

A LINGUIST'S VIEWS ON PROGRESSIVE ANOMIA:
EVIDENCE FOR DELBRÜCK (1886) IN MODERN NEUROLINGUISTIC RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

In his short paper of 1886, the neogrammarian linguist Delbrück sketches his views on normal language processing and their relevance for the interpretation of some of the symptoms of progressive anomic aphasia. In particular, he discusses proper name impairments, verb and abstract noun superiority and the predominance of semantically related errors. Furthermore, he suggests that part of speech, morphology and word order may be preserved in this condition. This historical document has been lost in oblivion but the original ideas and their relevance for contemporary discussions merit a revival.

Key words: neogrammarians

Delbrück expressed some very original thoughts on the symptoms of (progressive) anomic aphasia in the May 7, 1886 meeting of the Jena Society of medicine and natural science. He states that he was encouraged to formulate his views from a linguistic perspective by a comment of his colleague Binswanger and that the problem of aphasia should be examined more closely from a psychological perspective. Except for a reference to Delbrück (1886) in Freud (1891) and Marshall (1974), Delbrück's remarkable considerations are fully unknown to contemporary aphasiologists. The summary presented here and a comparison to what we now know about this condition will show the relevance of Delbrück's views for contemporary discussions. But first, who was Delbrück and what was his relation to Binswanger?

Berthold Gustav Gottlieb Delbrück (Putbus/Rügen, 1842-Jena, 1922) studied comparative linguistics with the famous indologist Pott at the University of Halle from 1859 to 1861, when at the age of 19 he defended his PhD-thesis which was written in Latin. He became a pioneer of comparative syntax. He left Halle for Berlin in 1860 where he studied with Bopp, Weber and Steinthal. Steinthal may have been his first contact with questions on aphasia although this has not been documented. Delbrück's habilitation in 1866, again written and defended in Latin, was on the syntax of the dative in the Rigveda. From 1867 to 1870, he taught comparative linguistics at the University of Halle and then became the successor of Schleicher and Leskien at the University of Jena, Germany, where he taught Indology and Indo-Germanic linguistics until 1912. He researched comparative syntax of Indo-European languages and initiated this field of study. Delbrück belonged

to the group of so-called "Young Grammarians" (Junggrammatiker), a term they were jokingly referred to, or Neogrammarians, the more neutral English term. This school of linguists originated in Leipzig in the 1870s and included Brugmann, Leskien, Osthoff, Delbrück, Werner, Paul and Behaghel. The Neogrammarians were concerned with what they believed to be a genetic relationship between the individual Indo-European languages and language families. Observable similarities in cognate word forms could be the reflex of a common origin. The methods of natural sciences ('positivism') were used for historical comparison as applied to the phonological, morphological and syntactic systems of the languages involved in an attempt to reconstruct their earlier stages. The reconstruction was seen as an explanation for the similarities among the words which developed historically from the earlier form via a series of sound laws ('Lautgesetze'). The original idea of language universals was thus historical in its conception. The Neogrammarians also rejected their precursors' exclusive reliance on texts and stressed the importance of spoken language. They thus paved the road for linguistic structuralism.

Otto Binswanger (1852-1929) was a colleague of Delbrück at the University of Jena, where he was a professor and director of the psychiatric hospital. He performed intensive histopathological and clinical research, particularly on dementias (Binswanger's disease: dementia encephalitis). He is also well-known in his function as Friedrich Nietzsche's psychiatrist.

As his sources on aphasia, Delbrück used some of the available literature that was passed on to him by Binswanger and he was given the opportunity to make some personal observations.

DELBRÜCK'S (1886) REVIEW OF THE LANGUAGE ABILITIES OF A CONTEMPORARY ADULT

Before dealing with the anomic symptoms, Delbrück first set up some methodological requirements which he considered essential. He urges aphasiologists to compare the language of aphasic subjects with normal language processing in age-matched controls and not with that of children, as was often done in the literature. Secondly, the comparison should be with synchronic language and not with speculations on diachronic stages, which he had also often encountered in the literature. "On the one hand, it is hard to conceive how a contemporary person could regress into what his ancestors spoke 4000 years ago; on the other hand, our knowledge of prehistoric speech situations or even of the origin of language is so uncertain that it is better to ignore it in this case. In contrast, what we are able to observe daily in ourselves and others has the disadvantage that it may appear trivial, but it has the advantage that it can be verified by everybody".

In accordance with this rule, Delbrück sets out to review some relevant issues in normal language processing. He discusses the sound level, the word level and the level of morphologically complex words and sentences. Generally, his view is that "the request to the speech organs comes from within, where intended speech is prepared and formed. No doubt, we first make an inner representation of the sentences and words we want to speak, and this representation is at the basis of the utterance".

With respect to the *sound level*, Delbrück negates the question whether there is a representation of single sounds which are then articulated. "We do not learn sounds individually but in and with words. (...) It is true that in the course of learning to read in school, words are analysed, but when we get to school, we can already speak. (...) It can thus be said that by articulating numerous sentences and words we acquire a muscle feeling which allows us to produce the words in our mother tongue with the habitual articulation, and that we do not face the task as having to utter a single sound".

Concerning the *word level*, an inner representation is accepted but not merely for isolated words. Delbrück stresses that the mental lexicon is structured. "The speaker has a large stock of words at his disposal which he associates with certain concepts. (...) The possibility to retain so many words can partly be explained by the fact that they are not isolated but mentally combined into groups". He identifies groupings based on *etymological (morphological) relations*: "We experience words like 'Stein: stone', 'steinern: stony', 'Versteinering: state of being turned into stone', 'Mühle: mill', 'mahlen: grind', 'Müller:

milller', 'Mehl: flour' as etymologically related, and at least the basic words of each group are therefore fixed and appear in memory if the derived form is uttered. Proper names and foreign words are seldom integrated in etymological groups". A second form of lexical structure comes from *conceptual groupings*: "Even in the uneducated, words form conceptual groups which is evidenced by the more frequent substitutions of members within a group than of two members of different groups". A third building block in the lexical architecture are *parts of speech*: "Even the uneducated have some feeling for part of speech. This is again evidenced by substitution within a given part of speech". A fourth characteristic is the distinction between *concrete and abstract*, which also differentiates nouns and verbs: "Thus, many verbs are more internal and abstract than nouns".

Concerning *the level of morphologically complex words and sentences*, Delbrück also postulates inner representations: "Our memory not only contains a large amount of single words but also different schemes or types, namely, inflectional schemes, word building schemes, sentence schemes". "Concerning inflection, there is no doubt that even the uneducated has certain types of inflection of nouns, verbs, etc. in his head. He is not conscious of this and would not be able to produce the forms of a verb, but there is evidence that these types are available to him without his consciousness. He reacts to each deviation of the normal inflection as wrong or ridiculous and even the uneducated is able to inflect correctly those words that he encounters for the first time. It is important to stress that these inflectional types like all types still to be mentioned are similarly fixed in the uneducated as in the educated person".

"The situation seems to be similar for *derivational types* as for inflectional types. (...) For suffixes like '-ung, -heit, -keit, -ei, -lich' (-ness, -y, -ly), we can constantly build new words".

With respect to *sentence construction types*, Delbrück considers his approach innovative: "It has long been known and accepted that inflectional and derivational types are present in the mind of the speaker, but it is less well known that there are also fixed types of sentence construction. Everyone knows that we are tied to certain constructions, for example in the combination of certain prepositions with certain case forms, but it has only become clear recently that there are also certain sentence types and that we can trace their existence and change throughout the centuries. The layman imagines that we inherit the single words from our predecessors and that we are free to combine them into sentences. This view, however, is totally mistaken. In addition to the words, certain word order types have been transmitted from which we cannot deviate without a reaction of our language intuitions against such deviations. It would lead too far to present the main sentence types of German

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