

## Book Reviews / Évaluation des ressources écrites

### **Uncommon Understanding: Development and Disorders of Language Comprehension in Children (1997)**

Dorothy V. M. Bishop

**Publisher:**

Psychological Press

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www.amazon.ca

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\$48.00

**Reviewer:**

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Language comprehension and its impairments in children are topics that receive little specific attention in the clinical literature and fare only slightly better in the developmental literature. Clinicians know that a poorer long-term prognosis accompanies language comprehension impairments, resulting in a more severely disabling condition. Thus, the relative neglect of the topic is not an indication of its significance to clinicians. Happily, Dorothy Bishop's book *Uncommon Understanding* begins to fill this gap. In this book, Bishop provides the reader with an overview of the multifaceted phenomena that is comprehension by integrating research from several areas including psycholinguistics, language acquisition, and neuropsychology. Bishop approaches the topic of language comprehension impairments by focussing solely on children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI) and the research that bears upon their comprehension difficulties in particular. Readers should be aware that it *is not* a guide to

assessment and treatment of these impairments; nonetheless, it provides a much-needed review of contemporary research in language comprehension. Because of this, the target audience is likely to be graduate students and clinicians who are looking for a synthesis of the vast literature relevant to language comprehension and its impairments. The review of language comprehension impairments is not exhaustive and Bishop's own work figures prominently.

The book is organized into nine chapters, the first two of which are overviews of comprehension and SLI. The remaining seven chapters tackle the job of coherently presenting the literature on theories and models of comprehension and relevant research on impairments from a bottom up perspective. That is to say, Bishop begins with speech perception impairments in children with SLI, moving through their lexical, then grammatical, then discourse comprehension difficulties in chapters 3 through 8. Generally, each of these chapters follows a similar format of first presenting the cognitive models relevant to each level of comprehension, then the developmental literature that bears on the topic, and finally, the research findings pertaining specifically to children with SLI. In the final chapter, Bishop discusses SLI from the theoretical perspective of "Modularity." Although a more detailed critique of these chapters follows, further discussion is first warranted for the book's dual themes of language comprehension deficits and causes of SLI, themes that run throughout all chapters of this book.

As previously mentioned, Bishop focuses the discussion of

comprehension impairments solely on children with SLI. At times her goal of providing a comprehensive picture of comprehension and its deficits is lost in a larger discussion of causes of SLI. She provides no overarching model of SLI as a comprehension-based impairment, so the questions of whether children with SLI have comprehension deficits and if so, what the nature of those deficits are, become confounded with the question of what causes SLI? Given the controversy surrounding this diagnostic category, one wonders what is gained in our understanding of comprehension impairments by focussing on this group alone. Do we have any evidence or suggestion that a language comprehension deficit would look different in children with other developmental diagnoses? It is unfortunate that the discussion of comprehension deficits could not have been dealt with more prominently.

The individual chapters vary in the degree to which they adequately cover their major topic. Chapters 3 and 4 review speech perception and lexical development. Both areas have relatively rich (if not controversial) literature pertaining to children with language impairments. In synthesizing this literature, Bishop's position is clear. The speed of auditory processing and phonological short-term memory are the weak links in the chain of bottom-up processing for children with SLI. When she does present research that might suggest otherwise, she raises the caution of the impact of attentional problems on the experimental outcomes. It is unclear why such potential difficulties would not also colour performance on, for example, non-word repetition tasks or decon-

textualized auditory processing tasks. Perhaps "attention" as an enabling factor in comprehension performance needs to be addressed in all research on the topic. Bishop does recognize that the interpretation of the auditory processing research is controversial and not definitive. She suggests that treatment research might disambiguate the role of auditory processing in SLI.

Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to grammatical or sentence level comprehension and real time processing of sentences. It is in this context that Bishop introduces the longstanding debate of whether language impairment is a problem of an innate modular mechanism (a linguistic perspective à la Chomsky) or if they are the reflection of a cognitive processing deficit (a psycholinguistic perspective reflecting either auditory processing or working memory impairments). The research on sentence level comprehension deficits is presented in the context of how they inform the debate, rather than in its own right. Interestingly, in her evaluation of the research on potential links between various hypothesized auditory perceptual deficits and the grammatical difficulties of children with SLI, Bishop maintains that although a direct relationship has not been found, it would be premature to reject a more indirect connection. She suggests that an early perceptual deficit could have 'downstream' impact on syntactic ability of later years even if the original perceptual deficit has resolved. Clearly such a hypothesis calls for longitudinal studies of children with SLI, a proposition that Bishop endorses.

In chapter 7, the focus is upon discourse comprehension, and it is here that Bishop introduces contextual effects upon comprehension. Once again she follows the format of presenting contemporary models of discourse comprehension first, then notes the paucity of developmental research in this area and in children's understanding of spoken discourse in naturalistic settings in general. She then addresses research on the ability to integrate multiple sources of information and engage in constructive comprehension in children with SLI. Although a number of potential 'causes' of discourse level comprehension problems are raised, the experimental data to support any of them are sparse, leaving the discussion primarily speculative in nature.

Chapter 8 addresses the comprehension of social meaning or the intention of the speaker. This is the least satisfying of the chapters because this complex topic is dealt with in a more cursory fashion than previous levels of comprehension. It is unclear why Gricean Speech Act theory was chosen to frame the discussion rather than a review of early comprehension of communicative intent based upon primary sources such as Jerome Bruner and Elizabeth Bates. Theory of Mind research is presented as being requisite for understanding other's intention. Bishop does make the important point that no analysis of comprehension difficulties is complete without considering social understanding. Brief overviews of the difficulties children with SLI have with literal versus nonliteral meaning, their responsiveness in conversation,

and referential communication are provided. The discussion then turns to autism and evidence for 'semantic-pragmatic' disorder, again attempting to examine explanations for the deficits noted.

The role of the final chapter of the book is somewhat perplexing. It is primarily a critique of modular views of language rather than a summary or synthesis of the picture of comprehension deficits in children with SLI that has been built throughout the previous chapters. The focus of the final chapter veers away from comprehension per se to a discussion of causation of SLI and how that should be studied and how competing theories should be evaluated. There is at best a tenuous link between this final chapter and the book's objective of a coherent picture of comprehension deficits in children. Most perplexing perhaps is Bishop's critique of the bottom-up approach she attributes to Modularity, given that it was the approach used in the book to present comprehension.

*Uncommon Understanding*, authored by Dorothy Bishop, brings together diverse literatures in service of understanding the puzzle that is language comprehension impairments. As such, Bishop has done a service to developmental researchers and clinicians. However, readers looking for the kind of data or insights about comprehension deficits that might be translated into clinical action, that is, applied to create more sensitive and specific evaluation procedures or innovative treatment procedures, should look elsewhere.



**Beyond Aphasia (2000)**

Carole Pound, Susie Parr, Jayne  
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**Publisher:**

Speechmark Publishing

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\$65.00

**Available from:**

www.psycan.com

**Reviewer:**

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This simply written and excellently organized book describes an integrated social and linguistic model and practice for living with aphasia. This approach underlies the work of the authors at the aphasia centre, City University, London, U.K. as well as a developing British network of aphasia centres known as the Connect Network.

The book is organized into six chapters, preceded by an index of figures and tables, making it easy for the reader to access practical information. In chapter 1 the authors describe the social model of aphasia, which is the underlying philosophy of the aphasia centre, and compare this with other models of aphasia intervention. This chapter, as all others, is well referenced and highly readable. In addition, there are examples of "aphasia-friendly" documents to demonstrate how all information in an aphasia-friendly setting can be made barrier-free.

Chapter 2 describes the principles of group work and collaborative goal planning. This chapter is practical for clinicians with clear, instructive case examples given. The value of individual versus group intervention, and linguistic versus social intervention is discussed.

Chapter 3 describes several other methods and therapies used at the London aphasia centre and at other agencies in the aphasia world where the focus is on social interaction. These interventions seek to develop and support skills in the person with aphasia as well as in their social communities and partnerships. In this context, the work of Aura Kagan at the Aphasia Institute in Toronto is discussed. Again, case examples are extensively used. One example given is of the preparation for and experience of a group "pub outing" for a group of people with severe aphasia, which demonstrates the transfer of total communication strategies to real life social experiences.

In chapter 4, the authors discuss the social, political, and educational barriers faced by the person with aphasia and the therapies that seek to overcome these barriers. Again, case examples clarify all described therapies and projects. A case study is described of a young man with aphasia who participates in an email therapy program. His aphasia-friendly teaching guide for the email program is also reprinted.

Chapter 5 describes the development and nurturing of personal, social, and collective identities for the person with aphasia. In chapter 6 the authors discuss the painful and prolonged process for people living with aphasia of integrating the aphasia into their lives. Again they provide case examples from the lives of real people living with aphasia. The authors also touch on the complex issues for therapists of outcome evaluation and discharge from service.

This book is directed at a broad audience, from students to experienced speech language pathologists, psychologists, and others working in the area of communication disability. It is aimed at those working with clients, caregivers, and volunteers who are concerned with supporting people who are living with long-term communication barriers and the related changes to life and relationships. I think that through the clear articulation and organization of the book, as well as the extensive use of case examples and vignettes, this book will effectively reach this broad target audience.

In summary, *Beyond Aphasia* is a highly useful clinical guide and resource for those working in rehabilitation centres or community agencies. It could be used for planning the programs, groups, and goals for a social approach to living with aphasia.

