bandwidth will be reduced, significantly so, if we go to a threadbare world of just a few large languages.

The final part of the book. “Listening While We Can,” is where Evans confronts the likelihood of just such a grim future. This is territory readers of *LD&C* will know well: the likely future toll, the difficulties of determining who the last fluent speakers are, scales to measure degrees of language endangerment, the pitfalls of serial obsolescence in language recording technologies, the high cost of documenting endangered languages, the dynamics of insiders versus outsiders in working with indigenous languages. All these “obscure and neglected tongues,” fast disappearing, are “examples of how self-organizing human systems of great complexity emerge without centralized planning.” They may hold answers to important questions about how we should conduct our lives that we haven’t the capacity to even think about within the framework of the relative handful of languages that are coming to dominate the world.

Yet the overall feeling I got from the book was not one of despair. The inherent beauty of these small languages is what shines through over all else in Evans’ writing, and I am of the opinion that getting the average person to care about language endangerment absolutely requires a positive emphasis. This is where Evans’s style serves well. It is rich in literary allusion and in metaphor, and bold in its unrestrained choice of words from outside the standard scholarly lexicon. Here’s an example gleaned from a couple of consecutive paragraphs. I’ve italicized some metaphors and other words that you would perhaps not expect to find in the usual academic tome:

In the past few decades the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis has suffered a peculiarly *schizophrenic* fate. It is seen by some *heavy punchers* in the fields of philosophy and psychology as a sort of *glandular fever* that briefly infects romantic college students *exposed in their dorms* to *factoids* about the number of Eskimo words for snow, before *emerging cured* into a more sober and orderly world in which facts are facts.... Some recent popular scientific books ... summarily *trash* the significance of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis.... At the other extreme, many post-modern scholars and anthropologists have *outwhorfed* Whorf by *digging into extreme relativist foxholes*. These scholars assert the ultimate incompatibility of different discourses, with scant regard for the recurrent similarities in ontological categories like space, time, and causality exhibited across the world’s languages. But a belief in the shaping power of words over thought is also alive and well outside the *charmed salon* of postmodernist scholars... (pp. 162–163).

This blending of the high-academic register (“discourses,” “ontological categories”) and vivid casual talk is not easy to pull off. Quite simply, it makes *Dying words* fun to read.

And, as I say, that’s a critical point. To convince friends like mine, you need to emphasize the inherent beauty in the human facility for creating different languages —the playfulness and the fun. Evans approaches the inherently depressing subject of language extinction not with the somber gravity of an undertaker, but rather with the infectious delight of a connoisseur. He’s like a good travel writer: “These languages are *wonderful* — you really need to go there!”

So maybe the most important thing endangered languages have to tell us is that language in all its riotous variety is a joy. To their speakers, endangered languages produce a special, endlessly layered, indwelling kind of joy bound up in their sense of identity — a

joy at the deepest of levels. But even a monolingual speaker of one of the big steamroller languages can participate in that joy, and not just superficially. All it takes is the right guide to point out the best places to visit.

There are some glitches along the way, of course. The pedant in me cannot refrain from mentioning that I noticed several typos and inconsistent spellings, and one researcher with whom I am intimately familiar is both misidentified and given a curious, phantom affiliation. Perhaps there are other errors that a nonspecialist like me would not catch. But in the end, these are just cavils, the minor mistakes that are practically inevitable when an author takes on a global topic of such complexity.

In sum, this is the best book I've yet seen in terms of its potential to persuade the broader public of the need to value endangered languages and to support the fight to keep them in daily use. Will *Dying words* convince my recalcitrant friends? I don't know, but I will urge them to try it.

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