

Preface

This book rests on three pillars: the formal principles that guide children in the astonishing feat of acquiring their first language; the subtle nature of dialectal variation; and the social, educational, and philosophical implications of human grammar. Naturalistic observation, academic experiments, and a personal outlook all come into play.

One might ask, why put grammar, philosophy, social implications, and experiments all in one book? Whitehead once said that one should have a “devotion to abstraction and a passion for detail.” In that spirit, it is precisely my goal to make connections among philosophy, empirical detail, and social implications. My purpose is to show how philosophically deep questions, and a child’s basic dignity, are connected to what children say, even to the first word they speak and to what we adults think of as cute expressions. One child said, for example, “My mind is very angry, and so am I.” She assumed two levels of mind, perhaps a body and a soul, and underscored the reality of the soul for a six-year-old. Beyond philosophy, I will urge that we all recognize the social significance of abstract theories.

Every act we humans undertake requires us to summon our whole being and personality in order to choose what to do. How does a person, not just a brain, decide to eat or sigh or think of love (or do all at once)? How is the mind organized so that it can integrate diverse information to make such decisions? One thesis of this book is that our grammar “machine” can be a model for all dimensions of mind and personality. Though each module of mind has its own makeup, still we generate emotions, art, athletic moves, friendship—everything our minds and bodies create—with combinatory principles similar to those we find in grammar.

What we say is like a visible DNA, a slender angle on ourselves that projects both an image of shared human nature and an intricate map of individuality. The words that tumble out of our mouths—even a child’s first words—show that we each command abstract, unconscious “mathemati-

cal” principles, instantaneous creativity, and a unique personal gestalt that we share when we speak and that others can recognize. I will argue that we each have a unique formula that determines our actions. One reason why we should have respect for each other is that none of us can quite grasp that formula within another person. Intuitively, most people sense that each person has dignity beyond the judgment of others.

One way to gain respect for ourselves and for children is to look straight at the challenge of language acquisition: how do children acquire every nuance of meaning and every odd piece of grammar their native language contains? As we will see, everything about the human mind gets into the act.