# BOOK REVIEWS

**Names For Things: A Study of Human Learning.** John Macnamara. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1982, 275 pages, $17.50.

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> By various means of representation, and with the aid of language as an organizing principle, we construct each for himself a world representation: that we modify this representation in the light of further experience in order that our predictions may be better: and that we improvise upon it for a variety of reasons. (James Britton, p. 31)
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> Man *literally* is a symbol-using animal. He really does approach the world symbol-wise (and symbol-foolish). (Kenneth Burke, p. 260)
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> The trait that sets human mentality apart from every other is its preoccupation with symbols, with images and names that *mean* things, rather than with things themselves. (Susanne K. Langer, p. 139)
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> The meaning of words, whose virtue is to be substitutes exerting the powers of what is not there. (I.A. Richards, p. 32)

John Macnamara attempts to present a cogent description of how children learn names. Within his preface he states:

> So far psychologists have failed to deal with what strikes me as the very real complexities of name learning.
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> The aspects that seem most neglected may be surprising when just listed: reference, meaning, hierarchical relations among meanings, the grammatical category to which names belong (noun) and its subdivision, proper and common names. (p. vii)

To address these issues Macnamara approaches name learning by synthesizing ideas from philosophy, linguistics, and psychology with the records of Kieran Macnamara's language development and with his (and others') empirical testing of children's language development. His use of this data helps give some unity to a work which, by its very nature, is broad in scope and unrefined in its theory. This is not, however, a fault; rather it is an asset. For while often too much material and too many ideas are being thrown at the reader, and while these ideas are frequently not tied one to another, they do present the reader with a rich vein of information from which to speculate. And it is from speculation that all great theories derive.

This is one of those books which, while it answers no questions, will have to be referred to by those mining in Macnamara's mountain. For instance, Macnamara says: "Reference is the contact language makes with the environment; it is the device that enables us to talk about the things we see and touch. Meaning is in some degree the sense we make of that environment; it is to some degree what we have to say about it. Thus the psychology of names relates directly to the conceptual system and to the perceptual one" (p. viii). The concept with which Macnamara grapples is one that in

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idea is similar to what the poet or novelist attempts: to take the chaos of life and present it as a coherent vision. The difference lies in how the artist presents his or her vision and how Macnamara presents the child organizing his or her universe. For Macnamara semantics contains whatever answers there are to how a child learns. And as he noted, it is semantics which lend what coherence this book holds (p. ix).

What is interesting is that Macnamara returns again and again to the concept of semantics/reference as an organizing technique for the child—for how the child perceives the object governs his or her reaction to it. And in each section ("Matters Mainly Psychological," "Matters Mainly Linguistic," "Matters Mainly Philosophical," and "Implications for Learning and Cognition") he presents data from each point of view to clarify what role semantics has in the child's cognitive development:

> No psychological theory of language learning, so far as I am aware, takes referring seriously, and that marks them gravely inadequate. Part of the reason for the neglect has been uneasiness with any notion that cannot be expressed as an association or system of associations. Moreover, psychology has been and still is stoutly positivist and reluctant to employ categories that cannot be defined in terms of sensory attributes. Now referring involves an observable act, but the act expresses an intention. I have proposed that the intention to refer is an explanatory construct; it forms part of the explanation of certain events. Such an intention always involves a purpose, that of referring to an object by means of a symbol. In claiming that a child naturally interprets certain events as acts of referring, I am claiming that he imposes on the observable event the explanation—carried out for the purpose of picking out an object in attention. That in turn implies that he has a mind that deals in those categories and relations. (p. 228)

Language is the key to how humans think, if one accepts what Macnamara claims. He has started to prove empirically what Langer, Burke, Richards, and Britton have claimed for so long: that words (symbols) govern how we interpret the universe, an idea going back to Whorf. It is, as Macnamara claims, important that psychology begin to study how humans use symbols. We often take language for granted, believing that what we say will automatically be understood to mean what we meant it to be—this is not often the case, which is why I.A. Richards said that rhetoric should be the study of misunderstandings. The spoken word is a first order symbol of a thing; the written word of the second order, representing the sound of the word and not the thing itself.

This all can mire when our symbols no longer represent a thing but an abstraction, such as beauty or love. For these words do not have a physical representation such as car or tree. By attempting to study how a child learns language and to study language's importance to learning, Macnamara has begun the work which has needed to be started for many years. What he and those who follow him find will be of use not only to psychologists and linguists, but to rhetoricians, teachers, and poets.

## References

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