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**THE SUNDAY TIMES**

# Language: The Cultural Tool by Daniel Everett

Daniel Everett comes out of the jungle fighting, with a rich, deeply readable work on the theory of language that aims to put Chomsky in the shade

*Bryan Appleyard* Published: 18 March 2012



Out of Amazonia: Daniel Everett (third right) with a Brazilian Indian friend (Ed Swinden)

In the Wari' language of Brazil, the word for "wife" translates as "our vagina". Your first reaction is probably that this is insultingly reductive, and that the Wari' men accord very low status to their women. On second thoughts, perhaps the word honours the women as the very source of life and is thus the highest

possible compliment the men could pay. Which is it to be?

Daniel Everett, despite having co-authored the only grammar of the Wari' language, cannot answer that question. In fact, nobody can answer that question without conducting a systematic analysis — a “thick description”, in anthropological terms — of Wari' culture. And that is the big point: language is, ultimately, the tool of a culture.

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Or take the Piraha people deep in the Amazonian jungle. Everett spent a total of 30 years with them and speaks the language fluently. In the early years, he — a white-faced, red-bearded man who plainly was not Piraha — would address them in their own tongue. They stared at him with open-mouthed amazement and did not respond. They regarded him, he realised, as “a big, bipedal - parrot”; he was merely mouthing the words — he could not possibly know what they meant. In technical terms, they could not extend their own “theory of mind” to include a non-Piraha. Their language is who they, uniquely, are.

Everett has now emerged from the jungle — he is dean of arts at Bentley University in Massachusetts — to produce a book whose importance is almost impossible to overstate. This is an intellectual *cri de coeur* and a profound celebration of human diversity. After reading it, you will — should — care as much about disappearing languages as you do about the clubbed seal or the harpooned whale. But, first, you need to know about Noam Chomsky.

Chomsky is to linguistics what Freud once was to psychoanalysis: he is the subject itself. But it was Freud's fate to be overthrown, and that is what is now happening to Chomsky; after this book, it is hard to imagine how he will be resurrected. Irascible Chomsky now regards Everett as a charlatan.

The argument is about nature versus nurture. After the evils of Nazi naturism — the Jews, they said, were “naturally” inferior — intellectuals became nurturists, believing that people were made, and could be improved, by society. The pendulum started to swing back in the 1970s and 1980s with the arrival of evolutionary psychology and a new belief in the existence of “human nature”. The orthodoxy since then — propagated by EO Wilson, Steven Pinker and, pre-eminently, Chomsky — has been that we come into the world equipped with a battery of “instincts”, including language, derived from our Darwinian inheritance.

In the case of language, one big argument for this is the speed with which children learn to speak, picking up vocabulary and complex syntax in a few months. Chomsky said this was because we are born with a capacity for a universal grammar, and that, ultimately, all languages could be traced back to this biologically determined form.

Reasonable as this may sound, there is very little — Everett would say there is no — evidence for an inborn universal grammar. There is no “language instinct”, as Pinker calls it, because a language is learnt and an instinct, by definition, is not.

This book is an assembly of empirical evidence against Chomsky and Pinker. Children, for example, do not learn syntax as such, they learn words and sentences as units of meaning. This gives them a feeling for sentences, which becomes, in adult terms, syntax. Similarly, there is no universal grammar that can be detected beneath all the 7,000 languages in the world. The variety is as bewildering in languages as it is in forms of behaviour, because languages are tools of the culture from which they spring; they are, in a sense, the greatest works of art that humans have ever created.

Crucially, this means that human cultures can be opaque to each other. “Different languages and different cultures can,” Everett writes, “produce different thoughts.” Language is a cultural, not a biological, tool, precisely because it gives meaning to the world in which it is formed; it is not some pure Platonic entity that adapts itself to that world, it is a product of the world. So, to know why wives are called vaginas in

Wari', you need, as far as possible, to become a Wari'.

This is to scratch the surface of a very rich but also very readable book. Everett is not the first to challenge the reign of Chomsky, but he is the most accessible, and, thanks to his years in Amazonia, the most - intimately informed. But, graduates in linguistics, beware: you may discover you have been horribly mistaught.

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