

## Vanishing Voices, The Extinction of the World's Languages, (2000)

Nettle, Daniel and Romaine Suzanne, Oxford University Press, 225 pp.

Reviewed by Eugolina Vázquez, Universidad de las Américas, Puebla.

---

Why should we care about the extinction of languages? What can we do as speakers of a language, or as teachers and language professionals? The answers to these questions are given in *Vanishing Voices, The Extinction of the World's Languages*. Nettle and Romaine's primary aim in this book is to inform the scientific community and public about the threats the world's languages and cultures are facing. In this eight-chapter book, the authors explain the causes of why and how languages are dying, as well as the conditions that lead many others to danger of becoming extinct if something is not done early on. They inform and raise people's awareness about the importance of preserving language diversity by demonstrating an interesting correlation between the loss of biodiversity and the loss of language. At the same time, they attempt to convince their audience about the benefits of doing so for the entire species. *Vanishing Voices* analyzes language loss from different perspectives: ecological, geographical, historical, economical, biological, and political. It also explains their interrelation in affecting the life of a language.

This book has several notable strengths. First, it provides statistics about the numbers of existing languages, their distribution throughout the world, the number of languages already extinct, as well as the rate of extinction. Above all, it illustrates the problems many languages and cultures face, usually precede the fast spreading of a reduced number of metropolitan languages, whose nation-state model has been either imposed or voluntarily taken as the ideal to follow.

In general, Romaine and Nettle show a strong correlation between the loss of linguistic diversity (language extinction) and the loss of biodiversity. They write

*Language is not a self-sustaining entity. It can only exist where there is a community to speak it and transmit it. A community of people can exist only where there is a viable environment for them to live in, and a means of making a living. Where communities cannot thrive, their languages are in danger. When languages lose their speakers, they die (p.5).*

Though language resides within a species, it is not a biological entity, and yet there are numerous similarities between both: ecologists have not been able to specify the existing number of living species and how many are at risk; more attention has been paid to some species than others; the concentration of biodiversity is found through the tropics; and, it would take a lot of time to replenish biodiversity if even possible.

Another assumption in this book is the idea of the existence of multilingualism and bilingualism in most countries since the beginning of time, as a result of biodiversity. Thus, being monolingual is neither natural nor adequate for the species survival. Multilingualism is the norm and the key for survival; preserving biodiversity will also result in the preservation of language diversity. Therefore, in order to protect certain environments, it is also necessary to protect the speakers of the languages spoken in these environments.

Activism has focused mainly on the preservation of biodiversity, without considering language. Therefore, we must include language and do the same with language loss if we want to build a sustainable future. The preservation of a language in its fullest sense ultimately entails the maintenance of the group who speaks it, and therefore the arguments in favor of doing something to reverse language death are ultimately about preserving cultures and habitats. It is necessary to establish language policies and laws that protect language diversity and make their preservation part of the general activism on behalf of the environment. Linguists and language professionals must become activists and convince other international civic groups, such as Green Peace, Amnesty International, etc., that language preservation is an important task.

On the whole, this is a basic book for everyone who studies languages or holds in interest in it. It challenges teachers interested in bilingual education to understand the significance of teaching two languages, and leads us to re-direct our efforts in doing so. Unfortunately, this information won't easily reach those directly involved speakers in general (above all minority language speakers). So, it is our duty, and that of the scientific community, to take immediate action.