

11.2 IS THE HUMAN LINGUISTIC CAPACITY UNIQUE: CHILDREN AND PRIMATES COMPARED

Our discussion of language development in children has focused on two important and intimately interconnected properties of human language use. First, it is *rule-governed*; that is, humans master and follow rules for forming and using expressions of their native language. (For a challenge to this view, see, for example, Rumelhart and McClelland 1986; and for a recent defense, see Pinker and Prince 1988.) Second, it is *creative* (that is, humans spontaneously produce and understand expressions they have never encountered before in their linguistic experience). These are both properties that have been stressed in putting forth the claim that the human linguistic capacity is unique.

In recent years, in a fascinating set of experiments, the traditional idea that language is unique to the human species has been challenged. Psychologists, working in teams, have attempted to teach primates various communication systems (for example, sign language) that are thought to reflect certain essential properties of human language. Such projects have raised an intriguing possibility: even if a primate species (such as the chimpanzee) has a very rudimentary natural communication system in the wild, perhaps a member of this species could be taught a communication system not natural to the species, with complex properties on a par with certain properties of human spoken language.

Are primates in fact able to acquire and use language in a way similar to the way humans do? Primates have often been compared with children with respect to the acquisition of language, yet the contrast between the two is striking. Young children acquire complicated linguistic systems apparently effortlessly, whereas primates have required massive training efforts to master quite rudimentary communication systems. From one point of view—the traditional one referred to above—this would hardly be surprising. Humans, after all, are predisposed to learn language, whereas chimpanzees and gorillas are not. From this perspective, comparing children and chimpanzees with respect to language development is quite instructive, and the contrast between the two serves to clarify the nature of the task that all children carry out in mastering their native language.