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## Language in mind: An introduction to psycholinguistics by Julie Sedivy (review)

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## TEXTBOOK REVIEW

**Language in mind:** An introduction to psycholinguistics. By JULIE SEDIVY. Sunderland, MA: Sinauer, 2014. Pp. 558. ISBN 9780878935987. \$122.95 (Hb).

Reviewed by LISA PEARL and SUSAN BRAUNWALD, *University of California, Irvine*

**1. INTRODUCTION.** *Language in mind: An introduction to psycholinguistics*, by Julie Sedivy, is intended as a general introductory textbook for undergraduate students with no prior linguistic background. As S herself puts it, she wrote this book as ‘an opening conversation that provokes curiosity, and a map for what to explore next’. In our opinion, S has overwhelmingly achieved this goal, communicating her infectious fascination with psycholinguistics through both the content and format of this visually stunning textbook and its companion website (available at <http://sites.sinauer.com/languageinmind/index.html>).

A fundamental strength of the textbook is its versatility. Its format allows instructors to easily assign the portions of the content that correspond to the purpose of their courses and the background of their students. The main text functions as a framework that is sufficient for an introductory survey course, and a plethora of supplemental information in both the chapters themselves and the companion website provides greater depth of coverage that complements the main text.

In this review, we take into account the dual perspectives of students and their instructors. Given our personal expertise, we primarily draw specific examples from the chapter on learning the structure of sentences to highlight the richness of the information available in *Language in mind*. We now turn to the features of this book that we believe make it an exceptional textbook for both students and instructors.

**2. THE STUDENT’S PERSPECTIVE.** S wants the content to be informative, comprehensible, and relevant to a wide range of students, from a neophyte just hearing about all this for the first time to an advanced student well-versed in linguistic fundamentals who wants to dig deeper into a particular area. Most importantly, S wants to help students think intelligently and analytically about language, whatever their background. To accomplish this, she connects the theoretical content in each chapter to relevant applications such as language pedagogy, persuasive rhetoric, and the aesthetic use of language, among others (often through the ‘Language at large’ boxes in each chapter). Additionally, S utilizes several strategies to make the information both accessible and engaging.

First, the overall tone of the text is very casual and conversational (including the occasional humorous tidbit). This is something that both of us enjoyed, though readers who prefer a more streamlined presentation may not appreciate it as much. The overall approach is Socratic and so the text is meant to be read actively, encouraging students to think about the material as they are reading it.

Second, the beautiful graphic design and vivid illustrations provide aesthetic anchor points for the text under discussion, scaffolding the organization of each chapter and clarifying its content. These illustrations include (i) diagrams (e.g. the human vocal tract in figure 4.5), (ii) photographs (e.g. categorical perception in a nonlinguistic domain in figure 4.9, examples of category members in figure 5.4), (iii) line drawings (e.g. constituent structure in music in figure 6.1), (iv) original abstract art (e.g. the opening of every chapter), (v) cartoon depictions of experimental design (e.g. the head-turn preference paradigm in figure 4.1, stimuli for the habituation and test phases of a word-recognition task in figure 5.1A, stimuli for a syntactic bootstrapping experiment in figure 5.5), and (vi) graphs of experimental results (e.g. categorical-perception behavioral results in chinchillas in figure 4.11, newborn ERP results depicting statistical learning in figure 4.4, infant word-recognition behavioral results in figure 5.1B, child vocabulary exposure over time in figure 5.2, infant grammatical-categorization behavioral results in figure 6.3). This makes the information seem very user-friendly and digestible, despite its breadth and depth.

To further draw the reader in, each chapter opens with a ‘teaser’ designed to capture attention via intriguing facts related to the chapter’s content. S then offers interesting questions or observations that lead to theoretical points and arguments as well as discussion of seminal research. All of this is liberally interspersed with concrete demonstrations and interactive activities in both the textbook itself and the companion website. For example, table 6.1 asks readers to describe a plausible meaning for novel compounds; web activities for the chapter include listening to stimuli from a syntactic categorization experiment and acting as a subject for those stimuli, along with an explanation of what the experiment is meant to demonstrate.

The technical material is introduced with simple language that makes it comprehensible to students from nonlinguistic backgrounds and provides a handy refresher for students from linguistic backgrounds. Boxes of various kinds within a chapter develop an idea from the text in more detail with a relevant example or concrete data (e.g. Ch. 6 includes boxes on constituent structure and poetic effect, rules for constructing sentences of English, quirky verb alternations, syntax and the immature brain, and the CHILDES database, among others). The chapters also contain a variety of study aids: new terms are helpfully bolded in the text, concisely summarized in the margin, linked to flashcards in the companion website, and found in the glossary at the end of the book.

An additional goal of the book is to help students understand how to interpret the empirical data that science trades in. Figures and tables from primary source material are integrated into each chapter, and S discusses both the logic behind the experimental design and the interpretation of the empirical data gathered. In essence, the book provides the reader with a basic scientific literacy (focused on psycholinguistics) and offers a guidebook for the variety of methods—both experimental and analytical—that language science depends on. S’s self-described goal is to help students develop a ‘how do you know’ mindset, and we agree with her that the ability to interpret scientific data is one of the foundations of this mindset.

Beyond that, S also wants students to understand the gist of the theoretical debates—both large and small—in psycholinguistics and to think about the different predictions that further research could test. To facilitate this, the textbook promotes developing and evaluating rudimentary hypotheses by considering relevant empirical evidence via the ‘Digging deeper’ boxes at the end of each chapter. These typically describe a current debate within the field (e.g. domain-general vs. domain-specific theories of language learning in Ch. 6), followed by a specific project suggestion that builds on the material discussed (e.g. designing an experiment that investigates domain-specific vs. domain-general structure learning).

More generally, S’s overarching goal is for students to apply the knowledge they have learned in a variety of ways, and we believe the text and companion website accomplish this admirably. One note we do have for students using the text is that the chapters themselves tend to be longish, making the integration of knowledge from an entire chapter at once somewhat challenging. However, with some guidance by a knowledgeable instructor about which material to focus on within a chapter, the text is very easy to learn from.

**3. THE INSTRUCTOR’S PERSPECTIVE.** The first author recently used this textbook for a quarter-long (ten-week) introductory psycholinguistics course aimed at both advanced psychology undergraduate students without prior linguistic knowledge and advanced linguistic students with prior linguistic knowledge. The course covered four distinct areas: linguistic representation, language acquisition, language processing, and the neurological basis of language. Due to the design of S’s textbook, where each chapter can function well as an independent unit, it was very simple for the first author to draw from the relevant chapters when teaching each segment of the course. For example, she used Chs. 4, 5, and 6 without reference to the preceding chapters when teaching the acquisition portion of the class. (To S’s credit, however, we note that the book also reads smoothly if read straight through from beginning to end.)

In this course, students read the relevant chapter sections and had access to additional primary source readings the instructor had collected for that area. The instructor also leveraged several of the accompanying demos, interactive activities, and weblinks available via the companion website, with students always responding very favorably. In general, the first author found it very

easy to create lectures based on the material in the chapters—there were numerous concrete examples, sufficient crosslinguistic coverage to demonstrate linguistic variation,<sup>1</sup> and accessible online versions of the relevant figures and tables via the instructor website.

A particular strength of the book comes from S's deliberate effort to write in a theoretically agnostic way. While she surely has her own favorite theoretical perspectives, S does an excellent job of presenting an even-handed discussion of the many unresolved issues in psycholinguistics. She explains both sides of controversial theories and the different questions, assumptions, hypotheses, and interpretations of empirical data that they engender (e.g. the discussion in Ch. 6 about universal grammar and poverty of the stimulus). We found S's descriptions of the main theoretical debates to be contextualized well and therefore appropriate for beginning students. However, we recognize that some instructors may wish to teach within a specific theoretical framework. In that case, we believe S's text is still useful as a conceptual foundation, but would be best supplemented with theory-specific material, such as targeted review articles or primary source material selected by the instructor.

Still, a main strength from an instructor's perspective is the remarkable depth of coverage with the systematic supplementary information, which is provided via the color-coded boxes in each chapter as well as the many examples and activities on the companion website. This makes the textbook suitable not only for general introductory courses, but also for more targeted courses in one of the many areas S covers. For this latter kind of course (as with theory-oriented courses), the material in the textbook and companion website can provide a useful conceptual foundation. For example, we could easily imagine a more advanced class focused on experimental acquisition techniques that relied only on the acquisition chapters; any of the acquisition-focused projects would function well as a course-long project where students get hands-on experience with what goes into appropriately designing an experiment.

Related to this, another of S's stated goals is to provide an overall conceptual framework that can be used as a jumping-off point for further targeted reading in a specific area—and this is why more seminal readings tend to be discussed in the text itself. The suggested further readings and associated weblinks on the companion website are ones that would likely be accessible if the student has understood the material from the chapter (and importantly, *ONLY* that material). The utility of this design is that the seminal readings likely will not change (much), while the relevant further readings and weblinks may. Since the further readings, weblinks, and web essays can be easily updated on the website, this means the textbook-website combination is likely to remain current for quite some time.

*SUMMARY.* *Language in mind* was written to endure, taking a broad perspective on what constitutes psycholinguistics and thereby providing a starting point for a variety of language science interests. It is a resource that is current (and easier to keep so via the companion website), has significant pedagogical structure, and should be quite appealing to readers from a variety of backgrounds. Its focus on reader engagement makes it stand out among textbooks of this kind. We highly recommend it to instructors teaching many different types of courses, from introductory survey courses on psycholinguistics to more specialized courses where students use the material as a foundation for conducting language science research of their own.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, (i) phonotactic constraints in English, German, French, Italian, Hebrew, Hawaiian, and Indonesian (Ch. 4); (ii) allophones in French, English, Finnish, and Spanish (Ch. 4); (iii) comparative lexical gaps in Hawaiian, Sudanese, English, Sanskrit, Russian, Polish, Kiriwina, Chinese, and Czech (Ch. 5); (iv) morphology in Czech, Turkish, and Swahili (Ch. 5); and (v) agglutination in Swahili and Klingon (Ch. 6).