NONFICTION REVIEW

Review: How Language Began: The Story of Humanity's Greatest Invention by

Past six days My articles Search

Times+ My account

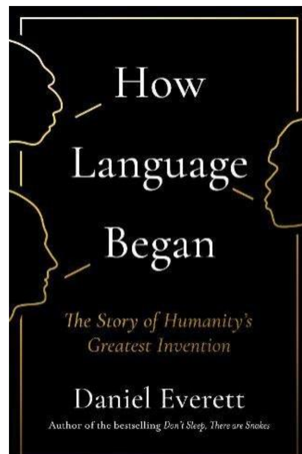
Oliver Kamm is not persuaded that language has existed for 60,000 generations

Oliver Kamm

September 16 2017, 12:01am,
The Times

Daniel Everett, right, learnt the language of the remote Piraha tribe while living with them in the Amazon rainforest
MARTIN SCHOELLER

Share Save



Language is uniquely human. The ability to make combinations of sounds correspond to ideas in someone's head distinguishes our species from all others. Language enables discoveries and inventions to be communicated across generations and continents. Yet our knowledge of how language emerged and where it comes from is speculative, even mysterious. That's because, unlike physical organisms, the languages of prehistory leave no fossilised traces. In *How*

Language Began, Daniel Everett sets out to explain the origins and nature of language.

Everett is a fascinating personality and he has written an engrossing book. His thesis, in brief, is that language is not a recent development in human history. He argues that, instead of being (as other scholars have assumed) about 50,000-100,000 years old and possessed exclusively by *Homo sapiens*, "language began with *Homo erectus* more than one million years ago, and has existed for 60,000 generations".

How did it come about? Through culture. Language is not, says Everett, just another form of animal communication. Its core is "the symbol, a combination of a culturally agreed upon form with a culturally developed meaning". And he stresses that *Homo erectus* had these symbols, born of their art and technology and uncovered by archaeologists, including tools of bone and stone, backed knives, wooden artefacts and the addition of colour to art.

How Language Began occupies a rare literary space that explains complex issues clearly to general readers while being an original

contribution to scholarship. While Everett's case ultimately leaves me sceptical, the arguments he marshals and insights he provides are impressive. I learnt much from the book; anyone interested in language would gain from reading it.

Everett has worked for more than 30 years in the Amazon rainforest. He went first as a missionary. Having lost his religious faith, he remained to study a remote tribe called the Piraha. They are a hunter-gatherer community numbering a few hundred, without social hierarchy and living pretty much as their ancestors must have done millennia ago. The Piraha are immensely gifted in their knowledge of survival in the jungle, but appear to have no sense of history beyond the present generation.

Braving snakes, diseases and even an attempt at murder, Everett discovered things about language — not only the characteristics of the languages of the Amazon, but also the faculty of language itself. "I have personally discovered," he writes almost as a casual aside, "two sounds in the Amazon over the years (one in the

Chapakuran language family, the other in Piraha) not found in any other language of the world." For any scholar, verifiable discovery of what was previously unknown is the peak of achievement. Yet Everett's direct observation of the Piraha convinced him of a linguistic thesis of much wider significance.

The Piraha language has surprising idiosyncrasies, such as that it contains no words for numbers, but one characteristic stands out. Linguists refer to the phenomenon of recursion, meaning that one clause can be contained within another without limit (for example: *the rains, which were furious, destroyed the village*). The range of meanings that language can express is infinite, because you can always embed another clause. Everett concluded from his studies, however, that the Piraha language didn't allow recursion, making it unique among the 7,000 or so natural languages in the world today.

> "
> **The Piraha appear to have no sense of history beyond the**

This may seem an esoteric conclusion, but it has caused ructions in the

present generation

scientific study of language, because it poses a challenge to a highly influential theory. This is the view that language is the realisation of an innate human faculty: the reason that language is universal, and that every toddler rapidly masters a set of complex grammatical rules, is that language is part of our genetic endowment. The language faculty is hardwired into the human brain. This idea is especially associated with the linguist Noam Chomsky (who calls language a "mental organ", analogous to the heart, or the system of vision) and the cognitive scientist Steven Pinker, although their theories diverge substantially in other respects. Language, on this view, is as intrinsic to humans as walking on two feet. It's not a cultural artefact, such as eating with a knife and fork.

To Everett, this is wrong. Languages are not alike. He argues that there is no "language instinct" (in Pinker's celebrated phrase). Language is instead a culturally acquired invention. Once our very distant ancestors had invented the symbol, culture gave rise to language. A symbol is an "arbitrary, conventional association of form and meaning"

where one thing (perhaps a tangled tree root) is understood as standing for something else (say, a coiled snake). And symbols, says Everett, are "just a short hop away from language". Language is not fundamentally different from other mental capacities. Everett adduces evidence from fields as diverse as early art and neuroscience. He maintains for example that mental disorders do not support the notion of a language organ, for (he argues) there are no language-specific disorders.

Now, I happen to think there is a lot in the idea of an innate language faculty. One suggestive piece of evidence is the speed of language acquisition by infants. In his great book *The Language Instinct*, Pinker notes that four-day-old babies can distinguish their mother tongue (not their mother's voice) from other languages. They suck harder when they hear it than they do when they hear some other language.

However, Chomsky's view of language evolution is vulnerable to Everett's thesis. Chomsky is famous for arguing that languages vary within quite a narrow set of parameters. A scientist from Mars, says Chomsky, "might reasonably conclude that there is a single human language,

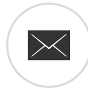
with differences only at the margins". Other linguists maintain that languages differ too much and individual languages have too many weird constructions for this to be a plausible position.

Take a single example of strangeness in English grammar. Of the nine reflexive pronouns in standard English, some are based on accusative forms (himself), some on plain case forms (itself) and some on genitive forms (ourselves). Why aren't these regularised to genitive forms throughout (which would give us hisself and theirselves)?

Only this month the author (a non-scientist) of a new popular book on Charles Darwin claimed that human language was an argument against "slow, plodding evolutionary materialism". Everett's book shows, among much else, how ignorant that proposition is. His account of the gradual emergence of language, which like humanity itself began in Africa, is totally consistent with the centrality of natural selection and sexual selection as mechanisms of evolution. He suggests that two million years ago, our very distant ancestors were the first beings in the 4.5 billion-year history of the

planet to exchange information by the use of language — to say "I'm hungry", or perhaps even "I love you". It's a tantalising hypothesis and a powerful evidence-based theory advanced in a fine book.

How Language Began: The Story of Humanity's Greatest Invention **by Daniel Everett, Profile, 330pp; £25**

Share  Save

Related links

NONFICTION REVIEW

Charles Darwin: Victorian Mythmaker by AN Wilson

Daisy Goodwin

Ninety-nine years ago Lytton Strachey published his famous take-down of the graven idols of the previous generation, *Eminent Victorians*. In it...

September 2 2017

NONFICTION REVIEW

Making Sense: The Glamorous Story of English Grammar by David Crystal

Rose Wild

If you spend your time with toddlers, you probably aren't thinking: "I wish I had a good book to read." Unless it's one of those manuals about how...

January 14 2017

Joint pain? Seven low-impact sports

to adapt your workout

If joint pain is affecting your exercise routine, it's time to make a change

SPONSORED

Comments are subject to our community guidelines, which can be viewed here.

0 comments

Newest | Oldest | Most Recommended

You are logged in as a registered user

Ready for more?

Ready for more? Get unlimited access to the stories behind the headlines by subscribing for less than £1 a week.

FIND OUT MORE

BACK TO TOP

GET IN TOUCH

Contact us
Help
The Times Editorial Complaints
The Sunday Times Editorial Complaints
Place an announcement
Classified advertising
Display advertising
The Times corrections
The Sunday Times corrections

MORE FROM THE TIMES AND THE SUNDAY TIMES

The Times e-paper
The Sunday Times e-paper
Times Currency Services
The Sunday Times Wine Club
Encounters Dating
Times Print Gallery
The Times Archive
Times Crossword Club
Sunday Times Driving
Times+
The Sunday Times Rich List
Insider City Guides
Good University Guide
Parent Power
The Brief

© Times Newspapers Limited 2017.
Registered in England No. 894646. Registered office: 1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF.

Privacy & cookie policy Syndication Commissioning Terms Terms and conditions