

Annette Karmiloff-Smith, in memoriam

« Annette is ... a net ». It is with these words that, one evening in the fall of 1977, Jérôme Bruner introduced his speech opening the dinner organized to celebrate the thesis that Annette Karmiloff-Smith had brilliantly defended in front of a jury composed also of Bärbel Inhelder, Hermine Sinclair De Zwart and John Lyons. What Jerry wanted to emphasize by this word game was the ability of Annette to absorb and organize in her work the essential epistemological positions in hard competition in this decade about the status of language and its role in cognitive development; absorption capacity which, Jerry added, was complemented by real experimental creativity and remarkable talent in theoretical elaboration and exposition.

Arriving in Geneva at the end of the sixties for contingent reasons, Annette enrolled in what was then called the “Institut Jean-Jacques Rousseau” of the University of Geneva, and obtained, in 1970, her bachelor’s degree in experimental psychology. During these studies, her intelligence and dynamism had been noticed by Bärbel Inhelder and Hermine Sinclair De Zwart, and the latter (the famous “Mimi”) asked her to take up an assistant position in 1972, then introduced her to Jean Piaget, who hired her the same year at the *International Center of Genetic Epistemology* (ICGE). I was also, since 1969, assistant to Hermine Sinclair and Jean Piaget and we became colleagues and soon close friends: we supported each other in the design and realization of the developmental psycholinguistic experiments which would give rise to our respective theses, and together we carried out research at the ICGE on the theme of "generalization" (1972-1973), followed by another on the "correspondences" (1973-1974), the results of which were published by Piaget under our two names in 1978 and 1980.

After her thesis defense (whose revised version was published in 1979 under the title *A functional approach to child language*) Annette was recruited by Bärbel Inhelder to participate in her research program on the cognitive strategies used by children to move from one stage of development to the next. She rapidly became the leader of the project's collaborative group and played a decisive role in its theoretical reorientation, highlighting the role of pragmatic and linguistic factors in the deployment of children's strategies.

During her Geneva period, Annette already shone with her humor, with a “joie de vivre” that made her enjoy (all) the pleasures of life, and at the same time she was distinguished by her intelligence and by a theoretical requirement that have sometimes led her to take positions different from those of her thesis director, and even from “le patron” (Piaget) nevertheless venerated. Appreciated by a few, Annette's liberty was only moderately pleasing to the piagetian "guardians of the temple", which resulted notably in her absence from the book directed by Inhelder and Cellierier, "Le cheminement des découvertes de l'enfant" (The Process of the Discoveries of The child”), describing results of research that she had however largely oriented.

If Annette had the extreme elegance of still prefacing this book, she gradually took her distance from Geneva and, with her departure for Nijmegen, began the long and rich scientific journey that was to make her famous. Had she succeeded Inhelder, she would no doubt have been able to ensure a genuine critical continuity to the Piagetian project, now almost abandoned. But her journey and her work are ultimately more useful, in that they bear witness to a courage, a thought and a smile that will not be forgotten.

Jean-Paul Bronckart
Professeur honoraire, Université de Genève