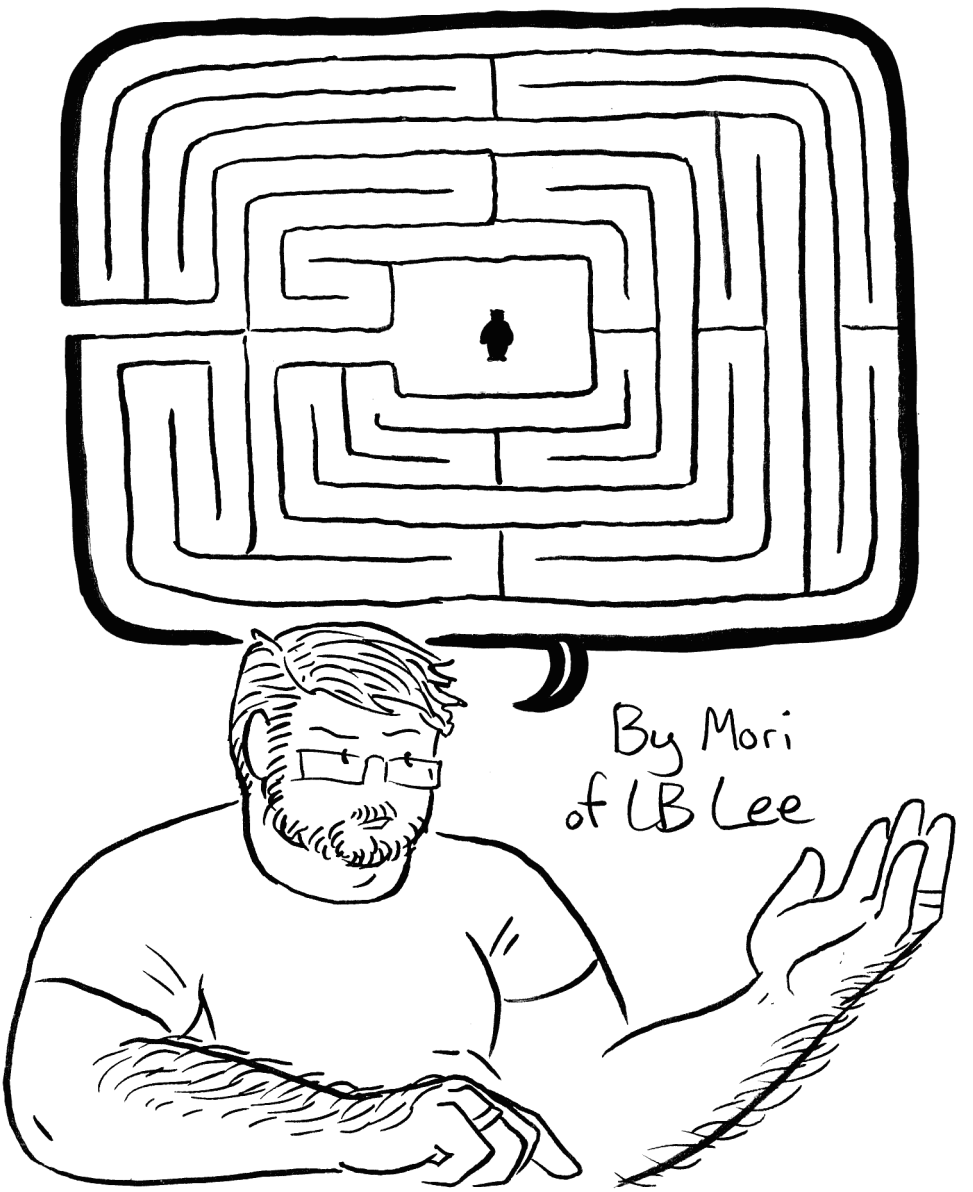
Rogan's Aphasia



The Obligatory Intro (blah)

We are multi. (AKA multiple personalities). Other comics go into more detail. All you need to know for this book is, the following people live in the same body:



Mori: me! I shouldn't be in charge! I'm an abrasive pain in the ass!

Rogan: responsibility hog. No shit his ass would drop!





Sneak: ray of sunshine the most creative

Bob: wants to know how our brain works (me too, dude)

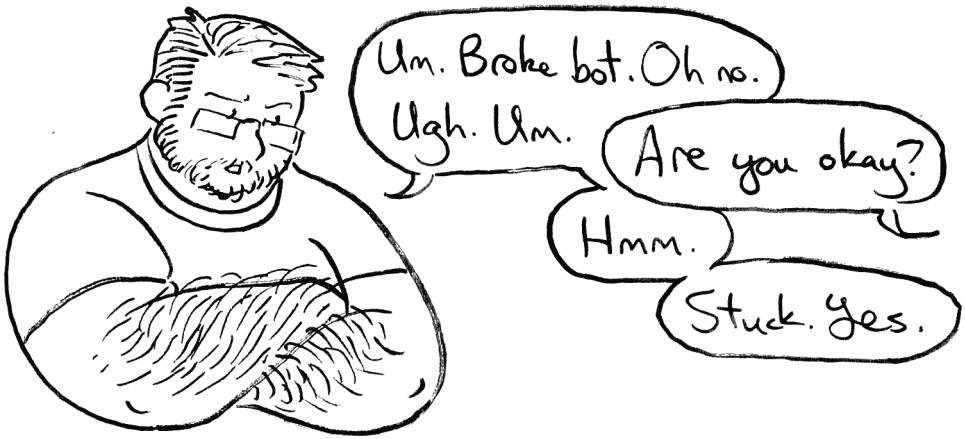




Mac: Rogan's husband. A royal horndog.

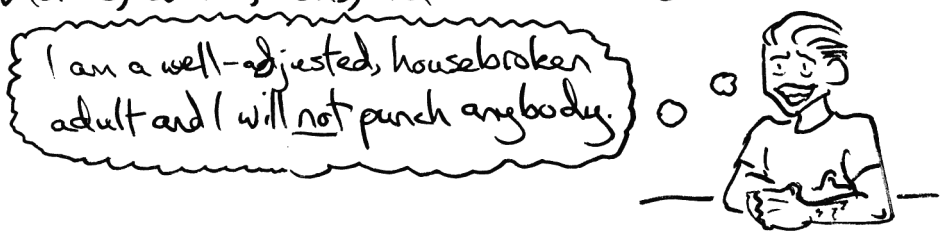
Okay, on with the zine! (phew)

In May 2023, my headmate Rogan went aphasic.

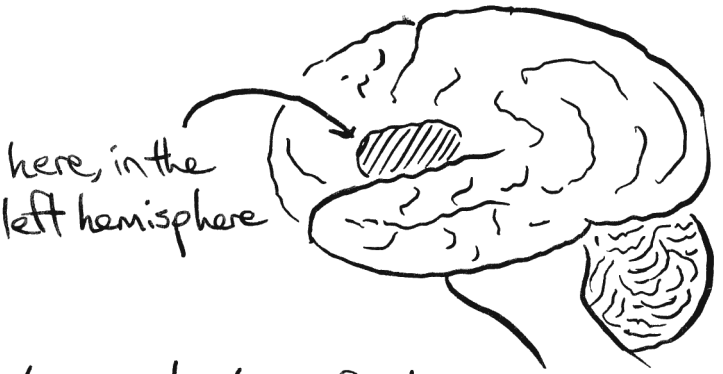


He still understood us fine. He just couldn't speak, write, or sign more than a couple words at a time, preferably content words. Tenses, conjugations, plural vs. singular, all that grammar stuff seemed to lose or confuse him.

At first, we hoped it'd just go away, and after four days, it did. But then it came back... for three and a half weeks. It sucked. Suddenly I was the one performing the LB Lee persona at home, work, cons, and social events.



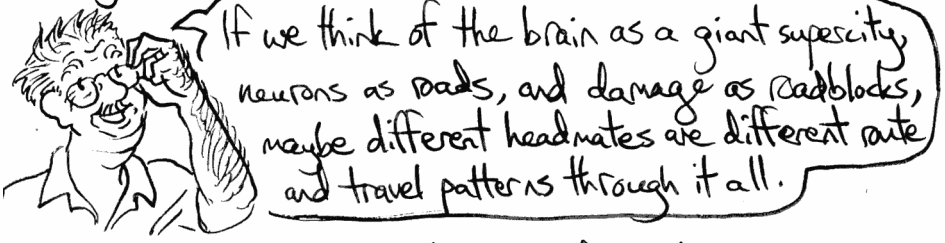
Why was this happening? And why only to Rogan? Well, Broca's aphasia (Rogan's kind) is caused by a specific kind of brain damage:



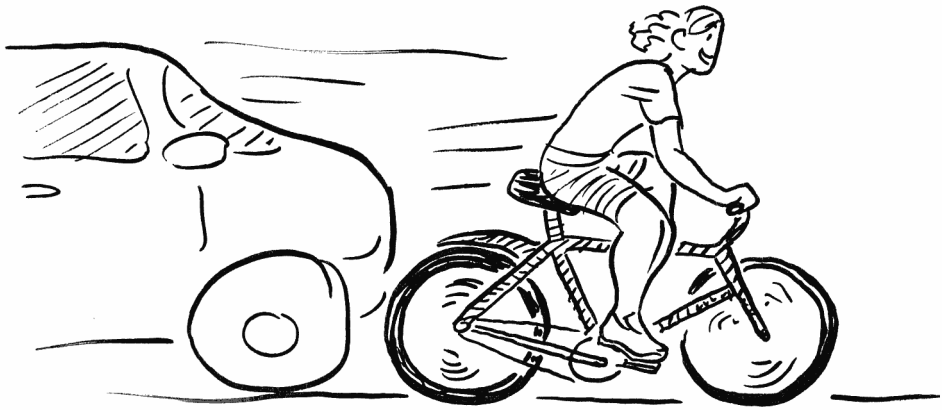
We have a history of, ahem, "neurological injury," which is euphemism for, "Mom liked to smother, strangle, and drown us as kids." We've also had multiple concussions. Most of the time, we managed to mostly recover. (Though we get days-long headaches, need a lot of sleep, sometimes process things slow, get easily lost or confused, and so on.)

Rogan in particular took a lot of these injuries, and he was dealing with the memory of a particularly bad one. In some way, I think he was reliving the injuries, and thus re-manifesting old symptoms. As he composted the memory, neutralizing and coming to terms with it, he recovered once again and got his words back... for now.

Why only Roger, though? Our headmate Bob has a theory:



It's just a guess, but it would explain our varying skills and impairments. We all live in the same city, but have very different ways of navigating it! It'd sure be adaptive, growing up the way we did. Maybe it helped us compensate for the damage.

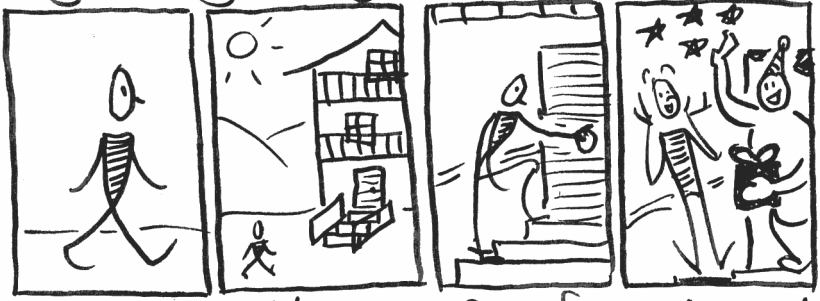




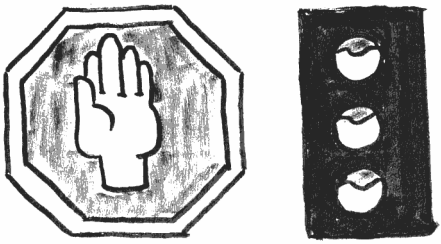
Theory's all well and good, but what could we do for Rogan in the meantime so he could communicate? Much like the MBTA, his mental transit system was clearly experiencing "delays in service."

His sense of symbol and picture, though, was fully intact. He knew the meaning of what he wanted to say; he just kept getting turned around by the grammatical complexity of spoken, written, and signed language. Could we work around that?

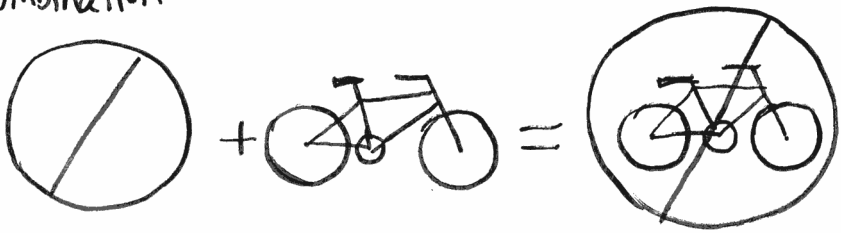
Being a cartoonist, we knew how to convey meaning through images in sequence:



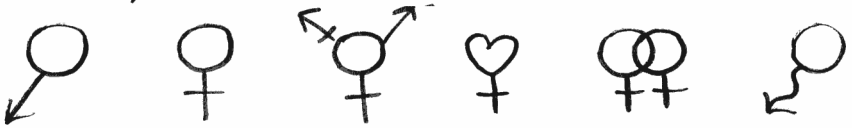
Thanks to folks like Henry Dreyfuss and Charles Bliss, we also knew that graphical symbols could be used to communicate across language barriers. A symbol's meaning could be adjusted using color:



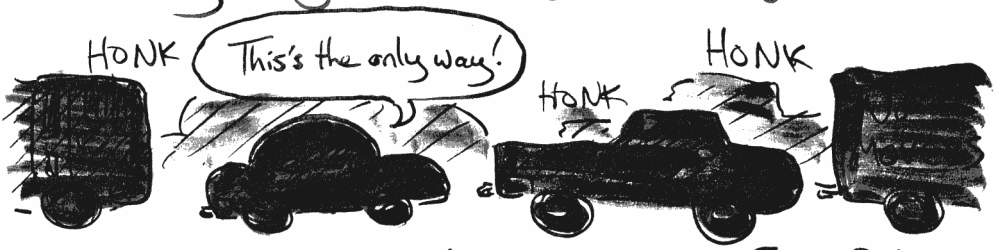
Combination:



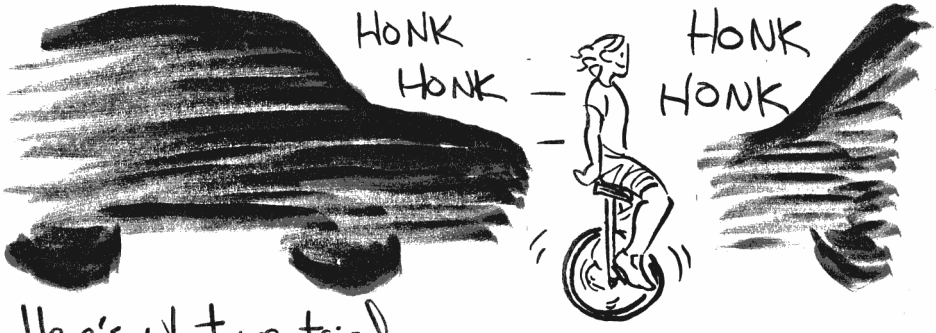
Or shape:



Could we adapt this knowledge for the sake of Rogan's communication? What if, instead of insisting on forcing through the neurological traffic jam...



...we found another route, another way? Even if it was slower, weirder, or less socially acceptable?



Here's what we tried.

☺ Emoticons ♡

Using a mix of text, emotes, and other miscellaneous images via online chat programs. Discord has a zillion icons, and Rogan could use them to hold a pretty decent conversation! More so than any other method!!



+ flexible!
+ Complex concepts can sometimes get expressed!
+ Screenreadable by blind friends???

- requires high tech, so...
- we can't do this outdoors.

Verdict: best overall method, especially for distance communication and techies.

Cards

Drawing symbols on little 3" squares of scrap cardstock, punching holes in them, and stringing them on a carabiner using cardboard dongles to label sections (with ☺, +-, etc.) We put opposite or related concepts on each side (☺, ☹). ~30 cards ≈ 60 signs!



+ pocket-size
+ low-tech
+ cheap and easy to make and modify
+ line up cards for more complex statements

- limited vocabulary (only so many cards you can sort through), so...
- ...less complexity is expressible.

Verdict: Rogan's favorite for headmate or in-person conversations.

Communication Boards

These are the "classic" means of alternative communication, used in schools and such: sheets, with little tiles containing words and statements the person can point to. "Books" of sheets can be hole-punched and bound with brads or a binder, with tabs for easy sorting: "descriptions," "actions," "topic: meals"...



(enlarged for clarity)

+ more versatile, higher vocab than cards
+ low-tech, fit easily in backpack

- bulkier than cards
- overwhelmingly cutesy kid design, so...
- ...Rogan loathes them.



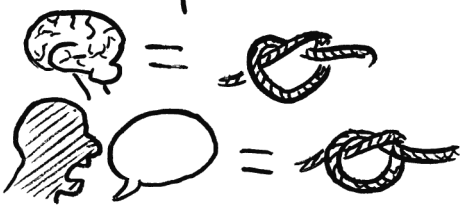
Verdict: we carry it, but Rogan has refused to use it even once.

♡ Thinking In Symbols 💔

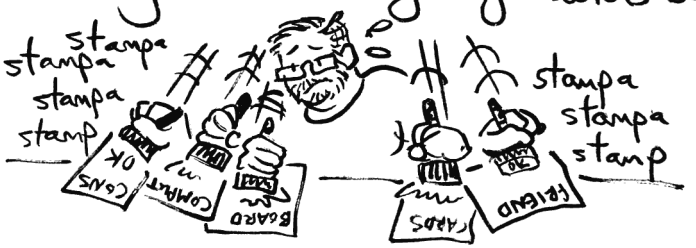
Switching out of language mode is tricky. No cards or emoji pidgin will read exactly like written or spoken language. It takes practice to go from "how are you?" to "🙋=☺?" Part of Rogan's frustration was, he's a very verbal guy and suddenly he couldn't connect! Lonely!



Or, as he expressed it while aphasic:



Some concepts were so abstract and technical, we found no way to have an in-depth talk about them. System decisions piled up, prompting a frantic Congress once Rogan got words back:



But there was a kind of poetry in the ways Rogan communicated while aphasic. A lot of dithering and equivocating got cut, out of necessity. You had to pay more attention, meet him halfway.

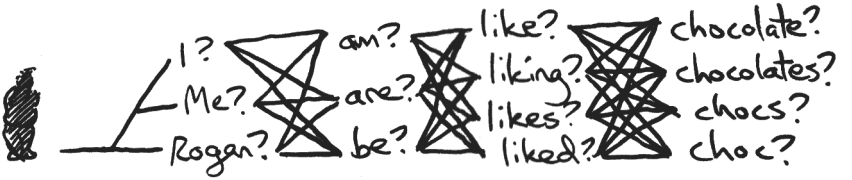


We don't know if Rogan will go aphasic again, but if he does, we'll be ready. Grace, who's mostly mute by default (though in a different way), is glad to finally have a communication method not made for kindergartners; it might help other less verbal headmates too. We plan to bring our cards to noisy cons and clubs from here on out.

It was tough. But I think we handled it well.

What It Felt Like

I learned a lot about my brain while aphasic, even if I couldn't express it. It really did feel like being trapped in a maze, with so many constantly branching paths that I couldn't keep track of my route. For example, the sentence "I like chocolate" would become...



And this is still a simplification! All the synonyms and alternate word choices would buzz around my head like a cloud:



By the time I pinned down a word, I'd be so worn out that I'd lose track of what else there was to say!

-P66T



Images were so much easier. Way fewer choices, way simpler "grammar." It was so much less trouble to say:

 than "I like chocolate."

Equally or more frustrating was how even my headmates would try to talk for me, or how folks would act like I was stupid or a little kid. I understood them (and their condescension) just fine.



I understand why it happened, since I was reduced to linguistically expressing myself like a two-year-old, with exaggerated facial and body expressions to compensate, but still, it sucked. (Even though I know I've behaved similarly with ESL speakers and stuff. Turnabout is fair play, I suppose.)



This isn't to say everyone was jerks! Most folks handled it great! Grace, being mostly mute herself, took it in stride, as did her husband Bob.



Secret hint I learned in 2008: if someone can't understand you, at all, quit talking. Don't talk louder or slower, just stop. Find a different way to communicate entirely. Write, mime, emoji, play Charades, whatever, just shut up. Once you give up beating your head against the wall, linguistically, new avenues of communication open up. There's less shame, less, "me rational citizen, you big dummy" a better deal all around.

Aphasia also taught me weird things about how I think. I'm one of those people with a continuous inner monologue, and my aphasia didn't change that. I just completely lost the ability to think in words on purpose. It was super weird and annoying, especially since my knee-jerk self-hate could still blather on, but I couldn't reason back!



This also meant I couldn't "talk" in head-space via conscious thought. My thoughtleak became mostly noise, unless I focused on broadcasting clear images (like emoji). It was hard!



That's how I'd describe the experience: hard and educational.

Make Your Own Cards!

You need:

- 1 sheet of scrap cardboard (preferably different colors)
- 1 pack of index cards or scrap cardstock (normal paper tears too easily; cardboard's harder to punch)
- holepunch
- scissors
- 1-2 carabiners (make sure the holepunch holes are big enough to fit!)
- pencils, pens, markers, etc.
- 1 rubber band (holds cards together for protection)

Directions:

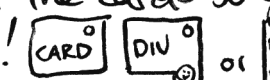
① You want your cards pretty uniform in size and shape to keep them from getting beat up, so cut the index cards in half or the cardstock to size; ~3" square is plenty of room.

② Punch holes in the same corner of each card, so they will hang together neatly (and durably).

③ Write/draw a concept on each side of the card; opposites/similars are good pairs. Don't get hung up on making them perfect, pretty, or grammatical! You can always toss or remake bum cards! Or add new!

(Example pairs: ☺/☹, ++/--, √/0, A-Z/0-9)

④ Divide the cards into sections, if need be. Keep it simple! We have ☺ for emotions, + - for modifiers. Keep anything you need regularly up front. (Our topmost card is, "I am having trouble speaking and am using these cards to communicate. I understand you fine.")

⑤ Cut cardboard section dividers. These will need to stick out past the cards so you can see them all at a glance! 

Also make sure they're different lengths or shapes from each other too, or they'll cover each other up! 

⑥ Stack your cards and dividers and put them on the carabiners. Keep a couple blank cards at the back to replace ripped ones or make new ones. Rubber band them together to protect them. (If you have two carabiners, link them together so you can pop them off your bag/belt loop/lanyard without dropping cards!)

⑦ USE 'EM. Only through use will you learn what cards you really need, what works for you. Fancy cards, you'll be reluctant to toss and redo. Make 'em cheap, make 'em ugly, make 'em work. Use in loud concerts, for deaf friends, whatever, just use 'em!

Want to Learn More?

Stuff that helped us during this:

Cole, B. Erin. Little Brain's Guide to Post-Concussion Syndrome. Self-published, 2018. Read online at: www.littlebraincomics.com/little-brains-guide-to-post-concussion-syndrome/

DomesticShelters.org. "How Strangulation Affects the Brain." Accessed July 12, 2023. https://www.domesticshelters.org/articles/health/how-strangulation-affects-the-brain

Dreyfuss, Henry. Symbol Sourcebook: An Authoritative Guide to International Graphic Symbols. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972.

Konigsburg, E. L. Silent to the Bone. New York: Simon Pulse, 2000. ← kidlit, gave us the cards idea

Roseberry, Erin. Brain Damage Comix. Self-published, 2017-2022. Read online at ko-fi.com/s/e3c852bf78 or fox-teeth.tumblr.com/braininjurycomix

Tobii Dynavox, LLC. Core First Communication Book. Download: us.tobiidynavox.com/products/core-first-communication-books ← good communication board, free!

Tufte, Edward R. Envisioning Information. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 1990.

Also the Wikipedia page for "expressive aphasia."

Speechless Semiotics

When Rogan, LB's main fronter, found himself unable to speak, write, or sign more than a few words at a time, it could've been a disaster. Instead, his headmate Mori stepped in (and made a zine about it, with his OK). Herein:

- What is aphasia?
- Why might Rogan have had it?
- How we worked around it.



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