

Ape Language Research is Alive and Well: A Reply

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Jean Umiker-Sebeok and Thomas A. Sebeok in a paper entitled "Clever Hans and Smart Simians: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy and Kindred Methodological Pitfalls" (*Anthropos* 76.1981: 89-165) put forth a series of arguments designed to demonstrate that language relevant research with apes is not a proper field of study. Their case against ape-language is built upon a number of assertions which are questionable and should be open to debate. In the present paper, a number of these assertions are laid out and responded to individually in order to clarify for the reader both the basic positions held by Umiker-Sebeok and Sebeok, and the alternative positions which are offered here.

Assertion 1: Ape-language researchers are highly critical of one another; therefore, one should dismiss all of their results as inconclusive. "The cumulative effect . . . has been . . . to shift attention away . . . [from the] data . . . and onto the dubious nature of the . . . procedures" (Umiker-Sebeok and Sebeok 1981: 91).

Response: Disagreements among researchers in a common area of investigation are *neither unusual nor improper states of affairs*. Such disagreements, particularly those of a procedural nature are, in many ways, the life blood of science, particularly of the behavioral sciences. If the disagreements seem more severe in the field of ape-language, it is only because the press has so sensationalized the claims regarding the capabilities of apes. Umiker-Sebeok and Sebeok do not differentiate scientific reports from popular press accounts. They cite Desmond, for example, a journalist and author of the popular book, *The Ape's Reflexion*, as one of the foremost authorities on "anthropomorphic tendencies among ape-language researchers." This reliance on popular sources makes disagreements between researchers seem far more significant than they, in fact, are.

Assertion 2: Ape-language studies can be classified as either *apprentissage* (scientific) and/or *dressage* (circus performances) (95).

Response: Ape-language projects are not *apprentissage*, they are not *dressage*, and they are not some combination of the two. The application of this dichotomy to ape-language work is both inappropriate and misleading. There has been no attempt to teach apes impersonal associations, "conditioned reflexes" as Hediger's (1968) definition of *apprentissage* requires, nor has there been any attempt to teach them to "perform certain actions at a special personal signal" as Hediger defines *dressage*. Instead, the goal has been to teach chimpanzees the value and potential of communication and to establish a communal base for the interpretation of symbols. To accomplish this we have structured situations to maximize the need and value of communication. We have manipulated the environment to present the chimpanzee with a problem, and then demonstrated the means to solve the problem or to solicit help (Savage-Rumbaugh, Rumbaugh, and Boysen 1978a and b). It is the solution and the problem-solving process, communicative and behavioral, which we seek to study.