

advocacy. Powell wants regional policy-makers to respond to the flood of data on global warming. Otherwise, he says, westerners will find themselves in a megadrought of their own making.

References

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LINGUISTICS

Pondering Grammar and God

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Contemplate your life as it is now, the things you hold most dear to you, family, and the beliefs and values you have adopted and hold true. What would your life become if you were to lose them all? Who might you be? These are questions that Dan Everett faced in the course of his fieldwork among the Pirahã people of the Amazonian jungle. *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes* offers Everett's personal account of the language and life of the tribe and, at the same time, a close-up of his life and experiences in making sense of this new world.

As a trained linguist and devoted Christian, Everett (now in the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at Illinois State University) set out with his wife and three children to bring the word of God to the Pirahãs. Aiming to succeed where other missionaries had failed, he tried to master the famously difficult Pirahã language (for which the tribe is notorious in linguistics circles) and to break their recalcitrant rigidity toward alien faiths. In a twist of fate, Everett lost all: God, wife, and even linguistic ideology. The Pirahãs left him stripped of these but, in return, provided their own take on life. They taught him about the “immedi-

acy of experience”—the principle he locates at the heart of the Pirahã language and culture. According to Everett, living and speaking for the moment allows the tribe's members to enjoy each day as it comes, to avoid stress and the burnouts that result from worrying about the future, and to disregard the regret and guilt of the past.

The book has two parts. The first describes everyday life within the tribe. Although lacking any temporal organization, this narrative talks in an honest and raw voice about birth, death, eating, hunting, rituals, spirits, sex, family and kinship, growing up, and community among the Pirahãs. The people and stories are intertwined with Everett's own life: as a husband fighting to save his wife and daughter from a near-fatal bout of malaria, as a linguist and fieldworker coping with first-language and first-culture biases, as a Christian coming to terms with dissipating faith, and as a foreigner in a community plotting to kill him. Despite a few confusing aspects of the story (such as how the individual Pirahãs mentioned in the book interact with one another), the prose lures the



Immersed among the Pirahãs. Everett with Kaabohoá.

reader with vivid and unexpected incidents that leave one pondering when the movie might be coming out.

The second part focuses on the linguistic aspects of Everett's Amazonian experiences (primarily on the Pirahã language and, more generally, on the author's own ideas). The author trained within the generativist school, founded by Noam Chomsky, that has largely dominated the linguistics arena over the past 50 years. Generativists endorse the idea of an innate universal grammar and propose that language acquisition is, at least to some con-

siderable extent, innate. Like many of the beliefs the author held when he arrived in the Amazon, generative grammar was soon questioned and discarded because it had “little enlightening to say about the Pirahã language.” The “straight head,” as the Pirahãs term their

language, appears to lack terms for color, number, (distant) past events, and quantifiers. Everett goes so far as to claim that the language lacks recursion, the ability to put one phrase or sentence inside another (in a “matrioshka-doll effect,” as eloquently put by Everett). The absence of recursion is extremely difficult to swallow—not just by Chomskyans, but by any linguist. These claims remain

highly controversial and many linguists dismiss them; however, a field often benefits from the reexamination of some of its more cemented assumptions. Nonetheless, although such health checks are good for the field, they are often extremely tough on those who instigate them.

It is not clear for whom the second part of the book was written. The discussions there are too simple and introductory for the practicing linguist and probably too long and clamoring for the lay reader—although Everett offers good explanations of some basic ideas from linguistics (such as the concepts of tones and tonal languages and the distinction between phonemes and allophones). To his merit, however, the author includes several transcripts of conversations with the Pirahãs. His willingness to present these demonstrates his confidence in his interpretations, and the transcripts add credibility to his argument.

The book is fascinating. In part, that is because Everett provides a personal glimpse of a tribal people living in a remote jungle. More important, we see the world of the Pirahãs through the lens of a unique source: someone whose own world is turned upside down and who possesses an inquisitive and adventurous mind that is, at times, very much in conflict with itself. In addition, *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes* may serve to bring the furor of linguistics and language research to readers who would otherwise never catch sight of it.

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Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes

Life and Language in the Amazonian Jungle

by Daniel L. Everett

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