

Linguists doubt exception to universal grammar

April 23 2007

Controversies in the field of linguistics seldom make headlines, which is why the current imbroglio over an alleged counterexample to Universal Grammar (UG), made famous in the 1960s by Noam Chomsky, MIT professor of linguistics, is so unusual.

On one side is Daniel L. Everett, a linguist at Illinois State University, who has spent several decades studying Pirahã, a language spoken by roughly 350 indigenous hunter-gatherers in the Amazon rainforest. On the other are a number of linguists, including MIT linguistics professor David Pesetsky, who have thrown doubt upon many of Everett's claims, both cultural and linguistic, about the Pirahã.

In a telephone interview, Pesetsky said, "What we tried to do in our response was to highlight the ways in which we are trying to unravel the system that unites all the languages in the world," including Pirahã. The attributes that Everett claims are unique to that language are in fact extant in other well-documented languages, such as Bengali and even German.

Linguistics began to focus attention on UG several decades ago in an attempt to move their study from the particularization of philology--the detailed description of individual languages and language families, with which the field was preoccupied for centuries--to an understanding of the remarkable wealth of features that all languages share, and thence to an understanding of the human mind.

The current contretemps began with Everett's 2005 paper in *Cultural Anthropology*, "Cultural Constraints on Grammar and Cognition in Pirahã: Another Look at the Design Features of Human Language," which described a number of "gaps" in Pirahã morphosyntax (the relationships between words and how their elements convey meaning).

As a culture, says Everett, Pirahã speakers lack any sense of the past beyond what living individuals have personally experienced, and they have no creation myths or fiction, no sense of numbers or counting, and no art. Constraints of culture, Everett believes, in turn impoverish the language, which has no tenses, no names for colors and other allegedly unique paucities.

The language constraints, he claims, indicate "some of the components of so-called core grammar are subject to cultural constraints, something that is predicted not to occur" by Chomsky's universal-grammar model.

Everett's article and his colorful field career have been taken up by the popular press, with stories in the *Independent*, *Der Spiegel* and, most recently, the *New Yorker*, among other publications.

His critics--Pesetsky, Andrew Nevins of Harvard and Cilene Rodrigues of the Universidade Estadual de Campinas in Brazil--fired back in March of this year with a paper entitled "Pirahã Exceptionality: A Reassessment," taking issue with virtually every claim to Pirahã's uniqueness that Everett advanced. Everett hastily answered (also in March), with "Cultural Constraints on Grammar in Pirahã: A Reply to Nevins, Pesetsky, and Rodrigues (2007)." (Those two papers may be viewed at the LingBuzz linguistics archive site, ling.auf.net/lingbuzz, where they head the "Top Recent Downloads" list.)

Pesetsky marvels at the interest this debate has sparked, not only within the field but in the world at large. As of April 12, he noted in an e-mail,

"Our paper has been downloaded 1,300 times and (Everett's) reply has been downloaded 910 times--astonishing figures for the site and for a field like linguistics."

While linguists at MIT pay a lot of attention to theoretical questions, such as the universal properties of sound systems, speech perception and speech production, field linguistics is far from moribund here. Linguistics grad student Seth Cable is heading off soon to Alaska on an National Science Foundation dissertation grant, to study the syntax and semantics of questions in Tlingit, a language spoken by an indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest. And one of the great figures in field linguistics, the late Kenneth Hale, was an esteemed member of the MIT faculty until his retirement in 1999; in his long career, he worked on languages as diverse as Hopi, Tohono O'odham (of the Sonoran desert region) and Warlpiri. His fluency in the latter, an indigenous language of Australia, was such that he was able to keep his sons, Ezra and Caleb, fluent in the language even after they had moved back to the United States. "He was a linguist's linguist," as Pesetsky put it.

Source: MIT

Citation: Linguists doubt exception to universal grammar (2007, April 23) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2007-04-linguists-exception-universal-grammar.html>

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