

ANOMIA FOR COMMON NAMES AND GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES WITH PRESERVED RETRIEVAL OF NAMES OF PEOPLE: A SEMANTIC MEMORY DISORDER

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the case of an anomic patient (FH) who is impaired at naming pictures of objects but has no difficulties in recalling the names of familiar people. Even though his performance on McKenna's (1997) Category Specific Naming Test was at the first percentile, he consistently recalled the names of familiar people as successfully as controls. It is argued that the pattern of performance displayed by FH represents a much clearer double dissociation with proper name anomia than any case previously reported (Cipolotti et al., 1993; Semenza and Sgaramella, 1993). FH is unable to provide detailed semantic information about many of the objects that he cannot name, even though he can recall semantic information about familiar people. Consequently his case appears to represent the mirror image of the proper name anomic patient (APA) described by Miceli et al. (2000) who was unable to recall detailed semantic information about many of the people she was unable to name. Further investigation of FH's anomia revealed impairments in retrieving both common nouns and verbs, and difficulties in retrieving and comprehending geographical names. It is argued that FH's preserved ability to name and recall biographical information about people supports the view that knowledge about familiar people may be subserved by its own dedicated neural subsystem (Kay and Hanley, 1999; Miceli et al., 2000; Gentileschi et al., 2001).

Key words: anomia, proper names, common nouns, semantic memory

INTRODUCTION

There now exists a large literature reporting cases of neurological patients who are impaired at retrieving proper names but who have relatively preserved ability to retrieve common names (e.g. Carney and Temple, 1993; Fery et al., 1995; Harris and Kay, 1995; Hittmair, Delazer et al., 1994; Kay et al., 2001; Lucchelli and De Renzi, 1992; Lucchelli et al., 1997; McKenna and Warrington, 1980; Miceli et al., 2000; Saetti et al., 1999; Semenza and Zettin, 1988, 1989). Such patients have great difficulty in recalling the names of celebrities and family members but perform much better when asked to name pictures of objects. Perhaps the most striking case reported to date is that of Patient PC (Semenza and Zettin, 1988) who was able to name sets of body parts, fruits, vegetables, vehicles, pasta, furniture, and colours without error but was unable to name any famous faces or places whatsoever. In other patients with proper name anomia, the difference between common name and proper name retrieval is not always as extreme as was observed with PC. Patient APA (Miceli et al., 2000), for instance, could recall the names of approximately 40% of a set of 90 famous faces (control

range = 76-90%) and had a mild impairment in the retrieval of common names.

An important but controversial question is whether or not there also exist patients whose performance represents a double dissociation with proper name anomia. Semenza and Sgaramella (1993) reported a patient (RI) who produced proper names but not common names in spontaneous speech and also when he was supplied with the first sound of a name in confrontation naming. Cipolotti et al. (1993) described a patient (MED) who was much better at writing names of familiar people than names of common objects. As Brédart et al. (1997) pointed out, however, although these patients showed some selective sparing of proper name retrieval, they do not represent the mirror image of proper name anomia. Neither patient was able to say the name of a single face in tests of confrontation naming. Although MED was able to write the name of a limited set of famous faces much better than she could write the name of objects in confrontation naming, it was unclear whether or not her performance in writing the names of a larger set of faces would have been within the normal range.

Another important issue in proper name anomia concerns the point at which the person recognition system has broken down. In their investigation of patients with general word finding difficulties, Gainotti et al. (1986) distinguished between a “purely expressive anomia” and an anomia due to “lexical comprehension disturbances” (see Ellis et al., 1992, for further discussion of this distinction). In the former, the naming problems seemed to occur despite normal comprehension. In the latter, the patients made more semantic errors and were less likely to retrieve full semantic information about objects that they were unable to name. We believe that this distinction can be applied also to patients with proper name anomia. Proper name anomics can sometimes recall very detailed semantic information about people that they are unable to name. For example, Harris and Kay’s (1995) patient (BG) was able to recall unique facts about personal acquaintances and celebrities (e.g. a television personality’s catch-phrase) despite her naming impairment. This strongly suggests that BG’s knowledge of familiar people stored in semantic memory was completely preserved. Consequently, it appeared that her impairment reflected either a problem at the level of the lexical representations used in proper name production or else a problem in gaining access to these representations. Patient APA (Miceli et al., 2000), on the other hand, often failed to retrieve detailed semantic information about people she was unable to name. Miceli et al. suggested that her naming problems were the consequence of damage to representations of people stored in domain-specific semantic memory.

The anomia for common names observed in the two patients who showed some selective sparing of proper name retrieval also seemed to be associated with a semantic impairment. RI (Semenza and Sgaramella, 1993) made 4/20 errors on what appears to have been a fairly simple test of word-picture matching. MED had comprehension problems for common names (McNeil et al., 1994). As Brédart et al. (1997) pointed out, these observations indicate that neither patient was suffering from a purely expressive deficit. It appears that the cause of their naming problems was at least in part a semantic memory disorder rather than a problem at the level of the lexical representations used in speech production (Brédart et al., 1997).

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