

# Pirahã syntax and the Everett controversy

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**Abstract** Daniel Everett has stated that the Amazonian indigenous language Pirahã appears to do without all the familiar syntactic resources — like hypotaxis, coordination, and stacked modifiers — that in languages like English allow arbitrarily long sentences to be constructed. This undercuts arguments that there are infinitely many sentences. Everett noted a conflict with Chomskyan claims about ‘recursion.’ Linguists who disagreed with him did not limit themselves to presenting syntactic evidence. Rather, they published allegations that he was a liar, a charlatan, and a racist; they accused him of both scientific misconduct and illegal research activity; and they played a role in getting his applications to do further field research denied by a Brazilian government agency. I review the history, and point out the crucial relevance of facts found in neglected work from earlier decades.

## 1 Introduction

In a target article in *Current Anthropology*, Daniel Everett (2005) stated that the syntax of the Amazonian isolate language Pirahã shows no sign of clausal hypotaxis (it lacks subordinate clauses) or clause coordination (there are no coordinators like English *and*) or intraphrasal stacked modification (as in [*little [green [frog]]*] or [[[[*my*] *brother’s*] *wife’s*] *village*]). In English and other European languages these are the primary devices that support arguments for the unboundedness of sentence length, and hence the claim that there are infinitely many sentences.<sup>1</sup>

Everett was very probably correct, and his claim should never have been a topic of controversy, since many other languages have been cited as showing similar syntactic properties. But because Everett directly contradicted a key claim of Marc Hauser, Noam Chomsky, and Tecumseh Fitch (2002, henceforth HCF), polemics erupted.

HCF posited a universal human cognitive ability called ‘recursion’ (without defining that term, which I will avoid here).<sup>2</sup> To motivate it, they remarked: ‘The core property of discrete infinity

<sup>1</sup>Other arguments might be offered. For example, if the adjective phrases of English include {*very old, very very old, very very very old, ...*}, that alone would suffice, provided the suggested sequence continued without bound. Pullum and Scholz (2010) note that this begs the question, and warns against the whole idea of taking languages to be potentially infinite sets, but the present paper presupposes the conventional view assumed in the majority of the literature.

<sup>2</sup>Linguists’ use of the term ‘recursion’ is a morass of confusion, as Lobina (2014) correctly points out.

is intuitively familiar to every language user,' since people recognize that 'There is no longest sentence (any candidate sentence can be trumped by, for example, embedding it in "Mary thinks that. . .")', and there is no non-arbitrary upper bound to sentence length' (HCF: 1571). In this, they were simply echoing prior generativist literature: syntax textbooks had been saying the same for half a century. But by the end of the 20th-century numerous publications had noted languages of which it didn't appear to be true.

A particularly clear case is found in a descriptive monograph on another Amazonian language, Hixkaryana, published in 1979 by Desmond Derbyshire, who was at that time a PhD student working under my direction at University College London. Derbyshire clearly documents that Hixkaryana has no subordinate clauses, no clause coordination, and no intraphrasal multiple modification. No uproar resulted.

Comparable facts in other languages were reported both before this and later, particularly for small-population languages of preliterate cultures. Collinder (1960), Dixon (1972), Givón (1979), Nash (1980), Dixon (1981), Mithun (1984), Kalmár (1985), Koehn and Koehn (1986), Foley (1986), and others discuss relevant aspects of languages in families including Uralic, Pama-Nyungan, Chinookan, Iroquoian, Cariban, and Sepik. The literature is far too broad to review here, but my main point about it is that THESE STUDIES HAD SAT ON LIBRARY SHELVES FOR DECADES WITHOUT TRIGGERING CONTROVERSY.

In fact two of them were written by MIT linguistics faculty: Ken Hale (1976) claimed that Warlpiri (Pama-Nyungan) had no phrase structure, which means a fortiori it could have no subordinate clause constituents; and Wayne O'Neil (1977), citing Hale, argued that early Old English had only loosely adjoined secondary predications, not true syntactic embedding.

This paper does not aim to adjudicate the truth of Everett's claims or any of the earlier ones (see Pullum 2024 for that). Instead, I simply chronicle what happened in the years after 2005. Calling it a controversy or debate would be an understatement; it was a campaign of vengeance and career sabotage.

## **2 Character assassination and career disruption**

The obvious course of action for linguists who felt Everett's *CA* paper must be mistaken would have been to engage with him collaboratively to find out more about relevant properties of the Pirahã language. This was not the path chosen by the trio who became Everett's primary discussants: Andrew Nevins, David Pesetsky, and Cilene Rodrigues, henceforth NP&R. Their paper (Nevins et al., 2009a) was written without contact with either Everett or anyone else who knew the Pirahã language. It was an exercise in textual exegesis, drawing virtually all of its factual information about Pirahã from Everett (1986). But it did not stop at addressing factual claims; from the start it employed thinly veiled inferences and accusations of prejudice, dishonesty, and even research misconduct on Everett's part.

The suggestion NP&R made was in essence that Everett's early descriptive writings on Pirahã did offer evidence of subordinate clauses (along with various other things like numerals, quantifiers, and color names, topics I do not treat here), so his 2005 position was a suspiciously unsupported and possibly mendacious retraction of earlier views.

Despite mentioning the idea that HCF had only ever intended a weak claim about phrases containing other phrases (pp. 366–67, fn. 11), NP&R only made that point in passing; their central aim was to argue that in 2005 Everett was telling lies about CLAUSAL embedding, and that one could learn this by simply looking at his work of a quarter-century before, where he did tell the truth. In the refereed paper they published in *Language* (2009a) they could only adumbrate the claim of dishonesty, but in less constrained channels they and others were less guarded: emails, tweets, blogs, remarks to journalists, and posts on Facebook can slip the surly bonds of scholarly decency.

The attack mounted by NP&R, and taken up by other anti-Everett linguists, was not the worst that a social scientist ever suffered; the libeling of anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon and geneticist James Neel by Patrick Tierney (2000) was surely worse.<sup>3</sup> But the trashing of Daniel Everett runs a fair second for nastiness.

Tom Bartlett of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* heard about it from linguists that he interviewed in 2012. His account of linguists' behavior (Bartlett, 2012) is not edifying, but fully accords with my knowledge and experience of the events. He speaks of a linguistics discipline “populated by a deeply factionalized group of scholars who can't agree on what they're arguing about and who tend to dismiss their opponents as morons or frauds or both.” Other disciplines have disputes too, he admits, but even so, “linguists seem uncommonly hostile.” If anything, Bartlett somewhat understated things; the following subsections refer to documentable incidents that he did not even mention.

## 2.1 The BCS lecture

In the fall of 2006 Professor Edward Gibson arranged for Daniel Everett to give a lecture on Pirahã syntax in the Brain and Cognitive Sciences department (BCS) at MIT. David Pesetsky, of MIT's Department of Linguistics and Philosophy, contacted Gibson by email. Details of the interaction are disputed,<sup>4</sup> but Gibson reports Pesetsky as apparently thinking that Everett held reprehensible views about the Pirahã people, mentioning a claim that the Pirahã talk like chickens and act like monkeys. Gibson knew the latter remark. It was from a page headed “Pirahã: The People” on the University of Pittsburgh website,<sup>5</sup> and reported a contemptuous remark by Brazilian merchants who traveled the Maici river and occasionally traded with men from Pirahã villages. Everett wrote: “The local traders say they ‘talk like chickens and act like monkeys’.” He was quoting, not endorsing the characterization; he despised the ignorance of the people who repeated the saying. Gibson pointed out that an unendorsed direct quotation entailed nothing about Everett's views, but when

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<sup>3</sup> Tierney falsely alleged that Chagnon and Neel had deliberately exacerbated a fatal measles epidemic among the Yanomamö people in pursuit of some kind of eugenics experiment. For a time anthropologists Leslie Sponsel and Terence Turner persuaded the American Anthropological Association to support these charges and condemn Chagnon and Neel. See Dreger 2011 for detailed research on the whole sordid story of this affair, and a vindication of Chagnon and Neel. Tierney is now regarded as totally discredited.

<sup>4</sup> Pesetsky asked Gibson to assure him that he was not forwarding the email exchange to anyone else, and Gibson gave that assurance. Gibson has since honored Pesetsky's wish to keep his emails private. When I asked Pesetsky to show me the emails, he refused, so I have only Gibson's broad paraphrase of them as my source.

<sup>5</sup> In 2007 it was still accessible at <http://amazonling.linguist.pitt.edu/people.html> but it did not survive Everett's subsequent moves to other universities and seems not to have been preserved by the Wayback Machine archiving site.

the first draft of NP&R's paper was circulated about three months later,<sup>6</sup> it contained a statement that the authors felt a "general discomfort with the overall presentation of Pirahã language and culture" that Everett gave, and in a footnote (p. 51, fn. 74) it repeated the quote from the river traders.

The extent of NP&R's hostility to Everett's views and suspicion about his relations with indigenous Brazilians became much more explicit on Tuesday 28 November 2006, when Gibson sent out a formal announcement of Everett's lecture to the mailing lists for linguists and BCS people at MIT and Harvard. Immediately Andrew Nevins (who had never met Everett, and refused when Gibson later suggested a meeting) sent out a scathing email from his Harvard account to the same lists about the expected content of the talk.<sup>7</sup> The subject line was "enough is enough" and it opened by saying:

although david, cilene and i are working on a paper about the linguistic features of piraha, i thought some of you should see some of the more obvious counterexamples to everett's cultural claims before his talk at mit on friday, especially since we may not be allowed to ask questions without being cut off.

He then gave a link to Everett's "Pirahã: the people" site and said: "have a look at this archived web page from just over 6 years ago. Did the Piraha change since then, or did Everett?" – an indication that NP&R were going to try to show that Everett was not just wrong, he was lying about facts he had previously acknowledged. After giving a few links to Brazilian anthropological literature, Nevins ended with a sarcastic parody of advertising copy:

You, too, can enjoy the spotlight of mass media and closet exoticists! Just find a remote tribe and exploit them for your own fame by making claims nobody will bother to check!

This struck me as like an intrusion into linguistic science of the sort of attack ads typically seen in political election campaigns. I commented on it in a discussion of the issue on Language Log the next day,<sup>8</sup> speculating on whether the attack might be motivated by a combination of Chomskyan orthodoxy, liberal hypersensitivity regarding ethnic minorities, and academic prejudice against missionaries.

The talk attracted a large audience. Nevins, Pesetsky, and Rodrigues all attended, and so did Marc Hauser, the lead author of HCF. Hauser was well acquainted with Nevins, who regularly attended Hauser's lab meetings at the time. Ironically, seven months after Nevins's email about "claims nobody will bother to check," Harvard investigators began to check some of Hauser's

<sup>6</sup> LingBuzz, 8 March 2007, [https://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/000411/v1.pdf?\\_s=AES\\_1bvQN0ZRFPhy](https://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/000411/v1.pdf?_s=AES_1bvQN0ZRFPhy)

<sup>7</sup> At the time I had a Radcliffe Institute email address that David Pesetsky had kindly added to the MIT visitors' email list to keep me informed about colloquia during a sabbatical at Harvard, so I was an accidental recipient of Nevins's email. He had tried to reach the MIT Brain and Cognitive Sciences list as well as the lists for the two linguistics departments, but found it closed to external senders.

<sup>8</sup> 'Fear and loathing on Massachusetts Avenue,' on Language Log, 29 November 2006, online at <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/linguagelog/archives/003837.html>

claims about primate behavior, and within four years he had been found responsible for serious research misconduct and had lost his professorship and quit academia.<sup>9</sup>

## 2.2 Refusal of FUNAI research permits

In 2007, Everett received an unexpected phone call from the distinguished journalist Larry Rohter, who had been South American bureau chief for *The New York Times* since 1999. Rohter was in the office of the director (*presidente*) of FUNAI (Fundação Nacional do Índio, later renamed Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas), the Brazilian government agency charged with overseeing the welfare and protection of the country's indigenous people. He had in his hands a letter written to FUNAI by Cilene Rodrigues. Rohter read the Portuguese text to Everett over the phone.

The letter expressed objections to Everett's linguistic research and his representation of Pirahã culture. It may also have expressed the view that he was not a suitable person to be permitted to work with Brazilian Indians. I have not seen the letter, and Rodrigues did not respond when I asked her for a copy of it, but Rodrigues's role in the interaction with FUNAI is confirmed in an article in *The New York Times*,<sup>10</sup> which reports that "She declined to elaborate on the contents of the letter, which she said was written at Funai's request and did not recommend any particular course of action," and that "asked about her overall opinion of Dr. Everett's research, she said, 'It does not meet the standards of scientific evidence in our field'."

A few years earlier, Napoleon Chagnon's enemies had managed to persuade FUNAI to deny him permission to visit the Yanomamö people in Brazil. Something similar now appeared to happen to Everett. The next time he applied for permission to bring some researchers to the Pirahã territory (which, ironically, he had originally assisted FUNAI in demarcating in order to protect the Pirahãs' right to their land), he found that he was denied. He was later able to get permission from the local FUNAI office to visit the area merely as an aide and interpreter to a film team during the making of the 2012 documentary film *The Grammar of Happiness*,<sup>11</sup> but his applications to do grant-supported field research on the language met with negative decisions.

Everett flew to Brasília to discuss the situation, accompanied by the doyen of Amazonian research, the late Aryon Rodrigues (1925–2014), who had been a mentor to him during his doctoral studies. They had set up a meeting with the national director of FUNAI, Márcio Meira, but Meira did not show up. Instead he sent a deputy had no power to make executive decisions. Everett was thus cut off from visiting the people he had known intimately for more than thirty years.<sup>12</sup> Among

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<sup>9</sup> In July 2007 investigators entered Hauser's lab to seize computers, video records, and documents. By August 2010 they had found him "solely responsible" for "eight instances of scientific misconduct," including "problems involving data acquisition, data analysis, data retention, and the reporting of research methodologies and results." After a year's leave of absence, Hauser learned that he would not be allowed to return to teaching or research at Harvard, and he resigned effective 1 August 2011. Later a separate investigation by the federal government's Office of Research Integrity found in September 2012 that he had fabricated data, manipulated results, and wrongly described experiments supported by several federal grants (see DHSS notice 77 FR 54917, 09/06/2012). Gross (2011) provides a detailed discussion of the Harvard investigation and its aftermath.

<sup>10</sup> "How Do You Say 'Disagreement' in Pirahã?" by Jennifer Schuessler, *The New York Times*, 21 March 2012.

<sup>11</sup> On YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NyB4fIZHeU> and also via SLICE at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_LAR6eeiVtY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_LAR6eeiVtY)

<sup>12</sup> Everett lived in Pirahã villages for 10 days in 1977; 3 weeks in 1978; 6 weeks in 1979; 8 months in 1980; 4 months each year from 1981 to 1985; a total of 12 months during 1986–1988; a total of 36 months during 1989–1999;

other things, this was a material loss for the Pirahã, because every time Everett arrived in their village he would bring medicines and other valued items.

### 2.3 Chomsky’s “charlatan” insult

In early 2009 Noam Chomsky was interviewed about the dispute by *Folha de S. Paulo*, the the largest-circulation newspaper in Brazil, and with evident irritation he told the interviewer (see the issue of 1 February 2009):

Ele virou um charlatão puro, embora costumava ser um bom linguista descritivo. É por isso que, até onde eu sei, todos os linguistas sérios que trabalham com linguas brasileiras ignoram-no.

[“He became a pure charlatan, although he used to be a good descriptive linguist. That is why, as far as I know, all the serious linguists who work on Brazilian languages ignore him.”]

The petty abuse of the first sentence is followed by a piece of dishonesty: since Chomsky has never worked on Brazilian indigenous languages and has never discussed any detailed work by those who have, he has no knowledge of the wider community of Amazonianists (many of them missionaries, others secular linguists or anthropologists in a variety of universities in Europe, Australia, and the Americas), and therefore has no grounds for assessing Everett’s standing among Amazonianists. The truth is that Everett’s expertise has never been questioned by the linguists with whom he has worked, or by any of the roughly twenty researchers who have spent time with him among the Pirahã to do research, or by any of the few outsiders who (like Steven Sheldon) have actually made progress on learning the Pirahã language.<sup>13</sup>

Chomsky continued with a clearly unverifiable claim about Everett’s private thoughts and hopes:

Everett espera que os leitores não entendam a deferença entre a GU no sentido técnico (a teoria do componente genético da linguagem humana) e no sentido informal, que dis respeito às propriedades comuns a todas as línguas.

[“Everett hopes that the readers do not understand the difference between UG in the technical sense (the theory of the genetic component of human language) and the informal sense, which concerns properties common to all languages.”]

Chomsky is alluding to his reinterpretation of HCL’s “recursion” claims as having never been about languages, but only about the genetically transmitted human ability to acquire language. He is claiming that Everett wanted to fool *CA* readers into paying attention to sentence structure when really he knew the focus should have been on genetics and neurophysiology.

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20 months during 1999-2001; and three months during 2001–2009, a total of just over 100 months.

<sup>13</sup>Chomsky had perhaps forgotten that Everett had mentioned the lack of syntactic embedding in Pirahã during a personal conversation with him at MIT 25 years earlier, and at the time had thought it interesting; see Everett (2007:12, fn. 7).

But HCF never provided any genetic or neurophysiological facts about the human language capacity that Everett could have focused on. As Everett noted in a response to NP&R, if the “genetic component” is the issue on the table, then Chomsky’s claim seems virtually empty: humans simply have whatever special thing it is that permits them to acquire and use language (see Everett 2009:439). Since he was motivated by what HCL actually said (“There is no longest sentence,” etc.), he concentrated on “properties common to all languages.” That isn’t charlatanry.

## 2.4 Overt accusation of racism

Later in 2009, Rodrigues increased the rhetorical temperature some more. She explicitly alleged in a magazine interview with the German journalist Malte Henk that Everett held racist beliefs: “Everett ist ein Rassist. Er stellt die Pirahã auf eine Stufe mit Primaten” [“Everett is a racist. He puts the Pirahã on a level with primates”].<sup>14</sup> By “primates” she clearly means apes and monkeys, unless she has forgotten that all humans are primates.<sup>15</sup>

As Bartlett (2012) remarks, “When you read Everett’s two books about the Pirahã, it is nearly impossible to think that he believes they are inferior. In fact, he goes to great lengths not to condescend.” He does indeed. He stresses their sharp intelligence, ingenuity, strong group identity, rich social life, and ability to grasp complex discourse. He lived with them, hunted with them, raised his three children among them, talked with them endlessly, and learned from them during periods of residence totaling well over eight years. His many accounts of interaction with them (most engagingly in Everett 2008) often evince admiration, and never for a moment suggest he sees them as racially inferior beings.

But accusations of racism are potent weapons in contemporary intellectual and political debate, whether grounded or not – more powerful than any points about syntactic analysis could be.

## 2.5 Fraud libels

While working on his 2012 article, Tom Bartlett asked Nevins for some comments on the war on Everett. Nevins refused to be interviewed, but emailed back: “it seems you’ve already analyzed this kind of case!” – appending a link to an earlier Bartlett story about Diederik Stapel.

The implied defamatory claim here is extreme. Stapel is famously an admitted fraudster. He voluntarily returned his PhD certificate to the University of Amsterdam because he acknowledged that his scientific misconduct had been “inconsistent with the duties associated with the doctorate.” So far 58 of his papers in social psychology have been retracted on grounds that the data were either manipulated or – in at least 30 cases – simply invented out of thin air. Stapel would invent whole tables of data with no empirical basis at all, and published many reports of experimental studies that were never conducted. Nevins is equating Everett’s eight years of immersive fieldwork and data analysis with the proven scientific misconduct of a man described in *The New York Times* (26 April 2013) as “the biggest con man in academic science.”

<sup>14</sup> *GEO* magazine (Gruner + Jahr, Hamburg, Germany), January 2010, p. 59.

<sup>15</sup> In an email to Everett, Rodrigues denied ever making the statement, but Malte Henk stands by his claim about what she said to him on the record; see Everett (2013:13).

At the time Nevins sent his message to Bartlett, Everett was a dean at Bentley University and happened to be chairing an investigation into allegations against a professor of accounting: Professor James E. Hunton, who ultimately resigned in December 2012. By 2016 at least 37 of Hunton's papers had been retracted under suspicions of wholesale invention of data and publishing reports of studies that had never been conducted.<sup>16</sup> Bentley, therefore, had a well-functioning procedure for dealing with research misconduct, which could have been used against Everett if anyone had come up with a scintilla of evidence about fraud or other research misconduct.

Tom Roeper of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, also directly and publicly accused Everett of fraud. Speaking about Everett on camera to the makers of *The Grammar of Happiness*, he said: "I think he knows he's wrong, that's what I really think." With a knowing smile, he added: "I think it's a move that many, many intellectuals make to get a little bit of attention."<sup>17</sup> Roeper's claim is not just that Everett is wrong, but that he KNOWS he's wrong, and is telling lies "to get a little bit of attention."

## 2.6 Illegality accusations

In Brazil, the allegations started to reach further than simply positing dishonesty. Rumors were spread that for decades Everett had been working illegally, never obtaining the required permits for working in Indian areas. Denny Moore, an American linguist resident in Brazil, made forceful allegations along these lines to me in personal conversation and subsequent email (May 2019) and made further remarks on the topic in a Facebook comment in January 2024.

The suggestion that Everett had never complied with the full legal requirements is implausible on its face, because if it were true then his failure to obtain a FUNAI permit after Rodrigues's letter of 2007 would have been of no importance. Everett arrived in Brazil in 1977 and was granted permanent resident status under an agreement between the Brazilian government and the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), so he can visit the country without a visa whenever he wishes. But doing research on the Pirahã reservation without a FUNAI permit would be illegal. The only reason Everett has not been able to do any field research among the Pirahã since 2009 is that he strictly respects the law – as one would expect, given the crucial necessity for him to have access to indigenous Amazonian areas.

In 1977 all SIL missionaries were allowed to live among indigenous populations (Desmond Derbyshire had been with the Hixkaryana under such terms since 1955 when I met him). In 1978 the government canceled the contract with SIL and all missionaries had to leave indigenous lands. At that point Everett became a graduate student at the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP), and in that capacity, with the help of Aryon Rodrigues, he received written authorization from the director of FUNAI to return to the area, and spent a year living in a Pirahã village with his American wife Keren (now Keren Madora) and three children – not a visit that could have been accomplished furtively.

Eventually FUNAI reached an understanding with SIL that allowed all of its members to continue working in indigenous villages, not as missionaries but in order to do linguistic research

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<sup>16</sup> See *Retraction Watch*, <https://retractionwatch.com/category/by-author/james-hunton/>

<sup>17</sup> For a bookmarked location of Roeper's remark in the SLICE release of the film, retitled as "Decoding Amazon: life of the Pirahã," go to [https://youtu.be/\\_LAR6eeiVtY?t=1323](https://youtu.be/_LAR6eeiVtY?t=1323)



and translate morally uplifting works into indigenous languages. That blanket permission for SIL members covered Everett after he completed the PhD at UNICAMP, until 2001. During that period he never needed to fill out the permit application forms used by university academics, whether Brazilian or foreign, which is why (as suspicious Brazilian researchers have found) searches in the public record for his applications via that channel come up with no results.

In 2001 Everett left SIL. Since then, when doing grant-supported research as a faculty member at the University of Pittsburgh (1988–1999) or the University of Manchester (2001–2006), he has entered the country on the basis of his permanent resident status (contrary to some allegations, he has never entered Brazil on a tourist visa), and he obtained permission for visits to indigenous areas through close contacts with FUNAI.

There are different ways for permanent residents to work: they can apply to the national office of FUNAI, or go through a local FUNAI office in the appropriate region provided Brasília does not object. They can also visit at the request of an indigenous group, which FUNAI is required to accept. One way or another, Everett has always had the needed permits, and two national-level directors of FUNAI (including the much-respected Apoena Meirelles) visited Everett while he lived with the Pirahã, which would hardly have happened if he was an illegal foreign interloper. He has a letter from FUNAI thanking him for his work, and a short article by praising his work appeared in a magazine in 2012<sup>18</sup> and was archived on the FUNAI website.

There was an occasion in 2007 when Everett was with the Pirahã along with several students and a local FUNAI official with a grudge against him reported that they were there illegally. A heavily armed team of military police made the long river journey through a rainstorm to get to the relevant Pirahã village and arrest him. Everett greeted them in fluent Portuguese, showed them his permanent residence document and his letter from the local FUNAI office. The policemen relaxed, and posed smiling for a photo with members of Everett's team. A few days later in Porto Velho, he was called in by the FUNAI office there over the same incident, and again satisfied the organization that he had done everything legally.

Everett is not and never has been the subject of any civil suit or criminal indictment for illegal presence in an indigenous area. Yet allegations that he is a notorious lawbreaker continue to be spread by linguists in Brazil. The strong antipathy felt by many Brazilian academics to North American missionaries may be partly to blame, since Everett is still thought of as associated with that role, more than two decades after he left SIL.

## **2.7 The Nevins/Carvalho/Rössler video**

A conference was held at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro in 2013 that was devoted entirely to work arguing that Everett was wrong. Everett heard about the planning for it, and offered to attend the conference at his own expense, but he was told he would not be welcome. During the same period (August 2013) Nevins took the opportunity to work with Emerson Carvalho and Eva-Maria Rössler to produce a video<sup>19</sup> which seems to have the primary purpose of further damaging Everett's reputation. It is represented as an interview with two representatives of "the leadership" of the Pirahã (in truth they live an anarchist socio-political life with no political leaders). The main

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<sup>18</sup> Marcelo Moraes Caetano, "Indagado pelos Pirahã," *Revista da Cultura* 61, August 2012, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> Online since 2013 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3jWI4cPRMg>

speaker throughout the video is Jose Augusto Diarroi, nicknamed “Verão” by Portuguese speakers because of his SIL contacts (*verão* means “summer”), who falsely represents himself as member of the Pirahã community. His father was Pirahã, but his mother was not, and he was raised elsewhere, never acquiring more than a smattering of the Pirahã language. Sitting beside him is a native Pirahã speaker whose name is given as Yapohen (not a possible Pirahã name) but is actually Hiahoái. Very few Pirahã utterances are heard in the entire interview, and none are glossed in the subtitles.

Augusto tells tales about Everett engaging in activities seemingly drawn from the worst stereotypical charges against bad missionaries, claiming that Everett had terrorized the people he lived among, threatening them that God would kill them all if they did not come to Jesus and convert to being “true believers,” and so on. Nevins’s voice can be heard saying things like “Wow!” from time to time. If any of what he says were true, Augusto would not be one to tell about it, because he never lived in a Pirahã village during any time when Everett was there.

At certain points Augusto attempts to elicit some contributions from Hiahoái, who is visibly reluctant to speak, and says nothing for a long time. When he is eventually prompted to say a few things in Pirahã, Augusto pretends quite unconvincingly to translate them, turning a few seconds of Pirahã into several minutes of Portuguese. What he represents as translations are total fabrications. A version of the video with transcription supertitles of the Pirahã utterances was uploaded by Miguel Salinas in 2019.<sup>20</sup> See Everett and Gibson (2019:781, fn. 3) for brief discussion of some of this video, with examples of the mistranslations.

## 2.8 Cancellation at universities

The work that NP&R have put into representing Everett as a disreputable person and untrustworthy scholar has not had significant material effects on his career: he has served successfully as a department head, dean of arts and sciences, and acting provost, and unlike Hauser or Hunton he remains a tenured full professor to this day. Nevertheless, NP&R have created a kind of folklore, a vague shadow of disrepute, which continues to have effects. Mud sticks, if you throw enough of it. One of Everett’s daughters reports having met people in Brazil who say, “Oh, you’re the daughter of that racist guy.”<sup>21</sup> And substantive professional consequences do result from this atmosphere of negativity.

For example, on 12 March 2017 Everett offered to give a talk to the linguists at the University of Oxford the following September – at no cost to Oxford because he was planning to visit the UK anyway. The planned lecture was not to have been about Pirahã syntax, incidentally, but about paleoanthropology and the emergence of language in early humans. His offer was greeted with enthusiasm by the head of the linguistics faculty, Professor Aditi Lahiri, who promptly let her colleagues know the good news. But within hours her acceptance was withdrawn in a rather awkward email message.

The next day Everett learned the reason: two junior faculty had objected by email as soon as they learned of the tentative plan, citing potential “reputational damage” to Oxford if Everett were to speak there.<sup>22</sup> It is hard to believe someone would think a visiting speaker could be so toxic that

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<sup>20</sup> Online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEEAufXg8fc>

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Liz Else and Lucy Middleton, *New Scientist*, 19 January 2008, p. 44.

<sup>22</sup> This was reported to Everett by the late Yorick Wilks (1939–2023) in an email, 13 March 2017, which I have

his mere appearance would inflict reputational damage on Britain's oldest university, often ranked number one in the world. But this is the sort of strange fruit the long campaign against Everett has borne.

Other such events continue to occur. For example, the Oxford cancelation was almost exactly mirrored recently at the University of Düsseldorf. In early July 2024, University Professor of Linguistics Hana Filip was setting up for Everett to give a talk within the Institute of Linguistics in October 2024. Everett had lectured at Düsseldorf before, but things had changed. Recent additions to the faculty had apparently reduced the local tolerance of heterodoxy. On 11 July 2024 Professor Filip got back to Everett (in an email that I have seen) saying: 'I am embarrassed and very sorry that I have to write to you this unhappy message.'

She explained: 'we have some new faculty members who come from departments that are not sympathetic to your work', and added: 'Obviously, I completely misjudged the predilections of my colleagues and I apologize for it.' But the new faculty's feelings must have gone far beyond 'predilections' or simply being 'not sympathetic', because they had made it clear that the proposed lecture could not take place. The arrangements had to be dropped and the invitation had to be withdrawn. Professor Filip ended by telling Everett: 'All I can do is to apologize in the sincerest way.' NP&R's campaign had started to affect continental Europe.

## 2.9 The double review of *Recursion Across Domains*

The conference in Rio de Janeiro in 2013 resulted in a book entitled *Recursion Across Domains* (Amaral et al., 2018). The central aim of the conference and the book was to publish studies saying Everett was wrong, and he was never invited to submit a reply to its criticisms. But the editors of the Linguistic Society of America's journal *Language* invited Everett together with his collaborator Edward Gibson to write a review of the book. It ultimately appeared as Everett and Gibson (2019). However, when it became known to Everett's opponents that such a review was being commissioned, the editors promptly came under pressure to alter their decision. After some consultation they made an unprecedented move: they would give the book two review articles in the same issue. Several potential reviewers who were thought likely to take a more anti-Everett and pro-Chomsky line were sounded out but declined. Finally Norbert Hornstein agreed to take on the task.

Hornstein (2019) opened by admitting with admirable frankness (p. 791) that he knows nothing at all about the empirical content of the book – topics like the syntax of South American languages, and a certain amount of experimental psycholinguistics. In fact he says: "Facts usually make me itchy... My allergies will lead me to pass lightly over many of the specific empirical findings in what follows." His main qualification was clearly that he could be relied upon to support the Chomskyan line, and that he did.

Further pressure on the editors of *Language* induced them to do an additional thing regarding the same book that as far as I can see was unprecedented: *Language* (like most scholarly journals) does not publish aggrieved responses to book reviews submitted by authors whose work is criticized. But Cilene Rodrigues sent in a letter of protest about the Everett and Gibson review,

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seen. Wilks stated that he had seen the objectors' emails but did not name them.

which had said that her work did not exhibit “high scientific standards.” The editor (Andries Coetzee) initially resisted the idea of publishing it (and told Everett and Gibson that it would not be published without their having right of reply), but he was eventually persuaded to print it, and it appeared in *Language* 96.2 (2020), 221–223, without a reply. A short editorial clarification concerning one sentence in the Everett and Gibson review was also printed. Thus *Recursion Across Domains* ended up being the subject of four different items in the pages of *Language* when the usual maximum for any book is one.

## 2.10 Recent literature overviews

The work NP&R have done to damage Everett’s reputation has been ample to color the general impression a newcomer to the dispute will pick up. The superbly detailed survey of Amazonian languages by Aikhenvald (2012) takes the line of treating the issues as unfit for discussion, declaring that “there is neither consistency nor plausibility to the quasi-analytical statements which have been made concerning this language [Pirahã], or its culture, during the past fifteen years. I refrain from quoting these sources” (p. 411, n. 91). She thus avoids any discussion of the polemics of the post-2005 literature. In fact she cites nothing on Pirahã dated later than 1986.

Janet Chernela, an anthropologist specializing in Amazonia, recently tried to survey the whole dispute in an article for *Annual Review of Anthropology* (Chernela, 2023). She seems to think she has provided a balanced summary, but her treatment of the relevant literature is hopelessly skewed against Everett. She never even mentions the existence of *Handbook of Amazonian Languages*, and hence never refers to Everett (1986), unquestionably the most important descriptive document in the whole dispute. She cites Nevins et al. (2009a) without ever mentioning that it was followed by a detailed response (Everett, 2009) in the same issue of *Language*, nor the rebuttal to that by Nevins et al. (2009b), nor the final rejoinder to that by Everett (2013). She very briefly mentions the incompetently uncritical review article by Hornstein (2019), but seems unaware of the vastly more expert critical one by Everett and Gibson (2019).

Admittedly, reading all of the post-2005 work just cited would be an exhausting business – anyone who doesn’t come out of reading it feeling dazed and confused just hasn’t been paying attention. But the skewing of Chernela’s coverage is quite extraordinary. It is possible that she fell victim of a major downside to accessing literature online: anyone who had *Language* 85 no. 2 in their hands could not fail to see that Nevins et al. (2009a) is immediately followed by Everett’s 37-page response, but if Chernela simply heard about the former and downloaded a PDF of it she might well have had no idea the latter existed.

However, she has less excuse in the matter of the two reviews. She cites Hornstein (2019) in connection with Chomsky’s claim that “variation between languages – while possibly interesting for other purposes – is irrelevant to the nature of the FLN” (p. 140). But its first page carried an editor’s footnote explaining that “This issue of *Language* contains two review articles focusing on the volume *Recursion Across Domains*,” and adding: “Since the topic of this volume (recursion) is one of central interest (and some controversy) in current linguistic theory, we thought it important to publish reviews from scholars who will bring differing perspectives to the topic,” and so on. Those differing perspectives do not come through in Chernela’s account.

She makes some patently erroneous and unfounded claims, like that NP&R “reanalyzed data

collected among the Pirahã by Everett’s predecessors”(p. 140). NP&R did nothing of the sort, and do not try to represent themselves as having done it. Steven Sheldon, whose residence among the Pirahã antedated Everett’s, did produce some transcribed texts, which are utilized by Futrell et al. (2016), but NP&R appear not to have known about them. NP&R (2009a:391) do cite a table of six pronoun forms from a paper by Sheldon, but the paper (Sheldon, 1988) appeared two years after Everett’s main descriptive work on the language was in print.

In another inexplicable piece of invention, Chernela asserts that “Much of Everett’s field methodologies involved structured interviews using a recorder” (p. 143), and she asserts that his work “flies in the face of Boasian anthropology” because it fails to “interpret cultures and languages on the basis of each society’s own logic and values rather than through a universal yardstick” and “understand language as a social phenomenon in which meanings cannot be understood apart from context.” But Everett’s work involved interacting more closely with the community than any other outsider has ever done or was ever competent to do. He lived in the community and participated in its life for eight years. His children became fluent in the language and often played with Pirahã children all day. He constantly strived in his work to “interpret cultures and languages on the basis of each society’s own logic and values.” Throughout Everett (2012) it is clear that language is being seen as intimately linked to culture, and Boas is copiously discussed in Everett (2016).<sup>23</sup> Like NP&R, Chernela never met Everett or even emailed him. She seems to have decided up front that he was to be her representative of the typical desk linguist asking elicitation questions, not the sensitive anthropological investigator attuned to culture, values, and meaning.

The general pall of negativity that has been cast over Everett’s work may be responsible for some of Chernela’s bias. Like NP&R, she worked without any contact with Everett or anyone else who had ever lived with the Pirahã and learned their language. It was an anthropologist, Bambi Schieffelin, who suggested to Chernela that she might write the article, and neither of the two people thanked in her acknowledgment note for reading the paper in draft (p. 146) is a linguist. She does no linguistic analysis; she simply browsed some of the recent literature and came away with the broadly negative view of Everett’s work that NP&R were intent on establishing as the default.

The end result is not too surprising given the intellectual climate that the campaign of hostilities created. Linguists should be ashamed of this ghastly parody of science, with its rumors of racism substituting for scientific discussion, and career sabotage replacing rational criticism. It only makes things worse that it was under-informed from the start: Pirahã is not unique in providing an example of a language that doesn’t support the usual arguments for an infinite class of grammatical sentences.

### 3 Conclusions

To some extent it could be said that Everett’s detractors have failed: after 18 years of attacks he remains a well-paid tenured professor, having served successfully as a department head and dean; his books find major publishers; he gets requests to lecture around the world (though generally not

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<sup>23</sup> Chernela mentions the existence of both these books (p. 144), but only in passing, and she misstates the title of the first.

in theoretical linguistics departments).

Yet a vague shadow of disreputability lingers, and his career as the most important living Amazonian field linguist has been truncated by the success of his enemies in getting his field research applications denied by FUNAI.

The sole basis for this entire saga is that he stated something about sentence structure in Pirahã that conflicted with recent Chomskyan orthodoxy. That was judged sufficient reason to smear him as a racist, to spread rumors about him breaking Brazilian law, and to recommend against his doing further work on a language in which hardly any other outsider is fluent.

The fact that Everett's claims about Pirahã are probably true is significant, or even shocking, but it is not the fundamental point for my purposes here. The issues I have raised concern mostly the ethics of linguists' conduct, and its effects. A major opportunity was missed when NP&R deliberately decided to work in secret, consulting no one who knew any Pirahã. They could have applied their talents in a collaborative spirit. Fluent speakers like Everett and Madora could have acted as consultants and fellow researchers. New linguistic insights might perhaps have been attained. But NP&R never considered that course for a moment, because their primary goal, quite obviously, was to bring Everett into disrepute. The result today is that Amazonian linguistics is split into two irreconcilable ideological camps, and the entire discipline of linguistics has been made to look (as it did to Tom Bartlett) like a snakepit of hostility.

Future historians of our field will have to decide whether the campaign of innuendo, insult, libel, and bureaucratic warfare against Everett was an edifying or justifiable way to pursue linguistic science. They might do well to pay attention to a remark made by a young Brazilian anthropologist who has been working with the Pirahã people in recent years, as recently expressed in his Master's thesis (Felizes 2023: 59):

A relação de Daniel e Karen Everett com os Pirahã é algo que perdura até aos dias atuais. Durante mais de quarenta anos de convívio – permanente ou esporádico – conquistaram a reputação de grandes amigos, de saberem bem a língua, de serem exímios contadores de histórias e de se tornarem importantes aliados, a quem os Pirahã geralmente recorrem para resolver potenciais conflitos ou aprender coisas sobre o mundo dos brancos.

[Daniel and Keren Everett's relationship with the Pirahã is something that has endured to the present day. During more than forty years of coexistence — permanent or sporadic — they gained the reputation of being great friends, of knowing the language well, of being excellent storytellers and of becoming important allies, to whom the Pirahã often turn to resolve potential conflicts or learn things about the white world.]

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