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Lewis Shapiro Receives Editor's Award

Shapiro, with the School of Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences, will receive the award later this month.

By Coleen Geraghty

Lewis Shapiro, a professor in the **School of Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences** in the **College of Health and Human Services**, will receive the Editor's Award this month from the American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology (AJSLP).

About AJSLP

The journal is a quarterly publication of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, a professional group with more than 180,000 members.

Shapiro received the Editor's Award for his article, "Complexity in Treatment of Syntactic Deficits," which appeared in the February 2007 issue, and was co-written with C.K. Thompson of Northwestern University.

Shapiro's research

SDSUniverse talked with Shapiro about this research, which has been funded by the National Institutes of Health since 1992.

SDSUniverse: What are syntactic deficits?

Shapiro: Aphasia is a disorder that results from damage to portions of the brain that are responsible for language. Individuals suffering from aphasia sometimes have serious problems producing and understanding sentences, particularly those that require abstract knowledge of syntax or sentence structure.

We have designed a treatment program that allows aphasic individuals to re-learn the underlying structure of sentences they can no longer produce or understand.

SDSUniverse: Describe the treatment program.

We have published more than a dozen research articles showing that if we train certain types of sentences, learning generalizes to other sentence types that are not trained.

And, although our program focuses on sentences, improvements in conversational speech and understanding are also observed. However, for such an approach to work, the sentences that are trained and those to which generalization occurs must be similar in their underlying linguistic form (hence, our program is called "Treatment of Underlying Forms").

SDSUniverse: Your research also resulted in a surprising outcome didn't it?

Yes, it turned conventional wisdom on its head. We often assume that learning emerges from the simple to the complex.

However, our work discovered just the opposite pattern: It is significantly more effective to begin treatment with more complex sentences; the production and understanding of simpler sentences (even those that still cannot be produced or understood prior to treatment) then emerge without any training. This 'complexity' approach is also buttressed from work in several other domains, including phonology and semantics, as well as learning a second language, motor behavior and mathematical skills.