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Direct and Real: Carol A. Fowler's Theory and Approach to Science

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ABSTRACT

This article includes both an introduction to the special issue and discussion of our connections with Carol Fowler. We briefly review the motivation for the special issue and reflect upon the ways that she has impacted us and science more generally.

Dedicating a special issue of *Ecological Psychology* to the work and influence of Carol Fowler hardly needs justification. Her impact on *Ecological Psychology* and, more broadly, the fields of speech and reading research are clear even to those who do not belong to any of these communities. But Fowler's scientific contributions, which are numerous and directly motivate the articles in this issue, are only part of what compelled us to put this issue together. In large part, we wanted to recognize Fowler's influence on us and many other scientists.

One could not describe Fowler's style as flashy. She is not motivated to write articles that grab headlines or to build a reputation for its own sake. Instead, her impact on the field emerges not just from a body of work that is exemplary in its theoretical precision and empirical rigor but also from so many individual discussions in her office, during lab meetings, or in written reviews and responses to the articles of her colleagues (the difference between verbal exchange and written exchange with her is inconsequential as her written responses are nearly as prompt, copious, and well articulated as her verbal responses). In each of these interactions her arguments are characterized by deep knowledge, formidable reasoning, and a willingness to be completely (and helpfully) blunt. What this ensures is an unmistakable position. No one listening to her wonders what she thinks about a particular model or theory. To be on the outside of one of these interactions is to see an ideal of scientific discourse, the healthy and frank exchange of ideas between equals. She manages to achieve these dynamics no matter whether her discussion is with a member of the National Academy, an assistant professor, or a 1st-year graduate student. To be on the inside is to be tacitly but persistently reminded not to talk unless you know what you're saying and to be fully prepared to defend your ideas against clear and well-articulated counterarguments. As her students and her junior colleague, we can attest that the experience was terrifying,

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thrilling, and absolutely essential. In the obvious way, it prepared us for the life of an academic and scholar, but, more importantly, it shaped our thinking, both how we do it and what we think about.¹

In honor of Fowler's work we have solicited papers from her faculty mentors, contemporaries, and students that demonstrate the breadth and longevity of her influence. The companion pieces of Shankweiler and Turvey make the case for her broad importance in reading and speech, respectively. Those who know Fowler's work from one or the other field will no doubt be impressed that her influence extends as far as it does. Tuller and Feldman add to these retrospectives the view of Fowler's graduate school cohort who were influenced by Fowler's ideas early on in their intellectual careers. These authors focus particularly on an idea that is fundamental in Fowler's writing and thinking, the intimate relation of production and perception. Taken together, these papers give a sense of the structure of Fowler's theoretical contributions.

The issue continues with a paper from two more of Fowler's graduate school contemporaries, Remez and Rubin, who examine her work on the specification of articulatory gestures in multiple modalities. In doing so, they highlight an experiment that exemplifies the elegance of Fowler's empirical work and the questions her experiments continue to raise about the specification of speech gestures in the perceptual array. The relation between perception and production is revisited in Pardo's piece highlighting Fowler's contributions to understanding this interplay in the domain of imitation and conversation. Here we see a discussion not only of Fowler's work and influence in understanding how perception and production are linked but also one of her more interesting ideas, that linguistic units are public and negotiable. The final two papers of this issue move beyond retrospectives to show in very different ways how Fowler's work has provided a basis for structuring ways of thinking. Gick's paper examines the support found in 30 years of motor control research for the idea of coordinative structures, an idea that Fowler and her colleagues applied to speech production in 1980. The author shows that Fowler et al.'s work is as relevant (perhaps even more so) now as it was 36 years ago. In Tuller and Raczaszek-Leonardi, Fowler's work in changing the conception of phonemes inspires a dynamic and poetic homage.

The striking thing about the papers collected here is their variety. No two are discussing quite the same thing, which speaks to the depth and breadth of Fowler's influence. Her work also remains relevant to questions that occupy the minds of researchers in fields ranging from ecological theory to speech perception to social dynamics. Through her work, she has proposed and solidified ideas that are today essentially commonplace; a graduate student who holds them dearly and close to her heart may not even know from whom they came.

¹ A personal note from James S. Magnuson: I have a unique perspective as a cognitive psychologist who has been deeply influenced (if not fully converted theoretically) by Fowler's thinking and approach to science. My first interactions with her were by correspondence when she was action editor on one of my papers nearly two decades ago. Her gentle yet firm rejection was accompanied by some of the most constructive feedback I have ever received. When I joined her as a colleague at UConn and Haskins in 2004, I admit it was with some trepidation. I expected that we would be at odds, given her reputation as a formidable debater and staunch defender of Direct Realism. It was a delight to discover that she was also incredibly generous with her time and intellect. In particular, I recall one case when, after explaining what was wrong with my work from her theoretical perspective, she Socratically helped me refine the cognitive explanation I had been attempting to develop. Working with her and Navin Viswanathan has been a highlight of my working life. She implicitly and explicitly challenged us to strive for precision and clarity in all things and led by example. I am a better scientist and mentor thanks to my time with her.

It is amply clear to those who resonate with her ideas that her account, with its emphasis on direct perception, offers a markedly different framework for the study of language use. But even those who disagree with her theory must acknowledge her knack for cutting to the heart of matters and shedding light on crucial questions any theory must address. Fowler has tirelessly contributed to the empirical literature with elegantly designed experiments that deserve the attention of every researcher interested in understanding spoken language use. We are delighted with the contributions collected here and are grateful to the contributors. We are also grateful to Carol Fowler as a mentor and colleague and look forward to seeing where she leads the field next.