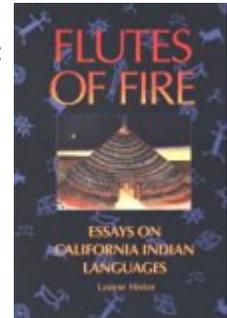




Leanne Hinton. *Flutes of Fire: Essays on California Indian Languages.* Berkeley, Calif.: Heyday Books, 1994. 270 pp. \$18.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-930588-62-5.



Reviewed by Frances Karttunen

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The April 1995 issue of *Scientific American* contains an article on the worldwide precipitous decline in frogs and toads. It reports that, "amphibian populations in many parts of the world seem to be dwindling, and some groups are disappearing from their native habitats completely. The loss--first recognized in 1990--deserves attention not only because it is disturbing in its own right but also because frogs and their kin may serve as indicators of the overall condition of the environment."

It is also true that the number of languages spoken in the world is plummeting. One could appropriate the frog statement in the following way. Speaker numbers of more than half the world's languages are dwindling, and languages are fast disappearing entirely. Their loss--a topic of urgent concern for linguists since 1992--deserves attention not only because it is disturbing in its own right but also because the loss of language diversity entails loss of cultural and intellectual diversity.

Despite the uniquely human nature of languages, it may prove easier to mobilize resources for the protection of endangered amphibians than

for endangered languages. Frog species come in vibrant colors that delight the eye. Even the shovel-sized cane toad has a certain sappy appeal. The song of spring peepers and the boom of bull frogs is evocative of summer nights in the country, part of a bucolic heritage many Americans cherish and want their children to experience. We need only to be shown pretty pictures of frogs or to be played a tape from rain forest or swamp to be engaged, and beyond the aesthetic appeal there is the pragmatic one of the potential medical uses of frog and toad venom.

Endangered languages are another matter. They are difficult to appreciate. Whatever our native language, we use it largely unselfconsciously. Verbal art, no matter how pervasive in some cultures, is only a small part of language use. Most of what we do with language is utilitarian. So it happens that some speech communities pragmatically let their own languages go until it is almost too late to salvage them, and many more yield to prejudices of neighbors, come to look upon their own languages as inadequate, and actively seek to

make their children monolingual speakers of the dominant languages crowding in on them.

If speakers themselves can lack perspective on their languages, it is even more true that non-speakers have no way to appreciate them. A glowing golden toad is appealing. The same toad under a leaf has no effect. Languages we do not know are even less accessible. They are hard to imagine. Few of us make an investment in learning an "uncommonly taught language," much less several. More debilitating yet is the widespread popular belief that some languages are more "primitive" than others, with cruder articulation, less grammatical structure, fewer words--that some people speak incomplete "dialects" rather than full, functional languages, and they might as well go the way of the dodo-bird.

Linguists know this to be untrue, but how can nonlinguists catch a glimpse of the highly abstract world of language and understand the significance of a loss of 50% or more of the world's languages in the next generation?

A guide is needed, and Leanne Hinton is that guide. In *Flutes of Fire* she takes us on a guided tour of endangered languages in the microcosm of California, where prior to 1700 as many as a hundred different languages were spoken. These were not what linguists mean when they use the word "dialects", that is regional variants of a single language, in this case some generic "Indian" one. They were languages as different from one another as Chinese and Lithuanian. Half of them are now extinct, many of them victims of the violence against Indian people that accompanied the California gold rush, and we have lost the necessary information to reconstruct their historical relationship to one another.

Fifty years ago J. P. Harrington, the single person who did most to preserve what we know of many of those now-lost languages, compared the situation to a house afire. Hinton has taken the metaphor of fire as both destructive and regenerative to organize a collection of twenty-two essays

on the nature, history, and future of the languages of native California. She is the author of nineteen of them, two are co-authored by Hinton and a colleague, and one is by Robert Oswalt. These essays were originally written for the general reader, and *Flutes of Fire* is completely accessible to the nonlinguist. At the same time, it is meticulously correct by linguistic standards. The reader can have complete confidence in the information in this book.

In addition to the essays, the book contains maps, useful graphics, many photographs, excerpts from other works, and most particularly, the voices of many Indian people of California who speak for themselves about their experiences and their aspirations. One essay recounts the career of the wildly eccentric J. P. Harrington from the viewpoint of his colleagues, relatives, wife, and especially of the people who provided him with information about their languages. It is a very attractive book.

Academic readers who may find the frequency of "beautiful," "lovely," and "exciting" too Californian for comfort should keep several things in mind. First these essays were originally written and published separately, and the frequency of these attributes is not so high within individual pieces as across them. Second, they were written for the general reader, especially the speakers of the languages in question and their children and grandchildren, and for this audience reminders of the beauty and complexity of the languages and of the communities in which they are spoken are a necessary antidote to popular stereotypes. And finally, linguists *do* find languages compellingly beautiful and profoundly exciting. That is the source of our devotion to the work. We certainly aren't in it for the money.

Leanne Hinton recently wrote to me, "You could argue that language is the vehicle of knowledge, and not at all separable from the rest of culture....Language loss is symptom of/related to/cause of loss of philosophy, religion, values, oral

literature, environmental knowledge, medicinal and nutritional knowledge, etc. Loss of linguistic diversity equals loss of cultural diversity. And some of us would argue that loss of cultural diversity is dangerous to the human species. Linguists are not involved in language preservation efforts just because of the potential loss to linguistics, but also because of the human rights issue. To the extent that language loss is involuntary and undesired by speech communities, linguists, like many other people, want to help."

World historians can help and be helped too. *Flutes of Fire* can acquaint teachers and students with the analogy of loss of language diversity to loss of biodiversity. It can enhance the quality of discussion of cultural assimilation, nation building, and the English-first movement in the USA and similar policies in multilingual nations around the world. It adds yet another dimension to the issue of human rights. And it does so with grace, intelligence, and intelligibility.

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