



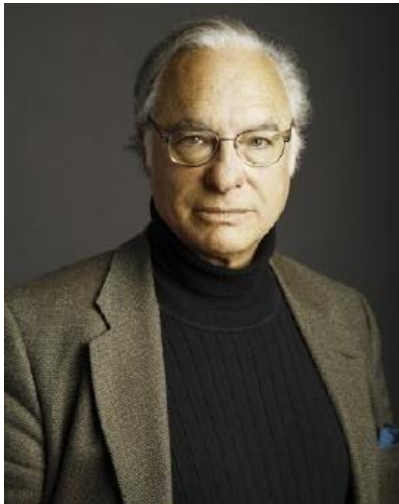
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Archives Jean Piaget

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Reflections on Piaget, Chomsky, Fodor, epigenetics and the Baldwin Effect

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Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini is (since August '99) Professor of Cognitive Science at the University of Arizona, member of the Cognitive Science Program, of the Department of Psychology, of the Department of Linguistics, and honorary member of the Department of Management and Policy. From January 1994 to July 1999 he was director of the Department of Cognitive Science (Dipsco), of the Scientific Institute San Raffaele, in Milan (Italy), and professor of Cognitive Psychology at the San Raffaele University. From September 1985 to December 1993 he was Principal Research Scientist at the Center for Cognitive Science of MIT. He has been a visiting professor at Harvard University (Spring 2007, 1989 and 1988), the University of Maryland (Fall 2006), MIT (Fall 2003 and Spring 1993), at the Collège de France (Paris, May-June 2002), Rutgers University, NJ (Fall 1992), at Harvard University (Spring 1988, 1989 and 2007) and at the University of Bologna (Spring 1997 and 1998). In August 1990 he was the chairman and organizer of the XII Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Society, held at MIT. From 1980 to 1985 he has been the Director of the Florence Center for the History and Philosophy of Science (Florence, Italy); from 1974 to 1979, the Director of the Royaumont Center for A Science of Man (Chaired by Jacques Monod) in Paris, and lecturer at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris-Sorbonne). He obtained his doctorate in Physics at the University of Rome in 1968.



Photo: Ioanna Berthoud Papandropoulou

Résumé de la conférence

Over 40 years have passed since the Royaumont debate between Jean Piaget and Noam Chomsky, with contributions there and then of many other illustrious scholars. I will attempt to summarize some of the still relevant issues from that debate (that I had the privilege of organizing), update them and then move to a critical presentation of some related open problems in psychology, in cognitive science and in biology. Notably epigenetics (a topic that has occupied a prominent role in Piaget's work and that has bloomed in the last 15 years or so) and the so-called Baldwin effect. Contrary to what has been recently proposed, I will show that the Baldwin effect cannot be linked to Waddington's canalization and to present-day epigenetics. There is no evidence of any instance of the Baldwin effect in biology proper, and its alleged explanatory power in the evolution of language and cognition vanishes. It's interesting, though, that there is such a need for a mechanism like that in standard neo-Darwinian reconstructions of the evolution of language and cognition. During the debate, Guy Cellérier said that Piaget had a "gentleman's disagreement with Darwin". I and other biologists cringed at the time. Now I have developed myself a gentleman's disagreement with Darwin and I owe posthumous excuses to Jean Piaget on this point.