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Anthropology

Movie Essay: Language

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Language

Language is something that humans know very little about, and yet they can use and understand it perfectly, without questioning how they know it. In the film “Discovering Human Language” linguists examine and explore how and why humans use language. Humans can understand phrases and sentences that they have never heard before, and therefore linguists argue that there is some sort of underlying system or pattern in the brain that governs how humans understand language. This understanding is abstract and arbitrary. For example, why is order so important in the context of speech? One can say the “big, red balloon” but will sound strange if they say “the red, big balloon”. These rules are innate; there is no reasoning behind them that anyone can actually explain, but they are universal. How do people separate words in speech when there are no breaks between words when spoken? These are all questions that linguists strive to answer. Linguists also question this: Is language the barrier between humans and all other species, is language exclusive to *Homo sapiens*? Understanding and using language was previously assumed to be exclusive to humans, and many linguists still believe it is, but recent studies have shown that chimps and other primates have the ability to use language to achieve ends similar to a way human would use language. However, the idea that these chimps are actually cognizant of the ability to use language is questionable.

In the film “Chimp Talk” researchers argue that chimps and certain other primates have the ability to comprehend language. Chimps that are being researched use different human tools to express their language, such as sign language and keyboards that have symbols on them. These special keyboards are also used to communicate with mentally retarded humans who cannot speak. Chimps use them to express emotions, wants, needs, and many other things. They form sentences without conjunctions or many other necessary parts of speech, but they are comprehensible nonetheless. Scientists who are researching these chimps say that they are not just using their ability to communicate just to ask for food, as many people believe, but they are actually using them to socialize and “talk” about events that occurred. These chimps have about the mental capacity of a young toddler, but it is still questionable whether or not they are really using language.

Noam Chomsky, a leading linguist, argues that the idea of chimps using language is a ludicrous claim; animals can be trained to do a myriad of things, whether or not they actually comprehend what they are doing or “saying” is a different matter. He argues that the mechanism may not even be the same; how language works in the human brain is barely understood, how can we understand the mechanisms in chimps any better? Chomsky believes that humans have a part of the brain that allows us to use language. Our neural wiring is unique and allows us to use grammar and syntax; it is innate in humans. Chomsky says that part of the brain may not even be the mechanism through which chimps and primates use to understand and “speak” language. Can chimps form new sentences or understand sentences they have never heard before? Chomsky argues that they cannot.

Ultimately, I believe that the studies that show that primates can communicate using their own forms of language are misleading. These primates can appear to be using language properly and the fact that they can learn it is incredible, but they are following rules that humans give them. Primates just do not have the neurological wiring to properly use language. For them to form new words or unique phrases, or understand when something is grammatically or syntactically incorrect is simply impractical and impossible.