

Project Nim: An Explorer but Failure

What would happen if an animal was treated like a human and raised by humans? And what would happen if it was taught how to speak English? Professor Terrace tried his best to answer the question through Project Nim. He tried to explore the origin of linguistics in a whole new way, and I have born a good will to it and wish it success. However, after professor elaborated his experimental design in the documentary, I thought it not rigorous enough to draw any conclusions. In other words, the defective experimental design in Project Nim fundamentally led to its failure.

There exists three defects in professor's experimental designing——lack of control groups, little variable controlling and inaccurate positioning of experimental subjects. All of them are fatal for a single scientific research, but unfortunately, professor Terrace seemed to ignore all of them.

In a scientific research, control groups refer to subjects receiving normal or zero treatment. Its function is to determine the effect of experimental treatment or independent variables by comparing different experimental treatments. As science and technology develops, using control groups has become one of the paradigms in scientific researches, according to Thomas Kuhn, one of the greatest philosopher of science. Kuhn also said that the paradigm is a worldwide behavior pattern that a group of researchers engaged in a certain scientific science and technology should obey, so do professor Terrace. But Terrace didn't set any control groups to show people what would happen if a different chimpanzee was treated in a different way. And this experiment would become none-scientific without any control groups included in the experiment to compare with Nim. As a result, the conclusion of this project would be unconvincing.

At the same time, the project showed little variable controlling and casual management. Factors of economics, politics, prevailing thoughts, the affairs of the professor, ..., were all influencing the experiment. The project lacked a relatively objective environment. Professor Terrace also invited more and more teachers to help Nim learn human language, asked different *mothers* to raise Nim. Did continuously changing environment affect Nim or not? Did other subjective factors affect the process of this project or not? Professor Terrace didn't give us his answer. The management of this project is so casual that it started someday and ended suddenly. All these factors have weakened the reliability of this experiment.

Besides these weaknesses, the project made another mistake in treating Nim as a pet, but not a human. From the very beginning, Professor Terrace hoped that Nim should be raised as a human baby. But researchers indulged Nim with his wildness, sent him away just because he was old and not that cute any more. These phenomena won't happen in the relation between adult and children but human and pets. In the middle of the documentary, Professor Terrace admitted that he never regarded Nim as a human infant. This contradictory shows his inaccurate positioning of experimental subjects and it would probably lead to chaos in the study.

Even if we consider the data that Nim have indeed learned over 1000 words to express his feelings and convey what he thought, it doesn't mean that he has grasped the grammar and truly learned the language. And from this aspect, professor Terrace couldn't answer his final problem that how the linguistic developed.

Surely professor Terrace has made great progress in studying linguistic and pointed out a new way for other scientists. His distribution was indispensable in the history of linguistics. But it was unexpected that he made several low-level errors in basic scientific research methods. These mistakes resulted in none-rigorous experiments, none-scientific trainings and none-convincing conclusions. Honestly, Project Nim was not experimental enough to confirm whether chimpanzees can acquire human language, namely, it was a failure.