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Jerome Seymour Bruner [1915–2016]*

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> Language is for using, and the uses of language are so varied, so rich, and each use so preemptive a way of life, that to study it is to study the world and, indeed, all possible worlds.
>
> (Bruner, *In Search of Mind*, p. 176)

Jerome Bruner died on 5 June 2016, at 100 years of age. He did his undergraduate work in psychology at Duke University, his graduate work in psychology at Harvard University, and held various types of faculty positions over the years at Harvard, the University of Oxford, the New School for Social Research, and New York University.

Bruner was a pioneer in a number of different fields of psychology. In his early research he developed the 'new look' in the study of perception, demonstrating that even people's most basic perceptual judgments are influenced by their goals, beliefs, and values. In 1960, he created (with George Miller) the Center for Cognitive Studies at Harvard, a founding institution of the cognitive revolution. His empirical work there focused mainly on infant perception and cognition, establishing important new methods that proved instrumental to the mini-revolution in infant studies that soon followed. In his later work he focused on narrative thinking, and how it provides normative structure to so many different aspects of human cognition and culture. Bruner was also instrumental in revolutionizing American education. His books *The Process of Education* (1960) and *Toward a Theory of Instruction* (1966) were founding texts of American progressive education (both cited over 8,000 times), and he was an architect of the US Department of Education's revolutionary Head Start program and a consultant in the modern development of the famous Reggio Emilia (Italy) curriculum for early childhood education.

Bruner was also a pioneer in the study of child language acquisition. He only focused empirically on the topic for about a decade, mostly during his years at Oxford from 1972 to 1980 (although he did a bit of work on children's narratives after that). His main theoretical goal was to steer the

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field away from a Chomskyan focus on syntax as the essence of language and onto a focus on the pragmatics of human communication as foundational. His most important theoretical paper during this time was 'The ontogenesis of speech acts', which appeared as the lead paper in the second issue of the *Journal of Child Language* in 1975. It is the most cited paper in the entire 40+ years of the journal. (And his empirical paper documenting some of its claims – with A. Ninio in 1978 on 'The achievements and antecedents of labeling' – is the second most cited.) In that paper Bruner introduced many ideas and themes that would later become important in the so-called social-pragmatic (or usage-based) approach to language acquisition. He thus emphasized the crucial role of child–adult social interaction and intersubjectivity – conceptualized more specifically in terms of joint action formats and joint attention – in scaffolding children's early mastery of linguistic conventions. He also gave some attention (see also his 1983 book *Child's Talk: Learning to Use Language*) to the important cognitive role played by social-relational action categories such as agent, patient, recipient, and location in children's acquisition of grammar.

Jerome Bruner's contributions to the study of child language acquisition are foundational. He was one of the early pioneers who took the field beyond an atheoretical study of 'ages and stages' to a theoretically motivated investigation of how children acquire their society's most powerful cultural tool. In the process, he developed important theoretical concepts – from joint attention to scaffolding – to ground children's language acquisition in their social and cognitive development more generally. And he also explored in several ways how the process of acquiring a language in turn influences children's developing cognitive and social skills. Despite his relatively brief focus on the topic, Bruner's treatment of language as a culturally created communicative tool will continue to enrich the field for many years to come.

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