Introduction

We developed *Linguistics of American Sign Language* in the early 1990s because of the lack of materials on American Sign Language (ASL) structure at the undergraduate level. In the years since then, as we have taught ASL structure to fluent users of the language, we have refined and revised the text. Yet, we still have the same two basic goals in writing this text.

Our first goal is to teach the basic concepts of linguistics as they pertain to ASL structure. To this end, we introduce fundamental areas of linguistic inquiry—phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and the use of language—and discuss the phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and sociolinguistic structure of ASL. Our discussion reflects the current state of research in these areas, including the work of individual researchers. We recognize that there is more than one perspective on some aspects of ASL structure. We have chosen to work within the theoretical framework developed by our colleagues in the Department of Linguistics at Gallaudet University—Scott K. Liddell and Robert E. Johnson. We also recognize that perspectives on linguistic phenomena are often subject to rapid change, and our materials reflect some of the most significant changes in perspective. One of the most important concepts we want to convey is that linguistic inquiry is a dynamic and flexible undertaking, not a frozen or static one. In fact, since this book first appeared in 1992, perspectives on some aspects of sign language structure and its use have changed, and research in areas such as discourse and variation has increased dramatically.

Our second goal is to teach students to think critically about the structure of ASL and about claims that researchers make about that structure. We encourage students not to memorize linguistic facts but rather to think about language structure. This text is designed for undergraduate-level students who already know how to sign ASL and who have skills in using the language. For that reason, we set aside the time for class discussions, during which students can think about and question the information being taught. We encourage students to use what they already know to learn about the linguistics of ASL.

Linguistics of American Sign Language consists of seven parts. The first part introduces fundamental ideas about languages as unique communication systems. We use this section to focus attention on the fact that ASL is a language. No one can really understand the structure of ASL without first knowing its basic components. The second part, on phonology, provides an introduction to the basic parts of signs and lays the groundwork for the examination of morphology (part 3), syntax (part 4), and semantics (part 5). Part 6, Language in Use, deals with variation and historical change, discourse, bilingualism and language contact, and artistic uses of ASL, in other words, how signers *use* their language.

Part 7 consists of supplemental readings. The readings are of three types: "classics," such as the articles by Battison and Stokoe, to provide historical background

for the study of sign language linguistics; articles that represent current research on ASL; and readings that provide a foundation in general linguistics. Many of the readings cover, in detail, concepts that are explained in the text.

In addition, a DVD accompanies the text. The first part of the DVD provides demonstrations of all of the signs and structures discussed in the text. The second part of the DVD contains a wide variety of signing examples, ranging from a 1913 film of George Veditz, a former president of the National Association of the Deaf, to interviews of Deaf subjects who have been part of large research projects on sociolinguistic variation. The DVD can be used by teachers and students for class discussion and homework assignments.

Because of our focus on the linguistic structure of ASL, we have not included information about Deaf culture or the Deaf community. We leave it up to individual instructors to include such information in their courses.