

Does the survival of Tungusic languages depend on the Amur Tiger?

Establishing a link between linguistic diversity and biodiversity, as well as between changes in language use and changes in the natural environment, has been ubiquitous theme in endangered language research over the past decade and a half. However, the nature of those linkages has received relatively little critical attention. This paper argues that, while a correlation between concentrations of linguistic diversity and biodiversity may exist, that correlation does not translate into a more direct relationship, despite (often implicit) suggestions that it does.

Nettle (1999) and Nettle and Romaine (2000) were among the first to argue that there is a statistically significant overlap between geographic regions that contain a large degree of biological diversity and a large number of languages. Although some basic questions remain about this argument, not least the relative difficulty of ascertaining the analogue to a unique species when determining linguistic diversity (separate language families, branches, languages, dialects?), there has been widespread acceptance of this correlation. Following on the heels of the Nettle and Romaine argument, Maffi (2005) and, more recently and controversially, Gorenflo et al. (2012), propose that the correlation reflects a deeper tie between the ability for multiple languages and multiple species to thrive in a particular geography, and as a consequence, that conservation efforts for both should be integrated. Using case studies regions where climate change is most noticeably influencing human habitation I argue against this logic.