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More than a Gesture

Introduction

In 1965, an event took place that was to change the history of a language and its people. William C. Stokoe, Dorothy Casterline, and Carl Croneberg published their *Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles*. At the time, few people paid attention. Although American Sign Language (ASL) was the language of a large population in this country, few hearing Americans knew it existed.

Fourteen years later, Edward Klima and Ursula Bellugi, linguists at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, published *The Signs of Language*, the first in-depth description of the grammar of ASL. Still, relatively few people knew about ASL. Fewer still were able to study it as a second language. As of 1982, Battison and Carter wrote that “as far as we know, no college or university has yet made [American] Sign Language a permanent part of its foreign language curricula, on a par with the other foreign languages they teach” (p. vii).

By the mid-1980s, the scene had changed radically. ASL programs were being established on campuses and in high schools across the country. ASL could be seen everywhere: on television (for example, in *Barney Miller*, *Happy Days*, *Love Is Never Silent*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and even a McDonald’s commercial); in the theater (Mark Medoff’s *Children of a Lesser God*); at the movies (*Voices*, a movie that generated much controversy in the Deaf

community because a hearing actress portrayed the part of a deaf woman, and the film version of *Children of a Lesser God*); at political rallies; in high school and college classrooms, where deaf students were mainstreamed with hearing students. ASL was beginning to pervade the American experience.

Interest in ASL has reached an all-time high and shows no signs of declining. No matter where we look, the situation is the same. As soon as one ASL course is established, there are enough students to fill two. If two classes are opened, enough students show up to fill four.

Any language teacher has to feel heartened by such popularity and acceptance of a previously neglected language, especially when it is a language in our very midst. For those who have been in the field of ASL for many years, it seems miraculous. Unfortunately, such rapid growth can also be dangerous. In their attempts to establish new ASL programs and to meet the ever-increasing demand for more classes, many schools are offering courses that do not really teach ASL; instead, they teach some version of Pidgin Sign English or a form of manually coded English. (We will discuss these terms in detail in the next chapter.) It would be hard even for traditional language courses to keep up with increasing enrollments of the magnitude experienced in ASL. The field of ASL instruction was, understandably, ill-prepared to respond. There were few teacher training programs; there was a paucity of materials, no standard curricula, little or no literature on second language instruction of ASL, and no accreditation procedures for ASL programs and teachers. It was common to find ASL being taught by well-intentioned instructors with far too little knowledge of the language and its users. There is little that a textbook alone can do for these teachers; one can only hope that the field will offer enough support to allow under-prepared teachers to become more competent.

Of course, many schools have been aware of this danger and have consistently maintained high standards in their ASL courses. The instructors in these courses are either native users of ASL or

highly fluent second language users; they have degrees or experience in second language instruction; they use materials that are designed specifically for the teaching of ASL and not for some other form of signed language; and they associate on a regular basis with Deaf people. It is also common, however, to find good teachers who need program and classroom guidelines for the teaching of ASL. These teachers must learn how to teach their students about the history and structure of ASL. They must learn what materials are available and how to evaluate and use them; how to design and implement an ASL curriculum; how to develop effective teaching strategies, and evaluate students' performance; and how to incorporate Deaf culture into the ASL classroom. It is to these instructors that we offer our book.

There are two groups of people for whom this book is not intended. First, it is not directed to those who do not know ASL. If you are interested in teaching ASL and do not yet know the language, then your course is clear. Study ASL and get to know Deaf people. Spend several years becoming fluent; spend a few more learning about how to teach languages to second language students. You will be rewarded with excellent career opportunities. Second, this book is not intended for experienced ASL instructors who are familiar with most of the issues highlighted herein. Nonetheless, we encourage such readers to use this book as a reference source and to offer it to others who have less experience teaching ASL.

Myths and Misconceptions about ASL

Many second language students are attracted to ASL courses because of a curiosity about the language and its users. Students do hold, however, many misconceptions about ASL. Unless these misconceptions are examined and dispelled, they will impede students' appreciation for and acquisition of ASL.

This section discusses some of the myths and misconceptions that pervade popular thinking about ASL, both as a human

language and as a foreign or second language. We will examine these myths and misconceptions by posing the common questions that they lead people to ask.

Is American Sign Language a Derivative of English?

Because of its signed modality, people often assume that ASL is merely a gestural representation of English. ASL is a fully developed, natural language, one of the world's many signed languages. It is not a derivative of English; ASL contains structures and processes that English does not (Klima and Bellugi 1979). Neither is it a *simplified* language. ASL is a complete language with its own unique grammar (Fromkin 1988). It is also a rich language with a long and interesting history. In order to appreciate ASL as a language independent from spoken and written languages, and from other signed languages, students should be taught the history and structure of ASL.

Is ASL a System of Communication or a Language?

There are many ways to communicate information. Bees communicate the direction of flowers with an elaborate dance in which they wiggle their tails. Animals communicate information about territoriality by odor. Facial expressions, calls, and other systems of nonverbal communication are used by primates. Even single cells communicate information by means of DNA and the genetic code. All of these are *systems of communication* (Akmajian, Demers, and Harnish 1984). Human languages certainly share some features with these systems of communication; for example, they have a channel through which they are transmitted (auditory, visual, olfactory, chemical). However, human languages have features that set them apart from these more general systems of communication.

One of the most important of these features is *productivity*. Human languages are composed of a limited set of parts that can be combined to form a potentially unlimited set of structures. For example, sounds can be combined to form different words, and

words can be combined to form an infinite number of sentences. This aspect of productivity manifests itself in two ways: production and comprehension. People can both produce and understand sentences never seen or heard before. It is unlikely, for example, that anyone has ever before seen the sentence, “During the hurricane, Marlon Brando spilled a hatful of chocolate soup on his blue suede shoes.” Although the meaning is nonsensical, users of English would not fail to understand the words. In chapter 2, we will discuss productivity and its presence in signed languages such as ASL.

Human languages are also characterized by *arbitrariness* and *displacement*. Words in natural human languages do not necessarily resemble their referents (arbitrariness). The word *bear* is not a bear, nor does the word smell, sound, or look like the animal that it signifies. Humans can talk about things removed in time and space from their personal experience (displacement). They can talk about events that happened yesterday, or that might happen tomorrow. They can wonder about events happening across the world just as easily as they can remark about events taking place in front of them. They can talk about such concrete objects as cars or houses, or such abstract concepts as love, honesty, or God.

Thus, it is only partially true to say that human languages such as English or Spanish are systems of communication. They are that and more. The same is true for ASL. ASL is a system of communication, and it is more—it is a true human language, with all the features characteristic of other human languages. This means that an abstract concept can be expressed in ASL as easily as in English, Spanish, Navajo, or any other spoken language.

Perhaps one reason many people believe that ASL is merely a system of communication is that they have quite detailed—but largely incorrect—ideas about what constitutes a human language. For example, many people, including some language teachers and researchers, assume that all human languages are spoken. They also make assumptions about the relationship

between speech and other forms of language, such as writing. On the basis of these preconceptions, people make reasonable but incorrect inferences about ASL.

Is ASL a More Conceptual Language than English?

This is a common question. There seems to be something about ASL that makes people want to call it a “conceptual” language. In truth, though, it makes little sense to say that one language is more conceptual than another. All languages are conceptual; they package concepts into linguistic units of various sizes—words, phrases, sentences, texts—so that the concepts can be communicated to others.

The real question is not whether one language is more or less conceptual than another, but how a particular language chooses to package concepts. In some languages, Navajo for instance, a word may contain much more information than a typical English word. One word in Navajo may have to be translated into English as a phrase or even a sentence. This does not make Navajo more conceptual than English; the two languages merely have different ways of packaging concepts.

In fact, ASL is quite similar to Navajo in this regard. Much more information can be packed into a typical ASL sign than into a typical English word. Perhaps this is what people are noticing when they say that ASL is more conceptual than English.

Another feature of ASL that may have an influence on this question is that of arbitrariness. As explained, a universal characteristic of human languages is arbitrariness—in general, words do not resemble their referents. ASL, on the other hand, does seem to exhibit a high degree of iconicity—ASL words often seem to resemble features of their referent. A common example is the ASL word TREE (figure 1), which does indeed resemble a tree. The evolution of ASL over the last 75 to 100 years, however, is such that the degree of iconicity is decreasing (Frishberg 1975). Certain aspects of the grammar of ASL also work to suppress iconicity (Klima and Bellugi 1979).



Figure 1: TREE

Source: Reprinted, by permission of the publisher, from E. Shroyer, *Signs of the Times* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1982), 24.

Even spoken languages incorporate some iconicity. Sound symbolism is one example: words like *choo-choo* and *cocka-doodledoo*. Woodworth (1991) finds an iconic relationship between vowel pitch and distance in deictic pronouns and place adverbs in 26 languages chosen from a worldwide sample.

Written languages at various stages in their development also exhibit a degree of iconicity. Many students are familiar with the early history of writing, in which written symbols clearly resembled elements of the real world. As writing systems evolved, they typically lost their iconic elements and became more conventionalized and arbitrary.

Finally, the degree to which any language incorporates arbitrariness and iconicity is open to much debate. We have considered cases of iconicity only at the word level, where words or signs can resemble their referents. There are many other places that iconicity can appear in language. When examining these other areas, we find that ASL may be no more or less iconic than spoken languages (Haiman 1985).

It would be nice to be able to claim that ASL is a more conceptual language than English; this would possibly allay many people's fear that ASL is a simplified language. Neither position is true.

Is ASL a Universal Language?

No. ASL is indigenous to the United States and parts of Canada. There are many naturally occurring, indigenous signed languages in the world, just as there are many natural spoken languages. Just as people who speak English cannot understand people who speak Chinese, people (whether they are deaf or hearing) who know ASL cannot understand people who use Chinese Sign Language.

It is interesting that most people assume that sign language is universal. Perhaps this is because many people wrongly assume that sign language is based on universal emotional expressions or body language. This is not the case. In fact, research on young deaf children with deaf parents has demonstrated that these children make a clear distinction between the use of facial expressions to convey emotions and facial expressions to convey grammatical features of the language (McIntire and Reilly 1988).

People may also assume that ASL is not a naturally-occurring language but was instead devised by hearing people to help deaf people understand and acquire language. Why, they wonder, would people devise more than one signed language? The answer, of course, is that no one invented ASL; it is a naturally-occurring language. They may be confusing ASL with one of several manual codes for English, which will be discussed later.

When people learn that ASL is not universal, they often remark, "Wouldn't it be nice if deaf people all over the world could communicate with each other?" Perhaps it would. It might also be nice if hearing people the world over could break language barriers. The fact is that people everywhere use different languages, and deaf people are no exception. It is also true that people acquire a sense of identity, a sense of pride, through the language they use. Again, deaf people are no exception. As will be shown in chapter 4, the use of and respect for ASL is a major avenue to admission into Deaf culture.

Is ASL a "Foreign" Language?

The question of whether ASL is "foreign" depends on the specific meaning of "foreign." If several people were asked what qualifies as a foreign language, most would probably respond, "a language used in another country." The foreignness of the language is directly related to whether or not it is associated with a geopolitical entity—a foreign nationality different from our own. But, the matter is not so simple. Consider the case of Navajo. Some universities in the United States teach Navajo and accept it in fulfillment of their undergraduate foreign language requirement. Yet, Navajo clearly does not originate in a foreign country—like many other languages, Navajo is indigenous to the United States. Many of the world's languages are not affiliated with nationalities and thus, under this definition, would not be considered foreign languages. Not only would this definition lead to an untenable position on the status of these languages as foreign languages, it would fail to explain some of the most important events taking place in our world today. Much of the current restructuring of the world, especially in the former Soviet bloc countries, is motivated by ethnic unrest. Much of the sense of ethnic identity derives from the use of a particular language.

Furthermore, many of the languages taught as foreign languages at American universities actually have a long history of use in this country. Spanish is an obvious example. Spanish is the native language of many United States citizens who do not consider themselves foreigners. In spite of this, almost every school in the country that has a foreign language requirement accepts Spanish in fulfillment of that requirement.

Alternatively, consider the special situation of foreign exchange students in the United States. They come here speaking both their mother tongue and English. Which is their foreign language? Clearly, it is not the language that originates in another country; it is not their native language. If anything, English is their foreign language.

Foreign language requirements are designed to move students to learn a language that they do not already know—a language that is foreign to them and to their experience. ASL qualifies admirably as foreign in this sense. For this reason, many language scholars now speak of second language, rather than foreign language, requirements.

Issues related to the acceptance of ASL as a foreign language are being debated in school districts, universities, and state legislatures across the country. ASL teachers and students should be aware of the movement to accept ASL as a foreign language and should be prepared to discuss the issues with others. Some of these issues are presented in more detail in chapter 2.

American Deaf Culture

Every language student knows there is more involved in a second language course than just learning a new language. Students must also learn about the culture of the people who use the language. The same is true for second language students of ASL. They should learn about the culture of American Deaf people.

For many people, the idea that there is such a thing as American Deaf culture is new. ASL instructors must be prepared to teach their students about the values and beliefs of Deaf people and to help students understand the concept of culture as it applies to deafness.

There are many ways in which ASL students can learn about Deaf culture, both explicitly and implicitly. Chapter 3 presents information about Deaf culture that can be shared with ASL students in an explicit way. Teachers can also bring Deaf culture into the classroom implicitly by the way they structure the classroom, the lessons, and the materials. Of course, the best way for students to learn about Deaf culture, and to learn ASL for that matter, is for the teacher to be Deaf. This is not always possible, however. In these circumstances, hearing teachers can directly

expose students to Deaf culture by inviting Deaf people to participate in class sessions and by encouraging ASL students to seek out Deaf people in the local community. These and other strategies will be discussed in chapter 4.

The Plan of the Book

Chapter 2 describes ASL in more detail, including its history and structure. The text includes more discussion of the linguistics of ASL than may be typical in a book on second language learning because of the number of linguistic and cultural issues that must be explained to the student of ASL as a second language. We begin our discussion of this by highlighting the following three points.

- Because ASL has only recently been studied as a legitimate first or second language, much information about the language comes directly from linguistic research. Teachers and students must be able to use and understand this information in order to pursue their study of ASL.
- Whereas ASL is a language like any other, it is also a special type of language—a *signed* language. When dealing with signed languages, people cannot assume that teaching the language itself is sufficient. Students must not merely be able to converse fluently in ASL; they must also understand the nature of signed languages in general and their relationship to spoken and written forms of language.
- Second language students will often serve as provisional ambassadors for ASL. Part of the reason for this is the aforementioned great popularity and curiosity regarding ASL. Of course, it would be best if people satisfied their desire to learn more about ASL by taking a course from a Deaf person. The reality is, however, that when looking for sources of information, many people will turn to friends or colleagues who have studied ASL. In addition to acquiring communicative competence in ASL, students must also acquire a healthy respect for and under-

standing of the language, its structure, its history, and its users. Students must be able to talk competently about signed languages in general and, more specifically, about ASL to others.

Chapter 3 presents information about the Deaf community and Deaf culture. Chapter 4 discusses issues related to ASL instruction. Finally, chapter 5 explores some of the special issues facing ASL instructors: (1) introducing ASL students to the Deaf community and to native users of ASL; (2) ASL teacher qualifications; and (3) the important difference between people who can communicate fluently (using ASL) with Deaf people, and those who have the additional language and professional skills required to be interpreters for Deaf people.