



Courtesy of Julia Reinbold

A puzzling people

Dan Everett has spent almost his entire career studying the culture and language of Amazonian people, focusing lately on a small group of hunter gatherers who for some reason cannot learn to count

After living with the Pirahã people for some years Professor Everett, a renowned linguist, has concluded that theirs is the only known language not to contain numbers or even a concept of counting. Furthermore, Pirahã is thought to be the only language without colour words, and its people do not draw, except for extremely crude stick figures representing the spirit world.

The Pirahãs have become a much sought after source of investigation by linguists in recent years, but there is little agreement on the reasons behind the Pirahã's seemingly unique language evolution.

Professor Everett, who says he came into linguistics serendipitously, got hooked: "I have always been interested in languages, largely due to hearing Spanish spoken all around me when I was growing up on the Mexican border where my dad worked as a cowboy, bartender, and mechanic. But I really wanted to be a musician."

All that was to change when, on a trip with the school band to Hollywood, he went to see the film *My Fair Lady* and became transfixed by the work of fictional linguist Henry Higgins. A few years later he met Keren, a young woman later to become his wife, who had been raised in a tribal village in Brazil. And so began a life long fascination with the Amazonian people and its languages.

So what are the Pirahã like, and what can we learn from them?

They are a technologically primitive river people living as hunters and gatherers with very little agriculture, according to Professor Everett. They eat mainly fish, wild fruit and nuts, depending on the time of year. They sometimes boil their fish and make a soup, but mainly they just throw the bigger fish directly on to a fire.

Professor Everett found that despite knowing how to preserve meat by smoking, drying, and salting, the Pirahã never did this except to



Professor Dan Everett



Courtesy of Gerald Slike

trade meat with outsiders. They say, 'I store my meat in the belly of my brother', because they share with those who need meat, never storing up for the future.

They produce beautiful, strong, bows and arrows for hunting. They also make very crudely woven baskets for transporting material from the fields. "They wear necklaces from seeds and home spun cotton string, using teeth, feathers, beads, beer can pull-tabs or other objects that show little symmetry and are very crude and unattractive compared to the artefacts of other groups in the region," Professor Everett said. "Their primary purpose is to ward off the evil spirits they see almost daily."

The men wear leather loin-cloths and the women go naked when there is no supply of cloth. While the men will wear gym or Bermuda shorts received from trade deals with outsiders, women refuse ready made dresses, making their own garments following a universal pattern.

Toys for children are normally not found, though they will play with dolls and other toys from the outside. The people know how to make spinning tops, whistles, toy canoes, and carved dolls, but they never do so unless asked.

In 1980, at the Pirahã's urging, Professor Everett and his American wife began a series of evening classes in counting and literacy to see whether the people could learn to count. "My entire family participated, with my three children (9, 6, and 3 at that time) sitting with Pirahã men and women and working with them. Each evening for eight months my wife would try to teach Pirahã men and women to count to ten in Portuguese. They wanted to learn this because they knew that they did not understand trade relations and wanted to be able to tell whether or not they were being cheated - or so they told us."

After eight months of daily efforts – without ever needing to call the Pirahãs to come for class - the people concluded that they could not learn this material and classes were abandoned. Not one Pirahã learned to count to ten in eight months. None learned reliably to add 3+1 or even 1+1.

"Similarly we were never able to train a Pirahã to even draw a straight line without serious coaching and they are never able to repeat the feat in subsequent trials without more coaching. The concept of a correct way to draw is profoundly foreign."

Professor Everett says he is deeply concerned for the future of the Pirahã thanks to the ever more intrusive presence of settlers: "Their language is not endangered by their own attitudes but it is endangered, as are many others, because the Pirahã themselves are endangered by Western diseases, alcohol, and the inexorable changing world that we live in."

"This beautiful language and culture, so fundamentally different from anything the Western world has produced, has much to teach us about linguistic theory, about culture, about human nature, about living for each day and letting the future take care of itself, about personal fortitude, toughness, love, and many other values too numerous to mention. And this is but one example of many other endangered languages and cultures in the Amazon and elsewhere with 'riches' of a similar nature that we may never know about because of our own shortsightedness."



Courtesy of Keren Everett