

Lila Gleitman, Who Showed How Children Learn Language, Dies at 91

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Lila Gleitman, whose pioneering work in linguistics and cognitive science expanded our understanding of how language works and how children go about learning it, died on Aug. 8 at a hospital in Philadelphia. She was 91.

Her daughter Claire Gleitman said the cause was a heart attack.

Until the 1970s, most linguists believed that the structure of language existed out in the world, and that the human brain then learned it from infancy. Building on the work of her friend Noam Chomsky, Dr. Gleitman argued the opposite: that the structures, or syntax, of language were hard-wired into the brain from birth, and that children already had a sophisticated grasp of how they work.

“The study of language acquisition, her primary scientific concern, was her field in a special sense,” Dr. Chomsky said in a statement. “She virtually created the field in its modern form and led in its impressive development ever since.”

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