JRAI Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute

What I'm reading

Language, culture, and mind: trends and standards in the latest pendulum swing

N.J. Enfield *Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics*

Daniel Everett, *Language: the cultural tool*. London: Profile, 2012.

The study of language in relation to anthropological questions has deep and varied roots, from Humboldt and Boas, Malinowski and Vygotsky, Sapir and Whorf, Wittgenstein and Austin, through to the linguistic anthropologists of now. A recent book by the linguist Daniel Everett, *Language: the cultural tool* (2012), aims to bring some of the issues to a popular audience, with a focus on the idea that language is a tool for social action. I argue in this essay that the book does not represent the state of the art in this field, falling short on three central desiderata of a good account for the social functions of language and its relation to culture. I frame these desiderata in terms of three questions, here termed the cognition question, the causality question, and the culture question. I look at the relevance of this work for socio-cultural anthropology, in the context of a major interdisciplinary pendulum swing that is incipient in the study of language today, a swing away from formalist, innatist perspectives, and towards functionalist, empiricist perspectives. The role of human diversity and culture is foregrounded in all of this work. To that extent, Everett's book is representative, but the quality of his argument is neither strong in itself nor representative of a movement that ought to be of special interest to socio-cultural anthropologists.

Not everybody sees research on language as relevant to anthropology. The reasons are historically clear. While anthropology has tended to focus on diversity and social construction, some of the most influential lines of research in linguistics have supposed, if not explicitly argued, that the quest to understand language is a quest for human cognitive universals. But that phase in linguistics is passing, as witnessed by widespread and significant re-orientations in the study of language, both in and out of its home discipline. Universalist, rationalist approaches have recently gone from dominant to outdated, supplanted by empiricist-leaning perspectives which emphasize social context and cultural diversity. These parallel-running lines of work are poised to converge, and to supersede the desiccated and socio-culturally impoverished versions of linguistics that have so little to do with anthropology. And so now is a time to witness the ascent of a whole new fashion of research on language. There is, for instance, the recent trend in cognitive science which exposes that field's failure to recognize culture's contribution, directing attention now to human diversity (Evans & Levinson 2009; Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan 2010; Prinz 2012). There is the ethologically grounded

Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.) **19**, *155-169*

strand of work that views language as a behaviour for maintaining social relationships (Dunbar 1996; 2003; Hinde 1997), and, ultimately, for creating social systems (Hinde 1976). There's the wave of work on Machiavellian Intelligence, Theory of Mind, co-operative instincts, and other aspects of social cognition that make language possible (Astington & Baird 2005; Goody 1995; Tomasello 2008; Whiten & Byrne 1997) and that make language usage the way it is (Enfield in press; Enfield & Levinson 2006). There's the conversation-analytic work in sociology that combines micro-ethnography with structural analysis to get at the mechanics of social life as we experience it (Sidnell 2007; Sidnell & Stivers 2012). The list of recent anthropologically relevant work on language continues: research on linguistic relativity (Leavitt 2010; Sidnell & Enfield 2012; and many references therein); research in language documentation and description (Crowley 2007; Thieberger 2012; and many references therein); research in linguistic anthropology (Agha 2007; Kockelman 2010; 2011; and many references therein), all now bringing the study of language back towards the concerns of anthropology.

In the context of this great collective pendulum swing, the publication of a book like Daniel Everett's *Language: the cultural tool* (2012) makes sense. Twenty years ago there was Steven Pinker's innatist book *The language instinct* (1994), whose snappy subtitle presupposed the thesis: *How the mind creates language*. Today the trade publishers anticipate a different audience, an audience that will warm to the idea that language is a 'cultural tool', that language embodies the great differences among cultures, that it is language that creates the mind. As a result, a book that aims to explicate and celebrate the close relations between language and culture is being talked about from the *Guardian* to the *Economist* to the *New York Times*. That sort of exposure should be a golden opportunity for the cause, but alas, as I shall explain below, the opportunity is mishandled. But before we turn to the problems, first some background.

The human capacity for language: innatism versus functionalism

The reason why chimps and dolphins fail to learn our languages is not that they can't pronounce our words. The existence of sign languages proves that language can be fully realized by means other than vocalization. And yet no other species can convincingly acquire a human language, no matter what the medium. The secret to our special readiness for language is somewhere in the uniquely human mind. What, then, is this psychological readiness for acquiring language? Some say it is like our readiness for maintaining balance, or for walking. This capacity develops in the individual, they say, and it evolved as a biological adaptation in the history of our species. The influential research tradition called 'generative linguistics' has argued since the 1950s that language is like this. The guiding hypothesis was that humans possessed an evolved, specialized mental device for learning languages. With the help of this inborn device, sometimes referred to as Universal Grammar, an infant could acquire any human language it happened to be exposed to, with no special instruction. It was once thought that Universal Grammar would be a rich and complex tool-kit for the mind, but decades later the search has yielded just one finding, and even this is controversial. Harvard psychologist Marc Hauser and colleagues announced in a 2002 article in *Science* magazine (Hauser, Chomsky & Fitch 2002) that the evolved language device contains exactly one simple principle: recursion. Recursion allows the output of one operation to serve as input for the same operation again, yielding potentially endless sequences, such as when one looks at one's repeating reflection inside a mirror-walled elevator. We see recursion in language, for example with the use of embedded *that*-clauses ('John

thought *that* Mary said *that* Bill suggested *that* ...', and so on, *ad infinitum* in principle). But even this one proposed feature of Universal Grammar isn't much to write home about. Many linguists view recursion as neither necessary nor sufficient for language (it need not be specifically linguistic); others simply find it to be one among the many issues that matter. Is this all that Universal Grammar has boiled down to? If so, then as developmental psychologist Michael Tomasello (2009) puts it, 'Universal Grammar is dead'. Others quip that it was never alive in the first place.[1]

So if a newborn's readiness for language is not a specialized inborn mental language device, what is it? One answer is that language is made possible in our species by a unique combination of cognitive capacities that were originally adapted for other functions. Think of our inborn readiness for fighting with swords. Our ability to learn sword-fighting and engage in it obviously depends on our biology in things like the size and shape of our hands and arms, properties of our systems for vision and spatial co-ordination, and so on. But of course there was never a biological adaptation for sword-fighting. It was the human body, mind, and social world that provided the adaptive context for the evolution of sword-fighting, not the other way around. The same is true for writing with pencils, driving cars, living in houses, and all other uses of technology. Linguists and other scientists of language have begun to explore the possibility that language itself is something like this, at least as far as the cognitive side of language goes. Suppose that the evolution of the human mind did not feature any adaptations for language itself, but instead, sometime after we had acquired our modern cognitive profile, some creative soul somehow stumbled upon the *idea* of language (however this 'idea' might be defined), just as people would stumble upon other simple but revolutionary ideas like the wheel, the lever, and electricity. Language, on this view, was simply an improved technique for communicating, a new technique that everyone would adopt, and that has since played a critical role in a process of cultural niche construction or co-evolution (Durham 1991; Richerson & Boyd 2005), not unlike the way beavers have evolved to fit the reservoir environments that they themselves create. In the realm of language, our vocal tract evolved in parallel with the earliest forms of speech in our species (Fitch 2010; Hurford 2007; 2012; MacNeilage 2008), while languages themselves evolved historically to fit the human brains, bodies, and social institutions that make language possible. The second of these processes might have resembled the invention and development of tools from bows and arrows to swords to golf clubs.

Sophisticated accounts of language along these lines have recently emerged in cognitive science research, for example by the psychologists Nick Chater and Morten Christiansen (Chater & Christiansen 2010; Christiansen & Chater 2008), by the philosopher Jesse Prinz (2012: 137-90), and by the linguist Daniel Dor (2012). Controversial linguist Daniel Everett pursues the same idea in *Language: the cultural tool*. Like Dor and Prinz, Everett uses the word 'invented' to describe how modern humans came to have language. The story goes that, as with the invention of the telephone, once language was on the scene we became able to communicate in amazing ways that would have been unthinkable before, and now that we have it, just like the car, the home computer, and the smart phone, we can't imagine life without it. We did not evolve to use these gadgets. These gadgets evolved to be used by us. And this is what these authors want to say about language. 'Language is a tool that is invented rather than an attribute of our genome', Everett says (p. 7), and he means it literally. To be clear, he is not saying that people invented a new organ inside their brains. He is saying that the earliest humans already had what they needed cognitively in order to use language, they just

didn't have any actual languages to speak. Once they discovered the idea of language, this kicked off the possibility that actual languages like Greek and Korean could then historically evolve, just as they continue to evolve today. Our biologically evolved cognition supplied the starting conditions for language to be learned and used, no differently from the way that our biology supplies the conditions for us to use everything from wheels and levers to telephones, computers, and guns.

This is called a 'functionalist' approach to language (see, e.g., Nichols 1984). If language can be fully supported by cognitive adaptations that exist independently of language itself, functionalists argue, then there is no reason to invoke an innate mental device for language (Langacker 1987; Tomasello 1998; 2008, *inter alia*). This kind of account is simpler, and therefore preferred on scientific principles of parsimony. But there is at least one important caveat. The special difference between language and tools such as golf clubs, pliers, and wrenches is that language must have already existed in some form well before we became anatomically modern. It is clear that our highly specialized vocal tracts evolved with the presence of language itself as a selective pressure (Fitch 2010; MacNeilage 2008). This co-evolutionary process is an essential part of the story of language evolution, and without it, an argument like Everett's would be weakened considerably. On his account, at the time of the 'invention' of language, but before languages (with an 's') existed, a newborn baby would have to have been cognitively fully equipped to acquire a human language, yet would not have possessed the modern vocal tract for speaking the way we do today (or, presumably, the auditory sensitivity for hearing speech the way we do today). The prediction is that if we could transport such a baby into the world of now, it would be unable to acquire spoken languages like English and French, but would be perfectly able to acquire a sign language, with its full grammatical richness embodied entirely in movements of the hands, body, and face (Emmorey 2002; Goldin-Meadow 2003; Liddell 2003; Sandler & Lillo-Martin 2006).

Functionalist linguistics has enjoyed growing popularity across the disciplines that focus on language, now going a good way towards displacing the innatist approach of generativist linguistics (Chafe 1994; Croft & Cruse 2004; Evans & Levinson 2009; Tomasello 1998). But higher approval ratings do not exempt the field from being measured against the highest standards of data and argument. At least three major puzzles need to be cracked if a functionalist account of language is going to make progress, both in changing the minds of sceptics and in opening up new avenues for those who are already on side. One is the cognition question: What is both unique to the human mind and sufficient for language, yet not specifically evolved for language? Second is the culture question: How does language relate to the rest of culture? Third is the causality question: By what mechanisms can people's behaviour influence the shape of language? To mount a convincing case, these questions must not only be clearly articulated, they must ultimately be answered. They are minimal requirements for a functionalist account of language, and for an account of language that will enable and foster the proper reconnections with anthropology.

The cognition question

What is it about human cognition that is uniquely human, able to account for how language is learned, and yet not specifically adapted for language? The answer, it is now clear, is our social cognition. This does not simply mean our motivation to socialize. Many species are strongly motivated to interact socially, to communicate, and to engage

in politics (de Waal & Tyack 2003; Dunbar 1988). Yet none of those species have language, and none can acquire it. Why not? The reason has to do with distinctly human social cognitive capacities that include the bases of trust, co-operative and altruistic propensities, moral capacities, shared intentions and agency, sensitivity to local norms, and high-level abilities to model and track what others believe and what they know (Enfield in press; Enfield & Levinson 2006; among many others). While these capacities can surely be tooled differently in different cultural settings, there are fundamental commonalities. These remarkable aspects of human social cognition have been the basis of several sophisticated and empirically well-grounded modern accounts for the unique possession of language in our species, for example in the work of biologist Robin Dunbar (1996), psychologists Michael Tomasello (2008) and Namhee Lee (Lee, Mikesell, Joaquin, Mates & Schumann 2009), and linguist James Hurford (2007). Everett makes surprisingly little of these nuanced works, drawing from them only the conclusion that 'what is really unique about human communication is that we want to talk to each other in the first place' (pp. 36-7). Everett's primary citation on social cognition is Aristotle, who noted in the *Politics* that humans appear to be highly motivated to socialize. But – at the risk of understatement – the science of social cognition has rather developed since then. Recent advances in this innovative and successful field of research, especially over the last few decades, show that we have very much more than just a desire to congregate. For language, culture, and society to be possible at all we need a full suite of features of social cognition – trust, norms, and joint agency being of special importance – that are particularly elaborated in humans, and that we are only now beginning to understand. While this point is being made ever more emphatically in relation to the science of language (e.g. Astington & Baird 2005), the relevant research is being done mostly outside of linguistics. The essentially social nature of the cognition that underlies language is being studied by philosophers, psychologists, biologists, and sociologists, among others. Such interloping from other disciplines into research on language is just one among many signs of a paradigm shift in the study of language today.

Why has linguistics failed to handle the relation between social cognition and language? The reason is that mostly, whether by principle or mere convenience, linguists have not studied language directly in its role as a tool for social action. This makes little sense, as language serves its most important functions in the context of social life. Functionalist linguists tend to be aware of this shortcoming, making gestures in the right direction yet hamstrung by a lack of relevant analytical tools. Everett does this when he says that 'the essence of language as a tool is seen clearly in leisurely conversation' (p. 221), yet he does not discuss even the most fundamental technical features of conversation and how it works, things like the system of *turn-taking* that regulates the flow of human interaction (Ford, Fox & Thompson 2002; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974), or the system of *repair* by which problems such as misspeaking or misunderstanding are corrected (Enfield & Sidnell in press; Hayashi, Raymond & Sidnell 2013; Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks 1977). Nor does Everett discuss the current movement to remedy linguistics' neglect of conversation, despite approvingly citing Lee *et al.* (2009). The authors of that book conclude, 'It is only after we take seriously the nature of grammar and language of ordinary, casual conversation that we can begin to reflect adequately on the evolutionary motivations of grammar and language' (Lee *et al.* 2009: 107). While this general sentiment is as Everett would have it, Lee *et al.* and like-minded others do more than just express it. They show how the structures of conversational

interaction are utterly central to the 'language as tool' idea. They ground their theory of language as a cultural artefact squarely in arguments and evidence from areas of research within or affiliated with the branch of sociology known as Conversation Analysis, one of the few research traditions that have systematically studied the unique structural properties of language in conversation (Atkinson & Heritage 1984; Sidnell & Stivers 2012).

Everett is right to want to connect language with social cognition, but one can't help being underwhelmed by his conclusion that 'most of human language, its forms and functions, result from the interactional or social instinct proposed by Aristotle in conjunction with various features of the real world' (p. 218). While it points in the right direction, it is not specific enough to be a serious challenge to the old establishment or a real move forward for the already converted.

The culture question

Linguists love to talk about the language-culture relationship, but we struggle with it, mostly because we have little or no training in anthropology. The problems are elementary: How to define culture? Is 'culture' even a useful concept? Is it possible to distinguish culture from language? If so, how to make the distinction and how to build a logical argument that the two are related? One of the great themes of modern anthropology has been to push against old-fashioned views of the fixedness of culture, and instead to try to capture its diffuseness, fluidity, and negotiability. So Everett will not endear himself to his colleagues down the hall when he implies that he is the first to recognize that culture is dynamic and evolving. Having asked 'What is culture?' (p. 202), he considers a folk definition ('high culture', etc., rejected as unscientific), then a published definition from Tylor ('that complex whole' including belief, art, morals, etc.), and then Geertz ('a transmitted pattern of meaning, symbols, conceptions', etc.), concluding then that '*all previous definitions* of culture appear to share a core flaw: they treat societies' values, knowledge, and meanings as though they were fixed, when in fact they are dynamic and evolving' (p. 203, emphasis added). Seemingly without concern for the known dangers and complexities of the culture question (Barnard 2000; Clifford & Marcus 1986; Kuper 1999; Layton 1997; among many others), Everett says he has a solution. This is to define culture as a system of 'ranked values', where all cultures can be distinguished by two things: 'the totality of their values' and 'the relationships between these values' (p. 300). He illustrates his proposed method for studying culture by comparing *cablocos* – 'people usually descended from indigenous groups in Brazil who live in semi-industrialized communities along the banks of the Amazon and its tributaries' – with *Ohio factory workers*. He states that both groups share three core values (hard work = good; good meal = good; overweight = bad), but the two groups have a different relative ranking of these values. For Ohio factory workers, he says, 'good meal' outranks 'overweight is bad', while for *cablocos* it's the other way around. One is left to infer that the Ohio factory workers are more overweight than *cablocos*, which would presumably be explained by the proposed difference in value ranking, but we are not given the facts. Which 'factory workers' are meant? Are they in fact more overweight? No data or published research is cited. No mechanism is suggested by which conflict among values is resolved in real-time behaviour. It's hard to know what to make of the proposal that this 'ranked values' idea is a 'complex conception of culture' (p. 301), or of the suggestion that there is a method here.

If this is the 'culture' part of work on the language-culture connection, then there is much room for improvement; it is certainly not representative of the better-quality work available today on language-culture connections. In the field of linguistic anthropology, decades of effort has been put into worrying about these matters, with sophisticated results (see, e.g., Agha 2007; Bauman & Sherzer 1974; Duranti 2001; 2004; Hanks 1990; Hymes 1964; Silverstein 1976; Silverstein & Urban 1996; among many others). This is what I mean by saying that the book is a missed opportunity: readers who don't already know the field will come away with a wrong impression of the kinds of arguments that are being given and the kinds of standards that are being met.

An argument in support of the language-culture relationship often begins with an observation that Language A has a feature, word, or idiom that Language B lacks. Then one might hypothesize that the linguistic difference correlates with a cultural difference between the two populations. There are better and worse versions of the argument. Probably the worst version of it is when the linguist does not actually posit a correlated cultural difference, but rather takes the observed linguistic difference and re-describes it as a cultural difference, only then to correlate it with itself. Everett effectively does this when he tells of how he realized that the English word *hum* does not have a direct translation into Portuguese. His conclusion from this realization is that *hum* therefore has 'a cultural resonance' for English speakers (p. 129). What could this mean? What he has illustrated is a fact known to any bilingual, namely that some words cannot be readily translated from one language into another. Culturally interested linguists over the years have taken this simple fact and drawn pretty much any conclusion they like from it. As linguist Mark Liberman has said, 'a language really can't win at this game'.[2]

A related type of bad argument for a language-culture relationship is to focus on the exotic-sounding literal meaning of a word or phrase in another language, and assume that it has a special cultural significance. Everett cites the case of the Wari' language of Amazonia. He writes, 'There is an obvious cultural question raised by the fact that in Wari' wife and vagina are the same word' (p. 195). One problem with this kind of claim is that the historical source of the relatedness between these two meanings of a word with the basic meaning 'hole' may be not at all apparent to those who learn the language today. It could just as well be true that Wari'-speakers have simply learned this word with two separate meanings. It is easy to speculate about cultural reasons for such connections, and so such speculation must be somehow constrained. Otherwise, using Everett's reasoning, we would notice phrases like English *West Wing* and speculate that we English-speakers conceptualize our buildings as giant flying birds; or we might take the phrase *downtown branch* in relation to a bank to suggest that in English-speaking culture, we conceptualize institutions as giant trees; *skirting board* would mean we conceive of house furnishings as women's clothing; and so on, indefinitely. When this reasoning is applied to our own native languages, we quickly see the exoticizing nature of the way it attributes a motivating value to the person who uses an expression that has been inherited from a coinage belonging to a different time. This is not to say that such metaphors cannot be culturally instructive, rather that they must be treated with caution; if there is indeed some sort of live connection between two senses of a word, it is likely to require careful treatment, as Raymond Firth (1966) warns in his discussion of Evans-Pritchard on the Nuer association between twins and birds (Evans-Pritchard 1956; cf. Littlejohn 1970).

In an only slightly more substantial version of the argument for a culture-language relation, a cultural phenomenon is identified but it turns out to be only indirectly related to language. Everett gives the examples of the English words *haggis* and *traffic cop*. These words have no direct relation to cultural values, only to the existence of haggis and traffic cops in the social environment and hence the need to refer to them in communication. The same account explains why only some languages and not others have words for sand dunes, sharks, and tulips. And the haggis example undermines the argument further, for a different reason. As a native English-speaker, I have known the word *haggis* since I was a child, but I have never seen haggis, let alone eaten it or learned to appreciate any cultural significance (certainly not any cultural 'value') beyond its ethnic emblematicity. It would hardly be possible to argue that my knowledge of this word, and many more words besides, is associated with my cultural values or associated norms.

When Everett turns the language-culture discussion to his work on Pirahã, a language spoken in the Brazilian Amazon, we are on slightly firmer ground, though not without the occasional near-tautology: the Pirahãs 'do not talk about the distant past or the far-off future because a cultural value of theirs is to talk only about the present or the short-term past or future' (p. 152). In other publications, Everett has laid out in more detail the content of this claim (e.g. Everett 2005), and its virtue lies in the attempt to find evidence of a specific guiding cultural value in as broad a range of features of the language as possible (cf. Evans & Wilkins 2000; 2001; Hale 1986; Wierzbicka 1992; among others).

But there is an obvious pitfall for this type of argument, and this pitfall can be conceptually fatal, especially when unacknowledged. If we make a claim about the values of a certain cultural group, it is essential to distinguish between ideology (in the sense of conscious assertions about what people do, or should do), practice (in the sense of what people actually do), and norms (for regimenting practice, often in relation to ideology, by sanctioning and similar behaviour). An ideology is a value that members of the culture explicitly express and claim to hold, while a practice may make a value tacitly evident in the way people actually behave (or it may contradict expressed values altogether). It is crucial not to get these two confused. Just think of the difference between expressed values and actual behaviour by politicians running for office. But when Everett says that 'the Pirahã constrain what they talk about to subjects that they have first-hand knowledge of' (p. 199), it is not clear whether he is talking about Pirahã ideology or practice. Both of these might surface at the same time when, for example, a missionary tries to talk with the Pirahã about the events described in the Bible, as Everett relates. But how far down does this proscription go? What happens when a Pirahã hunter comes home to the village with a serious injury – when he relates the tale are the others banned from voicing their reactions? Or from reporting it later to others in turn? Can we imagine a world in which we are literally banned from any talk about things we did not experience ourselves? To assess the claim of a Pirahã 'immediacy of experience' principle, we would need to see the only kind of data that can settle the question: an extensive corpus of recordings of everyday conversation, as a measure of the enacted reality that runs alongside the expressed ideology.

While the language-culture relationship could have been the most important issue in his book, Everett's treatment of it is neither convincing in itself nor representative of, or fair to, a sophisticated literature on the topic. At its worst, Everett's unfocused discussion of possible ties between language and culture exemplifies how easy it is to suggest such relations, while doing no justice to the high-quality work that has long

grappled with the real difficulty of actually establishing those relations. Frustrations with the gap between what is claimed and what is demonstrated in this work have been forcefully articulated already by some of the world's most experienced and distinguished scholars of the language-culture relationship, in response to earlier work by Everett. Linguist Anna Wierzbicka of the Australian National University wrote:

> Because I fully agree with Everett's general claim that to a considerable degree culture shapes language and that meaning is central to the understanding of both languages and cultures, I deplore all the more his extravagant and unsubstantiated specific claims (2005: 641).

Similarly, cognitive anthropologist Stephen Levinson of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in the Netherlands wrote:

> There is a growing interest in human diversity throughout the human sciences, but unequivocally establishing the facts is a difficult and delicate business. Everett has neither established the facts nor handled the rhetorical delicacies that would be essential to establishing a bridgehead for studies of linguistic and cultural diversity among the universalizing sciences (2005: 637).

Such brutal assessments have got to hurt, but precisely because they came from fellow travellers, it is puzzling that Everett is yet to take them on board.

The causality question

If people can influence or determine the shape of the cultural worlds they inhabit, what are the causal mechanisms involved? Consider the control that people have over the language they speak. While we are in principle free to decide what to say, how to say it, where, and when (leaving aside obvious reasons why we are often not really free in these ways), we do not get to decide which words and grammatical constructions our languages provide us with. This has been determined by courses of events in the long histories of our languages, over which we have no control. What, then, are we to make of Everett's repeated statements that languages have the features that they have because their speakers 'choose' or 'decide' for them to be that way? How can individual choices cause languages to be the way they are?

One sense in which we have an element of control over our languages – though not in an everyday sense of the word 'control' – comes from the nature of linguistic conventions. Conventions exist by virtue of a tacit common public agreement. Thus, the word *dog* can be used to refer to dogs because English-speakers all 'agree' that it can. In other language communities, there are different agreements: French speakers say *chien*, Germans say *Hund*, Japanese say *inu*. These words work in certain communities, but are powerless in others. Everett says that words have the power they have 'because we let them', and 'because we want them to' (p. 51), in the same way that certain pieces of paper count as money only because – technically – we all agree to treat them that way. But to put it in these voluntaristic terms is misleading. There's an important sense in which, under the weight of your inherited historical community, you don't really have a choice as to whether certain pieces of paper count as money. It's a 'choice' you make when you don't have a choice. In reality, there is no first-hand sense in which we literally choose the way our languages are structured. Just try choosing for your words to mean new things and see how well it works.

Another sense in which our individual choices can affect language structure relates to our tiny individual contributions to the enormous historical processes by which

fashions of behaviour diffuse in society. Every piece of community convention, such as a word or phrase in a language, can ultimately be traced to little decisions by little people when we view them in the grand context of history (Rogers 1995). If enough people make enough of the same kinds of choices, then over time an aggregate effect is observed. For example, when people speak they tend to minimize effort in articulation, and this means that their speech can be degraded in various ways – words get cut short, left out, fused onto other words. These individual 'decisions' to cut subtle corners can ultimately aggregate and cause changes in the grammatical structure of a language, for example by turning a free-standing word like a verb into an affix (Hopper & Traugott 1993): for example, the suffix *-ward* in words like *homeward*, *southward*, and *seaward* derives ultimately from a proto-Indo-European verb meaning 'to turn, to bend'.

Scottish economist Adam Smith gave this kind of social causation a name – the invisible hand – and Everett even uses the term, but he misses Smith's key insight: that the motivations for individual choices are seldom directed towards their observed higher-level effects. Instead, Everett wants the link to be direct. In writing about the distinction in speech 'channel' between normal speech and 'whistled speech' in Pirahã (pp. 271-2), Everett says that Pirahã-speakers 'choose to define the ways in which the channels should be used and when to use them'. But what is the nature of this 'choice'? An infant who is learning the Pirahã language does not choose whether the language features a whistled speech variety or not, nor does he decide what the normative significance of the variety shall be. The individual may choose whether or not to use this form of speech on a given occasion, but this one person's choice will not determine the fate of the speech form and its status in the language. Nor can an English-speaking child choose to make whistled speech part of English. She can try, but its success or failure will ultimately depend on social processes that are out of her hands. These processes are well understood from a vast literature on social diffusion of innovation, from Everett Rogers' classic *Diffusion of innovations* (1995) to Malcolm Gladwell's brilliant popularization of these issues in *The tipping point* (2000).

We are left, then, to figure out by ourselves which claims Everett means literally and which he means figuratively. He defends the view that people 'invent' their languages (p. 7), that the existence of words 'is a cultural decision' (p. 107), and that meanings in language 'are produced by culture for its own purposes' (p. 130). But ask yourself: Did I invent my language? Did I decide to have these words? Does my culture have purposes?

We know from the work of economist and cognitive scientist Herbert Simon (1990) that docility in humans is adaptive. And related work in sociology and some lines of anthropology tells us that most people are imitators, only a few really learn, and even fewer are truly innovative (Boyd & Richerson 2005; Csibra & Gergely 2006; Gergely & Csibra 2006; Richerson & Boyd 2005). To be sure, behind society's snakes and ladders, there are cracks and footholds in the surface that we can convert into opportunities if we are creative enough, daring enough, or lucky enough. But to a large extent we do well by simply following the currents we were born into. Either way, our agency over culture and society, language included, is extremely tenuous. Everett fails to grapple with the highly indirect causality that links individual choices and their society-level aggregate effects. As a result, his repeated claim that individuals' choices are what connect cultural values directly with the structure of language is simplistic at best.

Language, culture, and human sociality

With the twenty-first century well under way, it is now clear that the scientific study of language will soon be done with its quixotic phase of trying to specify the contents of a little device in the mind for acquiring language. New empirical research findings, combined with developments in theory and methodology, have put human sociality at the heart of the capacity for language (Enfield 2010). This allows that, with respect to our cognition at least (our vocal tracts are another matter), our species may not be specifically adapted for language, but rather we might have acquired language by discovering the simple and irreversible *idea of it*. (Though exactly how to articulate what this 'idea' consists of is not clear.) A once-innovative idea for a means of communication then caught on so well that there isn't a soul on earth today who hasn't adopted it. The proposal is compelling to a point, but there are holes in it that need filling. For one thing, the argument is not complete without the inclusion of a co-evolutionary account of how our vocal tracts evolved after language was already on the scene. As Daniel Dor writes, '[L]anguage was invented *before* its speakers were fully prepared for it' (2012: 86, original emphasis). Second, it needs to be definitively shown that there is *nothing* in our social cognition that is specific to language. This remains an open question, and there is reason to suspect that some of our special skills of social inference might have developed only in the context of language (Grice 1975; Levinson 2000; Sperber & Wilson 1995). And third, any serious progress on the language-culture connection will require that the empirical, theoretical, and analytic quality of work on both the language and the culture side of the equation be state of the art.

The timing is right for a book on this topic, but Everett's execution is off, leaving the book without an obvious audience. It is not original enough to be a stimulant for research. It is not investigative enough or fair enough to the literature to be a news report for the thinking public. It is not hard-hitting or specific enough to require or even allow that opponents seriously engage with the arguments. This will be a source of frustration to many functionalist linguists who support the sentiment, but who would rather see a more adequate version of the argument gaining popular attention. And anthropologists will search in vain for a meaningful take on culture. The idea that language is a tool is undeniable if taken in the broad sense to mean that we use language to get things done. But Everett says that language is no different from a wrench or a hammer, in the sense that it is literally designed by people to fit predetermined functions: 'Words are as much tools as pliers', he says (p. 266). Language is on a par with 'guitars, golf clubs, wrenches' (p. 250). These sound like metaphors but Everett keeps saying that they are not. What is gained from pushing this analogy to an extreme? Aside from the obvious and significant ways in which hand tools are different from language, too many questions remain unanswered, including the three most important ones: the cognition question, the culture question, and the causality question. Little of the public attention to Everett's book has delved into these problems, focusing instead on controversies that his work has generated elsewhere. If it were to focus instead on the book's central arguments, it would find these arguments to be neither threatening to the sceptic, satisfying for the sympathizer, nor adequately informative for the interested reader.

Language is a poster child if ever there was one for the twin concerns of anthropology: human uniqueness and human diversity. Everett's book comes, then, at a key moment, and there is clearly a willing audience. The puffs on the book jacket target

a public excitement for intrepid ethnography, stating, for example, not only that the author, a linguist, has produced 'the most important anthropological field work ever undertaken', but that he has 'outdone' all of Mead, Boas, Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss, and Benedict! This in itself may be enough to cause anthropologists not to want to open the book at all, but if they did actually read it, they might despair for the reasons I've outlined, among more, saying, 'Well, another reason not to be concerned with linguistics'. Here's where this book could actually do some harm. The antidote is for those anthropologists not already working in the language domain to acquaint themselves with the very promising new lines of work in the study of language that together constitute language's latest pendulum swing back into the world of culture.

If linguistics has failed to live up to its status as a field of anthropology, it is because dominant sections of the discipline have explicitly – and inexplicably – excluded social context. A major emphasis on finding universals has meant that variation and diversity have been under-appreciated or overlooked, if not actively dismissed. But to focus on these deficiencies of a now-outdated universalist, formalist, innatist approach to language would be a distraction. Focus instead on the vibrant socially and culturally orientated lines of research on language that have continued without interruption, many of them represented in departments of sociology, communications, or anthropology. The linguistic establishment no longer even has a safe home in cognitive science, thanks to a dramatic shift of perspective in that interdisciplinary field towards exploring the significance of human diversity and flexibility over universals, of the role of experience over the contribution of innate propensities and 'instincts', and of social cognition over abstract mental modules. All of this adds up to a timely opportunity for socio-cultural anthropology to renew its engagement with research on language.

NOTES

This work was made possible by the European Research Council project 'Human Sociality and Systems of Language Use' and the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. I am grateful to a number of colleagues, and to two anonymous readers, for helpful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay.

[1] Quote from interview with Ted Gibson, a professor of cognitive sciences at MIT (cited in Bartlett 2012).

[2] *http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=3884#more-3884* (accessed 8 November 2012).

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Langage, culture et esprit : tendances et normes du nouveau renversement de courant

Résumé

L'étude du langage en relation avec les questions anthropologiques possède des racines profondes et diverses, de Humboldt et Boas, Malinowski et Vygotsky, Sapir et Whorf, Wittgenstein et Austin jusqu'aux anthropolinguistes actuels. Un récent ouvrage du linguiste Daniel Everett, *Language: the cultural tool* (2012), cherche à vulgariser certaines de ces questions en se concentrant sur l'idée que le langage est un outil d'action sociale. Dans le présent essai, j'affirme que ce livre ne représente pas l'état de la recherche dans ce domaine et ne satisfait pas trois critères qui définissent un bon compte-rendu des fonctions sociales du langage et de sa relation à la culture. Je formule ces exigences au moyen de trois questions : la question de la cognition, la question de la culture et la question de la causalité. J'examine la pertinence de cet ouvrage pour l'anthropologie socioculturelle, dans le contexte d'un grand renversement de tendance interdisciplinaire qui s'amorce actuellement dans l'étude du langage, éloignant celle-ci des approches formalistes et innéistes et la rapprochant d'un point de vue fonctionnaliste et empiriste. Le rôle de la diversité et de la culture humaine est prépondérant dans tous ces travaux. En cela, l'ouvrage d'Everett est représentatif, mais son argumentation n'est ni solide en elle-même ni représentative d'un courant susceptible d'intéresser particulièrement l'anthropologie socioculturelle.

N.J. Enfield is Professor of Ethnolinguistics at Radboud University and is a senior staff scientist at the Max Planck Institute, Nijmegen, The Netherlands. He is leader of the European Research Council project 'Human Sociality and Systems of Language Use' (2010-14). He recently edited the book *Dynamics of human diversity* (Pacific Linguistics, 2011), and has just completed a monograph called *Relationship thinking: enchrony, agency, and human sociality*.

Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, PO Box 310, 6500 AH Nijmegen, The Netherlands. Nick.Enfield@mpi.nl