

Introduction

The traditional way of writing about Deaf people is to focus on the fact of their condition—that they do not hear—and to interpret all other aspects of their lives as consequences of this fact. Our goal in this book is to write about Deaf people in a new and different way. In contrast to the long history of writings that treat them as medical cases, or as people with “disabilities,” who “compensate” for their deafness by using sign language, we want to portray the lives they live, their art and performances, their everyday talk, their shared myths, and the lessons they teach one another. We have always felt that the attention given to the physical condition of not hearing has obscured far more interesting facets of Deaf people’s lives.

Our exploration is partly a personal one: the lives of Deaf people include our own. Carol was born deaf in a Deaf family. Her parents and her older brother are Deaf, as are a set of grandparents and some other relatives. Tom, in contrast, became deaf as a child and did not meet other Deaf people until he entered a college for Deaf students.

Our professional interests over the last ten years have also led us to this topic. We have both participated in a new generation of research on signed language. Carol has written technical descriptions of the structure of American Sign Language, and Tom has written about approaches to teaching English to Deaf people that recognize signed language as a central instrument. With our colleagues, we have uncovered significant details about signed

born w/ HL but
all can
sign

postlingual HL/learn
sign
an
adult

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languages that had never been thought about before, let alone described. The sum of this research is that signed languages are far from the primitive gestural systems they had been assumed to be. Instead they are rich systems with complex structures that reflect their long histories. Thinking about the linguistic richness uncovered in our work has made us realize that the language has developed through the generations as part of an equally rich cultural heritage. It is this heritage—the culture of Deaf people—that we want to begin to portray in this book.

hearing
loss, impairment. —

Before beginning our journey through the imagery and patterns of meaning that constitute Deaf people's lives, we must identify the community of "Deaf" people with which we are concerned. Following a convention proposed by James Woodward (1972), we use the lowercase deaf when referring to the audiological condition of not hearing, and the uppercase Deaf when referring to a particular group of deaf people who share a language—American Sign Language (ASL)—and a culture. The members of this group reside in the United States and Canada, have inherited their sign language, use it as a primary means of communication among themselves, and hold a set of beliefs about themselves and their connection to the larger society. We distinguish them from, for example, those who find themselves losing their hearing because of illness, trauma or age; although these people share the condition of not hearing, they do not have access to the knowledge, beliefs, and practices that make up the culture of Deaf people. As we will emphasize in subsequent chapters, this knowledge of Deaf people is not simply a camaraderie with others who have a similar physical condition, but is, like many other cultures in the traditional sense of the term, historically created and actively transmitted across generations.

Woodward's distinction, while useful, is not an entirely clear-cut one. For example, consider deaf children from hearing families who encounter Deaf people and their culture outside the

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vent the will of "obstructionist" adults to teach one another the knowledge of Deaf people.

In many of these schools, deaf children spend years of their lives among Deaf people—children from Deaf families and Deaf adults who work at the school. Many schools are staffed to some extent by Deaf people who graduated from the same school or another one like it. For these deaf children, the most significant aspect of residential life is the dormitory. In the dormitories, away from the structured control of the classroom, deaf children are introduced to the social life of Deaf people. In the informal dormitory environment children learn not only sign language but the content of the culture. In this way, the schools become hubs of the communities that surround them, preserving for the next generation the culture of earlier generations.

The residential school is not the only avenue for introduction to the community. Some deaf children do not leave home to attend residential schools but, like both of us, stay home and go to public school with "the others," as hearing people are called. Tom remained among his hearing neighbors and relatives, and in various ways adapted to the demands of his school. Only later, as an adult, did he meet other Deaf people. In Carol's case, her Deaf parents and older brother attended residential schools, but because she is "hard of hearing" she was judged to be more likely to withstand the demands of a "speaking environment" and went to public school instead. Each way of entering the community carries its own issues of identity and shared knowledge; we discuss these further in a later chapter.

As we have said, one of the primary identifying characteristics of the group is its language. The history of the education of deaf children in America is marked by almost total ignorance about the place of signed languages in the family of human languages, ignorance that has been translated in tragic ways into social and educational policy. But despite these pressures, American Sign

adequate, age-approp. social
lang. development. Some public
schools have enough deaf kids to

more
classes
+ usually
academically

serve additional

demands, but do not always
provide additional disabilities or foster

Language has had a durable history. Its origins can be traced to the emergence of a large community of deaf people centered around the first public school for deaf children in France, founded about 1761; the language that arose in this community is still being used in France today. In 1817, a Deaf teacher from this school helped establish the first public school for deaf children in the United States. Although his language was incorporated into the early curriculum, the children's own gestural systems mingled with the official signed language, resulting in a new form that was no longer identifiable as French Sign Language. Some signs and structures in ASL today still reflect their French Sign Language origins, although the two languages are distinct.

According to the common misconceptions about ASL, it is either a collection of individual gestures or a code on the hands for spoken English. But in fact, although ASL does use gesture, as English uses sound, it is not made up merely of gestures any more than English is made up merely of noises. Individual signs are themselves structured grammatical units, which are placed in slots within sentences according to grammatical rules. Signs are not a form of "fingerspelling," a manual system in which a hand configuration is used to represent a letter of the alphabet. Although signers may fingerspell an English term or a name, the bulk of their signed communication is made up not of fingerspelling but of signs, which are structured according to an entirely independent set of rules.

To give just one example, ASL verbs can be divided into three major classes (Padden 1988b). Verbs in one class can inflect for person and number of both the subject and the object; these include GIVE, SEND, TAKE, CATCH.¹ Those in another class do not inflect for person and number at all; they include LEARN,

1. Signs are represented by English translations in small capital letters. If more than one English word is needed to translate a sign, the words are joined by hyphens. Small capital letters joined by hyphens represent fingerspelled words or abbreviations. These translations, of course, can only be approximate, and often do not express the full range of meaning of the sign.

have discrete classrooms. None in WA that I know of. The two deaf schools for deaf in Cap Hill (oral only) & Van couvee (sign & speak & cued) (identifiable)

with the language. This intuitive creativity we do not dispute. What we could not find in any of the old films we watched was the focused, analytical sense of the language as object that we see in *My Third Eye*.

Along with "Yankee Doodle," the LACD and Krauel films include many signed performances of a certain type of popular song. This type of song was apparently widely performed in several parts of the United States, but its origin is unclear. In one version filmed by Krauel, a leader stands in front of a group, next to a large board with a list of animals. He leads the group through the list as they sign the song together in a simple rhythm. The trick is to stay in unison for each beat. After each animal sound, the group repeats the sign DARN three times:

The birds sing, sing, sing, but I hear them not at all,
Darn, Darn, Darn

The cats meow, meow, meow but I hear them not at
all,

Darn, Darn, Darn

The dogs bark, bark, bark but I hear them not at all,
Darn, Darn, Darn

The cows moo, moo, moo but I hear them not at all,
Darn, Darn, Darn.¹

Very
old
ASL
poem

The refrain "Darn, Darn, Darn" makes this song similar to another set of songs we found in both collections. In these songs, the repetition is done with a distinctive "one, two, one-two-three" rhythm, into which the performer inserts his own vocabulary.

One of the earliest performers of these songs seems to have been a pep-squad leader at Gallaudet College, George Kannapell, who continued his "one, two, one-two-three" routines after he graduated from college in 1930. Kannapell appears in one of Krauel's films with the following song, probably a narrative about going to a convention or on a group tour:

1. Translated by Ted Supalla.