

Book Reviews

Jean Aitchison.

**THE ARTICULATE MAMMAL:
AN INTRODUCTION TO PSYCHOLINGUISTICS.**

New York: Universe Books, 1977. 256 pp.

(also available in paperback editions from London:

**Hutchison & Co. Ltd., 1978, £3.25; and New York: McGraw-Hill
Book Co., 1978, \$4.50.)**

For those who are a bit intimidated by tree diagrams, transformational derivations, or the terse prose of experimental psychology, *The Articulate Mammal* is the most comfortable introduction to the complex field of psycholinguistics that I know of among the wide assortment of introductory texts which are available. It abounds in sketches, simple diagrams, and other visual aids to complement the written text itself, and each chapter is introduced by a fetchingly appropriate quotation — many of them from the pen of Lewis Carroll. My personal favorite is from Benjamin Franklin and is used to preface a chapter on child language acquisition: “Teach your child to hold his tongue; he’ll learn fast enough to speak.” (p. 125) It is only in a few places that these attempts to make the material more easy to assimilate miss the mark; in the discussion of language and the brain in Chapter 3, for example, only the diagrams illustrating contralateral control are of any use; the lateral illustrations of the cerebrum on the other pages are so simplistic that they could easily mislead the reader about the relationship between neuro-anatomical form and linguistic function.

Among the wide variety of topics that have been subsumed under the rubric “psycholinguistics” there are three general themes with which Aitchison is fundamentally concerned: one is the issue of the innateness of human language, another is the process of child language acquisition, and the third is the manner in which humans process and produce linguistic information. Of all the topics that could be included in an introductory text, these three pertain most directly to the field of education, and, coupled with the book’s inherent

readability, this aptness in choice of material persuades me to recommend *The Articulate Mammal* highly to those who are engaged in teaching, especially the teaching of language as either a mother tongue or as a second language.

The first four chapters are devoted to the innateness issue, and although the author falls into the popular trap of introducing this delicate topic in terms of a polar dichotomy (“nature” or “nurture”, p. 18), any intelligent reader can see that her heart is in the right place by the time she finishes presenting the evidence concerning the role of innate factors in the acquisition of language by children. Unlike some contemporary psycholinguists who have thrown out the baby with the bathwater by suggesting that environmental factors play little if any role in language acquisition, Aitchison concludes her summary chapter on the innateness issue with the following prudent observation:

Both sides are right: nature triggers off the behavior, and lays down the framework, but careful nurture is needed for it to reach its full potential. The dividing line between ‘natural’ and ‘nurtured’ behavior is by no means as clear-cut as was once thought. (p. 89)

Chapters 4-8 deal with child language acquisition, a topic that spawned enormous interest in the last two decades and is now an autonomous field of its own — developmental psycholinguistics. The discussion revolves around two important and competing models of how an infant acquires the incredibly complex, abstract structures of any human language within a relatively short span of time under such generally unfavourable circumstances. One model, charmingly depicted as “Content Cuthbert,” suggests that the components of language acquisition which are innately specified are restricted to a set of *linguistic* universals, which serve as a template for rapid linguistic development in the mother tongue to which the child happens to be exposed. This is, of course, Chomsky’s perspective on how children acquire language, and it was he who suggested that children like “Content Cuthbert” are born with a “language acquisition device.” The alternative view, one that has gained increased currency during the past few years, is the model named “Process Peggy.” “Peggy” is innately specified with a template of *cognitive* universals, which can be applied to all kinds of environmental puzzles and which is by no means uniquely limited to the enterprise of language learning alone. These chapters do a commendable job of introducing the competing theories and presenting the respective arguments and data in a cogent manner, although educators will be surprised to find no direct references to Piaget, obviously the spiritual father of “Process Peggy.” Even the first letters of the names of these two models bring to mind the names of their respective proponents — C for Chomsky and P for Piaget.

The final four chapters deal with the psychological processes which underlie the comprehension and production of human speech. This field, usually referred to as experimental psycholinguistics, began to develop momentum in the late fifties when it was simultaneously inspired by a new model of grammar, proposed by linguists like Chomsky, and a renewed interest in cognitive models

for learning, proposed by such psycholinguists as Miller. Aitchison does a thorough job of reviewing the copious experimentation on comprehension and production that was undertaken in the sixties, and she is astute enough to point out that many of these experiments were constrained by the inadequate linguistic models upon which they were based. For example, the early experiments which attempted to show that the difficulty in comprehending sentences was directly proportional to the number of syntactic transformations which that particular set of sentences had undergone, ignored the semantic differences between negative and passive transformations.

For the reader interested in pursuing any of the topics introduced in greater detail, Aitchison has thoughtfully included a section entitled "Notes and suggestions for further reading." The omission of an index is the only feature detracting from the book's otherwise attractive format. It is a pleasure to recommend *The Articulate Mammal* because its scope is ideally suited for those concerned with language pedagogy, and because it has so capably reviewed the findings of psycholinguists during the sixties and seventies. It would be an even greater pleasure to know that the theoretical insights gleaned from psycholinguistics could be translated into more inspired teaching, and more effective learning, in language classrooms in the decades to come.

Thomas Scovel
Foreign Language Institute
Tientsin, China

Byron G. Messialis/Joseph B. Hurst.
SOCIAL STUDIES IN A NEW ERA.
New York: Longman.
501 pp. \$9.95.

When one thinks of the numbers of books on Elementary Social Studies, one is inclined to see a parallel in Tennyson's brook. Unfortunately, this particular "brook" is beginning to have all the appearances of a Mississippi: these books become bigger and bigger, and longer and longer, and yet seem to say less and less. It is pleasant to find in this particular issue a volume which has something in particular to say, albeit it takes nigh on five hundred pages.

The particular concern of Messialis and Hurst is that Social Studies as taught in the USA has led to parochial attitudes at a time when internationalism and the organizations of international and national governments increasingly rub shoulders one with the other. Interestingly enough, these authors cite Social Studies as taught in the elementary schools of Canada as being superior in this respect. The Canadian elementary pupil, in their opinion and those of the researchers they have examined, is more aware of the provincial and the national, even of the continental, setting than the American pupil would appear to be.