



KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

Dan Everett Cries Whorf

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If you haven't yet heard of Daniel Everett or the Amazonian people, the Pirahã, you soon will. Lately, in many places—from *Science* to last October's *Current Anthropology*—both have appeared, often surrounded by surprise and controversy. Everett believes that the Pirahã language lacks several of the key design features that anthropologists and linguists have always assumed necessary for all human languages. It appears that Pirahã is one of the most restricted languages ever documented.

Everett says that Pirahã has no grammatical embedding, no perfect tense, no color terms, no quantifiers; no numbers or a concept of counting, and pronominal and kinship systems that just barely qualify as such. Their phonemic inventory is one of the world's most abbreviated (three vowels and eight consonants for men; one less consonant for women), and they communicate as much through whistling, humming and singing as they do through consonants and vowels.

It appears that Pirahã culture is also unique: there are no creation myths, no musical instruments, no individual or collective memory past two generations, and a system of visual art that consists only of simple stick figures. And for all practical purposes, the 200 Pirahã remain monolingual, and have little desire to acquire things from the outside world and even less curiosity about it.

Everett holds an anti-Whorfian position, arguing that it is the peculiarities of Pirahã culture that explain the unusualness of their language. While maybe not as contentious as the Yanomamo or Mead-Freeman controversies, these claims have stirred emotions. For example, one commentator

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to his *Current Anthropology* article claimed that Everett made the Pirahã "sound like the mindless bearers of an almost subhumanly simple culture." Others, however, said that Everett's work will "serve as a catalyst for new research that will contribute to nonuniformitarianist approaches of language evolution." Needless to say, I was anxious to interview him on his recent visit to the Midwest.

Jim Stanlaw: OK, let me begin with an extreme statement. Let's say I'm an anthropology graduate student, and here you tell me about a society that defies common sense, defies everything I've ever been taught. Can you understand how I might react?

Dan Everett: Sure, that's why it took me 27 years to write it up. To explain why the Pirahã lack

these things [mentioned in the paragraph above], some people have replied that they suffered some sort of severe trauma in their history that has disintegrated their culture. But every record that I've read of the Pirahã, going back to 1784, describes them as more or less the same as they are today.

JS: When did it dawn on you that the people were so cognitively and affectively different?

DE: OK, so I'm working on learning the language; you're looking for things, and you don't find them. In 1984 after I'd been working on the language for seven years, and I'd finished my PhD, I spent a year as a visitor at MIT, and I was talking to Chomsky one day, and I said to him, "I can't

find any real strong kind of evidence for any kind of embedding in this language." And he'd say, well how do they say this? How do they say that? And I'd tell him, and we couldn't seem to find it. And the next day, a PhD student of his came in and said, "Boy, you really bothered Noam, telling him about this lack of embedding." And I thought, so maybe I'm wrong, maybe they do have embedding. So I redoubled my efforts to look for this when I got back. But it's not there.

These are things, then, that you catalogue—the things that you notice that they don't seem to have. And so I started to think, is this just a language that has a bizarre series of coincidences? You know, the fact that they don't have numbers, they don't have counting, they don't have color terms, they have the simplest kinship known, they don't have creation myths, they don't have fiction. They're not retarded. So is there something else? Then I started thinking about this word that means "in and out of experience," and how important this is to them, and how crucial it is to them to see canoes disappear around the corner and then come back. I started looking at their conversation and I noticed there's not a single text, or a single conversation, where it's not about immediate experience. And then you look at the suffixes on the verbs, the evidentials, that indicate whether something was seen, deduced or reported, and you start to ask, how much mileage would I get in explaining these things if I said there's a cultural value of where the declarative utterances are only assertions about things that had been experienced by the speaker, or reported to the speaker by someone alive at the time that the speaker is talking? ☐

More of this conversation can be found in the Society for Linguistic Anthropology column in this issue's Section News (p 55). —Ed.

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The Pirahã language, argues Daniel Everett, lacks several key design features of human language assumed necessary by anthropologists and linguists. Photo courtesy of Dan Everett