

Reading response 3

[Linguistics](#), [English](#)



Reading Response on “ THE ARTICULATE MAMMAL” by Jean Aitchison

Aitchison has explored the mystery of language from a structural point of view. The book has examined whether language is limited to human beings and how children acquire the technique of language, and whether language is innate or has to be learnt. The first chapter is mainly based on critical review of B. F. Skinner’s book Verbal Behavior by linguist Noam Chomsky. Skinner has associated learning of language with the series of experiments conducted on animals like rats and pigeons. Skinner argued that like animals learn specific tasks by means of voluntary responses, so do human beings learn language in the similar way. Skinner links human’s usage of words with external events like a person will always use appreciative words on seeing a beautiful picture. However, Chomsky has heavily criticized Skinner’s explanation of language since how a person will react to an event depends on the person’s perspective. For instance, a picture which seems beautiful to someone may seem hideous to another person. Chomsky has mostly rejected Skinner’s work by arguing that the latter’s experiments on animals are not relevant to the concept of language (Aitchison, 2011, pp. 7-23). The eighth chapter is based on Chomsky’s views on transformational grammar. For an alien to learn the language of humans at first it may seem that the easy way is to memorize all sentences that one may hear. However, this is a completely disastrous method of learning language since in this method one is not trying to understand any patterns in the words within a sentence. In any given situation, uttering sentences with words without understanding the meaning will solve no problem. Moreover, a sentence can be too long for memorizing. The important thing is to focus on the rule in

which a speaker utters words in a sentence since a language is structured with words. Chomsky has talked about transformations which links the hidden structure and the surface structure of sentences. He has also stated that there is no concrete set of rules to decide which sentences are permissible in English (Aitchison, 2011, pp. 170-186).

The tenth chapter deals with how human beings deal with sound in general and provides a framework of speech perception. Earlier, psycholinguists believed that to understand language one just needs to link words with sounds uttered by the speaker. However, this fingerprint approach has been rejected by modern psycholinguists for three reasons. Firstly, the speed with which a speaker utters words cannot be possible for the listener to identify each sound. Secondly, no alphabet has fixed acoustic representation, for instance an alphabet has different sounds in different words depending on what comes after that. Moreover, each speaker has difference in accent making sounds vary between speakers. Thirdly, alphabets like B, D and G has similar sounds and therefore it is difficult to distinguish each sound (Aitchison, 2011, pp. 205-233).

Aitchison's book is a brilliant and concise introduction to psycholinguists. I find it fascinating the way the author has accessed the works of Naom Chomsky and examined the technique of language in an impartial manner. I support the theory that grammar defines the structure of words and only by understanding the art of grammar one can comprehend language. The idea for the hearer is to understand the internal structure of a sentence which essentially has no acoustic representation.

Reference

Aitchison, J. (2011). *The Articulate Mammal: An Introduction to Psycholinguistics*. NY: Routledge