

Discussion post to **Angry words** by Tom Bartlett (March 20, 2012) *Chronicle of Higher Education*



norbertfrancis • 5 years ago

Sorry for posting this comment after so much time has passed. But in some ways I was happy to have missed the discussion back in the spring because it saddens me to read it now. A good deal of clarification is needed to get this discussion back on track. In particular, the accusations that have surfaced are of such gravity that I am puzzled why they have not been addressed more seriously.

First, to sort out some of the questions that have been raised by the author and commentators: the questions of tone, decorum and ethics need to be separated from Everett's scientific claims. These, of course, are related to the questions of tone, decorum and ethics, but they need to be considered separately, first to see exactly how some of them might be related. After studying the research reports and debate, I, for one, have come to the conclusion that Everett's findings regarding the absence of recursion in Pirahã are off the mark. Readers should take up the suggestions in this blog to study the assessment of Nevins, Pesetsky & Rodrigues in particular; the claim about recursion, from what I can gather as a non-linguist, is probably, in my understanding as an outsider, far off the mark. On the bigger question, that Everett's study challenges the fundamental concepts of Universal Grammar was nicely addressed by nhorste. In the end what we're interested in mainly is the mental grammar, the language acquiring capacity, not what a "dictionary version" of the Pirahã grammar might tell us. It is interesting, and needs to be understood, what are the patterns of how people use the language they know; but ultimately, in this debate (per Everett's challenge) it's about what speakers are capable of. Following nhorste, an example of a relevant experiment would be the following: would native speakers of Pirahã be incapable of learning, in a naturalistic acquisition setting, a language like Portuguese, including its recursive patterns, because of their "culture?" The "cultural constraint" hypothesis would predict the most primitive pidgin-like second language (L2) acquisition across the board, even in cases of first language attrition (which normally assures L2 completeness). But for folks interested in UG, dismissiveness would be a big mistake. There is no way we can say at this point that Everett's findings are not important, in some other way, or whether or not he's on to something about what language competence consists of; that down the road his findings might help us get a better understanding of the language faculty. My bet is that they are, and that we should engage his research in an open-minded and above all respectful way.

Second issue that, in principle, should be considered separately: access to the community of speakers that apparently has been denied to Everett. Those of us who do fieldwork in countries of which we are not citizens abide by the legal restrictions placed on our research. For better or for worse, these are the conditions we accept. The procedures of the Brazilian FUNAI, and how they are implemented, may or may not be in the best interests of indigenous communities (as Anonimo and others have noted, this is a very complicated question); but that's another discussion. At the same time, the grave accusations that have been made against Everett's project are relevant to this problem.

On tone: almost everyone seems to agree that it needs to be cleaned up, but my first impression is that the metric is not being applied even-handedly. Starting with Everett, remarks about "armchair linguists" (starting in Edge, 2007) are unnecessary and uncalled for and do nothing but distract us from the important things we need to talk about. Crossing the line, however, are insults and other kinds of school-yard bad behavior, if indeed the reports of these are true. Try as I did, I could not find in my search the disrespectful indignity that supposedly appeared in a 2009 issue of *Folha de Sao Paulo* [maybe someone could help me] pronounced by prominent linguist. So I cannot affirm that it did or that indeed the offense was ever committed publically. If it was, an apology should be expected by all honest and fair-minded students of language and cognition – no less. Doesn't matter if it was years ago.

Beyond questions of decorum and mature academic discourse are matters of serious ethics violation that have been hinted at in this discussion. An accusation of data falsification (in this case directed at Everett) cannot be alluded to and then just dropped, as like "throwing the rock and hiding the hand." If another researcher has evidence of such grave violation of research ethics (fabrication of results – mentioned in Tom Bartlett's *CHE* 2012 article), the profession needs to see it; alternatively, if no evidence is forthcoming, a rectification is the least that we should expect. If the suggestion of falsification was actually made (again, I am not sure that it was), all parties to the alleged implication, including Bartlett, need to come clean – if there is evidence of falsification, the charges need to be made public.

The most troubling of all are the accusations of racism (for one last time, reported third hand without independent confirmation). Indeed, if Everett is guilty of racism in his work with the Pirahã, that of course changes everything, and FUNAI would be completely justified in denying him access to the community. And again, given the wide coverage this alleged accusation has received, the persons involved in reporting it, and if true, the author(s) of this most serious charge of all, need to make the relevant materials (or a summary report of their contents) public. Then, is there something that the profession and readers of Everett's research papers don't know? There is nothing that I have read [maybe someone can help here as well] to suggest that a charge of racism in this case is anything more than an irresponsible insinuation. I will stand corrected if evidence can be brought forward. What's curious to me though (in conclusion) is how is it that such a denunciation is seemingly taken so lightly among participants in this discussion, as if it's become common currency these days in public debate.