Language: structure, processing and disorders

by David Caplan, The MIT Press, 1992. $45.00 (xx + 515 pages) ISBN 0 262 03189 2

This book provides a very good introduction to studies ofaphasia for neurologists, speech-language pathologists and neuropsychologists. It approaches this topic from a psycholinguistic perspective, presenting research on and theoretical explanations for a manifold of aphasic symptoms within the context of the most recent cognitive models of speaking, listening, reading and writing. Five chapters are dedicated to different aspects of word processing and their disorders. These chapters review current ideas about the way in which spoken words are recognized, how the meanings of words are represented, how written language is processed, etc. Word-processing disorders such as anomia, dyslexia and agaphria are described in terms of psycholinguistic models for unimpaired word processing. The same procedure is followed in the three chapters discussing disorders of sentence and discourse structure, which are more complex levels of linguistic organization. A final chapter discusses some implications for the diagnosis and treatment of language disorders.

The strength of the book is that it is organized on the basis of our knowledge about normal language processing. However, the implication of this psycholinguistic bias is that one will not be able to find detailed information on the relation between observed neurological lesions and resulting language disorders.

My sole complaint about this book is that, in addition to discussing the outcome of relevant modern research on aphasia, it does not critically review the research methods used, despite the fact that the author stresses the importance of 'on-line' methods in aphasia research. These methods monitor language comprehension and production processes as they unfold in real time, millisecond by millisecond. One such on-line method that has recently been applied to aphasia research is the ERP (event-related potential) method, in which recorded brain potentials are time-locked to the relevant language processing events. Despite its claimed importance for workers in aphasia research, the book does not provide the reader with a clear picture of such 'on-line' methods. In my view, the reader would have profited from an additional chapter that discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the different research methods that are currently used in aphasiology. This, however, is a minor point and does not affect my main conclusion that this book should not be missed by those interested in a scholarly overview of the current state of the art in aphasia research.


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