

# *Can Homo erectus put an end to Chomsky's mechanistic metaphysics?*

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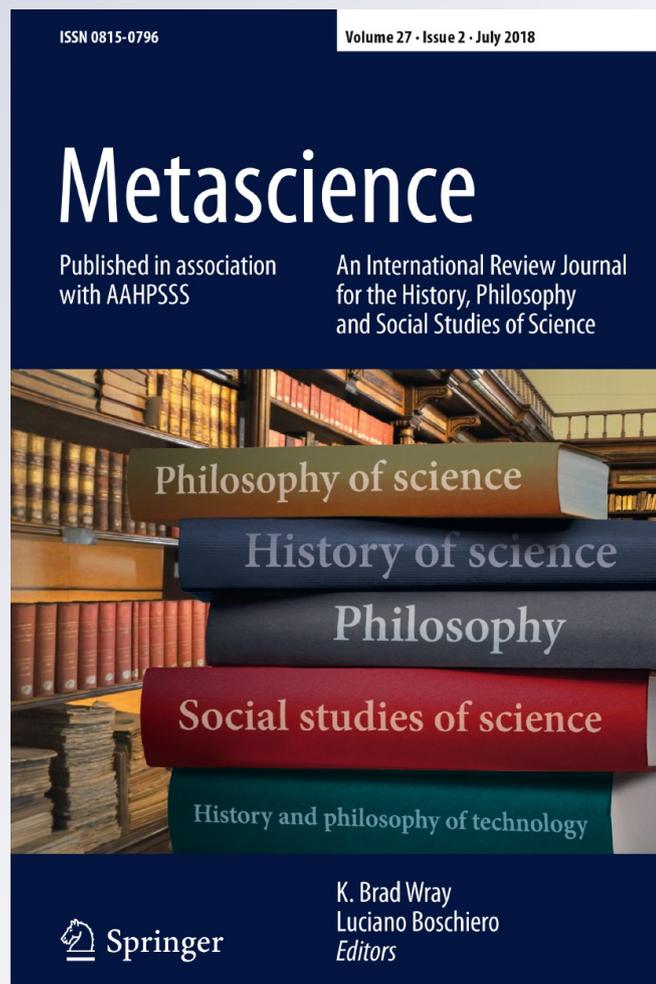
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## Can *Homo erectus* put an end to Chomsky's mechanistic metaphysics?

**Daniel L. Everett: How language began: The story of humanity's greatest invention. Liveright Publishing, Norton & Co., 2017, 348 pp, ISBN: 9780871407955, \$29.00 HB**

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This should be a watershed book as it effectively demolishes the unwarranted assumptions that support the work of the major linguist of our times, Noam Chomsky. Instead of regarding language as predominantly computation and only secondarily as communication, as Chomsky insists, Daniel Everett offers convincing evidence that language's main function is to communicate shared meanings within a cultural community, which allows for social learning and cultural creativity.

To demonstrate this, Everett attempts to trace the origin of symbol use, which he sees as the foundation of human language, and he finds it in the distant prehistoric past among the far-travelled species we designate as *Homo erectus*. In linguistic terminology, Everett defends the *constitutive* view of language over the *designative*, preferred by cognitive scientists. After years of refusing to discuss the origin of language, Chomsky in 2002 agreed with the metaphysical speculation that it must have begun as a lucky neural mutation in a single individual (Hauser et al. 2002). Everett presents a very strong case for slow cultural invention among many individuals as the impetus for language.

Everett has the academic credentials in both linguistics and anthropology to take on this task, and his personal story is intriguing. He did 20 years of fieldwork, studying rare languages among isolated Amazonian tribes and lived among the culturally basic Pirahã. He first went to Amazonia as a missionary to convert the natives to Christianity, but instead it seems they opened his perspective and he was himself deconverted, after which he became a cultural anthropologist. Likewise, he began his linguistic fieldwork as a supporter of Chomsky's innate universal grammar, but when he discovered that some central aspects of the supposedly

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inborn grammar were not present in the language of the Pirahã, he again deconverted, turning to cultural relativism instead.

After an essay in *Cultural Anthropology* (Everett 2005) outlined his controversial position, he began an intellectual feud with Chomsky and his followers in the pages of *The New Yorker* magazine and a more than 100 page give-and-take in the June 2009 issue of *Journal of the Linguistic Society of America*, *Language*. Chomsky now apparently refuses to talk of Everett, dismissing him as a charlatan (de S. Paulo 2009). In his previous two books, Everett (2012, 2017) pursued his case for cultural variation among languages and for the intersubjective invention of language. This book completes his survey by making the case that language began with the creation of meaningful symbols by *H. erectus*, the inventor of fully functional language in the human sense. Any language spoken by *H. erectus* would have been rudimentary or even primitive, in the original sense, in the same way Everett found Pirahã language, though he observed that it worked well enough for them.

Just what makes human language unique in this world continues to be a controversial topic, but Everett thinks grammatical structures are helpful additions to language though not the core necessity. This goes to symbols, which he defines as “conventional ways of representing meaning that are largely arbitrary” (7), but which everyone in the cultural group can understand. Language extends the basic symbol by stringing them together and developing ways to expand their references. He argues that Pirahã speech does not show evidence of recursion, the ability to extend sentences indefinitely by adding modifiers, phrases, and clauses within them, which Chomsky has claimed is essential to language (Hauser et al. 2002), and it further shows no signs of the generally accepted universal design features of language, interchangeability, displacement, and productivity.

Beyond this, he presents strong evidence against the widely accepted neuroscientific claims that the brain has specific language modules and the announcement that the FOXP2 gene is specifically for speech. Of course, physical adaptations or *exaptations* are necessary for speech, but these may have resulted from our move into language and not caused it. “What underlies our wonderful human voices is a jury-rigged collection of anatomical parts that we need for other things. This tells us that language is not a biological object but a semiotic one. It did not originate from a gene but from culture” (89).

Many before Everett have taken on the task of opposing Chomsky’s nativism, but Everett does not mention them. One of the most notable is Terrence Deacon (1997). This is a pity for Deacon’s argument for the co-evolution of language and the brain could have helped Everett’s case. Deacon also agrees with the early rise of symbolism, but his understanding of symbolism seems to go deeper, for he claims that for symbolism to have meaning a *symbolic threshold* must be crossed. This indicates that at a certain point in evolution, early humans entered a new world of symbolic culture in which every event or object seemed to be imbued with meaning, and every symbol’s reference involves other symbols. We take up residence in a *virtual* world with senses of time, space, and personhood unknown to other animals. A single abstract sign could not symbolize in this sense; it could only be indexical or a part of a gestural, nominative *protolanguage* (Bickerton 2000). A single symbol is

understood via intersubjective consensus, for each symbol assumes a meaning from its relation to such a symbolic world (cf. Cassirer 1944, 1953/1923; Taylor 2016).

I agree with Everett's claim that the exchange of meaningful symbols is the keystone to human languages and that social conversation is the *sine qua non* of a fully functional linguistic mind. However, I suggest that Everett could have read more of the philosophy of symbolic forms, for example, Cassirer (1953/1923). Once the symbolic threshold is crossed, everything changes. Taylor (2016) states that "language makes possible a new kind of consciousness" (6), which leads toward individual self-agency. Cassirer notes, "No longer in a merely physical universe, man lives in a symbolic universe. Language, myth, art, and religion are parts of this universe. They are the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of human experience" (1944, p. 25). As Everett himself agrees, there are few indications of myth, art, or religion in the archaeological record left by *H. erectus*. Everett cites evidence that *erectus* used fire, but he cannot prove that such use was not merely opportunistic. Furthermore, *H. erectus* used the same hand axe for over a million years; this is not a sign of cultural adaptation or the social learning that conversation brings.

Everett bases his case for fully human language being invented by *H. erectus* on a few disputable archaeological finds that need only suggest indexical representation. He continually goes back to mentioning the seagoing watercraft that he assumes must have been built by *H. erectus* to get to the island of Java, where skeletal remains of the species have been found. However, an assumption is not evidence, and there may be other explanations for how *erectus* got to Java, such as a significant lowering of sea levels at that time. His strongest backing for social advancement among the *erectus* population is the Lower Paleolithic Geshar Benot Ya'aqov archaeological site near the Dead Sea, but the inhabitants are unknown and his claim of social hierarchy and centralized planning there is sheer speculation. I would be happier if Everett had stuck to calling it a hypothesis and had objectively compared the sparse evidence for symbol use among *H. erectus* and *H. neanderthalensis* with the certain evidence for *H. sapiens* > 100 thousand years ago.

The book is written for non-specialist readers and citations are sparse, though his important explanation of linguistic independence from innate neural structures will be challenging for some. His writing is clear and his witticisms occasionally amuse, but he sometimes loses his objectivity when he asserts his claims. The fact that I was unconvinced that *H. erectus* invented human symbolic language only spurred me to further thinking, so I enjoyed it immensely and recommend it to interested readers.

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