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## Reassessing adjective chaining in Pirahã

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### Abstract

Pirahã is an indigenous amazonian language spoken by a predominantly monolingual population of around 400 people inhabiting the edge of the Maici River, southern Amazonas state. The Pirahã language emerged in linguistic studies after Daniel Everett's publications throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. In his work, the author claims Pirahã lacks many linguistic structures which were so far considered universal by contemporary Generativist Theory. For example, Everett claims the language completely blocks recursion in all syntactic levels. This assertion is particularly controversial as recursion has been proposed to be a basic propriety of human language by mainstream chomskyan theory. Recently, researchers like Cilene Rodrigues reassessed Pirahã to verify if it effectively blocks syntactic recursion. Our work can be seen as a continuation of this line of inquiry. Our main objective was checking, through a small group of tests, if the language allows multiple adjectival modification of a single head-noun.

**Palavras-chave:** syntax, amazonian languages, adjectives

### Introduction

The Pirahã language has gained special attention after Daniel Everett brought evidence suggesting the language lacks all kinds of recursive structures, thus making it unique, as it would be the only language known to completely block syntactic recursion at all levels. This assertion became particularly controversial, since recursion, until then, was regarded as a universal property of natural languages within the paradigm of generative grammar.

Our work sought to reassess whether the language allows adjective chains, that is, multiple adjectives modifying a single head-noun. Our starting point were Everett's assertions on Pirahã adjectives, where the author mostly denies the possibility of multiple adjectival modification.

Our methodology for this work was experimental: we conducted fieldwork with a native monolingual Pirahã speaker and, through a series of elicitation tests, sought to gather meaningful data on adjectival modification in Pirahã.

### Discussion

Our data suggests the language does allow adjective chaining, at least with two APs, contrasted with single adjective modification, as in:

(1)  
xaxai kopaiai  
N.stone Adj.black  
black stone | single adjective, direct modification

(2)  
xaxai ogiai-xaagaha kopaiai  
N.stone Adj.big-V.be Adj.black  
big black stone | adjective chain with 2 adjectives modifying a single noun

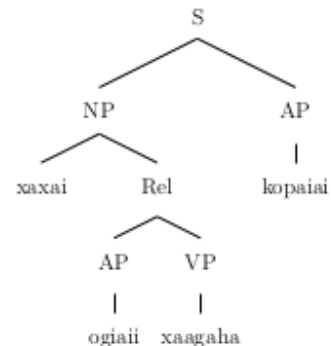
It seems relevant that multiple adjectival modification relies on a verbal copula with *xaagaha* positioned immediately after the first adjective. Since Pirahã follows a SOV order, said copular verb takes the modified noun and the first adjective of the chain as arguments. The speaker never produced sentences using more than one adjective without a VP between the head NP and the final AP, as in:

\* xaxai xaopaiai kuihi  
N.stone Adj.black Adj.small

What seems crucial is the fact that, in our data, every adjective chain shows up together with an intermediate copular VP between the two adjectives. In this context, our main task is understanding how the final AP is linked to the head NP, taking into account that there is another AP and a copular verb placed between these two elements.

Our hypothesis of work is that the verbal copula *xaagaha* is linked to adjectives forming reduced relative sentences, as in:

**Figure 1.** Proposed syntax-tree diagram of an adjective chain in Pirahã using a reduced relative sentence



### Conclusions

We believe our data points to some new relevant information about the Pirahã language. It seems clear that multiple adjectival modification of a single noun is possible in Pirahã and, according to our proposal, operates by employing reduced relative sentences. Until now, most fieldwork on the language denied the possibility of relative sentences or of names accompanied by more than one modifier in the language.

We believe the main question concerning Pirahã adjective chains is checking whether these structure is recursive, that is, if it can create sequences of more than two and potentially infinite adjectives over a single head noun by using reduced relatives, or even other syntactic strategies.