

Faculty of Language blog



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June 16, 2014 at 5:48 PM

This is a reply to Christina's post about a question that came up in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (CHE) discussion of 2012. At the time I asked if in fact Daniel Everett had been accused, as was suggested in the *CHE*, of (1) charlatanry, (2) fabrication of data and (3) racism in his fieldwork of many years with the indigenous community of Pirahã speakers, and especially whether there was evidence for (2) and (3).

<http://chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2012/03/28/poisonous-dispute/>

The three accusations are related because they appear to be part of an effort to discredit Everett's work. If, on the other hand, the accusations are based on evidence the profession should be provided with this evidence or a summary of it. In addition, (3) in particular has been reported to have been a consideration in evaluating whether Everett should continue to have access to the Pirahã community by the Brazilian government agency (FUNAI) charged with granting such access; and (1) and (2) have been pointed to as being relevant to this evaluation. A "charlatan" according to Webster's Third Edition is a "fraud." At the time, I asked if anyone could help me locate the published record of the accusation (1), attributed to Noam Chomsky, that Everett is a "charlatan." The following is the account of an exchange, written by the editor(s) of the Science page of *Folha de San Paulo* appearing in the September 1, 2009 issue. The title of the report reads: "Ele virou um charlatão", diz Chomsky ["He became a charlatan," says Chomsky].

<http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/ciencia/fe0102200904.htm>

The second paragraph begins: "Ele virou um charlatão puro, embora costumasse ser um bom linguista descritivo." [He became a pure charlatan, even though he was once a good descriptive linguist]. The passage appears in quotes, suggesting that these are the words of Noam

Chomsky. In the interest of fairness, it needs to be determined whether the quoted passage attributed to Chomsky was actually pronounced: (a) in an interview on-the-record, or if it was (b) off-the-record and then published without permission or knowledge of Chomsky, or that it is (c) a misquotation, in the clear case of (b) or (c) an irresponsible report by the author. Given that a version of the “became a pure charlatan” charge has been widely circulated on the internet, I am asking which of the three (a), (b) or (c) is the case, and if Professor Chomsky stands by the characterization of Everett being a “pure charlatan.” I’m still waiting to see if anyone can help me clarify accusations (2) and (3). Thank you in advance.