The British Aphasiology Society Research Update Meeting

Leeds Beckett University 27th April 2017

This year's Research Update Meeting was held at Leeds Beckett University for the first time. We were delighted to welcome clinicians and researchers from the Yorkshire and Humber area as well as those who had travelled from across the country. The meeting had a lively atmosphere with attendees asking lots of questions and sharing their own experiences in relation to each of the topics.

Morag Bixley (Senior Lecturer in Speech and Language Therapy at De Montfort University) started the day off with a fascinating presentation about a single case study with a participant with severe aphasia in which Semantic Activation Therapy with word finding was compared to Semantic Activation Therapy without word finding. She used video clips throughout the presentation to demonstrate the therapy. Positive results for both types of therapy including generalisation to untreated words. Interestingly, she found that the participant made larger gains within the condition without word-retrieval practice, which led to an interesting discussion about possible reasons for these findings.

Next up was Louise Lander (Speech and Language Therapist at Moor Green Outpatient Brain Injury Unit, Birmingham Community Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust) who presented the results of her MRes study funded by the National Institute for Health Research, evaluating an intensive group rehabilitation game therapy for word-retrieval difficulties. The picture-naming therapy game was played in a group, which was divided into two teams. Three games with different types of cue were compared: phonemic, phonemic+gesture and phonemic+semantic. After playing each game for 18 hours over 2 weeks, they found significant improvements for treated words with all participants improving, and generalisation to word retrieval within other tasks (picture description, Boston Naming Test and the Cindarella Story). It was concluded that the therapy games are not only clinically-effective and cost-effective but were enjoyed by the participants. This motivating talk was met with strong enthusiasm by therapists, some of whom commented they are keen to try out these games.

To finish the morning session, Lindsey Thiel (Senior Lecturer in Speech and Language Therapy at Leeds Beckett University) presented her work on using technologies for writing in aphasia. She summarised the findings of her PhD study, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, which showed improvements to email writing in a group of people with aphasia and acquired dysgraphia following training to use predictive writing software (Co:Writer 6, Don Johnston Inc.) and training in computer and internet skills. She then discussed some preliminary data from a study investigating the perceptions of people with aphasia on using writing apps. Participants found apps to be helpful for writing emails, although training and support were considered to be necessary. Participants liked apps that were basic, easy to use and adaptable with good predictability, text to speech and spell/grammar check. This led to a discussion around the important candidacy issues around technology use and the practical issues around recommending app for patients.

The afternoon session began with Helena Thornley discussing the influence of emotional valence as a psycholinguistic variable and how this can impact people with aphasia (PWA) during word recognition which forms the basis of her current PhD. The overarching aim of her study is to investigate the role of emotional valence on single word processing, and how this variable may impact word recognition in aphasia. Helena described how emotional valence, which has been explored as a facilitating or inhibiting factor in psychology, may be a very relevant factor in word finding abilities. She described how the study findings suggest that emotionally valenced items demonstrate an advantage in both processing speed and accuracy. These results suggest that positive and negative emotional valence is an influential variable that should be considered when mapping assessment and therapy for PWA.

Helena's talk was followed by Elizabeth Anderson who shared her PhD research focusing on single-word and context frequency effects of verbs in aphasia at Sheffield University. Elizabeth took the audience on a journey of linguistic theory in relation to grammatical processing, bridging the division between linguistic competence and performance. The aim of her study focuses on how single-word verb frequency and verb frequency in different sentence structures may help to inform assessment and therapy approaches for individuals with aphasia. The findings thus far are indicative that context frequency can influence the speed and accuracy for which verbs are processed rather than just single-word verb frequency, and this needs to be considered when setting therapy targets for PWA.

The final talk of the afternoon session was given by Cecilia Devers (Senior Lecturer in Speech and Language Sciences at Leeds Beckett University) who presented on a study carried out as part of her previous PhD. She provided a general overview of the PhD which investigated pronoun processing in people with fluent and nonfluent aphasia at single-word, sentence and discourse levels for both comprehension and production. The focus of the talk was related to one of the studies: pronoun production in sentences. The aim of the study was to understand the underlying difficulty for which pronoun production difficulties arise in a variety of different sentence conditions (e.g. active, passive, semantically reversible and semantically reversible with multiple pronouns) with 1-, 2- and 3-arguments. The findings suggest that PWA demonstrate difficulty producing pronouns in complex sentence structures in addition to the difficulty observed in PWA producing complex sentences. These findings further support the need to consider the types of sentences used in assessment design and therapy design when targeting pronouns.

This year contained a variety of topics which were engaging on many levels for all of the attendees and presenters. We have received very positive feedback on the location of the venue, how diverse the research areas were and how valuable all topics were in relevance to clinical practice. We would like to thank everyone who helped to organise the day, presented interesting talks on their research, attended and engaged in insightful discussion.

See you all next year!

Lindsey Thiel and Cecilia Devers