

*Una descrizione del linguaggio afasico ante litteram*

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Studi italiani di linguistica teorica e applicata XLIV, 3 (2015), pp. 402-417

SUMMARY

This paper considers, in a historiographic perspective, the initial developments of aphasiological studies in Italy and to this aim it investigates medical texts published between 1914 and the beginnings of 1920s in our country. This period is acknowledged as crucial for the progress of the research on aphasia in Europe: on the one hand, the huge number of soldiers presenting traumatic brain injuries and suffering from language loss or impairments constituted an emergency in all the countries involved in the First World War. On the other hand, war provided scientists with the opportunity to verify, on a number of cases inconceivable in the civilian medical practice, the neurologic models elaborated on the basis of Broca and Wernicke's findings on brain areas for language and to better describe aphasic syndromes. However, so far very little is known on Italian contribution to research on aphasia in this 'pre-linguistic' phase. The analyses of medical writings reveal scientists' interest for language disorders and clinicians' awareness of the importance of traumatic aphasia for describing the topography of language centres in the brain. Nevertheless, the attention for truly linguistic data is extremely limited in these texts. As for military medicine studies, the limited space for language description is due to the dramatic conditions of the first aid on the battlefields, but the situation is not really different for case studies on civilian patients or veterans. Certainly, the lack of interest for a linguistic description of pathologic use derives from the fact that clinicians viewed language as a series of activities practiced for communication (mainly speaking and understanding, but also repeating, naming, etc.) but did not consider language as a system of knowledge organized into different components and levels of representation and analysis. This view would be integrated in aphasiological research approximately 20 years later, starting from Jakobson's fundamental essay. Moreover, the strong localizationist approach of Italian neurology of the time seems to have obfuscated the role of linguistic data which, even if inconsistent with the symptom profile expected, did not put into question the general clinical interpretation of the aphasic syndromes, based on the opposition between the two main linguistic modalities of production (subserved by the Broca's) and comprehension (subserved by the Wernicke's area).