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THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE

Language is not only the vehicle of thought, it is a great and efficient instrument in thinking.

—Sir Humphry Davy

Carol was a bright, lively young girl with an easy-going personality and a keen interest in horses. She did well in school and enjoyed literature and math. Others saw her as calm and strong, so much so that they were unaware of her isolation. She had some residual hearing, and if she was in a quiet room and one person spoke clearly and slowly, she could discriminate some of what was being said. If that dynamic shifted even a bit, if the speaker turned away, if noise came from somewhere else in the room, if another sixteen-year-old dropped a book or asked the teacher a question—in short if there was more than one clear, distinguishable, and direct expression of language—Carol was lost.

When she was younger and language was at a relatively simple level—one- and two-word expressions, language of limited vocabulary—Carol's classmates would try to communicate with her. They would slowly mouth "hello" or "Do you want to go outside at recess?" but children will not long tolerate a lag in response. One of Carol's early teachers taught the class rudimentary signs—HELLO, HOW ARE YOU? WHAT IS YOUR NAME?—and for a while the students used these signs, but it was a superficial, stagnant mode of communicating, and the signs were soon forgotten.

By the third or fourth grade, at a time when socialization becomes more complex, Carol began to feel more isolated from her classmates. It was not that they were unkind; they just tended to ignore her. Her exchanges with other students went from occasional to infrequent to rare. She did her homework during lunch and recess. She played soccer, but was never invited to anyone's house after school, on the week-

ends, or in the summer. No one consciously chose to exclude her; she just did not really exist. In return, she did not bother anyone; she simply stayed out of reach.

Carol had an interpreter for her academic high school classes, including English. The interpreter tried, but he was paid by the hour, he was not certified, and his vocabulary was incomplete, which meant that he often relied on fingerspelling.* He did his best but was always behind. He had two different responsibilities: (1) to convert spoken language into sign language for Carol and (2) to convert Carol's sign language into spoken language for the class.

One day, the teacher began the class by saying, "Some people think that Shakespeare and Freud had a lot in common. What do you think?" †

There was silence in the class while most of the students waited for someone else to take a chance. The teacher was a favorite at the school; though she was sometimes impatient, she loved the work, the students, and the subject matter. She had not objected to Carol's being placed in the class with a sign language interpreter.

Carol's interpreter signed the question as, "William Shakespeare. Freud. The same?"

A student raised her hand and said, "Well, I think because Shakespeare wrote about so many psychological things that maybe that is why they say he is kind of like Freud."

The interpreter then fingerspelled and signed the student's response, "S-h-a-k-e-s-p-e-a-r-e and p-s-y-c-h-o-l-o-g-i-c-a-l. He wrote about that—"

Before he got to the end of the student's response, the teacher was

*In ASL, the English alphabet is represented by handshapes for all the letters, *A* to *Z*. For example, the word *America* has a sign, but it can also be fingerspelled letter by letter: *A-m-e-r-i-c-a*. Unqualified interpreters sometimes leave out actual words and phrases, and they may misspell words (e.g., *Shakespear*). Thus the amount of information denied to deaf and hard of hearing students can be substantial.

†It is vital that the reader take the time to experience the entire classroom exchange. It is not easy to read the simultaneous discussions, just as it clearly was not easy for Carol to follow them in class. Numerous deaf colleagues and friends have indicated that the vignette is a powerful and realistic example of the isolation they feel.

already asking another question. "What plays do you think are psychological thrillers, so to speak?"

A second student answered, "Well, *Macbeth* for sure and *Hamlet*."

Carol's interpreter stopped interpreting the comment by the first student, began to sign the teacher's question, "p-s-y-c-h-o-l-o-g-i-c-a-l t-h-r-i-l-l-e-r-s," but stopped to try to capture the second student's response to the teacher, "M-a-c-b-e-t-h sure—"

Teacher: "Okay, but the rest of the class, what is it about these plays that—"

Interpreter: "and H-a-m-l—"

Second Student: "In *Macbeth* there is all that guilt—"

Teacher (smiling): "You mean, 'Out, out damn spot?' What do you make of that, Dr. Freud?"

Interpreter: "In those plays, what do you mean 'out d-a-m-n spot. Dr. F-r-e—"

Third Student: "The mind is playing a trick, trying to wash out the guilt for the crime."

Teacher: "And what about *Hamlet*? What is your diagnosis there?"

Interpreter: "—g-u-i-l-t—"

Fourth Student: "All that mother and son stuff and Oedipal deals—"

Interpreter: "—d-i-a-g-n-o-s-i-s—"

Teacher: "This is pretty universal and ancient stuff; what about Oedipus Rex, Sigmund, and William?"

Interpreter: "Old ideas about mothers and sons—O-d-a-p-u-s-s—S-i-g—W-l-i-a-m?"

Teacher: "The ancients, you see, understood the unconscious, even if they didn't give it a name or fully comprehend its impact on us as Sigmund Freud understood. Guilt and hatred and those things go to the root of our being, and Shakespeare, as a genius of language and psychology, understood this."

Interpreter: "U-n-c-o-n-s-c-i-o-u-s at the root that S-h-a-k—"

Fifth Student: "Was Shakespeare neurotic?"

Interpreter: "language and p-s-y-c-h-o-l-o-g-y—N-e-u-r-o-t-i-c—understood this."

Teacher: "Funny man, Carl. You know Freud said that there was no such thing as just a joke, that it hid some unconscious things. Maybe we'll begin your analysis right here."

The class laughed at both Carl and the teacher, which gave Carol a chance to raise her hand. She signed rapidly, "I don't understand, neurotic and unconscious, what were you saying about *Hamlet*?" Carol's in-

terpreter's receptive skills—his ability to read signs—were not very good; he voiced to the teacher and class, “I don't understand, neurology and conscience. What did Hamlet say?”

The teacher paused and asked the interpreter to repeat what he said. With five minutes left in the class, the teacher told Carol to carefully reread the scene where Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, dies. She then addressed the whole class. “So we see that Freud and the ancient Greeks and William Shakespeare share a good deal about the human psyche, and from them we learn much about ourselves. Just ask Carl. For tomorrow I'd like you to write a two-page essay on *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and Freud. See you tomorrow.”

As the students rushed out to their next class, the interpreter was signing to Carol, “G-e-r-t-r-u-d-e—Finish tomorrow H-a-m-l-e M-a-c-b-e-t-h F-r—”

COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE AND THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE are central to the human experience, and the ability and need to convey thoughts, feeling, hopes, and information defines the human species. It is as profound and simple as that. From Aristotle to Benedict de (Baruch) Spinoza to Dylan Thomas to Andy Warhol, philosophers and artists have understood that communication and language make our world intelligible and available to us.

A society exists whenever the members of a group can convey ideas to one another. Some call this “deliberate communication,” and its purpose is no less significant than to ensure that human beings are unified into one life and that the “development of the community as a continuous process of intercommunication and organization of experience” may proceed. Indeed, the “hypothesis of other minds would be untenable without the prior possibility of interpersonal communication.”¹ Josiah Royce, a late-nineteenth-century philosopher, concluded that “without language . . . there would be no self.”²

Suppose we had no word for a strawberry or nausea or coffee or a tear or capitalism; no language to express gravitation or death;

no way to communicate our understanding of, or confusion about, the relativity of time or why something makes us laugh. No way to convey, even partially, the feeling of love. Language is

not just some superficial part of human thinking. We are not just apes who have dabbled with some special communication trick. Language is totally integrated into every aspect of human mental functioning. We are linguistic savants, lightning calculators of semantic and syntactic arithmetic. . . . This rare and anomalous cognitive ability is thus one of the most robust and irrepressible characteristics of our species.³

We start, then, with this notion of the beauty, uniqueness, authority, and necessity of communication and language. We know without any proof that we must communicate and convey thoughts through language, or we cease to be human. And this is true for those with or without hearing, for those who rely on oral-aural language as much as for those who rely on visual language.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE

There are important differences between the concepts of communication and language. *Communication* refers to the general way in which humans convey thoughts, feelings, and ideas to one another. Communication can take the form of a smile, a punch to the nose, a written note, the celebratory dance of a football player, and tens of thousands of other conveyances. *Communication* is defined as “a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior.” *Language* is defined as “a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures, or marks having understood meaning.”⁴

Humans communicate and employ language. Deaf and hard of hearing individuals communicate in as many varied ways as

hearing individuals. They communicate through written, oral-aural, and manual modes. They employ language as hearing individuals do, whether it be English or ASL.

If communication and language are central to our being, then it follows that our institutions, our laws, our Constitution, must recognize those values as well. Our democracy insists on our freedom, and our freedom depends on the free flow of information, on the exchange of thoughts through language. The need to access information, to have our say, to appreciate what others think and communicate, is central to our democracy and to our growth as individuals.

International law recognizes the importance of language and the right to it. Article 27 of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provides that linguistic minorities shall not be denied the right to communicate with members of their community. This right creates an obligation to protect the identity and to ensure the survival and continuous development of linguistic minorities.⁵

The Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights acknowledges the right to be part of, and to be recognized as a member of, a language community; the right to use one's own language both in private and public; the right for one's language and culture to be taught (Article 3); the right to acquire knowledge of one's own language (Article 13); and the right to an education that will enable the members of a language community to gain full command of their own language (Article 26). The declaration also recognizes that the rights of *all* language communities are equal (Article 5).⁶ The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, or Linguistic Minorities calls for states to provide opportunities to "receive instruction in their mother tongues."⁷ Finally, the Hague Recommendations regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities suggest that education should be provided in a child's language and that a minority language should be taught as a subject on a regular basis.⁸

These conventions recognize that there is a significant connection between language and human dignity, that these rights must

be protected not by other individuals but by governments, and that it is not “enough if the state only assumes an obligation not to interfere with” the linguistic development of children—the state in fact has a duty to enhance the right itself.⁹ Many countries have taken steps and assumed these duties. South Africa recognizes sign language as an official language in school, and Uganda includes sign language in its constitution. Denmark and Sweden have long provided extensive sign language school programs.¹⁰ Our government should have a similar duty, so that deaf and hard of hearing children do not continue to be subject to laws and policies that, consciously or otherwise, interfere with rather than support their language rights. Our Constitution cannot continue to be merely neutral; it must affirmatively protect this right.

DEAFNESS AND COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE

Hearing loss and its linguistic implications are profound. Many, if not most, hearing people assume that greater amplification will resolve a hearing problem. They have little understanding or even awareness that though some deaf people develop oral-aural skills, many use a viable and formal visual language that conveys thought as fully and effectively as spoken language.

Most hearing people cannot imagine living without sound. Yet many deaf people have told me that they would not become hearing even if they could, because their language, culture, and community are rich in things that hearing people don't have. It is a worthy point to be respected and understood and to consider within the context of the importance of, and the right to, communication and language.

Deaf and hard of hearing children are fully capable of developing and using language and of communicating. However, their needs for special accommodations to access language and communication, in whatever mode or language they use, are different from

those of almost every other so-called disability group that the law and educational policy and programs address. All other children with disabilities, whether they are blind, use wheelchairs, or are developmentally delayed, can hear the teacher and their classmates. They know what is being said in the classroom just by being present. Deaf and hard of hearing children do not.

The issue of providing communication and language is made even more complex by the significant differences that exist between deaf and hard of hearing people. Approximately 13 million Americans have some measurable hearing loss, and 6.5 million have a bilateral loss (a loss in both ears). Demographers estimate that almost 500,000 Americans use ASL as their primary language and make up the Deaf community. That total is interesting in light of the number of people who speak other languages in the United States—approximately 400,000 speak French, 250,000 speak German, and 125,000 speak Yiddish.¹¹

Individuals who lose their hearing at or just after birth are called *prelingually deaf*, and those who lose their hearing after developing language (usually after the age of two) are called *postlingually deaf*. Some prelingually deaf individuals rely exclusively on oral-aural language and have no signing skills at all. Other prelingually deaf people use only manual means of communicating. Some of these people use ASL, whereas others use signing systems developed to teach English to deaf children (e.g., Signed English and Signing Exact English). Still others communicate both orally and manually using English-based systems like Total Communication and Cued Speech.*

*Signing systems, which are generally intended to be visual representations of English, are profoundly different from ASL. A sentence conveyed through an English signing system would in fact look very much like standard written English. Every English word would have a singular corresponding sign. For example, the sentence “Today I will run from my home to the park” would have a sign for each of those words and the order would be the same as in spoken English. Using ASL, the signer would es-

The number of people that use manual language (whether ASL or a signing system) or oral-aural language is hard to pinpoint. A survey during the 2002–2003 school year found that, of approximately 40,000 deaf and hard of hearing students, 18,237 (45 percent) were taught orally, 16,995 (42 percent) with speech and sign, and 3,753 (3 percent) with sign only.¹² The Gallaudet Research Institute found in 1995 that, of 43,861 deaf and hard of hearing children, 41 percent were exclusively oral, 56 percent used some combination of speech and sign, and 1.9 percent used ASL; in 2000, 44 percent were exclusively oral, 49 percent used a combination of speech and sign, and 5.8 percent used ASL.¹³ During the 1999–2000 school year, less than 15 percent of students six to eleven years of age had cochlear implants; by the 2002–2003 school year, the figure was up to 22 percent, a significant increase with major implications for the future education of deaf and hard of hearing students.¹⁴

Educators, parents of deaf children, and Deaf adults have long argued over the best way to teach language to deaf children. Some say that exposure to and development of ASL is a prerequisite for the development of English skills and literacy, whereas others counter that literacy is best developed if deaf and hard of hearing children learn English orally or through an English-based signing system. Research increasingly shows that deaf children who develop a natural, manual language learn to read (and write) much like hearing children for whom English is a second language and that the development of a strong native linguistic base (whether oral or manual) is necessary for literacy growth.¹⁵

This communication debate has been raging for hundreds of years, with no end in sight. I make no attempt to suggest that one way is better than another. Ultimately, it is essential that parents understand the difference between a natural and formal language

establish the place of the home and the park in the space in front of the body and would sign ME RUNNING while moving the hands from one place to the other.

and signing systems, as well as the difference between all manual options and oral-aural language. All families should be fully informed and knowledgeable so that the best decisions can be made for the deaf or hard of hearing child. Regardless of the parents' language-communication choice, all deaf and hard of hearing children should have access to what all other children in our nation take for granted—language and communication, the chance to develop English skills, and a rich educational environment in which they can communicate directly with their peers and teachers.

The need for communication and language illustrates the complex ways in which hearing loss is fundamentally different from any other disability. It underscores both the difficulties perpetuated by current law and policy and why communication and language access and development must become a right rather than an afterthought in our educational system. John Dewey said that “society exists in and through communication.”¹⁶ So it is for deaf and hard of hearing people.

NOTES

1. Elizabeth Flower and Murray G. Murphey, *A History of Philosophy in America* (New York: Putnam, 1977), 2:728–729, 751, 752.

2. *Id.* at 728–729.

3. Terrence W. Deacon, “Prefrontal Cortex and Symbol Learning: Why a Brain Capable of Learning Language Evolved Only Once,” in *Communicating Meaning: The Evolution and Development of Language*, ed. Boris M. Velichkovsky and Duane M. Rumbaugh (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1996), 105–106.

4. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.vv. “communication” and “language.”

5. See Anna-Miria Muhlke, “The Right to Language and Linguistic Development: Deafness from a Human Rights Perspective,” *Virginia Journal of International Law* 40 (2000): 705, 725.

6. *Id.* at 746–747.

7. *Id.* at 740.

8. Conversation with Dr. Rob Rosen, May 2006.

9. Muhlke, "The Right to Language and Linguistic Development," 743–744.

10. *Id.* at 752; and South African Schools Act, 1996, as provided to author by Claudine Storbeck, March 28, 2005.

11. Ross E. Mitchell and others, "How Many People Use ASL in the United States?" February 21, 2005, 25–26, http://research.gallaudet.edu/Publications/ASL_Users.pdf.

12. *2002–2003 Regional and National Summary* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet Research Institute, 2003), 6.

13. Introduction to *Annual Survey of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children & Youth* (Washington D.C.: Gallaudet Research Institute, 2000), <http://gri.gallaudet.edu/AnnualSurvey/>.

14. Ross E. Mitchell and Michael A. Karchmer, "Demographics of Deaf Education: More Students in More Places," *American Annals of the Deaf* 151 (2006): 100.

15. Pamela Knight and Ruth Swanwick, *The Care and Education of a Deaf Child* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Multilingual Matters, 1999), 166.

16. John Dewey, *Philosophy and Civilization* (New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1931), 87.