

# LANGUAGE

JOURNAL OF THE LINGUISTIC  
SOCIETY OF AMERICA

---

VOLUME 85, NUMBER 2

JUNE 2009

---

Letters to <i>Language</i> .....	245
Testing theories of linguistic constituency with configural learning: The case of the English syllable..... <i>Vsevolod Kapatsinski</i>	248
Another way to mark syntactic dependencies: The case for right-peripheral specifiers in sign languages..... <i>Carlo Cecchetto, Carlo Geraci, &amp; Sandro Zucchi</i>	278
The present of the English future: Grammatical variation and collocations in discourse..... <i>Rena Torres Cacoullos &amp; James A. Walker</i>	321
Pirahã exceptionality: A reassessment..... <i>Andrew Nevins, David Pesetsky, &amp; Cilene Rodrigues</i>	355
Pirahã culture and grammar: A response to some criticisms..... <i>Daniel L. Everett</i>	405
Reviews (see back cover) .....	443
The Editor's Report .....	<i>Brian D. Joseph</i> 497
Recent Publications .....	512

PUBLISHED BY THE LINGUISTIC SOCIETY OF AMERICA

## Abstracts:

---

### **TESTING THEORIES OF LINGUISTIC CONSTITUENCY WITH CONFIGURAL LEARNING: THE CASE OF THE ENGLISH SYLLABLE**

Vsevolod Kapatsinski  
*Indiana University*

This article proposes and tests an experimental method to assess the psychological reality of hierarchical theories of constituent structure in particular domains. I show that a hierarchical theory of constituent structure necessarily makes the prediction that an association between constituents should be easier to learn than an association between strings that cross constituent boundaries, whereas dependency-based theories of constituency predict that constituents cannot have associations that their parts do not have. Previous research has shown that the major division within an English syllable is between the onset and the nucleus, rather than between the nucleus and the coda. Thus, the nucleus forms a constituent (the rime) with the coda rather than the onset. The hierarchical theory of constituency thus proposes that English speakers should learn rime-affix associations more easily than body-affix associations and that the rime can have associations that its parts do not have. These predictions are confirmed in the present study. Applications of the experimental method and its variants to linguistic constituency in other domains are discussed.

*Keywords:* constituency, configural learning, syllable structure, rime, English

**[Back to TOC](#)**

**[Next abstract](#)**

---

## ANOTHER WAY TO MARK SYNTACTIC DEPENDENCIES: THE CASE FOR RIGHT-PERIPHERAL SPECIFIERS IN SIGN LANGUAGES

Carlo Cecchetto

*University of Milan–Bicocca*

Carlo Geraci

*University of Milan–Bicocca*

Sandro Zucchi

*University of Milan*

The occurrence of WH-items at the right edge of the sentence, while extremely rare in spoken languages, is quite common in sign languages. In particular, in sign languages like LIS (Italian Sign Language) WH-items cannot be positioned at the left edge. We argue that existing accounts of right-peripheral occurrences of WH-items are empirically inadequate and provide no clue as to why sign languages and spoken languages differ in this respect. We suggest that the occurrence of WH-items at the right edge of the sentence in sign languages be taken at face value: in these languages, WH-phrases undergo rightward movement. Based on data from LIS, we argue that this is due to the fact that WH-NONMANUAL MARKING (NMM) marks the dependency between an interrogative complementizer and the position that the WH-phrase occupies before it moves. The hypothesis that NMM can play this role also accounts for the spreading of negative NMM with LIS negative quantifiers. We discuss how our analysis can be extended to ASL (American Sign Language) and IPSL (Indo-Pakistani Sign Language). Our account is spelled out in the principles-and-parameters framework. In the last part of the article, we relate our proposal to recent work on prosody in spoken languages showing that WH-dependencies can be prosodically marked in spoken languages. Overt movement and prosodic marking of the WH-dependency do not normally cooccur in spoken languages, while they are possible in sign languages. We propose that this is due to the fact that sign languages, unlike spoken languages, are multidimensional.

*Keywords:* sign language, Italian Sign Language (LIS), WH-questions, prosodic marking of syntactic dependencies, negation, specifiers

**Back to TOC**

**Next abstract**

---

**THE PRESENT OF THE ENGLISH FUTURE: GRAMMATICAL VARIATION AND COLLOCATIONS IN DISCOURSE**

Rena Torres Cacoullos

*The Pennsylvania State University*

James A. Walker

*York University*

We use the variationist method to elucidate the expression of future time in English, examining multiple grammaticalization in the same domain (*will* and *going to*). Usage patterns show that the choice of form is not determined by invariant semantic readings such as proximity, certainty, willingness, or intention. Rather, particular instances of each general construction occupy lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic niches. While putative differences in meaning are largely neutralized in discourse, grammaticalization paths are reflected in particular constructions of different degrees of lexical specificity, which bear different nuances of meaning or tenacious patterns of distribution inherited from once-meaningful associations. We conclude that collocations contribute to the shape of grammatical variation.

*Keywords:* variation, future, English, collocation, construction, grammaticalization path

**[Back to TOC](#)**

**[Next abstract](#)**

---

## **PIRAHÃ EXCEPTIONALITY: A REASSESSMENT**

Andrew Nevins

*Harvard University*

David Pesetsky

*Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

Cilene Rodrigues

*University of Brasilia and Emmanuel College*

Everett (2005) has claimed that the grammar of Pirahã is exceptional in displaying ‘inexplicable gaps’, that these gaps follow from a cultural principle restricting communication to ‘immediate experience’, and that this principle has ‘severe’ consequences for work on universal grammar. We argue against each of these claims. Relying on the available documentation and descriptions of the language, especially the rich material in Everett 1986, 1987b, we argue that many of the exceptional grammatical ‘gaps’ supposedly characteristic of Pirahã are misanalyzed by Everett (2005) and are neither gaps nor exceptional among the world’s languages. We find no evidence, for example, that Pirahã lacks embedded clauses, and in fact find strong syntactic and semantic evidence in favor of their existence in Pirahã. Likewise, we find no evidence that Pirahã lacks quantifiers, as claimed by Everett (2005). Furthermore, most of the actual properties of the Pirahã constructions discussed by Everett (for example, the ban on prenominal possessor recursion and the behavior of WH-constructions) are familiar from languages whose speakers lack the cultural restrictions attributed to the Pirahã. Finally, following mostly Gonçalves (1993, 2000, 2001), we also question some of the empirical claims about Pirahã culture advanced by Everett in primary support of the ‘immediate experience’ restriction. We conclude that there is no evidence from Pirahã for the particular causal relation between culture and grammatical structure suggested by Everett.

*Keywords:* Pirahã, embedding, recursion, possessor, WH-movement, correlatives, numerals, myth, culture, universals, cosmology, parameters

**[Back to TOC](#)**

**[Next abstract](#)**

---

## **PIRAHÃ CULTURE AND GRAMMAR: A RESPONSE TO SOME CRITICISMS**

Daniel L. Everett

*Illinois State University*

This article responds to criticisms of the proposals of Everett 2005 by Nevins, Pesetsky, and Rodrigues (2009, this issue). It argues that their criticisms are unfounded and that Pirahã grammar and culture are accurately described in Everett 2005. The article also offers more detailed argumentation for the hypothesis that culture can exert an architectonic effect on grammar. It concludes that Pirahã falsifies the single prediction made by Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch (2002) that recursion is the essential property of human language.

*Keywords:* Pirahã, recursion, culture, immediacy of experience, universal grammar-1, universal grammar-2

**[Back to TOC](#)**

**[Book Reviews](#)**

BOOK REVIEWS IN THIS ISSUE

---

Aarts & Wallis (eds.): The British component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-GB), Release 2.	443
Aarts & Wallis (eds.): Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English (DCPSE).	
Wallis (ed.): The International Corpus of English Corpus Utility Program (ICECUP), version 3.1 .....	<i>M. Davies</i> 443
Aikhenvald & Dixon (eds.): Serial verb constructions:	
A cross-linguistic typology .....	<i>N. J. Enfield</i> 445
Aitchison: The word weavers: Newshounds and wordsmiths.....	<i>R. Lakoff</i> 451
Ansaldo et al. (eds.): Deconstructing creole.....	<i>M. Sebba</i> 454
Auer & Wei (eds.): Handbook of multilingualism and multilingual communication .....	<i>S. Romaine</i> 457
Bergmann et al. (eds.): Language files: Materials for an introduction to language and linguistics. 10th edn. ....	<i>K. Hazen</i> 458
Cheng & Corver (eds.): WH-movement: Moving on .....	<i>Ž. Bošković</i> 463
Davies & Dubinsky (eds.): Objects and other subjects: Grammatical functions, functional categories, and configurationality .....	<i>J. Moore</i> 468
Harlow: Māori: A linguistic introduction.....	<i>W. Bauer</i> 473
Johansson: Seeing through multilingual corpora: On the use of corpora in contrastive studies.....	<i>Å. Viberg</i> 476
Li et al. (eds.): The handbook of East Asian psycholinguistics. Vol. 1: Chinese.	
Nakayama et al. (eds.): The handbook of East Asian psycholinguistics. Vol. 2: Japanese.....	<i>N. Tsujimura</i> 480
Miestamo et al. (eds.): Language complexity: Typology, contact, change .....	<i>A. Carstairs-McCarthy</i> 484
Phillips: Word frequency and lexical diffusion.....	<i>R. W. Murray</i> 487
Wallace: The Sabellic languages of ancient Italy .....	<i>J. T. Katz</i> 490
Zúñiga: Deixis and alignment: Inverse systems in indigenous languages of the Americas .....	<i>D. Creissels</i> 492

**Back to TOC**