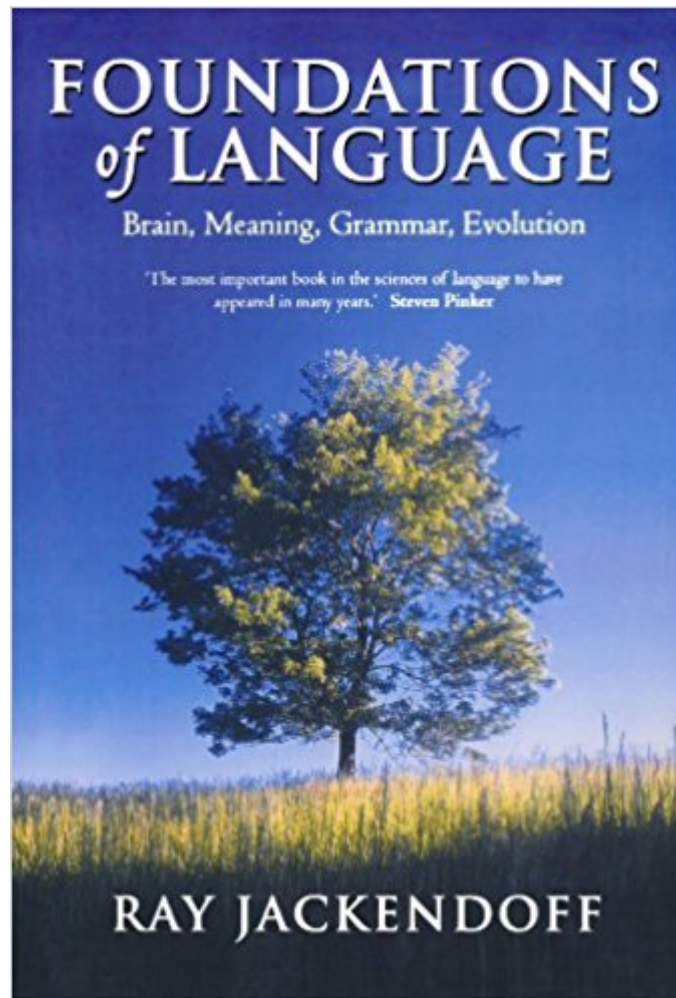




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# Foundations Of Language: Brain, Meaning, Grammar, Evolution



## Synopsis

Already hailed as a masterpiece, *Foundations of Language* offers a brilliant overhaul of the last thirty-five years of research in generative linguistics and related fields. "Few books really deserve the cliché 'this should be read by every researcher in the field,'" writes Steven Pinker, author of *The Language Instinct*, "But Ray Jackendoff's *Foundations of Language* does." *Foundations of Language* offers a radically new understanding of how language, the brain, and perception intermesh. The book renews the promise of early generative linguistics: that language can be a valuable entree into understanding the human mind and brain. The approach is remarkably interdisciplinary. Behind its innovations is Jackendoff's fundamental proposal that the creativity of language derives from multiple parallel generative systems linked by interface components. This shift in basic architecture makes possible a radical reconception of mental grammar and how it is learned. As a consequence, Jackendoff is able to reintegrate linguistics with philosophy of mind, cognitive and developmental psychology, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and computational linguistics. Among the major topics treated are language processing, the relation of language to perception, the innateness of language, and the evolution of the language capacity, as well as more standard issues in linguistic theory such as the roles of syntax and the lexicon. In addition, Jackendoff offers a sophisticated theory of semantics that incorporates insights from philosophy of language, logic and formal semantics, lexical semantics of various stripes, cognitive grammar, psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic approaches, and the author's own conceptual semantics. Here then is the most fundamental contribution to linguistic theory in over three decades.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Jackendoff (linguistics, Brandeis Univ.) tackles the substantial tasks of assessing where Noam Chomsky's foundation of research has led linguistics and reinterpreting his theory of universal grammar. While embracing many of Chomsky's ideas, Jackendoff proposes his own overall theory of language. His well-documented discussion covers "combinatoriality" (or grammar rules) and language processing, as well as lexical and phrasal semantics. Jackendoff's inquiry draws on and complements research in neuroscience, psychology, and biological evolution. For example, he examines working and long-term memory in language production and, most important, discusses phonology, syntax, and semantics as parallel, equally productive, or generative aspects of language. Like Lyle Jenkins (Biolinguistics: Exploring the Biology of Language, Cambridge Univ., 2000), he emphasizes connections between language and biology. Lacking a glossary and a list of the numerous abbreviations, this work is scholarly in approach and hence less accessible than works like Trevor Harely's broad, updated *The Psychology of Language: From Data to Theory* (Psychology Pr., 2001. 2d ed.). It is nevertheless a significant piece of scholarship and is highly recommended for academic libraries. Marianne Orme, Des Plaines P.L., IL Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"The intellectual journey of one of the most original and creative thinkers in modern linguistics."--John R. Taylor, *Studies in Language*"It's a rich mix, but one laid out in refreshingly plain language.... Provides challenging ideas and a fruitful combination of observation and analysis.... My advice is to read the book for the exceptional effort at synthesis that it is."--Merrill Garrett, *Science*"A sweeping survey of every major aspect of language and communication. ... He counters the belief that language stems from syntactic structure alone."--*Science News*"Jackendoff is certainly right in thinking that the question of why language has come to be as it is is one that linguists cannot permanently ignore... His breadth of knowledge and soundness of judgment, along with just the right amount of adventurousness, make for a book that deserves to be read and reread by anyone seriously interested in the state of the art of research on language."--*American Scientist*"Few books really deserve the cliché 'this should be read by every researcher in the field,' but Ray Jackendoff's *Foundations of Language* does. I think it is the most important book in the sciences of language to have appeared in many years. Jackendoff has long had a genius for seeing both the forest and the trees, and he puts his gift to good use here in a dazzling combination of theory-building and factual

integration. The result is a compelling new view of language and its place in the natural world."--Steven Pinker, Professor of Psychology, MIT, and author of *The Language Instinct* and *Words and Rules*"A masterpiece.... The book as a whole deserves a wide readership."--Nature

This book is simply one of the best books I've read on linguistics ever. It has completely changed my perspective on linguistics and has convinced me I should do graduate school for it. I recently finished my BA in Linguistics but was becoming disillusioned with minimalist theory and the (in my opinion) pointless, dogmatic way of thinking on all sides (Lakoff and Chomsky come to mind). Jackendoff's book provided a breath of fresh air integrating so many facets from other disciplines in cognitive science and making linguistics relevant, if not at the forefront, of this multi-disciplinary field. I love his take on making linguistics a discipline more geared towards the sciences and setting a whole new agenda for linguistics (discovering the rules and ways the language interfaces interact). If you are interested in linguistics, language, or just science in general, this book provides a decent intro to linguistics and other disciplines such as cognitive psychology and neuroscience. It is one book crammed with food for thought concerning the nature of language, thought, and meaning. Also, I would like to take a moment to discuss the three star review by Idiosyncrat. He says that Jackendoff dismisses things he does not understand such as Cognitive Grammar being combinatorial, and anthropological linguistics, as well as that he talks himself into a "solipsistic" mess because he dismisses these things. First off, Cognitive grammar is combinatorial and he does not dismiss it. Second, he does not dismiss anthropological linguistics. He merely comments that their viewpoint is too shallow (i.e. that language is only used for communication and it should only be studied for how it is used in a society) which I agree is true. Language has much more to offer and there is a lot more to it than just "we used it to communicate, end of story." Lastly, Jackendoff does not talk himself into a solipsistic mess. If Idiosyncrat read carefully, he would see that Jackendoff does not dismiss an external world. He merely states that we have perceptions of it (through our senses) and then our brain constructs the conceptual basis of that reality. He does not deny reality, only says that we internalize it to "create" our interpretation of the outside reality. Also, he is not speculating about this philosophically, he provides an abundance of evidence from the neuropsychology of vision and perception to make his point, and I believe, he is very convincing.

Good overview book. Linguistics is a fascinating study and everyone who wants to understand the efforts to analyze how language works should understand a little about linguistics.

On almost every page of this book, I encountered an something which caused my to spontaneously exclaim "exactly!" or "Wow!". I'm wrapping up my masters degree in Linguistics, and had still not found a theoretical framework within which I would have wanted to do research. My exposure to mainstream generative theories (mostly GB and Minimalism) had left me with an empty feeling inside as well as a great number of nagging suspicions that something was fundamentally wrong here. I was starting to turn into a boring anti-Chomskian and was reading up on every lesser-known grammar theory I could find in hopes of finding confirmation of the ideas of language that were starting to take shape in my head. I was also totally perplexed as to how grammar theory was supposed to integrate with psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, and evolutionary questions. To make a long story short, reading this book amounted to the experience of having a premier linguist with decades of professional experience at the forefront of the field say: "Your suspicions are justified, you're not the only one with these questions, here are some possible answers...", and then lay out a theory that convinces through its clarity, descriptive and explanatory power, and psychological and neurological plausibility. A side effect of reading this book is that I realized it is possible to be a nativist and a proponent of UG in spirit while also embracing advances made in connectionist, probabilistic, and statistical approaches to processing and language learning. Thanks Ray!

This is an extremely good book on the various branches of linguistics, and cognitive linguistics, and their interrelations. While this is not my field and I cannot judge how fairly Jackendoff characterizes particular lines of theory and research (mindful here of an earlier review), never have I learned so much from a single book, and I left it with a profound respect for the care with which scholars of language go about their work, and the quality of the ideas resulting therefrom.

Actually S.Dardon summarized things quite well so I have little to add, other than to say this should be required reading as part of any thorough-going education on psycholinguistics. Whether or not one agrees with all of Jackendoff's proposals, he offers detailed reasons for his ideas and often argues persuasively, making this a reference work which will serve serious students well for years to come.

But not nearly as good as many people would have believe. Jackendoff has an unquestionably good broad grasp of mainstream contemporary research in grammar and cognitive psychology, and his approach to grammatical theory is way saner than mainstream generative grammar. But he is too dismissive of many things he evidently does not understand, like Cognitive Linguistics (which he

calls "combinatorial", overusing the most overused word in this book), or anthropologically-oriented approaches to language. This is too bad, because he talks himself into a terrible solipsistic mess in his chapters on semantics (where he attacks "formal", truth-conditional semantics), which, as far as I can see, the only ideas that can get him out are those he dismisses the most casually.

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