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The ICA Adopts the Cluttering Orphan

Isabella K. Reichel
Fluency Renaissance Center
New York, NY

In 1964, Deso Weiss poignantly described cluttering as an orphan in the field of speech-language pathology. For more than 40 years since that time, most speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and other professionals were confused about cluttering, like people wandering in the desert. But recently, they have all been given a glimpse of the Promised Land, with the convening of the First International Conference on Cluttering in Katarino, Bulgaria, featuring the formation of the International Cluttering Association (ICA), under the passionate leadership of Kathleen Scaler Scott. With these groundbreaking events, awareness of cluttering—among professionals as well as the general public—has begun to be heightened as never before. The process of adoption of cluttering in the family of speech-language pathology has now begun! The main objective of the ICA is to bring together researchers, SLPs, consumers, and the general public to increase awareness of cluttering in all parts of the world. Through such a partnership, the ICA hopes to serve as a springboard for work among researchers, consumers, and SLPs in the field of cluttering, eventually leading toward a consensus regarding the definition of cluttering and an increase in documentation of the evidence base for effective diagnosis and treatment of cluttering. Furthermore, the ICA hopes that its newly formed and rapidly expanding Web site will serve as a valuable resource for those with the communication disorder of cluttering, their families and friends, SLPs providing treatment, and professors training these SLPs.

The conference leading up to the creation of ICA did not happen without the dedicated efforts of leading researchers in Europe and in the United States, including Ken St. Louis, who was awarded the Deso Weiss Award, sponsored by the Stuttering Foundation of America. The conference was held in Bulgaria, not merely because of the beauty of the countryside and not only because of the wholehearted hospitality of professors Dobrinka Georgieva and Katya Dionissieva, but primarily in recognition of the role that European professionals have played in the identification of cluttering in the past. The international representation at the conference and the significance of the occasion gave a sense of unity, commitment, and excitement!

The presence of consumers, who know cluttering first hand, provided an opportunity to see universal similarities in symptoms, as well experiences in dealing with negative stigma, frustration, fear about the future, and academic
and vocational barriers. Some of such feelings are described below by Anjea Ray, an SLP who also clutters, and who is a U.S. representative to the ICA.

Many individuals who stutter become SLPs to help others who suffer from the same condition. These SLPs enter the field armed with a much more personal understanding of the disorder that they wish to treat in others. But how often do SLPs enter the field unaware of their own speech difficulties and disfluencies?

I have always been dubbed a “fast talker,” and others have asked me to repeat myself or to slow down. My mother advised people that they would “just have to learn to listen faster,” because she believed that my speaking patterns mirrored my outgoing, bubbly personality. As my family was habituated to my speech, they never thought anything errant about it. I never did, either, until I began my graduate studies in communication disorders to become an SLP.

I consistently received positive feedback for my clinical work, but every one of my supervisors, in addition to the other faculty members, commented on my rate of speech. I thought I was speaking more slowly after these persistent reminders, but apparently my perception and that of my supervisors, fellow student clinicians, and clients did not match. It wasn't until my fluency professor told me that I needed to “stop this cluttering business to truly succeed as a speech-language pathologist” that I realized it was a real problem. He had labeled my speech and I didn’t know what that label meant or its potential implications for my future career path.

After some research, a phone call to Dr. Kenneth St. Louis, some self-analysis, and more consultations with my fluency professor and supervisors, I acknowledged and accepted that I was indeed a clutterer. I became extremely self-conscious as I began to notice more and more disfluencies in my speech—repetition of words/syllables, omission of sounds within words, abrupt/abnormal pauses, poor verbal organization, and “rushes” of speech (an incoherent, poorly articulated gibberish that only my closest friends can understand within a known context) formed with incomplete sentences without transitions. As my awareness increased, so did my stress from clinical rotations, my ongoing frustration with my inability to break the speech patterns, and my mounting fear of being ineffective as a SLP working with cognitively and linguistically impaired populations and their families.

The awareness of how my cluttered speech would affect my success as a clinician spurred my interest in the disorder—in particular, its management. My professor advised me to take a behavioral approach—to think about moving slowly, rather than talking slowly, and to feel each sound as I produced it. That has probably helped the most, coupled with Dr. St. Louis’ advice about practicing reading aloud (and in particular, poetry) while recording myself and analyzing my own speech to better understand the patterns specific to my speech. I try to organize my thoughts in my head before I express them, in an effort to keep the ideas linear, clear, and concise; this skill is critical for SLPs in general, but arguably more so for me as I work with the elderly in a nursing home. Due to declining cognition, poor memory, and hearing loss, my patients need me to conduct my therapy sessions using concise language that is spoken slowly. Managing my speech requires daily, vigilant effort, but it has helped me
to realize the difficulty in changing an unconscious habit, something that I ask of my patients every day.

We all look forward to the day that now seems closer than ever before, when the general public and SLPs alike will be aware of what cluttering is and what to do about it and when people with cluttering will be able to identify the disorder which their listeners may only have alluded in their feedback, and which was either misdiagnosed or was never named for them at all. We hope this leads to decreasing experiences of sadness, isolation, and the feeling of being misunderstood, inadequate, or confused about their communication disorder. Formation of the ICA is a beginning to this dream, goal, and mission. Thank you, Dr. Weiss, for referring, so dramatically, to cluttering as an orphan, and thank you, ICA organizers, for beginning the adoption process. As representatives of the United States to the ICA, we invite new members to join our new but much needed organization.

To find out more about the International Cluttering Association, visit our Web site at http://associations.missouristate.edu/ICA or e-mail Kathleen Scaler Scott at scalerscott1@earthlink.net.

References