

Eric H. Lenneberg

September 19, 1921 — May 31, 1975

Eric Lenneberg was born in Düsseldorf, Germany, where he attended school until he moved with his parents to Brazil in 1933. In 1945 he came to the United States. He graduated with a B.A. degree from the University of Chicago in 1949 and remained there to study linguistics. He received his Ph.D. from Harvard in psychology and linguistics in 1956, going on to study neuroscience at the Harvard Medical School as a Russell Sage Fellow. For a number of years he taught at Harvard and did research at the Children's Hospital Medical Center in Boston. During much of this time he held a USPHS Career Development Award in Mental Health. He was visiting professor of psychology at the University of Zurich in 1964-65. In 1967 he moved to the University of Michigan as professor of psychology and fellow in the Center for Human Growth and Development. In 1968 he was called to Cornell as professor of psychology, with an appointment in neurobiology and behavior as well. His two undergraduate courses were extremely popular and well rated. His rigorously high standards combined with his enthusiasm for his subject and his regard for his students created a special kind of loyalty in them. In recent years Lenneberg divided his time between Ithaca and White Plains, where he worked with several of his graduate students on clinical research in neuropsychology at the Westchester Division of The New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center.

During his time at the Children's Hospital in Boston, Lenneberg became known for locating children with extraordinary language disabilities or living in unusual circumstances so as to provide strategic points of inquiry for theoretical questions of language development. These cases led to important papers on the developmental course of babbling in a deaf child born to deaf parents and a paper on an older child who (for anatomical reasons) could not speak at all but who could manifest understanding of complex instructions. Lenneberg was the first to propose that the human capacity for language can only be explained on the basis of biological properties of the human brain and vocal tract. His interest and expertise in both language and psychobiology were combined in his book, *Biological Foundations of Language*, published in 1967 and now a classic. He went on to explore the evidence that language capacity is a specialized form of a more general cognitive capacity rather than a development of either animal vocalization or nonvocal communication.

Eric Lenneberg was well known in many countries for his work on the biological aspects of language. He was a visiting professor at the Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Recife, Brazil; an invited lecturer at the Academia Nacional de Neurologia do Brasil (of which he was an honorary member); organizer and chairman of a symposium

on “Language as Behavior” at the Max Planck Institute, Tübingen, Germany; participant and voted a permanent member of the International Symposium on Neuro-psychology; participant in a conference on mental retardation held by the Medical Research Council, London; and a consultant to UNESCO. With his wife, Elizabeth, he edited a book for UNESCO, *Foundations of Language Development: A Multidisciplinary Approach*.

Lenneberg was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, Sigma Xi, the Linguistic Society of America, the American Psychological Association, the Society for Research in Child Development, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He had held fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies, the Social Research Council, the Russell Sage Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, and Wenner Gren. He lectured and presented colloquia at all the major universities in this country, as well as many European ones, and served on the editorial boards of several journals. His research was published in numerous journals, ranging from psychological journals, *Daedalus*, and *Science to Language*, the *American Annals of the Deaf*, and neurological journals.

Eric Lenneberg’s work established new directions for the study of language and provided an inspiration for his devoted students. His death is a severe loss to the broad community of scholars seeking to unravel the neural and developmental basis of language, as well as to his colleagues and students in the University. He is survived by his wife, Elizabeth; two children, Miriam and Roger; and a brother, Helmut.

Ulric Neisser, Daniel Tapper, Eleanor J. Gibson