

Lila Gleitman, Psychology and Linguistics

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Lila Gleitman

Lila R. Gleitman, professor emerita of psychology and linguistics in Penn's School of Arts and Sciences, died on August 8. She was 91.

Dr. Gleitman was born in Brooklyn and graduated from the James Madison High School in Sheepshead Bay. After earning a bachelor's degree in literature from Antioch College, she entered graduate school in linguistics at Penn's School of Arts and Sciences, also working as a research assistant in Penn's department of linguistics. She studied under Zellig Harris and earned her master's degree in 1965 and her PhD in 1967. She began her academic career as an assistant professor at Swarthmore College, teaching there from 1968 to 1971. In 1972, she became the William T. Carter Professor of Education at Penn. She subsequently served as professor of linguistics and as the Steven and Marcia Roth Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania from 1973 until she retired in 2001.

In 1991, Dr. Gleitman and Aravind Joshi of Penn Engineering founded the Institute for Research in Cognitive Science at Penn; she co-directed the center until 2001. Under Dr. Gleitman's leadership, the Institute for Research in Cognitive Science became a model for promoting interactions between psychology, linguistics, computer science, philosophy, neuroscience and other branches of inquiry that contribute to the computational study of the mind (a role inherited by Penn's MindCORE today).

Dr. Gleitman's contributions to the study of language and cognition are renowned. In a career that spanned six decades, she explored questions pertaining to language in children and adults, such as how children acquire language, how language and thought are related, the nature of concepts, and the role of syntax in shaping the direction of word learning. She has earned particular acclaim for her work showing that children's keen sensitivity to syntactic structure plays a crucial role in their language acquisition. Dr. Gleitman and her collaborators' theory of syntactic bootstrapping enabled them to address many longstanding mysteries in the field, such as how blind children effortlessly acquire spoken language (including such words as "look" and "see," and color terms), and how deaf isolates invent sign language without exposure to any language at all.

Dr. Gleitman was a legendary mentor who trained a long and distinguished list of psycholinguists, many of whom went on to become central figures in the field. As former colleagues John Trueswell, professor of psychology, and Anna Papafragou, professor of linguistics, note, "Lila was a tremendous colleague and teacher. Her secret weapon was to combine serious discourse with joy, laughter and, crucially, respect for all present. This was on full display each week, at the famous 'cheese seminar' held at her home and named in honor of the cheese she served. There, student projects were regularly discussed, shaped and improved through her exceptional ability to get to the heart of the matter. She was deeply interested in mentoring students throughout her entire career, with much of her best work coming from collaborations with students."

Dr. Gleitman was widely recognized for her influential research: She was a member of the National Academy of Sciences and an elected fellow of the American Psychological Association, the Association for Psychological Science, the Society of Experimental Psychologists, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She served as President of the Society for Language Development, the Society for Philosophy and Psychology, and the Linguistic Society of America. Her publications include *Phrase and Paraphrase* (1970, with Henry Gleitman), *Language Acquisition: The State of the Art* (1982, co-edited with Eric Wanner), *Language and Experience: Evidence from the Blind Child* (1985, with Barbara Landau), *Sentence First, Arguments Afterward: Essays in Language and Learning* (2020), and the upcoming *Oxford Handbook of the Mental Lexicon* (co-edited with Dr. Papafragou and Dr. Trueswell).

Dr. Gleitman is survived by her two daughters, Claire and Ellen; and grandchildren, Zachary, Zoe, Philip and Lucas.