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Response to a book review

April 5, 2020

To the Editor:

In their review of the book *Recursion across domains* (ed. by Luiz Amaral, Marcus Maia, Andrew Nevins, and Tom Roeper, Cambridge University Press, 2018), Daniel Everett and Edward Gibson (E&G; *Language* 95(4).777–90, 2019) concluded that the chapters devoted to Pirahã do not meet 'high scientific standards' (p. 780). Their review is unusual in criticizing not only the argumentation and claims of these chapters, but also the very competence of the authors to conduct their research, as well as the competence of a local assistant thanked by the authors, mistakenly described as the 'primary Pirahã consultant' (p. 781).

I coauthored two of the chapters criticized in their review, Chs. 6 and 15. For space reasons, I focus on their criticism of the first of those papers. There is much to be said about the rest of their review, but I believe that the failings of their response to Ch. 6 satisfactorily exemplify issues that pervade the review. I am writing this communication not because their review was negative, but because it contains misrepresentations and falsehoods, which should be corrected.

I first briefly summarize the evidence and argument that Ch. 6 presents in favor of structural embedding. I then consider E&G's critique, ending with a brief response to their comments concerning our competence, the competence of our sources, and their criticism of our data.

Word order and control: Our argument for syntactic embedding was straightforward, based on fieldwork data that showed obligatory control, a phenomenon found internal to complex sentences in the world's languages, and not found across discourse.

The canonical word order of Pirahã is SOV (Everett 1983:201, ex. 3; *A lingua Pirahã e a teoria da sintaxe*, Universidade Estadual de Campinas dissertation). However, in constructions that one might take to show a clause embedded as a complement of a higher verb, Pirahã generally places that clause after the verb, yielding a structure that one might analyze as SVO (Everett 2005:629, ex. 24; 'Cultural constraints on grammar and cognition in Pirahã: Another look at the design features of human language', *Current Anthropology* 46(4).621–46). Everett 2005, however, took this as evidence that such structures do not actually involve clausal complementation, but paratactic conjunction, the putative clausal object actually constituting an independent sentence.

We presented the following arguments against E's (2005) claim:

(a) The Pirahã counterpart of sentences like 'I want to study' shows the phenomenon of obligatory control (OC). When the subject of 'study' is unpronounced, it must be understood as controlled by the subject of 'want'. Our consultant permitted no other interpretation.

(b) In such structures, both SOV and SVO are acceptable (Everett 2005:117, ex. 13, 14). The first of these orders is clearly not amenable to reanalysis as paratactic conjunction.

(c) Main-clause material may follow the complement clause in control structures with SVO order. A temporal adverb following a complement clause in an SVO OC structure can only modify the MAIN clause (Everett 2005: 119, ex. 17) (possibly because the embedded clause is too small to support adverbial modification). If the putative complement clause were actually an independent sentence, we would not expect that it could be followed by an adverb modifying an earlier independent sentence.

(d) SOV order is not restricted to environments of control. The desiderative verb *sogabagai* may also take a full clausal complement with an overt subject. In this case, SOV order is restricted; only the embedded predicate can precede the desiderative verb. The subject of the embedded clause follows the higher verb, resulting in a subject-predicate split. Once again, we would not expect an independent sentence to be followed by the subject of the sentence that preceded it.

E&G's critique: According to E&G, Rodrigues et al. 'missed some crucial issues with the materials that they use, which undermine their interpretation' (p. 784). They present (i) below as an alternative that we should have discussed, and (ii) as a related objection to our analysis:

https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2020.0017 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(i) 'Pirahã zero-anaphora involves … a form of discourse topic-tracking, along the lines of Everett 1983 and Givón 1983, which would be between two separate sentences.' (p. 784)

(ii) 'since the coreferential subjects of the two predicates can both be overt, control is not applicable.' (p. 785)

E&G do not explain how the alternative in (i) could explain the data discussed in our paper, summarized above, nor does the literature that they cite (Everett 1983 and Givón 1983 (*Topic continuity in discourse: A quantitative cross-language study*, John Benjamins)) clarify what alternative they have in mind.

Everett 1983 contains a section on intersentential anaphora (13.2.4, pp. 109–11; translated as pp. 260–62 of E's 1986 'Pirahã' in *Handbook of Amazonian languages*, vol. 1, ed. by Desmond C. Derbyshire and Geoffrey K. Pullum, 200–325, Mouton de Gruyter, 1986). Neither this section nor any other section of this work discusses topic-tracking.

Givón 1983 is an edited collection of ten papers by eight different authors, concerned with 'topic identification, topic maintenance and topic continuity in discourse' (p. 9). Although E&G offer no guidance concerning which contribution to this volume might suggest an alternative account of the data discussed above, possibly they have in mind the idea, discussed in different chapters of the collection, that many languages use zero anaphora to recover an established topic within a narrative.

In the construction that we studied, however, the subject of the main clause OBLIGATORILY controls the subject of the controlled clause when it is null. Control is not a general property of null subjects in Pirahã. In noncontrol configurations, these elements permit other referential options, but only a control interpretation was acceptable to our consultant in the examples crucial to our arguments for embedding. No comparable control phenomenon is observed for zero anaphora across indisputably independent sentences.

The additional observations in (b)–(d) above also receive no account on the independent sentence view, which was the point of the paper. No material in Everett 1983 or Givón 1983 supports an alternative account of these findings. Though (b)–(d) constitute the supporting evidence for our findings, they go unmentioned in E&G's critique, which thus entirely misrepresents our contribution.

A fuller discussion of these matters can be found in an earlier and more comprehensive version of this communication, available at https://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/004928.

Meeting high scientific standards: As noted above, E&G characterize the chapters of *Recursion across domains* dedicated to Pirahã as failures to 'meet high scientific standards' (p. 780). In their words: 'First, no author of any of the papers on recursive structures in Pirahã is fluent in Pirahã. Second, the primary Pirahã consultant that these authors worked with is Jose Augusto Pirahã-Diarroi … Although his father was Pirahã, Verão is not a native Pirahã speaker and is not fluent in the language' (pp. 780–81).

The first claim is true: we are not fluent speakers. Let me observe, however, that, although fluency in a language can only improve a linguist's investigation of that language, it is not and has never been a prerequisite for productive research.

The second claim is false. Our consultant for Ch. 6 was Hiahoai Pirahã, an adult Pirahã man, a native speaker of Pirahã. For Ch. 15, the main informant was Ioá Pirahã (although data on prepositional phrases was also collected from Hiahoai Pirahã). Ioá is a younger Pirahã man, and is also a native speaker of Pirahã.

Jose Augusto (also known as Verão) helped us in many ways. He accompanied Hiahoai and Ioá to Campinas/São Paulo and to Rio de Janeiro, where fieldwork was conducted. He also helped us during elicitations, intermediating, whenever necessary, in our interactions with the native speakers. But none of the data reported in Chs. 6 and 15 is from Jose Augusto.

Hiahoai and Ioá displayed some knowledge of Brazilian Portuguese, although I cannot judge how proficient they are. Jose Augusto is a native speaker of Portuguese and demonstrated good knowledge of Pirahã, although I am not in a position to judge his proficiency level. He has been in contact with the Pirahãs for years and is the creator of APIHAM (*Associação do Povo Indígena Pirahã do Amazonas* 'Association of the Pirahã Indigenous People of the Amazon').

We acknowledge that errors may have crept into our transcriptions. Indeed, that is certainly the case. E&G claim that tones and glottal stops were often not represented in our papers and those of our colleagues and that representations of vowel quality were inconsistent—describing our transcriptions as 'a mixed set of symbols that seems to be drawn partially from Portuguese, partially from English, and partially from Everett's (1979, 1983) phonemic representation of the language' (p. 781). In fact, we acknowledged that we did not represent tone in our transcription (p. 117, n. 14)—and if we are guilty of missing some glottal stops and mistranscribing some vowels, we are happy to be corrected.

Pursuant to this criticism, however, E&G made unflagged and unsourced alterations in the Pirahã examples they cited from *Recursion*

https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2020.0017 Published online by Cambridge University Press

across domains. Surprisingly, their alterations do not merely add tones and glottal stops and correct vowel quality. They also presumed to syntactically and lexically alter an example that matters to our argument. A key example from our paper (ex. 14a) was represented by E&G as their ex. 11 (p. 785). E&G, however, modified our original example in a substantive way. A period was inserted after the embedded verb not found in our example, and a parenthesized first-person pronoun was placed after the period not present in our actual example.

We, however, reported the example exactly as produced by our consultant (Hiahoai Pirahã). These changes were made silently, without comment, falsely attributing their version to us. Remarkably, E&G did not justify or even flag this correction (or any other). No information is provided concerning whether these alterations were made based on E's knowledge of the language as an L2 speaker or whether the reviewers consulted a native speaker. This strikes us as a rather significant violation of 'scientific standards'.

Since transcription errors were discussed by E&G in a manner intended to impugn our fundamental competence as researchers, it is worth dwelling for a moment on their silent alteration of some first-person pronouns in our examples to *tíi* (glossed as 1.ERG), which we had represented as *ti*. E's previous work contains zero occurrences of *tíi* until his 2013 manuscript 'The shrinking Chomskyan corner: A final reply to Nevins, Pesetsky, Rodrigues' (available at https://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/000994), which contains eight occurrences of *ti*, and two of *tíi*, with no allusion to a case distinction between these forms. Footnote 13 of Everett 2005 is the sole remark I have been able to find that alludes to an ergative-absolutive distinction in the first-person pronoun, but evidence for such a distinction is lacking in this and subsequent papers by E. For example, *ti* and *tíi* occur with the same predicate in exs. 16 and 18 of Everett 2013 (pp. 11, 12, 15), and toneless *ti* appears as the subject of transitive 'eat' in E's 2009 'Pirahã culture and grammar: A response to some criticisms' (*Language* 85(2).405–42; p. 415, ex. 23a–b). In E's 1979 master's thesis ('Aspectos da fonologia do Pirahã', Universidade Estadual de Campinas), the form is given as *či*, while in Everett 1983, 1986, 1992 (*A língua Pirahã e a teoria da sintaxe: Descrição, perspectivas e teoria*, Editora da Unicamp), 2005, 2007 ('Cultural constraints on grammar in Pirahã: A reply to Nevins, Pesetsky, and Rodrigues (2007)', https://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/000427), and 2009 almost all occurrences of the pronoun are *ti* (344 occurrences), with five occurrences of *tí* in Everett 2005. Thus, if there is indeed a tonally marked case distinction in the first-person pronoun, it has not yet been substantiated in the literature. E&G's alterations therefore look like correction for correction's sake alone, raising the question of what other alterations have a similar character.

Uncertainty is a fundamental and positive aspect of science; it nourishes knowledge. Within linguistics, lesser-known languages, such as Pirahã, present many questions and uncertainties, which may sometimes feed hot debates and disputes. This is all acceptable and can help the field progress. For sure, there is lots to be discovered about Pirahã. Inattentive criticisms and personalized characterizations are bad practices, however, at best pointless and at worst destructive to scientific discourse.

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CLARIFICATION

On p. 784 of Daniel Everett and Edward Gibson's review article in the December 2019 issue of *Language* (RA on *Recursion across domains*, ed. by Luiz Amaral et al.; *Language* 95(4).777–90, 2019), they say: 'But examples like 9 and 10, with overt subjects in the second clause (Everett 1983, 2016) (and which demonstrate the repetitive style favored by the Pirahãs), are also perfectly acceptable in Pirahã'. The phrasing here could be interpreted as indicating that the examples in 9 and 10 come from Everett 1983 (*A lingua Pirahã e a teoria da sintaxe*, Universidade Estadual de Campinas dissertation) and/or Everett 2016 (*Dark matter of the mind: The culturally articulated unconscious*, University of Chicago Press). This was not the intended reading. The reference to Everett 1983 and 2016 was intended to refer to the general issue of Pirahã sentences having overt subjects. E&G confirmed that the examples in 9 and 10 are based on examples from E's unpublished data books, and that the intention of these examples is to indicate that there are no control structures in Pirahã. See Everett 1983:34ff. on the lack of attested evidence for interclausal control.

https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2020.0017 Published online by Cambridge University Press