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THE CLASH OF GIANTS OVER TERMINOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

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ABSTRACT: Responding to the continuing conflict between behavioristic and rationalist/cognitive approaches to language and language development, some relationships between those two paradigms are explored. First, it is shown, by comparing terms employed in the opposing systems and by specifying their common underlying conceptual scope, that many of the assumed contrasts are more terminological than substantial. Having demonstrated underlying conceptual similarities, complementarities in strengths and emphases of both approaches are noted. Next, an integrative paradigm is suggested that explains language development from the perspective of skill learning. This perspective subsumes the basic concepts of both antagonistic approaches and incorporates their complementary strengths to fully explain the complex processes involved in the acquisition of language skills. The social implications of the two opposing theories and of the integrative approach are briefly discussed. It is concluded that an integration of the conceptual and empirical potentials of the two antagonistic conceptualizations of language development is needed and possible, once the emphasis on contrasts, which is exaggerated through contrasting labels, is overcome.

Continuing controversies as to the conceptualization of language and language acquisition could easily produce the impression that profound and unbridgeable differences exist between the major approaches to this topic. These contrasting conceptualizations have been most commonly represented as "behavioristic" versus "rationalist/cognitive" conceptualizations. Some of the central relevant concepts of these schools will be specified below in the course of the discussion, although it cannot be attempted to describe either or both of them exhaustively. In contrast to the predominant emphasis upon differences, conceptual homologies and similarities in approaches will be emphasized or even overemphasized to compensate for previous divisive characterizations and -- hopefully -- to build a bridge between both approaches across which communication and crossfertilization can begin. It is suggested that we cannot allow ourselves to remain frozen into the adversary legacy of the past fumbling and one-sided attempts at describing the complex phenomenon of language acquisition/transmission. In those areas, where differences in emphases do exist, the two major approaches appear to be mainly complementary and, consequently, both are needed for the full explanation of language and language acquisition. This complementarity will be exemplified in a preliminary manner by describing language acquisition as skill acquisition.

The presentation will be developed in three steps: First, the most general approaches to language in the opposing paradigms will be scrutinized and conceptual

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