

Obituary

Martin Dimond Stewart Braine was born in 1926 in Kuala Lumpur, where his father worked as a civil engineer. He initially followed in the footsteps of both his father and grandfather before him and trained to become an engineer, receiving his B.Sc. in mechanical engineering from the University of Birmingham in England. During an extended stay in Paris, he was drawn to the study of philosophy and attended several lectures by Jean Piaget. The time in Paris and those lectures in particular led to a life-long interest in the nature of the mind and how people acquire knowledge. He went on to receive a B.Sc. in psychology from the University of London and, in 1957, a Ph.D. from New York University. His early career included research appointments at the Downstate Medical Center of the State University of New York and the Walter Reed Institute of Research in Washington, D.C. In 1965–66, he was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship to study in Israel. He was a member of the faculty of the University of California at Santa Barbara and returned to New York University in 1971 as Professor of Psychology. He died on 6 April 1996, in New York City. He is survived by his wife, Lila Braine, Professor of Psychology at Barnard College, Columbia University, their children, Naomi and Jonathan, and two grandchildren.

In a lifetime of intellectual inquiry, Martin Braine endeavoured, along with others of us, to solve the problem: How do children acquire language? He was a logical empiricist. The logic in his empiricism came from his passionate concern for working through the intricacies of the problem, striving to arrive at the most reasonable and valid formal principles of explanation. But he was a firm believer in the power of learning from the available evidence – the perceptions available to the child for acquiring language. One of his earliest papers appeared in the *Psychological Review*, ‘On learning the grammatical order of words’ and began: ‘Just how virtually every human child contrives to learn his native language probably constitutes the most arresting mystery in psychology’. He proposed a theory of ‘contextual generalization’ whereby ‘a unit learned in one context generalizes to another context, even though it was never experienced in that context’ (Braine, 1963, p. 323). It was the basis for his well-known account of ‘pivot grammar’ to explain early sentences and much of his later research; as a theory of distributional learning, it continues to reverberate in contemporary research and theory.

He subsequently resisted being seduced by the innatism of our times that offered a rationalist solution to the separate but, arguably, related problem: How can a language be learned? His most recent paper, ‘Is nativism sufficient?’, appeared in the pages of the *Journal of Child Language*. In it he proposed a new empiricist theory, one that is intermediary between theories of nativism and radical empiricism, for explaining cognitive phenomena such as language. And he deliberately and emphatically disavowed interactionist views of nature/nurture. ‘Nativism has prospered,’ he wrote, ‘because

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discovering what is cognitively and linguistically primitive is one of the fundamental tasks of the study of cognition and development.... However, nativism is ultimately insufficient because it systematically ignores [another] major task of the study of development, which is to account for developmental change, including the origin of primitives.' He 'showed that there is a possible learning process capable of systematically eliminating syntactic categories from the list of primitives, accounting for them in terms of learning based on semantic primitives; these provide the nuclei on which the syntactic categories grow and they have to be postulated anyway for purposes other than language acquisition' (Braine, 1994, pp. 29–30).

The model is an elegant, logical extension of the work begun a generation ago on the importance of semantics for acquiring syntactic categories, and it sounds right to me. While it is still only a sketch of the learning mechanism and developmental processes required for language, it is, nevertheless, a rich blueprint for influencing theory and research for generations to come. We may never come up with an answer to the question: How do children acquire language? that everyone can agree on. But I have no doubt whatsoever that those who will be asking the question 10, 50, or 100 years from now will have been influenced in their search for the answer by the work that Martin D. S. Braine had done before them. That is his legacy to scholarship in language acquisition.

He left yet another legacy to scholarship in the philosophy of thought and language. In 1978 he began publishing major articles about how people think and reason. Drawing on his research on the logical structures underlying language and thought, he proposed that both are made possibly by a common 'syntax of thought,' a universal mental logic that is a part of all natural languages. At the time of his death, he was nearing completion of a co-authored book which presents new theoretical developments relating language acquisition to thinking and reasoning; it will be published posthumously.

He collaborated in conducting empirical studies with colleagues throughout North and South America, Europe, the Middle East and Australia. Worldwide, those who attest to the importance of the work, and of the man, join in mourning his death and, at the same time, in celebrating his life.

REFERENCES

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