

Book Review: Language in Mind: An Introduction to Psycholinguistics by Julie Sedivy

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15/02/2015

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Language in Mind: An Introduction to Psycholinguistics. Julie Sedivy. Sinauer Associates Inc., U.S. 2014.

Find this book: 

Taking the malapropism mantle from George Bush, [Sarah Palin's January 2015 speech](#) dissolved every known rule of the English language.

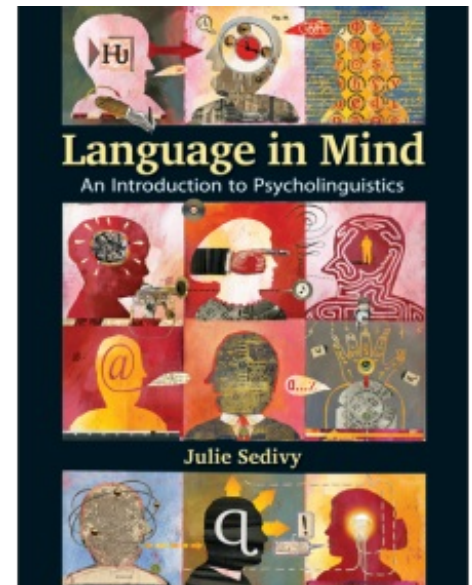
Designed as an undergraduate textbook, *Language in Mind: an introduction to psycholinguistics* is an essential handbook for navigating the sea of text, images, and sound that comprise our communication environment. It examines questions such as: how do we understand language and judge it to be funny or offensive? The fast-growing field of psycholinguistics, which combines insights from psychology and linguistics, provides tools to do just that—understand how language works.

Writer and University of Calgary adjunct professor in psychology and linguistics, Julie Sedivy seamlessly joins these two fields in *Language in Mind*: a field that Sedivy describes as, “The psychology of language; the study of the psychological and neurobiological factors involved in the perception, production, and acquisition of language” (p.5). Outlined in a highly teachable map that connects research from anthropology, neurobiology, cognitive psychology, and linguistics, it is hard to imagine these topics not being taught concurrently after encountering this book. *Language in Mind* is broken into twelve chapters with [accompanying web material](#). It begins with broad questions such as ‘What is language?’ and ‘Is language innately human?’, then moves in a methodical, richly interdisciplinary route to investigate these core questions.

Sedivy describes herself as having an “incurable infatuation with language”, which is energetically transmitted through *Language in Mind*, instantiating psycholinguistics as a course that many universities will now want to offer. Previously, Sedivy has written about practical matters such as the language of political campaigns and the psychology of commercials for the [LanguageLog](#) and the [Psychology Today blog](#), which shares the title of her first book *Sold on Language*. The growing interest in brain research and the increased data mining of language online make the field of psycholinguistics ever more relevant, if not yet well understood.

More than an instructive primer for psychology and language studies, this book challenges readers to critically examine *how* they know what they know. For instance, theories about the earth have ranged from flat to spherical to oblate spheroid to pear-shaped. “If *you* think that thinking the Earth is spherical is *just as wrong* as thinking the earth is flat, then your view is wronger than both of them put together”, writes Sedivy quoting Isaac Asimov’s “The Relativity of Wrong” (p. 2-3). The most attractive aspect of this book is the framework of criticality. Readers are urged to evaluate scientists’ methods as well as pursue their own questions.

In Chapter 2, ‘Origins of Human Language’, Sedivy introduces the question most commonly associated with the



study of language: is there specific language DNA or is it a capacity emerging from the sum of human's well-developed cognitive abilities? By diving into a topic that will be familiar to students and at the same time highlights the strong level of disagreement within the field, Sedivy sets the tone for exploring subsequent topics — a tone which compels the reader to decide for themselves how they know what they know. Underscoring the tensions that exist within the discipline, the chapter ends by listing core questions that continue to perplex and intrigue researchers, such as, “How are the various components of language learned, and why do children seem to learn them better than adults?”

Aimed at undergraduates, there is a secondary aim of converting ‘armchair linguists’ who are prone to make casual assertions such as “texting makes kids illiterate” and “some languages are more logical/expressive/romantic than others” (p.5). Sedivy coaxes readers out of comfortable assumptions to more critical engagement.

The value of psycholinguistics is most evident in chapters 10-12. In Chapter 10, ‘Discourse and Inference’, Sedivy describes ‘mental models’, the ambiguity of pronouns, event memory, and conceptualization. Topics are presented with real-world context. For instance, in discussing how ambiguity is resolved by a listener, readers are asked to imagine the exchange between a pilot and air traffic controller or operating surgeon and nurse. Demonstrating the book’s interdisciplinary heft, Sedivy pulls from previous chapters on brain processes, memory, and linguistic terminology to get at the heart of the mechanisms behind each communicative act. This approach far surpasses the murky insights made via fMRI studies or the static sentence diagrams associated with linguistics. Through bonus sections, *Language in Mind* highlights the topics that capture the imagination of researchers and students alike, for example, deaf communities, poetry, jokes, misutterances, and Alzheimer’s disease.

While Sedivy admits in Chapter 12: Language Diversity that the book relies largely on English language examples, it surpasses most other texts at this level by including several non-European languages. Disappointingly, the online resources make limited use of audio or video, missing an opportunity to share predominately oral languages or those with unfamiliar scripts. In light of the global nature of communications, this aspect of the book could be improved.

Even as an introductory textbook, *Language in Mind* prepares students to engage with debates framed by what Wittgenstein described as, “the limits of my language are the limits of my world” (p.474). In Chapter 12 ‘Language Diversity’, Sedivy asks, “Do words reflect culturally important concepts?” (p. 493), a question that has enormous relevance for culturally framed conflict. This chapter opens by describing the vast variety of languages, the primary research aimed at charting the similarities, and the subsequent gaps or questions left about how the nearly 7000 living languages differ in substantial ways. The chapter invites readers to consider how learning or knowing another language can substantively change ‘the limits of [our] world’. For instance, unlike English, Turkish obliges its speakers to indicate if the speaker was present or is passing along second hand evidence; Japanese uses markers for the shape and type of object described incorporating an entire category of grammar for which English has no parallel.

Overall, the daunting complexities of brain and communication research are approached in a clear and interactive manner. Sedivy encourages readers to critically assess the experimental methods that produced our current knowledge, pushing students to devise their own methods to test hypotheses as well as providing model after model of how to determine the parameters and limitations of an experiment. It would be a joy to teach using this book.

Gwyneth Sutherland has a Ph.D. in Peace Studies from the University of Bradford. Her research examines the impact of cultural bias in ICT design on identity, participation, and information access. She writes and speaks frequently about the political implications surrounding the invisible dimension of cultural translation. Her research draws from experiences working as an intercultural mediator as well as directing projects which use ICT to promote peace and democracy in Burma, Kenya, DR Congo, Haiti, and Morocco. Gwyneth has a degree in political science from Indiana University and speaks seven languages. See her blog, theseem.blogspot.co.uk.

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