

## **SIGNED LANGUAGES AND PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY**

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Signed languages are the natural languages used by Deaf<sup>i</sup> people. They are visual-gestural languages, produced using the hands and the face and made without sound. Signed languages are fully capable of expressing the range of human experience. Yet, there is a reluctance on the part of the professional and academic community to accept the fact that signed languages are natural languages just like any other natural language. However, for good reason, this reluctance is not shared by linguists.

The community of linguists long ago accepted that signed languages are natural languages, the first language of some people, the second language of many more. Linguists think that not only are signed languages worthy of study, from a formal point of view, but also that, as languages which utilize a different modality, they can shed light on a number of issues, pertaining to the relationship between language and the brain, the relationship of language to speech, and the human capacity for communication through the medium of language.

Why then has the professional community who work with deaf people found it so difficult to accept that signed languages are languages fundamentally just like any other? The first issue seems to be about who has the authority to decide on the status of signed languages as languages. Refusing to acknowledge the language of a group of people amounts to linguistic oppression. For members of the professional and legislative community to make judgments about what is or is not a language is a very serious matter. It may seem harsh to suggest that deaf people are the target of linguistic oppression by the wider society of which they are a part. Yet, this is a claim that is often made.

### **Linguistic Oppression**

Many Deaf people believe that they are systematically oppressed by hearing people and suffer all the indignities of an oppressed group subjugated by mainstream society. Their central claim is that they are not disabled, or handicapped, but that they are a linguistic minority whose language and culture are not recognized by the dominant hegemony. As an example, a substantial number of deaf people say that their up to twelve years of schooling are devoted to little more than training (often not very successful) in speaking and lipreading English or Afrikaans; that they are penalized educationally for failing to acquire these skills; that they are punished for signing; and that the attitude of hearing society towards deaf people is at best paternalistic, and at worst, genocidal. Although this charge seems a little hysterical, eugenic solutions to deafness have, in fact, been proposed.

### **Eugenic Solutions**

A typical response of many hearing people, when they learn that a deaf couple is about to marry, is "I hope they aren't thinking of having children!" The concern being expressed is that the deaf couple might give birth to a deaf child. People who have never really thought about deafness as being anything other than a disability often experience an instinctive and horrified response to the idea that the couple might be looking forward to having children, and in fact, that they might be quite delighted to bring a deaf child into the world. Why would anyone want to give birth to a deaf child, or risk having a child if there were a possibility of it being born deaf?

Everyone wants to have a healthy child but deafness is not an illness. Regardless of whether their child is deaf, Deaf people might relish the idea of their child using the same language that they do, so that communication between parents and child will not be a problem. Communication is an issue very dear to all humans, but one particularly cherished by deaf people because of the negative experiences that so many deaf people have had in trying to communicate in a hearing environment. Additionally, assuming that

the parents sign, the deaf child will have no language delay, as it has been shown that deaf children of deaf parents reach all the same milestones as do hearing children of hearing parents, at roughly the same age. Like all parents, the deaf couple might want their child to share in their culture, rather than feel that she has to go off in search of another speech community in which she feels comfortable and accepted.

For many hearing people unfamiliar with these issues, the attitude of deaf parents to the possible deafness of their child seems rather irresponsible and radical. This is natural if people view deafness as an illness to be cured, or a disability to be coped with, a problem that requires a solution. In fact, much more radical is the point of view of those who wish no more deaf children to be born. Alexander Graham Bell, son of a deaf mother, and husband of a deaf woman, tried to introduce legislation forbidding deaf people from intermarriage. He attempted to ensure that deaf people have minimal interaction with one another, and he advocated that in some cases, deaf people should be sterilized. He wrote and campaigned widely for a eugenic solution to the problem of congenital deafness. There is, to this day, an Alexander Graham Bell Society, dedicated to the eradication of congenital deafness. Deaf fears of the eradication of their variety of the human race are not based merely on phantasies of persecution.

It is probably true to say that just like any other expectant parents, deaf people want more than anything else for their children to be healthy. In general, deaf people are not, however, worried about giving birth to a child who is deaf. Those parents who are themselves children of hearing parents know what it means not to use the same language as their parents. Deaf children of deaf parents have not directly experienced the same communication difficulties in their homes.

Hearing people, on the other hand, particularly those with young families, or those in the process of planning families, tend to become very anxious when the topic of deafness is raised. It is a profound fear for most hearing people that their child could be born deaf. This is natural enough, since the majority of hearing people know very little about deafness. What they know is that if you have a deaf child he or she will be difficult to communicate with. The child will need special care, and will have to undergo years of speech-training. Education will not be a simple business. The child will be "handicapped."

Deaf adults try to encourage the hearing parents of deaf children to learn how to sign themselves, and to expose their children to adult models who do sign. Frequently, hearing parents of deaf children believe that the community of signing people is trying to snatch their children away from them; there is a belief that the deaf community will estrange the children from their parents by encouraging signed language rather than speech and by urging that the children be sent to residential schools for the deaf, where they will mix with other deaf children, rather than be integrated into mainstream hearing culture. There is also a myth that if a child learns to sign, he or she will never learn to speak, and many hearing parents of young deaf children believe and hope that their child will eventually learn spoken language. Based on these and other fears, many hearing parents feel nervous about allowing their children to learn signed languages, and they are reluctant to learn it themselves. This mistrust of signed languages has serious implications for the education of deaf people.

#### **The status of signed languages and the consequences for deaf education**

The attitudes of academics and professionals towards the acceptance of signed languages have very profound consequences. Ultimately, the education of deaf children is at stake. As yet, signed languages are not used as the language of instruction in schools for the deaf. The fact is that in the United States, the average deaf adult has achieved a fifth grade reading level. This includes deaf people educated in mainstream schools and in schools for the deaf. (The reading level is, it is assumed, much lower in this country, but there has not yet been sufficiently extensive research to make this claim conclusively). However, educators of the deaf are amongst the most vociferous and staunchest opponents of signed languages. The general view among educators of the deaf is that signed languages are not languages.

Oddly enough, the other most vociferous opponents of signed languages are speech therapists and audiologists, speech correctionists, and the medical profession

(including, in many cases, the proponents of cochlear implants). It is worth considering who stands to lose what if sign language is accepted as the language of deaf people, and all the rights and obligations which follow from that come into being.

It is a truism that in order to survive economically and compete for employment, deaf people need to know English. However, it should be clear that focusing on speech-reading and speech-training in English to the exclusion of other essential education greatly disadvantages deaf people. Physical constraints make it extremely unlikely that the spoken English of deaf people will ever be comparable with that of a hearing person. Beyond a point, such training has tremendously diminishing returns on improving the deaf child's actual comprehension skills in the language. However, deaf children can learn to read and write English.

The generally held view of language acquisition specialists is that children learn a second language when there is first language firmly in place. Thus, children who are fluent in signed languages have a better chance of learning (written) English as a second language. Children who have little sense of any language at all are very unlikely to acquire literacy. It is well-established that deaf children who have a first language firmly in place (usually a signed language) do well when it comes to acquiring a second language, such as written English. On the other hand, it is also well-established that deaf children who do not have a first language of any kind firmly in place, find it extremely difficult to learn to read and write English, and may, in fact, never succeed. If the medium of instruction were accessible to deaf children, the learning of content subjects, such as maths or history, would be greatly facilitated. Presently, the language barrier makes the learning of content subjects extraordinarily difficult and time-consuming for deaf students.

Schools for the deaf, in general, have not favored a signed language-first approach. Some use speech-training in English. Some use simultaneous communication (an attempt to speak and sign at the same time, usually resulting in very minimalist signing, sometimes called sign-supported speech). Some use manually coded English, an unsuccessful attempt to represent English on the hands. Yet others use various combinations of these approaches, known as Total Communication. In the main, all these methods have failed

dismally in improving the reading skills of deaf children. Yet, it is educators of the deaf, more than any other group, who most fervently oppose the use of signed languages in schools, and who are the strongest proponents of the view that signed languages are not real languages.

#### **Recognition of signed languages**

Signed languages are not usually used as a medium of instruction in schools for the deaf, and it is considerably more difficult for a deaf person to be certified as a teacher of the deaf than it is for a hearing person.

The question of whether or not something is a language cannot be decided by legislation. This raises the issue of authority. Who is qualified to judge what is a language and what is not?

#### **Who is qualified to judge?**

The general answer to the question of who is qualified to judge on matters of scholarly fact is that these matters must be referred to the experts in the field. Thus, when people want to know something about physics, they call the physicists; about astronomy, they call the astronomers; about poetry, they call the critics, or even, perhaps, the poets. These fields all concern themselves with serious objects of study. When it comes to matters of language, the principle illustrated above seems to fail. Everyone seems to think that they are experts on language, because everyone uses language. So we all believe we know what there is to know about daily language in use.

Of course, this attitude is different when we study language which has been crafted and stylized, to produce Art. By Art we mean works of poetry, literature and drama. This function of language has an elevated status in the academic world and is regarded as worthy of serious examination and study. For such judgment we defer to experts who

have for years studied the technical intricacies of how the crafted use of language can create immutable truth and beauty, capture the human condition in all its complexity and express universal human truths.

But what of ordinary language, which is as natural to us as breathing? Language, not as the vehicle for great thoughts and fine subtleties, political rhetoric and polished oratory, but language as the realization of the capacity we all take for granted, and seldom reflect upon, because it is so easy, and we all do it.

Generally, we all have an opinion about language, and we know we must be right, because language is something we use every day, and there is nothing to it. So why would we consult an expert? We know what there is to know. And we feel quite qualified to judge. Language is what we feel familiar with: for hearing people, it is a stream of sound that conveys meaning. You don't have to be an expert to know that.

When we reflect on how children learn language, we assume it must be from exposure to others who use the language. Maybe we think children learn through imitation, or maybe through some other cognitive process. Perhaps children learn language in the same way that they learn everything else, or perhaps differently. Whatever the case, most people think they know more or less what there is to know about language, as it is something so much a part of our very selves. As educated people, we know how to use language, to craft it so that is maximally accurate and efficient, especially when we write. We control language, and we realize the power of language in defining and changing a problem, in constructing identity and reality, in shaping thought.

So, why go to the experts on matters of language?

The problem with the thinking described above is that we trivialize language as an object of study in and of itself. Language is naturalized and familiar. We do not accord it the status of physics, or astronomy, or geology, or philosophy. We do not see language as worthy of study, and therefore we do not believe that there is any necessity for consulting the experts.

Suddenly we encounter a communication system quite unlike what we know of as language. It does not have sound. It does not have what we can discern as words or sentences. We presume that it does not have a grammar. It does not have a writing

system, so it certainly cannot be considered to have a literature. It is quite strange to us. The people who use it make weird faces. And the people who use it are handicapped, deaf. They cannot really use language. And so, using intelligent skepticism and our own experience of the world and of language, we decide that this communication system cannot be a language, because it is certainly not like any language we know.

We would be wary of making such classifications and decisions about the nature of a particle, or a meteor, a villanelle or a theorem, before consulting the relevant experts. But with language, because it is so familiar, we feel confident.

Faced with the phenomenon of gestural communication, we need to consult people who focus on language as a serious object of study. Language is a complex system, and knowledge of how language functions, how it is structured, and how its intricate subsystems interact in the process, is not simply intuitive. These are areas where many years of linguistic research have made possible great advances in understanding of the human language system, which have, however, not yet become well-known to the general public, or even, in some cases, to the educated academic and professional community.

Linguists, it turns out, have no doubt that signed languages are languages. Ask any linguist you know. Signed languages conform to all the structural principles of language. Moreover, they conform to all the functional principles of language. They are acquired by children in quite the way and at quite the pace that other human languages are acquired. In the event of brain damage, such as that caused by strokes, signers undergo very similar language disorders in their signed language as do users of spoken language. Analogues of spoken language disorders, such as stuttering or slips of the tongue, are found in signers who perseverate on aspects of signs, or who make rule-governed slips of the hand. Signed languages have as many different registers as do spoken languages: they can be used for joking, oratory, small-talk, academic presentations or flirting. There is even a way to whisper in signed languages. There are rules that govern the way turn-taking interaction takes place in signed languages. And chimpanzees cannot learn signed languages. They can learn to use certain fixed signs more or less appropriately under certain fixed contexts in extremely controlled situations, after much training, a far cry from the mastery of

abstract, rule-governed systems demonstrated by human speakers and signers (by the age of three) in their creative use of language.

In fact, linguists find signed languages a fascinating field of study because of the insights that these languages provide about the human capacity for language. The study of signed languages shows that they have all the characteristics of other languages and that sound is not a necessary condition for human language. The study of signed languages tells us a great deal about language in general, as well as showing that space is a dimension in which language can be expressed.

#### **Sign Language is not universal**

Many misconceptions about signed languages abound. One is that there is a universal sign language and if signed language is not universal, it should be. This is principally a misconception to do with the nature of language. There is a notion that signs are universally transparent and interpretable, in a way that words are not. This would suggest that signers of Namibian Sign Language could easily communicate with signers of Thai Sign Language. This is not the case. Just as different spoken languages use different words for different lexical items, so different signed languages use different signs.

Languages arise through use by a community. If different language communities of users have never had any contact with one another over many generations, then the arbitrary nature of language is such that their languages may not resemble one another at all. Thus, the sign for "girl" in ASL is quite different from the signs meaning "girl" in Taiwanese Sign Language, Swedish Sign Language and Namibian Sign Language. Different signed languages are just as different from one another as are different spoken languages, although those that are historically related show some similarities.

Thus, interestingly, British Sign Language and American Sign Language are not mutually intelligible. American Sign Language has far more in common with French Sign Language although they, too, are not mutually intelligible. The reasons for this may not, at first, be obvious. Signed languages are not fundamentally related to the spoken language of the geographical area in which they arise. Thus, American Sign Language (ASL) is not

derived from English. Neither is British Sign Language (BSL). The fact, therefore, that English is the spoken language of both countries is not relevant to a comparison of the signed languages. ASL is historically related, however, to French Sign Language, as the first school for the deaf established in the USA was started by a deaf French teacher in 1817, who brought with him the signed language used in France at the time. It is thought that this signed language, in combination with the indigenous signed languages used by deaf people in the USA at the time, formed the basis of what is now known as ASL.

The idea that there should be one universal signed language is equivalent to the idea that there should be one universal spoken language. The "success" of Esperanto, in this regard, should be noted. One may speculate on the reasons for the limited success of attempts to implement one universal spoken language. People feel very strongly about their language. It is a crucial part of our identity. It is unlikely that any of us would give up our own languages for the greater good of a universal spoken language, even though this would supposedly be simpler.

The point is that signed languages are not transparent. If they were, how much easier they would be to learn. This is another *misconception* about signed languages. Signed languages are not iconic in any greater way than spoken languages are onomatopoeic. Some signs may look like what they mean: many more are quite arbitrary. Someone not fluent in a particular signed language is unlikely to understand any extended signed language discourse in that language.

Another misconception is that signed languages are less complex linguistically than spoken languages, and that they are incapable of conveying abstract information. Linguists have shown that signed language grammar is as complex as, and in fact, very similar to, the grammar of all other languages. And it is simply false to suggest that signed languages are incapable of expressing the same richness and complexity of human thought that any other language can express. It is superfluous to note, but I do so merely to stress this point, signed languages can be used to discuss the RDP, calculus, or technical phonology.

### **Signed languages are languages in space**

The most obvious feature of signed languages is that they use a different modality from the one utilized by spoken languages. Signed languages involve the use of the hands, the face and the eyes. They occur in space. Signed languages are languages in the spatial modality, and as such, they exploit the medium of space maximally and most efficiently. They use the medium of space to express the relationship of the elements in the language to one another. Signed languages are processed visually, whereas spoken languages are processed aurally. Processing research has shown that it takes roughly the same amount of time to express a notion in a signed language as it does in spoken language. However, the packaging of information in the different modalities is different. Even though individual words can be expressed more quickly than signs in some cases, simultaneity of different pieces of information is an available option in the spatial modality, so more information can be packed into one sign. The fact is that both modalities function equally well to express all of the shades of meaning of which human language is capable.

Signed language grammar is built around a series of spatial contrasts, and space is used linguistically at all levels of the grammar. Traditionally, when linguists study the structure of a language, they look at various different linguistic units. The smallest contrastive linguistic unit is a phoneme, and phonology is the study of how these units are contrasted and organized. In spoken language, phonemes are regarded as representations of the smallest contrastive units of sound. People usually react with shock when it is suggested that the phonology of signed languages can be studied. The standard disclaimer is that the "phon-" in phonology means sound. How then, can languages distinguished by the complete absence of sound, have phonology?

It should be noted that even in spoken languages, phonemes are an abstraction. They are not the actual sounds themselves, but a representation of the combination of distinctive features that identify particular sounds. Different languages use different sets of phonemes, chosen from among possible phonemes and structured in language-specific ways with respect to other phonemes. Phonology can be seen as an abstract system for the organization of the distinctive units of language: sounds, in spoken languages. A language

that does not have sounds can, nonetheless, have a similar representation of its smallest linguistic parts, which is analogous to the representation proposed for spoken languages. This insight was first proposed and argued for by William Stokoe in 1960, in relation to American Sign Language (ASL).

In fact, signed languages have been shown to have a set of basic phonological primes that make up the distinctive “parameters” of any sign. These are the handshape of the sign, the movement, the location, and the palm orientation of the signer’s hand. Signs can be contrasted with each other by a change in any of these parameters. Analogous phonological processes to those found in spoken languages can be found in signed languages, too. The interesting feature of these parameters is that, because of the spatial modality, they can occur simultaneously. Thus, more than one piece of linguistic information can be conveyed at one time. This discovery, that signed languages use the simultaneous organization of phonological information, was made at a time when it was believed that the organization of spoken language phonology was sequential. This contrast between spoken and signed language phonology was regarded as a significant difference based on modality. Subsequently, it was shown that spoken language phonology is organized simultaneously as well sequentially. Interestingly, it was also shown that signed languages have a sequential organization of units, with signs being made up of a sequence of movements and holds, equivalent to the concatenation of vowels and consonants in spoken language. The phonology of spoken and signed languages is now regarded as involving similar processes and rules, each providing interesting evidence about the nature of the human phonological system.

Morphology is the study of the meaningful units of language. ASL morphology has been studied extensively, as it is rich and complex, and readily accessible because of the nature of its visibility in the spatial modality. Morphological contrasts in ASL are exhibited spatially. Inflectional information can be conveyed simultaneously with other meaningful information. Thus, a change in the movement of a sign can provide additional morphological information. For example, the sign meaning “to look” is produced with a certain handshape, at a particular location, with a specific movement and palm orientation. A change in the movement of that sign can produce signs meaning, “to look for a long

time", "to look repeatedly", "to look at intently" and others. Aspectual information is often encoded directly in the verb signs themselves, as compared to a language like English, where aspectual information may take the form of auxiliaries and word endings. So the same semantic possibilities are achieved in spoken as in signed languages. Each language exploits the nature of the modality most efficiently to produce equivalent results.

ASL, an agglutinating language, uses a system of embedded morphemes to convey a great deal of information within one sign. Thus, the morphological structure of ASL is similar to certain other agglutinating languages, such as Turkish or Eskimo. For example, in ASL it is possible, building on the basic morpheme meaning "to go from one location to the other" to use a handshape meaning "in a vehicle", and a movement which is both sharp and at a steep angle, to embed into one sign the meaning, "to travel in a car very fast up a steep hill". Different languages achieve this result differently: English uses a series of separate words, Eskimo and ASL use agglutinating morphemes, Eskimo serially, ASL simultaneously. These are all examples of how languages differ systematically from one another.

Syntax is the study of the sentence structure of a language. ASL syntax is rather different from that of English. Direct gloss translation (i.e., writing an English word corresponding to each sign) led to a belief that ASL had an inferior, fractured sort of syntax, because when translated in this way, ASL sounded like broken English. This, of course, is true of any language in direct gloss translation. Japanese, too, if each word were translated into one English word and presented in Japanese word order, would sound very much like broken English. This is because Japanese is not English, and has a syntax of its own. The same is true of ASL, and of other natural signed languages.

ASL syntax, like the other linguistic systems in ASL, is built on a set of spatial contrasts. Cohesion, allowing anaphoric reference, is established by assigning unique referents unique points in space, and referring to them consistently. These referents are nouns in ASL, and they are located in space. Reference to the locations at which they have been established is pronominal. ASL has verbs which agree with their subjects and their objects. In some cases, this agreement can actually be seen spatially, i.e., the verb sign

begins in the location where the subject noun sign has been set up, and ends in the location where the object sign has been set up. In other cases, agreement is realized in different ways. ASL also has a way of expressing tense information along with particular facial expressions and movements of the head and upper torso.

A great deal of sign language sentence grammar is made on the face. Many types of grammatical markings are expressed non-manually, for example, *wh*-questions are accompanied by the lowering of the eyebrows, and *yes/no* questions by the raising of the brows. Other grammatical functions, such as negation, hypotheticals, topic marking, relative clauses and rhetorical questions are also marked by use of non-manual marking: some combination of brow movement, tilt of the face, mouth tension and eye-gaze. Studies in ASL syntax show that ASL syntax is remarkably like that of other human languages: it has a hierarchical constituent structure that is comparable to that of other human languages and its syntax is governed by the same universal principles.

Thus, despite the fact that they use an entirely different modality to manifest their grammar, signed languages are languages that are formally entirely comparable to all other human languages.

What this means to linguists is that human language is really a function of the brain, rather than of the physical communication apparatus. The human brain organizes language in a rule-governed fashion. Naturally these rules are manifested in a way that best suits the modality in which the language is expressed. This suggests that the abstract rules of language are independent of modality, and that all human languages have the same fundamental organization. The discovery that the rule systems proposed for spoken language are also found in signed languages is thus an extremely important one for anyone concerned about the properties of language, and indicates that modality is a relatively superficial feature of the complex human language system.

Results from experiments conducted by neurolinguists provide further evidence that language, whether spoken or signed, is localized in the same cortical hemisphere of the brain. There is a commonly accepted view that where there is hemisphere specialization for language, the left hemisphere controls this function. However, spatial relations, in

general, are controlled by the right hemisphere. Very important research conducted by Poizner, Klima and Bellugi (1987), confirmed in many other studies, has demonstrated that in terms of hemisphere specialization for language, deaf people have language, specifically syntax, localized in exactly the same area of the brain as do hearing people, i.e., generally in the left cortical hemisphere.

Thus, although spatial relations are generally right-hemisphere functions, research conducted on deaf stroke-victims revealed that where there are left hemisphere lesions, deaf signers show language impairment, and where there are right-hemisphere lesions, language functions *per se* are not impaired, although the comprehension and production of other non-language spatial relations are affected. This is a far-reaching result, because it confirms that language is located in the left hemisphere of the brain, irrespective of language modality, and supports the claim that signed languages and spoken languages are similar in their organization and representation. It is also further evidence for the claim that language is represented as a separate module in the brain, rather than being merely a product of general cognitive functioning.

### **Language attitudes**

*How can it be a language if it has no written form?*

The fact that signed languages does not have an efficient and simple orthography has led some people to suggest that it is not a language. In fact, there have been various attempts to invent writing systems for signed languages but these have, in general, been cumbersome or difficult to learn, and none has really caught on. However, there is no reason to assume, just because a language does not have a written form, that it does not have all the properties of a natural language. There is no justification for saying that a language without a writing system is not a language. Many languages that do not have written forms are considered by linguists to be languages, as the oral form is, in fact,

regarded as the primary form of language. Languages such as Hopi, Choctaw, Zulu, Sotho and Cherokee existed for many years before being written down.

Languages that do not have written forms are, however, stigmatized in print-literate cultures, and their users are regarded as somewhat culturally inferior to users of languages that are rich in print-literacy. This has been true of the western view of many African languages that did not have a writing system, although it has now been abundantly demonstrated that many non-written languages are used in ancient cultures, rich in oral traditions built on a very sophisticated use of language. Linguists have shown that these languages are just as complex as any other human languages, just as capable of expressing human thought, and just as easy or difficult to learn as any other language. The negative social status of non-written languages is tied up with patterns of cultural dominance in Western society, and a reluctance on the part of the majority to accept difference, or a tendency to see the different as inferior, strange or menacing.

*How can it be a language if there is no grammar book?*

Because the majority of users of signed languages are not native (only 10% of deaf children are born to deaf parents), these languages do show some variation depending on the users. However, deaf people always refer inquiries about correct use to the "custodians" of the language. These custodians are usually native users of signed languages, Deaf children of Deaf parents who acquired signed languages as their first language. There is a general belief among Deaf people that there is a "correct form" of signed languages. This is not standardized in a prescriptive way -- there is no official Grammar of Signed Languages that is used in schools. The absence of grammars and textbooks which are conventionalized forms of evidence that a language is a language further reinforces the misconception that signed languages are not real languages.

One of the more iniquitous consequences of the widespread belief (among those with the power to control information and opinion) that signed languages are not real languages is that many deaf people themselves do not believe that they *are*. The fact that the use of

their language is stigmatized, especially by comparison with the use of English, causes some deaf people to devalue their language. This is a very common feature of the attitudes of oppressed people towards their language: they themselves denigrate it, usually by comparison to the higher prestige language of the dominant culture.

This phase in the recognition of language status can be seen in the history of Maltese, Bahasa Indonesia, Afrikaans, and many other languages of the world, whose users needed to develop pride in their own language and culture as part of their struggle against colonization. The belief that one's own language is somehow inferior, or not good enough, is a fundamental factor in the oppression of a people. The fact, of course, is that all these languages are full-fledged languages, with complex and systematic structures, capable of expressing all the functions that other human languages express. The judgment about their worth is a political one, used to assert the domination of one group over another.

*How can it have a literature if it's not written down? And how can it have a culture if it's not geographically localized?*

The standard argument used by the academic community in their rejection of signed languages is that signed languages have no literature and the deaf do not have a separate culture. It turns out that this argument does not bear scrutiny. It seems nonetheless to be a convenient objection used in opposition to the full recognition of signed languages. We could speculate on the reasons for this prejudice and we can try to understand that it is threatening to acknowledge that language is not made only in the way we have always believed it to be. However, it is probably more productive to look at the arguments proffered against admitting signed languages into the inner circle of the literary tradition, as it is studied on university campuses. The main considerations in deciding what constitutes a language for the American college language requirement is that the language must be that of a distinct culture and the language must have a literary tradition.

ASL is the language used by deaf people in a particular culture, which can be called Deaf American culture. The idea that there is another culture (lodged within, and critical

of, mainstream American culture), one that is not inherited necessarily by ties of blood, one which results from societal rather than geographic isolation; a culture chosen through identification as a result of oppression and isolation is somehow threatening to the guardians of the mainstream culture and it is one that many might try to deny.

It is as clear to anthropologists that there is a Deaf culture in the USA as it is to linguists that ASL is a language. One odd feature of this culture is that those who identify as members of the culture choose their identification and choose to identify with others who they feel share a common experience. Deaf children of hearing parents frequently have to break away from the culture of their parents. Deaf culture is built on a common language as well as the shared experience of being deaf. It is oppression on the basis of language that is the particular feature contributing to the isolation of deaf people, and their language is the one of the unifying principles of the culture. Language (ASL) and literary art are highly valued in the Deaf community and serve as the medium for transmission and negotiation of a set of values and a worldview that are quite distinct from those that underlie hearing culture.

Deaf culture is forged in residential schools for the deaf, and has as its center the Deaf Club. In Deaf culture, native users of signed languages tend to be regarded as leaders of the community, as the language is regarded as the central cohesive element of the culture. Deaf people seem to be very conscious of language, and it is a preoccupation in any conversation. Hearing parents of deaf children often fear that their children will learn to sign, for they see that using signed languages rather than English may cause their children to identify with a community of language users outside of the family, and may cause their children to reject their families. In fact, it seems to be the case that when deaf children break away from their families it is because of miserable communication experiences, rather than because they have learned how to sign.

Being a member of Deaf culture is empowering for Deaf people for many reasons, one of which is that they may feel free to use their own language and are not judged according to the norms of hearing culture. For deaf people, speaking can be a humiliating experience; hearing people frequently regard them as stupid, slow to understand, clumsy of speech. These "handicaps" disappear within the Deaf community. Stories, language

games, theater, and jokes are a very central part of Deaf culture, and storytellers are highly valued members of the community with a particular responsibility to pass down the tales of the culture.

The ready availability of video camera and video cassette recorders has revolutionized the notion of text with respect to signed languages. Signed narratives can now be preserved in permanent form, having been polished and crafted in a studio. These taped presentations are now somewhat different from live storytelling performances. In the USA, for example, videotapes are widely available to members of the Deaf community. There are now authoritative versions of texts and there may be more than one rendition of one composer's work. Texts can now be analyzed at any level of detail. Thus, to claim that ASL does not have a literature is to narrow the definition of text to the printed word, and to ignore the very rich, creative products of a vibrant culture.

Eventually, scientific research by linguists and anthropologists, and heightened respect for the culture and language of Deaf people is bound to have an impact on the attitudes of educators. There is a huge weight of responsibility on the shoulders of those whose attitudes are permeable to the facts. We should not allow yet another generation of deaf children to come out of school with less than adequate literacy, angry and resentful that they have been handicapped and disabled by mainstream hearing culture.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I have argued that signed languages are fully-fledged languages and have all the features that we expect of a human language. In addition, I have shown that signed languages can be used for any communicative functions that other languages can be used for. Ignoring these facts along with the fact that signed languages arise out of a vital culture with a burgeoning literature has implications for the education of deaf children. If the wider community does not recognize these realities, this can lead to a situation in which

deaf people feel oppressed and discriminated against by the culture into which they were born. The evidence that signed languages are languages has been acknowledged by linguists. The recognition of signed languages as languages by the broader professional, legislative and academic community is a profoundly social decision, affecting the lives of deaf people and should not be taken lightly.

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<sup>i</sup> In keeping with international convention, I use Deaf (upper case D) to refer to people who identify themselves with the Deaf community, and deaf (lower case d) to refer to people who have been diagnosed as audiotogically deaf.

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