



The Emergence of Language (Carnegie Mellon Symposia on Cognition Series)

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For nearly four centuries, our understanding of human development has been controlled by the debate between nativism and empiricism. Nowhere has the contrast between these apparent alternatives been sharper than in the study of language acquisition. However, as more is learned about the details of language learning, it is found that neither nativism nor empiricism provides guidance about the ways in which complexity arises from the interaction of simpler developmental forces. For example, the child's first guesses about word meanings arise from the interplay between parental guidance, the child's perceptual preferences, and neuronal support for information storage and retrieval. As soon as the shape of the child's lexicon emerges from these more basic forces, an exploration of "emergentism" as a new alternative to nativism and empiricism is ready to begin.

This book presents a series of emergentist accounts of language acquisition. Each case shows how a few simple, basic processes give rise to new levels of language complexity. The aspects of language examined here include auditory representations, phonological and articulatory processes, lexical semantics, ambiguity processing, grammaticality judgment, and sentence comprehension. The approaches that are invoked to account formally for emergent patterns include neural network theory, dynamic systems, linguistic functionalism, construction grammar, optimality theory, and statistically-driven learning. The excitement of this work lies both in the discovery of new emergent patterns and in the integration of theoretical frameworks that can formalize the theory of emergentism.

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