

THE GENESIS OF LANGUAGE

Edited by Frank Smith and
George A. Miller
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Reviewed by Jacques Mehler

The *Genesis of Language* is the outcome of a conference that was held at Old Point Comfort, Virginia, in April 1966, and was entitled "Language Development in Children." The list of participants was extensive and impressive. The topic had unquestionably *Zeitgeist*: The acquisition of very complex performance capabilities that are characteristic of human beings. A good conference could have been expected. Unluckily, the conference was another reflection of the confusion prevailing among those of us who are interested in language development.

The Genesis of Language is divided in three sections. The first, rather theoretical, includes papers by David McNeil, Jerry A. Fodor and Dan I. Slobin, all of them associated at one time or other with the Cambridge psycholinguistic community. The second section, represented by papers by Ruth H. Weir, Mildred C. Templin, Denis Fry and Ira J. Hirsh, is concerned mostly with language development in deaf and normal children. Finally, the last section contains papers by Eric H. Lenneberg, Richard A. Chase, Hans Kalmus and David Premack, dealing with some aspects of the biological foundations of language and communication systems in animals.

McNeil's chapter is well organized and presents most of the important theoretical issues about language acquisition. He claims that the acquisition process is a reflection of the child's native endowment. Given the availability of base structure and the complementation of other innate devices, children eventually will learn to speak the language of their own community. This is a very simple model. But McNeil does not tell us at what level and in which manner the innate components interact with learning. His position is almost equivalent to a theory of perception that claims object perception is due to the fact that eyes are innately present. The claim is true but not very useful. The position chosen by McNeil is attractive, and even reasonable, but at this stage it

is slightly more than an exercise in rampant speculation.

Fodor's position is much more cautious than the one adopted by McNeil. He considers it likely that innate components play an important part in the acquisition process. However he stresses that a performance model might be composed by heuristics which would play a far more important role than the innate structures.

Slobin's paper discusses the acquisition of syntax by Russian-speaking children. These generally unavailable data, although limited in scope, are very useful.

Weir presents raw data on the utterances of babies while in their cribs. Her data show that children engage in some sort of language game based on the repetition time and again of an utterance. It is as if the baby trains himself in the production of a certain sound. Unfortunately, the cumulative gathering of data without any guiding hypothesis ends up as an exercise in programmed loss of time.

Fry claims that the child is trying to coordinate the larynx with the articulators. After the feedback loop between the sounds and the sound-producing elements is first established, the baby imitates the productions of the elder community members. For Fry imitation means simply that the child will try to produce a sound that *strikes him as being similar* to the sound he hears in his environment. Rather than investigating the psychological structure of similarity, Fry uses the word similarity as an explanatory concept. To account for a fact in terms of similarity cannot by definition increase our understanding of the given fact.

Although we have heard dogs bark and sparrows twitter, we have yet to hear a monkey speak. That is, of course, if Premack and A. Schwartz do not succeed in training a monkey to talk. For many decades psychologists have been fascinated by all kinds of primates mainly because they are the animals most similar to man. Why then does not the primate speak? The behaviorist tried to find environmental explanations for this deficiency. But nobody ever has reported (except for Kafka in his *Report To The Academy*) an exceptionally gifted talking primate. Rather than conclude — as seems to be logically necessary — that the primates are not endowed biologically with the ma-

chinery necessary for productive language, psychologists tried to improve the technology of animal training. Failure piled upon failure, but this did not deter Premack and Schwartz from trying once more. Until a chimpanzee communicates productively, with duality of patterning and with sophisticated syntactic and semantic nuances, I shall not comment on Premack's attempt. However, my prediction is that, unless primates show a very fast evolution, we shall have to wait a few millenniums before hearing one of them speak — too long to keep my interest alive.

Kalmus concerns himself with problems of evolution and in particular with the evolution of language, and Lenneberg's chapter provides an excellent introduction to the biological substratum of language. James J. Jenkin's reflections on the conference serve as a useful summary and critical evaluation of the contents of *The Genesis of Language*.

Few conferences are so productive as to warrant publication of the proceedings. And, it seems a pity that so much time and conscientious effort was spent by the two excellent editors in editing a conference with such meager contents.

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THE EMPTY FORTRESS

By Bruno Bettelheim
The Free Press, 1967

Reviewed by Lee H. Willer

This most personal of volumes describing his theories as to the nature, cause, treatment and implications for personality development of autism reveals the intensity of Bruno Bettelheim's devotion to his task.

In the first section of this volume, Bettelheim spells out his understanding of the child's world from birth to 24 months, the time when autism frequently is diagnosed. He describes the infant in the anaclitic experience—by definition his most dependent position