



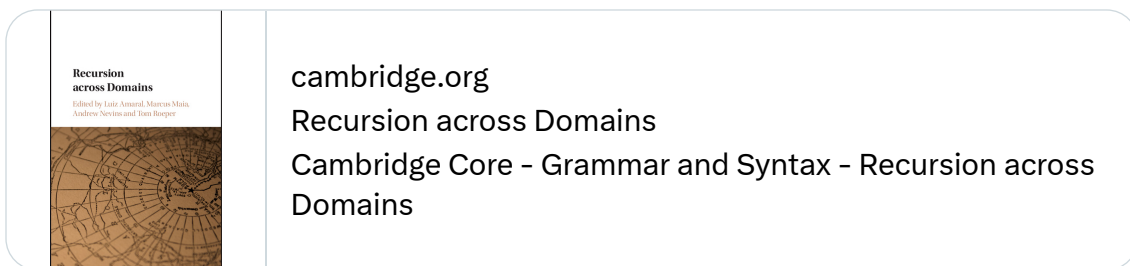
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Response to Rodrigues on Pirahã

Dan Everett and I recently wrote a critique of four papers about Pirahã. These papers appeared in:

Recursion across domains. 2018. Ed. by Luiz Amaral, Marcus Maia, Andrew Nevins, and Tom Roeper. Cambridge University Press.



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Our critique appeared in Language:
tedlab.mit.edu/tedlab_website...

Here, we did NOT argue about whether Pirahã has recursive syntax. (I happen to think that Pirahã will likely be shown to have such structures, while Everett is dubious. But this is not the point of our review.)





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Rather, we were concerned that:

- (a) none of the authors has even a rudimentary knowledge of Pirahã;
- (b) none of the authors had access to speakers able to (i) translate their questions into Pirahã or (ii) translate answers from a Pirahã speaker into e.g. Portuguese or English.



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Cilene Rodrigues, an author on two of the relevant chapters (chapters 6 and 15) disagrees, and put her response here:

ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/004928

Dan Everett and I have responded to Rodrigues here:

ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/005060

Our response is as follows:



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In Rodrigues's main chapter (chapter 6) she and colleagues seek to show that Pirahã has obligatory control structures, like “I want to study” in English, where the subject of “to study” is a null subject, and the clause “to study” is an embedded clause, an argument of “want”.





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The issue here is that there are several candidate analyses for the forms that Rodrigues discusses:

- a. discourse-based zero-marking (e.g., Givón 2017; 1983), which is very common cross-linguistically
- b. pro-drop
- c. obligatory control
- d. non-obligatory control



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Everett (1983) considers a superset of the examples that Rodrigues considers and concludes they are better explained as discourse-based zero-marking or pro-drop. “Even though there are no examples of control across clause boundaries, I hope to find them.” (Everett, 1983, p. 34)



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E.g., oblig control is not found with fully inflected verbs in general. Yet in all the structures Rodrigues labels oblig control in Pirahã, the verbs are fully inflected. OTOH, both pro-drop and discourse-tracking zero anaphora typically allow for the verb to be fully inflected.



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Furthermore, without a fluent bilingual, it is unclear how this work could take place. Rodrigues says:
“Crucially, according to our consultant, Hiahoai [sic] Pirahã, the elided agent of the predicate kapiiga kagakai [sic] is obligatorily controlled by the subject ti [sic], ...”



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but (1) it is unlikely that any Pirahã speaker would say that the reference in the null subject position is “obligatory”. This word does not exist in Pirahã, and it is not in their limited Portuguese vocabulary (it is a specialized academic term in this context);



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(2) even if the two Pirahã speakers did indicate that the null subject was usually co-referent with the non-null subject, this does not establish that the referential restrictions are due to obligatory control. One would need to distinguish the four types of structures above.



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Without a fluent bilingual, it's just hard to know what to make of the Pirahã chapters in this book. But we welcome discussion of these topics.

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