

Preface

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PREFACE

The effortless emergence of language in the very young child is the most amazing achievement of any nervous system. The processes underlying the acquisition and use of language, and the dissolution of these processes following brain damage, have been the focus of extensive research and of intense debate. A key development in recent years has been to apply the methodology and techniques of the cognitive psychology laboratory to the study of language acquisition and dissolution.

In the past, it was sometimes believed that pattern of dissolution of language in some sense mirrors the pattern of acquisition over the first two or three years of life. Although it is clear that the basis for such beliefs was generally ill-founded, it remains instructive to compare patterns of acquisition and dissolution to learn from their differences as much as from their similarities. At the same time, it has become evident that the study of the development and breakdown of language can make an important contribution to our understanding of intact adult processes. In addition, this study has a valuable applied perspective in the diagnosis and remediation of language disorders in both children and adults.

To enable the parallels and differences between acquisition and dissolution to be seen more readily, we divided the Discussion Meeting into four main sections which each contained the two themes. Framing this structure was an Introduction by Morton and an Overview by Caramazza, which put the two themes in relation to each other. The topic of the first section was speech perception and production. Mehler reviewed the acquisition of phonology in first year of life and Snowling & Hulme took up the story over the next few years. Blumstein's contribution dealt with impairments of both perception and production. The second section concerned language structure. Bowerman discussed aspects of early grammatical development, while Saffran discussed impairments of grammatical processing in language comprehension, and Butterworth discussed impairments of grammatical processing in production. The third section was broadly concerned with meaning. Mandler dealt with the acquisition of pre-linguistic precursors of semantics, and Gleitman focused on the prerequisites for the acquisition of verb meaning in older children. Miceli examined the evidence from the effects of brain damage on morphological lexical organization, while McCarthy & Warrington considered their effects on semantic organization. The final section was concerned with clinical applications. Frith & Happé described the consequences of childhood autism for language use, while Bishop considered specific language impairment in children. Howard explored the implications of cognitive studies of language and language impairment in the design of treatment programmes for acquired aphasia.

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