

BOOK REVIEW

Fearful Asymmetry: Bouillaud, Dax, Broca, and the Localization of Language, Paris 1825-1879, by Richard Leblanc

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That we now take for granted the localization of articulate language in a specific part of the brain does injustice to the long and huge effort of many people in proving it. It did not happen overnight. Indeed, it was quite a leap back in 19th Century Paris since it was thought that the prevailing dogma of symmetrical function in paired organs "ought to apply to the brain too" with its seemingly symmetrical hemispheres.

Proposing lateralization of cerebral function risked being ridiculed and required courage to stir strongly held beliefs and to be subject to critical analysis by the influential figures in the medical politics of the day. No wonder it took decades for Paul Broca, the well-known physician and anthropologist after whom *Broca's aphasia* is named, to articulate his proposed theory with conviction.

The *setting* is the 19th Century Parisian hospital district. The *quest* is to understand the brain organisation of language. The *players* are the defenders of brain symmetry versus the proposers of lateralization. The *audience and jury* are the metropolitan medical society meetings where physicians of the day regularly met, presented and discussed their work. Provincial society meetings also came to play an important role in this story. Throw into the mix the background of the debates about phrenology, and the changes from the Royal to the Imperial and eventually to the National Academies of Medicine and of Science, and these medico-political ramifications provide a rich dimension to the narrative.

Do you know why different terms – aphemia, aphasia, alalia, anarthria, agraphia – were used at different times? Do you know if Broca truly was the first to suggest the brain "centre" for language? What is Broca's connection to metabolic brain scanning using Positron Emission Tomography a century later? The answers are vividly represented throughout the book by Richard Leblanc, a neurosurgeon with a special interest in brain mapping, who pays tribute to all the notable names, including Broca himself, of course, and who importantly depicts the framework wherein some of the beginnings of modern localizing ideology flourished.

Leblanc's contribution is important. *Fearful Asymmetry* is a well-written and easy-to-follow book with appropriate references and footnotes. It is commendable that the author researched the vast primary sources in French and brings to us information that was previously unexamined with his knowledgeable, critical eye. He does so in a vivid and clear style, and the result is a highly recommended read.

Andreas K Demetriades
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