

Lost for words

They've no myths, no numbers or colours and few words for past or present. No wonder the Pirahã people defy our most cherished ideas about language, says **Kate Douglas**

"HOW was your world created?" asks the young anthropologist in Portuguese. He awaits the translation into Pirahã. "The world is created," replies one of the assembled men in his own language. "Tell me how your god made all this?" the anthropologist presses on. "All things are made," comes the answer. The interview lurches on for a few more minutes, until suddenly, the question-and-answer session is overtaken by a deluge of excited banter as the assembled Pirahã vie to be heard.

"I've cracked it," says the anthropologist as he hands his tape recording to Dan Everett a few weeks later. "Here is the Pirahã creation myth." Everett is dubious. In the past three decades, the linguist from the University of Manchester, UK, has spent a total of seven years living with the Pirahã in the Amazon rainforest and is one of just three outsiders,

along with his ex-wife and a missionary who spent time with them in the 1960s and 1970s, who is fluent in their language. He has long maintained that they are among the few people on Earth who have not devised a story to explain their existence. Others, including this particular anthropologist, find the idea difficult to accept.

Everett listens to the tape. After the short, stilted exchange, he hears some bright spark in the crowd point out that this guy asking them odd questions doesn't know their language, so he will need to get help from Everett to translate the tapes. "Hello, Dan!" comes a chorus of Pirahã voices. "How are you?" "When will we see you?" "When you come, bring us some matches." "And bananas." "And whisky." And so on. Nice try, but no creation myth here.

The lack of mythology is just one small aspect of why the Pirahã are so fascinating to anthropologists. According to Everett, they also have virtually no notion of time, and seem to live entirely in the moment. There is no creative storytelling and no oral history beyond two generations. They have no art except the crude line drawings they use to depict figures from their spirit world.

They are among the least materialistic people in the world, with very few possessions and little desire to attain more. They also have the simplest kinship system yet recorded: the language only has specific terms for "son" and "daughter". Past that, they talk in general terms about older and younger generations.

Pirahã culture is remarkably resistant to change. These people continue to be monolingual and maintain their traditional way of life despite more than 200 years of regular contact with outsiders.

Until recently, the Pirahã were best known among linguists because of debates over whether their language has any words for colours, and the fact that it has no number



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terms. Now, though, they have hit the scientific big time with the publication last year of a controversial paper by Everett. In it he takes issue with some of the most influential ideas in linguistics. In particular, he argues that the Pirahã's peculiar language is shaped not by some innate language instinct, as many linguists attest, but by their extraordinary culture. What's more, he says that Pirahã language and culture hold fundamental lessons in what it means to be human (*Current Anthropology*, vol 46, p 621).

There are around 350 Pirahã people, living along a 300-kilometre stretch of the Maici river in the south-west of Brazil's Amazonas state. Their lifestyle has much in common with other indigenous Amazonian hunter-gatherers, but what really marks out the Pirahã is their attitude to life. They are very laid-back, accepting things as they are, not fretting about the future, and taking great pleasure in life. Above all, these are a people who live for the moment.