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# Language in the brain

Jean Aitchison, *Words in the mind: An introduction to the mental lexicon*, Basil Blackwell (Oxford & New York), 1987, ISBN 0-631-14442-0, pp. 229, £7.95

Review by David Crystal

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Jean Aitchison's latest book asks a simple question: how do we store words in our head? The short answer is: we do not know. But a very large number of people (psycholinguists) are trying to find out. This book tells us where they have got to.

It is a horribly complex field, which requires investigators to have expertise in both experimental psychology and linguistic analysis. As a linguist, I have frequently found myself struggling with methodological issues raised by psychologically-trained psycholinguists; and I know that psychologists struggle just as often to grasp the technicalities of phonetics or syntax which come from linguistically-trained psycholinguists. Those who have a training in neither side have an impossible task, if they want to discover what is going on. Or, rather, they had.

For this account is a splendid exposition of the field, which takes the reader through a

wide range of psychological and linguistic notions. Aitchison introduces the whole domain, dealing smoothly with such topics as the size of the vocabulary we carry in our heads; the speed with which we bring words to mind; the tongue-slips we make, and what they tell us about the way our brain works; the way children learn words; how word meanings relate to each other; and the different ways there are of mapping this network of meanings.

The focus throughout is on English. In its emphasis on words, it is an important corrective to the preoccupation with syntax in recent years. It is a splendid synthesis of theoretical positions and methods, with clever analogies, realistic examples, and clear chapter summaries, the whole being well counterpointed by epigraphs, quotations from literature, line-drawings and the occasional cartoon.

Don't expect answers. Most chapters conclude by stressing how little we know. The complexity of the brain defies all analogies still. But if you want to find out about the current state of knowledge concerning language in the brain, with the least possible pain, then read this friendly book.

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