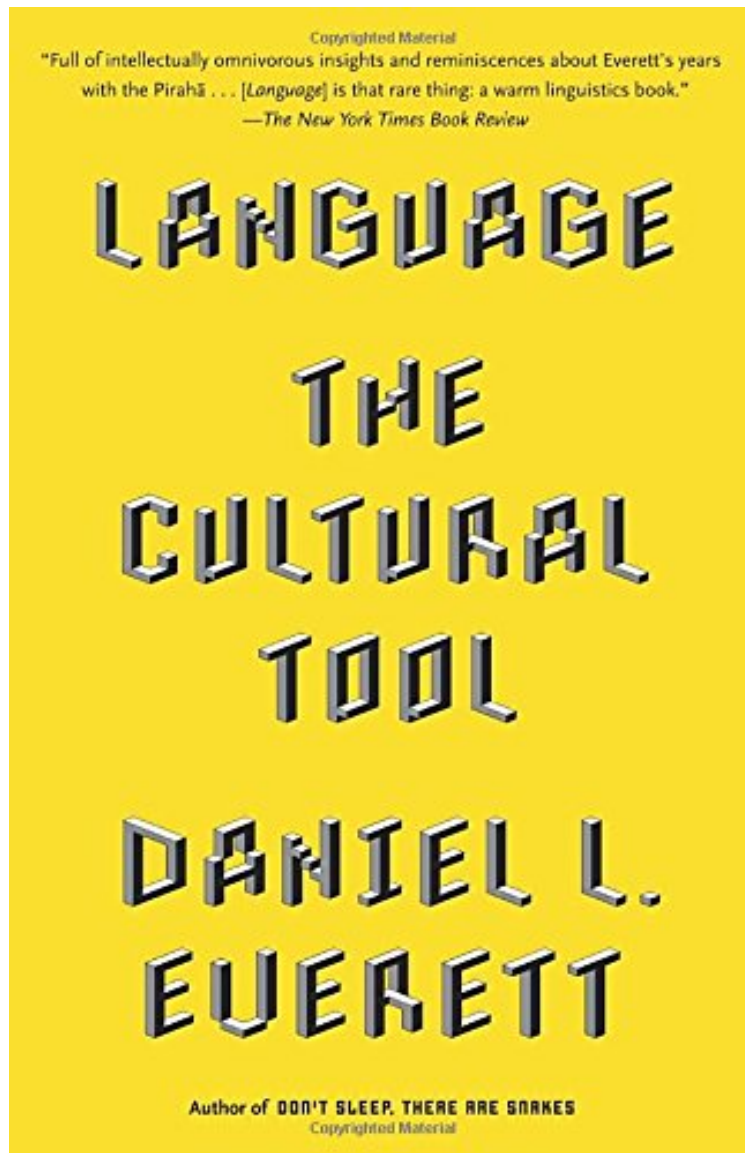


[Download pdf] Language: The Cultural Tool

Language: The Cultural Tool

Daniel L. Everett

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Daniel L. Everett : Language: The Cultural Tool before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Language: The Cultural Tool:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. recommended to me by a MacArthur winner whose brain I ...By H. W. Matalene Everett's book, recommended to me by a MacArthur winner whose brain I was luckily in a position to pick, has helped me sort out a question that has been on my mind ever since Noam Chomsky first gave me a fishy feeling many years ago. When science has not (or not yet) reached the point of being able to provide individual

features of language with detailed brain localizations that they do not also share with other, non-language faculties, the Chomskyan notion that we are all born with a species-wide "deep structure" that enables every healthy baby to "master" any native language must be entertained with some skepticism. For openers, apropos of "mastery," it should be obvious that not every native speaker of English who survives childhood has become a Shakespeare. Everett thinks that hominid cultures, already diverse, evolved a need for language before pharynxes lengthened, mouths shortened, and brains grew to permit hums and grunts to gain extra usefulness and become uniquely and differently articulated individual languages. Trained as a field linguist, Everett insists that whatever obscure and general similarities philosophy may find among our languages, it is the myriad differences between them that must be obvious to common sense. In addition to his expertise, Everett is a colloquial "good read" who can make you laugh out loud. This is a very important book about what makes us human. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Terrific book about language and linguistics and so much more. By Riccardo B One important book for me. The author not only knows his stuff, he knows how to get his point across in an engaging and entertaining way. My suggestion is to read his earlier work "Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes: Life and Language in the Rain Jungle" I did and found I had an easier time following along with his examples. I can't heap enough praise on this guy. And no we're not pals or connected in any fashion other than we share the planet. Check out his latest book. He will change your thinking...about your thinking. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Four Stars By Paul K Franzmann Most interesting book, delivered promptly at a fair price.

The most important and provocative anthropological fieldwork ever undertaken. Tom Wolfe For years, the prevailing opinion among academics has been that language is embedded in our genes, existing as an innate and instinctual part of us. In this bold and provocative study, linguist Daniel Everett argues that, like other tools, language was invented by humans and can be reinvented or lost. He shows how the evolution of different language forms that is, different grammar reflects how language is influenced by human societies and experiences, and how it expresses their great variety. Combining anthropology, primatology, computer science, philosophy, linguistics, psychology, and his own pioneering research with the Amazonian Pirah, and using insights from many different languages and cultures, Everett presents an unprecedented elucidation of this society-defined nature of language. In doing so, he also gives us a new understanding of how we think and who we are.

Full of intellectually omnivorous insights and reminiscences about Everetts years with the Pirah . . . [Language] is that rare thing: a warm linguistics book. The New York Times Book The most important and provocative anthropological fieldwork ever undertaken. Tom Wolfe Revelatory. There is nothing about humans that is quite as astonishing as language. The Guardian A book whose importance is almost impossible to overstate. This is an intellectual cri de coeur and a profound celebration of human diversity. . . . Very rich but also very readable. The Sunday Times (London) [Language] is that rare thing: a warm linguistics book . . . A useful study of a burgeoning theory compatible with Darwinism, anthropology, psychology and philosophy an interdisciplinary orientation the Chomskys have largely spurned. The New York Times Book [Language] deserves a serious reading. The Economist Readers eyes will . . . sparkle with new insight. Kirkus s Everetts stories of the Pirah . . . bring to life the culture that fosters the language. The stories also anchor his linguistic proposals in anthropology. Most linguists might take this as an insult; Everett would accept it as a compliment. The Globe and Mail (Canada) [Everett lob] a scientific grenade . . . into the spot where anthropology, linguistics and psychology meet: he asserts that the Piraha language exhibits traits that call into question aspects of linguistic theories that have been widely accepted for decades. Chicago Tribune Everett writes simply and persuasively about language. . . . His courage and conviction should give linguists pause for thought. The Observer (London) About the Author Daniel L. Everett is dean of arts and sciences at Bentley University. He has held appointments in linguistics and/or anthropology at the University of Campinas, the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Manchester, and Illinois State University. www.daneverettbooks.com Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Introduction The Gift of Prometheus The Greeks told a myth about one of mankind's greatest tools, fire. The story's hero was Prometheus, whose name means foreseer. Prometheus grew fond of the creatures that Zeus had asked him to help create, man and woman. He watched them with pity as they huddled cold and fearful of the dark, stumbling blindly after every setting of the sun. He knew the solution to their problem fire. But Zeus did not want humans to have fire. Fire would give humans more power than Zeus intended. They might even rival the gods themselves. So Zeus forbade it. Prometheus knew the risks of disobeying the king of the gods. Yet for pity and for love he smuggled a charcoal lit by Apollo's fiery chariot out of Olympus in a fennel stalk. No matter how pure his motives, Prometheus paid a horrible price for his charity. Zeus condemned him to an eternity of pain chained to a rock in the Caucasus, where each day his liver was consumed by a large vulture, regenerating every night in order to fuel his pain on the morrow. Only when the mighty Hercules slew the vulture and broke the chains was Prometheus freed. The myth of Prometheus, like all good myths, encapsulates cultural values and offers answers to keep a group of Homo curious satisfied until a better answer comes along. In this myth we can take away the belief that fire originated once in the human story. We are given a glimpse of the problems that fire was meant to solve. And we are taught that the

coming of fire was a momentous event in human history. The Hebrews myths also include a narrative about their gods coming to fear the growth of human power. But the Hebrew story differs dramatically from the Greeks. The Hebrew scriptures recognize that the power of language is greater than that of fire. The Hebrew god is not threatened by humans control of fire, but rather by their ability to talk to one another. From this appreciation for the power of language emerges the Hebrew myth of the Tower of Babel the tower that was raised to threaten the gates (Bab) of god (El). In this myth God is not worried about the physical technology of his creation, whether picks, axes, fire, or the like. He is instead infuriated by humans ability to work together. This threatens his power. And their cooperation rests upon on their communication. So God scatters his people across the face of the earth. Or as the Bible puts it: And the LORD said, Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one anothers speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of the whole earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth. Genesis 11: 69 New American Standard Bible Ironically, the Hebrew god was not a linguist. He did not seem to realize that diversity strengthens Homo sapiens, and diversity in language and culture strengthens us the most. According to the Bible, God created one man, Adam, and gave him the charge of learning about and naming the flora and fauna of creation. By spreading Adams descendants around the globe God in effect created a thousand Adams, learning about and naming not just the Garden of Eden, but the entire world wherever the children of Prometheus have gone, they have taken fire and language to master and learn about their world. This means that no one of us speaks the right language. We all speak the language(s) that helps us and these languages are formed to meet the needs of our culture and social situation. The Hebrews were right about one thing, though. The uttering of the first noun or verb, as non-momentous as that sounds, was arguably of greater importance than the stealing of fire from the gods of Olympus. Nouns and verbs are the basis of human civilization. Without these and other words, we could not utter history and life-changing phrases like I now pronounce you man and wife, This must be the place, or I name this ship the Titanic. If it were not for words, Founding Father Patrick Henry could never have uttered his famous sequence of two nouns, one pronoun, one disjunctive particle, and one verb, Give me Liberty, or give me Death! With nouns and verbs society was founded. With nouns and verbs the growth of human knowledge began. Naturally, therefore, a research question that captivates many modern thinkers is precisely the origin of nouns, verbs, sentences, stories, and other elements of human language. Did language and its parts come about suddenly or did they emerge gradually as cultural adaptations? This book is about the development of this great linguistic tool of our brains and communities, the cognitive fire that illuminates the lonely space between us far more brightly than the light of flames ever could. Here we look at the story of mankind's greatest tool, its purposes, and how it might have come to be. Unlike physical fire, the cognitive fire of language did not exist before humans called it into being. And every individual and culture in the history of our race places its own mark upon this tool. It is an invention that envelops all humans. It unites. It divides. It warms our hearts. It chills our souls. It invigorates our bodies and steels young men for battle. It gives us the greatest pleasure of all focused and ordered thoughts. We have become Homo loquax, as author Tom Wolfe calls us, or speaking man. We are the masters of this raging cognitive fire. Languages contribution to our mastery of the world is one way in which it serves as a tool. It is our greatest display of cognitive technology. It is the basis for an arsenal that includes mathematics, science, philosophy, art, and music. Language enables our brains to do things they could not do without it, like solving arithmetical problems, following recipes, and thinking about where our children are going after school. No linguist, psychologist, anthropologist, or philosopher would disagree that language is useful. But there is enormous disagreement about where this tool came from. Some say that language was discovered by chance, like fire. Others believe that one brilliant Homo sapiens might have invented it 75,000 years or so ago, as the Cherokee chief Sequoyia invented writing for his people. Still others claim that language is genetically encoded in the human mind, the fortuitous by-product of packing our skulls full of an unprecedented number of neurons. Easily the most famous answer to this question, though, is that language is part of our genetic endowment and that, because of this, all human languages share an almost identical grammar which includes sound systems and meanings. Under this view, the only significant differences between languages are their vocabularies. But this is not the only available explanation for the growth and presence of language in all humans. As I have said, I do not even think it is the best answer. This is not a book about why one view of language is wrong and why another view is correct although it does not shy away from stating its conclusions. Rather, this is a story about the joy of language, a joy that has filled my soul during more than thirty years of field research among indigenous societies of the Americas and life among my fellow Homo loquaces. From each of the nearly two dozen languages I have studied in the , Mexico, and the United States over the past decades, I have learned things about the nature of our species and our ability to communicate that I never would have learned by living a different life. I have learned about humans relation to nature and about perspectives on living and speaking in a world delineated by the ancient cultures of the jungle. I have learned how words reach into my heart and change my life, from the poetry of e.e. cummings and the prose of William James to the fireside stories of the human family. Language gives humans their humanity. But how did this marvelous artifact originate? How is it that all

humans possess it? Why are there so many similarities between languages if each one is a tool for a specific culture? And what does it mean, finally, to say that language is a tool? Is this just a way of speaking? The last question answers them all.