Book review

Basso, A. (2003). *Aphasia and its therapy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. xviii + 317pp. £27.50/$47.50 (hbk). ISBN: 0-19-513587-3.

This is a terrific book that is likely to be popular with students studying aphasia, be they students of psychology, or linguistic or speech and language pathology, for Anna Basso’s style is accessible, informative, and above all, entertaining. She writes with confidence about a topic she knows well, drawing on research (hers and others’) and clinical anecdotes. She adds to this her own philosophy developed over many years of scholarship and clinical practice, the mix providing a highly readable synthesis of fact, theory, clinical practice, and individual views. Basso reviews a broad spectrum of literature starting with an historical overview of seminal studies in aphasia. This commences with Broca’s work and covers selected studies up until those of the 1970s, which she sees as a turning point in aphasia studies. Views from conflicting camps of the neo-classicists, the behaviourists, the cognitive neuropsychologists, the social school, and others are reviewed along with examples of how these schools of thought have influenced therapy studies. She also reviews the important domain of measuring effectiveness of therapy. The book concludes with two appendices, the first containing two stories about the nature of knowledge and wisdom, one set in the Soviet Union and the other based on the wisdom of Mao Zedong, although set in pre-communist China. The second appendix contains one story about two doctors at the time of Louis XVI. I will return to these at the end.

In the opening chapter, the contributions of some of the major historical figures in the field of aphasia, such as Broca, Wernicke, Lichtheim, Dejerine, Jackson (but not Brain), and Marie, are summarised. This is followed by a brief review of some of the major contributors of the twentieth century, Goldstein, Bay, Schuell, Gerschwind, and Luria, the first stage of aphasiology. Basso considers that the next stage of aphasiology, or neuropsychology, her preferred term (p. 24), began with Goldstein relaunching the associationist theory in 1965 (no reference is given for this publication). Meanwhile, parallel to these developments in aphasiology in the USA the field was developing in the USSR. The publications of Luria, one of the best-known proponents of the work in Soviet Russia, were not known until a little later but became influential in continental Europe, although less so in the UK and the USA. Basso works from a classical descriptive model of aphasia, not as one might expect, the model developed by Harold Goodglass and his colleagues, but on Benson and Ardila’s (1996) taxonomy. As this follows very closely that of Goodglass, it is surprising that this isn’t spelt out. Reference to the highly influential work of Goodglass is introduced via Goodglass’s defence of the syndromic approach to aphasia assessment as laid out in his 1993 book *Understanding Aphasia*. Here, at last, follows an introduction of the Boston School’s assessment of aphasia, the most widely used assessment in all
English-speaking countries apart from the UK, it would seem (Katz et al., 2000). This chapter provides an excellent introduction to aphasia and should be recommended reading for all students of aphasia.

Chapters 3 and 4 cover a summary of aphasia therapy from World War I to the 1970s. Again, Basso sees this decade as a turning point in aphasia history and studies that have tried to test the effectiveness of aphasia therapy. She is justifiably critical of some of the so-called pragmatic approaches to therapy here and elsewhere in the book. She observes that this form of aphasia therapy often lacks ecological validity and cannot be the panacea for all types and severities of aphasia. In this chapter, Basso’s division of therapies into schools is somewhat stretched, with little justification save the judgement of other authors. For example, I am not sure I agree that Weigl (1961) can be described under the neurolinguistic approach, nor am I persuaded that, because we can assume that the author believed that language is not lost, this maps onto early claims of Chomsky about competence. The next chapter, on efficacy, is a must for students. Here Basso digests and lays out for the reader a series of studies on periods of spontaneous recovery, the effectiveness of treatment and, from this, the components that have been found to be beneficial to patients. I particularly like her conclusion because she makes it clear, here and elsewhere, that she firmly believes that aphasia therapy can work. To quote, “clinical studies . . . have demonstrated that aphasia therapy can enhance recovery in some patients . . . the question about efficacy of aphasia therapy was once important, today is obsolete” (p. 102). One may not agree with this view but one has to admire Basso’s faith. What we can sign up to, regardless of how far we follow her faith, is that the important questions now concern the nature of therapy and particulars about which participants will benefit. Whatever we may think about the evidence to date (and I think the data on evidence that Basso discusses are equivocal), surely she is absolutely right about the questions that need to be answered: which therapy is effective and for whom?

The conclusion of Chapter 4 leads neatly into the next three chapters devoted to cognitive psychology and rehabilitation studies conducted within the cognitive framework. Chapter 6 provides an introductory guide to the adoption of concepts, (modularity, universality, and subtraction) as well the tools of cognitive psychology, especially those used in the study of acquired language problems. The focus of this chapter is on acquired disorders of reading and writing that Basso uses to exemplify the difference between clinical and cognitive neuropsychology (p.123). Tucked into this chapter are sections on group (syndromes) versus single subject design debate, associations and dissociations, and identifying access and storage problems. The chapter provides a useful summary for students new to the field. A separate chapter is devoted to the lexicon, not surprisingly as single word assessment and therapy has been dominant in the cognitive neuropsychological approach to aphasia assessment and treatment. This is a great chapter for students, with a simple introduction to various models of single word processing. Basso outlines thinking on phonological and orthographic lexicons, conversion rules, and buffers, and touches on the semantic system. The chapter concludes with some thoughts about identifying the locus of damage.

Chapter 7 covers some studies in rehabilitation based on a cognitive neuropsychological approach. Selected studies are covered to illustrate therapy that has focused on disorders of naming, sentence production and comprehension, reading, and writing. Whereas studies to illustrate therapy for single word retrieval fit well within this model, the studies
selected for sentence-level therapy fit less well. The two studies by Mitchum and colleagues are based on Garrett’s model of sentence production but the two studies by Thompson and colleagues are theoretically driven by linguistic theory rather than processing models. Thompson’s work not only utilises assumptions about underlying hierarchical relationships between sentence constituents (based on generative grammar) but her results add psychological reality to theoretical concepts, in this case, the move alpha rule. Although an excellent example of thoughtful effective intervention, it does not illustrate cognitive neuropsychological approach to aphasia therapy.

In Chapter 8, Basso speculates on various factors involved in therapy in her search for a ‘‘theory of aphasia therapy’’. Here, and elsewhere in the book, she emphasises the importance of individual differences and the need to be cognisant of the multistranded nature of language disorders in aphasia. After a number of brief paragraphs she states, ‘‘this review is probably sufficient to demonstrate that most aphasic disorders have been shown (…) to recover’’ (p. 189), reiterating her views expressed earlier in Chapter 3.

Having reviewed a number of therapy studies and given us a summary chapter on what therapy might entail, Basso then, rather idiosyncratically, provides a further chapter on rehabilitation. This time there are more divisions, with the focus on methods of intervention. This chapter includes welcome inclusion of reports of her own intervention studies. In the section on sentence-level treatment, she illustrates ‘‘mapping therapy’’, one of the two approaches reported on in the previous chapter on treatment within the neuropsychological framework. Not surprisingly perhaps, given the theoretical framework used, she does not pick up on Thompson’s studies.

The penultimate chapter focuses on pragmatic approaches to aphasia therapy. Here Basso outlines a set of useful concepts subsumed under this heading while making the important point that pragmatics, that is, the use of language, is not usually disturbed in aphasia. Difficulties in communication, conversation, exchange of ideas, and so on are a result of the language disorder, not vice versa (p.237). A short tour of topics such as deixis, presupposition, implicature, speech acts, and conversational structure acts as brief notes for the interested student. In conclusion, Basso reminds us of Audrey Holland’s wise words (1991): ‘‘pragmatic approaches are not designed to change the aphasia symptom-complex but to provide a framework in which the patient is expected to accommodate and compensate’’.

Basso’s concluding remarks are optimistic. She acknowledges that therapy in the past may have been poorly designed but paints a picture of a dynamic, thoughtful field of study and research that is influential in the clinical sphere. She also notes that ‘‘knowledge is never infinite’’ (presumably what she means here is that understanding and facts are never ultimate) and that no practice or school of thought holds any special status. All is subject to evolution and change. This is, perhaps, the most important message students reading this text should hold on to. Finally, the two appendices illustrate that there are different routes to knowledge, wisdom and understanding, different ways of conducting controlled scientific study and that the sudden flash of inspiration can change the way we think.

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