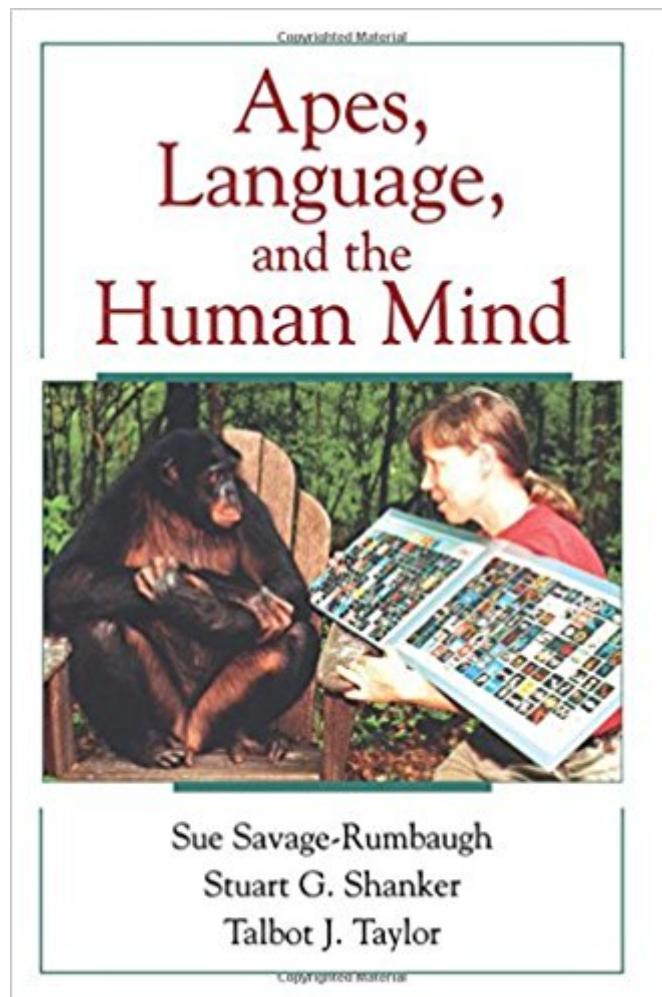


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Apes, Language, And The Human Mind



Synopsis

Current primate research has yielded stunning results that not only threaten our underlying assumptions about the cognitive and communicative abilities of nonhuman primates, but also bring into question what it means to be human. At the forefront of this research, Sue Savage-Rumbaugh recently has achieved a scientific breakthrough of impressive proportions. Her work with Kanzi, a laboratory-reared bonobo, has led to Kanzi's acquisition of linguistic and cognitive skills similar to those of a two and a half year-old human child. *Apes, Language, and the Human Mind* skillfully combines a fascinating narrative of the Kanzi research with incisive critical analysis of the research's broader linguistic, psychological, and anthropological implications. The first part of the book provides a detailed, personal account of Kanzi's infancy, youth, and upbringing, while the second part addresses the theoretical, conceptual, and methodological issues raised by the Kanzi research. The authors discuss the challenge to the foundations of modern cognitive science presented by the Kanzi research; the methods by which we represent and evaluate the abilities of both primates and humans; and the implications which ape language research has for the study of the evolution of human language. Sure to be controversial, this exciting new volume offers a radical revision of the sciences of language and mind, and will be important reading for all those working in the fields of primatology, anthropology, linguistics, philosophy of mind, and cognitive and developmental psychology.

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Customer Reviews

Kanzi, a male bonobo (an ape sometimes called a pygmy chimpanzee), has been under the care of language researcher Savage-Rumbaugh since infancy. Over a period of 18 years, he has learned to communicate his wants and to respond to spoken English by means of pictorial symbols called lexigrams. His communicative capability is about equal to that of a two-and-a-half-year-old human child. The first third of the book presents Savage-Rumbaugh's clear and entertaining account of Kanzi's upbringing. The remainder, largely written by the other two authors, is an argument in academic prose addressed primarily to critics who "insist that no ape has ever developed truly linguistic skills." The authors declare their "shared belief that the Kanzi research presents a serious and effective challenge not only to scientific thinking about the cognitive and communicational capacities of nonhuman primates, but also to received knowledge concerning the possession of those capacities by humans." --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

...enormously entertaining... -- The San Francisco Chronicle, Theodore Roszak This book is worthwhile reading. It is provocative and entertaining. The issues it raises are fundamental. Are we different and above all other species? The authors scream 'NO'. You be the judge. -- Roger L. Mellgren, Applied Cognitive Psychology --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

When Sue Savage-Rumbaugh and others first began suggesting that apes (chimpanzees and bonobos) had better communication skills than language experts would credit, she and the others were soundly denounced by a scholarly community who suggested she and the others were fooled by the clever Hans phenomenon or were making up their evidence. As evidence from her research accumulated, cognition theorists, linguists, and the like continued to reject her methods and results. But eventually, the evidence that some apes have some skills comparable to human language skills became insurmountable. This book is in three parts, written by a primatologist, philosopher, and a rhetoric and language scholar. Each takes the academic community to task at a different level. Savage-Rumbaugh presents her evidence that apes demonstrate communication (even language) skills. Stuart Shanker and Talbot Taylor examine the logic and rhetoric her arguments as compared to the arguments of her detractors, demonstrating that Savage-Rumbaugh's work is as serious and valid as that of the others', and demonstrating (at least to my satisfaction) that the arguments of her detractors are specious. The ramifications of this book and several others like it are significant. It says a great deal about the nature of human communication and language if bonobos can use the same processes as children to come to human language. As time passes, the value of a book may ebb. This is a 1998 book in a time when events happen quickly . . . it is for that reason, alone, that I

give the book only 4 stars.

Loved the first 3rd of this book. All about Kanzi's antics & knowledge! The last 2/3rds is more scientific.

Sue Savage-Rumbaugh (born 1946) is a primatologist most famous for her work with two bonobos, Kanzi and Mulika, investigating their apparent use of "Great Ape language" using lexigrams and computer-based keyboards. She is also the author of Kanzi: The Ape at the Brink of the Human Mind. In this 1998 book, she has teamed with a professor of Philosophy, and a professor of Linguistics, and they state in the Preface, "The authors' motivation in writing this book lies in our shared belief that the Kanzi research presents a serious and effective challenge not only to scientific thinking about the cognitive and communicative capacities of nonhuman primates, but also to received knowledge concerning the possession of these capacities by humans. At the very least, we feel that the results of this research oblige us to reconsider 'what we thought we knew' about the nature of communication and its relation to cognition. What is promised is a complete shift on how communication and cognition are seen--and understood." The authors admit, "We found that while it was easy to get chimps to use symbols in a way that looked like language, it was much more difficult to get them to understand and use symbols in a manner that was truly equivalent to that of young children." They state, "It was important to look for evidence of grammatical rules in Kanzi's utterances because many linguistic scholars have argued that the utterances of apes should not be characterized as truly linguistic in nature unless it can be shown that they employ grammatical rules similar to those found in human languages.... This seemed to me an extreme position. After all, Kanzi had learned to comprehend and use printed symbols on his own without special training.... Consequently, whether or not he could be shown to possess a formal grammar, the conclusion remained inescapable that Kanzi had a simple language." They ask probing questions, such as concerning the chimp Washoe: "Washoe's ability was startling, but was it language? Washoe knew what to do with her signs, but did she really understand what the signs themselves did in terms of her communication with others? It was not clear that Washoe's language possessed a syntax or that she fully understood the representational power of language."

Things were not going well at the Yerkes Regional Primate Center in Atlanta, Georgia. Biologist Sue Savage-Rumbaugh was attempting to train the female bonobo Matata to associate a handful of visual symbols ("lexemes") with familiar objects. But Matata was not cooperating. She just did not

seem to get the point of the exercise, and furthermore she had a youngster to care for. For his part, the young bonobo Kanzi did what any child would do, alternately clinging to his mother and running wild in the room. He was constantly demanding his mother's attention, but showed little interest in the task she was struggling to learn. That is, until one day when Matata was gone and Kanzi demonstrated to the researchers that he had already mastered his mother's lessons and then some. From that point, Kanzi became the focus of Savage-Rumbaugh's research; but instead of using standard behavioral techniques, her research team taught Kanzi simply by interacting with him. Thus began the first attempt to teach language to a young bonobo in a naturalistic fashion. Kanzi is now generally considered to be the most linguistically developed of all language-trained great apes. According to the authors, he has mastered the full complement of 256 lexemes in the artificial language Yerkish, expressly designed for ape language research. He can combine these symbols to express novel concepts, and he also uses gestures to help clarify intended meanings. But his most impressive accomplishment is that he can also understand spoken English, performing similarly to a two-and-a-half-year-old child. Kanzi cannot speak, though, because bonobos, like other great apes, lack the anatomical structures for producing speech sounds. The book "Apes, Language and the Human Mind" consists of four chapters. The first, called "Bringing up Kanzi" and written by Savage-Rumbaugh, is an entertaining and highly readable account of how Kanzi learned to communicate with humans. Savage-Rumbaugh's approach is strongly anthropomorphic, and she attributes human-like intentions and motivations to the apes she works with. It is hard to discern to what degree this anthropomorphism is appropriate, since humans are prone to attribute intentionality to all sorts of things--cars, computers, the weather--that clearly have no mentality whatsoever. On the other hand, it is often not difficult to imagine being in Kanzi's position, as for example when Kanzi refuses to camp out in a tent with the researchers, choosing instead to return to the lab, where he can watch TV and sleep in a bed. The second chapter, penned by Shanker, discusses the philosophical ramifications of ape language research. Anyone who is not a philosopher will find this chapter extremely tedious, but the take-home message is actually quite interesting. The view that humans are qualitatively different from all other species goes back only to Descartes, who argued that only humans (and supernatural beings such as angels and gods) have minds. Before that, the standard view was the Great Chain of Being, which saw all existence as a hierarchical structure with graded differences in mentality from mineral to plant to animal to human to divine. On that view, humans are still intellectually superior to apes, but not categorically so. Cartesian dualism is appealing to those--as for example primate researchers--who, as part of their livelihood, regularly treat apes in ways that would be considered unethical with humans.

Furthermore, Cartesian dualism is likely appealing to the ordinary person because, in our modern lifestyle, we no longer interact very much with other species, and what animals we do domesticate are intentionally bred for their docility (that is, stupidity). One has to wonder, though, how many hunters, stalking their prey, view their quarry as mindless automata. The third chapter, by Taylor, outlines the ongoing and often vitriolic debate over whether trained apes actually "have" language or not. Cases such as that of "Clever Hans," the mathematical horse, illustrate just how easy it is to unintentionally train animals to respond to subtle cues. Furthermore, humans naturally attribute mental processes to others, so it is important to test language-trained apes in an objective manner. However, skeptics of ape language research categorically reject the possibility that apes could have some linguistic ability, so there is no evidence that could ever convince them otherwise. This is a wholly unscientific stance for scientists to take. Although the null hypothesis should be that apes do not use language, the skeptic must nevertheless grant some criterion that, if observed, would be sufficiently convincing that some primates can indeed communicate intentionally with a symbolic system. In the fourth chapter, Savage-Rumbaugh considers what the data from ape language research tells us about the nature of human language, language acquisition, and the relationship of humans to other species. If apes can learn language, this means that language is not a uniquely human instinct, as Pinker argues. But if language acquisition and processing are based on general cognitive abilities that humans share with other primates--and perhaps with many other species as well--then why do only humans have language in their natural state? Regardless of the eventual answer to that question, ethical issues are also raised by primate language research. That is, if a non-human primate truly exhibits the cognitive abilities of a two-to-three-year-old human child, does that not then imply that non-human primates deserve the same rights that we accord human children? Researchers who regularly sacrifice primates on the altar of science do not want to even acknowledge the validity of this question. If five centuries of science have taught us anything, it is humility. We are not special. We are not at the center of the universe. Yet the scientist who accepts the heliocentric solar system, geologic time, the evolution of species and our common ancestor with the other great apes only a few million years ago nevertheless staunchly insists that humans are still special when it comes to language and cognition. Maybe, as her critics claim, Savage-Rumbaugh is over-interpreting the data. But given the trend of science toward greater humility, it is not unreasonable to think that humans are not special when it comes to language and thought either.

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