

SETTING THE STAGE.....

Right now, as you read this sentence, you are engaged in the process of language comprehension. As I write this sentence, I am engaged in language production. Probably neither of us finds our behavior remarkable. We comprehend and produce language all day long—when we read or speak, when we listen to dialogue or conversations, when we struggle to write a term paper (or a textbook chapter), or even when we compose the most mundane pieces of prose (“Gone to the library—meet me at 5 at the car”). In short, we take our language abilities for granted.

Evidence is abundant, however, that language use and abilities are not so straightforward. Researchers studying artificial intelligence have found it extremely difficult to build computer systems that can understand language (spoken or written) as easily as a 4-year-old child can. Parents of toddlers can attest that although language acquisition is rapid, a person takes several years to become proficient. Many high school and college students come to fully appreciate the complexities of language only when they try to master a second one.