

A Mind for Language

How does human language arise in the mind? To what extent is it innate, or something that is learned? How do these factors interact? The questions surrounding how we acquire language are some of the most fundamental about what it means to be human and have long been at the heart of linguistic theory. This book provides a comprehensive introduction to this fascinating debate, unraveling the arguments for the roles of nature and nurture in the knowledge that allows humans to learn and use language. An interdisciplinary approach is used throughout, allowing the debate to be examined from philosophical and cognitive perspectives. It is illustrated with real-life examples and theories are explained in a clear, easy-to-read way, making them accessible for students without a background in linguistics. However, this book is also a fascinating read for all people who take a keen interest in human language. An accompanying website contains a glossary, questions for reflection, discussion themes, and project suggestions, to further deepen students' understanding of the material.

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A Mind for Language

An Introduction to the
Innateness Debate

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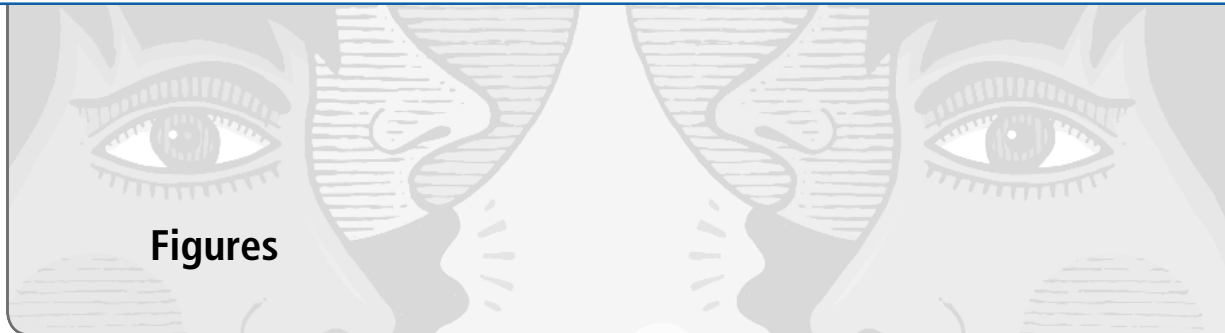
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Given the complexity of human language, it is not possible for any linguist to be a specialist in all areas of grammar. I want to thank all the students and colleagues who have given me feedback, have asked questions or pointed me to areas of research that were new to me, or mistakes in my representation of other fields. Thanks to Ljiljana Progovac (Chapter 6), William Snyder (Chapter 9), and Wendy Sandler (Chapter 13), who gave helpful comments. I specifically thank the four Cambridge University Press reviewers who gave me guidance on how to improve the original manuscript and the person who did the clearance reading for their comments. I also want to express my gratitude to Jeroen van de Weijer, who has helped me over many years to get this book into the present form, and to Péter Siptár for carefully proofreading the (almost) final version.

The two drawings of ASL signs in Chapter 13 are taken from <http://lifefprint.com>, courtesy of Dr. Bill Vicars.



How to Use This Book

The title of this book is *A Mind for Language: An Introduction to the Innateness Debate*. The central theme is an examination of the idea that humans have specific mental abilities to learn and use human languages. Other animals are not able to learn human language, even with intensive training, which is not to say that they do not have their own ways of communicating. An idea that this book focuses on is that humans are born with mental abilities that are specific for learning language. This idea is called the Innateness Hypothesis for language. According to this hypothesis, this language-specific ability is encoded in the brain, based on genetic specifications. Children acquire language using this innate system while being exposed to the language that caregivers use. The interaction between an inborn language capacity and language input will be recognized as a specific case of the debate about the roles of “nature” and “nurture,” which forms the backdrop of our discussion about language acquisition. What are the arguments in support of this hypothesis that was proposed by the linguist Noam Chomsky more than half a century ago? This book critically discusses the arguments that have been suggested, based on the study of how languages work and how children acquire them. A sequel book (*Genes, Brains and Evolution: The Language Debate Continued*) will discuss additional arguments that have been, or could be, used to support the Innateness Hypothesis from other disciplines than linguistics, such as neuroscience, genetics, the study of animal communication systems, and the evolution of our species.

The present book can be used to cover the content of a thirteen-week semester course for undergraduate students. The sequel book can then be the basis of a second thirteen-week course. However, it is possible to compress the subject matter of both books into one course if certain choices are made. In both books, most chapters can be read independently of each other. When used as a textbook, it is up to the instructor to select specific chapters or parts of chapters for “obligatory” reading, while summarizing other chapters or parts (which could then be “optional” further reading for invested students). A website that accompanies both books will contain a glossary, discussion points, questions, and exercises that can be helpful when the books are used as textbooks.

It is my hope that both books, while published as textbooks for undergraduate courses, can be read as “popular” science books that are accessible to any person who takes an interest in the *nature–nurture* debate, especially

x **How to Use This Book**

in the context of human language. It is not assumed that students or other readers have taken an introductory course in linguistics. The present book contains an introduction to the basic structure of language (Chapter 6). This is the most technical chapter and readers who have no prior background in linguistics should not get frustrated by new terminology. In my experience, it requires some effort to digest this chapter (and of course extra explanations and examples by the course instructor will help). Even when certain details remain obscure at first sight, the take-away message that language is apparently much more complicated than most people think is very important. It highlights the amazing accomplishment of children who learn their language(s) in just a couple of years without much, if any, instruction, which lends immediate plausibility to the idea that they achieve this because they are born with a “workbook” that points them in the right direction, giving them some information in advance and urging them to add information about the specific language that they are exposed to.

While our focus is on the nature and nurture of language, I have taken the opportunity to tell the reader about the many facets of language that make this phenomenon such a fascinating subject for every curious person. Readers will find out that the subject matter of both books combined is highly interdisciplinary. This is what has always attracted me to this topic, because it allows me to learn and write about other fields of science than my own.

The notes for each chapter occur as endnotes, per chapter, at the end of the book. These notes contain many references to articles, book chapters, and books that support or provide more detailed information concerning statements in the text. It is a scholarly practice to provide such references. However, on a first read, I do not want the reader to go back and forth between the text and the endnotes. This would interrupt the flow of the narrative. When a closer study of the text is desired, I recommend that readers consult the notes if they want to be directed to additional sources. Apart from the references in the endnotes, I have provided a list of suggested further readings for each chapter at the end of this book.

In conclusion, a disclaimer of sorts: The reader of this book (and its sequel) is reminded that both books were written to be used for undergraduate “General Education” courses. The backgrounds and “levels” of students are diverse and most were in high school just a year or two before they take the courses that are based on the two books. Given the interdisciplinary nature of our central subject, I feel that it is necessary to reinforce important information by repeating it, using varied wording and examples. This may disturb more advanced readers, but I hope that my presentation style does not throw them off too much. Given the wealth of information contained in this text, students are usually worried about “what they need to know.” My answer to them is: well, if I say it a couple of times, it is important and you should know it.