

Hyperlinguistic individuals and the relation between language and cognition: A methodological note*

TIMO HAUKIOJA

Persons who have relatively well-developed linguistic skills despite major impairments in general cognitive abilities are sometimes called hyperlinguistic. These individuals may employ complex grammatical devices in their speech, and yet have an IQ of 50 or less (for an overview of studies in this field, see e.g., Cromer 1991: 128–135 and Curtiss 1982: 294–301). This fact has been taken by some (psycho)linguists (e.g., Cromer 1991; Curtiss 1982; Curtiss and Yamada 1981; Fromkin 1991) as demonstrating the autonomy of language from the rest of cognition.

On the face of it, this argument seems quite compelling; here we have cases where language has developed far better than general cognitive abilities on which language is often supposed to be based. The occurrence of the reverse pattern — unimpaired general intellectual abilities but (almost) no language — does not really prove much one way or the other, since general cognitive faculties can be seen as making language possible while not necessarily leading to it; according to this line of reasoning, however, severe mental retardation should be expected to cause severe problems with language (although it is not easy to state exactly what kind of linguistic abilities we might expect from a person with an IQ of 50).

However, the argument put forward by Cromer and others starts to look a lot more questionable if one takes a look at another baffling case of exceptional cognitive development, the so-called “date calculators”. These are savants who, despite their poor general intellectual abilities, are able to calculate the day of the week of a given date sometimes even several millennia into the future (Parsons 1968 [quoted in Norris 1990: 278] gives the year 132,470 as an example; cf. also Horwitz et al. 1964). As a rule, savant date calculators are unaware of the procedures they follow in their calculations (although some may have an elementary understanding of the strategies employed). It is, however, clear that their method — whatever it is — is devised by these individuals themselves; their ability is not a learned but an acquired one, and it cannot be