

**Tulving E.** Episodic and semantic memory. (Tulving E & Donaldson W, eds.)  
*Organization of memory*. New York: Academic Press, 1972. p. 381-403.  
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A distinction was proposed between episodic and semantic memory as two parallel and partially overlapping information-processing systems. Episodic memory refers to memory for personal events and the temporal-spatial relations among these events, whereas semantic memory represents organized knowledge that a person possesses about words and other verbal symbols, their meaning and referents, about relations among them, and about rules and algorithms for the manipulation of symbols, concepts, and relations. [The SSCI® indicates that this paper has been cited in over 205 publications.]

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In 1970 Robert Glaser and James Voss at the University of Pittsburgh asked Wayne Donaldson, a colleague of theirs, and me to organize a conference on organizational processes in memory. It was held in Pittsburgh in March 1971. As frequently happens on such occasions, some of the participants interpreted the topic of the conference rather liberally and chose to talk about the future rather than the past. As a result, three conference papers—one by David E. Rumelhart, Peter H. Lindsay, and Donald A. Norman; one by Walter Kintsch; and one by Allan M. Collins and M. Ross Quillian—dealt with the understanding of language. All three papers (also published as chapters in *Organization of Memory*<sup>1</sup>) made explicit reference to “semantic memory,” borrowing this new term from one of the most influential PhD dissertations that was ever left unpublished.<sup>2</sup> As the future un-

folded, the three papers turned out to have been harbingers of the boom in semantic memory research.

Back in 1971, however, I had a problem. I had chosen not to give a paper at the conference because, although I had studied organizational processes at one time,<sup>3</sup> I did not think I had anything new or interesting to say on the topic. But when I listened to three sets of prophets from the coming era of memory research, it seemed quite clear that they were not really talking about the kind of memory that psychologists had been studying since Hermann Ebbinghaus's groundbreaking work in 1885. If this were the case, what kind of memory had psychologists been studying?

When I got back home—I was teaching at Yale at the time—I wrote the chapter cited here in which I speculated about the differences between episodic and semantic memory, and I inserted it into the volume containing the contents of our conference.<sup>1</sup> One problem concerned the name of the memory that was not semantic. I had misgivings about the obvious term, “event memory,” because it had been preempted in a different context.<sup>4</sup> While doing my homework for the chapter, I chanced upon a small book by S. Munsat<sup>5</sup> in which he used the expression “nonepisodic memory” to refer to nonpersonal memory, and I adopted the positive version of Munsat's term for my purposes.

The 1972 distinction between episodic and semantic memory was not at all original. Many philosophers as well as students of memory pathology had expressed similar ideas all along. I suspect that my paper turned out to be popular partly because, like the character in Moliere's play who discovers that he has been speaking prose all his life without knowing it, mainstream students of memory were pleased to find out what it was that they had been studying. The accelerating activity in the domain of semantic memory also helped fan the fires of the distinction.

Since 1972 the concepts of episodic and semantic memory have evolved considerably, other putative memory systems have been proposed, and the whole issue of the basic nature of memory has shifted into the focus of a lively and spirited debate.<sup>6,7</sup>

1. Tulving E & Donaldson W, eds. *Organization of memory*. New York: Academic Press, 1972. 423 p.
2. Quillian M R. *Semantic memory*. PhD dissertation, Carnegie Institute of Technology, Pittsburgh, 1966.
3. Tulving E. Subjective organization in free recall of “unrelated” words. *Psychol. Rev.* 69:344-54, 1962. (Cited 370 times since 1966.)
4. Reber A S & Millward R B. Event memory in probability learning. *Psychonom. Sci.* 3:431-2, 1965.
5. Munsat S. *The concept of memory*. New York: Random House, 1967. 130 p.
6. McKoon G, Ratcliff R & Dell G S. A critical evaluation of the semantic-episodic distinction. *J. Exp. Psychol.—Learn. Mem. Cogn.* 12:295-306, 1986.
7. Tulving E. Multiple memory systems and consciousness. *Hum. Neurobiol.* 6:67-80, 1987.