

DANIEL L. EVERETT. *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes: Life and Language in the Amazonian Jungle*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2008. Pp. 279. ISBN 978-0-375-42502-8.

One of the most interesting points of the book is presented in the opening chapter. Everett, doing field linguistics with the Pirahã in the Amazon, wakes up to much commotion—the entire village is excited about seeing Xigagaí, a ‘being that lives above the clouds’ on the opposite bank of the river. Everett finds no way to participate in the experience and is rather baffled by it; everyone else is seeing something on what appears to him to be an empty bank. The situation is especially significant, as linguist Everett (Illinois State University) is doing ‘monolingual fieldwork’, meaning that there is no common spoken language between the researcher and the speakers of the language. One can say that Everett’s situation is like a real life version of Quine’s ‘radical translation’ thought experiment. The methods used by Everett are based on common experience, or observation of behaviour: pointing at an object and asking what it is, making notes of situations where certain expressions are used and so on. The true meaning (or as he puts it, English translation) of a saying or word is to be conveyed through correlation with these perceptions. In Everett’s method guide for monolingual fieldwork he professes to being a pragmatist, but considering the above, he seems rather optimistic in saying: “But as I learned from the Pirahãs, our expectations, our culture, and our experiences can render even perceptions of the environment nearly incommensurable cross-culturally”. Clearly translation is always not easy, and can even seem to be impossible at times, even when starting from the methodological principle of assumed common experiences.

Yet this is but one situation where a striking lack of shared experience did not assure mutual intelligibility. Originally, working for the Summer Institute of Linguistics, Everett went to the Pirahã land around the Maici River in Brazilian Amazon to learn this unwritten language and translate the New Testament into it. As the ideas of Christianity seemed to be untranslatable to the Pirahã, Everett eventually began losing his own faith. In another unrelated incident, Everett and his wife attempted to teach counting to the Pirahãs for the duration of eight months without success, until the Pirahãs decided to discontinue the lessons, stating that counting is not something that they do. Later, experiments performed and designed by cognitive scientists seemed to verify that the Pirahãs have no method of exact quantification and were unable to tell apart groups of objects containing either five or six similar objects among other things (Gordon 2004a, 2004b; Frank et al. 2008).

These phenomena seemed to have something in common. After decades of research, Everett dared to finally publish a now infamous article in *Current Anthropology* in 2005. In this article Everett claimed that Pirahã was quite unlike any other language, lacking some features that are considered to be universal by very influential theories such as Charles Hockett’s design features of language and the Universal Grammar proposed by Chomsky, Hauser and Fitch. It lacked grammatical recursion (or at least a form of it called ‘embedding’) and, in consequence, counting and number terms, as these are usually conceptually recursive. Furthermore, it lacked colour terms, had the simplest kinship terminology ever recorded, had no creation myth or religion, and did not contain a formal social hierarchy. Everett’s explanation, the hypothesis he found most economic, was that a cultural principle in

Pirahã life was to explain all of this: the Pirahã expressed no interest in issues that were not immediately experienceable. Everett formulates the hypothesis as follows: “Declarative Pirahã utterances contain only assertions related directly to the moment of speech, either experienced by the speaker or witnessed by someone alive during the lifetime of the speaker” (Everett 2008: 132).

It is assumed by Everett that recursive conceptual thought is needed for history, counting and quantification, complex kin terminology and formal religion among other things. But as the Pirahã did not value such things, they did not develop the need to adapt such constructs from other cultures. This argument states that there is a value base, life style or culture that is the fundamental reason for the unusual grammatical phenomena. In general it is agreed among linguists that culture does influence certain areas of languages, such as vocabulary, but that it cannot influence morpho-syntax; debate has ensued as to what extent these claims are true and what they actually mean. For instance, what kinds of utterings can be considered numerals in the strict sense? Is a word that could be translated as ‘small amount’ really a number?

*Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes* addresses this discourse by attempting to explain more openly Everett's life with the Pirahã. The merits of this book are that it discusses issues that previous publications did not, but which are central to understanding the situation and the work. After all, there is only so much one can say in a limited amount of words and in a strictly delimited channel of discourse. Important topics are the relationship of the Pirahã to Caboclo<sup>1</sup> and other outside cultures. Pirahãs clearly have a certain distrust for foreign influences, which probably further explains their unwillingness to adopt certain foreign ways of life and thought. Everett also describes affairs within Pirahã culture, such as hunting and relationships with surrounding nature, friendship, humour, love affairs, excommunication and even murder. And while there are some other written descriptions of Pirahã life by Curt Nimuendajú, Marco Antonio Gonçalves and Steven N. Sheldon, none of them give such detailed accounts of these internal and external social interactions and ways of life. Also important from the point of view of an ethnographer, are autobiographical accounts that clearly state where Everett is coming from and how his stay with the Pirahãs has affected his and his family's life.

Finally, the book is written in such a manner that it is easy to follow even for people without formal linguistic or social science education. As the topic is quite intriguing to the popular audience it is small wonder to learn from Everett's interview with *New Scientist* that he is negotiating with Hollywood producers over a film about his life. Simultaneously, the research continues, and Everett has hinted vaguely in interviews that even more radical findings might be on the way.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Term used in Brazil describing a person of mixed Brazilian Amerindian and European descent.

BOOK REVIEWS

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