

# Different languages make different listeners

## Professor Anne Cutler

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Babies are born with no predisposition to a particular language; they acquire the language they hear. In other words, the processes in the baby brain must be language-universal. Adults listen extremely efficiently to speech in their native language, drawing on processes that would work very inefficiently with other languages. In other words, speech processing in the adult brain is language-specific.

What happens in between? That's what this lecture is about.

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**Tuesday, 2 August 2011**  
**6.00 - 7.00pm**

Sunderland Lecture Theatre, ground floor, Medical Building, corner of Grattan Street and Royal Parade, The University of Melbourne, Parkville  
(Melways ref: Map 2B C7)

***RSVP and further information:***

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## **Professor Anne Cutler** **BA, DipEd, MA (Melb), PhD (Texas)**

As a baby-boomer in Australia, Anne Cutler benefitted from a now almost forgotten side-effect of the wartime disruption of Europe: the extraordinarily high quality of language teaching in Australian schools in the 1950's. Among the highly qualified refugee academics who survived by teaching their native language were her Belgian high-school French teacher, and her Austrian teacher of German - a PhD from the University of Vienna.



This background led her to study languages at the University of Melbourne. Thanks to regulations mandating a "science subject" in the BA degree, she discovered psychology there as well. The link between these subjects was not at first easy to discern, partly because of 1960s experimental psychology's earnest concern with proving that it really was a science subject. This issue was approached by experimenting mostly on rats, not many of which use language?

Luckily, however, psycholinguistics emerged as an independent sub-discipline in time for her PhD study at the University of Texas. Psycholinguistics is a field in which language production, comprehension and acquisition are investigated with the methods of experimental psychology. Psycholinguistics has been her intellectual home ever since.

Her research has centred on the recognition of spoken language, beginning in her PhD studies. These studies began with the role of rhythm and intonation in comprehension; because these vary greatly across languages, this topic impelled her into cross-linguistic comparisons. Her most important discoveries have concerned how adult processing of spoken language is adapted exquisitely to suit the native tongue, making for great efficiency in listening to native-language speech, but difficulty in listening to structurally different foreign languages. She has studied this process of adaptation from its source in the earliest stages of infants' acquisition of language through all stages of adult processing of first and second language.

Her book "Native Listening," to be published in 2011 by MIT Press, summarises the story as revealed by nearly four decades of painstaking and internationally competitive research.

After postdoctoral fellowships at MIT and Sussex University, she pursued this research from 1982 to 1993 as a Medical Research Council staff scientist at the Applied Psychology Unit in Cambridge, and from 1993 as director at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. Psycholinguistics is inherently interdisciplinary, but because its component disciplines historically belong to different university faculties, most psycholinguists find themselves surrounded only by linguists or only by psychologists; the Nijmegen MPI is the world's only research institute devoted entirely to this field in all its inherent breadth.

Anne Cutler is also professor of comparative psycholinguistics at the Radboud University Nijmegen, and, since 2006, Professor in MARCS Auditory Laboratories at the University of Western Sydney. Her awards include the prestigious Spinoza Prize of the Dutch Science Council (1999). She is an elected member of seven scientific academies, in Europe, the US and Australia.