

INTRODUCTION

Why this book?

Psycholinguistics goes to the heart of what we do with language. It provides insights into how we assemble our own speech and writing and how we understand that of others; into how we store and use vocabulary; into how we manage to acquire a language in the first place; and into how language can fail us. One might therefore expect it to occupy a central place in any course of general linguistics, applied linguistics, communication studies or second language teaching. Yet it often does not.

The reason is that it is traditionally a difficult area to study. This is partly because of its cross-disciplinary nature. Any linguist who forms an interest in the subject has to tackle certain areas of psychological theory, while a psychologist cannot approach it without an adequate knowledge of linguistics. And, as George Miller observed (1990: 321), linguists and psychologists tend to have different perspectives on language: 'Linguists and psychologists talk about different things... Grammarians are more interested in what could be said than in what people actually say, which irritates psychologists, and psychologists insist on supplementing intuition with objective evidence, which irritates linguists.'

To this, one must add that Psycholinguistics overlaps with many other domains: among them, phonetics, discourse analysis, language pathology, neuroscience, computer modelling and language teaching pedagogy. For those of us who know and love the subject, this breadth of scope is what makes it so fascinating; but to an intending student the eclecticism can be daunting, to say the least.

A second source of difficulty is the inaccessible nature of many psycholinguistic ideas and findings. They are usually reported in specialist psychology journals, in a form that requires a knowledge of terminology and a familiarity with theory that an intending student is

unlikely to possess. There are indeed a number of handbooks which provide an overview of the subject; but they are mostly aimed at the Master's student or assume a basic grounding in psychology.¹

Far from treating Psycholinguistics as an instructional challenge, British universities have tended to respond by sidelining the subject. It is often taught by non-specialists, who themselves find it difficult to access information or appropriate teaching material. There are Master's courses in 'Applied Linguistics', and even Applied Linguistics conferences, in which mainstream Psycholinguistics is virtually ignored. Worse, the term 'psycholinguistic' is occasionally used to give spurious respectability to ideas unconnected with the discipline and unsupported by evidence within it.

In the USA, the position is rosier: Psycholinguistics features prominently in many course programmes. But it is still no easy task to present it to undergraduate majors in Linguistics or to postgraduate students who have never been exposed to Psychology. And in the USA, as in Britain and in many other parts of the world, the important field of TESOL (Teaching Speakers of Other Languages) has barely benefited at all from the vital research findings that Psycholinguistics has uncovered – simply because bridges have not been built to its students and its practitioners.

It is hoped that the present volume will mark a small step towards rectifying these problems. Its purpose is to make Psycholinguistics accessible to all those who wish to find a way into the subject. In all, over 350 key ideas are identified, and a brief introduction is given to the thinking and the findings which lie behind each. The concepts are explained systematically, with basic principles leading to more elaborate issues of theory. The book uses a language that avoids technical terms; and does not take for granted any previous knowledge of the field. Some background in basic linguistics is assumed, but even here the more complex notions are glossed where possible.

Psycholinguistics: The Key Concepts is one of the first major reference works to make this important area of study available to the non-specialist reader. The target readership includes students at undergraduate or at Master's level who are new to the field; general linguists who wish to widen their knowledge of Psycholinguistics or are asked to teach introductory courses; teachers of first and foreign languages wanting to know more about the processes involved in reading, writing, speaking and listening; and all members of the public at large

who are curious about the extraordinarily complex and apparently effortless faculty that we call language.¹

The concepts

Psycholinguistics is a domain with fuzzy boundaries; and there is some disagreement among those who teach it as to how widely they should set their sights. A broad view of the discipline might embrace all of the following:

- a. *Language processing*: including the language skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening and the part played by memory in language.
- b. *Lexical storage and retrieval*: how we store words in our minds and how we find them when we need them.
- c. *Language acquisition*: how an infant acquires its first language.
- d. *Special circumstances*: the effects upon language of (e.g.) deafness, blindness or being a twin; conditions such as dyslexia or aphasia (the loss of language after brain damage).
- e. *The brain and language*: where language is located in the brain, how it evolved and whether it is a faculty that is unique to human beings.
- f. *Second language acquisition and use*.

Many courses in Psycholinguistics choose to omit f. The study of Second Language Acquisition has developed independently, embraces sociological and pedagogical factors as well as cognitive ones; and employs a more eclectic range of research methods than Cognitive Psychology would normally accept. In addition, some courses prefer to omit c, for the very different reason that it is a large area of study in its own right. In some institutions, courses in Child Language or Language Acquisition are taught separately from those in 'Psycholinguistics' (i.e. language processing).

It was thus by no means a foregone conclusion which concepts were to be included in this volume. However, most introductory courses in Psycholinguistics pay some heed to first language acquisition as well as to language performance. Furthermore, the two areas are closely linked, with findings from the former inevitably influencing our understanding of the latter. It therefore seemed sensible to ensure that all of areas a to e above were adequately covered. The same coverage has not been extended to Second Language Acquisition, where entries are restricted to those notions which have clear links to mainstream psycholinguistic theory.

Strenuous attempts have been made to ensure that the range of concepts featured is as comprehensive as possible. An initial selection drew upon the author's own experience of teaching Psycholinguistics to those who were new to the subject. It was expanded by taking account of less central areas, cross-checking with glossaries in standard handbooks and recalling areas that the author found problematic when himself a student. However, any reference work such as this can never satisfy everyone. There will inevitably be complaints that some issues have been overlooked and reservations about others that have been featured. Since the whole purpose of the book is to plug gaps in knowledge, the author would be very grateful for any feedback that the reader cares to provide. Suggestions and comments from those who teach the subject would be especially welcome.

Accessing a concept

Psycholinguistics: The Key Concepts contains 358 entries, plus a number of cross-referenced terms. Some of the entries are short definitions or explanations consisting of only a few lines. But the book is an exploration of key notions rather than a dictionary, and many of the concepts are discussed as part of larger topics. The best way of checking understanding of a particular idea or issue is therefore to make use of the index at the end of the book. It lists the technical and semi-technical terms which are likely to cause problems for the student of Psycholinguistics, and provides references to the entries under which they appear.

The text for each entry provides a summary of principal issues and areas of controversy. Important technical terms are highlighted. They are chiefly shown in italics, but appear in bold where there is a full entry elsewhere for the term in question. For the reader who wishes to explore further, there are 'see also' cross-references to associated topics. For those who wish to study a concept in greater depth, there are suggestions for further reading.

Choosing this recommended reading was something of a headache. So far as possible, the suggested sources needed to be those that a non-specialist would find easily comprehensible, and those which a student could obtain through a good library. As a result, most recommendations are secondary sources and most are books. On the other hand, a guide such as this needs at times to specify primary sources – for example, where a given theory or finding is closely associated with a particular researcher. Recommended reading therefore sometimes includes research papers which the student reader may find somewhat

demanding. A rule of thumb is: where the reference is to a book, it is likely to be accessible; where it is to a paper in a journal, it may be less so.

A bibliography at the end of the book lists all the suggestions given for further reading, and includes references which occur within entries. To assist the reader who is new to the field, it also recommends several titles which provide uncomplicated introductions to various aspects of Psycholinguistics.

John Field
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Note

1 Notable exceptions are the very readable books by Jean Aitchison and Altmann's *The Ascent of Babel* (see final bibliography). My own *Psycholinguistics* (Routledge, 2003) offers a basic introductory course.