Ideologies and Attitudes toward Sign Languages: An Approximation

Abstract

Attitudes are complex and little research in the field of linguistics has focused on language attitudes. This article deals with attitudes toward sign languages and those who use them—attitudes that are influenced by ideological constructions. The article reviews five categories of such constructions and discusses examples in each one.

Language can be viewed as being influenced by powerful ideological positions.

Peter Garrett, Attitudes to Language

It is an implicit or explicit assumption of much language policy and provision that attitudes can or should change.

Colin Baker, Attitudes and Languages

“What an ugly language!” There it was. For the first time in nearly twenty years, somebody who was voicing a negative opinion about Austrian Sign Language. The speaker had just heard that I was a sign language linguist, and she immediately apologized for her spontaneous negative response. With grimaces of embarrassment she explained that she found the facial movements of the sign language interpreters she had seen on TV exaggerated and ugly. But I was not offended. Instead, I was surprised and amused because this was the first such incident in years and years of consistent “Oh, that’s so interesting. Can I ask you a question?” type responses to my profession. I had

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never encountered overtly communicated negative attitudes toward sign languages as such.

Attitudes toward a language or a feature of a language, toward language use or language as a group marker are all examples of language attitudes (Cooper and Fishman 1974, 6). Attitude research does not have a long history in linguistics, and there is surprisingly little theoretical work in linguistics (as opposed to a wealth of attitude research in the field of social psychology). A typical analysis of attitude per se generally comprises three parts: an affective component, a cognitive component, and readiness for action (Rosenberg and Hovland 1960, cited in Baker 1992). The affective component concerns feelings toward an object or a topic, and the cognitive component concerns thoughts and beliefs, while the two components may or may not add up to a “logical” whole. And the conative component contains the plan or behavioral intention for acting on the attitude.

In twenty years as a sign language linguist I have encountered mostly cognitive interest in sign languages, and rarely have my conversation partners openly communicated the affective aspects. In practice, most publications on language attitudes focus narrowly on the perception of a specific use of language, especially different types of production (pronunciation). Most studies look at attitudes on language variation, dialect, and speech style. Empirical research often matches certain speech styles with stereotypes of the speakers. But I agree with Baker’s wide definition of relevant areas of language attitudes:

Language attitude is an umbrella term, under which resides a variety of specific attitudes. For example, research has variously focused on:

- attitude to language variation, dialect and speech style
- attitude to learning a new language
- attitude to a specific minority language (e.g., Irish)
- attitude to language groups, communities and minorities
- attitude to language lessons
- attitude to the uses of a specific language
- attitude of parents to language learning
- attitude to language preference. (Baker 1992, 29)

The Language and Its Users

“It is perhaps the least surprising thing imaginable to find that attitudes towards languages and their varieties seem to be tied to attitudes
towards groups of people” (Preston 2002, 40). In everyday communication we find great uncertainty in what to call the users of sign languages. People say to me, “You work with the disabled,” and reduce my friends and colleagues to a word that I do not believe describes them well. What sign language users are called (and how they are seen) is of course hugely relevant in the political negotiation of how to approach and deal with sign languages. Thus, reflecting on attitudes toward sign languages while ignoring attitudinal developments with regard to those who use them or vice versa is impossible. As Burns et al. note, “It is extremely difficult to separate the two since attitudes toward a language are often intimately connected with those toward its users. We develop opinions about languages that reflect our views about those who use them and the contexts and functions with which they are associated.” (Burns et al. 2001, 182). In this article I therefore focus primarily on attitudinal categories and ideologies relating to deaf people and sign languages.

I want to point out one more aspect of the introductory anecdote about the atypically negative reaction to sign languages. My conversation partner immediately and apologetically explained why she thought sign languages were ugly: She had seen interpreters only on television. Apparently, she had never had personal contact with a Deaf sign language user or even seen signing in three-dimensional space. Her judgment was based on the performance of a hearing interpreter under extreme conditions (evening news interpretation) and not a face-to-face experience.\(^1\) It is my impression that in many countries this is typical: Sign languages are more often publicly visible when produced by interpreters (or even by overly confident sign language students, who in some countries clearly outnumber actual native signers) and much less often seen live when used by native signers. I suspect that often attitudes toward sign languages are based on experiences with hearing signers. This is obviously not ideal because they might never produce an eloquent, unaccented, and native variant of a sign language—a fact that researchers must take into account.

A substantial body of work looks at attitudes toward Deaf people from various perspectives, mostly professional (e.g., psychologists [Majors 1992], teachers [Ward Trotter 1989; Choi 1995], human service professionals [Cooper, Rose, and Mason 2004], future teachers of Deaf
people and sign language interpreters [Haug and Hintermair 2011], and students [Buckney 1990; Coryell, Holcomb, and Scherer 1992; Cambra 1996; Kiger 1997]). Some of these studies brought to light information that surprised the researchers. For example, a study on the impact of mainstreaming on attitudes toward Deaf people concluded that both the hearing and the Deaf subjects had predominantly negative mind-sets (Isaacs 1973). To counteract hearing people’s erroneous stereotype of Deaf people, one might ask, “How can the deaf student’s self-image be enhanced?” (ibid., 15). Then again, other researchers (e.g., Hill 2012) discuss ASL in terms of overt versus covert prestige when explaining that a stigmatized language can of course be favored within the minority community. It is clear to the informed reader that most sign languages have great covert prestige in the communities that use them (and that is a result of decades of political work within these groups). Another study (Kannapell 1989) shows that attitudes toward a sign language translate directly to a positive overall self-image of their Deaf users. The 205 students who participated in Kannapell’s study indicated a strong relationship between the attitudes about ASL and those about Deaf people, “but there is no relationship between their attitudes about English and about hearing people” (ibid., 204). Thus, for young Deaf people, strong bonds exist between attitudes toward a language and its users—only when it comes to Deaf signers. Hearing people, on the other hand, are not necessarily viewed through the lens of language attitudes.

Another group of studies has investigated attitudes toward specific sign languages, for example, ASL as viewed by Deaf high school students (Berke 1978), ASL as seen by foreign language departments (Sinett 1995), Flemish Sign Language as seen by Deaf people (Loncke 1983), Deaf Coda’s attitude toward German Sign Language (Goldschmidt 2000), and educators’ attitudes toward Hungarian Sign Language (Rácz 2009). A dated but comprehensive study on Deaf people in the European Union (Kyle and Allsop 1997) has shown that even within Deaf communities sign languages had little prestige; attitudes toward them were largely negative. Another detailed study (Hill 2012) has examined attitudes within the American Deaf community about different ways of signing. It focuses on perceptions of ASL and how the subject’s background (social identity) influences the subject’s view
of the signed output as “standard” ASL or not. In addition to these attitude studies a large number of works critically focus on the field of Deaf education and its relation to sign languages, although few of them can be perceived as empirical research on attitudes (see, for example, Lane 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas 2003; Cummins 2009; Horejes 2012).

Attitudes tend to be specific to objects. “Alongside attitude are close neighbor terms such as belief, concept, construct and opinion,” states Baker (1992, 13). This article discusses neither personal opinions toward sign languages nor socially shared attitudes. It also does not analyze the subjective judgments of the esthetic values of individual signers. Rarely are any attitudes on sign languages free from ideological influences; thus this article is oriented toward the other, more general direction, that is, toward global attitudes, or ideologies. This analysis focuses on those attitudes toward sign languages and the people who use them that are influenced by ideological constructs.

**Ideological Attitudes**

Language attitudes can be directly or indirectly measured by an analysis of social treatment. Such an analysis involves the content of diverse sources in the public domain, such as language policy documents, media texts, advertisements, and even semiprivate conversations. The analysis of social treatment “is sometimes viewed, especially by those working in the social psychological tradition of language attitudes research, as somewhat informal, and not lending itself to the rigor of statistical analysis and generalization to broader or specific populations” (Garrett 2010, 51). This article presents neither the results of a direct or an indirect measures study on attitudes toward sign languages nor a systematic analysis of a large corpora of specific texts. Instead, I offer my subjective, yet informed, approximative grid of ideologically driven attitudes toward sign languages that are specifically relevant to sign language policy making. In doing so, this article goes beyond the four ideologies of language planning identified by Covarrubias (in Reagan 2010) and discussed in Murray (this issue). This analysis does not cover the background or the origin and development of attitudes and their ideological roots, nor does it evaluate the context in which they arose. It aims to systematically describe what I have seen in the world of sign language policies in the past twenty years. I offer a grid
of specific ideologies that govern attitudes that are relevant to sign language policy making. This grid should support any further analysis, especially critical discourse analytical approaches. I have grouped these ideologies in the following five categories.

**Not Really a Language?**

The most fundamental ideological backdrop for attitudes constantly questions sign languages as such. The question posed (in various forms) is, Are sign languages real languages? Although the answer is short and sweet and definitive, widespread misunderstandings, misconceptions, and misinterpretations of sign languages still remain—even in the face of all the factual knowledge we now have. The *devaluing ideology* places sign languages low in an imagined hierarchy of languages or claims that sign languages have no morphology or simply states that they have no value for children. Even today, many people are not sure how they should imagine a grammar in space (and face) and whether the communities and the cultures that gave rise to signed languages can really be called “cultures.”

A classic example of many such misconceptions condensed into a small space is the infamous statement by a representative of the Council of Europe (forty-seven member states). He was asked why sign languages were not included in the European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages (1992) and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995). In a written response, Fernando Albanese, director of environment and local authorities in the Secretariat General of the Council of Europe argued as follows:

Article 1 (a) of the Charter gives the following definition:

a) “Regional or minority languages” means languages that are:

   i) traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State’s population; and

   ii) different from the official language(s) of that State; it does not include either dialects of the official language(s) of the State or the languages of migrants.

Personally, I think that in the case of the Sign Languages some of the essential elements required by such a definition are missing:

the “historical” character of the regional or minority languages, since the Sign Languages are connected with a handicap and not
with the membership to a group, ethnically, religiously, linguistically different from the majority of the population of a state; the concentration on a “given territory,” that is, a restricted geographical area in a State; the users of the Sign Languages are widespread on the whole territory of a State; the difference in respect of the official language(s) of a State. If I understand it correctly, Sign Languages are a means of communication within any language.

Therefore I do not think on the basis of the information in my possession that the Charter applies to Sign Languages. In any case, such a problem was never raised during the negotiations of the Charter. (letter from Albanese to author, April 2, 1998)

Note that this is a historical example and that the Council of Europe has since undergone a profound change in its approach to the topic. But it is safe to say that existential doubt about sign languages persists at all levels of policy making.

Mostly it was educators of deaf people who were influential with regard to devaluing views on sign languages because they were perceived as the experts, and for a long time they were the only ones who could spread their beliefs by publishing specialist books. Actually, this is not just a historical anecdote inasmuch as this ideology still poses a problem in Deaf education today. For example, in a national survey of the status of Austrian Sign Language, teachers of deaf people who worked in one of the six Austrian schools for Deaf children were asked whether Austrian Sign Language (ÖGS) was a fully functional language. Only 92.9 percent of the participating teachers answered “yes” (Krausneker and Schalber 2007). That seems like a high percentage, but taking into account that the sample consisted exclusively of teachers who were at that time active in a school for Deaf children, it is shocking that 7 percent of these specialist educators either did not know or did not believe that ÖGS is a fully functional language.

Even in the presence of information to the contrary, uncertainty and doubt remain about sign languages and their status, quality, and value. The latter might be the case with many minority languages, but general doubt that they are indeed languages is something that has come about only with respect to signed languages, as far as I know. They are so different in shape that they challenge human preconceptions of language.
Audism is “[t]he notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or to behave in the manner of one who hears” (Humphries 1977, 12) and the power relations, disadvantages, or discriminatory practices that result from this. The audistic ideology often results in measures that try to compensate for a loss of hearing or restore it instead of granting linguistic rights. Eventually, the ideology that sees hearing as essential and perceives hearing ways of understanding the world as superior turns against anything that would question this, such as sign languages. The perception that cochlear implants support “integration” into hearing life and society not only creates great pressure on individuals but also is brought forward as an argument in debates beyond the field of education. For example, in 2011, in the Italian debate on the recognition of Italian Sign Language, it was stated that, given the latest medicotechnical developments, spoken languages are “accessible” and signed communication is no longer essential (reported by Geraci 2012).

Apart from such overtly negative attitudes toward sign language, there are also more subtle and even completely unconscious ways of following audistic ideologies. Oralist educators often maintain that, because society is hearing and speaking, assimilation is “logically” desirable. According to this logic, the use of sign language creates social ghettos and personal disadvantages, hinders the development of spoken language, and so on. There are manifold examples for this, mostly from the area of education. As an example I want to quote one of the earliest European protagonists of oral early intervention: “The Natural Communicative Approach is based on the fact [that] the specific needs of a hearing impaired child, which it certainly has, are not served by providing a manual communication system. On the contrary, it needs more of the normal” (Morag 2009, 20, emphasis in the original; my translation from the German original). Even in the twenty-first century, Morag does not shy away from overtly employing an imagined “normal” and assumes that her readers will naturally understand and agree with her on the shape, content, and language of that “normal.”

The apparently well-meaning goal—integration into the majority society—appeals to many people who in their innocence never
question the assimilatory foundation of this approach. It would be sensible to ask why adaptation to the majority standards still comes with privilege, such as basic accessibility.

**A Language of the Disabled?**

Are Deaf people a linguistic minority, or are they citizens with a disability? This question not only has been heatedly discussed by the community itself but also is of profound importance for legislators if their actions are governed by either/or stereotyping ideologies.

Once one has arrived at the understanding that sign language users and sign languages need protection, the question arises as to what kind of legislative measures are suitable. Obviously, if sign languages are perceived within the disability paradigm, certain consequences arise. One pitfall is that such a viewpoint might lead to an approach that aims to provide access and may miss a clear differentiation between Braille, sign languages, and other forms of communication or communication aids; see, for example, Article 2 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities* or the German *Behindertengleichstellungsgesetz* (Federal Republic of Germany 2002). The disability paradigm might also lead to the conclusion that the issue is overly complicated with a tension between minority languages and disability. However, simply looking into the field of minority languages and making use of existing and working solutions, theories, and laws opens up new possibilities for sign languages. Similarly, particular consequences arise if Deaf sign language users are viewed only within the minority language paradigm, with a focus on linguistic rights but ignoring the necessary technical provisions for creating equal visual access (e.g., bells, signals, alarms). In Austria, the political discussion on sign language rights did go around in circles for years due to the legal argument that the state has no definition of minorities available other than the geographical-regional. This purely formal problem was solved not by acknowledging Deaf people as a minority group but by simply recognizing Austrian Sign Language as a language within constitutional law. Even today it remains the only language that is recognized in addition to the official language of the state, German. Today we have those nations that base their sign language policy on an understanding that places sign language users in the disability paradigm (e.g., Germany,
the United States), as well as others that think along the minority language paradigm (e.g., Austria, South Africa). For more examples see De Meulder, this issue.

Another aspect of this ideology is that, by viewing Deafness just as a disability, there seems to be a widely accepted agreement that, in principle, it is a commendable aim that deafness should be completely eradicated. Genetic interventions, prenatal screenings, and other forms of biological intervention threaten the existence of Deafness in the world (see the devaluing ideology, mentioned earlier). Such ideologies are possible only when Deaf sign language users have no cultural rights, argues De Meulder (this issue).

The Deaf sign language minority poses the need to question and revise common patterns of thinking, categorizing, and acting. Either/Or-definitions (linguistic minority or people with a disability) will never do justice to the reality of Deaf sign language users. Attitudes traditionally assumed by both minority language experts and disability experts need to be broader, more open, and more flexible.

At What Cost?

The economic paradigm is probably the most powerful attitude-forming backdrop at this point in history because we presently have no political approach that succeeds with its questioning of this materialistic ideology. Attitudes toward sign language issues that are dominated by this paradigm may bring up the costs of sign language interpreters and question whether access to a certain setting, commodity, or discussion for one single Deaf person is really worth all that money. This paradigm has wide implications if something as basic as human rights gets estimated in monetary terms and categories. For example, the present principal of the largest Austrian school for Deaf students published a brief article twenty years ago, in which she stated that it was not in the interest of the persons concerned “to enlarge a linguistic and cultural minority that needs interpreters for communicating with the majority and depends on subsidies by the state. This leads to isolation instead of integration” (Strohmayer 1995, 20, my translation).³ “Interpreters” and “subsidies” were two of her arguments against sign bilingual education. Needless to say, her ideology with regard to the Deaf community has clearly shaped the school she leads, the teacher
training program she oversees, and any committee over which she has presided.

Another example of what happens when economic thinking is applied to language diversity is the repeated idea put forth by hearing people to unify all sign languages and thus make communication much easier (see Adam, this issue). For example, member of the European Parliament McCubbin asked the following in an official parliamentary question: “Is the commission considering recommending a common sign language?” The European Commission replied that representatives of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) “have expressed their opposition to the harmonization of sign languages or the creation of a new common sign language” (Debates of the European Parliament 1991, 225).

Another far less benign example from another continent is the 1993 call by the Arab Federation of Organizations Working with the Deaf (AFOWD) for every Arab country to document its native signed language in the form of a dictionary, which would allow the federation to develop a unified sign language. Twenty years later it became clear that the project—led by hearing people—had become an actual threat to linguistic diversity in the Arab countries: Interpreters on TV were directed to use only the “unified language,” and this signed Esperanto should be used in educational settings. Deaf sign language users opposed the attempt to “simplify” a natural linguistically diverse landscape. In 2007 the World Federation of the Deaf protested the project’s activities with a clear statement against the unification of sign languages and again in 2009 with a call for the project to “cease immediately”: “Every sign language in the world, like any spoken language, has its own heritage, history, culture and traditions and such a process of forcible purification or unification would be to disregard all of these aspects of a Deaf community. This would be a violation of the linguistic human rights and cultural rights of a sign language community” (WFD 2009).

All Different, All Equal?

The fifth ideological foundation for language attitudes discussed here is one that principally values human diversity and understands that the idea of human “normalcy” is an illusion. Only recently we have
acquired a term—Deaf Gain (for an in-depth discussion see Bauman and Murray 2014)—that enables us to summarize these appreciative attitudes toward Deaf people who use sign language. “Deaf Gain is defined as a reframing of ‘deaf’ as a form of sensory and cognitive diversity that has the potential to contribute to the greater good of humanity” (Bauman and Murray 2009, 3). The gains are described along the line of cognitive, creative, and cultural diversity: “A family with a deaf baby benefits by being exposed to a new language and culture and to new people, ideas, and experiences. A deaf baby is value added to a family, but the contribution benefits not only the family but general society as well” (ibid., 9).

Deaf Gain is discussed along the semantic concepts of benefit, contribute, and ahead (see Bauman and Murray 2014, xxiv; capitalized glosses in the original). For many people this dramatically different perspective seems very unusual and poses a difficult ideological shift to even consider. At first glance, the Deaf Gain approach might seem to only superficially contradict the logic of other ideologies that generally see “the problem.” However, if we focus on our common interest (let us call it “a good life”), we see that most of the things that might seriously get in the way of a “good life” are created by humans (e.g., war, poverty, often even sickness). As we know, maintaining inequality, unjust distribution, or discriminatory access to commodities always ends up posing a danger to social peace—the foundation of a good life for each and every one of us. So one could argue in short that maintaining devaluing, audistic, or stereotyping ideologies with regard to sign languages will in the end be more of an effort than seeing, understanding, and appreciating Deaf Gain.

An example of a policy influenced by Deaf Gain would be a pharmacy in Vienna that employs the first and so far only Deaf pharmacist in Europe and also three Deaf pharmaceutical assistants. The Marienapotheke sees its employees and their Austrian Sign Language skills as a powerful and unique selling proposition, with leaflets, buttons, image campaigns, and ÖGS videos on their website. The pharmacy relies on their customers’ and their employees’ commonsense communication abilities to facilitate consultations and sales. They stress the multilingual skills of the Deaf pharmacist (originally from Slovenia, he signs and
writes more than one language) and offer their hearing employees ÖGS classes. Having completely turned around former approaches of “goodwill” and “social commitment,” the pharmacy enforces a seamless and proud discourse of difference and gain. The Marienapotheke has not only gained a unique and outstanding profile that makes it stand out from the more than three hundred pharmacies in the city but has obviously also become the trusted pharmacy of the Viennese Deaf community.

This discussion of the five prevailing ideologies should not result in a general rejection of ideology. We could of course ask ourselves what sign languages would look like in a hypothetical nonideological environment and what the situations of the language communities would be like. Personally, I do not believe that an ideology-free environment exists for any language.

Through Williams (1974) I came across the idea of “latitude of attitude”; in short, attitudinally motivated stereotypes might not always be one dimensional, and a particular person or language may be perceived with a range of attitudes. Applying this to the ideologies discussed in this article seems relevant, especially when considering that attitude theory describes three distinct components: an affective, a cognitive, and an action component. I suspect that these three are actually not necessarily always in sync. Obviously, in certain situations, society and individuals hold conflicting views on and advocate various ideological approaches to a subject. But I can also imagine individuals with differing cognitive and affective attitudinal elements, meaning that their thoughts about and emotions with regard to a language are not in sync.

Affect . . .

As mentioned in the introductory paragraph, attitude theory comprises three components: affect, cognition, and readiness for action. Loncke (1983), in his short article about Flemish Sign Language, describes a phenomenon well known in other communities: The attitudes toward the languages that make up a diglossic situation favor one language and disregard the other. In the case of the Flemish Deaf community in the 1980s, the “high” variant was spoken Flemish, and
the “low” variant was Flemish Sign Language (FISL). This resulted in attitudes that deemed signed exact Flemish (and similar variants) worthwhile and the actual FISL, with its differing grammar, inferior. In the 1980s, attempts at language standardization, documentation, language planning, and so on were aimed at making Flemish Sign Language more like Flemish instead of valuing the existence of a distinct language. Loncke believes in the power of information and makes a passionate plea for linguistic research on sign language: “In summary, FISL requires considerable research effort to inform the language planners in Belgium” (ibid., 162).

Common sense tells us that Loncke is right: The more we know about signed languages, the fewer misconceptions that should prevail. So what role exactly does information or knowledge play in the formation of attitudes? For Ajzen (1988), an attitude is a “disposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to an object, person, institution, or event” (4). For McGuire (1985), “attitudes locate objects of thought on dimensions of judgment. An example would be language as an object being seen favorable or unfavorable” (Baker 1992, 11).

It seems that attitude management is not based primarily on information and that attitudes can be much more effectively steered by emotional factors. “It is also generally accepted that attitudes can function as both input into and output from social action. In areas such as educational research and language planning, this potential duality is particularly important” (Garrett 2010, 21).

Kiger studied 175 hearing undergraduate students’ attitudes toward deaf students and concluded the following: “For our respondents, attitudes towards persons who are deaf were shaped by affect and past experience” (1997, 558). Obviously, language policy should be based on facts, research, data, and so on, and I would be the first to argue that sign language research is immensely important for the advancement of linguistic human rights. But, I must confess, this might be influenced by my personal preference for logical and rational processes and less by evidence because, in the end, all language policy is made by humans, who are—no matter what we like to think of ourselves—first governed by emotions. So I conclude with a thought that has grown in the process of writing and that I find surprising: Maybe the best way forward in sign language policy is to first create emotional value
around sign languages for everybody and then have the hard facts at hand to back up decisions for positive measures.

... and Action!

*In fact, there is a close link between rejection of deaf teachers, rejection of sign language in the classroom and the non-realization of extended educational opportunities comparable to [those for] hearing pupils.*

Klaus-B. Günther, *After Milan*

Attitudes differ from opinions when we take into account the conative (or action) component. It is easy to see the relevance of attitude research and management for sign language policy. For example, Burns, Matthews, and Nolan-Conroy (2001, 202) describe the “consequences and applications” of language attitudes with regard to sign languages. They cover the topics of second-language learning, employers’ hiring practices, mass media, and education. All of these domains are strongly influenced by language policies. Another author who points out the relationship between attitudes toward sign languages and education is Antosch (1986), who describes her perception of a cyclical pattern of attitudes toward ASL and concludes by describing their relevance for interpreters. In addition, Kannapel (1989) explains that attitudes are of relevance beyond large language-planning activities and political discourse: “Ideally, educational institutions of the deaf should have a sociolinguistic profile of each deaf student. The sociolinguistic profile should consist of three components: 1. Rating by professionals of each communicative/linguistic skill, including ASL and English. 2. Students’ self-evaluation of communicative and linguistic skills. 3. Students’ attitudes toward all forms of sign systems, English, and the cultures of deaf and hearing people” (ibid., 192).

Clearly, attitudes do affect readiness for action, and there is little doubt about the way in which actions relate to specific attitudes and ideological foundations, at least from a commonsense viewpoint. But empirical research tells us differently. It seems that no proven causal relationship exists between certain language attitudes and actions. Instead, studies show that expressed attitudes are not in line with actual behavior. People employ one attitude toward language issues in a dialogue—and then act completely differently when in contact with actual language users.
Concluding Thoughts

Thus attitudes are not very good predictors of actions. In addition, “general response patterns and relatively stable dispositions are not necessarily easily inferred from single acts of behavior or from an interview with a person” (Baker 1992, 16). Furthermore, “attitudes may be better predictors of future behaviour than observation of current behaviour. Attitudes tend to be less affected by situation factors, and can be measured more reliably” (ibid.).

A key element in attitude measurement is how general or specific the attitude in question is, and “broad response patterns (and not specific behaviours) are mostly satisfactorily indicated from attitude measures” (ibid., 17). What this means is that no matter how shaky the relationship between attitude and action, we can certainly still deduce ideologies from an analysis of actions with, against, toward, and in support of sign languages and sign language users. These ideologies influence attitudes in situations in which someone is confronted with sign language.

If we return to the case of my conversation partner who found sign language interpreters’ facial movements “ugly”, we can conclude that not only do the affective and cognitive aspects of her attitude seem to be in disharmony but on top of that we could not with certainty predict a further “course of action” she might take (apart from voicing her negative response, which, of course, is an action). As the author of this article and a theorist who has tried to bring some order to attitudes and ideologies with regard to sign languages, I find this highly frustrating. We can nicely categorize and analyze and discuss, but apparently we cannot with certainty predict actions that will come from these attitudes. As a person and a citizen, though, I am cautiously optimistic about this divergence because it opens up new or unexpected opportunities for greater acceptance of sign languages.

Tajfel (1982, cited in Kiger 1997) says that it is not contact per se that makes it difficult for individuals to maintain negative stereotypes. Rather, it is experiencing interactions that are varied, frequent, and diverse. So, we could somehow find a way for more hearing people to have more varied, frequent, and diverse contact with Deaf sign language users. This will not necessarily lead to the development of
positive attitudes, but it will make maintaining stereotypes (like the one deduced from seeing a single sign language interpreter on TV) much harder to maintain. This will in turn create an open space, if you will, in which individuals can form their own impressions and develop their own attitudes toward sign languages.

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Notes

1. If we imagine that a Deaf person’s only encounter with a hearing speaker was seeing a news broadcaster on TV, we can understand the absurd impression of spoken language that person would get (immobile; few facial movements; no gestures; eyes fixed straight ahead).

2. “Der natürliche hörgerichtete Ansatz basiert auf der Tatsache, dass die spezifischen Bedürfnisse eines hörgeschädigten Kindes, die es zweifellos hat, nicht in einer besonderen Behandlung wie beispielsweise der Bereitstellung eines manuellen Kommunikationssystems liegen, sondern vielmehr darin, dass es mehr vom Normalen braucht.”

3. “... eine sprachliche und kulturelle Minderheit zu vergrößern, die in der Kommunikation mit der hörenden Mehrheit Dolmetscher benötigt und von staatlicher Unterstützung abhängig ist. Dieser Weg führt in die Isolation statt in die Integration” (Strohmayer 1995, 20).


5. Flemish Sign Language was then referred to as FISL but is now called VGT.

References


