

Series Foreword

This series in learning, development, and conceptual change includes state-of-the-art reference works, seminal book-length monographs, and texts on the development of concepts and mental structures. It spans learning in all domains of knowledge, from syntax to geometry to the social world, and is concerned with all phases of development, from infancy through adulthood.

The series intends to engage such fundamental questions as:

The nature and limits of learning and maturation: the influence of the environment, of initial structures, and of maturational changes in the nervous system on human development; learnability theory; the problem of induction; domain-specific constraints on development.

The nature of conceptual change: conceptual organization and conceptual change in child development, in the acquisition of expertise, and in the history of science.

Lila Gleitman
Susan Carey
Elissa Newport
Elizabeth Spelke

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Acknowledgments

This book contains everything I know about how children learn the meanings of words. This is a topic I have studied for over a decade, and it has been immensely rewarding. The child's ability to learn new words is nothing short of miraculous. And the study of this ability bears on the most central questions in cognitive science. What is the nature of human learning? How are language and thought related? How do children think about the people and objects around them? We are far from answering any of these questions, but I think that the study of word learning can provide us with some valuable and unexpected insights.

I would have never started down this path without the good luck to have John Macnamara as my mentor when I was an undergraduate at McGill University. He has had a profound influence on my work, and much of what I say here is based on John's theory of word learning, as outlined in his book *Names for Things* and elsewhere. My debts to John are many. It was because of him that I decided to become a psychologist and went on to do my graduate work with Susan Carey at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. And, on a more personal note, it was at a party at his home that I met my wife (and occasional collaborator) Karen Wynn.

Amy Brand at MIT Press encouraged me, many years ago, to write this book, and I finally had the chance to do so while on sabbatical at the Medical Research Council's Cognitive Development Unit in London. I am very grateful to the people there for providing such a stimulating and hospitable environment. In particular, I thank Uta Frith, Mark Johnson, Annette Karmiloff-Smith, and John Morton. Down the road at Birkbeck College, Lolly Tyler and Heather van der Lely provided further moral and intellectual support.

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