

Tema 1. Las lenguas humanas

ACTIVIDAD 1. El lenguaje humano. Genie

1. Visiona el documental *La niña salvaje* (Documentos TV), disponible en (en español, 54:32 min).

<http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x4e5rf6/>

Este reportaje narra la historia de *Genie* [en realidad, Susan M. Wiley], una adolescente de Los Ángeles (EEUU) rescatada por los asistentes sociales después de haber pasado los trece primeros años de su vida recluida en una habitación sin ventanas y ningún contacto humano.

2. Lee el fragmento de Lust (2006) que aparece a continuación:

- Lust, Barbara (2006): *Child Language. Acquisition and Growth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

3. Después de ver el documental, podremos responder a estas preguntas:

- a) ¿Todos los seres humanos poseen la facultad del lenguaje?
- b) ¿Cuál es la condición indispensable para que todo bebé sano (que nace, por tanto, con la facultad del lenguaje) la desarrolle y acabe hablando una lengua?
- c) ¿Es la facultad del lenguaje dependiente o independiente de otras capacidades mentales o de la inteligencia general?
- d) Asumiendo un contexto sin aislamiento ni patologías, ¿la facultad del lenguaje se desarrolla mediante instrucción específica? (o, dicho de otro modo, ¿se "enseña" a hablar a los bebés/niños?)
- e) ¿Crees que un bebé adquiere la lengua materna del mismo modo que un adulto aprende una lengua extranjera? ¿Qué nos dice esto sobre el modo en que se desarrolla la facultad del lenguaje? ¿Qué es el periodo crítico?
- f) ¿Cuál es la relación entre lenguaje y comunicación?
- g) ¿Qué nos dice el caso de Genie sobre la estructura interna de las lenguas humanas (vocabulario, sintaxis...)?

Más información

- La historia de Genie fue llevada al cine en 2001, en una película estadounidense titulada *Mockingbird Don't Sing*, conocida en España como *Katie, la niña salvaje*.

- *El experimento prohibido. Genie, la niña que vivió atada a una silla y que gritaba ¡ya no más!* (Teresa Vallejo). En línea:

<https://recursosocioeducativos.wordpress.com/2014/04/03/genie-la-nina-salvaje/>

- Moñivas Lázaro, Agustín; San Carrión, Carmen; Rodríguez Fernández, María del Carmen (2002). "Genie: la niña salvaje. El experimento prohibido (un caso de

maltrato familiar y profesional)", pp. 221-230 *Alternativas. Cuadernos de Trabajo Social* 10, pp. 221-230.

5.8.1 Genie

The tragic case of “Genie” is important to these issues because of the relatively precise and extensive linguistic and cognitive analyses which it has received (Curtiss 1977, Curtiss et al. 1974).

Born in 1957, Genie experienced extreme deprivation beginning at about twenty months of age when she was confined to a dark room in the back of a house, harnessed to a potty seat by day and strapped in a sleeping bag in a caged crib at night, until she was discovered in 1970 at the age of 13.9. She was exposed to little or no auditory stimulation during confinement, and beaten when she made sounds. Genie’s language experience during confinement was thus thought to be minimal to non-existent.⁶¹ Her father barked and growled at her; her mother, going blind, was allowed minimal contact with her children. When discovered, Genie appeared to be about six or seven years old, weighed 59 pounds, was mal-nourished, incontinent, had difficulty standing and walking, could not chew solid food, and never spoke. She appeared to understand only a few words.

With physical nourishment and various attempts at personal, social and cognitive nourishment, Genie’s physical development quite quickly brought her into puberty. Her general cognitive development reached the six- to eight-year level by the next year, when she was fourteen. At the same time, Genie’s language development, particularly its syntax, appeared extremely deficient. After five months she began to use single words and her vocabulary grew quickly. Her first words were often cognitively complex, e.g., color and number words and superlatives. Two words were combined and then three to four words, e.g., (22); after about two years, attempted recursion appeared, e.g., (23).

22. want milk
 Genie love Curtiss
 big elephant long trunk
23. ask [go shopping]
 tell [door lock]

However, a complex of coherent linguistic deficits continuously characterized the syntax of Genie’s language (table 5.4). The nature of these deficits suggests the absence or malfunction of a Language Faculty. They all reflect incompetence for relating a surface form with an underlying form, i.e., to relate distinct levels of representation in ways required by natural language (chapter 2). Accordingly, Genie’s language lacks structure dependence; attempts at recursion in her language are deviant, as in (24a)–(24b).

⁶¹ Little is known of Genie’s history before her confinement. Medical records exist for a blood transfusion at birth during a Caesarian birth, and a normal birth rate of seven pounds. However, her mother reported that she did little cooing or babbling and showed certain developmental lags. Records also indicate a splint for congenital hip dislocation at four months, a weight of only fourteen pounds at six months, and only seventeen pounds at eleven months, and at fourteen months an acute illness involving fever, unresponsiveness and “possible retardation.”

Table 5.4 *The case of Genie: a complex of linguistic deficits (derived from Curtiss 1977).*

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- Word order problems
Inability to deal with *word order variation* in production and comprehension
“There are no rules permuting sentence constituents” (196)
 - Failure with *question formation*; “where cracker” (163)
No subject–aux inversion, as in “Do you have a cracker”
 - No *contractions*
 - No *auxiliaries* in Inflectional Phrases of sentences: “I *do* have a candy”
 - *Irregular and optional application of inflectional endings*: both “Curtiss is dance” and “Curtis is dancing”
 - Difficulty with *pronouns* of all forms
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24. a. I want mat is present (19 March 1975)
 b. Father hit Genie cry long time ago (2 May 1975)

In these constructions, the linear series of one proposition is simply juxtaposed with that of a second. A single noun functions both as the object of the first, and the subject of the second proposition, without embedding.

25. a. S - V - O - V - O
 b. Father hit [Genie] cry long time ago

Genie predominantly used her right hemisphere for language (and, to a lesser degree, for non language).⁶²

One possible explanation for Genie’s failure with language is that after a critical period the left hemisphere can no longer control language acquisition, “. . . accounted for by a kind of functional atrophy of the usual language areas, brought about by disuse (due to inadequate stimulation) or suppression” (Curtiss 1977, 216). Another possibility is that Genie’s brain function is related to brain damage which may have at least in part existed prior to her confinement. In the absence of full medical records, it is not possible to conclusively choose between these. This, plus the massive damage caused to all aspects of Genie’s development by her horrendous confinement, make it difficult to view this case as conclusive in evaluating a Critical Period Hypothesis for language development.

Genie’s case does provide converging evidence on the internal modularity of language organization, however. Genie’s relatively fast development of complex lexical knowledge, combined with her fundamental deficits in syntactic knowledge, once again demonstrate the dissociation of these components.

⁶² This was determined through dichotic listening, tachistoscopic tests and ERP analyses (Curtiss 1977, 213). In many ways, Genie’s language is consistent with the language of RH adults: commissurotomy and/or hemispherectomized (Curtiss 1977).