

Re: Gender in language

Source: <http://sci.tech--archive.net/Archive/sci.lang/2006-10/msg00241.html>

- *From:* Nathan Sanders <nsanders@xxxxxxxxxxxxx>
 - *Date:* Fri, 29 Sep 2006 16:40:01 -0400
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In article <1ogjtxj98l496.dlg@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>, Oliver Cromm <lispamateur@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote:

* Nathan Sanders wrote:

Non-human animals do not use language, nor can they learn it. Newborn puppies raised by English-speakers do not learn English [...]

Thus, if we can learn X and animals cannot, then (our ability to learn) X must be "hard-wired".

Ok then, so is (our ability to learn) building airplanes?

The process by which humans learn how to build airplanes in no relevant way resembles how we learn language.

Language acquisition happens instinctively for *every single* normal human baby (and many abnormal ones) in essentially the same progression, as long as they are immersed in a linguistically-rich environment, regardless of their desires, their effort, or how much they are "taught".

This is completely different from how humans learn how to build airplanes (or play chess, or most other mental feats many of us can achieve), because it requires active (conscious) study, cannot be learned by all normal humans, and does not follow the same precise progression for those who are able to learn how to do it. It is heavily dependent on our desire to learn, or our effort, and the quantity and quality of our instruction.

The question is whether the language faculty is a separate faculty or just an application of our general ability to learn.

Re: Gender in language

That is indeed the question. Certainly, the human ability to learn goes well beyond other animals' abilities to learn, at least with respect to language. Thus, whatever we do when we learn language is not just some general animal learning, but something specific to humans.

Can it all be boiled down to more basic principles of human cognition that are not specifically designed for language? That is, is it true for all linguistic features that they are each underpinned by some set of cognitive principles, such that each of those principles also underpins some non-linguistic feature? Perhaps.

However, there are a lot of things about language that don't seem immediately amenable to a general cognitive analysis: the seeming contradiction between the linguistic use of reduplication versus anti-echo effects like the Obligatory Contour Principle; island constraints on wh-movement; why more complex creoles arise during acquisition of pidgins; why syllable onsets are preferred and more varied while syllable codas are avoided and/or less varied cross-linguistically; why cognitive disorders such as Williams' Syndrome often have no ultimate effect on linguistic functionality, while at the same time, some genetic defects such as Specific Language Impairment have no apparent effect on any other cognitive functions; etc.

Nathan

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