

The death cry of the world's little languages

FELIX BENNETT

A noble face peers out from the jacket of this book: Ishi, the last Californian Yahi Indian – or, in the terms of this book, the last speaker of Yahi. It might have been the face of Ned Maddrell, the last native speaker of Manx, or Tefvik Esenc, the last to

speak the Caucasian language Ubykh, or any of hundreds of others. For, indeed, since the arrival of photography, the number of languages that have died out can be numbered in the hundreds.

Or thousands. The message of this book is stated plainly on its jacket: "The world's languages are dying. Ninety per cent of them are expected to disappear in the next one hundred years." There are 6,000 or so languages left. That means 54 languages a year. About one a week.

I have to declare an interest. I have written a book on this subject myself, published by "the other press", which appeared at more or less the same time as this one, and making the same case. The estimates chosen for the core message differ a bit – I opt for 50 per cent disappearing and for one a fortnight – but what does that matter? The point needs to be shouted from as many publishing rooftops as possible: we are facing language extinction on a worldwide, unprecedented scale.

Authors of books on language death have to do a lot in a short space. They cannot assume that their readership will immediately recognise the problem. As Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine say in their preface: "More has been said about the plight of pandas

Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages

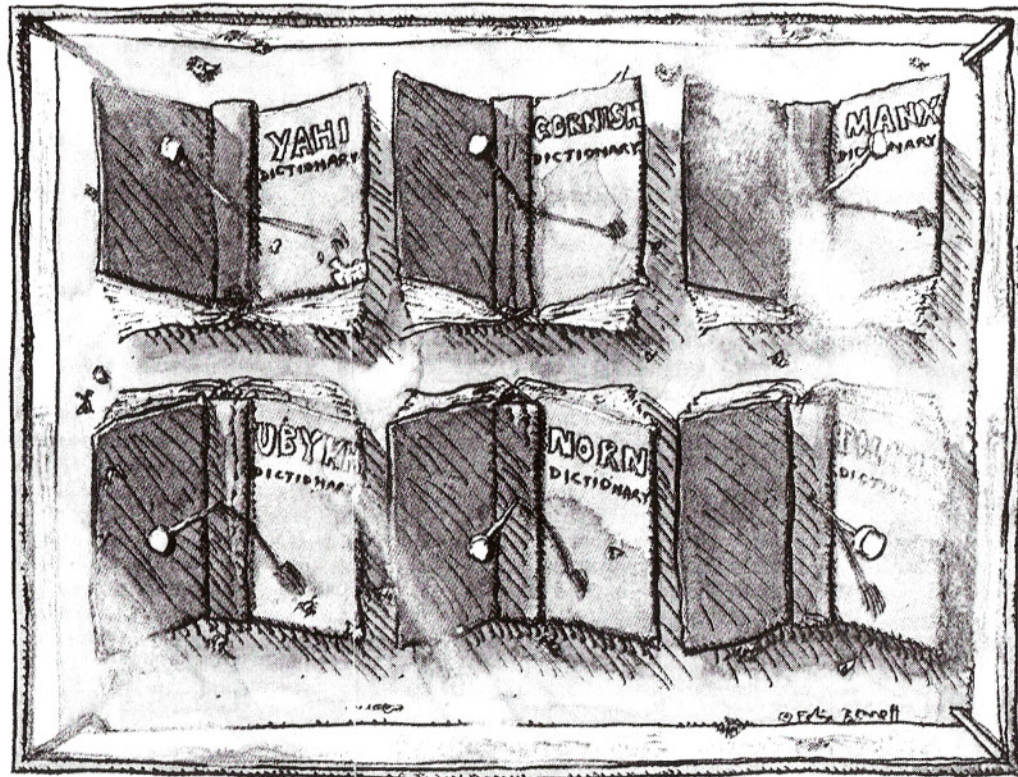
By Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine

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and spotted owls than about the disappearance of human language diversity." Most people these days do not need informing about the endangered state of the world's fauna and flora. But few are aware of the even more perilous state of the world's languages.

There is a certain logic of exposition that needs to be followed. First, the facts about language endangerment. Then: how has it happened? Why has it happened? Why should we care? And what can be done? The real strength of this book is the way it discusses these issues by balancing the description of individual situations with a general perspective derived from the two most relevant disciplines – anthropology (Nettle) and linguistics (Romaine).

It is right that an anthropological spirit permeates this book. The death of languages cannot be understood apart from the people who speak them and the pressures under which they live. The authors give us fascinating sections addressing the basic "why"



questions. For instance, large languages dominate small ones – but why are there large languages in the first place? The answer is closely argued in two central chapters, a biological account of early cultural history (in which the switch from a hunter-gatherer to an agricultural society is seen as critical) and an economic account that focuses on

the relatively recent growth of global forces in the hands of a few nations.

The book has a final chapter on "sustainable futures" that shows that, for many languages, something can be done. The picture is not totally black. Success stories, such as Hebrew and Welsh, must not be lightly dismissed as "exceptions", for they show what

is possible if the will (which means money) is there. This book cries out for a sequel on the many revitalisation projects around the world.

Nettle and Romaine have packed an enormous amount into their book, which ranges well beyond the specific issues surrounding endangerment. A few topics are given cursory treat-

ment: for example, I would have liked more on language attitudes, especially about those endangered communities and last speakers who are apathetic or antagonistic about their language. As often with collaborations, the text is a bit repetitive (we are told about the last Cornish speaker three times). And I noticed a misattribution of Dr Johnson's famous quotation about languages being "the pedigree of nations": it is not from his *Dictionary* preface but from the *Journal of a Tour of the Hebrides*. But such minuscule marginalia do not harm this clear, cogent and immensely knowledgeable book.

We are at the beginning of a long road – one that the biodiversity groups started a century ago for fauna and flora. "The language endangerment crisis is only just beginning to be taken seriously among linguists and their professional organisations." This book is a welcome indication that linguists are finally getting their act together.

But linguists cannot save languages, any more than ornithologists can save birds. The future is in the hands of every language user, and a climate of opinion needs to be quickly built up, if the "one dying each week" statistic is to be significantly reduced. *Vanishing Voices* is a book that needs to be chain-read, therefore: read it, then tell someone else to.

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