

**Underspecified Temporal Semantics in Pirahã,
Compositional Transparency, and Inference ¹**

Daniel L. Everett

Bentley University

deverett@bentley.edu

"Perhaps it might be said rightly that there are three times: a time present of things past; a time present of things present; and a time present of things future. For these three co-exist somehow in the soul, for otherwise I could not see them. The time present of things past is memory; the time present of things present is direct experience; the time present of things future is expectation."

St Augustine ([1], Book 11, Chapter 20, Heading 26)

Abstract:

When the semantics is underspecified for some range of meaning, i.e. the grammar fails to display the full range of signs (words and syntax) required for semantic interpretation, compositionality across the relevant range is non-transparent. Pirahã tense is interesting because temporal interpretations in Pirahã require more information than the syntax (or the pragmatics) provides. Moreover, not only are temporal interpretations in Pirahã underdetermined by Pirahã syntax, but this underdetermination provides yet more evidence against what I refer to as "naive compositionality," the idea that meanings are provided Montague-style by mappings from syntax to semantics. Indeed, as we see, it brings into the question the nature of compositionality itself. From this point I argue that if we reinterpret compositionality as a subtype of inference in the Peircean sense, this enables us not only to better understand some peculiarities in the relationship between Pirahã language and cognition but to also predict (as per Everett 2017 and Barham and Everett 2020) "degrees of fit" between morphosyntactic structure and meaning across languages, leading to a novel, though informal typology of language types, including languages without sentential recursion. Finally, Pirahã temporal semantics is also interesting because it forces an adjustment of Reichenbach's theory of tense, in line with Everett (1993), namely, that the "Reference" coordinate in his system is dispensable in some languages.

1. Introduction:²

1.1. Summary of major points

In what follows I review, revise, and move beyond the analysis of temporal semantics and grammar in Pirahã first developed in Everett (1993).³ This revised analysis reaches several conclusions. First, as argued by Everett (1993), the theory of tense developed in Reichenbach, if adopted at all, must allow for languages which lack what Reichenbach (see also Hornstein (1990)) called the "R(eference) point." Because Pirahã lacks perfect tenses and perfect interpretations, I argue that the R-point is unnecessary in Pirahã. Second, I argue that Pirahã's temporal structures require a theory of compositionality that, reminiscent of Partee (1995), requires that compositionality fill in gaps of structures and meanings that are missing from the syntax. Although there are many theories of compositionality that address similar issues, I will argue that it is more parsimonious to treat compositionality as a subtype of inference, ranging at least over culture, grammar, and real-world knowledge. This fits a particular approach to meaning, begun by Charles Sanders Peirce more than 150 years ago. I also argue that by treating compositionality as a subspecies of inference, we are better able understand a number of processes, including the recursive interpretations in Pirahã in the absence of recursive syntax, Pirahã tense, and interpretations in other languages. Finally, I argue that the inferential determination of Pirahã temporal semantics even though underdetermined by the syntax in the language allows better understanding of Everett's (2017) and Everett and Barham's (2020) conclusions that there are three types of language based on the tightness of fit between syntax and semantics.

If correct, this conclusion illustrates a possibility mentioned by Barbara Partee regarding syntactic underdetermination of quantification (based on a tripartate semantic structure for

quantification found in several approaches): *"If we were to regard such a structure as a common semantic interpretation of the very different syntactic structures in question, we might find ourselves asserting that some languages are more compositional than others."* (Partee (1995, 541). Though Partee rejects this possibility, I argue here that it is necessary and natural).

1.2. Organization of paper

Section 2 of this paper provides a summary of Pirahã time words and temporal interpretations as discussed in Everett (1993), as well as motives for rejecting the universality of Reichenbach's full temporal theory (even as modified by Hornstein (1990)). Section 3 discusses getting from Pirahã temporal syntax to Pirahã temporal semantics. Section 4 discusses the implications of our findings for compositionality. Section 4 also discusses the possible fit, alluded to by Partee (1995, 541) above, between grammars and inference/compositionality, supporting Everett (2017) and Barham and Everett (2020). Section 5 summarizes the findings and discusses some additional implications.

2. Pirahã Temporal Signs and Interpretants

Although there is a rich system of verbal aspectual suffixation in Pirahã, there is no purely temporal morphology (Everett 1983, 1986, 1993). There is also a very limited number of time words. Thus Pirahã temporal semantics is underdetermined by lexico-syntactic sources. And yet Pirahãs are aware of past, present, and future, even though they do not mark them overtly in the language. This mismatch in Pirahã of the absence of overt marking of traditional tenses with the presence of temporal interpretations corresponding in part to such tenses leads ultimately to a better understanding of the role of culture and real-world in linguistic

interpretation⁴. The role of culture and other information in temporal interpretations is not unique to Pirahã (e.g. Jaszczolt 2009; Partee 1996, Everett (2012a,b; 2016), inter alia).

The facts of Pirahã temporal meanings remind us that the study of little-known languages can pay back the effort required by discoveries of principles or better examples of principles than a lifetime of work on better-known languages might reveal.^{5,6} From the perspective of Everett (2012, 2016) all temporal systems begin with real-world physical and cultural experiences (also cognitive, but this term is a hyponym of culture).

One need not adopt a particular philosophical position on time and space to recognize that bodies require space and thoughts require time. Of course, we do not know this when we are born. We just live. Our interpretations of our proprioceptions and perceptions are constrained by the cultures from which we emerge, which shape our perspectives on the meaning and structure of time and space and the way in which these perspectives in turn affect our social expectations, knowledge structures, and values (Everett 2016). As we say in Portuguese when we want someone to arrive on time "Hora britânica, ouviu?" ('British time, you hear?') According to this Brazilian Portuguese saying, the British valuation and meaning of specific time interpretations guides one's behavior differently than those in Brazilian Portuguese. (Though the expression is ultimately intended to be humorous, it is frequently used to clarify beginning times of meetings.)

My proprioceptive awareness of my body's extension tells me something about the space I occupy. My eyes show differential distances. My awareness of time is in part formed by external factors, such as the sun's rays' intensity changing based on the time of day and the time of year. Our hunger tells us it is time to eat. Our thirst that it is time to drink. At a party the host "realizes" it's time for guests to leave, though guests might not share this realization - vantage

points are crucial. Events and our lives feel sequential, especially our thoughts as Peirce pointed out 153 years ago:

"To say, therefore, that thought cannot happen in an instant, but requires a time, is but another way of saying that every thought must be interpreted in another, or that all thought is in signs." (Peirce (W2: 207ff, 1868)).

This sequentiality becomes a basis for time and the time-line metaphor (left to right = past to future) found in many languages, just as it can serve as a foundation for other time systems, such as the temporal semantics in Pirahã, wherein culture arguably plays a stronger role than the morphosyntax in time reference. Culture permeates our lives, as I have argued in many other places (e.g. Everett 2005; 2012; 2016), in ways that are often unspoken and even ineffable. One of the first to write about this with clarity and elegance was Edward T. Hall (1959, 1976, 1990).

In 1959, Hall published **The Silent Language**.

*"It wasn't just that people 'talk' to each other without the use of words, but that there is an entire universe of behavior that is unexplored, unexamined, and very much taken for granted. It functions outside conscious awareness ... What is most difficult to accept is the fact that our own cultural patterns are literally unique and therefore **not** universal"* (Hall [1959] 1973, vii).

Hall is not merely offering here the banal observation that there is an unconscious. He is talking about cultural tacit knowledge—a more articulated notion. The concept of tacit knowledge (Polanyi (1974, 1966)) is one that I have expanded into the wider idea of "dark matter of the mind," which I defines as:

"Dark matter of the mind is any knowledge-how or any knowledge-that that is unspoken in normal circumstances, usually unarticulated even to ourselves. It may be, but is not necessarily, ineffable. It emerges from acting, "linguaging," and "culturing" as we learn conventions and knowledge organization, and adopt value properties and orderings. It is shared and it is personal. It comes via emicization, apperceptions, and memory, and thereby produces our sense of "self." Everett (2016, p11)

The concept of dark matter includes our understanding of time, individually and culturally and, as the definition claims, is acquired gradually over time as we grow up in a particular culture.

For example, some cultures offer a distinct application of their concepts of time for their gods. From some gods' perspective, the past, present, and future present themselves to the deity simultaneously. For such a being there would be no past, present, or future - He or She created all times at once and sits outside of time. (e.g. Psalms 90:2 "Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God"; or, from Ephesians 1:4, "For he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him").

Similarly Plato, an "god" of the Western secular canon, according to Reichenbach, viewed time as a "moving image of eternity" where "eternity" is a "reality not controlled by time flow." (Reichenbach 1956, 5).

One topic that has long intrigued anthropological linguists is the relationship between humanity's various senses of time and how these cultural manifestations are represented in temporally-based philosophies, sciences, theologies, and grammars. How do human cultures effect the linguistic expression of time? In Peircean terms, the process of sensing, tracking, and eventually representing the movement of the phenomenological/phaneroscopic perception of time from a vague feeling (e.g. the warmth of sunlight on our face that we do not focus on consciously) to a recognition of temporal stages of the daytime (say, morning and noon), to words, morphology, and reasoning about time is the result of his three phaneroscopic (phenomenological) characteristics. Peirce labels these three stages "firstness," "secondness," and "thirdness." The thirdness in particular is culturally and linguistically constrained and is the focus of this paper.

2. A Review of Pirahã Time

2.1. Absolute Tenses

In Everett (1983, 1986, 1993, and 2005) it is claimed that Pirahã lacks any dedicated morphosyntactic markers for past, future, or present. However, as presented in Everett (1986, 288ff), Pirahã has a rich set of aspectual suffixes to mark such notions as duration of action, realization of action, internal division of action, continuation of action, beginning of action or state, actions within and outside of the control of the speaker (which overlaps with the notion of proximate vs. remote tense), iteration of action, and resultative aspect. There are also two separate positional classes with three suffixes each to indicate the relative

- c. **tii soʔóá kaháp -á há**
 I already go -remote -complete certainty
 'I already left.'

PAST

- (2) a. **so ʔógió** long time ago/from now'
 time big (Also, like the examples to follow, a diachronic formation
 no longer productive in the language)

- b. **ʔaoói soʔógió koa - á -i.**
 foreigner long ago die -remote -action
 'The foreigner died a long time ago.'

- c. **ʔaoói soʔógió ʔowá -boí -haí**
 foreigner long ago purchase -movement -relative
 certainty

baósai.

cloth

'The foreigner will buy cloth some time from now.'

FUTURE/PAST

- (3) a. **pii ai -so** 'the water becomes thin (summer/dry season)
 water thin -telic

b.	ʔoogiái	hi	piiáiso	ʔab	-o	-óp
	Dan	3p	dry season	remain-stem vowel	-go	
	a	-i.		baisí	hi	ai
	remote	-relative certainty		Maici:river	3p	be

'ʔoogiái (Dan) will return in the summer (=low water time).'

'Dan returned in the summer.'⁸

FUTURE/PAST

- (4) a. **pii bígaí -so** 'when water is thickened' (winter/rainy season)
 water thicken -telic

b.	ʔoogiái	hi	piibigaiso	ʔabo	-óp
	Dan	3p	rainy season	remain-go	
	-a	-i.		baisí,	hi ai.
	remote	-relative certainty		Maici:river	3p be

'Dan will return in the rainy season.'

'Dan returned in the rainy season.'

(Separate clauses, with separate intonational breaks)

- (5) a. **tíihí káobí -so** 'Brazil nuts fallen' (used for latter part of
 Brazil nut fall -telic rainy season)

b. **ʔao aáibá -koí tíihíkáobíso.**
 foreigner many -intense latter period of rainy season
 'There are many foreigners (here) in Brazil nut season.'

(6) a. **ʔa ho ái** 'night'
 at fire be

b. **ʔoí kabáo ʔab i í -haí ʔahoái.**
 biosphere: remain stem vowel proximate -rel.cert. night
 jungle
 'Don't go out at night.'

(7) a. **hoa hoí hi -o** 'more than one day'
 fire couple at -it

b. **Hi hoahoíhio ʔab iig á.**
 3p couple of days remain -cont.-rem.
 'He is staying several days.'

Other examples of time words include words like:

(8) **ʔahoa koho -ai -hio** 'early morning'
 night eat -do -in

(9) **hi bigí bagá ʔais -o** 'sunrise/sunset'

3p ground/sky on top of do telic

(10) **hiso ógi ái'** noon' (lit: 'big sun time')
sun big do/be

(11) **pi ?ái** 'now' (lit: 'this water')
water -do/be

2.1.2. Sequential markers

Sequential markers or ordering words are formed metaphorically in Pirahã (as in many other languages), including such words as:

(12) a. **?apaí** 'first' (literally: 'head')
b. **Gói ?apai ?opí -ta -á -ti**
imp.pro head go -iterative -remote -directive
'You go first.' OR 'You go in front.'

(13). a. **ti ohi -ó** 'next' (at the butt)
butt side -locative
b. **Kóhoi ?apaí kao -p -á. Poioí hi tioh -ó kao**
Kóhoi head, emerge-vertically-remote. Poioí he butt-at emerge
-p -á -há.
-vertically -remote -complete certainty.

'Kóhoi was born first, then Poioi.'

(14) a. **gaaba** 'then/next'

b. **Kóhoi ?apaí kaopá. Poioí hi tihó kaopáhá.**

'Kohoi was born first, then Poioi.'

c. **Ti koho -ái -kab -á -ob -áo. Gaaba ti gí kobai -sog**

1p eat -do -end -remote -turn -telic. Next I you see -des.

-abagaí.

-frustrated initiation

'When I finish eating, then I (almost) want to see you.'

Each of the temporal expressions above can be made precise only via specific contextual inferences. Note, though, that in context each of these expressions is ultimately interpreted by simply interpreting the moment of speech as prior to the future event, following the event, or simultaneous present with the event.⁹

2.1.3. Other temporal representations

2.1.3.1. Temporal Clauses

In Everett (1983/1986), I analyzed a particular suffix, **-ao/-so** (vowel-initial following consonants, s-initial otherwise) as indicating telic aspect.

(15) **kab -á -o -b -áo soxóa.**
finish -remote -away -down -telic already

"I just finished.' OR 'I am about to finish."

The **-áo** is not a temporal connective/subordinator but rather it indicates 'boundary of an action'. Moreover, it can be omitted from what one might consider to be similar to syntactically subordinate clauses in other languages, as in (16) and (17):¹⁰

(16) a. **kohóai-xiigá. Tíi gí ?ahoái -soog -abagai**
 eat -continuative I you talk -want -frustrated initiation
 "(You) are eating. I want to talk to you."
 (Free translation: "When you finish eating, I want to talk to you.")

b. **kohóai -kabá -o -b -áo.**
 eat -finish -stem vowel -down -telic.
Ti gí ?ahoái -soog -abagai
 I you talk -want -frustrated initiation
 '(You) are about finished eating/you just finished eating. I want to talk to you.'
 (Free translation = "When you are done eating I want to talk to you.")

(17) a. **Pii boí -so. ti kahápií -hiaba.**
 rain move -telic. I go -negative
 'Rain has completed. I won't go.'

(This is because when the ground is wet, the snakes come out of their holes.)

b. **Pii -boí -iigá. ti kahápií -hiaba.**
 rain -move down continuative. 1 go -negative
 'It is raining. I won't go.'

If the suffix **-sai** 'old information' is used in these examples instead of **-so/-ao** the result is different:

- (18) a. **pii -boí -sai. Ti kahápií -hiaba.**
rain -move down -old information. I go -negative
'It rains (topic of discussion). I won't go.'

This can also be interpreted as a conditional (e.g. 'If it rains, I won't go'), but need not be. This arises just in case the conversation is about raining and one adds information about their plans. But there is no evidence for subordination apart from the English translation.

2.1.3.2. Additional examples

Past readings:

- (19) **ti kahi ob -áo -b -iig -á**
1 arrow see -telic -down/perfective-continuative-remote

"I was looking at the arrow."

- (20) **xi hiab -ab -óxóí -hix**
animal negative-remain -interrogative -interrogative

"Did the meat run out?"

- (21) **ti xi koho -áo -p -iig -á**
1 animal eat -telic -up -continuative -remote

"I was eating meat."

Future readings

- (22) **hi** **koab** **-ai** **-p** **-a**
 3 die -atelic -imperfective -remote
 "He will die."

- (23) **?ipóihí** **?ab** **-óp** **-ai** **-so.** **?aaxái**
 woman return -go -be -telic proper name

- ?ipóihí.** **tíi** **?ahá** **-p** **-í** **-t** **-aó.**
 woman 1 go -vert/imp. -prox. -iter. -telic.

Free translation: "When the woman returns, the wife of ?aaxái, I will leave again." (lit: "The woman returned. I am gone again.")

Present Reading

- (24) **kahaibó** **bogíaga** **-hoag** **-á**
 arrow point warp come/turn -remote

 -há **-taío**
 -compl. cert. resultative

"Therefore, the arrow head does not warp."

- (25) **Kó,** **Kohoibiíhiai,** **ti** **gí** **?ahoa** **-ai** **-sóog** **-abagai**

vocative, proper name 1p 2p speak -be -desiderative -frust:init

"Hey, Kohoibiihiaí, I want to talk to you.

Now that we have a basic concept of absolute tense expressions, in Pirahã let's consider more complex cases, beginning with English complex sentences and proceeding to ask why perfect tenses are *not* found in Pirahã, beginning with a brief introduction to Reichenbach's theory.

3. Reichenbach's Temporal Theory¹¹

There are clearly logical and real-world constraints on tense, so that, for example, we cannot have someone in the past being affected by events in the future:

(26) *John ate when he will get his meal.

Tense is constrained partially by logic and the real world. But if the properties of tense grammar and interpretation in natural languages were all logically necessary, then there would be no language-specific variation in the tense system and thus little need for crosslinguistic studies in this area. For purposes of discussion, Reichenbach's (1947) system will be used, though I propose a nontrivial modification of that system (cf. Everett 1993).

Reichenbach (1947, 288ff) argues that tense relies on three distinct temporal points: the *event time*, **E**, the *speech time*, **S**, and the *reference time*, **R**. These are all illustrated in the English perfect tenses:

(27) John will have finished when Bill arrives.

$$S_1 \text{ ___ } E_1, \text{ ___ } R_1 \qquad S_2 \text{ ___ } E_2, R_2 \text{ (where } R_1 \text{ ___ } E_2)$$

In (27), the event of *John's* finishing precedes that of *Bill's* arriving, and both are subsequent to the moment of speech. So, in both the main clause and the adjunct clause of (27) the Moment of Speech (S) precedes the Events (E): S ___ E. The perfect tense reading comes from the R points. In the matrix clause the event of finishing precedes the event of Bill arriving. To achieve this result we say that both R points follow the moment of speech, but that the R point of the matrix clause precedes the E point of Bill's arrival, as illustrated.

Future tense in Reichenbach's system is also simply expressed: the moment of speech, S, precedes the event, E and R.

(28) Future tense using Reichenbach's system: S ___ E,R

The representation in (28) indicates that S(peech time) precedes E(vent time), i.e. that the event is future with regard to my speaking.

For past perfect tenses, the event of the main clause follows the moment of speech, but it will precede the reference point, **R**, the time of Bill's arrival in (30), which is the **E** of the adjunct clause (Bill's arrival). **R** is also seen in past perfects:

(30) John had finished when Bill arrived.

$$E_1 \text{ ___ } R_1 \text{ ___ } S_1 \qquad E_2, R_2 \text{ ___ } S_2 \text{ (} R_1 = E_2)$$

The matrix tense structure of (30) is: E _ R _ S; the adjunct tense structure is E,R _ S. That is, in the adjunct clause the Event (Bill's arrival) and the Reference point are simultaneous, both preceding the Moment of Speech. The main clause Event, John's finishing, takes place prior

to the Reference point (the Event of the adjunct clause) which is itself prior to the Moment of Speech. Thus, the event of the matrix clause, *finished*, is not situated directly in relation to S but in relation to a point of reference fixed by the adjunct clause.

The crucial point is that the adjunct clause's temporal structure, in particular its **E** point, serves as the anchor for the **R** point of the matrix clause. Obviously, then, Reichenbach's reference point is important for talk about tense in English. Reichenbach goes so far as to claim that all tenses have R-points and he suggests that basic tenses may all be accounted for straightforwardly based on relations between **E**, **S**, and **R**:

- (31)
- | | | |
|----|---------------|-----------------|
| a. | S, R, E | present tense |
| b. | E, R ___ S | past tense |
| c. | S ___ R, E | future tense |
| d. | E ___ S, R | present perfect |
| e. | E ___ R ___ S | past perfect |
| f. | S ___ E ___ R | future perfect |

Note crucially, however, that **R** is not a logical necessity. For example, there are some tenses that we can talk about without it, as shown with Pirahã, below. So, while it is clearly important to the interpretation of perfect tenses, it is not necessary for the interpretation of the simple past, present, or future tenses. In these tenses, **R** is always simultaneous with **E**, the event time and is therefore redundant (at least for simple clauses). On the other hand, **E** and **S** *do* seem necessary if we are to interpret the world around us temporally. Without them an event cannot be situated along any temporal dimension. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of talk about time without a concept of event (**E**) or a way to indicate whether that event precedes or follows a

deictic anchor, **S**, at least pragmatically or contextually. If this is correct, then **E** and **S** are *epistemologically prior* to **R**. They make talk about tense possible in the first place, whereas **R** "merely" enables us to draw finer distinctions and to mark relations between these.

A further argument for conceding epistemic priority to the Event point over the Reference point comes from work by Davidson (1967) on action sentences, as further developed by Higginbotham (1985) and Leder (1991). Both Leder and Higginbotham argue at length that E(vent) is a crucial component of all verbal (and even nominal) structures, independent of tense. Leder further argues that this independently needed notion of Event is indeed the same notion of Event that Reichenbach-influenced tense specialists refer to. Assuming something along the lines of the Leder and Higginbotham approaches, then this provides further support for the contention that E and S are the primary building blocks of temporal interpretation, while R is secondary.

Of course, many proposals on tense have arisen since Reichenbach (1947), both within philosophical logic (e.g. Montague 1974) and linguistics (for an important survey of facts about tense in English and discourse-based interpretations, see Declerck (1991)). Within Generativism, Hornstein (1990) was one of the earlier proposals. Hornstein accepts most of Reichenbach's original ideas but, further develops Reichenbach's model by extending the model to account for a wider range of intrasentential relations between tense in matrix and embedded clauses. I will not provide a complete introduction to Hornstein's model here, referring the reader to Hornstein (1990). I will however discuss those of his elaborations which are necessary in order to understand some relevant implications of Pirahã.

Consider how Reichenbach's theory might handle the famous Double Access Reading cases such (33) & (34) below. To analyze these examples in Reichenbach's tense theory Hornstein (1990) argued that Sequence of Tense (SOT) structures, such as Double

Access Readings, require an additional syntactic component in Reichenbach's model, the Rule for Temporal Connectives (RTC). The latter is stated in (32):

(32) Rule for Temporal Connectives (RTC): Write the Basic Tense Structure (BTS) (the linear arrangement of **E**, **S**, and **R**) of the adjunct temporal clause (TNS₂) under the BTS of the matrix clause, TNS₁). Associate the **S** points. Associate the **R** points by moving **R**₂ to **R**₁, placing **E** accordingly.

- (33) a. John heard that Mary is pregnant.
 b. John heard that Mary was pregnant.

- (34) a. John said that Harry will leave.
 b. John said that Harry would leave.

These are referred to as Double Access Readings (DAR) because the tense of the adjunct clause is checked against both the time of the main clause and the moment of the entire utterance (cf. Giorgi 2010). Under a particular reading, the a & b examples in (18) and (19) are temporally synonymous. They differ in that in the (a) examples, both matrix and subordinate **S** points are anchored to the actual moment of utterance. In the (b) examples, however, the **S** point of the subordinate clause is anchored to the **E** point of the (immediately) dominating clause, as in (35), representing example (33) above.⁸

- (35) [John heard that [Mary was pregnant.]]
 TNS₁ (E₁, R₁ ___ S₁) TNS₂ (E₂,R₂, ___ S₂)

$$\begin{array}{c}
 (36) \quad \text{SOT rule: } \text{TNS}_1 (\text{E}_1, \text{R}_1 \text{ ___ } \text{S}_1) \\
 | \\
 \text{TNS}_2 (\text{E}_2, \text{R}_2, \text{ ___ } \text{S}_2)^{12}
 \end{array}$$

Another example of the utility of Reichenbach's system includes its ability to account for ungrammatical temporal modification. In (37) for example, the problem is that the Basic Tense Structure of the example is simple past, or **E,R _ S**. But the modifying expression, *at this very moment*, requires that **R** and **S** be simultaneous, since it requires a present tense meaning. This produces a grammatical/logical violation and the sentence is ruled out:

(37) *John left at this very moment.¹³

Example (12) illustrates another problem:

(38) *John left tomorrow.

The tense structure of *John left* is a simple past: **E,R S**. However, *tomorrow* requires that **R** follow **S**. This produces another violation and (38) sentence is therefore also ruled out.

No consider what happens when a matrix structure is a simple future and the adjunct clause tense is present (subscripts indicate relevant clause):

(39) John will arrive when you eat pickles. $\text{TNS}_1 (\text{S}_1 \text{ ___ } \text{R}_1, \text{E}_1) \text{ TNS}_2, (\text{S}_2, \text{R}_2, \text{E}_2)$.

The tenses of each clause must be aligned via the RTC:

RTC -->

S	R ₁ ,	E ₁			
S ₂ ,	R ₂ ,	E ₂			

This eating pickles is linked to John's arrival, producing the grammatical (simultaneous future events) reading.

As noted, however, the **R**-point is not always needed, in even English. For example, one could say that the **R** point is unnecessary in past tense. Mary's pregnancy is unrelated to John's hearing when both matrix and subordinate tenses are past. Their only relationship is arguably that each occurs prior to the moment of speech. As we see below, for Pirahã the **R** point never seems necessary.

To conclude this summary, the tense points **E**, **S**, and, occasionally, **R**, as well as *syntactic* conditions on the ways in which these maybe ordered and related intrasententially are crucial to an understanding of English tense.

Reichenbach's system would similarly operate in Pirahã, in sentences like (40):

(40) **ti gáí -sai. asi ti soʔóá ʔáab -óp -á -p -á.**

1 say -old information assim 1 alreadyturn -go -up -remote

kapiiga -kakaí-sai ʔoogiái hi ʔigí - o

paper -mark -old information Dan 3 with -loc

"I just arrived. I want to study with/teach Dan."

E__S. S__E.

These sentences can be understood as time or causally-related clauses or, depending on speaker intentions, unrelated events as stated. Nothing connects them morphosyntactically.

There are thus two reasons why a simple application of either Reichenbach's basic system or Hornstein's (1990) modifications do not work here. First, Pirahã sentences are never embedded (Everett 2005, 2009a, 2012a, 2012b, 2017) and so the temporal interpretation of one clause is bound by the discourse and cultural context rather than morphosyntactic connections to another clause. Normally, the rightmost sentence in (40), "I want to study with Dan," would be interpreted as following the speaker's arrival noted in the first sentence. But it might also be the inverse, e.g. someone wanting to study with Dan (me) to earn money because they just arrived, the sentence having no implied temporal relationship to when Dan is studying (could have been four days ago, might be tomorrow). Thus due to the lack of recursion in Pirahã, SOT constraints do not exist in Pirahã¹⁴.

We have seen that Reichenbach suggests that tense can be understood in terms of the three points, **E**, **S**, and **R**, but that **E**, *event time*, and **S**, *speech time* are epistemologically prior to **R** in talk about tense. As Pirahã and many other languages illustrate, however, temporal systems vary significantly. The discussed variation predicts that tense systems crosslinguistically could vary with regard to **R** (or its equivalent) but likely never in regard to **E** or **S**. The crucial role for **R** arises not in the basic tenses (where Hornstein (1990, 112) admits that **R** has '... no interpretive reflex'), but in complex tense relations, some forms of temporal modification, and **SOT** structures. In section 4, we see that this grammatical, "naive compositionality" (e.g. in Montagovian semantics) solution falls short and that generally to interpret tense structures in languages,

we must use additional information from culture and the real world.

The stronger point is that while Pirahã manifests interpretations for past, present, and future tenses, though it lacks direct syntactic markers for them, it nevertheless lacks *interpretations* corresponding to perfect tenses, SOT structures, Double Access Readings, complex tense structures, or multiple temporal modification structures, due to the combination of its lack of **R** and the absence of sentential recursion.

3.3. Conclusion to Section Three

To summarize, Pirahã lacks any affixes for tense and otherwise has a very restrictive set of temporal nouns, adverbs, and adjectives. However, as presented in Everett (1986, 288ff), Pirahã also has a rich aspectual system including suffixes to mark such notions as duration of action, realization of action, internal division of action, continuation of action, beginning of action or state, actions within and outside of the control of the speaker (which overlaps with the notion of proximate vs. remote tense), iteration of action, and resultative aspect. There are also two separate positional classes with three suffixes each to indicate the relative certainty of the speaker with regard to the action being asserted (complete certainty, relative certainty, uncertainty) and the speaker's source of evidence (deduction, observation, hearsay).¹⁵

4. Peircean Semeiotics and Compositionality

4.1. Compositionality

The modern idea of Compositionality traces back, as many ideas about language do, to Frege (1892) and Peirce (a body of work dating back to 1865 at least). Although Peirce predates Frege in his writings about the formal nature of human language, most current researchers rightly

see Frege (1892) as a foundational work. The so-called "Frege's Principle" states that, as Dowty (2007, p3) puts it:

(41) "**Frege's Principle** (So-called): 'The meaning of a sentence is a function of the meanings of the words in it and they way that they are combined syntactically.'"¹⁶

Although Frege's principle is not without opposition (see Gayral, et. al. 2006, among many others), one thing is clear to most linguists - the grammatical structure and lexical items in a specific linguistic unit are not irrelevant to its meaning. Just how relevant they are will depend on the degree of "compositional transparency" (Dowty (2007, 8) involved. Languages and constructions, I argue (Everett 2017, in progress) can be more or less transparent and this variation falls into one of three types (which I label G₁, G₂, and G₃ languages). Consider two English examples:

(42) Ol' John kicked the bucket.

(43) Sally kissed Mary.

Example (43) is compositionally transparent, while example (42) is not - idioms are idioms because their literal meaning is not what they actually mean or, as Peirce would put it, they have "grown" as symbols.

All languages likely allow grammatical utterances to vary according to whether they are more or less compositionally transparent. And as we have seen in the examples above, Pirahã temporal interpretations are not compositionally transparent.

Yet there are many linguists and philosophers who believe that compositional transparency is universal, with occasional exceptions, all of which can be fixed by plugging the syntax into the pragmatics and downloading conversational implicatures and the like. I refer to this position as "naive compositionality" (Montague (1974) being perhaps the best example). The problem with naive compositionality, however, as currently practiced, is that it makes two erroneous assumptions - that all we need for literal semantics is in the syntax and that compositionality takes place at the sentence level, leading to the unfortunate fact that most syntactic theories are largely sentence-bound.¹⁷ There are many non-naive views of compositionality, of course. Jaszczolt (2009) and (2014) are two such examples. But although Szabó (2000), Jacobson (2014), Dowty(2007), Pelletier (1994), Kamp (2019), and Peirce (1909), inter alia, offer more nuanced views of compositionality, they are by and large still sentence-bound and omit any theoretical role for culture¹⁸. Thus study of compositional transparency variation across constructions and across languages is vital for improving our theories of human language. In this regard, Pirahã joins all other languages of the world in forcing us to go beyond naive compositionality and pragmatics in order to model their understanding of temporal intensions and extensions, in spite of the fact that their morphosyntax underdetermines their temporal semantics, varying by degree cross-linguistically. But as we will see (and see also Everett 2005, Everett 2012, Everett 2016, Everett 2017) Pirahã allows for less compositional transparency between the syntax and the semantics than some other languages. I am going to argue that what unites all languages is not identical compositional transparency but what I will call "semiotic inference."

4.2. Compositionality challenges

A modern statement of Frege's Principle is found in Szabo (2000):

- (44) *"Principle of Compositionality: the meaning of a complex expression is determined by meanings of its constituents and by its structure."* (Szabó 2000, 3)

But this bare statement on its surface does not offer a solution for Pirahã temporal interpretation. The question remains as to how we achieve temporal interpretations for time words, affixes, and discourses in Pirahã without either precision time words or tense morphosyntax, if not by naive compositionality along the lines of (44)

In light of (44) let's reconsider examples like the following from Pirahã:

- (45) a. **kohóai-xiigá.** **Tíi gí ?ahoái -soog -abagai**
eat -continuative I you talk -want -frustrated initiation
"(You) are eating. I want to talk to you."
(Free translation: "When you finish eating, I want to talk to you.")

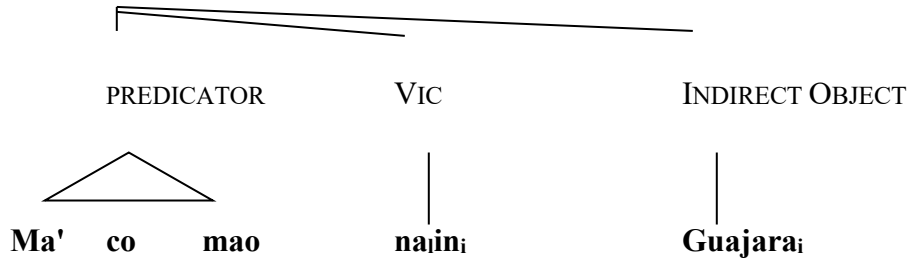
The interpretation of this example depends on seeing someone eating or quoting someone. The interpretation also depends on the cultural understanding of **-abagai** which can also be an illocutionary force marker, i.e. this is an indirect speech act (literally it is "I almost begin to want to talk to you." making it not quite a direct statement). So we only know the temporal meaning of this example, like the English examples in (57)-(67) below by a

combination of real-world knowledge and experience, with cultural values on how best to express ideas.

Thus again we see that in spite of the fact that lack of tense morphemes and precise temporal lexical items, the speakers of Pirahã are nevertheless able to come up with precise temporal understandings, modulo culture (see below)¹⁹. They must use their ability to infer from the context, the discourse, the words, expressions, gestures and so on what time frame is implicated in the meaning of individual utterances.

Peirce argued that all reasoning takes place via semiotics - using one sign to interpret another. For Peirce, however, signs, including entire propositions, need not be "expressed" linguistically. An interpretation can take words, gestures, immediate context, cultural values, and so on into account, not being exclusively bound by the linguistically expressed elements (see also Jaszczolt (2009, 2014), inter alia, for similar findings).²⁰ We have seen that Piraha uses inferences from a variety of sources to come up with temporal interpretations, for example.

Yet another excellent example of the failure of naive compositionality in temporal interpretations comes from Wari' *Intentional State Constructions* (ISCs; Everett (2009b)). These are used to express a variety of concepts, including temporality. Consider, for example, the use of these constructions to express quotatives and future tense (Everett and Kern 1997 discuss these examples in the context of Wari' grammar). The embedded sentence carries stress only on the last syllable of the sentence, i.e. the embedded sentence/predicate is stressed like a word; the embedded sentence is otherwise a non-idiomatic, fully productive sentence:

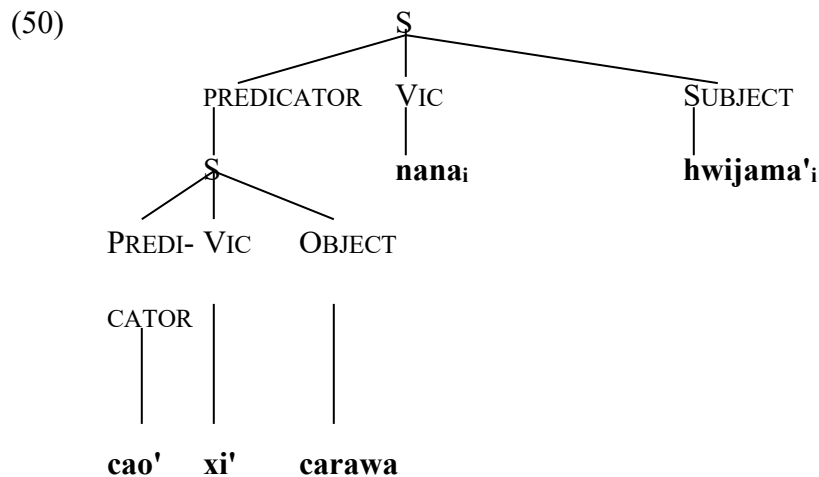


In (48) we see an (asymmetrically) embedded sentence, **Ma' co mao** 'who go', in the predicator position of the larger clause **nanam 'oro narima** taramaxicon which is followed by the agreement-tense clitic complex, **nain**, where **na** agrees with an understood masculine subject (not part of the structure) and **in** agrees with **Guajara**. The literal meaning of this most embedded clause is 'Who went to Guajara', where Guajara is the indirect object of the verb **mao**. This is in turn embedded in a larger structure (lacking a verb), 'he-to-them (fem) Chief women'. It means literally 'Who went to Guajara (said) Chief to women'. Though a verb of saying is necessary to the English translation, it is not necessary in the Wari' clause (more on this below). These intentional state constructions are also used to express future tense (even though Wari' also has future tense morphemes that such constructions are gradually replacing; Everett & Kern (1997)).

Example (49) shows a simpler ISC construction. This one is used to communicate future tense (see the next section) but has the form, roughly, of a quotative (Everett and Kern (1997, 55ff) and Everett (2009b)).

- (49) **Cao' xi' carawa nana hwijima'.**
 eat 1pincl:rf animal 3p:rp/p children

'The children will eat food.' (lit: "'We will eat food," the children (say).')



In such examples, the meaning is not obviously compositionally transparent, but is computed based on the speakers' knowledge of Intentional State Constructions. One could of course make the interpretation of (50) compositionally transparent by adding a stipulation to Wari' grammar: "A sentence under the NUC position is interpreted as a predicate and no other predicate is allowed." This stipulation allows the speaker to "compose" the meaning from the syntax in Wari'. On the other hand, it begs the questions of (i) how this language-specific stipulation is learned and (ii) how such stipulations fit into other aspects of temporal interpretation, as in English and Pirahã, etc. The unifying answer is inference - speakers learn and interpret ISCs by induction (going from parts of utterances to the entire utterance) and deduction (having learned a grammar they apply deductive principles to determine that ISCs have a stipulation attached that tells them how to parse the utterance top-down). And the child learning the language begins by the inferential principle of Peircean abduction (see section 5) and tests its guesses by induction (to build a theory of the language) and deduction (to use that theory to interpret individual utterances). This does not rule out a role for innate knowledge. This

paper does not take on that larger issue. But innate knowledge is used inferentially like any other knowledge (for Peirce innate knowledge is phylogenetic learning while non-innate is ontogenetic learning, though he was relatively agnostic on the amount, if any, of the former in human cognition).

Now let us turn back to Pirahã. Just as temporal interpretations are not computationally transparent, neither are recursive interpretations. This is interesting because it reinforces the point that sentence interpretations need not be exclusively computed from the linguistic structure of single sentences. In other words, Pirahãs use inference to learn the unique principles of their grammar and inference to parse and interpret the meanings of their discourse, sentence, word, and other signs. If inference is indeed crucial to the learning of individual languages, beyond the lexicon - e.g. constructions, stipulations, idioms, etc., then all speakers of all languages must use inference to construct their grammars, modulo innate parts (which I have argued elsewhere, e.g. Everett (2012; 2016) there is very little, if any, convincing evidence for). But, again, compositionality is nothing more than the use of linguistic/semiotic knowledge in the inference of meanings, appropriate contexts of usage, grammaticality, and so on. Especially in light of Peirce's (1868) arguments against intuition and introspection as "capacities of man."

Sauerland (2018), for example, argues that Pirahã sentences manifest recursion, based on the fact that recursive interpretations are possible for some sequences of linguistic units. His conclusion is that the linguistic units must form a single recursive unit in order to account for the recursive semantics. But this does not follow. Taking his examples (very poorly transcribed, so my own corrections are included) we can see why the point does not follow, owing to lack of compositional transparency.

(51) Spoken by speaker 1 (Toe):²¹

ce kahápe ogéhiai igeuo

I go star up

(This should be: Ti kahápií ?ogihíai ?igí - o)

(I go star alongside-locative)

“I have been to the stars.”

(52) Spoken by speaker 2:

Toi he gái-sai ce kahápe ogéhiai igeuo

Toe say first-person-singular have-been stars

(This should be: Tooí hi gái-sai Ti kahápií ?ogihíai ?igí – o)

(proper name he spoke. I go star alongside-locative)

a. co-ordinate interpretation: “Toe talked, and I have been to the stars.”

b. subordinate interpretation: “Toe said ‘I have been to the stars’ . ”

Sauerland hypothesizes that there are two interpretations of the sequence of words in (51) and (52): the co-ordinate interpretation in (51) and the subordinate interpretation in (52).

Sauerland further hypothesized that the subordinate interpretation requires syntactic recursion in order to be interpretable as such, where as the co-ordinate interpretation does not require syntactic recursion.

He constructed 10 items like (51) and (52), and a further 10 control items like (53) and (54) where speaker 2 misreports what speaker 1 says:

(53) Spoken by speaker 1 (Toe):

ce kahápe kahe'ai igeuo

I go moon alongside

(This should be: Ti kahápií kahaiʔaííi ʔigí – o)

(I go moon alongside-locative)

“I have been to the moon.”

(54) Spoken by speaker 2:

Toi hi gáí-sai ce kahápehai heesé igeuo

Toi said “I have been to the sun.”

(This should be: Tooí hi gáí-sai Ti kahápiháí hisí ʔigí – o)

(Tooí he spoke. I will go sun alongside-locative)

a. co-ordinate interpretation: “Toe talked, and I have been to the sun.”

b. subordinate interpretation: “Toe said ‘I have been to the sun’.”

Critically, both interpretations of (54) are false. Sauerland then had 16 Pirahã speakers take part in his survey. In this survey, participants were asked to decide whether each of the 20 items were correctly understood by Speaker 2 (specifically, they were asked “Did Speaker B hear well?”). Participants were trained on both versions of one item: they were told that they should say “no” to the control item and they should say “yes” to the target item (like (2)). They were then tested on the remaining 18 items (9 target, 9 control). Sauerland reported above chance behavior on the target items, and concluded that Pirahã contains true syntactic embedding.

There are several problems with (the reader is referred to Everett and Gibson (2019) for more details, which criticize as well the experimental design and interpretations of Sauerland's report). Most importantly, once again, Sauerland confuses a potential embedded *interpretation* with a need for *syntactic embedding* to obtain that interpretation. In particular, there is no reason to assume that interpreting (54) as “Toe said ‘I have been to the stars’ ” requires any syntactic recursion. As many others have noted in the discussion of recursion, sets of non-embedded syntactic materials can easily give rise to an embedded semantic interpretation, especially if such an interpretation is contextually supported. For example, Hollebrandse (2018) makes exactly this point about English examples like (55):

(55) Malcolm is guilty. The jury knows that. The judge knows that. (example is from Hollebrandse, p. 37)

An available interpretation of (55) is that the judge knows that the jury knows that Malcolm is guilty, in spite of the fact that there is no syntactic embedding in this example. And in English, given a context in which someone has just said “I have been to the stars”, if a second speaker says “Someone said something. I have been to the stars”, most listeners will agree that the meaning of this in the context is that Speaker 1 said that he has been to the stars, even though there was no syntactic embedding in the original statement.

Indeed, this alternative possibility to Sauerland's assumed reading is testable and so Everett and Gibson (2019) report on Gibson's testing of the alternative. Gibson ran the relevant control experiment in English, with 20 participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk, using the written versions of all 10 of Sauerland's items (as presented in the appendix in his paper), and

using the very instructions that Sauerland provided to the Pirahãs (“Did Speaker B hear well?”). Example target and control items are given in (6) and (7).

(56) Example target item:

John: "I have been to the stars."

Bill: John said something. I have been to the stars.

(57) Example control item:

John: "I have been to the moon."

Bill: John said something. I have been to the sun.

Note that there is no syntactic embedding in the written form of what Bill says in each discourse: there is no quotation or embedded sentence. The embedded meaning would have to be inferred because it is not present in the presented syntax. Our English participants agreed with the target sentence on 99% of the trials, demonstrating that they obtained the embedded interpretation in spite of the lack of embedded syntax. Furthermore, they disagreed with the control (as desired) on 98% of the trials. All materials are available at osf.io/z86k2/.

So where do these interpretations come from? Where do any meaning interpretations come from? Jaszczolt (2009) and Everett (2016) argue that interpretations are pieced together using whatever information is available to the speaker. Notice that if we were to step outside the confines of naive compositionality, we could refer to any piecing together of information (from solving crimes to baking cakes from recipes) as a form of compositionality or, better, inference. In fact, we might say that the main function of the cerebral cortex (see Rolls 2016; Kortylewski;

et. al. 2021; Baroni 2019; Bienenstock, et. al. 1996; inter alia) is to "compose meaning." As visual compositionality pieces together the visual components of the environment along with learned visual recognition patterns, so linguistic compositionality uses the clues of the linguistic elements to piece together partial meanings but is simply a subtype of Peircean inference (deduction, retro-/abduction, and induction)²². As Peirce says:

"The elements of every concept enter into logical thought at the gate of perception [via signs, DLE] and make their exit the gate of purposive action [interpretation of signs]; and whatever cannot show its passport these gates is to be arrested as unauthorized by reason." (Peirce (1903)).

Peirce says that all knowledge, including all linguistic knowledge, is the result of inference. He attacks the idea that there is any special power used for making linguistic judgements, other than inference, rejecting Cartesian intuition and introspection.²³ It is no surprise, therefore, that in recent years several works, e.g. Russell (2012), have argued that statistical inference is crucially implicated in speakers' interpretations of utterance.

To better illustrate the role of inference relative to naive compositionality, consider the following examples from English:²⁴ In these examples the grammaticality (or felicity, depending on one's theory) of each example varies depending on real-world and cultural knowledge.

- (58) a. John reported that Mary has COVID-19/is happy.
b. Yesterday, John reported that Mary has COVID-19/?is happy.
*c. Almost a hundred years ago, scientists concluded that the ivory-billed woodpecker is pregnant/happy/flying. (modification of example from Barbara Partee, p.c.)

- d. Almost a hundred years ago, scientists concluded that the ivory-billed woodpecker is extinct. (example from Barbara Partee, p.c.)
- (59) a. John claimed that Mary is pregnant.
 b. Yesterday, John claimed that Mary is pregnant.
- (60) ?a. Twelve months ago, John reported that Mary has COVID-19.
 *b. Twelve months ago, John reported that Mary is pregnant.
- (61) a. Twelve months ago, John reported that the elephant is pregnant.
 *b. Thirty six months ago, John reported that the elephant is pregnant.
- (62) *a. Two years ago, John reported that his neighbor Tricia is happy.
 ?b. Two years ago, John reported that the Virgin Mary is happy.
 ?c. Today, John reported that his neighbor Mary is happy.
 d. Two thousand years ago, John reported that the Virgin Mary is happy.
 e. Zookeepers who examined Ellie the elephant in the Cincinnati zoo five months ago announced/published that she is pregnant. (example from Barbara Partee, p.c.)
- (63) *a. One thousand years ago, John reported that Bill is his friend.
 b. One thousand years ago, John reported that Muhammed is God's prophet.
 c. Two thousand years ago, John reported that Jesus is alive.
 *d. Two thousand years ago, John reported that Bill is alive.
 e. The ancient Egyptians believed that the earth is flat.(example from Barbara Partee, p.c.)

People interpret and evaluate the grammaticality of the sentences above inferentially, via cultural and real-world knowledge, in conjunction with their knowledge of the words and

structures of their languages. Thus in (63c), Jesus, as an eternal being to some religions, can be alive after a thousand years, while Bill cannot be in a physical sense (though for some he is eternal in heaven). Each of the contrasts in (58)-(63) depend on inference in which the linguistic information is just one part of the final felicity/grammaticality of the example. One might of course argue that compositionality plays its role then submits the result to pragmatics to determine if the constructed meaning fits the context. But there are a couple of problems with this suggestion. First, we must ask why the process of compositionality is proposed to be different from the general inferential abilities of humans. Again, cooking by a recipe or solving crimes seem to be abilities that require a power and process of inference identical in operation to the construction of sentence meanings.

The idea that there are only inferences in understanding our native tongues, not some other special capacity (intuition) of the mind, obviously means that no speaker is able to make intuitive judgments about what is grammatical or not, because intuition doesn't exist. We only judge whether something is grammatical or not just as we only judge what something means in the first place - via inference, using one or more of the three "-ductions" - induction, abduction, or deduction. If I ask you if the following sentences are OK, what is the process by which you answer me?

(64) John is three years old and is CEO of a major company.

(65) John are the nicest guy I know.

(66) Talking about Mary, he is a smart woman.

(67) Who do you wonder whether saw John?

(68) Who do you wonder whether John saw?

According to Peirce there is only one answer for any form of reasoning, inference. You know the answer to these questions because you are remembering that you heard the sentence before or because you infer that it is ungrammatical or grammatical and why based on its comparison to other sentences (or, if one insists, inference from innate "knowledge"). (Again see Everett (2012, 2016) for criticisms of this concept.)

But for Peirce the forms of inference are dependent on his theory of signs, his semeiotic. Simply put, Peirce's semeiotic system differs from all others in its strict triadicity. A sign must have three components (not merely the Saussurian dyadic form+meaning). These are the Object, Interpretant, and Representamen (the form of the sign). So "apple" has the phonemic form "apple" that varies by dialect and it has as object the red, sweet fruit that we make cider with. But the form and the object can only come together as a sign of some type if they have an interpretant - if they can be interpreted by other signs in the language. In "apple of my eye" the interpretant of apple will be different than in "apple in my eye" and so on. Semiotic inference uses knowledge of linguistic signs and their arrangement (the arrangement is also a sign) and other forms of knowledge in an inferential process built on cultural learning and semiotic principles, such as "closeness in function --> closeness in syntax" (also known as iconicity).

4.3. Compositional transparency and linguistic typology

This leads us to a proposal in Everett (2017) and Barham and Everett (2021), in which it is argued that there is more than one bauplan behind the organization of the individual languages of the world. These language types are classified according to the relative degree of compositional transparency, i.e. how tight the fit is between the syntax and the semantics. I

propose three broad organizational structures and argue that we find examples of all three in the world's currently spoken languages. Only one of these organizational plans might support the compositionality that Szabó (2000) and others assume, however. For the other two types, compositionality is less directly connected to the syntax. The broad language types that I defend here are: a linear order grammar, G_1 , (subject-verb-object in (69)) that conveys meaning (Figure 1). G_2 languages, which have hierarchical structures but no recursion (Figure 2), and G_3 languages, which have recursion, as well as all of what G_1 and G_2 languages have (Figure 3) (Everett 2017: Chapter 9). In this hierarchy of grammars, there is no need for a protolanguage in language evolution; a G_1 language is sufficient to convey nuanced, abstract meaning. G_1 languages may have evolved first, with recursion a late and unnecessary expectation for early languages (Karlsson 2009; Everett 2017; 2012a). G_1 – G_3 coexist today with G_1 and G_2 languages found in some societies without graphic traditions (Everett 2005; Gil 2009).²⁵

The empirical differences in these three grammars are illustrated diagrammatically using sentences (68)–(70), in Figure 1a–c:

(68) John came in the room. John sat. John slept. (Interpreted as "John came into the room, sat, and then slept.")

(69) John entered the room by the garden. John slept. (Interpreted recursively, as in ())

(70) John came in the room, sat, and slept.

The illustrations in Figure 1a–c conform to a G_1 grammar. In these diagrams, there are no category labels, e.g. “noun” or “verb”, and no phrase labels, such as “verb phrase”. The simplest grammatical structure would be a linear arrangement of words as a

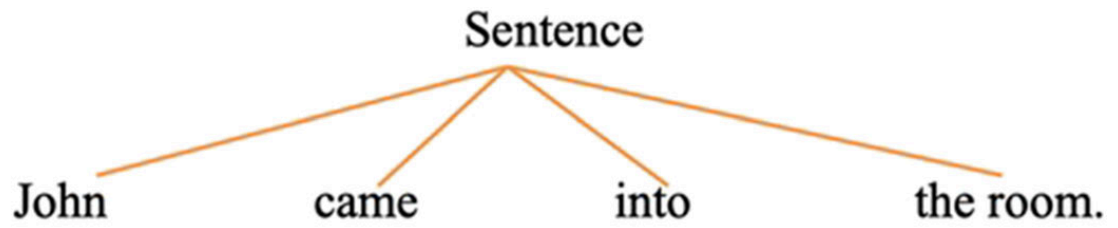
proposition/sentence. There are modern languages represented by G1 grammars, for example, Pirahã (see also Futrell et al. 2016; Everett and Gibson 2019) but also Warlpiri, Wargamay, Hixkaryana, Kayardild, Gavião and Amele among others (Pullum 2020).

A G2 grammar would allow the structure in Figure 2 which shows hierarchical nesting of sub-phrases. A G3 grammar would allow structures such as that shown in Figure 3. Two sentences are contained in or “dominated by” the highest sentence making this a grammar without constraints on recursion. Everett (2017) uses Peirce’s theory of signs (below) to outline an evolutionary pathway to symbol-based language based on speech and gestures. The archaeological record of Homo erectus provides the material evidence for concluding that this hominin

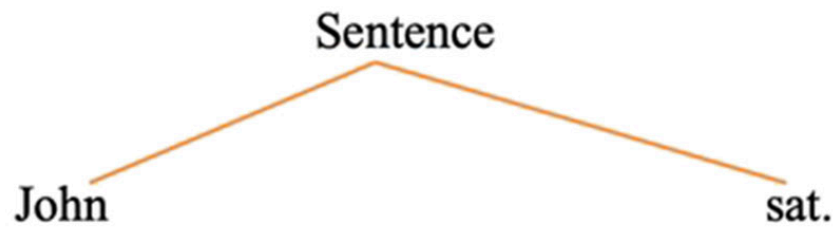
Figure 1 a–c Three diagrams illustrating the linear sentence structures enabled by G1

languages

a



b



c

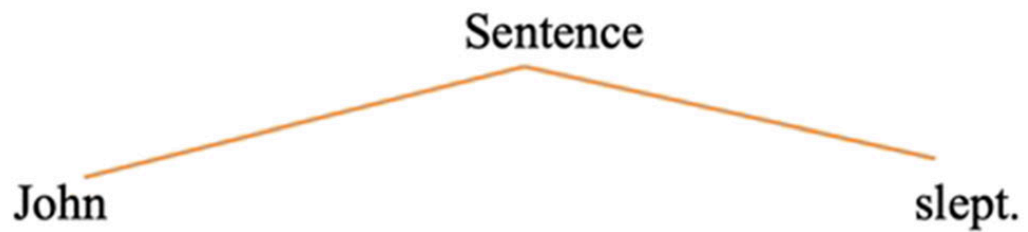


Figure 2 An example of the hierarchical nesting of sub-phrases in a G2 language

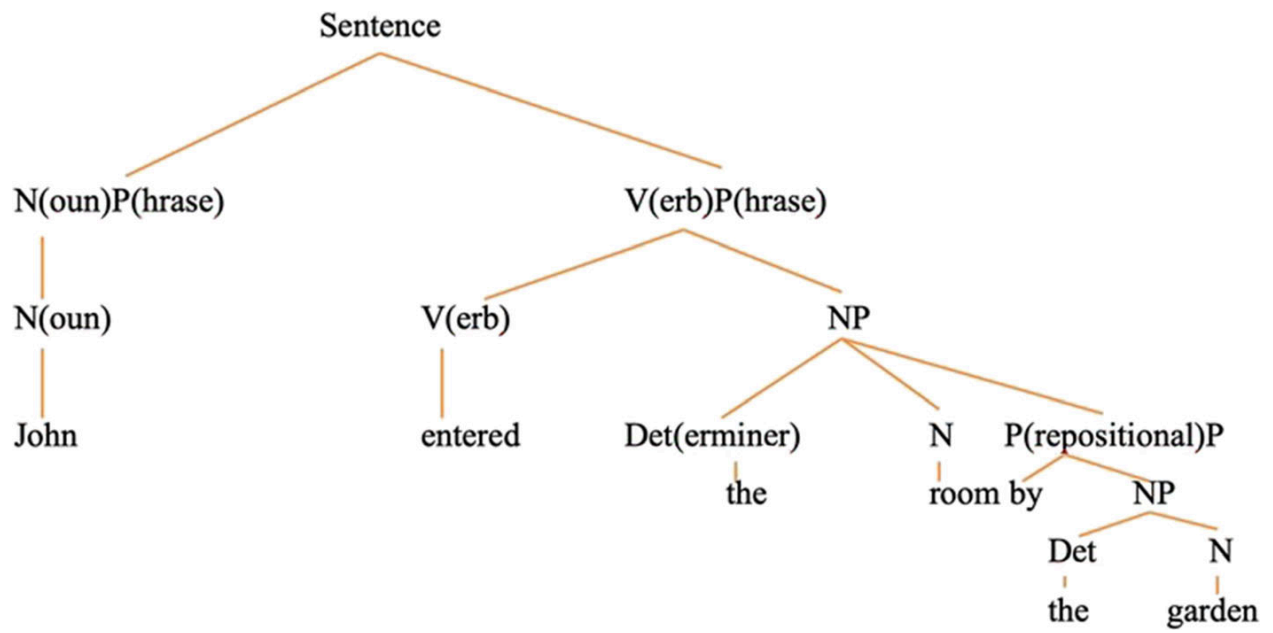
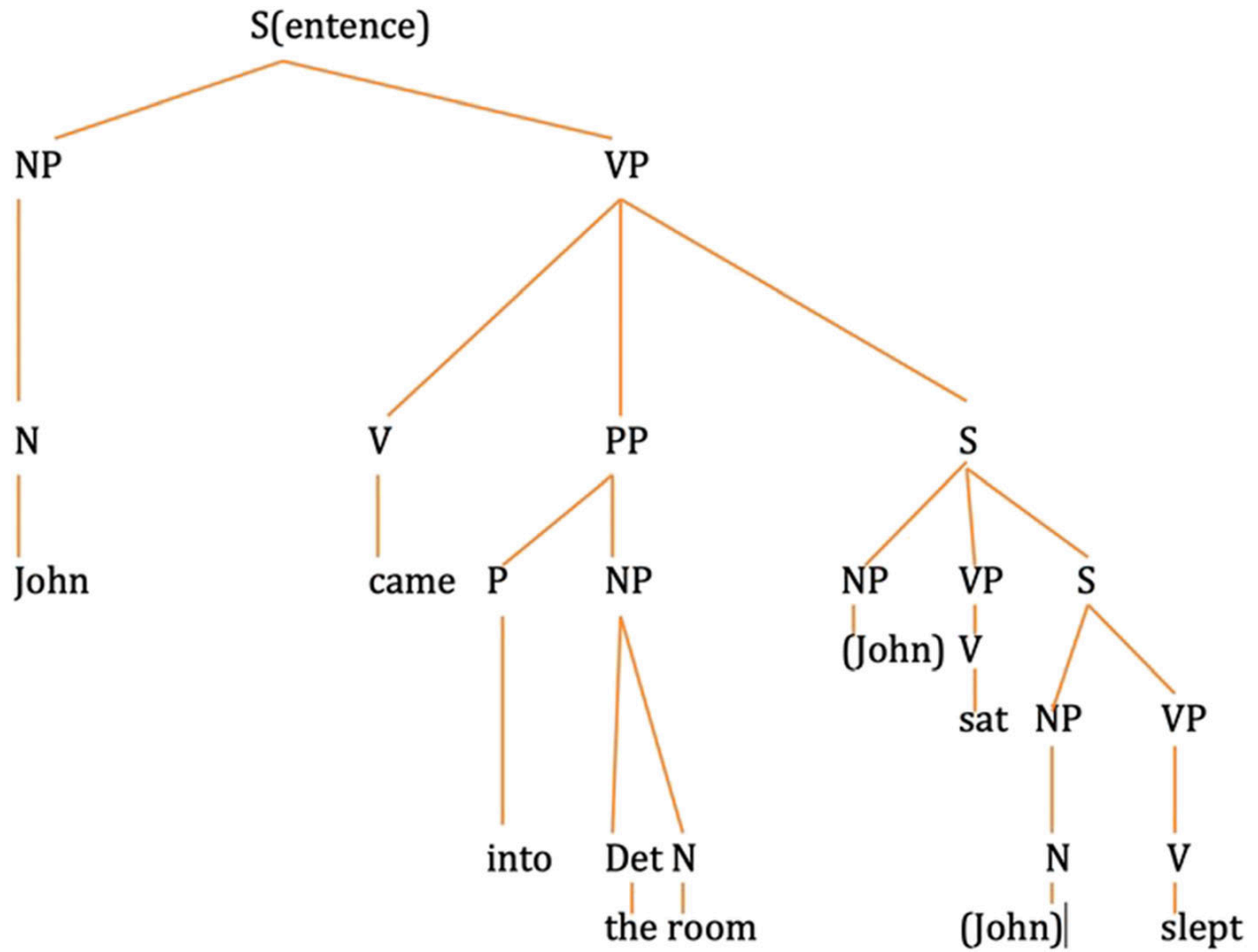


Figure 3 Diagram of the embedded structure of a G3 language with recursion



These grammar types are hypothesized to reveal the differential degree of compositional transparency found in languages of the world.

Thus temporality in Pirahã and other languages has much to teach us about human cognition and the interpretation of language. If there were space, we might further explore how this inference-based account of interpretation can account for a variety of other interesting facts about Pirahã such as the contrast between interpretation of numerical concepts vs. color concepts, the distinction in the language between the absence of quantifiers (of certain types) and generic terms, and so on (cf. Everett (in progress)).

5. Conclusion

5.1. Dark Matter and Culture

The Pirahãs, the Wari's, English speakers, and others know what times are relevant and important in their languages because their knowledge of the external world, cultural values, the ways in which these values have been encoded into their languages, and the ways that they are learned and applied - all examples of inference. This correspondence between the world, culture, grammar, and meaning also supports the idea that we "get" meanings because of our species' advanced capacity for the general animal ability to infer from one sign (or datum) to another, as Peirce would have it. This raises several additional questions. But if this widely accepted process is not wrong, compositionality is but a special form of inference that is applicable once inference has built up a sufficient knowledge of the language to enable the inference from form, culture, real-world knowledge, discourse context, sentence structure, lexical choice, etc. to meaning. Compositionality, a subdomain of inference, is conducted by the same means just in a distinct semiotic domain, i.e. linguistic form.

Using culture and inference further answers the question of why any languages have tense marking in the first place and, if so what kinds. After all, if all languages could construct

interpretations without tense as Pirahã does, why have tense? Because cultures value (Everett 2016) more or less precision in temporal interpretations, precision that is underwritten by a wider array of terms, and constructions. Cultures create tense markings for the same reasons that they create color terms, numerals, and so on - what terms a language has and how it builds them into discourses, the lexicon, sentences, and so on is a matter of inference. No special linguistic ability or endowment will in general be necessary. Some cultures value one set of words, others value another.²⁶

On the other hand, the question of why people have semantic interpretations for absolute tenses in every language known even without tense-marking doesn't seem to be a cultural problem but an issue of universal facts about animal cognition and the relationship of life to the world. Yet even here, we still must learn these tense inferentially.

Another crucial cultural component of time in Pirahã is what Everett (2005) calls the "Immediacy of Experience Principle." Stated informally with regard to time/tense/temporal interpretation, this simply means that as far as temporal semantics goes (see Everett (2005) for more details) Pirahãs do not talk about the distant past or the distant future ("distant" being loosely defined as beyond two generations). They may talk about what their children will be when they grow up, but this is very rare. They may talk about a time when they had not seen outboard motors, but this is not a distant past and is easily inferrable from the fact that the motors are known to have postdated the arrival of the first missionaries. This is not to say that the Pirahãs have no idea that there will be a distant future or that there is/was a distant past. But they do not talk about these. It is similar in this respect to taboos in many cultures (but not in Pirahã) against naming the dead. Or like raising your voice to children in Western culture. A violable constraint (in the sense of Everett (2016)) but a strong constraint nonetheless. This principle may

very well have affected the development of the tense system in Pirahã or, vice-versa, may have come into the culture due to the language - as I point out in Everett (2016) the direction of causality in language-culture relations is not transparent, largely because these two domains form a symbiosis.

5.2. The role of inference

Inference is in a sense the subject to which Peirce devoted his entire research career, across physics, chemistry, mathematics, logic, philosophy (especially pragmatism) and so on. In this sense Peirce is similar to Herbert Simon who dedicated most of his research life (Nobel-Prize-winning economic theory, management theory, cognitive science, computer science, and so on) to problem-solving (a form of inference). Peirce's is careful to emphasize throughout his body of work that there is only one way that humans know anything - inference. Inference for Peirce has three forms (prior to Peirce, only deduction and induction were understood/known):

(71) Deduction:

1. Rule (major premise)
2. Case (minor premise)
3. Result (conclusion)

(72) Example of Deduction:

All phrases are formed by Merge (major premise/rule)

John's brother's friend is a phrase (minor premise/case)

John's brother's friend is formed by Merge (conclusion/result)

(73) Induction:

1. Result

2. Case

3. Rule

(74) Example of Induction:

John's brother's friend is formed by Merge (result)

John's brother's friend is a phrase (case)

All phrases are formed by Merge (rule)

(75) Abduction:

1. Result

2. Rule

3. Case

(76) Example of Abduction:

John's brother's friend is formed by Merge (result)

All phrases are formed by Merge (rule/guess)

John's brother's friend is a phrase.

We negotiate our paths through life by inference. We either build generalizations (induction), we decompose general ideas into particulars (deduction), or we guess (abduction).²⁷ New knowledge, as Peirce argued at length, only arises via abduction, which he also referred to as "ampliative inference." We guess. Then we make inferences about that guessing and a combination of induction and deduction will tell us whether our abduction is also on the right track.

Just as Peirce believed that all philosophy and reasoning should be firmly based in mathematical principles, Russell (2012) offers a quantificational theory of inference in certain domains of linguistic knowledge. The avoidance of such quantificational inference in modeling human interpretations of sentences, actions, events, and so on, is done at science's peril.

Compositionality, then, is that form of inference (any of Peirce's three forms of inference) in which prior knowledge of linguistic units is often necessary, though not sufficient. Prior knowledge is not always necessary because we can use inference to figure out utterances that have foreign words we do not know in them or even entire foreign sentences we have no previous knowledge of (especially in the appropriate contexts).

Of course, in computing the meaning of a sentence, priority will be given to the information contained in the sentences - the words contained and their arrangement. But this particular inferential operation can be overridden by context, by "coercion" (Pustejovsky (1995)) of word meanings, by the introduction of foreign words into the sentence, by implicatures (Grice 1991), and so on. As stated earlier, by way of simple illustration, this is similar to following a recipe, another inferential process. A recipe for biscuits may be followed carefully with the final biscuit the "compositional interpretation" of the recipe. But recipes, like linguistic meanings can be overridden. A given recipe can be altered to fit dietary restrictions, different altitude, extra spice, lack of ingredients, and so on. This is the same operation of inference as interpreting a sentence. The purpose of dwelling on this is to remind us that it is not necessarily the case that linguistic meaning is as special as we might have otherwise thought.

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Appendix: Pirahã Text²⁸

Xigábaí almost bitten by snake

Told by **Xahoápati** to Dan Everett ca.

2000

Xaí ti ig -a -í apaí.
 Thus. 1person comit. -sound -proximate first (literally 'head')

'So I spoke at first.'

Xigábaí gí basí ig -a -b -o
 Xigábaí 2person bed comit. do. -down -direct
-p -a -p -í
 -up -vertical -up -proximate

'Xigábaí was bringing your bed back up.'

Xís ib -á -i -ta -a -b
 animal hit -vertical -proximate -repetive -down
-o -i -haí tigaiti. direct -transition -rel:cert snake

'He arrowed the snake a couple of times.'

Xís a -xáa -há. animal bite -intelic-comp:cert *'The snake bit (at him).'*

Xaí Toítóí hi xigí -a -xáa -i
 Thus Toítóí 3person comit. -bit -intelic -proximat

-há.

comp:cert.

'Thus Toítoí with (him) it bit at (also).' Hi agíai tigaiti -gíi xibigaá.

3person thus snake -real direct observation:be (bushmaster)

'Thus it was a real snake, a bushmaster, they saw.'

Tigaiti -gíi xaí. Xis ib -á -i

snake -real thus animal hit -vertical -proximate

-ta -b -og -aáti.

-repetitive -down -desiderative -uncert/imperative

'It is a bushmaster. Shoot it!'

Hi agía xogi -áaga -ó

3person thus big -be -directional

xis aihi og -a -á -a

animal that:one want -find -intense -vertical

-b -ó -p -a -p -á. Xaí tigaiti.

-down -direct -up -remote -up -comp.cert thus snake. *'Thus the bulk of the people wanted to search carefully down on the ground. Thus (for that) snake.'*

Ti agía xis igí -o

1person thus animal comit. -directional

k -á -ab -ó -p -á

object -intensely -bite -direct -up -vertical

-p -á -xaí.

-up -vertical -do

'(When I was) with the animal, (it) struck up (at me).'

Ti ig -ái -sai.

1person comit. sound -old:info

xi ab -áo -p -í -saxáa

3person bite -telic -up -proximate -frustrated:event

-g -abaga -á.

desiderative frustrated:initiation -complete certainty

'I spoke (as I have been doing). It almost bit him, almost wanted to.'

Xiabáisi k -á -ab -o -ó

human:being object -intensely -bite -direct -directional

-p -a -i -hiab -i

-up -vertical -proximate -negative -transition vowel

-só -(a)i. Xáihá.

-telic- -do thus.

'Thus, it (the bushmaster) didn't bite the human being (upwards and viciously).'

Xi go -ó -i xa -ó -o

3person -focus -locative -proximate bite -direction -direct

-p -á -a -ha -xaí.

-up -intense -vertical -comp:cert -do

'He was there (almost) bitten?' (It was there that he was almost bitten)

Xi go -ó -i xa -ó -o

3person -focus -locative -proximate bite -direction -direct

-p **-á.**

-up -intense

'He was there (almost) bitten.

xoí **hi** **aí** **-si** **-xíga.** environment 3person is

-old:info -emphatic *'It was there in the jungle.'*

Xigábaí **hi** **aa** **-b** **-áo** **-b**

Xigábaí 3person bite -down -telic -perfective

-íi **-sa** **-xá** **-abaí.**

-intensive -old:info -intensive -frustrated completion

'(The snake) almost bit Xigábaí, as we have been saying.'

Xigábaí **hi** **áa** **-b** **-o** **-ó** **-p**

Xigábaí 3person bite -down -direct -locative -up

-ái **-hiab** **-sói** **-xáihi.**

-do -negative -doubt -declarative

'(The snake) barely didn't bite Xigábaí.' Quase medo.

(Port) 'Almost afraid.'

Notes

¹ I would like to thank Kasia Jaszczolt for her invitation for me to participate in the workshop Understanding Human Time and to all the participants for their individual research and for the many who commented on what follows. The Zoom format had the advantages of keeping the workshop green and the discussions up close and personal.

² This chapter borrows and paraphrases frequently from Everett (1993).

³ Pirahã is a language of the Brazilian Amazon, the only surviving member of the Mura language family (Loukotka 1968).

⁴ Note that my claim is not that I am the first to notice the long-known fact that real-world knowledge influences semantic and pragmatic interpretations. Rather I want to urge of different conception of the nature of this influence.

⁵ Pirahã is a "tenseless language" in the sense of Comrie (1985, 50ff): languages "...where time reference per se is not grammaticalized...", i.e. where there is time reference but it is not reflected morphosyntactically.

⁶ The reader is urged to consult more cross-linguistic work on temporal semantics of less-studied languages, e.g. Dr. Lydia Rodriguez on temporal representation in the Mayan language Chol (Rodriguez (2019)), Simeon Floyd (2016) on Nheengatu (Brazilian creole language), and my own work (Everett and Kern 1995) on Wari'

⁷ More data is available from the MIT corpus of Pirahã texts: <https://osf.io/kt2e8/>

⁸ From this point on, I will give on free translations and skip morpheme-by-morpheme glosses, unless these are crucial for a particular point about time.

⁹ That is, as per Everett (1993), in a Reichenbachian system these can all be generated by orderings of the coordinates E 'event time' and S 'moment of speech.'

¹⁰ As we see, a sentence may be semantically hypotactic to another without being syntactically subordinate.

¹¹ This section borrows heavily from Everett (1993), simply repeating some of what was given there and rewriting those portions where my opinion/analysis has changed.

¹² The SOT rule is provided here for completeness' sake in presenting Hornstein's (1990) adaptation of Reichenbach's system and is not crucial to the argumentation.

¹³ For some speakers this example is fine. In that case "at this very moment" must be interpreted as non-literal.

¹⁴ Paul Postal comments on this section (p.c.) that in Arc Pair Grammar it is possible to treat discourses as sentences, via "overlapping arcs." He says:

"Now, suppose we apply that view of anaphora to Pirahã's purported lack of embedding with one further assumption. Assume that so-called discourses are not different from sentences, just are one specific type of sentence. Think of coordination as involving neighboring arcs 1...n, each with the label 'Coordination', while discourses involve neighboring arcs 1...n with the label 'Discourse'. And then assume that Pirahã temporal sequences are just such discourse sentences... The point then is that under the assumptions above, the representation of the Pirahã examples do involve syntactic embedding. This is not an ad hoc assumption to achieve some result about the example, but is simply a consequence of (i) the treatment of anaphora as in Johnson and Postal (1980) plus (ii) the assumption the discourses are/can be single sentences."

But of course the problem with doing away with discourse as Postal suggests in this case, is that discourse is a separate domain of which sentences are constituents and is marked by non-sentential particles, coherence, topic-marking, and many other of the facts that have emerged in

the vast discourse literature over the years. Moreover, the view that discourse is just a large sentence (not uncommon unfortunately) cannot account for the Pirahã facts or the myriad other aspects of discourse grammar, as many of the works referred to this paper are at pains to demonstrate.

¹⁵ However, superficially there may appear to be counterexamples to the claim that Pirahã lacks perfect tenses, represented in (i). Such examples might superficially look like perfect tense:

- (i) **Kaoáibógí ʔab -o -óp -ai -ta -ha -ó.**
 jungle entity remain-stem -go -atelic -repeat-comp.cert. -position
Gíxai soxóá koho -ái -p -á -há
 you already eat atelic -vert/imp -remote -compl. cert.

"The jungle entity completely returned. You already ate."

*"When you arrived I had eaten."

Example (i) does not express a perfect tenses. Nor is a perfect reading found in either the literal translation or in the most common usage of the Pirahãs. Very similar structures are found in other languages with similar aspectual markings and do not entail perfect tense readings (e.g. Chol, Lydia Rodriguez, p.c.).

And indeed in Everett (1993) I deny that this structure type has a perfect reading. On the other hand, I have not yet conducted experiments on such readings with native speakers. Therefore I cannot rule out the possibility that (i) might be used as the closest equivalent to a past perfect example for some speakers. Similar examples could exist for future and present perfects, though they are, like (i), translations of independent clauses without overt tense marking. I doubt that this is the case, but, again, experimental work is needed. Of course, if these did receive

perfect tense translations, this would present a problem for my 1993 analysis that Pirahã lacks the R reference point for temporal interpretations since this point is required for a perfect tense in the Reichenbachian system. But they do not seem to have perfect tense interpretations.

¹⁶ Once again, like most researchers of his era and the modern era, unlike Peirce, Frege's view of language was sentence-bound. In Everett (in progress), I suggest that this is because of the centrality of the proposition, often expressed by a single sentence in natural language, to much philosophy of language and mind. But as Stjernfelt (2014) and others make clear, propositions can be expressed perfectly clearly external to language.

¹⁷ The sentence-boundedness of most modern linguistic theories seems to be a result of the focus on the proposition in philosophy of language. But as we see propositions do not even require sentences to be expressed. This is a misguided bias.

¹⁸ It might sound strange to say that Kamp's Discourse Representation Theory is sentence-bound. In several ways it clear is not sentence-bound. But it lacks any account of the standard features of discourse that, say, Longacre (1983; 1976), Grimes (1976), inter alia).

¹⁹ By the expression "modulo culture" I mean that cultures have different rankings of time values and their relevance (see Everett 2017). Thus their understandings of what a "long" time or a "distant" time will vary, among other aspects of the mapping between temporal ontology (Steedman (1997)) and linguistic meaning.

²⁰ Consider in this regard the wind blowing the weather vane to the west when it is blowing in from the east. The configuration/movement of the weather vane expresses the proposition "The wind blows westward" nonlinguistically but fully semiotically (showing that linguistics is but a subspecies of semiotics).

²¹ Sauerland does not speak the language at all and hence does not represent the phonetics accurately, thus omitting much grammatical information from his transcriptions.

²² Clearly, as the works cited make clear, our inferential abilities are underwritten by the structures of our brains.

²³ Peirce (1868), argues at length that there is no such thing as intuition, a central part of the cognitive research of Descartes and many linguists (e.g. Chomsky). Defining intuition as a cognition unlinked to a previous cognition, Peirce concludes that no such cognitions exist and that all cognition is part of a chain of inference with other cognitions. He claims that the only evidence for intuition is that we think we have it. To this dubious claim he replies:

*“A child has, as far as we know, all the perceptive powers of a man. Yet question him a little as to *how* he knows what he does. In many cases, he will tell you that he never learned his mother tongue; he always knew it, or he knew it as soon as he came to have sense. It appears, then, that he does not possess the faculty of distinguishing, by simple contemplation, between an intuition and a cognition determined by others [which would be an inference, DLE].”*

²⁴ Different authors mark some of these examples as pragmatic infelicities or grammaticality violations (see Giorgi (2010) for example). It isn't clear that such distinctions are relevant when we recognize that all interpretations are the result of inference.

²⁵ Perhaps a more workable definition of compositionality in light of the above discussion is that of Pietarinen's (2005, 525ff) "Pragmatic Principle of Compositionality (PPC)":

(i) "The meaning of a sentence is the meaning of all sentences that follow from that sentence either by inductive or deductive principles and permissions under all authorized circumstances (i.e., those arising out of mutual consent by [the interlocutors, DLE]." Pietarinen (2005, 525ff)

But this would still be a subtype of inference. And it also fails to account for the greater amount of information found entirely outside of sentences, as per Jaszczolt (2009).

²⁶ For example, my subculture does not value golf. My male relatives considered golf a "sissy" sport and any man who played it was not quite a real man. So growing up in such a culture, I have no terms (and I never left those cultural confines in this respect) for golf. I do, however, know a lot of words about cattle and the raising of them, since this was a respectable male activity in my upbringing.

²⁷ Peircean abduction (and Peirce is the originator of the term) is not to be confused with more recent bastardization of the term to mean "inference to the best explanation," which needs a separate term.

²⁸ This appendix is included so that the interested reader can trace temporal interpretations through a text in Pirahã to better exemplify temporal readings in context.