

DAVID CRYSTAL. **Language Death**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2000. Pp. 198.

As the frontispiece of this slender volume tells us, “only 600 of the 6,000 or so languages in the world are ‘safe’ from the threat of extinction.” One might naturally think that language preservation would be at or near the top of the linguistic agenda, but such is not the case. The aptly named author, who writes with precision and clarity where others rely on jargon and opacity, turns his attention to this most pervasive of worldwide phenomena, one about which he obviously feels a sense of personal urgency. The first matter is, of course, defining language death before making the case for why linguists and even the general public should care. He then looks at the causes for language death and proposes a plan to retard if not outright halt the extinction of so many languages.

As well intentioned as this book might be and as well documented as language death is, the critical Chapter 2, “Why should we care?,” feels belabored. C’s emphasis on the sacrosanct character of language in this chapter, the wonder of its diversity, its testament to the variegated splendors of the human intellect, verges on the fulsome. Furthermore, his paragraph arguing on behalf of the preservation of languages for their value as repositories of literary traditions is ironically eviscerated by the languages and writers that he cites, all of which are European and/or Anglo-American in origin and thus in no imminent danger of extinction (45). And might this overriding concern for language preservation be an obvious manifestation of the linguist’s bias? At one point, he quotes Edward Sapir: “Language is the most massive and inclusive art we know” (40). I would venture to guess that practitioners from the nonlinguistic arts might beg to differ with him on that point.

And his crucial comparison of language death to ecological preservation efforts seemed somewhat

overextended (25, 32-34). The death of the natural world is death for all; language death, while nothing short of devastating to a local community, even if they themselves do not view its loss in such terms, will not impact the lives of the rest of us to any appreciable degree. This public indifference is, of course, the crux of the matter. Perhaps what C is hoping to do is far too high-minded for the types of appeals that would move most people to action, i.e., where their own safety and well-being are at stake, as with obvious ecological threats. In the minds of most, threats to language survival other than their own would appear to be matters of a less urgent nature. The American indifference to and even hostility toward languages other than English is well known. As described by C, language death seems to be largely a third world phenomenon, and the urban West has been notoriously indifferent to cultures not its own.

Languages have always died (the estimate cited is 6,000 dead since recorded history began [69]), just as organisms, animate and inanimate, have come and gone over the millennia. The American Southwest was the site of a prehistoric ocean and is now a desert. Clearly, change is natural. But never before has the rate of extinction undergone such a dramatic upsurge than in the present age of globalization and its concomitant destruction of native habitats and cultures. To be sure, for some, what they gain by integrating into a larger, dominant culture and speaking a larger, dominant language is an increased economic viability and, thus, improved chances for survival. To such as these, C's misdirected concern for their lost language and culture may seem ironic and perhaps misplaced consolation coming from an emissary from the culture that seeks to replace their own and from which they seek to improve their livelihood.

In the end, C's effort to galvanize support for large-scale language preservation is noble but perhaps quixotic. The forces working to produce these changes, whether globalization or indifference to preserving local culture and traditions, seem too irresistible, too massive in scale.

Moreover, the sheer astronomical number of languages to be preserved and the huge costs involved (C estimates a total cost of \$575 million over a three-year period [95]) would seem to vitiate the force of C's argument. And when more basic survival needs are not being met for millions, the price tag for preserving a dying language seems at best a luxury, and at worst a kind of moral recklessness. Besides, as C notes several times throughout the book, by the time most preservation efforts are implemented, it is already too late—the language is already well on its way toward extinction.

None of my objections to C's cause is meant to condone the current malaise with regard to language death. C rightfully accuses today's university linguists of being more interested in abstruse theories (and career advancement?) than the unglamorous field work that was once the bread and butter of the linguist's profession. But more salient issues will prevail in the end. If C's slim tome can be said to have any value, it is in the poignant awareness that it brings to those who do care about linguistic diversity that so much has been and will continue to be lost.

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