

Babel and psychobabble

Roy Harris

THE ASCENT OF BABEL: An Exploration of Language, Mind and Understanding.

By Gerry T. M. Altmann. Oxford University Press 257pp, £18.99 - ISBN 0 19 852378 5.

Many students, Gerry Altmann tells us, find psycholinguistics "mysterious and impenetrable". One reason for that is unwittingly indicated in Altmann's own definition: "the study of how the mind turns language into meaning, and back again". This already incorporates enough confusions to make the subject mysterious and impenetrable not just for his undergraduates, for whom the book was written, but for everyone else as well. Altmann adds to the muddle by conflating various possible interpretations of such basic terms as "word", "sentence" and "grammar".

Evidently in psycholinguistics you do not have to worry about exact terminology, since the subject is 90 per cent speculation anyway, and the remaining 10 per cent laboratory experiment. The experiments are ingenious. They involve nonsense syllables and spliced tapes, images flashed on screens, split-second timing and a great deal of button-pushing. But what do they "prove" about language in everyday life, where these cleverly contrived laboratory conditions do not obtain? Altmann often seems uncertain, so no wonder the students are perplexed.

The theory of communication behind Altmann's psycholinguistics is crude Lockean telementation (you "end up reconstructing the idea that the speaker or writer intended to convey") and the theory of mind no less crudely mechanistic. Altmann comes across as a brash essentialist, fond of phrases such as "the very essence of language", "the essence of meaning", "the nature of language understanding", "the true significance of language", "the secret of language", and "the key that unlocks the final mystery", as if he were writing for readers too naive to be suspicious of academic sales talk. In a revealing comparison, he says that he wanted to write a book that would be the linguistic equivalent of the technical manual that comes with a CD player. It would explain "the insides of the human mind". His assumption is that the mind is a machine. The notion that it might not be just a machine he dismisses as "magical", with a single contemptuous reference to Descartes. This is typical of the intellectual level of Altmann's "exploration" of language. It is like being initiated into the mysteries of tennis by someone convinced that the "essence" of tennis is what goes on inside the brain of a tennis player.

This Alice-in-Neuroland approach is shielded from disbelief by the fashionable trope of linguistic processes as computational processes. (One of the chapters is called "Wiring up a brain".) For Altmann this is more than a figure of speech. He tells us that in "practical reality" meaning is "what happens when some particular neural circuitry somewhere in the brain is stimulated into activation". Alas, this kind of psycholinguistics cannot deliver on its promises. The world is still waiting for the identification of that bit of neural circuitry whose stimulation is the meaning of the word "daffodil", or of the utterance "Daffodils are yellow" (or of any other word or utterance).

Altmann's psycholinguistics often seems to reintroduce by the back door very dubious notions that linguists questioned or rejected long ago. Lithuanian, he tells us, is the "oldest" Indo-European language. Written Chinese characters do not represent the words of Chinese but "the meanings or ideas themselves". (So, presumably, the neural circuitry?)

Alphabets operate on the principle "one symbol per phoneme in the language". Which must make English spelling an inscrutable psycholinguistic mystery.

In Altmann's account of language learning, nouns are just vocal labels for objects, whereas verbs stand for events and actions. Grammaticality is simply a matter of the correct sequence of syntactic categories in a sentence: so any English sentence comprising "determiner noun verb determiner noun verb adjective" in that order will be grammatical. But if there is any sensible reason for treating, for instance, "Some elephant be a democracy shake awkward" as grammatical it must be known only to psycholinguists. In spite of the metaphorical reference to Babel in his title, the diversity of the world's languages is discussed only at the end and very superficially. That the chapter on "the meaning of meaning" gives no account of metaphor is apparently no problem for those ascending Babel, since we all use words "to mean just what we choose them to mean" and the only psycholinguistic puzzle is to understand "why everyone appears to have made the same choices". Here Altmann seems to have swallowed a pre-Babel myth that cannot hope to survive, even psycholinguistically, in a post-Babel world.

What use is psycholinguistics? The question does not arise until chapter 12 on language disabilities, where we learn, at last, that some limited help is available for "patients". It is all the more pity that their plight is illustrated by supposedly humorous cartoons in appalling taste that are a disgrace to author, artist and publisher.

Roy Harris is editor, Language and Communication.