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978-1-107-12391-5 - The Crucible of Language: How Language and Mind Create Meaning
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The Crucible of Language

From the barbed, childish taunt on the school playground, to the eloquent sophistry of a lawyer prising open a legal loophole in a court of law, meaning arises each time we use language to communicate with one another. How we use language – to convey ideas, make requests, ask a favour, express anger, love, dismay – is of the utmost importance; indeed, linguistic meaning can be a matter of life and death. And yet, until relatively recently, the communicative value of language was all but relegated to the margins of scientific enquiry.

In *The Crucible of Language* Vyvyan Evans explains what we know, and what we do, when we communicate using language; he shows how linguistic meaning arises, where it comes from, and the way language enables us to convey the meanings that can move us to tears, bore us to death or make us dizzy with delight. Meaning is, he argues, one of the final frontiers in the mapping of the human mind.

Vyvyan Evans is Professor of Linguistics at Bangor University, where he has served as Head of the School of Linguistics and English Language, and Deputy Head of the College of Arts and Humanities.

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Praise for *The Language Myth*

'A much-needed, comprehensive critique of universal grammar. Vyvyan Evans builds a compelling case that will be difficult to refute.'

David Crystal,
author of The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language

'Evans' rebuttal of Chomsky's universal grammar from the perspective of cognitive linguistics provides an excellent antidote to popular textbooks where it is assumed that the Chomskyan approach to linguistic theory (in one avatar or another) has somehow been vindicated once and for all.'

Michael Fortescue,
Professor Emeritus, University of Copenhagen

'The Language Myth builds a compelling case that there is no innate universal grammar. Evans's work is a welcome contribution to our understanding of the origin, nature, and use of human language.'

Daniel L. Everett,
Dean of Arts and Sciences, Bentley University

'Highly recommended.'

Seizi Iwata,
Kansai University

'Is the way we think about language on the cusp of a revolution? After reading The Language Myth it certainly looks as if a major shift is in progress, one that will open people's minds to liberating new ways of thinking about language.'

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In memory of Jim Gardner, 1937–2012, and Joseph Gardner, 1940–2013.

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'Language is to the mind more than light is to the eye.'

William Gibson, *The Miracle Worker*

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Preface

For much of the second half of the twentieth century, the scientific study of language assumed that syntax – our ability to construct grammatically well-formed sentences of great complexity – was the underlying hallmark of human language. The unfortunate consequence was that the study of meaning was relegated to the margins, barely getting a look-in. Yet, in our everyday world of experience, as we act and interact in the host of encounters that make up our daily lives, it is the communicative value of language – the meanings we use it to convey – that is of pre-eminence; in everyday life, how we use language and for what purpose is of the utmost importance; linguistic meaning can be a matter of life and death. And yet ironically, until recently, the scientific study of language relegated its central function – the way we use language to convey ideas, make requests, ask a favour, express anger, love, dismay – to all but the margins of scientific analysis.

In recent times, the study of meaning has returned to the fore, regaining its rightful place as the centrepiece of the scientific study of the human mind. This book tells the story of how our language, in conjunction with the vast body of knowledge about the world which we carry around with us in our heads, enables us to communicate with one another – sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. From the barbed, childish taunt on the school playground to the eloquent sophistry of a lawyer prising open a legal loophole in a court of law, meaning arises each time we use language to communicate with one another. *The Crucible of Language* explains what we know, and what we do, when we communicate using language; it shows how linguistic meaning arises, where it comes from and the way in which language enables us to convey the meanings that can move us to tears, bore us to death or make us dizzy with delight. And in so doing,

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it proffers profound insight into exactly what it is to be human. This book presents the emerging story of what we now know about *how* we mean, and how we *use* language to mean, following a cascade of recent scientific breakthroughs.

This book is the sequel to *The Language Myth*. It presents the new, exciting and radical alternative to the views of language and mind that I critiqued there. I pick up some of the themes I introduced in the earlier book; I address concepts and the mechanisms that underpin mind design, the embodied basis of the mind, the semantic basis of grammar, the evolutionary origins and precursors of language, among others. And this is because these are the bread and butter concerns of language, mind and meaning. But in this book, I approach them from a wholly different perspective, in order to illustrate my central argument: meaning arises from the confluence of language and the mind; both are central to the way we use language to communicate, and consequently to convey meaning.

That said, this book assumes no background: it matters not a jot whether you have read *The Language Myth*. I provide the necessary context in each of the chapters, outlining the issues and concerns and assuming no prior knowledge. My presentation attempts to capture the wonder and excitement at what the science of language and the mind has discovered in recent years; meaning is, in many ways, one of the final frontiers in terms of mapping the human mind. This makes the terrain new, and in parts speculative. But the tale I have to tell, and the discoveries I present here, are gripping – certainly, for those of us working at the frontier of meaning in language and in the mind, the journey has been fascinating; it is also beginning to reveal vistas that earlier generations of researchers may have thought improbable. I hope you enjoy the ride.

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