

Evans, N. (2010). *Dying words: Endangered languages and what they have to tell us*. Chichester, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell. vi+ pp. 290.

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This book, strategically divided into five parts, provides an extensive historical, linguistic, and sociocultural background of extinct and endangered world languages such as Ilgar, Kayardild, and Iwaidja. Evan's main objective is to foster an enhanced awareness of the rapidly increasing number of dying languages, and emphasize the importance of recording native speakers of these languages to create durable forms of language that can be learned by future generations of speakers. The author's main argument is that preserving dying languages in durable print forms such as dictionaries, grammars, and instruction guides allows for the maintenance of human history and unique ways of thinking.

Part I begins by explaining the myth of the Library of Babel—which deals with people who are obliged to speak mutually unintelligible languages—to introduce the author's discussion about the importance of linguistic diversity of Aboriginal languages (Maung, Marrku, Amurdak, etc.) and clans (Agarlda, Croker Island, Ulbu, etc.) from the northwestern Arnhem Land in Australia. The author argues that although the loss of linguistic diversity in Australia has accelerated more extensively in recent years, clearly devastating cases of linguistic diversity destruction occurred during the colonization of Indigenous cultures in the New World. Evan's also argues that the two main historical reasons for the rapid loss of linguistic diversity are agricultural expansion or the formation of industrialized state societies. In addition to the aforementioned arguments, the author discusses the importance of developing written records of endangered sign languages. Because there were not any written records, for example, of the Ottoman Turkish sign language often used in the Ottoman courts by both deaf and non-deaf people, it is now very difficult to determine how bodily gestures related to Ottoman speakers' cognitive processes (Bon, 1996; Şükrü Hanioglu, 2008). There have also been problems with recording previously existing languages due to the inability to accurately capture the complete process of speech transmission: "the [sound] articulation by the speaker, its acoustic transmission through the air, and its perception and neural decoding by the hearer" (p.40). Most phonetic research studies attempt to describe step 1 according to well-known speech patterns, accurately capture step 2 with spectrograms, and do not examine step 3 unless said studies analyze issues relevant to conversation or discourse analysis, code switching, or the syntactic structure of interaction. Overall, the author emphasizes that developing and maintaining written records of world languages is useful for understanding human history.

In Part II, Evans challenges Chomsky's (2006) Universal Grammar Theory by arguing that children and adults must often learn the sounds, meaning, grammar, and social cognition of languages such as Dalabon, Kayardild, Matses, Newari, and Navajo that do not have similar designated properties. A clear example of the non-universal semantic relationship between English and Navajo is provided through the author's examples of how the word "give" in English is used to describe different types of giving events that include different kinds of gifts (ball, backpack, mittens, etc.) whereas Navajo uses different verbs such as *lá* and *jaa* to represent

both the English word “give” and the shape, form, size, or plurality of the objects given. The author concludes with an emphasis on social cognition—how speakers are obliged to portray reality through their native language—which includes examples of evidential linguistic systems in Matses that require speakers to demonstrate the extent to which alleged information is true.

In Part III, the author argues that employing the comparative method to reconstruct languages not only allows researchers to develop ancient forms of words, but also allows them to link these words to ancient societies in specific contexts. For example, Evan’s provides a language reconstruction example of agricultural terms in proto-Bantu such as \*-kúnde “black-eyed peas” and \*-bá “oil palm” (Ehret, 1998, p.105) to show that the proto-Bantus population shares sociocultural characteristics with ancestral people from West Africa. Part IV focuses on the subconscious thought patterns manifested in the coevolution of different world languages. The author argues that when these patterns are not documented, it is more difficult to examine the dynamic relationships of coevolution between ancestral languages and ancient cultures. Part V emphasizes the importance of gathering written and audio data of different endangered languages such as Kusunda, Gapun, and Dalabon. Evan’s argues that formal education institutions should value recorded audio data just as much as written documentation of ancestral languages with regard to preservation to ensure that speakers of future generations better understand the human history conveyed through speakers’ subconscious language patterns.

The book targets readers who are interested in acquiring in-depth knowledge about how endangered languages portray different aspects of human history through phonetics, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. The author successfully substantiates all arguments in favor of preserving endangered languages by providing numerous examples of how these languages synchronically and diachronically represent specific events of human history.

### References

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