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# ***Everett and Recursion***

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***Dan Everett***

# Piraha [pi-da-HAN]

An indigenous people of Amazonas Brazil who live along the Maici river, a tributary of the Amazon (Mura language family, now an isolate). The language has 250-380 speakers. Unlike most endangered languages, does not have mostly bilingual speakers.

- no numbers
- no fixed color terms
- No relative tenses
- no deep memory (history), tradition of art or drawing; myth, fiction
- 3 vowels
- no words for *all*, *each*, *every*, *most*, or *few* (quantification)
- Few specific kin terms (one word for *mother*, *father* )
- no recursion: no embedded clauses, no recursive prenominal possessors, restricted wh-constructions

# Chomsky: Recursion

1. Informally: The ability to “insert one phrase marker into another of the same type”
2.  $[_{S} \textit{the man is walking down the street}] \implies [_{S} \textit{The man who is wearing a top hat is walking down the street}]$   
+  $[_{S} \textit{the man is wearing a top hat}]$
3. What renders the language infinite (simplifying): “the infinite use of finite means” (Chomsky quoting Humboldt)
4. Chomsky has recently argued that recursion is the cornerstone of all languages, and is possible because of a uniquely human cognitive ability. (Hauser, Chomsky, Fitch 2002)

# Recursive constructions

None of these occur in Piraha

- Embedded clauses
  1. Relative clauses: The man *who is wearing a hat*
  2. Complement clauses: John believes *that Mary is a sausage head.*
  3. Subject clauses: *to err* is human; *visiting relatives* can be a nuisance; *That John is a fool* is obvious
- NPs inside NPs: [NP a picture of [NP a picture]]
- Pronominal possessor recursion: *John's father's* bird

# *Immediate Experience*

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No

- Myth
- Fiction
- Modeling
- Drawing
- history

All of the missing grammatical elements (recursion, color terms, relative tenses) are ways of generalizing or abstracting away from immediate experience. Thus, a cultural property is having massive influence on the structure of the grammar.

# *Comments on Everett*

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- “It’s as if he had read the table of a contents of a typical issue of a Generative linguistics journal and happened to have found a language that exhibited none of the phenomena being discussed.” – Mark Gawron
- “a bomb thrown into the party.” – Steve Pinker
- “I have to wonder whether he’s some Borgesian fantasist, or some Margaret Mead being stitched up by the locals.” – e-mail to the editors of a popular linguistics blog



Many of Everett's claims about Piraha have been challenged in

Andrew Ira Nevins, David Pesetsky, Cilene Rodrigues. 2007. Piraha Exceptionality: a Reassessment. *Current Anthropology* 46:621-646.

All the properties Everett's claims of Piraha are either

- Unsurprising (found elsewhere, in communities without a culture of "immediate experience"); or
- wrong

- There is a nominalization morpheme and therefore embedded clauses [Everett's own early work in Diss, now disavowed]

hi ob-aaxai [kahai kai-sai]

3 see/know-INTNS arrow make-NOMLZR

He really knows how to make arrows.

Everett NOW claims this is 'parataxis'

- There are quantifiers (Everett is using etymological glosses; the word that means all is glossed as *big*)
- Ban on prenominal possessor recursion and restrictions on wh-constitutions well known in other languages (German) without a cultural "immediate experience" constraint

John's car

Hans-ens Auto

Case restriction in German?

John's car's motor

\*Hans-ens Auto-s Motor