

Linguistic theory and fieldwork in interaction: the case of Pirahã

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The interaction between theory and data is essential in every field of science, and has recently confirmed its relevance within linguistics in the discussion of Pirahã and its alleged lack of recursive syntax.

Contrary to the widely held view that recursion is an important and maybe even a universal component of language (Hauser, Chomsky & Fitch 2002), Everett (2005) has claimed that Pirahã, a Muran language spoken in the northwest Amazon, does not show any evidence of recursion in its syntax. This has initiated a heated debate among linguists and cognitive scientists (Pinker & Jackendoff (2005), Nevins Pesetsky and Rodrigues (2007), cf. discussion on LanguageLog), which is still ongoing. The fierceness of debate mainly seems to have its roots in theoretical presuppositions about human language, and its relation to cognition in general: is recursion a property of syntax located in a universal and autonomous language acquisition device, or is it a property of human reasoning and thus part of cognition in general?

The concept of *recursion* has entered linguistics from mathematics (cf. Tomalin 2006) and has proven to be a useful tool in the explanation of certain features of language such as discrete infinity. However, when assigned too much significance, theoretical concepts can change from a tool to represent patterns OF a language, into a framework prescribing patterns FOR a language, with the inherent danger of projecting phenomena onto a language where in fact they might not exist.

In this presentation I will address the current debate on recursion, and I will argue that the only way to clarify the issue is by undertaking focussed fieldwork and analyzing the data according to categories relevant for the particular language system. I will present data from my own fieldwork on relative clauses in Pirahã (a possible locus for recursion) and will focus on the use of the suffix –SAI, which has been adduced as the main candidate to indicate recursion since it occurs in contexts of semantic embedding.

- (1) Piboibai-SAI ti kahápi-hiaba
Rain-SAI 1 go-NEG
'If it rains, I don't go'

Based on its patterns of distribution and the clauses it can attach to, I will demonstrate that –SAI is not an indicator of embedding, contrary to the often circular reasoning in favour of recursion: evidence of universality of recursion is seen in data, which are analyzed in these terms on the assumption that recursion is universal.

Thus I will show that independent fieldwork is the only way to break this vicious circle of argumentation, and provides the key to turn the circle into an upward spiral where data and theory constantly feed into each other.

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