I. Everett (2005, 2009) claims that Pirahã, a language spoken in the Amazon region of Brazil, is non-recursive. With respect to the availability of recursion within the nominal domain, Everett claims that only one level of embedding is possible within possessive noun phrases:

(1) xipoógi hoài hi xaagá
   xipoógi shotgun 3Psg be

   This is Xipoógi shotgun

(2) [kó‘oi hoaigi] kai gáihii ‘iga
   Ko‘oi son daughter that true

   ‘That is Ko‘oi’s son’s daughter’

II. In this presentation, we will present new data showing that multiple levels of recursion is indeed available within possessive noun phrases in Pirahã. As (3) and (4) show recursive possessors are possible.

(3) agoa Iapohen motohoi
(4) niupai hi igato huakue kopae
   canoe Iapohen motor
dog 3PSg tail long back

   ‘Iapohen’s canoe’s motor’

   ‘The long tail of my black dog’

Interestingly, however, it interacts with word order. In (4) and (5), the order Possessor>Noun is inverted in the second level of embedding, as the possessor appears post-nominally. We argue that this is to be related to the semantic distinction between inalienable and alienable possessive relations. In (3)-(4), the semantic relation between the possessor and the noun is inalienable in the level of embedded (motor boat, dog tail), but alienable in the second level (canoe Iapohen, dog my).

III. Everett also presents the so-called gai-sai constructions (5) as evidence for the lack of recursion within the sentential domain.

(5) Maria hi gaisai
   Maria 3Psg say-NOMINALIZER beautiful I

   ‘Maria said I am beautiful’

According to Everett’s analysis, -sai is a nominalizer morpheme. Hence, in (5) the matrix verb is nominalized in order to avoid a recursive structure in which one sentence in embedded inside the other. Assuming –sai to be a nominalizer, as it functions as a nominalizer elsewhere (6), we suggest that (5) is another instance of possessive noun phrases. Hence, (5) means (7).

This is the only syntactic context in which the pronoun hi appear. This pronoun is also available in possessive constructions, as shown in (1). As we will also show these constructions present the same order restrictions notice above for possessive nouns phrases. Hence, these are cases in which a verb is nominalized and the whole construction is understood as a possessive noun phrase, which, as we will show, contains and embedded sentence as the complement of the verb. In Pirahã there is overt copular verb ‘to be’, but as we will suggest, (5)-(7) might involve a covert one.

(6) xiohói xiboít-i-sai
    wind cutter-NOMINALIZER

    ‘Propeller’

(7) Maria’s saying was I am beautiful

Keywords: nominalization; Pirahã; recursion; possessive constructions
References
