

## NOTE

# PERSONAL NAME ANOMIA: A SINGLE CASE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

A case presenting an anomia specific for person proper names but no naming impairment either for other types of proper names or for common names is reported. The deficit was equally present both in face-naming and in naming upon definition and was not affected by the descriptiveness of the labels borne by the individuals. The patient had no semantic processing impairment either for faces or names. The results are discussed in terms of impaired access to intact phonological representations.

## INTRODUCTION

Some patients showing a disproportionate or even an exclusive impairment of proper name production have been described during the last few years. Semenza and Zettin (1988, 1989) described two patients who exhibited impaired production for several types of proper names but absence of word finding problems for common names. They showed difficulties in retrieving names of people and names of geographical sites (rivers, mountains, towns etc.), while were able to provide correct and often precise information about the items to be named. This naming difficulty was observed in visual confrontation as well as in naming upon definition.

Patients showing a more specific deficit, i.e. an impairment restricted to people's name retrieval, have also been described. McKenna and Warrington (1980) reported the case of a patient who presented a deficit in naming people in the context of a spared ability to name cities and objects. More recently, Carney and Temple (1993) reported a similar patient. Lucchelli and De Renzi (1993) also described a patient with a nominal deficit that affected people's names but none of the other kinds of proper names that were tested (i.e. names of cities, states, rivers, monuments, etc.).

All these patients' naming deficits have been interpreted as instances of a category-specific anomia: proper name anomia<sup>3</sup>. There is some agreement on what is special about proper names processing. Most authors stressed that proper names convey almost no information about the entities they name. For instance, Cohen (1990) argued that proper names are arbitrary and meaningless in the sense that they would be detached from the semantic network representing conceptual knowledge. According to Semenza and Zettin (1988, 1989) the function of proper names is simply to refer to the objects so-named and not to describe them by any attribute. Proper names are "pure referring expressions". Similarly, Lucchelli and De Renzi (1992) expressed the idea that proper names are just tags that permit to identify their bearers but that on their own tell nothing on the properties of these bearers.

In this paper, we describe a new patient who shows a selective difficulty in naming

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<sup>3</sup> Shallice and Kartsounis (1993) described a patient who suffered from a difficulty to retrieve people's names, as well as the names of recently acquired concepts, such as AIDS. They, however, attributed the deficit of this case to anterograde amnesia.

people. The main steps of the investigation were as follows. First, it was assessed to what extent the patient could access identity-specific semantic codes storing biographical information about people (Bruce and Young, 1986), it was evaluated whether people's names comprehension was spared, and whether the patient's deficit was specific to people's names and did not extend to other classes of proper names. Then, it was investigated whether some aspects of phonological knowledge about the items to be retrieved was preserved. Finally, it was tested whether the level of descriptiveness of names affected the patient's performance. As mentioned earlier, it is generally assumed that people's names are arbitrary. However, there is at least one kind of personal names which are not always arbitrary: the names of cartoon characters. For instance, Snow-White is so-called because her complexion is as white as snow. Benoit Brisefer (literally, Benoit Ironbreaker) is a young boy with a superhuman strength. Gaston Lagaffe (literally, Gaston The Blunder) is an incredible blunderer. These examples show that names of cartoon characters may be partially descriptive in the sense that they sometimes specify some properties of their bearers. Since absence of descriptiveness has been seen as a factor that makes proper name retrieval particularly difficult (McWeeny, Young, Hay et al., 1987; Cohen, 1990), we tested whether the patient's performance was better in naming characters with partially descriptive names than in naming characters with non-descriptive names.

#### CASE REPORT

OV is a 63 year old right-handed French-speaking woman with 9 years of schooling. She is a retired employee of a ministerial department. In March 1986, while she was working in her office, she suddenly experienced an episode of "blurred" vision lasting about twenty minutes. In the following months, these episodes repeated about every three days. In July 1986, an angiography revealed an aneurysm of the internal carotid artery, located at the origin of the posterior communicating artery, which was clipped in August 1986. Following this neurosurgical procedure, she presented mild language deficits characterised by an anomia for objects and people's names. Object anomia improved to normal within a few months during which she had rehabilitation.

A C.T.-scan performed in January 1993 showed the clip in situ, mild left cerebral atrophy, and a lesion in the genu of the left internal capsule. Neurological examination was normal. However, OV mentioned persisting difficulties to remember people's names (including names of relatives and close friends) since 1986. She described this deficit as particularly disabling and interfering with her daily and social life.

#### GENERAL NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

The present neuropsychological assessment started in January 1993 (7 years after onset). Written and oral language was unremarkable except mild naming difficulties and slowness to verbally formulate complex ideas in usual conversation. Visual confrontation naming [EXADE naming battery (Bachy-Langedock, 1988)] was in the normal range (86/90).

Memory testing showed normal scores on short-term memory tasks but some degree of long-term verbal memory impairment. Scores on the WMS-r were, respectively, 70 for verbal memory, 88 for visual memory, 70 for general memory and 71 for delayed recall. She obtained poor scores on the Rey auditory-verbal learning task but normal scores on the "La Ruche" (Violon and Wijns, 1984), a visuospatial learning task.

On the WAIS, OV's verbal IQ was 107, performance IQ was 112 and full-scale IQ was 111. She scored 49/60 on Raven's Progressive Matrices (PM38), which is above percentile 98.

When requested to produce the names of relatives or acquaintances (her mother's surname, her neighbour's, ...), she scored 11/16 (8 controls matched for age, gender and educational level to OV were all 100% correct). Moreover, she could name correctly only 3/10 faces of very famous people. It is important to note that she claimed having good general knowledge

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