From Neuropsychology to Mental Structure
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To my mother
## Contents

**Preface**  
*page xiii*

### I  Introducing Cognitive Neuropsychology

1. From the Diagram-Makers to Cognitive Neuropsychology  
  1.1 Why Neuropsychology?  
  1.2 Paradigm Shifts in Neuropsychology: The Diagram-Makers and their Critics  
  1.3 The Diagram-Makers’ Successors  
  1.4 The Rise of Cognitive Neuropsychology  
  *page 3*

2. The Cognitive Neuropsychology Approach  
  2.1 On Modularity  
  2.2 What Can Be Learned about Normal Function from Impaired Behaviour?  
  2.3 Neuropsychological Facts  
  2.4 The Single-Case Approach  
  2.5 Facts Are Only What Individual Patients Do  
  2.6 Symptom Complexes  
  2.7 The Importance of Dissociations  
  *page 18*

### II Converging Operations: Specific Syndromes and Evidence from Normal Subjects

3. The Short-Term Memory Syndrome  
  3.1 The Syndrome  
  3.2 Simple Alternative Explanations  
  3.3 A Simple Theoretical Account of the Dissociation  
  3.4 The Dissociation Between Auditory–Verbal STS and LTS Performance  
  *page 41*

4. More Complex Alternative Interpretations  
  4.6 General Theoretical Inferences  
  4.7 The STS Deficit: Speech Production or Comprehension?  
  *page 49*

5. The STS Deficit: Speech Production or Comprehension?  
  *page 57*
## Contents

3.8 An Anomaly 65  
3.9 Conclusion 66

4 The Peripheral Dyslexias 68  
4.1 Why the Acquired Dyslexias? 68  
4.2 Letter-by-Letter Reading 73  
4.3 Simultanagnosia 75  
4.4 Word-Form Dyslexia: Compensatory Strategies and the Locus of the Impairment 77  
4.5 Surface Dyslexia 81

5 The Central Dyslexias 88  
5.1 The Selective Preservation of Phonological Reading 88  
5.2 Deep Dyslexia 98  
5.3 In What Does Deep Dyslexia Consist? 101  
5.4 Simple Explanations of the Deep Dyslexia Symptom Complex 104  
5.5 The Inadequacy of the ‘Normal Isolated Semantic Route’ Theory 108  
5.6 Deep Dyslexia: The Right Hemisphere Theory 112  
5.7 Deep Dyslexia: Conclusions 116  
5.8 The Exceptional Case: CAV 117  
5.9 Phonological Alexia: A Distinct Syndrome? 119  
5.10 Phonological Alexia: What Processes Are Impaired and Intact? 122  
5.11 The Acquired Dyslexias and Modularity 126

6 The Agraphias 130  
6.1 Do Specific Agraphias Exist? 130  
6.2 The Central Agraphias 131  
6.3 Lexical Agraphia 132  
6.4 Phonological Agraphia 134  
6.5 The Double Dissociation 136  
6.6 Other Central Agraphia Syndromes: Writing via Semantics 138  
6.7 The Capacity of the Phonological Writing Route(s) 142  
6.8 The Writing Process and the Peripheral Agraphias: Impairments of the Graphemic Buffer 145  
6.9 Selecting and Realising the Graphic Motor Pattern 152  
6.10 A Few Complications 154

7 Language Operations: Are Input and Output Processes Separate? 158  
7.1 Separate or Common Input and Output Processes: Are the Two Empirically Distinguishable? 158  
7.2 Classical Conduction Aphasia 164  
7.3 A Comparison with Normal Subjects 169  
7.4 Multiple Syntactic-Processing Systems 171  
7.5 The Modern Aphasia Group-Study Method 174  
7.6 The Central Syntactic-Processing Mechanism: Problems 178
Contents

8 The Generality of the Approach: The Case of Visual Perception 183
8.1 Introduction 183
8.2 Dissociations Between Disorders of Sensation 184
8.3 The Distinction Between Apperceptive and Associative Agnosia 187
8.4 Converging Proposals from Other Fields 193
8.5 Associative Agnosia 198

III Inferences from Neuropsychological Findings

9 On Method: A Rejection of Ultra-Cognitive Neuropsychology 203
9.1 Introduction 203
9.2 Inferences from Group Studies: Are They Ones of Principle? 205
9.3 Pragmatic Difficulties in Conducting Group Studies 208
9.4 The Relevance of Localisation 213
9.5 Conclusion 214

10 On Method: Single-Case Studies 217
10.1 Introduction 217
10.2 Neuropsychological Evidence and Theory Development 220
10.3 Neuropsychological Evidence and Theory Falsification 224
10.4 Inferences from Impairments: Task-Demand Artefacts (Validity of Assumption 8b) 228
10.5 Inferences from Dissociations: The Problem of Resource Artefacts (Application of Assumption 6) 232
10.6 Inferences from Dissociations: The Problem of Individual Differences (Validation and Application of Assumption 9) 238
10.7 Inferences from Dissociations: Reorganisation after the Lesion (Validity of Assumption 8a) 241
10.8 Conclusion 243

11 Functional Specialisation 245
11.1 Delusions about Dissociations? 245
11.2 Specimen Non-modular Systems 249
11.3 Distributed Networks 253
11.4 The Degree of Specialisation and the Depth of Dissociations 257
11.5 Specifying the Forms of Functional Specialisation 258
11.6 More Specific Functional Architectures: Cascade and Distributed-Memory Models 260
11.7 Conclusion 264

IV Central Processes: Equipotentiality or Modularity?

12 Selective Impairments of Knowledge 269
12.1 Introduction 269
12.2 Are Central Systems Non-modular? The Case of Acalculia 269
## Contents

12.3 General Impairments of Knowledge 274
12.4 Access Disorders 279
12.5 Criticisms of the Impaired Access–Degraded Store Dichotomy 285
12.6 The Structure of Semantic Memory I: The Elements 286
12.7 The Structure of Semantic Memory II: Modality Specificity 291
12.8 The Structure of Semantic Memory III: Category Specificity 297
12.9 An Application of Category Specificity: Agrammatism? 304
12.10 Conclusion 305

13 The Allocation and Direction of Processing Resources: Visual Attention 307
13.1 The Problems of Parallel Processing 307
13.2 A Special-Purpose Attentional Control Subsystem: Vision 310
13.3 Attentional Dyslexia 311
13.4 Neglect as a Pathology of Attention 314
13.5 Neglect Dyslexia 320
13.6 Neglect as a Disorder of Spatial Representation 323
13.7 Impairments of Attention and Representation: Are They in Conflict? 326

14 The Allocation of Processing Resources: Higher-Level Control 328
14.1 Classical Views on Frontal Lobe Function 328
14.2 The Supervisory Attentional System and Contention Scheduling 332
14.3 The Supervisory System Approach: Individual-Case Studies 335
14.4 Frontal Lobe Group Studies 336
14.5 The Supervisory System and Frontal Syndromes 339
14.6 Problem Solving and Coping with Novel Situations 345
14.7 The Supervisory System: Is It Internally Equipotential or Modular? 350

15.1 The Amnesic Syndrome 353
15.2 Amnesia and the Episodic–Semantic Distinction 356
15.3 Amnesia and Priming 358
15.4 The Retention of Old Memories in Amnesia 361
15.5 The Acquisition of New Memories 367
15.6 Developments of the Impaired Episodic Memory Account 368
15.7 ‘E-Mop’ Theory 370
15.8 The Norman–Bobrow Theory 373
15.9 Frontal Lobe Amnesia 374
15.10 Appendix 379

16 Modularity and Consciousness 381
16.1 The Relevance of Modelling Consciousness 381
Contents

16.2 Blindsight 383
16.3 Knowledge Without Awareness 388
16.4 The Split-Brain Patient and Dual Consciousness 391
16.5 Bisiach’s Critique 396
16.6 Conclusion 401

References 405
Subject Index 445
Author Index 454
Index of Patients Cited 461
Preface

Interest in neuropsychology has increased greatly over the past 20 years. This has mainly occurred for direct clinical reasons, such as the increase in the ability of neuropsychological investigations to assess the crippling problems in thought, memory, and language that can occur from brain damage. There is, though, a second reason for the increase of interest in the subject. The human brain is still the organ we understand least well, and the process by which its highest function – cognition – operates remains mysterious. The dramatic effects of brain damage appear to provide valuable evidence about how the systems underlying cognition operate. The aim of this book is to assess this evidence. Is neuropsychological evidence of any real value in understanding normal cognition? If so, what form or forms should this evidence take, and what substantive conclusions can be drawn?

The relevance of neuropsychological findings remains controversial because neuropsychology – in a somewhat parallel fashion to psychology – has rejected much of its former doctrines in virtually every generation. The approach that is the subject matter of this book, cognitive neuropsychology, is hardly a generation old. In many respects, cognitive neuropsychology seems very healthy. Interest in it is increasing rapidly, and surprising findings are frequently being made. Yet its practitioners use conflicting methodologies, each of which balances on a set of barely examined assumptions.

In the 1970s, I wrote two articles (Shallice, 1979a, 1979b) that assessed, in a positive fashion, a methodological approach then unfashionable within neuropsychology – the single-case study. Since then, this approach has become very popular and is now being claimed as the only way to carry out neuropsychological research relevant to normal function. Some years ago, I decided that the position I had earlier adopted was in certain respects glib and that a more thorough assessment would be appropriate. That assessment has grown into this book.

The book is addressed both to neuropsychologists and to those in neighbouring fields who may wish to draw on neuropsychological research findings. It is structured in terms of an overall argument on the relevance of neuropsychological findings and the types of methods used. I argue for an approach between the more traditional neuropsychological procedures, with their emphasis on group studies and the anatomical localisation of deficits, and the more fashionable ‘ultra-cognitive’ methods, which ignore anatomical and other neuroscience considerations and are
xiv  

Preface

centered only with the results of single-case studies. I have attempted to ground
the argument in discussions of those topics where cognitive neuropsychology has
been most successful. The somewhat idiosyncratic ordering of the topics arises from
their place in the overall argument. No attempt has been made to provide complete
coverage of the literature; the set of potentially relevant neuropsychological findings
and theories of normal function to which they might relate is far too large. This has
meant that certain important areas (e.g. agrammatism) are dealt with in less detail
than they objectively deserve.

The selection of topics and their ordering in the overall argument has been strongly
influenced by where I have worked. Although cognitive neuropsychology is now an
approach that is used world-wide, many of its roots lie in research in Britain in the
late 1960s and 1970s, and a number of the topics addressed are those that became
current in that period. More specifically, in the late 1960s, as a cognitive psychol-
ogist at University College, London, I began to collaborate with Elizabeth Warrin-
ton at the National Hospital. In her department I had the very good fortune of
working where the range of patients seen for clinical purposes and, more particu-
larly, the variety of research problems encountered – both clinical and basic re-
search – were to become as great as those in any neuropsychological centre in the
world. Most of my empirical work has continued to be carried out there, and I
remain convinced that the best environment for neuropsychological investigations
is a clinical department where work on clinical and basic research problems can be
mutually supportive. Mutually beneficial contacts between basic research workers
and clinicians also reduce the ethical problems of studying a devastating illness for
reasons other than the direct benefit of the patient. The particular approach I advo-
cate here is strongly influenced by the methods used in the National Hospital.

The other strong influence on selection of topics has been the other part of my
work environment – the Medical Research Council Applied Psychology Unit, Cam-
bridge, where I have been based for the past 10 years. The type of cognitive psy-
chology theorising with which cognitive neuropsychology methodology dovetails
effectively is very well represented by the work of Alan Baddeley, John Morton,
Tony Marcel, Karalyn Patterson, and my other colleagues. The extensive discus-
sions that take place at the APU have kept focused the other half of the project –
the understanding of normal function to which neuropsychological research relates.

A book of this length cannot be written without much help and support. During
a period when the excellent research environment that British scientific institutions
used to provide has become a part of our history rather than our current reality, I
have been most fortunate to work for the Medical Research Council and their Ap-
plied Psychology Unit. Without the support of the MRC and the encouragement of
Alan Baddeley, the director of the APU, this book could not have been written.

I am grateful to many people for their assistance. During the whole period of the
development of the idea of the work, I was much helped by Deborah Hodgkin.
Much of the first draft was written while I was on leave of absence as a visitor to
Jacques Mehler’s CNRS unit in Paris and as a visiting professor of the University
of Padua. I very much appreciated the facilities provided and the warmth of the
Preface

Welcome at both institutions. Elizabeth Warrington kindly read most of the first draft; she helped me to eliminate many errors and rococo meanders. Marie-France Beauvois, Jacqueline Derouesné, David Howard, John Morton, Don Norman, Karalyn Patterson, Eleanor Saffran, and Alan Wing all read chapters; I much appreciated their cogent comments. The book was produced with an antiquated technology – the biro; my secretary, Sharon Gamble, somehow managed to translate the obscure scrawls produced into a coherent text with remarkable speed and accuracy. I thank her very much and would also like to thank Carmen Frankl and Alan Copeman, who prepared many of the figures.

The work would never have been completed without the support of Maria, my wife, whose encouragement of the hours I spent on it never failed to astonish me. Finally, I would like to thank Susan Milmoe and the staff at Cambridge University Press, who produced the manuscript with much skill and speed.