[Daniel L. Everett](http://daneverettbooks.com/) is Dean of Arts and Sciences at Bentley University. He is the author of [*Language: The Cultural Tool*](http://www.amazon.com/Language-Cultural-Daniel-L-Everett/dp/0307378535) and the subject of the documentary [*A Grammar of Happiness*](http://www.essential-media.com/node/119).

**Avi Solomon:** Were there any formative experiences in your childhood that shaped your career?

**Dan Everett:** Well, by far the most important experience in my childhood was the death of my mother when I was eleven. She was twenty-nine. That changed my life, and it taught me that life is extremely fragile. And I knew from that point on that I was going to die and never feared dying. Because I felt that if my mother had died, I certainly didn't have any fear of dying.

Another important thing was music. I found the guitar, and played music, and wanted to be a famous musician. I had insecurities and issues that were the result of the fact that my mother had died so young, and music really helped me through all of that. And also it turned out I was pretty good at music, that if I stuck with something long enough, I could get really good at it. That encouraged me when I went to college, even though I had not been a very good student in high school, to believe that if I worked hard, I could be a good student.

So these things encouraged me and changed me, and gave me different perspectives on my life. Those were two of the most important things of my childhood.

**Avi:** You describe your uncle in World War II recounting how his Marine platoon got shot on the beaches, and what their last words were.

**Dan:** They said "Momma". He was in the Marines that were the first on the beaches, and he was eighteen years old. Most of these men were eighteen. He said the last thought everybody had was for their mother. It's a really sobering thing. I know that I'm sixty years old, and my mother has been dead for forty-nine years, but there's not a day that goes by that I don't think about her, and when things happen. I think every young man is close to their mother ñ that's the normal. I realize that there are dysfunctional relationships, but it is a surprisingly powerful force in male lives.

**Avi Solomon:** How did you come to live with the [Pirahã](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pirah%C3%A3_people)?

**Dan:** I met a young woman in high school and she had been raised in Brazil, her parents were missionaries. We decided after we got engaged that we would be missionaries ourselves, so took all the training, and went off to Brazil to translate the bible and we were asked to work with the Pirahã because their language wasn't related to any other known language. I had done well in linguistic training, and so the mission thought that we might be the people to take up the challenge, because no one else had been able to figure out the language.

**Avi:** You went to convert them, but they kind of ended up converting you.

**Dan:** That's right. I went to tell them about God, and the need to be saved so that they could go to heaven and not go to hell, but what I found was a people for whom most of the things that were important to me seemed irrelevant. They couldn't understand why I thought that I had any right to tell them how to live, although they tried very hard to understand me because they treated me with respect. And they couldn't understand why I could think that someone whom I had never seen, never met, whom no one I knew had ever seen or ever met, could be the basis for teaching them how they ought to live.

Also, the quality of their lives was better in most respects than most people I knew who were religious. Just the way that they coped with the difficulties of life around them, and related to one another. This is not to say that they're a perfect people. Nobody is. But I found them extremely inspiring and challenging. And I certainly couldn't, after a while, justify to myself the idea that I knew more about how to live than they did.

**Avi:** During the course of your fieldwork you underwent a triple crisis, a personal, intellectual, and religious crisis.

**Dan:** On the personal level, it was a very hard time for me. Before I met my current wife I was all alone. There were some days of dark depression in there. And it was the end of my thirty-plus year marriage. But that wasn't by design. That happened as a result of my religious change. I would have loved to have avoided those things. Obviously the hardest thing by far for me, was to have my children not talk to me for quite some time. It's still hard on my daughters. You know, they go back and forth between talking to me and not talking to me. But I really believed and still believe that I had to tell the truth as I understood it, and take the consequences. As far as religion, I felt that I had been a hypocrite for a long time because I didn't believe in things that I said I believed in, and I had to be honest. Professionally, I realized that to contradict the major theory that I had been working with, to say that I thought it was wrong was going to create a lot of opposition. I didn't really anticipate how much, but I knew it would cause some. But that's what I felt and that's what I had to say.

**Avi:** What gave you the resilience to pull through?

**Dan:** I feel like it was being able to look at myself in the mirror and know that I was saying what I believed, and no longer pretending things that I didn't believe. And it was meeting my current wife. She has been the greatest source of encouragement and support that I've ever had.

**Avi:** What is your definition of language?

**Dan:** My concept of language is broader than many theoreticians. To me language is far more than grammar. Grammar is simply the way that we take, for example, words and put them together in sentences. That's a simple component. But language to me includes all the things that we talk about, and the ways that we talk about them. So it includes poetry, and conversation as well as sentences, phrases and words. And each individual item, whether it's a sentence or whether it's a word, is a sign in the sense of the Swiss linguist Saussure. It has meaning, and it has form. And the meanings and the forms are largely ñ not exclusively, but largely shaped by the values of the culture that produces them. So just like some cultures have words that aren't found in other cultures. One example is Haggis, which is a food in Scotland, but a lot of cultures don't eat that food, so they don't have the name for it. By the same token, different cultures have different constraints on the shape and the meaning that's conveyed by sentences so that the very grammar is shaped by the culture.

Let me just say what I mean by culture. I mean knowledge, and ways of interacting, and I mean a set of values ranked in a certain way so that each culture not only has a set of values, but it knows which values are ranked higher than other values and have higher priority or more importance. Culture is one of the largest, most important shapers of the form and meaning of our language. And that has been overlooked and denied, in fact, by many modern theories of grammar.

**Avi:** How did you learn the Pirahã language?

**Dan:** By working daily and starting off with simple objects. I would point to an object, and say it's name in English. Like a stick, or a leaf, an animal, a part of my body. Saying the name in English, and then writing down whatever they responded, and trying to figure out whether that was the noun I was after. Then I would do things with the objects. Throw the stick. Drop the leaf. Hit myself. And try to get verbs. And by working very slowly, setting a goal of ten words a day for myself, I worked all day every day for the better part of a year. After about six or seven months I could say a lot of things. But it took me about a year of hard work before I felt like I could say pretty much what I needed.

**Avi:** The Pirahã language has rules of empirical evidence built into it.

**Dan:** That's right. Every verb ends with a suffix that tells you whether what you're saying was directly observed, or inferred, or just overheard by hearsay. So they don't talk about things that they haven't witnessed themselves, or that somebody they know hasn't witnessed. They don't have stories of the ancient past because that doesn't make any sense to them. You were never there. And they don't have stories about what's going to happen to them in the future. They speculate a little bit, but it's not an important part for them. They don't make plans for the distant future because again, you haven't seen that. You haven't been there. So they live one day at a time. It's not like they don't know that there is a past, or they don't know there is a future. They just don't talk about it because it doesn't make any sense to them to talk about it. The interesting thing about the Pirahã language is that it's like the Basque of the Amazon. It's not related to any other known Amazonian language. That means that if it ever did come from any other Amazonian language, it's been more than 6,000 years. We can tell, for example, that German and English, and French were the same language 6,000 years ago because we can see similarities between them today. But we can't find any similarity between Pirahã and other Amazonian languages, which indicates that it's probable that it has been distinct for more than 6,000 years. The descriptions of Pirahã culture that we have from about 1784, indicate a culture very similar to the way that it is today, although more numerous. So you know, it's possible that if we went back several thousand years, it's not only possible, it's probably likely the Pirahã culture was different. Maybe the language was different. Probably it was. But we know that for the last several hundred years at least their culture has been relatively stable, and the way that they live today was the way that they were living in the 1700s.

**Avi:** So what is the secret of their happiness?

**Dan:** I believe that they're happy because they don't worry about the past, and they don't worry about the future. They feel that they're able to take care of their needs today. They don't want things that they can't provide for themselves. At least they never have in my experience. In other words, I take in things and they will ask for a few little things that I have that they don't make, such as pots and pans or matches. And if I give it to them, fine, and if I don't give it to them, fine. They're not materialistic. They value being able to travel quickly and lightly. I've never met another group, not even another Amazonian group, that is so little concerned with material objects.

**Avi:** The Pirahã use various ways to express themselves, especially whistling and humming.

**Dan:** They're not the only group in the world that does this, but it's especially important to them. They hum and whistle, and they use other kinds of speech much more than many other groups. So anything they can say using consonants and vowels and what we would consider to be normal speech, they can also say by whistling or humming. Because they use the tones of their language and they use the rhythm of their language to communicate, and that's rich enough. It's much richer in some respects than languages like English, so that they actually have enough information in the tones and rhythm of their humming and whistling to talk about anything. Women do not whistle. Men can hum like the women, but only men can whistle, and they use it almost always when they're hunting. It's a good way of communicating and sounding like birds.

**Avi:** They also have a special language for communicating with spirits.

**Dan:** Actually "spirits" is a bad translation. I started calling them "spirits" when I was a Christian missionary. And what they are to the Pirahã are jungle entities that are not humans, but look like humans. And they all talk in a falsetto voice. But they're tangible. You know, I mean if you saw them or I saw them, which I have many times, to us in our way of thinking, they're just Pirahã talking in a high falsetto voice. But to the Pirahã they are really different creatures. They'll say there's one of those "fast mouths". And I'll say "Well, that looks just like so-and-so from the village". And they'll say "Yes, they look just like Pirahã. But you can tell they're not because they talk in those high voices". I suppose that the closest thing we have to it is saying that someone is possessed. But it's not quite the same to the Pirahã. They would say that that is not a Pirahã. In fact if you find a Pirahã man that claims to be one of these jungle entities—it's always men that do this—these fast mouths, and you talk to him later, he will deny any knowledge of it. He will say "That wasn't me, I wasn't there".

It's a different concept of what's objective or subjective. It doesn't neatly fall in our dichotomy of fact versus fiction. And so for example, even when they dream, they'll tell you about dreaming and while they know that it's not the same as being awake, they consider it just as valid an experience. So the fact that I dreamed I was walking on the moon means that in some sense I did walk on the moon.

**Avi:** The Pirahã have an intimate knowledge of their environment.

**Dan:** The Pirahã can tell you what the name of every different species of tree according to the way that they classify them. They can tell you what animals live in those trees. They can tell you what kind of food those trees produce. They can tell you about the animals. They can tell you which ones can be tamed, which ones can't be tamed. Which ones are good for eating. Where they live. If you're going along the river and you see bubbles coming to the top of the water, they can tell you whether that's a fish or whether it's the rock underneath. And every Pirahã child that I've ever asked is able to give me the same information. So everyone learns about nature and their environment very early on in their lives. Each individual Pirahã is fully capable of providing for themselves. Any Pirahã child, a boy, can provide for himself from the time he's nine or ten years old.

**Avi:** Did your children also pick up stuff from the Pirahã children?

**Dan:** Yes. My daughters, when they were young, would take off with Pirahã girls during the day in a canoe, and disappear, and be gone until evening. And come back singing with them, and they would walk with them through the jungle and pick up things with them, and learn the names for those things. My son from the time he was three years old had a Pirahã bow and arrow, and would run with the Pirahã boys all around the village and sometimes into the jungle. And they would tell me all sorts of things about animals they had seen, and often come back with animals and lots of different things like berries and nuts that they'd collected in the jungle.

**Avi:** How can we try and emulate some of this in our own lives?

**Dan:** I think the main thing is being observant. You know, our children can't begin to take care of themselves when they're nine or ten years old, because they're not forced to observe and to learn about you know, the world around them. There are certainly many members of our culture who are extremely observant and knowledgeable about nature, but it's not general in our culture. The Pirahã have to survive. They don't have the concept of going to a supermarket to get their food. When I tell them about it, they find it very boring. They have to feed themselves every day. They don't store food. So each day when they wake up they're hungry. Each day they have to find food. They have to find food for their children, for themselves, for their family. And that means knowing where to find the food.

One night a Pirahã man came in to the village and told me that a bushmaster, one of the most poisonous snakes of the jungle, tried to bite him. And that he was tired, but tomorrow morning he was going to go out and kill the snake. So he left early the next morning, and he came back about 11:00 am or noon with this enormous poisonous snake with an arrow through its head, and he stuck it into a tree, and it was just hanging from the tree. He said to me "He thought he would bite me, but I bit it!". I can't imagine knowing enough about my environment to go back and find the same snake that tried to bite me the day before in the thick jungle.

**Avi:** So the Pirahã have made a cultural choice to live in the present and it shapes their language?

**Dan:** That's right. They've made a choice. So for example, everything that Pirahã say has to come with a marker for where they got the evidence. And that is why their grammar is radically different from the grammars of many other languages. Because the taboos on talking about things for which you don't have evidence for have profound impact on the actual structure of the language.

**Avi:** Are individuals in the Pirahã culture conscious that they're choosing to live in the present?

**Dan:** I wouldn't say so. If you think about some of the things that we do on a regular basis, we make decisions in our lives every day, and there are things that we don't do, but it's not conscious. It's just something that we do. To take one extreme example - my anthropology professor, the first one I ever had, asked the class to spit in their hands. And some people didn't want to do it, but others did. He said, okay, now lick it back up. Nobody wanted to do that. He said "But why? What is the problem? It just was in your mouth a couple of seconds ago, and now you don't want to lick it back up". Who knows that we don't want to do that? Do Americans tell themselves that if they expel something from their body they don't want to take it back in their bodies?

The Pirahã are not like that in some ways. I mean, a lot of things that they consider repugnant we don't, and things we consider repugnant they don't. But nobody goes around and teaches anyone that it's wrong to do this, and it's wrong to do that. These are just values that we absorb, and we internalize them through imitation. And by cultural constraints on talking in a similar way.

Say for example, in the marriage ceremony in English when you put the ring on the spouse, you say "With this ring I thee wed". Nobody talks like that today. But you do it in that ceremony, and nobody is conscious of why they do it that way. So there's all kinds of ritualistic language. So it's that cultural form that affects the language that we use, but it's not conscious to people. They can say "Oh yes, that's right, that's the way I say it". But they wouldn't be able to tell you why.

**Avi:** Another expression of culture shaping language is their relationship to numbers or quantities.

**Dan:** They don't need numbers, and they don't need quantities except in very relative amounts. So they can say a small pile of things, or a big pile of things. But they don't need any more than that, and they don't have words for any more than that. A number of people have claimed that numbers are innate and that the concept of counting is innate. It's difficult to reconcile claims like that with the fact that the Pirahã have no numbers and don't count. That's a very controversial claim, but it has now been tested and corroborated by three separate studies in major scientific journals by people who've actually been there. So factually it's quite sound and well tested to say that Pirahã don't have numbers. And the reason they don't have numbers is because they don't need numbers. There's no task in their culture for which numbers are important.

Also, having numbers requires generalization, and those generalizations go beyond the Pirahã principle that you talk about the present, and you avoid generalizations whenever possible. I mean, if the Pirahã has a word for dog ñ and they of course, do ñ any noun is a generalization. So if a Pirahã says parrot, they don't just mean one parrot. They mean all parrots. So clearly they generalize. And they generalize to the degree that all languages have to generalize. You can't have a language without being able to talk about a noun or things, and the events that they participate in. You know, so there's a thing and it does something. Or a thing and something happens to it. So they can do that. But they avoid unnecessary generalizations that go beyond the needs of their culture. And numbers are such a generalization, so they don't have them. They don't have words for colors. They can clearly see colors and describe them but don't have words for them. They don't have words that some philosophers and linguists have considered to be essential to all human languages, such as quantifiers like the word "all", or "each", or "every". They don't have words like that.

**Avi:** They might not have that, but there's a tradeoff with happiness.

**Dan:** When you talk about how complex a language is, it can be very simple in some respects and very complicated in others. The Pirahã word structure is very complicated. And a lot of things we do with complicated sentences, the Pirahã do with simple sentences, but very complicated words. However, this refusal of theirs to generalize beyond the present and their refusal to worry about the past or the future is, I believe, crucial to their happiness.

And what's the evidence for their happiness? On the one hand every visitor that I take down to the Pirahã comments that they've never seen people smile and laugh so much. That's one superficial evidence of happiness. But you also don't find Pirahã sitting around depressed and crying. You don't find chronic fatigue syndrome. You don't find suicide. The concept of suicide is foreign to them. I've never seen evidence for any of the mental disorders that we associate with depression, sadness and lack of happiness among the Pirahã. They just work, they come home, and they talk. They're happy. They sing at night. And they get up and do it again. It's just an amazing degree of satisfaction without the need for consciousness-altering drugs or states.

>*Daniel Everett performs "Colors in my Life"*

**Avi:** You described a day where the whole tribe was at the beach having a huge party.

**Dan:** Yes. In the rainy season there are no beaches because [the river](http://maps.google.com/maps?f=q&source=s_q&hl=en&q=-7.360700,+-62.271883&sll=33.894339,-117.981641&sspn=0.016885,0.033045&ie=UTF8&geocode=FUSvj_8ddc5J_A&split=0&ll=-7.360679,-62.271881&spn=0.040348,0.06609&t=p&z=15&iwloc=A) comes up more than seventy feet. Since food becomes harder to get in the rainy season because you have the same amount of fish, but in much greater volume of water, the Pirahã tend to spread out, and you find very small villages of maybe one or two families. But in the dry season when the river goes down and the beaches come out and the fish are easy to catch, they get together on the beaches in large groups. And you'll find beaches with over 100 Pirahã for a couple of months during the dry season. And in that case, they're singing and dancing every night. They could go on dancing for forty-eight hours, sometimes even for seventy-two hours. But that doesn't mean that everyone's awake for that entire period of time. It just means that you dance and dance and dance, and then when you get tired, you might step out and take a nap, and then get back up and start dancing again. But the noise and the happiness and all this stuff going on with it continues on. And if you're like me, and not able to do that all the time, and trying to sleep, it gets frustrating! They're just happy the whole time!

**Avi:** They also do not express recursion in their language.

**Dan:** That's correct. That's a cultural choice. Here's how it works. In the Pirahã language, every verb has a meaning, and that meaning includes the participants in the action. So take the verb "hit". That is ñ whatever hit means, plus the person doing the hitting, and the thing being hit. So I hit you. You're the thing being hit. I'm the person doing the hitting. Every part of that basic verb's meaning has to be warranted by a suffix on the verb that tells you where the evidence came from.

Now if I start to make it more complicated, so instead of ñ so let's say that I say John hits Bill. That's fine. John and Bill and hit are all warranted. We know whether the evidence was observed, whether it was overheard, or whether it was inferred. But the minute I say John said that Peter hit Bill, all I can tell is the evidence for John said. I can't tell about the evidence where Peter hit Bill. Each verb has to be separate, and have its own evidence expressed for it. That's a simplified explanation. And the fact that each verb and its participants have to be evidenced, warranted by these suffixes that gives the source of evidence means that there can't be any recursion in the language. Here's another way of thinking about it. This isn't the technically correct way of thinking about it, but it does get the idea across. When we utter a simple sentence, every part of it is new information. John hit Bill. I'm telling you that something happened. If I say on the other hand the man who you saw yesterday hit Bill. The "who you saw yesterday" is old information. That's why we put it in there so we can keep track of things. And that's a recursive structure, but it violates the fact that it's not an assertion, it's not new information, there's a part of that that's old information. So as long as you say that each sentence has to carry only new information, and we have to know the source of the evidence, there can be no recursion in the language. And that follows from the principle of immediacy of experience that I've talked about. Because that immediate experience tells us that it has to have been experienced by the person speaking, or by someone who told the person speaking. And that is reflected in the grammar by these suffixes that tell us where the evidence comes from. And those suffixes, by their very nature, prohibit recursion.

**Avi:** That kind of reminds me of a [Yoga Sutra](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pramana) which talks about these three kinds of knowledge!

**Dan:** I've often seen a strong correlation and compatibility between the Pirahã worldview and Zen Buddhism.

**Avi:** Your recursion claim has aroused intense controversy.

**Dan:** Many claims I've made have been controversial. And every single one of them has been independently tested. Thirty years ago, I made claims about the way the rhythm of the language worked. And UCLA sent down a phonetics specialist, Peter Ladefoged, who was probably the greatest in the world at that time. Then he went with me to the tribe and tested these claims. And only after he said we had verified them did people begin to accept that. And it's the same thing. People have tested the number claim. They've tested the color claim. And they've tested the recursion claim.

At the last Linguistic Society of America meeting in Portland, Oregon a paper was presented by MIT cognitive scientists who had gone through all of the Pirahã data very carefully , and they made sure to go through data that was not collected by me, but by the previous missionary. Because the feeling was if they went through data collected by me, somebody could say well, he just made up that data, or he doctored it up. But they went through stories and text collected by another missionary who was there before me, and their conclusion after going through all of these examples very carefully was that they didn't see any clear evidence for recursion in the language. In fact, they saw evidence for the contrary. That there wasn't recursion in the language. And that was a very well attended talk, and some of my critics were there as well as a lot of neutral observers. And this wasn't my research. This was somebody else's research testing my research. So I believe that the absence of recursion is far more accepted today among people who think of Pirahã than it was just a few months ago, since the studies have come in.

**Avi:** How hopeful are you that the Pirahã will survive their encounter with modernity?

**Dan:** I have to say that overall I'm not really optimistic. I don't want to underestimate them. They're a very strong and resilient people, but [the history of these kinds of contexts is not good](http://rewild.info/anthropik/vault/sorenson-preconquest/index.html). But I do have a lot of faith in the Pirahã inner strength and if any culture can stand up to this kind of pressure, it's theirs.

**Avi:** And hopefully, we the colonized can learn from them.

**Dan:** There's tremendous amounts we can learn from them, and in fact, from all other groups and peoples who are not like ourselves. I am currently working on a book idea called "[Wisdom From Strangers](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7936945.stm)" about how we can learn very important valuable lessons from people who are unlike ourselves. In fact, the more unlike us they are, the more we can learn. You cannot learn what you need to learn just by staying in the library. You have to have these experiences to take you beyond the boundaries of what you know, and make you live in ways that you never knew before.

**Questions:**

1. Based on the documentary we watched in class and this interview with Everett, is language shaping culture, or is culture shaping language? Make a solid claim as to what is influencing what and support this claim with evidence from either text. (10 marks)
2. Explain what Everett means when he says, “[the history of these kinds of contexts is not good](http://rewild.info/anthropik/vault/sorenson-preconquest/index.html)”. (5 marks)
3. Are the Piraha a linguistic phenomena, or simply an ancient society doomed to modernism? Explain. (5 marks)
4. Considering target audience, context of creation, and context of reception who was this text created for and what was the intended impact? Explain. (5marks)
5. Has Everett or the Brazilian government helped, or harmed the Piraha? Explain. (5marks)