

Society for Linguistic Anthropology

JAMES STANLAW AND MARK PETERSON,
CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Everett on the Pirahã Language

This month we present excerpts from an interview with Daniel Everett. More of this interview can be found in the Knowledge Exchange section of this issue.

Jim Stanlaw: Let me ask you this, and I don't know how to do it politely. Do you think the Pirahã are at an evolutionary stage?

Daniel Everett: I think that the language is. And [Brent] Berlin has tried to get me to use the term "primitive language." He says we need to bite the bullet and say that this is a primitive language. We have to get over our prejudice to use this term. I think that's right. Since it hasn't developed, my thesis is that it had developed to fit a particular cultural niche. And that cultural niche means that it's not as complicated as other languages. So the implications of that are enormous.

So the good thing about the people that are coming down to test this stuff is, none of them believe a word I say. They think that, "Dan can't be a total idiot; He's published in a lot of journals, and he's been with this language for a long time. So whatever his error is, we'll discover it." But I think that in three years people will recognize the significance of the Pirahã for our theories of culture, and our theories of linguistics. I think that if nothing else, if this is correct, it's the end of the Chomskyan program.

JS: One of the commentators to your Current Anthropology article said you made the Pirahã seem ...

DE: Mindless. Yes, Stephen Levenson actually said that. Look, this is because we've been taught, as you say, that every culture has this or that, so either we're wrong if we don't see it, or they are subhuman. It's an ethnocentric evaluation, an ethnocentric reaction. This is one of the things



Daniel Everett and the Pirahã, with whom he has worked since 1977. Photo courtesy of Dan Everett

that has led me into American pragmatism, and to the abandonment of the notion of truth as something that I seek for as a scientist. It's because particulars can be extremely important. The entire Pirahã case shows that there are situations that fall outside of our theorizing.

Rarities can only be denied circularly. So if you can't ignore them as exceptions, and if we also say there's no way to expand current theory to encompass them, what does this mean? It means that certain things fall outside of theory. Theories can't explain everything, and this is really upsetting to Western culture. But it's ethnocentric to think that our theories can explain all cultures. Our theory of cultures gives us a way, if you take a pragmatist's view of the matter, to navigate through the world by bumping our head less. But there are still unknowns along the way. We find something like the Pirahã. We're going to do a number of experiments, and I predict right now that these will show that the Pirahã are of normal intelligence; but at the same time, they don't have all these things that I'm saying that they don't have. That will mean that we've been wrong about a lot of stuff. And that's what I think this case is. The most important lesson to gain from the Pirahã case is that language evolution is ongoing ...

JS: You said before that some think that your research shouldn't even be conducted—that it's bad ...

DE: That it's bad morally, not that it's bad empirically. And to a certain degree I realize what they are saying. *National Review* published a favorable review of my research, and I believe that if it's in the *National Review*, there are probably some racist motivations—you know, how ignorant the "savage" is. On the other hand, you really do have to let the chips fall where they may. I don't think that there's any reason why the Brazilian government would treat the Pirahã any differently, or why anyone else would do so. But some people say that they would take away the Pirahã's land rights, because if they're sub-human, why should they have land rights? That's ridiculous. That's not going to happen in Brazil. Brazil protects those people. It's far more likely that people will believe that I'm an idiot than that they think these people don't deserve protection. So I don't see any problem at all.

Dan Everett is chair of phonetics and phonology in the department of linguistics at the University of Manchester. He has worked with the Pirahã since 1977. More about the Pirahã can be found at his website (<http://lings.ln.man.ac.uk/info/staff/DE/DEHome.html>). Please send your comments, contributions, news and announcements to SLA contributing editors Jim Stanlaw at stanlaw@ilstu.edu or Mark Peterson at petersm2@muohio.edu.

Society for Medical Anthropology



JANELLE S TAYLOR, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Our Vision for MAQ

*By Mark Luborsky and Andrea Sankar
(Incoming MAQ Editors)*

We are delighted to serve the members of SMA as the next editors of *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*. The times are ripe for medical anthropology, and it is ready. You can see the ideas, concepts and insights produced by medical anthropologists are increasingly sought by scholars widely outside our field and the general public. At the same time, the breadth of issues and debates is increasing within the field. Clearly, a host of our core medical anthropology concerns (such as: health, disease and illness; socio-cultural dimensions of health in individuals and groups; suffering and healing; locating the particular in the global laboratory of human societies and conditions; qualitative and mixed methods) are gaining a place in the sense of problem for study by other disciplines, and in local and national level public and policy settings. As editors we are committed to enhancing MAQ's vital role in this expansion of our field and the opportunities for change offered by wider recognition of medical anthropology's offerings.

As we write this letter and reflect on the coming task, we are mindful of the varied demands of editorship. Together we welcome the opportunity to work closely with the incoming editorial board and foreign corresponding editors to sharpen our sense of MAQ's vision, and foster a vigorous and broad flow of topnotch manuscripts. We believe our joint editorship offers distinctive strengths given our separate scholarly and professional interests, commitment to socially engaged scholarship, and breadth of perspectives in concepts and methods. We relish this extension of our longstanding dinner arguments about culture, health, research and anthropology today. Readers can expect not a monadic editorial voice, but the stew of two long-collaborating cooks (and newlyweds hoping to celebrate our 5th anniversary in the final year of editorship).

What is our vision? Outstanding scholarship across the entire smorgasbord of issues, approaches and methods in medical anthropology is the menu we envision for MAQ. We seek to encourage and support excellence across the widest range of medical anthropology. We envision MAQ as the recognized forum for vibrant debates and refinement of ideas, methods in medical anthropology, and for exploring how our field relates to health practice and anthropology in general.

MAQ is our primary commons, a table where SMA serves up the array of intellectual and methodological traditions representing the whole SMA membership and MAQ readership. We will energetically promote MAQ's creative generative capacity by welcoming the breadth of discourses merited by the topic, methods, and concepts, and state of knowledge in an area. We