

# INTRODUCTION

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American Sign Language (ASL), the language used by signing Deaf people in the United States and Canada, has a rich history.<sup>1</sup> Like spoken languages, sign languages develop as a result of regular and sustained contact between groups of individuals, in this case, individuals who cannot hear. Contrary to popular belief, sign languages are not universal. Each one is shaped by the people who use it, the environment in which it emerges, and the distinct experience of interacting with the world primarily through sight. ASL offers a treasure trove of historical relics from America's past that are stored within the forms and meanings of its signs.

Because Deaf people are most often born into hearing families, the language and culture that develops naturally among them is typically passed down outside the nuclear family.<sup>2</sup> In many ways, the American Deaf community resembles an ethnic minority group. Yet, unlike other minorities, members of the Deaf community are characterized by a shared language and by a disability. As a result, the dichotomy between a cultural view of deafness as an element of identity and a pathological view as a defect that needs to be fixed is ever-present.

The exact number of people who use ASL is difficult to quantify (Mitchell, Young, Bachleda, and Karchmer 2006). Though the

U.S. Census collects data on individuals with hearing loss, it does not distinguish between signing and non-signing deaf people. Additionally, many hearing people learn ASL as a first language (children of deaf adults or CODAs) or learn and use it regularly as adults (e.g., family members, friends, teachers, and interpreters). We do know, however, that Deaf people have steadily carved out a space for themselves in the American mainstream so that it is no longer unusual to see them on television, at public events, and in places of employment. They work in all sectors of the economy, attend institutions of higher learning, raise children, and participate in their communities. Many universities and even high schools now include ASL as a foreign language (though it is as indigenous to the U.S. as English). Interpreter Preparation Programs have sprouted all over the country in response to the legally mandated access afforded Deaf and hearing people who need to communicate with each other. With the advent of videophones and federally funded video relay services, Deaf and hearing people are now able to make phone calls to each other through interpreters who use ASL, English, and in some cases, Spanish. As a result, Deaf people have a greater degree of access to the mainstream than ever before and ASL is beginning to be recognized as one part of the diverse linguistic makeup of the U.S.

The increase in access to the mainstream has unavoidably precipitated a shift in the ethos of the Deaf community. Because deafness is a low-incidence disability that affects

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1. In accordance with convention, we will use "Deaf" to refer to Deaf people who sign and identify themselves with a cultural community and "deaf" to refer to audiological status.

2. Mitchell and Karchmer (2004) found 94–96% of deaf children in the U.S. are born to hearing parents.

only a fraction of a percent of most populations, schools for Deaf children were at one time primarily residential; students boarded during the school year and returned home on weekends and holidays. The physical concentration of Deaf children and adults allowed for the rapid development and transmission of the culture and language. Today, mainstreaming has become the norm, resulting in fewer opportunities for the intergenerational exchange needed to pass down ASL. The profusion of cochlear implant surgeries in young children coupled with the chasm between Deaf adults and non-signing hearing parents has led to fewer children learning ASL. Most Deaf clubs, once the hub of social life for adults, have closed. Remote interactions via videophones and text messaging have allowed for frequent contact in lieu of personal visits.

Many lament these changes as indications of a dying culture, while others view them as a reinvention of what it means to be Deaf in the twenty-first century. The constant is that the community continues to evolve along with its language. While the history of ASL might seem irrelevant to these contemporary transformations, we see it as even more crucial to edifying Deaf people's place in American society. Signs are steeped in history and ASL is a product of American culture—an amalgam of influences both foreign and domestic. By looking deeply into the etymology of this language, we can expose relics of a cultural past that are furtively embedded in contemporary signs.

## Signs Have a History

The story of how the Deaf community and ASL came to be usually begins with the founding of the first American school for deaf children in Hartford, Connecticut in 1817. The American Asylum for the Deaf

and Dumb (now, American School for the Deaf, henceforth ASD) resulted from the partnership of three men—Mason Fitch Cogswell, a hearing American doctor and father of a deaf child; Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, a hearing American reverend; and Laurent Clerc, a Deaf French educator. Gallaudet and Clerc's collaboration marked the beginning of formalized deaf education as well as the importation of French Sign Language (*Languge des Signes Française* or LSF) to this continent. Clerc had attended the historic school in France (now, the Institut National de Jeunes Sourds, henceforth INJS) founded in 1791 to carry on the legacy of Abbé Charles Michel de l'Épée. De l'Épée opened the first school to educate Deaf children using signs, in 1760 in Paris, France, and he is still heralded across the world as the father of deaf education.

Establishing ASD was momentous in many respects, but the one most relevant to this work is that it created a place where Deaf Americans could regularly interact using a sign language, one that happened to be heavily influenced by LSF. Deaf children born into hearing families prior to the establishment of ASD were isolated, had restricted access to communication within their own families, and limited (if any) interactions with other Deaf people. ASD and the other residential schools that followed became a second home where they were able to learn to sign, interact with peers and adults who were also Deaf, and become accustomed to a visually oriented way of life. Some Deaf people had been signing in isolated pockets across the U.S. well before the opening of ASD, but it was not until the founding of this school that ASL as it is known today began to be standardized.

Gallaudet did not know sign language before meeting Clerc, but Clerc was fluent in LSF and taught it to Gallaudet. Very little is known about just what variety of

sign language Gallaudet, Clerc, and the first generations of students used; no documents describing signs were published in the U.S. until the late nineteenth century. However, it is in the early nineteenth century where we find the origins, or *etymology*, of much of the language's lexicon. Previous studies of historical change have only scratched the surface of this connection. Now, almost two hundred years later, the history of ASL's lexicon and its link to LSF are finally coming to light.

### The Birth of ASL

According to the 1887 Annual Report of the directors of ASD (*Annual Report 1887*), the population of 77 students who attended the school in its first two years came from diverse backgrounds. Most were older than sixteen and had never used sign before. Clerc's historic role in the founding of ASD meant that LSF was both introduced to and used by this nascent Deaf community. We can deduce that Clerc's dialect reflected the areas from which he came, including the municipal community of Paris where he was educated but also regions outside of Paris where he and many of the first students at INJS grew up. His language was also strongly influenced by Signed French, a methodical code that de l'Épée invented to map signs in French grammatical order. A community of Deaf people lived on Martha's Vineyard long before ASD opened, and their language also likely had some influence on ASL's history. Thus, to get a clear picture of what cultural resources were exploited in the development of the signs of early Deaf America, we must consider old LSF and its dialects, the signs used by the first students and teachers at ASD, and cultural practices and ways of life particular to the U.S. and France more than two hundred years ago.

### *Martha's Vineyard*

The first group of settlers came from Massachusetts to the island of Martha's Vineyard in 1644. Originally from England, they continued to move to the island for the next seventy years, and the first deaf person arrived on the island in 1694. For several generations, a disproportionately large number of genetically deaf children were born, raised, and remained on the island, and the entire population of the island used a sign language (Groce 1985).

The first three students from Martha's Vineyard to attend ASD—Mary Smith, Sally Smith, and Lovey Mayhew—were admitted in 1825, seven years after the school opened. No more than four students from Martha's Vineyard were present at ASD at the same time until the 1850s and 1860s, when their attendance peaked at around twelve students (*Annual Report 1887*). Since some of the first generations of ASD students were from the island, it is likely that a number of Martha's Vineyard Sign Language (MVSL) signs were incorporated into ASL, though probably less than is typically assumed. Bahan and Nash (1996) analyzed data collected from Nash's great-grandmother, a hearing resident of the island who knew MVSL. Nash documented approximately 300 signs and found roughly 20 percent of them had cognates in ASL. While it is certainly possible that some of these signs were inherited into ASL from MVSL, without documentation of the signs as they were used before the opening of ASD, there is no way to verify which language transmitted the cognates.

### *Transmission of old LSF to ASL*

Unsurprisingly, the earliest forms of LSF have proved a rich source of data from which to glean information about ASL's history. Many of the students educated under

de l'Épée's method, like Clerc, were invited or elected to travel to other countries to propagate it. It is well known that Belgium, Holland, Mexico, Brazil, Switzerland, and Quebec share historical ties to LSF and thus, indirectly, to ASL. In all of these countries, former students of INJS founded schools for the deaf: Joseph Henrion in Belgium, Édouard Huet in Mexico and Brazil, Isaac Chomel in Switzerland, Brother Young in Quebec, and Henri Daniel Guyot, a hearing instructor from INJS, in Holland. Gallaudet and Clerc also carried on de l'Épée's mission soon after the founding of ASD, convincing other U.S. states of the need for similar schools in their areas. From 1817 to 1857, roughly two generations of American students attended twenty residential schools across the East Coast, Midwest, and South that used the sign language from Hartford (Gordon 1892). Many of the students who graduated from ASD moved to these states to be teachers and administrators, thereby assuring the transmission of the method and, more importantly for us, the language used by Clerc, Gallaudet, and their first generations of students. In 1864, Edward Miner Gallaudet (son of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet), founded the National Deaf-Mute College (now Gallaudet University) in Washington, DC. Many of the students from ASD and other residential schools pursued degrees at the college and became fervent advocates for signed pedagogies.

### *Oralism and the Milan Congress*

As the residential institutions strengthened their roots, a burgeoning movement to eradicate sign language also began to take hold. A philosophical argument materialized between proponents of de l'Épée's method and advocates of the oral method, each attempting to claim success in teaching deaf

children (Lane 1984). The first oral schools opened in 1867; by the late 1800s, there were seventy-seven schools for the deaf in the U.S.—eighteen schools used the oral method and fifty-nine used either the manual method (sign) or the “combined” method (sign and speech) (Gordon 1892).

Sustaining the use of sign language as the primary communication method in the schools turned out to be a formidable task in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Alexander Graham Bell, who was a teacher of the deaf and was fascinated by genetics, became one of the most vociferous and successful advocates for oral education (Lane 1999). The oral versus manual debate quickly distilled into a contest over the superiority of speech or sign. In 1880, a Congress of predominantly hearing educators in Milan, Italy endorsed the exclusive use of the oral method to teach deaf children. They claimed that teaching students to speak was paramount to their integration in a hearing world.

The Milan Congress's edict suppressed the overt use of sign language in almost all schools for the deaf throughout Europe, and especially in France. Deaf children were strictly monitored in their classrooms, playgrounds, and dormitories and were punished for any evidence of signing. French Deaf people continued to sign covertly; however, the result of this policy had a catastrophic effect on the community for a century, particularly in terms of education but also in recording the language. It took one hundred years for the community to reassert ownership of its language and to once again publish documents of LSF during a period now known as the *Réveil sourd* or *Deaf Awakening*.

The Milan Congress also had a negative impact on American Deaf people but less absolutely than in France. While the wide-

spread practice of excluding sign language from classrooms certainly did occur—as did the unjust removal or demotion of most Deaf teachers—the application of that principle took on different forms in each school. Instead of acquiescing to the edict, the American Deaf community united in opposition to it.

### *Deaf Opposition to Oralism*

Three factors contributed to the relative success Deaf Americans experienced in countering the Milan decree. First, the cultural and geographical distance between Europe and the U.S. allowed for some flexibility in the policy's implementation. Americans are wont to pave their own way, even if (and sometimes especially because) it directly contradicts European mores. Far from the watchful gaze of European educators, the Americans interpreted and implemented the mandate according to their own principles. Each state had independent discretion over the operation of its institutions, permitting distinct approaches to and opinions about optimal teaching methods. In most cases, schools implemented dual-track programs where the so-called “bright” students were assigned to oral classrooms and the “dull” students were relegated to manual classrooms where sign language was used (Gannon 2012; Nomeland and Nomeland 2012). Some schools prohibited signing but allowed fingerspelling. Still others completely abolished sign language in the classrooms but disregarded it when students signed in their dormitories (Gannon 2012; Lane 1999).

The second force that fueled the resistance was the healthy number of Deaf people educated in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary institutions founded on signing pedagogies. Gallaudet University had been

open for sixteen years while forty-six schools for the Deaf were operating by the time the Milan decree was announced. These institutions educated Deaf children who eventually became successful Deaf adults invested in the preservation of the language for future generations. The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) contributed greatly to the unification of Deaf Americans through a series of films produced between 1910 and 1920. George Veditz, president of the NAD from 1904 to 1910, beautifully conveyed the Deaf community's indignation in the face of oralism's “false prophets.” Contrasting the American and French communities, he said,

For 33 years, the French Deaf have watched, with eyes full of tears, with hearts breaking, as the beautiful language of signs was wiped out of their schools. For 33 years, they have strived, struggled, and fought to reestablish it in their schools. But for 33 years they have been pushed aside. [. . .] The French Deaf look at us American Deaf with jealous eyes. They look at us as a prisoner, locked down with an iron chain about his leg, looks out at those wandering free.<sup>3</sup>

Organizations like the NAD and publications like the *Silent Worker* and the *American Annals of the Deaf* helped to unite geographically dispersed Deaf people behind the common cause.

The third factor to foster Deaf American resistance was the Christian church. Christian groups of various denominations proved instrumental in their critique of oralism. Many leaders and missionaries believed that in order to be saved, Deaf people had to understand the Word of God,

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3. Translated by Emily Shaw, from *Preservation of the Sign Language* by George Veditz, 1913.

regardless of the medium through which it was conveyed. American religious groups were quick to counteract the Milan edict. Daniel D. Higgins, for example, declared in his dictionary of ASL,

Do not let the exaggerated propaganda, which claims that all deaf persons are now learning to speak and to read the lips perfectly, deter you from learning this language. Even if those claims were true, the deaf using this language would be with us the rest of our lives. . . . Do not allow slavishness to a method or system, merely mercenary or ambitious motives, or the fear of biased, foolishly proud and sentimental parents lead you to do present or future harm to the pupil spiritually or materially. (Higgins 1942, 1)

Religious men published several dictionaries during the early twentieth century to disseminate across the country, thereby endorsing sign language as a legitimate means of communicating in a social space (Long 1910; Michaels 1923; Higgins 1923, 1942).

The distinct American reaction to the Milan Congress shaped ASL in significant ways. Even at the height of oralism, ASL continued to be used, albeit in a politically charged environment. Deaf individuals were pressed to prove their intelligence and their literacy in English. Consequently, initialized signs and idiomatic expressions borrowed from English became, and remain, characteristic components of ASL. The use of fingerspelled English words and the documentation of ASL signs actually increased after the Milan Congress, unlike in France where it abruptly stopped. Uncovering connections between ASL and LSF is possible today because of the work carried out to maintain ASL's presence in American culture. Though there are many missing pieces in the history of the lexicon, we have a great deal of

documentation to mine. We turn next to a discussion of the work of recreating those connections.

### Etymology of ASL: Research without Tradition

While the events that transpired during the development of the American Deaf community are well documented, very little is known about the history of its lexicon. William Stokoe's seminal work in 1960 marked the beginning of formal research into the structure of ASL. Stokoe was the first to identify linguistic properties of ASL, spurring a movement to legitimize the language in scholarly circles. Stokoe was also the first to bring attention to ASL's lexicon. In 1965, with Dorothy Casterline and Carl Croneberg, he published the *Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles*, the first text to formally describe the composition of signs and their meanings. The book catalogues over a thousand signs described by three components (or *parameters*): handshape, movement, and location.<sup>4</sup> The authors provide information about regional, gender, and generational variations in many entries as well as in articles in the appendix.

While scholars used this work as a springboard for identifying and describing ASL's phonology, they paid less attention to the important historical information it contained. Given the stigma associated with signing, especially in response to the oral movement, it is not surprising that most of the earliest linguistic studies foregrounded ASL's formal structure—its phonology, morphology, and syntax—over its iconicity to

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4. Two additional parameters, orientation (Battison 1978) and nonmanual markers (Liddell and Johnson 1986), were later found to be relevant to the structure of signs.