



Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages

By Daniel Nettle, Suzanne Romaine

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Few people know that nearly one hundred native languages once spoken in what is now California are near extinction, or that most of Australia's 250 aboriginal languages have vanished. In fact, at least half of the world's languages may die out in the next century.

Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine assert that this trend is far more than simply disturbing. Making explicit the link between language survival and environmental issues, they argue that the extinction of languages is part of the larger picture of near-total collapse of the worldwide ecosystem. Indeed, the authors contend that the struggle to preserve precious environmental resources—such as the rainforest—cannot be separated from the struggle to maintain diverse cultures, and that the causes of language death, like that of ecological destruction, lie at the intersection of ecology and politics.

In addition to defending the world's endangered languages, the authors also pay homage to the last speakers of dying tongues, such as Red Thundercloud, a Native American in South Carolina; Ned Mandrell, with whom the Manx language passed away in 1974; and Arthur Bennett, an Australian who was the last person to know more than a few words of Mbabaram.

In our languages lies the accumulated knowledge of humanity. Indeed, each language is a unique window on experience. *Vanishing Voices* is a call to preserve this resource, before it is too late.

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Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages By Daniel Nettle, Suzanne Romaine Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1013529 in Books
- Published on: 2002-05-16
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.10" h x .80" w x 9.10" l, .82 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 256 pages

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Creating an explicit link between ecological and linguistic vitality, Nettle (Ph.D., anthropology, University Coll., London) and Romaine (English language, Oxford Univ.) persuasively present the scientific value of saving endangered languages. Anecdotes, statistics, and graphs help address significant assumptions about why languages die and how a few languages have achieved world dominance. The authors provide useful background information and tackle underlying issues, some of which spurred another recent publication, Stephen G. Alter's *Darwinism and the Linguistic Image* (Johns Hopkins Univ., 1999). Among other books that offer detailed examinations of threatened languages are *Endangered Languages*, edited by Lenora Grenoble and Lindsay Whaley (Cambridge Univ., 1998), and Robert M.W. Dixon's *The Rise and Fall of Languages* (Cambridge Univ., 1998). Highlighting the wealth of scientific knowledge encoded in threatened languages, the authors promote not only bi- or multilingualism but also the economic and ecological benefits of cooperating with endangered language speakers. Recommended for academic and large public libraries. DMarianne Orme, West Lafayette, IN

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Review

"Language extinction is a great tragedy for human culture and for scholarship on all things human. This fascinating book is the latest word on this important issue, containing a wealth of knowledge and wisdom. If we have the good sense to rescue the priceless legacy of linguistic diversity before it vanishes forever, *Vanishing Voices* will surely deserve a good part of the credit."--Steven Pinker, author of *The Language Instinct* and *Words and Rules*

"*Vanishing Voices* is an urgent call to arms about the impending loss of one of our great resources. Nettle and Romaine paint a breathtaking landscape that shows why so many of the world's languages are disappearing and more importantly, why it matters. They put the problem of linguistic diversity into the wider context of global biodiversity, and propose the revolutionary idea that saving endangered languages is not about dictionaries and educational programs, but about preserving the cultures and habitats of the people who speak them. Along the way it's also a fascinating introduction to how language works: how languages are born, how they die, and how we can prevent their death."-- Deborah Tannen, Georgetown University

"[A] superb study of endangered languages.... The tapestry of supporting detail is every bit as compelling as the central thesis-- from an examination of how indigenous languages function as museums of local culture to a history of the way in which dominant languages like English, Mandarin, and Spanish have vanquished more vulnerable tongues."--*The New Yorker*

"Mr. Nettle and Ms. Romaine do an impressive job of identifying the process by which languages are abandoned or not passed down to the next generation, framing it in terms of disparities in social, political, and economic status."--*Red Herring*

About the Author

Daniel Nettle is the author *The Fyem Language of Northern Nigeria and Linguistic Diversity* (O.U.P.). Suzanne Romaine is Merton Professor of English Language at the University of Oxford and is the author of *Language in Society: An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (O.U.P.). *Vanishing Voices* was awarded the 2001 Book of the Year Award from the British Association of Applied Linguistics.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Kevin Strickland:

The book *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages* make one feel enjoy for your spare time. You can utilize to make your capable much more increase. Book can for being your best friend when you getting stress or having big problem along with your subject. If you can make reading a book *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages* being your habit, you can get far more advantages, like add your capable, increase your knowledge about many or all subjects. It is possible to know everything if you like open and read a publication *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages*. Kinds of book are several. It means that, science publication or encyclopedia or other people. So , how do you think about this publication?

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Nicole Powell:

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