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
1. Informally: The ability to “insert one phrase marker into another of the same type”

2. \([S \text{ the man is walking down the street}] \implies [S \text{ The man who is wearing a top hat is walking down the street}]\)

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: \([\text{NP a picture of } \text{NP a picture}]\)

• Pronominal possessor recursion: John’s father’s bird
Immediate Experience

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

• “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
Color | red  
---|---
Number | one, two, many  
Quantity | a small amount *hoi* (falling tone)  
          | a somewhat larger amount *hoi* (rising tone)  
          | a lot  
Recursion | I saw the dog that was down by the river get bitten by a snake  
          | I saw the dog. The dog was at the beach. A snake bit the dog.

“This looks like \{ blood.”  
   vrvicum. (local red dye berry)\}”
Many of Everett’s claims about Piraha have been challenged in


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-constructions 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