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Author: Padden & Humphries

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Living in Others' World

Deaf people for the most part have always lived within the world of others. Thus it is not surprising that their theories about themselves and their language are powerfully colored by beliefs held by others. The story that the Abbé de l'Epée invented signed language, for one, is a reconciliation of what Deaf people believe with what others believe. Epée's metaphorical role in the creation of their community is illustrated by the magical powers assigned to him.

If we look further at the speech by George Veditz from which we quoted in Chapter 2, we find another example of the imparting of unwarranted powers to others. Veditz gives the following account of the way signed languages are transmitted across generations:

> From olden years, the masters of this sign language, the Peets, the Dudleys, the Elys, the Ballards are rapidly disappearing, and we, in past years, loved these men. They had a precise command of the sign language, they could communicate to us using only signs and we could understand them. But fortunately, we have several masters of our sign language still with us. Edward Miner Gallaudet learned this sign language from his father, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet. There are several others like Dr. John B. Hotchkiss, Dr. Edward Allen Fay, Robert P. MacGregor who are still with us. And we want to preserve the signs as these men now use them to keep and pass on to future generations . . . there is but one known means of passing on the language: through the use of moving picture films. (Veditz 1913)[1]

Veditz gives to the hearing persons he mentions the responsibility for transmitting signed language. Significantly, he neglects to credit Edward Miner Gallaudet's Deaf *mother* for her hearing son's language competence, and instead says he learned it from his father, a hearing man. Sophia Fowler Gallaudet had an older Deaf sister and a Deaf cousin who lived across the street (Gannon 1981; Lane 1984). It is likely that she was exposed to signed language at an early age, and this would suggest that Edward had a proficient model of the language in his mother, perhaps a better model than his father, who had no knowledge of any signed language until he met Laurent Clerc at the age of twenty-nine.

Veditz believed, as was customary in his time, that signed languages are derived from spoken languages and have been invented by individuals such as Epée. His repeated references to Epée and Gallaudet suggest that he thought signed language would gain prestige or respect by being associated with leading hearing figures. If such esteemed men were responsible for the language, then it could not be as primitive or as degraded as others thought. He probably also believed that languages are transmitted primarily by intellectuals rather than by any normally competent person. His urgent appeal for preserving the purity of sign language on film implies that he thought the language's survival depended on continuing the direct line of transmission from Gallaudet himself.

Veditz's ideas about signed language can be traced to predominant beliefs held by others. Here again we arrive at the problem Deaf people have of developing an independent understanding of themselves. Given that they live within the world of others, is a science about Deaf people a science of themselves or one given to them by others?

1. Translated by Carol Padden.

The problem of how to describe signed languages is not new. In his book *Language* (1921), Edward Sapir, one of the foremost linguists of this century, articulated the standard view of his time when he described signed languages of "groups of deaf-mutes" as in the same category as gestures of "Trappist monks vowed to perpetual silence" and "the gesture language of the Plains Indians of North America" (1921:21). Later, Sapir's student Leonard Bloomfield, an influential force in the field of language studies for most of this century, continued the same line of thinking: "It seems certain that these gesture languages are merely developments of ordinary gestures and that any and all complicated or not immediately intelligible gestures are based on the conveniences of speech" (1933:39).

These descriptions fail to notice two ways in which signed languages are different from gestures of monks and Plains Indians. First, signed languages are acquired as first languages, whereas the other systems are used to supplement the group's spoken language. Second, signed languages are the primary mode of social interaction for the groups that use them. Trappist monks, it is safe to assume, learned to speak before they took their vow of silence; hence their gestural systems are not primary languages but systems devised for unusual circumstances. Although the original descriptions are confused, it is clear from rereading the available records that the gestural systems of the Plains Indians were not used within a tribe as a mode of social discourse, but rather were means of communicating with other tribes who spoke different languages (Mallery 1972; Perlmutter 1986).

Sapir and Bloomfield did not examine signed languages in detail to see whether they could identify structures resembling those found in oral languages. If they had, as have a number of investigators in the present generation of scholars, they would have discovered a remarkable similarity of categories of structures (Perlmutter 1986).

Although Sapir and Bloomfield did not venture further into the description of signed languages, their authority was enough

to establish the tone of official thought. For the next generation of those influential in deciding how deaf children in America would be taught, Helmer Myklebust's *Psychology of Deafness* (1957) set the standard. Speech is the basis for human language, and all other forms are derivatives:

> The manual sign language used by the deaf is an Ideographic language . . . it is more pictorial, less symbolic . . . Ideographic language systems, in comparison with verbal symbol systems, lack precision, subtlety, and flexibility. It is likely that Man cannot achieve his ultimate potential through an Ideographic language . . . The manual sign language must be viewed as inferior to the verbal as a language. (1957:241–242)

The implication for Deaf people who use signed languages is clear: their choice makes them lesser humans, unable to achieve their ultimate human potential. These beliefs were not based on an analysis of signed languages, but rather on impressionistic evidence that was allowed to take on scientific weight. The dismissive tone of Myklebust's cursory review of signed languages was not considered degrading or suspiciously researched, but became a standard.

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In the face of the opinions of others about signed languages, what kinds of theories did Deaf people themselves develop about their language? Evidence can be found in back issues of the *Silent Worker,* a forum where Deaf people exchanged ideas about a variety of topics, frequently including their language. The *Silent Worker,* when it was revived in 1948 after nearly twenty years, rapidly became one of the most widely read magazines in the Deaf community. As part of a strategy by Byron B. Burnes, then president of the National Association of the Deaf, the magazine set out to improve the image of Deaf people by portraying them as hard-working, law-abiding citizens. (This same concern for public image later led the NAD to rename the magazine the *Deaf*

American because the older name was too close to that of the official organ of the American Communist Party, the *Daily Worker*.)

An editorial in the February 1950 issue interested us because it had preserved shades of Veditz's lecture—as children the editors had known Veditz, and his many public orations remained in their memories. The theme of the editorial picked up on Veditz's cry that the survival of sign language was threatened:

> the sign language is in danger of becoming a lost art unless something is done by the deaf to keep it at a standard where it can be considered the medium of conversation of a cultured people . . . The tendency today is away from standard usage, in favor of improvised signs and "slang" signs. If the tendency continues, the time will come when the sign language will no longer be universal, and the deaf in one state will be unable to converse freely with those of another state. (Burnes 1950)

The editorial goes on to give a curious description of "the sign language": "There is no grammar in the sign language. There is no standard authority by which it is determined that one sign is correct and another is incorrect, but custom has given us a fairly good standard, and we recognize a correct and incorrect form of usage."

The editorial writer subscribes to a long tradition of describing his language as lacking any internal organization or structure. Indeed, it has no special name but is called simply "the sign language."

As Deaf people from a different generation, we know that because natural signed languages have been transmitted from one generation of users to the next, they are not primitive but complex systems. The fact that generations of children learn the language, thereby imposing structures and systems on it, is one kind of argument modern investigators use for grouping signed languages with other natural languages and for distinguishing them from derivative systems.

Why then did the editors of the *Silent Worker* describe their language in terms almost as dismissive as Myklebust's? We could use the same answer we came up with for Veditz's errors: it was simply unthinkable at the time to refer to signed language in the kind of terms used by modern linguists. No respectable hearing linguist in 1950 would have suggested, as linguists do today, that signed languages contain verb agreement, have rich combinatory qualities, and have dependent and independent clauses. Books about signed language published at that time consisted of only lists of signs, grouped in broad categories such as "food" and "emotions." No rules of the language were included, except for "tips" on how to use it, because it was believed there were no rules beyond a simple mapping onto English or a set of general logical principles easily discerned by the learner.

But when we looked at the *Silent Worker* editorial closely we found interesting ways of describing "the sign language." What first struck us was the reference to the language as an "art." Veditz's repeated references to signing as "beautiful," "lovely," and "graceful" were consistent with the idea of "art." This view of the language is still active today, as evidenced by a poem by Patricia Smolen (1982) that appeared in the *Silent News*, a popular deaf newspaper published monthly out of New York City:

Changing Signs

The language of signs so deeply ingrained
By deaf forebears, for years was unchanged,
Signs are being revised by the new breed
Spurred on by the hearing who don't know our need.
"For the sake of progress," it is loudly proclaimed,
Old signs are altered, a few left to remain.

We the golden agers, do sadly decry
Strange hand motions but learn them we try
The sign language once so lovely to see
Has changed to a language confusing to me.

Again, the adjective is "lovely," to describe a language constantly threatened by outside influences. In the passage from

Veditz we quoted in the beginning of this chapter, the ideal signer is a "master," an artist who is revered and loved for a "precise command" of the language. It is implied that good signing is like a beautiful painting or sculpture: there is an order in how the parts come together. The result of correct signing is aesthetically pleasing and satisfying. Bad signing, in contrast, is jarring and unpleasant. The *Silent Worker* editorial goes on to complain:

> There exists today a notable carelessness in the use of the sign language. The old-time masters of the sign language used a clear-cut, carefully chosen style of delivery which was easy to understand and pleasing to see. Today too many deaf are inclined to slur over their spelling and crowd their signs, and in order to understand them, one must strain both one's eyesight and one's mentality. (Burnes 1950)

In the larger society that surrounds Deaf people, the typical way of referring to orderly systems like languages is as an interlocking system of rules and grammars. But Veditz and the editors of the *Silent Worker* referred to their language in terms of a different aesthetics: not of rules, but of art. Masters of the language have perfected "a clear-cut, carefully chosen style of delivery," which is "pleasing to see." And like students of art, students of the sign language would do well to study with masters. A failure to adhere to the rules (or what we would now call ungrammatical signing) "strains both one's eyesight and one's mentality." Without a notion of the grammaticality of signed language, the editors could only describe failures in competence in terms of how they "strain" the viewer.

Another example is from the *Silent Worker*'s response to a reader who had written commending a columnist for his strong position on the sign language; her concern was the sloppy declamation of "The Star-Spangled Banner." The columnist, Emerson Romero, responded: "There seems to be a feeling among many of our sign slingers that it makes little difference what sign one uses as long as it is understood. People are losing sight of the fact that

there are correct signs, and a correct form of delivery, just as there is a correct form of English grammar" (Romero 1950).

What did these writers mean by "a correct form of delivery" and "a clear-cut, carefully chosen style of delivery"? What could these phrases mean but a sense of rules? What is "a precise command of the sign language" but an ability to use the grammar correctly? Contrary to the popular belief that signed languages are based on speech and derive their rules from spoken language, the *Silent Worker* editors and Veditz complain that those who do not know the language, including those who presumably know the spoken language, persist in creating unacceptable sign sentences, or, to use today's terminology, ungrammatical sentences.

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We came across another good example of this type of complicated vocabulary in a filmed interview, *Charles Krauel: Portrait of a Deaf Filmmaker* (1986). Krauel began making home movies of various Deaf activities in 1925 and continued to make films for many years. His films are among our best surviving records of Deaf life from as early as 1925.

Krauel, interviewed at age ninety-two, was asked about his world as he filmed it and about his life today in a different generation. He reminisced about the old days when clothing, hats, and, as he added with a note of regret, even signs were different.

> Nowadays, signs are different. Back then, signs were better, you know, natural, but now with all these IS kind of signs, and all that—well, it may be good for children who need to learn language. Those kinds of signs are good language. My signs are not, they're like "short-cuts," more abbreviated. But it sure saves time though. This faster way of talking is much clearer. Nowadays, with IS and all those things, you get these long drawn-out sentences that take forever to sign. It's a waste of time, I tell you.[2]

2. Translated by Carol Padden.

Krauel is contrasting his language with recently developed pedagogical tools variously called Seeing Essential English, Signing Exact English (both of these go by the acronym SEE), or Signed English. Collectively called "manual English systems," they were created by committees of educators for the purpose of teaching English to deaf children. In these systems, new signs are invented for English words that do not have single sign translations, such as the third-person present-tense singular form of the verb "to be" ("all these IS kind of signs"). Old signs are also modified in a further attempt to impose correspondence between English and ASL. The normal order of signs in ASL is reorganized in an attempt to mirror the order of words in English sentences (Gustason and Woodward 1973). To use an example we have mentioned before, the sequence I-GIVE-HIM BOOK MAN is ungrammatical in ASL, but in an attempt to mirror the English sentence "I gave a book to a man" invented systems use this order and add invented signs to supply the "missing English elements." These attempts, however well-intentioned, rest on the pervasive belief that signed languages are essentially "incomplete" systems and amenable to modification for educational purposes. They ignore the fact that individual signs, like words, are inseparable parts of a larger grammatical system.

These kinds of violations are probably what leads Krauel to complain about "long drawn-out sentences that take forever to sign." Despite his intuitions about his language—a "faster way of talking" that "saves time" and is "natural"—Krauel explains that his language is not "good" language. Manual English, in contrast, is good for deaf children because it teaches them "language."

Krauel borrows the widely used convention of distinguishing between English and ASL by using the signs LANGUAGE (for English) and SIGN (for ASL). In this way, his vocabulary is consistent with that of official sources. In 1967 the Department of Health, Education and Welfare issued a circular entitled "Life Problems of Deaf People: Prevention and Treatment," which was widely circulated. According to the authors, Mary Switzer and

Boyce Williams, "Many Deaf people . . . have very limited language skills. They receive information mainly through the eyes. They impart information by combinations of signs, gestures, speech, and writing, although the large majority prefer signs between themselves and hearing persons who are masters of sign language" (1967). This usage carries the implication that Deaf people are unable to learn any language—an incorrect belief but one that has persisted until very recently.

Krauel has more to say about his language. As he tries to explain what he means about the difference between manual English and what he uses himself, he hesitates and is almost apologetic. Sign language is "natural," he says, implying that manual English is not. He pauses as if to ask his interviewer to understand what he means. What is he trying to say?

We think that by "natural" he means what is expected, not strange or bizarre. A human language is natural; its orderliness does not "strain both one's eyesight and one's mentality." Artificial languages, such as invented sign systems, do not have this quality; they lack the power of systems of rules created by generations of children learning from adults who themselves acquired the language as children.

Krauel's intuitive reference to his language as "abbreviated" and made up of "short-cuts" suggests that he believed it to be less than complete, but it also captures the idea that his language is an efficient system that stands in contrast to the laborious systems invented by committee, such as manual English.

With Krauel, as with Veditz and others, we see again the contradictory ways of talking about the language. Krauel says his language is not good for children, but it is natural and efficient. It doesn't have qualities associated with spoken language, but it does the kinds of things spoken languages do.

This doublespeak grows out of an attempt to reconcile two very powerful truths: signed language is rejected by the larger society, but it is the essence of how Deaf people live and how they understand their lives. Having to live with both these truths, Deaf people acknowledge the official truth by using the official

vocabulary but reserve a special vocabulary for the oppositional truth, their own contrary knowledge.

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In the play *Tales from a Clubroom* (Bragg and Bergman 1981) we can see how these competing sets of knowledge play themselves out in the social world of Deaf people. First presented at the centennial celebration of the NAD in 1980, the play has been popular as a glimpse into the everyday world of the Deaf person. A large part of the appeal of the play is its more-real-than-real characters, their types familiar to anyone who has spent much time in local Deaf clubs. Abe Green is the stereotypical rough-and-tough club president; Will Grady is the club jester and operator of the movie projector. From the time the play opens on a captioned film night at the club, to its climax, when the club treasurer is exposed for embezzling club funds, the audience can almost predict how the characters will play out their roles.

The plot is almost secondary to the way the actors personify, indeed amplify, the tensions within the Deaf community. For example, the status and styles of the characters Mark Lindsey and Tim Shalleck illustrate the ways social lines are drawn over the problem of how to talk about language.

When Mark Lindsey makes his entrance and begins to sign " 'Englishy,' that is, with English syntax," the audience chortles in anticipation of an upcoming battle. Lindsey is a graduate of Gallaudet College, a college for deaf students, and one of Smolen's "new breed" who use what Krauel called "all these IS kind of signs." At one point in the play, Lindsey is warned by Will Grady that his social class—as marked by his education and brand of signing—is going to get him in trouble with the club members:

Grady: Say, you use some strange signs.
Lindsey: What do you mean, strange?
Grady: You fingerspell big words. "Operate, opretate." I don't know how to fingerspell it. And you use fancy signs . . . Our signs are good enough for us. I'm older than you, so let me give you some advice. You came here to make some new friends, right? (Lindsey nods.) If you want to be accepted, don't act like a smartass or you won't make any friends.

Tim Shalleck is everything Lindsey is not: a "muscular bartender with limited education; uses only the simplest and most picturesque signs (ASL)." Here we see a symbolic opposition between the ways the two men are described. Lindsey's signs are "fancy," but Shalleck's are "simple" and "picturesque." Lindsey is a college graduate, one of "the high-cultured" type; Shalleck is a bartender with limited education. The two characters are immediately suspicious of each other, and later, symbolically, they fight over a woman. The audience expects to see tension between them as they play out very real tensions in the community.

As we watch the other characters interact with Lindsey, we see that they do not take him entirely seriously, in fact they hold him at a distance. Grady and the others resent Lindsey's use of "fancy" signs and his repeated complaints about "lack of culture" in the club. We understand these reactions as a shared rejection by the club members of Lindsey's belief that signed language is inferior and needs to be fixed.

But Lindsey is not without influence. Other members, while they keep him in his place, sometimes mimic his style, as when the club president's wife, Mrs. Greene, uses manual English during an announcement. But Mrs. Greene apologizes for her lapse: "Excuse my sign language! My children in school are influencing my signing; I'm using SEE."

Any indulgence of Lindsey disappears, however, when tension leads to conflict. Observe the following exchange between Shalleck and Lindsey, in which Lindsey suggests that Shalleck himself, by association with the language, is inferior:

Lindsey: (Fingerspells to Shalleck) Tom Collins!
Shalleck: (Shakes his head, showing that he doesn't understand Lindsey. Yabuski talks in picture signs to Shalleck who grins

and shakes his head and points to the two bottles on the shelf.) Don't have. First or second? . . .

Lindsey: (To Yabuski) What's the matter with this bartender? Doesn't he read fingerspelling?

Yabuski: (To Lindsey) Shh! Be quiet.

Shalleck: (Moves angrily to Lindsey and taps him roughly on the shoulder.) You think I'm dumb? I have a house, a wife, children and a car. What've you got?

Shalleck does not understand the English term for the mixed drink, so Yabuski translates by using "picture signs." This term, seemingly borrowed directly from the language in Myklebust's textbook, is used here to suggest signed vocabulary as more concrete, less sophisticated, and by implication inferior to manual English. The implication is clear: Shalleck needs picture signs because he is of low intelligence.

But Shalleck is a member of the club's board and is highly regarded by other members. The woman Shalleck and Lindsey are competing for prefers Shalleck, and in the final showdown Shalleck wins:

Lindsey: (To Shalleck) . . . I have news for you friend, she's a cock tease! . . .

Shalleck: That's enough from you. Tell the lady you're sorry or . . .

Lindsey: (To Greene) Get this gorilla away from me! Do something!

Greene: (To Lindsey) I won't permit female club members to be insulted by outsiders. Get out! . . . You've no right to bully and insult ladies.

Lindsey: This is between me and the lady. None of your business.

Greene: But it is our business! We look out for each other! You have a college degree—big deal! You're no better than any of us. We're sincere . . . We have hearts! All you have inside you is a knife and smart aleck words!

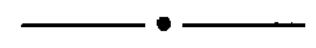
Shalleck: (To Lindsey) Are you man enough to apologize to the lady?

Greene: (To Lindsey) Either apologize or get out!

Lindsey: You leave me with no other choice . . . I guess I proved who's dumb.

Shalleck: (Menacingly) Who's dumb?

Just as the club members reject Lindsey but allow him to have some influence, they embrace Shalleck but say he has limitations. The audience understands the tensions between the two characters because they are important ones within the community. Signed language is honorable, but the club members seem unable to escape the suspicion that it may be what others say it is, a form inferior to human language, and worse yet, that people who use it may also be inferior. Shalleck is, after all, only a bartender.



All the examples we have quoted in this chapter illustrate a particular problem. The "science" of others, which celebrates speech, is so pervasive that it effectively overpowers a different knowledge, namely Deaf people's knowledge about signed language. Typically, when Deaf people portray their language as "lifesaving," as in the story about Joshua Davis (Chapter 2), their beliefs are considered "personal" or "romantic." When Veditz warns against those who would eliminate the language, his plea is counted as a "political" one. When the editors of the *Silent Worker* observe that others do not use the language correctly (for the logical reason that they have never learned its rules), this is dismissed as a complaint about "style" rather than grammar.

Others believe that Deaf people are protective and romantic about signed languages because they are "dependent" on them. Lacking the ability to use speech, it is said, they become overly sentimental about their "adaptive means." In contrast, hearing people surely do not think of themselves as "dependent," in any pejorative way, on speech.

Embedded in the texts we have presented is a complicated understanding of how signed languages work. Deaf people's writings reveal a self-analysis that is not, strictly speaking, scien-

tific—it is impressionistic, global, and not internally analytic—but their many adjustments of theories proposed by others suggest that they find the theories of others inadequate, imbalanced, and sometimes, about the most important ideas, false. That they live with others' theories while maintaining separate theories of their own is a tribute to the powerful possibilities of their culture.

Deaf in America

Voices from a Culture

Carol Padden

Tom Humphries

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