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Foreword

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¹The breadth of topics covered in this volume gives some sense of the range of Brian MacWhinney's perspectives on and contributions to our understanding of language -- how it is learned, represented, and studied. My brief personal reflections will focus on this latter contribution – how language is studied, and how researchers can be supported in studying the acquisition and use of language, with appropriate attention to variation due to the language features themselves, the learner's stage of development, the linguistic context, the activity being engaged in, and the presence of clinical impairments.

Kempe, Brooks and Gillis in their chapter in this issue identify the launch of the CHILDES project (database and associated analytical tools) as the beginning of the 'big data' approach in child language. CHILDES had been in its turn inspired by the example of Roger Brown, who in the 1960s acted on the idea that any transcript of a child's utterances could be recurrently analyzed from multiple independent perspectives. Brown thus produced (with the help of his long-suffering secretary and an overworked mimeograph machine) multiple copies of the transcripts of Adam, Eve, and Sarah interacting with their parents and/or the Harvard graduate students recruited to lug enormous tape recorders to home visits. Those transcripts were analyzed in a regularly scheduled seminar that included Samuel Anderson, Ursula Bellugi, Courtney Cazden, Richard Cromer, Gordon Finley, Colin Fraser, Jean Berko Gleason, David

¹This paper is part of a special issue (2024, 44) entitled: In Honour of Brian MacWhinney's Five-Decade Contributions to Language and Psychology Research (edited by Zhisheng (Edward) Wen and Hassan Mohebbi).

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McNeill, and Dan Slobin. (One set of those transcripts constituted an early entry into the CHILDES English database and lives on there still, even as the mimeographed pages have dimmed below legibility.)

In 1984 the MacArthur Foundation funded a research network focused on the transition from infancy to childhood. The Foundation provided funds for each of several local nodes of the network, and for yearly meetings of all the participants. I was part of the Harvard node, and Brian (because of his prior affiliation with the University of Denver) belonged to the San Diego node, led by Elizabeth Bates. Brian proposed a shared data bank for the language of children in the transitional developmental period that the network targeted – making the sensible argument that individual researchers' efforts to accumulate reasonable sample sizes were operating in very small increments. This was the period when $n=3$ was the default, and $n=25$ was gargantuan. We anticipated some difficulty in wresting our colleagues' data sets away from them but great joy at the prospect of being able to analyze a much-enriched database. In fact, datasets were donated with alacrity, as if we were all finally finding a home for the artifacts accumulating in our elderly parents' attics. Getting folks to actually use the data was, on the other hand, surprisingly slow; it required offering pedagogical supports for their own entry into the system and tools that would enable them to introduce the system into their teaching. Brian facilitated all these efforts by recruiting collaborators, contributing his own time and design skills, and disseminating knowledge of the affordances of the system. It should be acknowledged that the affordances of the system were at the beginning somewhat limited: automatization of the analytic procedures that we had been doing by hand (MLU, TTR, morphology analysis, frequency counts, word searches, etc.) But it developed quickly, thanks to Brian's willingness from the very beginning to design it as a field-wide collaboration. If some user suggested that new analysis or organizational feature would be useful, Brian acknowledged the need and oversaw its design and introduction. Thanks to Brian's generosity and responsiveness, CLAN was a product of distributed cognition, ultimately so widely used because it reflected the needs of the field.

Keeping the system going after the initial funding from MacArthur required regular and recurrent grant writing, efforts which Brian undertook with no apparent agita. He also had the vision, from the very beginning, of expanding the system beyond child language, to incorporate other data sets, including adult talk, classroom talk, talk produced by individuals with various cognitive or language disorders, as well of course as talk in as many different languages and crosslinguistic situations as possible. By now both the databases and the tools available for using the databases have expanded beyond anything we could have imagined in 1984. One of the most recently developed tools, collaborative commentary (see Fromm and Kowalsky chapter in this issue), in fact harkens back to Roger Brown's mimeographed transcript pages, on which it is possible to see notes written in different colored pens by Melissa Bowerman, Rick Cromer, Ursula Bellugi and other participants in the collaborative analysis of the original transcripts.

Brian MacWhinney is, ultimately, a romantic. He dared to assume that researchers would operate in a spirit of generosity and collaboration, sharing their data and contributing their ideas about how to expand and improve a set of tools being offered to them. He launched CHILDES in an era when data exchange required mailing floppy discs and when teaching others how to use the system required holding IRL workshops. But making the system available created an

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understanding of how, one day, big data about actual language use and large-group cross-site collaborations might help us answer a wide array of questions. Perhaps that day has come.

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