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# Desmond Derbyshire (1924–2007)

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### Editors' Introduction

In his obituary about our late colleague, Desmond Derbyshire, Professor Geoffrey Pullum describes him as a tireless researcher, a top-notch linguist, a dedicated Christian and a wonderful human being.

Desmond Cyril Derbyshire, pioneering scholar of Amazonian linguistics, died peacefully in his sleep at 5:30 a.m. on December 19, 2007, aged 83.<sup>1</sup> In his distinguished academic career he had never held a regular faculty position in a university; his work in linguistics was divided between linguistic fieldwork in Amazonia, translation of the Bible into the Hixkaryana language, writing and editing books and papers about the languages of lowland Amazonia and the Guiana highlands, and serving in educational and administrative roles for the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

Des was born in the county of Durham, in the north of England, on September 10, 1924. He did not go to university after leaving secondary school, but trained as an accountant. It was while he was working as a

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<sup>1</sup>This obituary by Geoffrey Pullum first appeared in LINGUIST LIST: vol-19-1, Jan. 3, 2008 (see <http://www.linguistlist.org/issues/19/19-1.html>). It is used by permission of the author and Linguist List.

chartered accountant in the early 1950s that a friend working as a missionary in South America invited Des and his wife Grace to come and visit for a holiday, and they accepted. During their holiday in the jungle of what is now Guyana, something happened to Des that was literally life-changing.

One afternoon Des decided to walk back on his own from one village to another but instead got completely lost. Attempting to retrace his steps was no use; he couldn't find the point at which he had strayed from the usual path. He wandered about until long after nightfall, and began to be very concerned indeed. There was no sign of any paths or of human habitation anywhere in the area, and he had been wandering for miles and miles. He had no food or drink or survival aids of any kind, and he was hopelessly lost in trackless forest. He spent the night amid the alien sounds of South American tropical jungle, well aware that he might die there and never be found. And in the privacy of his prayers, he made a firm promise: if he could be delivered from this situation to get back to Grace and his friends, he would dedicate the rest of his life to God's service.

Morning finally came, and something became apparent to Des that he had not been able to notice the previous night: within a quarter of a mile of where he was, a river was now visible through the trees. Rivers are thoroughfares in the South American jungle. He made his way down there and sat on the bank. Later that morning he was found by people who were out in a boat looking for him.

Des didn't have to admit to anyone the promise he had silently made to his God during the night. But any commitment he ever made was one that he kept. In his own view, he had placed himself under an irrevocable obligation regarding the remainder of his life. He went back to England, gave up his job as an accountant, took the SIL's training course in basic field linguistics and bible translation, and went with Grace to Brazil, to live with the Hixkaryana tribe in the village of Kasawa by the Nhamunda river (a northern tributary flowing into the Amazon from the Guiana highlands).

Living conditions were primitive, and no outsiders knew anything much about the language other than its Southern Guiana Carib genetic affiliation. At the time there were only about a hundred speakers, and the society was demoralized and in a state of collapse from introduced diseases. Between 1959 and 1975, Des and Grace lived with the Hixkaryana for extended periods totalling over seven years and worked on learning the language. The rest of the time was spent in doing descriptive work and bible translation at SIL centers, or back in England raising funds. (SIL

members are expected to support their work with donations raised through their home churches and supplies a modest supplementary stipend only if donations prove inadequate for even a minimal standard of living.)

The most surprising story Des told of the long period of work in the Hixkaryana village concerned a day in November 1965. He had woken up early and begun work on linguistic analysis as usual, but today he heard the unexpected distant whine of the engine of the Norseman floatplane that the Summer Institute of Linguistics used for travel around the Amazon region of Brazil. He thought it was very strange that the plane would be coming to the village without having notified him previously. He watched it circle and land in front of his house. Once the motor was silent and the pilot's door was open, Des asked the pilot why he had come. The SIL pilot grinned and said, "I've got Robert Kennedy on board." Des looked in the passenger seat in the back, and sure enough, there was New York's US Senator Robert F. Kennedy.

Bobby Kennedy spent three days with Des among the Hixkaryana, sharing the daily lives of the people in the village and getting to know Des and Grace and their work. Kennedy was an excellent guest, participating fully in village life with its various hardships and never complaining. One afternoon, as Des and Bobby were bathing in the Nhamunda river, Kennedy asked Des: "What's the name of this river?"

"The Nhamunda," Des told him.

"I want to remember the name," said Kennedy, "because just now, right here in this river, I have decided to run for President of the United States."

(And so he did, announcing his candidacy late, in March 1968, when the weakness of incumbent president Johnson's support was fully clear. He was assassinated less than three months later, immediately after winning the California primary.)

As Kennedy prepared to board the plane on the third day to leave, he turned to Des and said, "You know, a lot of people would say that these people are not worth the bother of spending your life, with all of your education, in this isolated jungle spot." And he went on to say how much he admired Des for his work, and for believing that the Hixkaryana were worth the bother.

Des did indeed think the Hixkaryana were worth the bother. He worked on for another ten years in Brazil, and completed a translation of the entire New Testament, sending it off for (anonymous) publication under the title *Khoryenkom Karyehtana: O Novo Testamento na Lingua Hixkaryana*. Then in 1975 he decided it was time to become better acquainted with current linguistics, and he applied to do a Ph.D. at

University College London. Special dispensation was needed from the University of London for him to be admitted to read for the Ph.D. (he had no university degrees at all), but Neil Smith, head of the theoretically inclined Linguistics Section of the Department of Phonetics and Linguistics at University College London, decided to admit him because of his linguistic training and interesting language background. And on Neil's suggestion, although Des was many years my senior, I became Des's de facto dissertation supervisor (officially, I could not supervise a doctoral student, because I was a temporary lecturer, not a member of the Senate).

I have never known a more dedicated, conscientious, meticulous graduate student. The knowledge he had brought with him was a rich resource and turned out to interest me greatly. During 1975 I happened to have made a study of all the literature I could find on languages that supposedly had object-initial basic constituent order in canonical clause types, and I had concluded that in none of them was the basic order genuinely object-initial. There were no languages, I had decided, in which fixed constituent order rather than case was the key indicator of grammatical relations in simple clauses, and the normal order, in contexts not conditioned by special discourse factors, was OSV or OVS.

I mentioned this in a lecture at UCL in the fall of 1975, in the first few weeks of Des's first term as a graduate student. Des raised a hand and said politely that he thought the language he had been working on might be an exception, since OVS was its normal order. My reaction was that it would probably turn out to be an SOV language with optional subject postposing, but we would talk later and try to determine the facts.

As we went over the issue carefully together in the following weeks, it became clear to me that Hixkaryana was no partial exception; this was the first rock-solid counter-example. And investigating it further looked like a much more interesting prospect than trying to protect my own previous opinions from being shown by my student to be wrong.

Hixkaryana, it turned out, has fairly strict word order. Transitive clauses have a tightly bound OV verb phrase constituent that is usually followed by the subject NP. Des had actually said so in a dense 1961 paper I had not seen (*IJAL* 27:125–142), packed with obscure formulae in the style of Kenneth Pike's framework, tagmemics, of which I knew little. My speculation about SOV order being more basic was completely refuted: the evidence pointed the other way. SOV order was not common, and when found was generally accompanied by clear signs (such as focus particles) that the discourse context was special. SOV order was the result of subject fronting for emphasis or contrast, not normal or neutral.

Texts were available from which the facts could be confirmed: Des had published a collection of transcribed stories by native speakers under the title *Textos Hixkaryana* in 1965. But in addition, a well-concordanced comparative bilingual text was available: the first bound copies of *Khoryenkom Karyehtana* had arrived from Brazil. The translation had been checked throughout in consultation with native speakers, who approved the grammar and style years before Des even knew that OVS order was supposed to be unattested, so its preparation was not influenced by any linguist's view. We picked out the first hundred transitive clauses from the modern English version of the Gospel of Matthew, and counted the frequency of OVS constituent order in the corresponding sentences of the Hixkaryana translation. It surprised us both: the frequency was one hundred percent.

I encouraged Des to write a squib for *Linguistic Inquiry* pointing out what appeared to be the first case of a fixed-order OVS language. I gave some advice about the outline and style of such a paper, but very little help was needed; Des wrote impeccable scientific prose, and the squib was accepted immediately. It appeared in 1977 (*LI* 8:590–599). I also persuaded Des to offer a paper summarizing the syntactic typology of Hixkaryana for presentation at the Linguistics Association of Great Britain (spring 1977). Since he was away in Brazil when the meeting took place, it was my privilege to present it on his behalf.

A short report appeared in the *Sunday Times* on the fact that an OVS language had been discovered, and the next week, to my great irritation, a letter appeared from someone who said that this was nothing new, it occurred in German. The point was apparently not an easy one to get across to the public at large: it was not about what was permitted, but about what was typical. No one could think it was normal in German to tell your sweetheart “Dich liebe ich” rather than “Ich liebe dich.” In Hixkaryana, OVS was the basic, ordinary order of phrases, not just a sometimes permissible stylistic variation. So Des and I both learned a little about the difficulty of presenting linguistics to the public at large.

John Hemming's important historical work *Red Gold: The Conquest of the Brazilian Indians* came out in 1978, and the *Sunday Times* got a conservative literary critic to review it. Des and I were both utterly astonished by the result. The review began by describing a charming seventeenth-century Portuguese comic opera he had recently seen, and noted that the culture of Portugal's prosperity at the time had been funded by earnings from brutal overseas conquests; then it described some of Hemmings' grim catalog of genocide; and finally it raised the question of whether the Portuguese slaughter of the Brazilian Indians had been justified, and presented the opinion that it had, because their low cultural level and

“deeply uninteresting lives” did not come up to the standard of the architecture and music that Western civilization had produced.

Des and I were quite appalled, and we both sent letters to the editor. Mine was a polemic condemning the critic as an evil and ignorant racist. Des’s letter was very different. He wrote movingly of having lived among Brazilian Indians and having valued them as friends and teachers and learned a great deal from them, and concluded simply that the reviewer was mistaken. There was no bitterness in it. The Sunday Times printed Des’s letter but not mine. Des liked to tell this story (so Dan Everett tells me) because he was proud of having emerged (to his surprise) the winner in a straight contest with me. I like the story too: I felt that it was the right decision for the Sunday Times to print Des’s letter, with its first-hand experience, generosity, and calm reason. And it taught me a little about the power of Des’s quiet and gentle manner in dealing with people and issues.

An announcement came out some time around then announcing a new series of descriptive monographs, to be written in accord with a typological checklist format devised by Bernard Comrie and Norval Smith. I pointed out to Des that this would be a straightforward way to get a reference grammar of Hixkaryana published, and he immediately decided to take on the task. Meanwhile he was developing certain typological and theoretical ideas that he wanted to explore separately in his doctoral dissertation—nobody knew anything about what to expect in the syntactic patterns of an object-initial language. Now he had two book-length projects going.

One day in the early summer of 1979, Des told me he was going to collect the bound copies of his dissertation from the University of London’s bindery. On his way back, bringing me one of the bound copies, he picked up his mail at the department office, and found that *Lingua* had sent him the first author’s copies of the monograph he had completed for them—it was number one in the new *Lingua Descriptive Series*—so he gave me one of those as well. Just in time to catch a plane the next day: he was off to North Dakota to teach in SIL’s summer program.

Des had managed, without any fuss, to complete the Ph.D., publish a new book (an entirely different work), and leave for a teaching assignment on another continent, all within twenty-four hours.

It crossed my mind at the time that this is how one might imagine a life might go if it were being directed and scheduled by an omniscient and omnipotent higher power. But on balance I think that to assume divine intervention at two different binderies would be to downplay Des’s calm and efficient planning of his life. He was always reliable, always met deadlines and expectations. And he worked with a discipline, accuracy,

and intelligence that permitted him to write excellent material without going through numerous drafts.

I had obtained grant funding for Des to work on Hixkaryana, and subsequent to his completing the doctorate we prepared another grant application to explore other languages of the Amazon basin and nearby areas to see if there were more object-initial languages to be discovered. The project was funded, and produced results. We found information on about a dozen cases of languages virtually unknown to linguistic science that appeared to have OVS or OSV basic word order in the clause. Some were Cariban, but some were in other language families of Amazonia. Des went off to Brazil to track down obscure literature in Portuguese and unpublished work by SIL members in Brazil. I obtained permission to work in the British Museum Reading Room so that I could consult the work of a German anthropologist, Koch-Gruenberg, who in the 19th century had taken down data from a clearly OVS Cariban language, Hianacoto. We produced a joint article on object-initial languages that appeared in 1981 (*IJAL* 47:192–214), and we began work on a series of volumes to be called *Handbook of Amazonian Languages* (*HAL*).

At the end of the first year of our grant we had nine publications and an impressive record of achievement to present to the Social Science Research Council, which duly made its decision on renewal: funding for the second year was denied, on the grounds that we had done so much work. The idea was, apparently, that those who made significant progress should have their funding stopped. I was furious at this myopic decision (the decision strongly influenced me in making my decision to give up my job in Britain and work in California for most of the next three decades), and I felt I had let Des down, since the grant was currently his only source of income. But Des, always calmer and more centered than I knew how to be, accepted the decision with no bitterness at all, and returned to work for SIL. He became a senior administrator in the academic branch of SIL based in Dallas, Texas.

The work that Des started in 1977 basically established Amazonian linguistics as a contentful subfield. With regard to syntax, at least, hardly anything was widely known or available concerning any Amazonian language in the mid-1970s. Things are very different today. By 1998, through long-distance collaboration and occasional visits, Des and I had edited and published four volumes of *HAL*. All owed most of their content to Des, who patiently worked with SIL members to encourage them to write grammatical descriptions, persuade them to finish and deliver, and then meticulously edited and revised their work. My role was very much secondary (desk research for the general material on Amazonia and its

languages, writing most of the introductions to the four volumes, and dealing with the publisher).

One contribution that Des solicited for volume 1 was Daniel Everett's 200-page description of a genetically isolated language, Piraha, which has since become very well known through Everett's work. A number of other contributions were similarly of almost monograph length, and described some fascinating and genetically diverse languages in considerable detail.

All of Des's share of the royalties from those volumes went to SIL's work on Amazonian linguistics, so I donated all of my share to a fund for the support of Amazonian linguistics at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where it covered various occasional small grants, including fellowships for a couple of Brazilian students who attended the 1991 Linguistic Institute.

In due course others began to contribute to the developing subfield of Amazonian linguistics, some directly influenced by Des and others coming to the subject independently. An important collection of papers on the lowland Amazonian languages was published in 1990 under the editorship of Doris Payne, a dynamic SIL member (now a full professor of linguistics at the University of Oregon) from whom Des had obtained two excellent contributions to *HAL*. Des tried hard to find Brazilian academic linguists to write descriptive material on Amazonian languages, but it was not until 1998 that we at last managed to get one: a major contribution from a non-SIL linguist, by Alexandra Aikhenvald (a Russian-born Brazilian citizen) appeared in volume 4 of *HAL*. Brazilian linguistics students began to apply to American graduate programs (some went to MIT to work with Ken Hale). In 2000, Lucy Seki, whose work I first heard of from Des, became the first Brazilian-born linguist ever to publish a book-length grammar of an Amazonian language (Kamaiura).

Probably the most significant effect of Des's work on the field at large was that volume 1 of *HAL* came to the attention of the Australian linguist Robert M. W. Dixon, previously known for work on Australian aboriginal and Austronesian languages, and (so he has told me) he found the linguistic material so fascinating that he resolved to start working in Amazonia himself. And over the next decade that is what he did. The survey of Amazonian languages Dixon jointly authored with Aikhenvald for Cambridge University Press came out in 1999, and his book on the Jarawara language of Amazonia won the LSA's Leonard Bloomfield Book Award in 2005.

In the last part of his life, Des moved to Hampshire in England, where a donor had made a house available for him. There his wife Grace died, on September 7, 1997. It was a major blow, depriving him of the person who had been his closest companion for over fifty years. From then on, while still

being involved in academic linguistics (he was scheduled to be in Holland on January 30th, 2008, for the doctoral promotion meeting on Henk Courtz's dissertation about the Carib language), he spent most of his time working on a Hixkaryana translation of the Old Testament, making occasional visits to the Hixkaryana settlement in Brazil to consult with native speakers.

His work with the Hixkaryana was successful in several ways. Linguistically it was extraordinarily productive and valuable. With regard to translating the Bible, it achieved a published result. And as regards the missionary work, at least some of the tribe began to identify themselves as Christians. Des once showed me (and translated into English at my suggestion) a lengthy diary kept in Hixkaryana by a close friend of his, Uchunu, who had become ill with a serious condition (a cancer from which he eventually died), and made a long journey away from the Nhamunda to get medical treatment in the city of Belem, and later in Manaus. Uchunu wrote of encountering Portuguese-speaking Brazilians at a hostel who taunted him for being an ignorant savage out of the jungle, and wrote with clear satisfaction of being able to tell them with pride that in fact he was a Christian. Of course, simple human respect should never depend on anyone's religion. But it would be less than fully respectful to Uchunu to ignore his own view: he saw his standing as a practicing Christian as a significant and positive part of his sense of self and value.

Regardless of one's position on missionary work, one has to view the Hixkaryana as lucky that their first extended interaction with the modern world was this gentle missionary couple, Des and Grace. As is well known, many Amerindian groups in South America have been far less fortunate. Des loved the Hixkaryana people; he respected their intelligence, kindness, generosity, and practical skills; he delighted in their language; and he cared about their welfare. They have done well in the fifty years that Des knew them, and their society is far more robust than it was when Des and Grace arrived. From a demoralized population in danger of extinction in 1959, with only about a hundred members, few children, and high infant mortality, they grew to a population of about 350 in all by the time I met Des, and today there are about 600, with access to modern medicine, frequent intermarriage with the Waiwai tribe, high literacy rates and a school with Hixkaryana teachers, and a government-assisted Brazil nut business.

Des's repeated visits to the Hixkaryana never stopped until he was too unwell to travel. If there had been enough time, I am sure he would have completed a translation of the Old Testament for them, and also further works on the grammar of their fascinating language for us linguists. But his time ran out.

I will miss him personally, and so I think will everyone who knew him. I never met anyone who knew him who didn't also like him and respect him. The Hixkaryana have lost their closest external friend and advocate, but because of his efforts their language and linguistic culture will never disappear unrecorded as so many Brazilian indigenous languages did. SIL and the Wycliffe Bible Translators have lost a dedicated administrator and translator. We linguists have lost a top fieldworker, an eminent scholar of Cariban languages, a very fine descriptive and comparative linguist, and a wonderful human being.