

When a person communicates thoughts by talking, writing, listening or reading, language symbols are used. For example, the word "pencil" is the language symbol for the object known as a pencil. It is said by combining sounds. The person can write "pencil" by combining letters in a specific order. He/she can read these letters and understand that the word "pencil" means "the thing that you write with." A person has learned to understand the word when someone says, "Give me a pencil, please," and he/she hands the speaker a "pencil" and not an "umbrella."

If a person has aphasia, he/she usually knows what they want to say, but when they try to say it, the words do not come out correctly. The person can still think, but the ability to understand speech or to talk has been damaged. He/she might say, "Put the cigar on the chimney," when he/she may really want to say, "Put the lunch on the table." In this case, the person has the correct mental picture but uses the wrong words. An example like this is easy for the listener to interpret, because more than likely, the patient did not intend to say, "Put the cigar on the chimney."

But what happens when you are at dinner and ask for the sugar but really want the cream? The words are meaningful and appropriate for the occasion, but you have not correctly expressed what you wanted to say. More than likely, both you and the listener will be frustrated and confused by this type of inaccurate communication.

The amount of language loss can vary. The language loss can be severe in all areas of expression (speaking) and comprehension (understanding), or it can be severe in some areas and less severe in other areas. For example, the person may not be able to say any meaningful words; instead, he/she may just repeat one word over and over. At the same time, he/she may listen to and understand most conversations and questions.

Following a brain injury, patients may not always understand what is being said to them. One man who experienced aphasia described his difficulty understanding what was spoken to him in this way: he knew that the nurse was talking to him because he could hear her voice, but all the words she said were meaningless. When she asked him if he was cold and wanted a sweater, he said it sounded like a foreign language. It did not make sense. When she used gestures and pointed to the snow outside the window and showed him a sweater, he knew immediately what she meant. Aphasia, therefore, is a reduction or disruption in the ability to use words or other language symbols due to damage to the brain. The person's spoken language is changed, as is their understanding of spoken language as well as their reading, writing and math abilities.