

The ascent of Babel: An exploration of language, mind, and understanding.

Gerry T. M. Altmann. Oxford University Press, 1997. Pp. 304.

Given the small number of introductory psycholinguistics books currently available, it is not only refreshing to find a new one, but it is a particularly delightful to find one as accessible to general audiences as Altmann's *The Ascent of Babel*. Altmann, a professor at the University of York and an established psycholinguistics researcher, aimed to write a book that anyone could understand and enjoy. Indeed, he has succeeded. The result is not just another run-of-the-mill textbook. The prose reads like the transcription from a semester of lectures or from a very long conversation carried out between mentor and student. The prose reads as smoothly as it does, in part, because there are no references cited within the text. They have been included at the end of the book in a chapter-by-chapter format. In addition, very few researchers are mentioned by name, which serves to speed readers along, focusing on findings rather than individuals. The names that are mentioned are of those at the top of the field who should become known to every student of psycholinguistics.

The book contains fourteen chapters. The first four chapters focus on child language acquisition. This is more coverage than is typically offered in psycholinguistics books. However, the material works well to illustrate the mystery of human language and will likely captivate readers, particularly those with little or no background on the subject. Chapter 1 is a short introduction to the study of psycholinguistics. The intellectual origins of the field are presented as well as a brief description of the experimental approach. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on what the child is born knowing. Chapter 2 reviews the research that demonstrates learning that takes place in utero. Chapter 3 reviews research that explores categorical perception in humans and also in other species. Chapter 4 addresses the acquisition of words and grammar. This chapter contains an important discussion of the nativist view of grammar acquisition, which has been promoted for several decades by Noam Chomsky (See Chomsky (1968).) and popularized more recently in Pinker (1995).

The seven chapters in the middle of the book deal with topics related to the organization of linguistic knowledge and the use of language by fluent readers and speakers. Chapter 5 introduces the notion of a mental dictionary and Chapter 6 discusses how words are found in the dictionary. In Chapter 7, sentence-level processing is discussed. Much of this chapter focuses on how language users resolve syntactic ambiguity. Chapter 8 goes deeper into issues of comprehension, covering the interpretation of referential expressions and the comprehension of sentences containing long distance dependencies. Chapter 9 makes an ambitious attempt to explain what researchers mean by the word 'meaning' and to suggest how meaning might be computed by the mind. In chapters 10 and 11, the current research on speaking and reading is presented, respectively.

Issues related to neurocognition and neurolinguistics appear in Chapters 12 and 13. In Chapter 12, the subject of language disorders is addressed. Among those discussed include aphasia, dyslexia, and specific language impairment (SLI). The latter disorder is the least well known and perhaps the most fascinating. SLI is an inherited language deficit and has figured prominently in discussions concerning the possible existence of a 'grammar gene.' However, Altmann cautions readers against making any premature conclusions. In Chapter 13, Altmann discusses the relationship between actual brains and the artificial brains, which are constructed by researchers to simulate and to explore the processes involved in learning and using language. This topic is undoubtedly the most difficult to explain to the beginning student or nonspecialist. Altmann skillfully manages to convey the content of this complex subject matter with an impressive simplicity and clarity. The closing chapter of the book contains discussions about the evolution of language, language families, and the rapid extinction of human languages.

Each of the chapters are short and breezy, leaving readers wanting to know more. Altmann confesses to being selective about the material that he covers. His aim was to identify the current issues and to highlight what is the state-of-the-art. The book was not meant to be a reference book, nor should it be mistaken for one. Instructors of courses, such as psychology of language, psycholinguistics, or cognitive psychology, may find the book suitable as required reading, but only if the book is supplemented by a traditional textbook or additional readings, such as a collection of research articles. Nevertheless, students and nonstudents alike are likely to find the book an enjoyable peek into the scientific study of language.

Chomsky, N. (1968). *Language and mind*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Pinker, Steven. (1995). *The language instinct: How the mind creates language*. Harper-Perennial.