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Neil Smith, Ianthi Tsimpli, Gary Morgan and Bencie Woll
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The Signs of a Savant

Language Against the Odds

Every once in a while nature gives us insight into the human condition by providing us with a unique case whose special properties illuminate the species as a whole. Christopher is such an example. Despite disabilities which mean that everyday tasks are burdensome chores, Christopher is a linguistic wonder who can read, write, speak, understand and translate more than twenty languages. On some tests he shows a severely low IQ, hinting at ineducability, yet his English language ability indicates an IQ in excess of 120 (a level more than sufficient to enter university). Christopher is a savant, someone with an island of startling talent in a sea of inability. This book documents his learning of British Sign Language, casting light on the modularity of cognition, the modality neutrality of the language faculty, the structure of memory, the grammar of signed language and the nature of the human mind.

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For Christopher and his Family

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Preface

We have been studying Christopher for nearly twenty years, documenting – and marvelling at – his remarkable linguistic ability. The fruits of our earlier research resulted in a dozen articles and a book, *The Mind of a Savant* (Smith & Tsimpli, 1995),[1] in which we spelt out our interpretation of his skewed abilities. This work raised more questions than it answered, and one in particular has preoccupied us ever since: how would Christopher with his flair for languages but with severe apraxia, some of the characteristics of autism, and limited intellectual ability, cope with a signed language? The tension is obvious: he has a huge talent for language but signed languages require precisely those social, visuo-spatial and kinaesthetic abilities in which he is most lacking. Hence we decided to teach him British Sign Language (BSL) and observe the results.

Some of the findings reported here have been published in articles (Morgan *et al.*, 2002a, 2002b, 2007; Smith, 2003) but most of it is new. We have also presented parts of this material at conferences and seminars at UCL (University College London), Korea National University Seoul, the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, the University of Oxford, the University of Cambridge, the University of Reading, the University of the West of England in Bristol and Gallaudet University in Washington DC. We are grateful to the various audiences for their input.

In addition to this we have received a vast amount of help from others in the preparation of this book. Our major debt is to Christopher, whose patience and enthusiasm have been a source of inspiration, and to his family, especially his sister, Ann Fairclough. We are likewise indebted to the Camphill Village Trust, especially John Carlile and his family, for help and advice and for providing an environment in which Christopher and others can thrive. In addition we are grateful for comments, conversation, criticism and help both practical and theoretical to Noam Chomsky, Annabel Cormack, Frances Elton, Uta Frith, Annette Karmiloff-Smith, Jill Lake, Ann Law, Peter Lovatt, Peter Möbius, Laura-Ann Petitto, Deirdre Wilson and Cambridge University Press's anonymous referees. None of these should be held responsible for what we have done with their contributions.

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