

Research into
teaching language to
apes always attracts
curiosity and attention



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1. Research into Teaching Language to Apes Always Attracts Curiosity and Attention. Discuss the Extent to Which Such Studies Contribute to Our Understanding of How Children Learn Language

Since the 1960's and 70's, several studies have been carried out which attempted to teach apes of one kind or another to speak. Although it can be accepted that apes and humans have much in common in the way of anatomical and genome resemblances, little or no actual 'speech' success has been achieved. Many scientists consider that apes do not lack the intelligence to speak but the physical differences in the oral cavity, tongue, vocal tracts etc. make it impossible for them to create the sounds. We know though, that for example, the orangutan brain is very similar to our own, with the left hemisphere being significantly larger than the right, and that the left hemisphere in the human brain is the language centre, used for the production and comprehension of language. Still our apes did not talk, but the belief that they could understand and communicate ensured that other methods were employed to test and confirm that belief. So American Sign Language, coloured plastic shapes as symbols for words, and specially designed computer keyboards were all tools utilized to research, teach and bring about the acquisition of linguistic skills. And to some extent, they all worked.

The study of Kanzi, a bonobos (called a pygmy chimpanzee), who was never actually trained to use anything, but merely observed his adoptive mother in the laboratory for two years, provides us with good insight as to one way in which a child's linguistic abilities develop. The mother received the training, with words, signs and keyboard, but was unable to respond. She was

returned to the Yerkes Primate Center and Kanzi stayed around the

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laboratory. Within a week, he was using the keyboard, and later putting together two and three-word sentences. He had learned by observation, and his understanding of language, when tested alongside that of a little girl of similar age (two and one half years), was found to be similar to hers. The important factors identified here for both ape

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and child would seem to indicate that if reared from an early age in a " language structured environment" (1974 Savage-Rumbaugh), both become enabled to acquire and comprehend language. Translated to layman's terms, this does not have to be a laboratory or test site, it informs us that talking with and attending to a child will help its linguistic development.

The methods utilized, and the research studies have had the positive effect of encouraging linguistic research into the essence of human language and the physiological and intellectual properties which combine to bring about its development.

Because animals can learn language, but do not speak, the hypothesis is that only humans are able to do so. The human baby is born genetically predisposed to learn and use language, the acquisition of language is biologically controlled. But this is not always going to happen, sadly. In considering those instances where children are severely disabled, either physically or mentally, when production is hampered yet comprehension may exist (proven in the ape studies), the methods used to enable communication in those studies may be beneficial and therapeutic. Studies too, on deaf or hearing but signing babies have shown that as young as five months, a baby can sign for milk! If we extend the possibilities and consider the teaching of such skills to those children unable to achieve full linguistic

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competence, then the ape studies have not been a failure, we have learned much. The computers, shapes, voice synthesizers, are all tools for communicating.

In acceptant that human babies are born to grasp the complexities of language, and much recent research is indeed proving this to be the case, the any means at our disposal to extend that ability to its full potential is worthwhile.

Perhaps we should thank the likes of Sarah, Nim, Koko, Kanzi et al for working so hard to help us to do just that. And of course, the researchers who persevered in the face of much controversy and disbelief.

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