

YNEZ VIOLÉ O'NEILL, *Speech and speech disorders in Western thought before 1600*. (Contributions in Medical History, Number 3.) Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1980. xii + 246 pp. No price stated.

This book provides a more comprehensive account of the history of ideas about speech disorders than anything so far available. Indeed, the subject has hardly been treated at all, apart from a few articles, mainly on the post-Renaissance era, and a few regularly-used citations from early thinkers, which appeared in textbooks on speech pathology. For the most part, histories of speech disorders begin in 1861, with Paul Pierre Broca's hypothesis concerning the localization of speech in the brain. The present book thus provides a new perspective, and a more systematic foundation for studying this neglected topic.

O'Neill covers an enormous span of recorded history in her search for discussion of the problem of speechlessness. She begins with the earliest descriptive hints in Egyptian papyri, and continues her enquiry through early and late Greek philosophy, early Eastern European thought, and throughout Europe in the Middle Ages. Only two chapters (about a quarter of the book) are specifically on the post-1300 period, and the book ends at 1600. O'Neill considers the end of the sixteenth century an appropriate place to stop, because she sees it as a turning point: by then, classical ideas on speechlessness had been assimilated in the West, and new analytical frameworks were beginning to emerge, due largely to anatomical discoveries, and a clearer conceptual awareness of the distinction between 'speech' and 'language'. Certainly, from the seventeenth century onwards, there were major changes, both at a theoretical level and in clinical practice (as illustrated by the advances made in the education of the deaf in that century).

O'Neill is anxious to stress the relevance of her period, and her approach, to our continuing concern to reach an understanding of speech problems. She points out, quite correctly, that the three main questions posed by the ancients are still not satisfactorily answered today, namely: what are speech problems, what causes them, and how do we treat them? Her hope is that a historical perspective to these questions will be of benefit to modern attempts to find solutions. She therefore writes: 'This study began as a test of the hypothesis that a coherent body of thought about speech and its impairments existed during the period of classical antiquity through the sixteenth century' (p. 9). 'Coherent' is an inappropriate term for such a period, but O'Neill does draw out some interesting patterns of thought. Essentially, she explores the tension between the views that speech disorders are a medical topic (voice and articulation being controlled by the brain) and that they are a philosophical/theological topic (speech being an essential human characteristic, the expression of the soul). The distinction is nicely illustrated at one point (pp. 87-8) by an account taken from Bede, where a boy's physical complaints were treated by a physician, but his speechlessness was treated by a priest. The interaction between the views is carefully traced for each historical period covered, using medical observations of pathological and traumatic conditions, and philosophical discussions of physiological function. The tension is finally resolved, in the author's view, in the sixteenth century, when speech became clearly a part of medical science.

The governing principle of the book is O'Neill's concern to inter-relate the attitudes of different ages. There is therefore a central historical dimension, in which personalities, biographical detail, dates, textual and other influences are plotted. Many of the details are left to footnotes, grouped at the end of every chapter. In fact, the book contains over 40 pages of relevant notes, covering bibliographical, textual, personal and other points. The notes are meticulously done, and will enable anyone to track down the sources—not always an easy task

when one is dealing with so much foreign-language material, and so many translational editions. A separate 18-page bibliography is provided, and divided into Primary Sources and Secondary Materials, within which books and articles are separated. There is an index of subjects, and of names. What must be appreciated, in this respect, is the pressing need for reliable editorial matter on the topic of speech disorders. There is very little secondary material available, and O'Neill has had to comb a great deal of literature herself in order to establish the relevant material.

But apart from the breadth of its historical dimension, the book provides a useful slant on the question of terminology. The problem is that when an older writer used a term such as *aphonia* or *aphasia*, or even anatomical terms such as *epiglottis* and *pharynx*, there is no guarantee of a correspondence with their modern use. O'Neill is careful to use the original nomenclature (transliterating Greek terms), to avoid begging any questions, and as a consequence she is able to show clearly some remarkable confusions in the history of linguistic and anatomical thought (e.g. Galen's use of the term *pharynx* to refer to the structure we would these days call the *larynx*). The more abstract speech terminology, of course, is far more problematic, in view of the multitude of approaches to the subject: O'Neill provides an illuminating discussion of Greek nomenclature here, and shows its influence on later stages of thought. The only minor quibble I had was over her spelling of vocal cords as both 'cords' (e.g. p. 58) and 'chords' (e.g. p. 57).

A noticeable feature of the book is the way the author is able to control and organize her subject-matter. It is very easy for writers on linguistic topics to let their subject run away with them, as they proceed from speech to language, and thence to comprehension, communication, symbolisation, and the community as a whole. O'Neill tries to avoid this by adopting a very narrow definition of the topic of speech disorders: for her, speech is 'the faculty of producing articulate vocal sounds which express thoughts' (p.5). In other words, it comprises phonation (the use of the vocal cords to produce voice) and articulation (the production of vowels and consonants in the vocal tract). Her exposition thus excludes matters of language structure, vocabulary, prosody, and so on, and also any systematic discussion of the physiological mechanisms of phonation and articulation. But here we are faced with a problem, which the book does not entirely solve. Speech is not 'just' sounds, but a mode of expression for language (along with writing, signing, etc.). Hence, speech has grammar and meaning, and traditional discussion deals with such matters, alongside the phonetic side of the subject. It would seem to be an impossible task to try to extract only the phonetic aspects of the problem from the literature, and indeed O'Neill does find it necessary to introduce other linguistic issues from time to time. But lacking a theoretical framework for the discussion of language as a whole, the discussion becomes somewhat uneven, arbitrary and, at times, superficial. For instance, given the acknowledged importance of Plato's *Cratylus* to the history of ideas about speech, one might have expected more than a paragraph on it (p. 33). Likewise, the account of the important Greek notion of the *logos* is dealt with summarily (p. 57), and the crucial distinction in Greek linguistic thought between *physis* (that language originated from a natural source) and *thesis* (that language originated by convention) is relegated to a footnote (p. 53). I appreciate that, to be fair to such notions, the size of the book would have significantly increased, but perhaps this would have produced an account which integrated more satisfactorily with modern ideas about the subject.

For, surprising as it may seem, in view of O'Neill's depth of awareness of historical nuance, the view she provides of the contemporary subject of speech disorders is really rather superficial. At one point, for example, she refers to 'the modern definition of *dysphasia*' as 'an impairment of speech caused by a central lesion, manifested by lack of coordination and failure to arrange words in their proper sequence' (p. 25). But, as one surveys the many contemporary characterizations of this disorder, one thing is clear: *dysphasia* is *not* a disorder of speech, in O'Neill's sense, but one of language; also, it has a receptive side (involving problems of comprehension), whereas the above definition deals only with expression. Or again, her definition of a language disorder (p. 4) is 'a problem in the thought processes underlying any kind of communication', which is a confusion of psychological and linguistic levels of definition, and does no justice to the complex contemporary discussion of this topic.

Indeed, one wonders just how aware O'Neill is of the contemporary scene in speech pathology. She knows that the modern subject is a multi-disciplinary one, and at one point she cites the interests of 'neuroscientists, biochemists, psychoanalysts, as well as experts in learning psychology, feedback theory and linguistics', (p. 215); but she nonetheless says 'speech is now considered a medical subject' (p. 6). This is far too superficial a view of the present-day study of speech/language disorders. These days, a new tension has arisen, with the rapid development of

the behavioural sciences, so that the medical contribution is now complemented (though some would say confronted) by a behavioural analysis—largely provided by psychologists and linguists. Training courses try to maintain this complementarity, and the research field is beginning to reflect it. It would have been nice to see O'Neill's final discussion take this major twentieth century trend into account, even briefly. As it stands, the gap between her historical review and present thinking is too great for her conviction to be supported that 'studying the origins and early history of ideas about speech and its disorders could make modern attitudes eminently more comprehensible' (p. 9). O'Neill has written a fine, scholarly contribution to the history of ideas on this subject, but the gap she leaves between 1600 and the present day, plus the bias of her medical background, limit her book's significance and applicability to the issues posed by current clinical speech analysis and practice.

DAVID CRYSTAL, *Department of Linguistic Science, University of Reading, Whiteknights,  
Reading RG6 2AA, England*