

CHAPTER

**1**

**An Ecological Perspective  
on Assessment and  
Treatment of Aphasia**

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Ecology is more than saving snail darters and cleaning up pond scum. As you might guess, ecology is a somewhat more complicated concept than the popular simplification would have it. Ecology refers to the study of a complex web of biological, environmental, and social processes and values that interact in strange and sometimes not so obvious ways.

We are asked to extend the concept of ecological perspective to aphasia. Kevin Kearns envisioned addressing the impression that "too much emphasis has been placed on patient management within restricted clinical environments." He has suggested that the complex interrelationships between environmental factors and communicative behaviors have been acknowledged infrequently throughout the history of clinical aphasiology and only recently with any degree of vigor.

One of the hallmarks of aphasia is its variability. Some researchers have devoted a good deal of energy to the search for sources and explanations of inter- and intrasubject variance. Yet we may be looking for variation in all the wrong places. Some contend we have looked to the lesion and to linguistic competence for too long. In a recent issue of the *Journal of Speech and Hearing Disorders*, some astute researchers (Glosser, Weiner, and Kaplan, 1988) suggest that an alternative interpretation of the situational differences observed in aphasic language and communication derives from sociolinguistic models determined by multiple factors in a complex social communication matrix. This communication matrix, according to these writers, includes not only the linguistic competence or attributes of the speaker, but also the properties of the listener, characteristics of the physical setting, types of communication tasks or acts, and the availability or restriction of multiple channels or modalities that may be used interactively for communication (Glosser et al., 1988, p. 115). Glosser and colleagues present some compelling evidence that intrasubject changes in *verbal complexity* and *verbal disruptions* may well be linked not only to out-of-clinic settings but also to changes in conversational topic. Specifically, the same subjects in their investigation produced more complex language when speaking about their work or a major illness than when speaking about family or school.

These are some of the complex interactions encompassed in the idea of "ecological perspectives of assessment and treatment." As someone with "wrinkled feet" (Rosenbek, 1979) reminded us a few years ago, it takes courage to evaluate cherished beliefs and traditional ways of doing things, but it can result in revision and refinement of the quality of services we provide. A further benefit is that we may just chart a course or two for the future. It is not too early to prepare the next generation of aphasiologists. For they shall inherit the ship.

## REFERENCES

- Glosser, G., Weiner, M., and Kaplan, E. (1988). Variations in aphasic language behaviors. *Journal of Speech and Hearing Disorders*, 53(2), 115-124.
- Rosenbek, J. (1979). Wrinkled feet. In R. Brookshire (Ed.), *Clinical aphasiology* (Vol. 9, pp. 163-176). Minneapolis: BRK.