

**Macnamara J.** Cognitive basis of language learning in infants.  
*Psychol. Rev.* 79:1-13, 1972.  
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The paper gave theoretical arguments for the thesis that infants learn their language by first determining, independent of language, the meaning a speaker intends to convey and then working out the relation between the meaning and the expression they heard. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicates that this paper has been cited in over 135 publications since 1972.]

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The idea for this paper occurred to me in about 1968 when I was teaching at St. Patrick's College, Dublin. My research at the time was on educational matters related to bilingualism. I was much influenced by Chomsky's writing, which I admired, and yet I was puzzled by the view of child language learning that grew around his work. The picture seemed to be of a child grappling with linguistic structures in a vacuum. I proposed that the child's understanding of the nonlinguistic context was important. For example, if he heard *Mary hit Tommy* when he had seen that happen and if he also found that *Tommy hit Mary* would be rejected in that setting, he would have a clue to the syntactic

role of noun order in English. I presented arguments to support the thesis relating to syntax, morphology, and phonology. This was my first essay on child language.

The paper was picked up, I believe, because the idea's time had come. It also helped that the thesis was clear, the arguments simple, and the writing reasonably good. These qualities were due in large part to the repeated critiques of Harris Savin, who read the various versions for *Psychological Review*. He was an exacting critic who held the paper up for a whole year, never attempting to impose his own views but pushing me in the direction of my own. I felt I owed him so much that I asked the editor, George Mandler, to tell me who he was so that I could thank him. Perhaps another feature that helped the paper was that it provided a nonviolent introduction for some readers to those ideas in the philosophy of language that have been gaining on us psychologists ever since. The paper was also helped by its appearing in *Psychological Review*.

I now feel that while the idea for my paper was right, the arguments were simplistic. My views, 10 years later, are expressed in a book that covers part of the same ground.<sup>1</sup> But there was more blood in them than could be collected even in that book. For about four years, I have been working on the manuscript of a new book on the relations between logic and psychology. In it, I present the thesis that logic supplies a competence theory for parts of cognitive psychology. My examples, worked out in six chapters, are all drawn from the area of pre-natural-language cognition and language learning. This, I trust, will be the end, at least for me, of the idea that has piloted me for about 17 years.

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1. Macnamara J T. *Names for things: a study of human learning*.  
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982. 275 p.