

# The alpha and omega of Jerome Bruner's contributions to the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics

Willem J.M. Levelt

Director Emeritus, Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics

Presentation at the official opening  
of the Jerome Bruner Library,  
January 8th 2020

Today it is exactly 40 years and one week ago that this Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics was established here in Nijmegen. That was on January 1st, 1980. President Reimar Lüst performed the opening ceremony on March 18th in our first Institute building, the former Canisius College on Berg en Dalseweg. (Sadly, Reimar Lüst passed away almost exactly forty years later, on March 31st, 2020).

However, the Institute has a pre-history. We started as a try-out Max Planck Project Group. That Project group began on September 1st, 1976, consisting of one person, me, plus an electronic typewriter, both located in my Nijmegen Psychology Laboratory office. During the following 5-7 months we rented liberal office space in this Canisius building, appointed secretarial, administrative and technical support staff as well as a 10-person, temporary scientific staff, recruited from various European countries and the United States. We also proudly installed a PDP 11-55 computer.

The Project Group was officially opened by President Lüst on May 3rd, 1977 in the presence of numerous Dutch and German officials and a number of world leaders in psycholinguistics, among them Lila and Henry Gleitman, Merrill Garrett, Herb and Eve Clark,

John Marshall, John Morton, Mimi Sinclair and Dan Slobin.

And this brings me to my point for today: Another participant in this opening ceremony was Professor Jerome Bruner. At the time, Professor Bruner was a very happy member of Oxford's Wolfson College and a very unhappy member of Oxford's Psychology Department, which he described as "institutionally appalling" in his 1983 autobiography *In Search of Mind*. I had already known Jerry Bruner since I spent my post-doctoral year '65/'66 at Harvard's rather revolutionary Center for Cognitive Studies, which was jointly directed by its founding fathers George Miller and Jerry Bruner. I still remember being generously received by Jerry and Blanche Bruner, together with my wife Elisabeth, for a welcoming party in their beautiful Cambridge mansion. That was only 55 years ago.

An essential greumium of any Max Planck institution is its Scientific Council, its Fachbeirat. For a Max Planck project group it is crucial, as it is involved in the decision making about whether such a temporary group should be turned into a permanent Max Planck Institute. President Lüst had asked me to provide nominations for this Council. My friend Ino Flores d'Arcais suggested to me that we should nominate professor Bruner as Chair of the Council. D'Arcais had also been a post-doc at the Center for Cognitive Studies, together with me. He had been in Jerry Bruner's department, whereas I was in George Miller's. That was a brilliant thought indeed, and – thank heavens – it worked out well. As Jerry Bruner wrote in his autobiography: "I accepted in the mid-1970s (with some trepidation) the Chairmanship of the Scientific Advisory Committee of the Max Planck "Study Group" of Psycholinguistics". And he modestly added: "I knew it would seem odd that an American (albeit an Oxford professor) should be promoting a countervailing European center for research".

I later asked Jerry Bruner to honor us and the Max Planck Society by presenting the opening lecture on the 3rd of May 1977. Jerry accepted and his lecture, entitled *Mother-infant Dialogue and early Linguistic Awareness*, was widely announced by way of posters all over the place (remember, there were no digital social media at the time). The lecture was presented in the large auditorium of the Canisius building.

Jerry was well aware that he was publicly putting us on the map; the first Max Planck research institution established outside

of Germany, the first one in the language sciences. This is what he wrote about it in his autobiography:

When the institution at Nijmegen was founded I presented it with a gift of a seventeenth century print, a map of the heavens, in the four corners of which are engravings of the observatories in Greenwich, Leiden, Copenhagen and Padua. It was to wish them good luck in mapping the world of language. That mapping will be harder than mapping the heavens. The heavens stay put when you are looking at them. Language changes when you think about it. In the end, probably, full linguistic mapping will be impossible. For you cannot exhaust the subject by studying language “just” as a symbol system with its inherent structure – or “just” in any single way. Language is for using, and the uses of language are so varied, so rich, and each use so preemptive a way of life, that to study it is to study the world and, indeed, all possible worlds.

On the tavola’s passe-partout, Jerry had engraved:

Incipitote quo hoc fiat facilius

What does this mean? Professor Bruner’s lecture had not only opened the Project Group, but also its first scientific conference, entitled *The Child’s Conception of Language*. One year later, we published the proceedings of this conference (Sinclair et al., 1978), which, of course, also contained Jerry Bruner’s opening address. That paper ended as follows:

It remains only for the right personage to declare this observatory officially opened, with the right performative! If this is my function, I duly exercise it.

Then follows the engraved Latin text, plus its English translation:

Start ye so that it be more easily done!

Jerry Bruner chaired the Project Group’s Fachbeirat meetings in 1977, 1978 and 1979. President Lüst had envisaged a decision on

the Group's future no later than during the second half of 1979. This meant that the Fachbeirat's report of 1978 would be crucial. Jerry lived up to our dearest hopes. Here is the concluding sentence from his report to the president:

I think I can sum up by saying, simply, that the report from the Fachbeirat is that excellent progress has been made and that it is our considered view that the Max-Planck Projektgruppe should now be transformed to Institute status under Professor Levelt's direction in Holland. At some future time it may be appropriate to appoint a co-director whose formation is in linguistics proper, but when that is done it should be assured that such a co-director is also wedded to the ideal of interdisciplinary work involving both linguistics and psychology.

Jerry was clearly referring to Wolfgang Klein, whom I had invited to join me in the Project Group. And indeed, in 1980, Wolfgang became my co-director.

Jerry Bruner's report also touched on the then precarious issue of the future Institute's localization. It explained, in subtle wording, that the combined strength in both psychology and linguistics, provided by Nijmegen University and a future Max Planck Institute, would create a "critical mass" in these fields, unmatched in Europe and soon on a par with MIT or Stanford University. The letter mentions "a special Dutch genius for playing host to international ventures" and concludes: "I can think of no place in Europe better suited for a Max-Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics".

I had been nervously following the meetings of the Max Planck officials in which they were preparing the decision, in particular the meeting they had with our Scientific Council, chaired by Professor Bruner. I kept a diary at the time. Here is one passage about Jerry's performance in that crucial meeting: "And there was Bruner (...) who possesses the gift of raising participants in a discussion above themselves. You don't dare, in Bruner's presence, to talk about petty details – he appeals to a constructive stance in people and nobody can resist that".

In the end it all worked out well and the Institute was born, after this 3-year pregnancy, on January 1st 1980.

Jerry Bruner spent the academic year 1978/79 at the Netherlands

Institute for Advanced Study in Wassenaar, where we had organized a “year of language acquisition”. During that year, but also time and again around Fachbeirat meetings over the following decade, Jerry visited us, spending most of his time talking with our students and postdocs about their ongoing work and always “lifting them up” as it were. Here is another passage from my diary: “Bruner always makes you think that you are onto something important, something valuable”.

When George Miller visited us during the Project Group years, he said about Jerry:

He is never discouraged by over two thousand years of studying the mind.

Over the years Jerry Bruner and I kept a correspondence – often in hand-written letters, as e-mail did not yet exist in those archaic times. Today the Institute’s archive contains several of those letters by Jerry.

In 1990, after no less than 13 years, Jerry resigned from the Fachbeirat. These had been the pioneering years of the Institute, carrying Jerry’s mark. They are the alpha of Jerry’s contributions to my Institute. Let me now turn to the omega.

In 2006 I became director emeritus of the Institute. My dear colleagues organised a wonderful surprise farewell event on Friday May 19th, two days after my 68th birthday. The single most outstanding surprise that day was Jerry Bruner’s presence. I was deeply moved by the then 90-year old Jerry coming all the way over just for this farewell event, but even more so because he came only weeks after he had lost his beloved wife Carol Feldman. During the meeting, Jerry Bruner presented a short lecture about the progress in psycholinguistics since the establishment of the Institute.

After the event, Jerry spent two days with my wife Elisabeth and myself in Amsterdam. They were days of warm friendship.

Five years later, on April 27th, 2011, I attended the 50th anniversary celebration of Bruner’s book *The Process of Education*, a book that has changed education both in the United States and in Europe – as I would argue during the meeting.

It was a lovely event, in which a large part of Jerry’s worldwide

scientific network, so well represented in his library, participated. It was the last time I met Jerry, the last time I heard him speak in public, full of humor.

During the panel discussion I got the opportunity to praise Jerry, from the audience. This is what I said:

I came to know Jerry when I was invited to be a Fellow at the Center for Cognitive Studies, long, long ago. It was directed by Jerry and by George Miller and that year changed my life. It also eventually caused the establishment of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. I mention that because Jerry agreed to become the first chair of our Research Council. That has been essential in the development of the Institute. Jerry, with his slanted view, would lift up any discussion of how to proceed. We were not moving, we were leaping. The title of this panel is “Education in the US today”. We could have organized a second panel “Education in Europe today” and I can only tell you, from experience, that Jerry’s inspiration is very, very much around everywhere. The Academies of Science have combined in Europe to develop primary education and in particular this idea of the child being a scientist. That is Jerry’s idea and it is very much alive in Europe at the moment. Thank you, Jerry, for your inspiration at all these levels.

To this Jerry immediately responded:

It was God’s idea.

In his closing remarks, Jerry expressed his deep concerns about present day education in the United States, concluding:

But anyone who expresses deep satisfaction with the current state of affairs, everyone who thinks things are OK, better go and see their psychiatrist.

We should be happy that Jerry was spared the gloom of the new US presidency. Jerry Bruner passed away on June 5th, 2016, one hundred years old.

A few months later, in September, I participated in the short, but impressive Memorial Ceremony for professor Bruner, also held in the Law School of New York University. Among the speakers were Professor Eleanor Fox, Jerry's partner in life. She began her presentation with: "I did not know Jerry Bruner for the first 90 years of his life".

After the ceremony, Dan Slobin and I were invited to come over to Jerry's apartment, two blocks away. I had been there before, and I was happy to see that Jerry's magnificent personal library was still there in full glory.

We asked Whitley Bruner, what was going to happen with his father's library. And his short answer was: "Nobody wants it, not Harvard, not New York University, no-one else, it will have to be dismantled". He had already given away a few boxes of books to the antiquarians shop downstairs.

On the flight home, I realised that, if any institution could preserve this unique library, it would be our Max Planck Institute. By that time, I was a humble emeritus; I could only propose such a thing to my dear colleagues, the present Institute directors. I did, and I was greatly pleased that they adopted the idea, without much ado. Like myself, they appreciated the scientific relevance of this unique personal library. I want to thank them for this. We all ought to thank them for this.

When we proposed the idea to the Bruner family their response was just as positive: they generously donated Jerry Bruner's personal library to our Max Planck Institute. Thank you, dear Bruner family!

From then on, our task was to get the library shipped to Nijmegen, to import it without tax duties, to fully document it and to make it accessible to any serious user. To be honest, we had underestimated all of these tasks, but Naiveté is the catalyst of life.

But before we could even do so there was another urgent problem: would we be able to retrieve the books from the downstairs antiquarian? We contacted them and they were helpful. After a deep search, they identified no less than 204 books on their shelves that had certainly – or almost certainly – belonged to Bruner. No more than a few books had been sold in the meantime, but neither their precise number nor titles could be reconstructed at this stage. Of course, the remaining 204 books were the bookshop's property

now. Once more, I had to seek the help of the Institute's directors. Could we buy-back all of these books, keeping in mind that the antiquarians had not selected the least valuable items? Again, my colleagues agreed, to safeguard the integrity of this scientific treasure. The bookshop had certainly never before made such a quick and profitable deal.

We can now be sure that at least 95%, but probably substantially more, of Jerry's books are here – in total some 3300 books.

Our head librarian Karin Kastens accepted the enormous task to process and catalog the library. A less professional and gifted librarian would not have succeeded. But she did.

Christine Bruner, Jerry's daughter-in-law, sent us a box with what we came to call "the Bruner paraphernalia", including some wonderful photographs and objects from Jerry's apartment. These can now be found on display together with the library.

Upon entering the Institute building you may already have noticed the display of busts, figuring some of the great pioneers of our science - among them are Wilhelm Wundt, Clara Stern and Roman Jakobson. These busts were sculptured by Nijmegen artist Paul de Swaaf. When Jerry was here for his last Fachbeirat meeting in 1990, I asked Paul de Swaaf to make Jerry's portrait. Jerry liked the idea and the bust was made. Following the arrival of the Bruner collection, the Institute moved Jerry's bust next to his library, thereby promoting him to a distinguished pioneer of our science.

Jerry Bruner's library is the ever-lasting omega of his contributions to the Max Planck Institute; a unique treasure for our science and a living tribute to an exceptional mind and generous friend of the Institute.

- Bruner, J.S. (1971). *The Process of Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J.S. (1983). *In Search of Mind: Essays in Autobiography*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Sinclair, A., Jarvella, R.J., & Levelt, W.J.M., Eds. (1978). *The Child's Conception of Language*. Berlin: Springer.