

This Week's Citation Classic

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Olson D R. Language and thought: aspects of a cognitive theory of semantics. *Psychol. Rev.* 77:257-73, 1970.
[Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, Canada]

My attempt was to show that semantics was less a matter of the structure of dictionaries than it was a matter of cognition, the language user's knowledge of the world. The meaning of a word, I argued, expressed speakers' knowledge of objects and events relative to a context of alternatives. I illustrated my hypothesis by showing how meaning marked both the object or event and its context of excluded alternatives. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicates that this paper has been cited in over 155 publications since 1970.]

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"When psycholinguistics burst onto the field in the 1960s, it restricted its concerns to the psychological processes directly related to the linguistic structure *per se*—studies of syntactic transformation and semantic relations, as, for example, represented in dictionaries. At the same time, there coexisted a thriving cognitive psychology which offered some understanding of perceptual and conceptual problems which bore little or no relation to the structure of language.

"My paper was an attempt to put the two fields together. I tried to show that the categories of perception—which I treated as knowledge of objects and events relative to a context of alternatives—characterized both perception and language. Semantics was, in my view, not the study of dictionaries or even mental dictionaries, but rather the study of concepts, schemata, and knowledge. My paper was widely cited, I suspect, because it was one of the first to give the cognitive process such a central place in the understanding of language. In that my paper argued that language was not an autonomous system, it was taken as somewhat anti-Chomskian. I pursued this issue in a review paper published seven years later with the title 'From ut-

terance to text.'¹ In the years after my paper, I was delighted to see what I believed to be this hypothesis in new forms in the writing of John Macnamara,² Katherine Nelson,³ and Rosch and Mervis,⁴ all of whom characterized this knowledge and its role in language acquisition and semantic development even more clearly than I had. I continue to believe that the most interesting problem in psychology and in psycholinguistics is the relation between language and thought, a problem that has taken a new step in recent theories of speech acts and mental states following on the work of J.L. Austin,⁵ John Searle,⁶ and Z. Vendler.⁷

"What I failed to recognize sufficiently at the time was that even if language may take some of its meaning from cognition, language is, as Annetta Karmiloff-Smith⁸ puts it, a 'problem space' in its own right. Cognition may provide access to language but language has its own structure which the child must sort out.

"The one insight in the paper which I have never been able to advance is what I took to be a radical discontinuity between the perception of an event and the meaning of a word designating that event, namely, that words carry in them not only designations but their 'contrast sets.' I wrote: 'There is more information in an utterance than in the perception of an event out of context.' I think that problem could be stated in such a way as to show why language learning is so crucial to cognitive development.

"It is that perceptual categories and cognitive structures tend to reflect personal experience; an event is perceived and categorized relative to the immediate context of alternatives—we see a block as round in one context and white in the other. But words reflect cultural experience; words indicate those objects relative to the alternatives the language community has chosen to mark out for us. Thus, perceptually, an object *x* identifies only that *x* in its perceptual context; linguistically, an object *x* is identified relative to the set of alternatives from which it is traditionally differentiated in that culture. Thus, in learning language, as Whorf⁹ and Wittgenstein¹⁰ both suggested, we are learning to see the world in a way common to members of a particular social group."

1. Olson D R. From utterance to text: the bias of language in speech and writing. *Harvard Educ. Rev.* 47:257-81, 1977.
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7. Vendler Z. Say what you think. (Cowan J L, ed.) *Studies in thought and language*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1970.
8. Karmiloff-Smith A. Language development after five. (Fletcher P & Garman M, eds.) *Language acquisition: studies in first language development*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979. p. 307-23.
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