

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.

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How Children Learn the Meanings of Words

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Chapter 1

First Words

It looks simple. A 14-month-old toddles after the family dog, smacking it whenever she gets close. The dog wearily moves under the table. “Dog,” the child’s mother tells her. “You’re chasing the dog. That’s the dog.” The child stops, points a pudgy hand at the dog, and shrieks, “Daw!” The mother smiles: “Yes, dog.”

Many parents—and many philosophers and psychologists—would say that word learning is as simple as it looks. It can be explained in part by the processes of association and imitation and in part by the efforts of parents who want their children to learn how to speak. A child starts by listening to her parents use words and comes to associate the words with what they refer to. When she starts to use words herself, her successful acts of naming are rewarded, and her mistakes are gently corrected.

From this perspective, word learning is the easiest part of language development. The rest of language emerges without the support of “negative evidence”; children do not receive consistent feedback on the grammaticality of what they say (Brown & Hanlon, 1970; Marcus, 1993). But word learning may be a different story. While parents tend to be unconcerned if their child says “goed” instead of “went,” they are likely to notice, and react, if their child was to use *dog* to refer to a chair. Another difference is that much of language is productive. An understanding of syntax, for instance, allows us to produce and understand a potential infinity of new sentences. But word learning is merely the memorization of a series of paired associates: *dog* refers to dogs; *water* refers to water, *Mommy* refers to Mommy, and so on.

This is one picture of word learning. This book presents another. I will argue that a careful consideration of what children know and how they come to know it reveals that word learning is actually far from simple. Children’s learning of words, even the simplest names for things, requires rich mental capacities—conceptual, social, and linguistic—that interact in complicated ways.