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Don't Sleep There Are Snakes, By Daniel Everett

Reviewed by David Papineau

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The Pirahã Indians of the Amazon are a very peculiar people. They number fewer than 400 and have no myths, rituals or history. Their language is unrelated to any other living tongue. It can be whistled, sung, hummed or spoken. It has no words for numbers, colours, left or right, brother or sister.

The Pirahã never sleep for more than a couple of hours and talk through much of the night. They live as hunter-gatherers in villages along 50 miles of the Maici River deep in the Amazon forest. They have plenty of contact with river traders and other outsiders but display no inclination to change their ways.

Their peculiarities have caused a great stir in the academic world. Much of the excitement focuses on their language's lack of "recursive" constructions. The Pirahã have no ways of coining long phrases like "John's sister's boyfriend's" or "the cat that killed the rat that ate the malt". This contradicts the widely-accepted linguistic theories of Noam Chomsky.

According to Chomskyan orthodoxy, humans have a set of genes – a language instinct – that forces all languages into the same recursive mould. A few mavericks have always been sceptical of Chomsky's grammatical genes. In their view, common linguistic features stem not from genes but simply from the similar cultural needs that different languages are designed to serve. If the unusual requirements of the Pirahã allow them to do without recursion, despite their human genetic endowment, then it looks as if the mavericks were right all along.

Nearly everything we know about the Pirahã comes from Daniel Everett. He first visited them as a missionary in 1977 with the intention of learning enough of their language to translate the New Testament; 30 years later he is no longer a Christian, let alone a missionary, but chair of languages, literatures and cultures at Illinois State University, and something of a celebrity on the international lecture circuit.

Don't Sleep There Are Snakes tells the story of his repeated sojourns with the Pirahã. Related in episodic style, the book is destined to become a classic of popular ethnography. Life in the jungle is harsh and steamy, for missionaries and natives alike, and Everett employs an understated litany of narrow scrapes to help us understand the quirky Pirahã worldview.

Everett thinks that much about the Pirahã is explained by their literally limited horizons. They have no mental space for things outside their experience. Any report in their language must be grammatically marked either as something they have witnessed or that was witnessed by someone they know.

This would never do in our modern world, where we trade constantly in information from distant sources, but it works fine in a community of small villages where everybody knows everybody. Everett argues that this commitment to immediate experience explains why the Pirahã are so disinclined to learn any lessons from outsiders. Everett tried to

teach the Pirahã some simple arithmetic. They were more than willing, for they knew that their innumeracy handicapped them in their dealings with the river traders. But after a few months the lessons were abandoned. Not one Pirahã got as far as $1 + 1 = 2$. Some would argue that the Pirahã are hampered by the absence of number words. But Everett reminds us that many peoples with similarly limited vocabularies have no difficulty in becoming arithmetically adept. The Pirahã aren't incapable of counting; they choose not to. They just can't see the point of jumping through intellectual hoops unrelated to their experience.

Given this, it's no surprise that the Pirahã are missionary-proof. At one point, Everett's villagers told him politely that he was welcome to stay, but they didn't want to hear any more about Jesus. Later, he thought he was getting somewhere when he found them replaying his recorded version of the Gospel of St Mark. But it turned out that they just liked the bit about John the Baptist ("Wow, they cut off his head. Play that again.") Everett confesses that there is no record of even a single conversion in over 200 years of Christian missions to the Pirahã.

As Everett tells it, the Pirahã are a very happy people, even self-satisfied. They think their way of life cannot be bettered, and they may be right. But one fears for their future. They may have seen off the missionaries, but they are going to get a lot more visitors. Hundreds of high-powered academics will even now be writing grant applications to go and check Everett's startling ethnographic claims. Let us hope that the Pirahã are not spoiled by all the attention.

David Papineau is professor of philosophy at King's College, London

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