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In Memoriam: Lila Ruth Gleitman (1929 - 2021)



Lila Ruth Gleitman

The Notorious LRG

by: Kathy Hirsh-Pasek

On August 8, our field lost a giant, Lila Ruth Gleitman. Lila's work altered our understanding of the human mind through her elegant theoretical and empirical investigations of early language development. Redefining and broadening the field, she asked not only what children say, but also what they understand. With this wide lens, she demonstrated the robustness of the human language system. The inherent

properties of mind allow language to emerge in the face of deafness and blindness and allow young children to learn abstract words such as *thinking* and *believing* in the absence of clear perceptual referents. Well before it was fashionable to be interdisciplinary, Lila forged ties that now inextricably bind linguistics to psychology. In many ways she was the matriarch of the study of child language.

A member of the National Academy of Sciences, Lila won the American Psychological Association Distinguished Scientist Award, the American Association for the Advancement of Science John McGovern Award in the Behavioral Sciences, the Prix International from the Fyssen Foundation and the Rumelhart Prize from the Cognitive Science Society. Her work not only has had an impact on a wide range of scientific disciplines, but also includes numerous papers that have been cited over one thousand times. Her contributions to the fields of linguistics and cognitive science are incalculable.

Lila mentored many in the field with her inspirational style, her clear vision, her legendary humor and her deep intellect. She wrestled with questions that have puzzled philosophers for a millennium and she made progress on them through her creative research approach. As a mentor, she helped everyone in her orbit learn more, think better and contribute to a broader purpose.

Lila Gleitman is truly an intellectual entrepreneur. She gave us all a gift that will keep giving in the form of her remarkable wit and wisdom, and a suite of ideas and theories that will keep us all busy for generations to come. To those of us who knew her and loved her, the 91-year-old Lila, who just published her book *Sentence First, Arguments Later* (Oxford Press, 2020) and a forthcoming paper for the *Annual Review of Psychology* with her daughter Claire, will forever be The Notorious LRG.