a particular category or damage to the pathways leading from those semantic properties to lexical representations[6,7]. Damasio *et al.*[1] propose, instead, that category-specific deficits may reflect the categorial organization of the mediating lexical representations (*b* in the figure). They base their conclusion on the results of two studies — one involving anatomo-clinical correlations, the other involving functional imaging with positron emission tomography (PET).

The principal evidence they provide is the correlation between category-specific naming deficits and sites of brain damage. To maintain that the category effects in naming disorders reflect specifically the organization of lexical (and not conceptual) representations, it must be shown that naming failures do not result from damage to the semantic system. To this end, a naming trial was scored as an error only when patients demonstrated comprehension of the object by providing an adequate description but still failed to produce the correct name (for instance when they could describe a skunk as a small, black-and-white animal that makes a nasty smell, but not actually name it). In this way, Damasio *et al.* argue, we may be sure that category-specific naming failures can be attributed to a deficit in lexical retrieval and not in semantic processing.

Using this procedure, they found that patients who were selectively impaired in producing people's names had damage restricted to the left temporal pole (TP); patients who were selectively impaired in producing animal words had damage restricted to the left inferior temporal (IT) lobe; and patients who were selectively impaired in producing the names of tools had damage to the posterior inferior temporal lobe and the temporo-occipito-parietal junction (posterior IT+) (see Fig. 2 of the paper on page 501).

Converging evidence for this conclusion came from a parallel PET study with neurologically intact individuals: significantly greater activation was found in the left TP, IT and posterior IT+ in naming people, animals and tools, respectively. The close correspondence in the results obtained in the PET and the anatomo-clinical studies provides a compelling basis for the conclusion that word knowledge is organized categorially in the left temporal lobe.

There is a pleasing elegance to the proposed theoretical framework for the organization of word knowledge in the brain. The autonomous level of lexical representation serves the important function of providing focal points for collecting the set of distributed conceptual and phonological features that constitute, respectively, the meaning and the pronunciation of words. The localization of these lexical representations to specific areas of the left temporal lobe is an important achievement. The proposal that these lexical representations are organized by semantic category is equally important, although it is not uncontroversial because other imaging studies have found maximal activation for the animal and tool categories in other areas of the left hemisphere[8]. We also cannot exclude the possibility that the category-specific deficits in Damasio and colleagues' patients involved semantic rather than lexical representations.

Further studies will be needed to resolve these potential difficulties, and to address aspects of lexical representation not tackled by Damasio *et al.* Their study was restricted to concrete concepts. Are abstract concepts — justice, evidence and ambition, for example — also represented categorially? Are they, too, represented in the temporal lobe? And what about syntactic information? Lexical representations must also serve as the focal points about the grammatical class of words and their selectional restrictions (for instance that the verb 'give' but not 'die' requires a direct object)[2,3]. It is obvious the syntactic features of words must be represented in the brain, but not how this information is organized in relation to other aspects of word knowledge.

What is clear, however, is that brain damage can result in selective deficits for individual grammatical classes of words. For example, patients have been reported with selective deficit[9] or sparing[10] in use of verbs, nouns or function words (articles, auxiliaries and prepositions). These results, like those for semantic categories, suggest some form of categorial organization at the lexical level of representation. It remains to be determined how the categorial structure for syntactic features is related to that for semantic categories, but the combined approach of anatomo-clinical and functional imaging studies provides a promising way forward. □

Alfonso Caramazza is in the Cognitive Neuropsychology Laboratory, Department of Psychology, Harvard University, 33 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138, USA.
caram@wjh.harvard.edu

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DAEDALUS

Variable voltage

THE transformer, that elegant invention which steps some voltage up or down in almost every electrical or electronic system in the world, has one major drawback. It only works with alternating current — indeed, that is why all power distribution systems use a.c. Daedalus is now inventing a true d.c. transformer.

He points out that a current flows in a wire because each electron is pushed along by the repulsion of the electrons behind it. They need not be exactly behind it; even an electron behind and to one side will exert a component of its repulsion in the direction of the current. Even an electron so far to one side that it is in an adjacent wire will exert some repulsion. So, says Daedalus, a steady current in one wire should create one in another wire alongside, simply by this diagonal repulsion. This is a d.c. transformer.

Sadly, electron repulsion falls off rapidly with distance. For an electron in one wire to influence one in another, the wires would need to be almost atomically thin and adjacent. Modern monolayer-film and vapour-deposition techniques can lay down such layers quite easily. So Daedalus's d.c. transformer consists of many alternate layers of metal and insulator, each only a few atoms thick, interleaved so that a current in the input layers induces a current in the output layers between them. If each input layer is a single wide strip, while each output layer is many narrow strips side by side and connected in series, the result will be a step-up transformer. Connected in reverse, it will step a voltage down.

In step-up form, the d.c. transformer will be a wonderful saver of batteries. All batteries lose voltage as they run down. We usually discard them long before they are exhausted, simply because their voltage has dropped too low. But an adjustable d.c. transformer in the circuit could be arranged to step up the voltage automatically as fast as it declined. The last drop of power could be wrung from every battery.

The step-down d.c. transformer will make possible a new battery. Many radioactive sources emit electrons or alpha-particles of many millions of electron volts — a tiny beam of 'primary current' at very high voltage. Fired at grazing incidence past an appropriate secondary winding, it could induce a much stronger current at a usefully lower voltage. Radioactive waste, now a pure liability, could power neat and highly efficient little 'radio-batteries' that might last for decades. They would be ideal power sources for isolated areas, or unmanned relay or scientific stations, or even spacecraft. David Jones