This 60-year-old man has gradually lost the ability of understanding spoken language for 2 years. He could speak only a few stereotypical sentences with empty contents and was nearly “word deaf” in speech comprehension when he visited our clinic. According to his family, he could still speak fluently even when he was already unable to read newspaper. He still functions normally otherwise at home and is able to use objects correctly despite being unable to name them. Neurological examination revealed no other abnormalities. The result of a formal general cognitive test, CASI (cognitive abilities screening instrument), is 4/100. Other higher corti-
cal function tests showed preservation in simple calculation as well as in recognition of random words. Brain CT showed atrophy of left posterior temporal lobe with secondary dilation of the temporal horn of the lateral ventricle on the left side. SPECT also showed hypoperfusion confined to the same region.

Semantic dementia (SD) is regarded as one of the main clinical variants of frontotemporal dementia, sometimes also referred to as frontotemporal lobar degeneration (1). SD is commonly described as a disorder of “loss of memory for words”. In contrast to Alzheimer’s disease, orientation to time, simple calculation and drawing skills are all well preserved in SD. Patients with early-stage SD usually show bilateral, though typically asymmetrical, atrophy of the anterior temporal lobes. As the disease progresses, the degeneration extends either to the posterior temporal lobes or posterior-inferior frontal lobes, or both (2). However, the anterior temporal lobe is relatively preserved in our patient. Whether semantic dementia should be viewed as a disorder involving one neurocognitive network (semantics) or two (language and semantics) is still a controversial issue. Current longitudinal studies indicate that the nature of the cognitive deficits in SD is dependent entirely on the location of cortical damage which tends to vary over time among different patients (3).

References: