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## *Preface*

*A* world with no sounds. Phones don't ring. Thunder doesn't clap. The radio's just another piece of furniture. Automobiles glide silently past. Imagine, a soundless environment. Does such a world exist? And in that world, how would you communicate? Without sound, how would you get the news of the day? Would you be able to order pizza and have it delivered to your house? How would you invite friends to a barbeque? Could you explain to a colleague why you were late for your meeting?

You may immediately recognize that such a world—a world without meaningful hearing—already exists. It is not a special place; it is not hidden in an enclave marked only by road signs restricting access. It is all around you, and yet few ever see it. Simply stated, it is the world of deaf people.<sup>1</sup>

That the deaf world tends to be invisible stems from two facts. First of all, deaf people are a small minority within the general population. How much of a minority is something we will discuss in chapter 7. Second, deaf people have no obvious indications of their lack of hearing—until you try to communicate with them. They don't wear dark glasses, carry canes, or sit in wheelchairs. Hearing aids, if they wear them, are not distinctive because persons who are hard of hearing also use them. But talk to a deaf person and their lack of hearing becomes apparent.

“What a tragedy,” you might say. “No sound; no way to communicate.” Not really. Most deaf people have developed a lifestyle detached from sounds. They communicate with signs, rather than speech. For that reason their social lives revolve around other people who use sign language. The majority of those who marry choose deaf spouses. Ask a deaf couple if they would rather have a hearing or a deaf child, and more than likely they will say deaf. It is not that they do not like hearing people; it is just that as social creatures, the value of communication is deeply

ingrained in them. They know that communicating and socially identifying with a deaf child who signs will be much easier than with a hearing child who depends on speech. They love their children equally, hearing or deaf. It is simply a matter of communicating.

## Language and Communication

Can we exchange information without a shared language? Yes, we have many examples of people communicating without having a common language. We do not have to go farther than the initial encounters between the Europeans who emigrated to the New World and the indigenous population. Columbus communicated with the natives, whom he misnamed Indians because he thought he had reached India. But he did not know their language nor they his. The pioneers who came to North America communicated with the local people they encountered before they knew each other's languages. In the Pacific explorers gathered information from natives—information that was accurate enough to save their lives as they sailed in the directions and for the times indicated by the natives—without the benefit of a common language.

### *What Is Language?*

Since this book is about language, we should establish a definition of it at the outset. You may already know that experts do not agree on what language is. But we are not linguists, so, like Humpty Dumpty, we can proclaim, “When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” Actually, we will be concurring with the majority of language experts if we adhere to the following definition:

Language is a systematic means of communicating ideas and feelings by the use of conventional symbols.<sup>2</sup>

The term *systematic* refers to the rules for combining the elements of the language—the grammar. The word *symbols* in the definition conveys another critical aspect of language: it is referential. Symbols refer to something that need not be present to be discussed. Symbols allow us to communicate about events in the past or future and at a distance or hidden from the sender or the receiver. The symbols may be of any kind: auditory, visual, tactual, or whatever, so long as they can be transmitted by one person and received by another. *Conventional* implies prior agreement about the meaning of the symbols between two or more people.

Our definition of language avoids some of the controversial issues, though not all. It tells what language can do—communicate thoughts and emotions—not what it must do. It makes clear that a set of symbols, a collection of signs, does not make a language if there are no rules for putting the symbols together. The concept of language expressed here is a social one; it requires that others (at least one other) share an understanding of the language elements (grammar and vocabulary) before the system achieves linguistic status. Sender and receiver may not be able to explicate the rules, but they demonstrate their internalization of them by their consistent behavior in relation to them.

Some linguists require that the symbols be arbitrary rather than iconic (representations of the form of that which is being described, like a picture of an object, an icon). An arbitrary symbol could not be understood by someone unfamiliar with the language. An iconic symbol could. Our definition of language does not address this point, but our discussion of sign language will.

We do not include the dynamics of languages in the definition—the fact that as languages are transmitted they tend to alter somewhat, usually in predictable ways. For instance, the original word for a flying machine that carries passengers was *aeroplane*; now *plane* means the same thing. The tendency to shorten or to prune words is one predictable feature of most languages, including sign languages. We will take up this latter point in the second chapter, when we discuss the structure of sign language.

Having said that, it should be noted that communication by pointing, pantomiming, drawing, and other nonlinguistic means is limited. For wide-ranging communication, especially for discussions about things not present and events not experienced in common, language is essential. We conclude that you can have communication without language, but the communication you will have will be thin gruel compared to the rich stew that comes with language.

Must languages be spoken or written? Are there forms of language other than the one with which most people are accustomed? The answer, of course, is yes: sign language. Like all languages, it consists of symbols that are combined according to rules (syntax) in order to convey thoughts and feelings. What are the symbols of a sign language? Instead of sounds or printed figures, they are the images made by fingers, hands, and arms—images that are linguistically shaped by movements of the eyes, eyebrows, lips, and cheeks, by the hunching and twisting of the shoulders, by the signer's posture. In the United States and in most of Canada the language

of signs is called American Sign Language or, as it is commonly abbreviated, ASL. For deaf people ASL is fundamental to communication. It is their language.

### *Speech and Language*

That the word *language* derives from *lingua* (“tongue”) betrays the common confusion about the relation between speech and language. For many earlier linguists, the words were synonymous<sup>3</sup>. The notion of a language not arising from spoken communication received little attention from leaders of language-development studies, and they in turn heavily influenced educators of deaf children. Because sign languages are not spoken, educators until recently did not accept the signing behavior prevalent in the Deaf community as a language. This gave them a reason for barring sign language from the classroom and, to the extent possible, from the schoolyard. Thus, the failure to separate speech from language had a profound influence on the education of deaf students. To avoid repeating that error, consider our definition of speech: *Speech consists of vocal utterances that may or may not be meaningful to others*. The key difference between speech, as we have defined it, and language is the requirement of meaningfulness. Speech does not need to be meaningful; language does.

Are speech and language independent of each other? If they are, we should find speech without language as well as language without speech. To illustrate speech without language, we could point to talking birds. A parrot’s utterances lack meaning and do not intentionally express thoughts and emotions. The bird does not necessarily want to eat when it says, “Polly wants a cracker!” It is merely repeating words it has been taught to say.

Turning to human examples of speech without language, consider *glossolalia* (speaking in tongues), which is sometimes heard in Pentecostal churches. It is speech without discernible meaning. Patients with certain forms of aphasia may speak but their words make no sense. Likewise, deaf persons with aphasia have been found to produce strings of signs that have no meaning to others<sup>4</sup>.

What about language without speech? Some people are born with anarthria (nonfunctioning vocal apparatus) and other conditions, such as cerebral palsy, and are unable to speak, but nonetheless can understand and develop language. They are able to express themselves through sign

language or communication boards and other devices. Speech pathologists have noted other cases of normally hearing children who were unable to speak but who, nonetheless, understood language.

Accepting the independence of speech and language is essential to appreciating ASL as a fully developed language, not a manual version of English. The fact that ASL and all other sign languages are natural languages partly accounts for the mushrooming interest in them—an interest that has exerted considerable influence on the education of deaf children and the rehabilitation of deaf adults. Furthermore, separating speech from language encourages a broader approach to research on both—an approach with potential for advancing our command of communication.

### *Hearing and Seeing*

Our two distance receptors, sight and hearing, work together so well that we may not have given much thought to their coordination. When both are intact, they work in tandem like a pair of well-trained coach horses. The two senses function so smoothly it is difficult to appreciate the effort of one or the other alone. But when either sense is seriously impaired or absent, we become sharply aware of differences in the way they operate.

A critical difference between hearing and seeing is that we hear *sequentially*, but we see *simultaneously*. That difference in temporal relations unlocks a distinction between spoken and signed languages that we will want to remember. If two words are simultaneously spoken, one contributes noise relative to the other. The sounds of language must occur one after the other if we are to hear and understand them. But when viewing a scene, we can grasp at once many of its features. When we describe the scene, we are forced to recite the features sequentially, but that is characteristic of our spoken language. In sign language more than one idea can be expressed at the same moment. We will find this characteristic aids in classifying sign communication and in understanding its impact on the development of visual-gestural languages as opposed to those that are sound based.

### *Attitudes toward Language*

Language is a very personal attribute. How we use language is taken as an index of our intelligence and clearly marks our social position. George

Bernard Shaw makes that point in his classic drama about language, *Pygmalion*. Early in the play, Professor Higgins points to Eliza Doolittle, standing in Covent Garden in her flower-girl rags, and says:

You see this creature with her Kerbstone English: the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days. Well, sir, in three months I could pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party. I could even get her a place as a lady's maid or a shop assistant, which requires better English.<sup>5</sup>

In his preface to the play Shaw comments, "Finally, and for the encouragement of people troubled with accents that cut them off from all high employment, I may add that the change wrought by Professor Higgins in the flower-girl is neither impossible nor uncommon."<sup>6</sup> Shaw cannot resist this added bolstering of his argument, nor would many knowledgeable persons disagree with his fundamental claim, if not his hyperbole, about the critical determination of social status by language.

In 1866 the Linguistic Society of Paris would not permit the presentation of papers that raised questions about the origin of language. To raise the issue at all was blasphemous. Language was the exclusive property of humans, the basis for our uniqueness. To question its origins was to imply that it might not have been handed down from above. Even now there are theorists who react emotionally to any questions about language existing in forms other than human. To them the very attribution of such a complex function to "lower" forms of life seems to demean our own. To readers who hold similarly exalted views of language, some of what follows could be upsetting.

Are we occasionally chauvinistic about our language? The present acceptance of English as essential to the study of most sciences reinforces such attitudes. The worldwide acceptance of English, however, is of recent origin. Until World War II German was accepted as the language of science and French the language of diplomacy. We should remind ourselves that in Shakespeare's time English was regarded as a "barbarous, vulgar, and rude tongue without logic."<sup>7</sup> It was considered unfit for scientific, let alone for polite, discourse. Four hundred years ago Sir Thomas More commented on the subject of the English language.

That our language is called barbarous is but a fantasy, for so is, as every learned man knoweth, every strange language to any other. And though they would call it barren of words, there is no doubt that it is plenteous enough to express our minds in anything whereof one man hath used to speak with another.<sup>8</sup>

*Thus Spake the Lord*

Writing in a sardonic vein, Flora Lewis, *New York Times* columnist (7 May 1982, p. A33), tells a joke to make a point about linguistic insularity.

Refusal to accept anyone else's language as worth knowing reflects the same narrow-gauge kind of head, the same stubborn ignorance, as that of the fundamentalist I heard about who denounced people speaking in other tongues, saying, "If English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it's good enough for them."

The story is apocryphal in both senses.

Governments have seen control of language as a means of dominating the citizenry. The idea is not in the least absurd. If all government is conducted in a language other than your own, then you do not have ready access to that government. If you cannot understand what is said about you in court, you cannot adequately answer your accusers. If you cannot read the placards, fill out the forms, and in other respects communicate with the government, then you are the government's vassal. You will not be able to advance your status in a country whose language you cannot use. Your livelihood, and possibly your life, will be in jeopardy should a language not known to you become the basis of commerce. In addition, think of what it means when the sovereign language, whatever it might be, is touted as a superior vehicle for thought. We shall see that this idea has continually been broached by adherents of particular cultures to denigrate those over whom they wish to impose their will.

Remember furthermore that wars have been fought over language. For example, in Belgium the Flemings and the Walloons have fought for nearly three centuries about whose language should prevail and now have only an uneasy truce. In 1980 the citizens of Quebec barely defeated a proposal to secede from Canada, a move some Quebecois believed necessary to protect their French language. Still, the decision not to secede did not stop fears of the disintegration of French culture in Quebec. To assist in protecting French as its dominant language, the provincial government enacted a law that required all signs to be printed in French only. Even bilingual signs became illegal. The Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the law violated freedom of speech, which includes the use of any language,

### *Dumping Mental Garbage*

A linguist strongly attacks earlier conceptions of the role of language in culture, especially its use as a tool of oppression by colonialists, as follows:

According to 19th-century racists, languages and people alike were ranged along a scale of being from the primitive Bushman with his clicks, grunts, and shortage of artifacts, to the modern Western European with his high pale brow and plethora of gadgets. That was when everyone, racist or anti-racist, did believe that Western Man was superior; the only argument was about how nasty this superiority permitted him to be toward “lesser” breeds. Now that we are rapidly disabusing ourselves of this kind of mental garbage, it becomes possible to uncouple language from “level of cultural attainment” and look at it developmentally without any pejorative implications.<sup>9</sup>

temporarily settling that dispute. Quebec’s attitude notwithstanding, Canada remains an officially bilingual country, with every federal document printed in both French and English.

So, at national levels and at personal levels decisions about language provoke controversies. No wonder then that discussions of it can stir strong emotions—emotions that sometimes pervert reason. You therefore need to approach what follows with an open mind. The conclusions to be drawn from revised views of our world may prove to be much more fruitful for you than any perspectives they might replace. And even if you make no conceptual reorganizations, you will likely enjoy meeting your deaf neighbors—in their language.

### What Lies Ahead in This Book

This book takes a not-too-technical look at sign languages. It is for all those who meet with deaf people, share homes with them, work alongside them, have them as students in class or as clients, friends, and customers. Increasingly, your chances of encountering deaf people grow. So do your chances of becoming deaf or hard of hearing. Furthermore, what follows should interest students of language and culture. In one way or another, all of us use our hands when we communicate.

Our focus will be on communication by deaf people, especially those



who live in the United States and Canada, though we will consider sign languages that exist in almost every country throughout the world. Today, most people have seen someone signing—on a bus, in a store, at public meetings, on television. Since Jimmy Carter's successful bid for the U. S. presidency in 1976, many politicians have employed interpreters to sign their public addresses for the benefit of deaf people in the audience. In the popular movie *Children of a Lesser God*, the heroine is deaf and signs her part. Sign language appears frequently on television. A whole generation of children has grown up watching Linda Bove sign on *Sesame Street*, and millions of television viewers have seen *Reasonable Doubt*, a series in which a deaf attorney uses ASL in the courtroom.

How did sign language become so popular? Why is there a sudden interest in it and why did interest emerge so slowly? When and where did sign languages originate? How did they develop? Are they easy or difficult to learn? Who teaches them and where? How are they used for day-to-day interactions among deaf people and between deaf and hearing individuals? Is there an international sign language? Are there other forms of signed communication, other ways to convey messages with one's hands alone?

Answering these questions will take us through art into science and back again, seeking to solve the mysteries of sign language. Some questions about sign language have no firm answers at present. Research in many aspects of sign language has begun only recently. But what has already been observed, studied, validated, and catalogued provides a thorough restructuring of some well-established beliefs about sign language and deaf people—and about language itself. Such cognitive restructuring forces a weakening, if not a complete rejection, of a few cherished ways of thinking—not only about our language, but about our culture. This survey of sign language will take us to the theater, to industry, into courtrooms, among educators and rehabilitators, and, most fascinating of all, into the lives of deaf people.

So much for what this book is about. What it is *not* is a sign glossary. It has a great deal to say about how to make oneself understood in sign language; it offers information about where to get sign language instruction and how to identify good teachers; it will help the reader sort through the recent plethora of sign dictionaries. But this book is not a dictionary, nor is it a lesson book. It introduces you to an intriguing language and to the people who use it and, if the book succeeds, it will open your mind to possibilities as yet unrealized for an ancient form of communication that has only recently been accorded its correct place in the linguistic spectrum.

### *Disciplines*

The study of sign language is not the sole province of linguists. Anthropologists, educators, neurologists, psychologists, sociologists, and others have begun to look at sign language to provide enlightenment on language and on human interactions. Ever since the revolution in physics, scientists have recognized the centrality of language to their activities. One of the major contributions of Einstein and the philosophers who interpreted his revolutionary thinking about physics was to explain how our definitions of research terms influence the results.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the newly aroused interest in sign language comes naturally to educators, scientists, and the general public. They have all recognized the centrality of language to our thinking.

Our treatment of the subject of sign language will try to avoid the jargon of the disciplines that have now embraced sign language—linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, education, rehabilitation, psychology, anthropology—and will try to find common paths through the academic maze. As we examine some of the technical terms used, we will assume that the reader is not acquainted with them, so each will be explained as it is introduced. What is more, we will attempt a comprehensive view of sign language, eschewing detail in favor of breadth. To compensate for the lessened detail, we include a sizable list of references from the growing literature to guide readers who wish to pursue their interests in further depth.<sup>11</sup>

### About the Authors

Because modern study of sign languages used by deaf people only began in the 1960s, and because much of what is written depends on informed opinion rather than systematic research, readers have a right to demand more than the usual knowledge about the authors of a book about sign. Our combined experience with and research on sign language exceeds 75 years, but we approach it from different perspectives.

For one of us signing is a way of life; he is deaf, and ASL is his language. The other author learned to sign in adulthood and can hear normally, and English is his language. Both of us have taught sign classes, done research on sign language, and written at some length about sign and about deaf people. Both hold doctorates in psychology, and both have had the honor of being chosen for the University of Alberta's David Peikoff Chair of Deafness Studies, one of only two such university chairs in the world.

While we have been involved with sign language for many years, we retain our fascination with it and our enthusiasm for passing along what we have learned about it and those who use it.

## Notes

1. For our definition of *deaf*, see chapter 7. Here we note only that by deaf we do not mean a complete inability to hear any sound—an extremely rare condition. Rather, deaf refers to the severely reduced ability to hear and understand speech. For communication deaf people are visually dependent. They may be able to hear some sounds, but what they hear is insufficiently clear for effective verbal communication.

2. Schein 1984.

3. Refer to definitions of *language* in dictionaries published prior to 1980; for example, “the expression or communication of thoughts and feelings by means of vocal sounds and combinations of such sounds, to which meaning is attributed; human speech” (*Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, 2d ed., 1970. New York: Simon & Schuster).

4. Aphasia is a condition in which ability to express language is lost due to disease of or injury to the brain.

5. Shaw 1912, 6.

6. Shaw 1912, p. vi.

7. Brennan & Hayhurst 1980, 234.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Bickerton 1981, 299.

10. For a discussion of this point, begin with Feigl and Brodbeck, 1953. The philosophers who pursued Einstein’s theories belonged to what became known as “the Wiener Kreis” (“the Vienna Circle”) after their habit of meeting in that capital’s coffeehouses for their debates.

11. If we had to select a name for the discipline devoted to the study of sign it would be *semiology*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, both distinguished lexicons, do not agree as to the meaning of this useful but seldom-used word; nor do they agree as to its spelling (*semeiology* in the former and *semiology* in the latter). *Oxford’s* first meaning for the word is “sign language.” *Webster’s* sole definition is “the science of signs in general.” They do agree on the Greek root, *semeion* (sign). It would appear that semiology could accommodate our interest in sign language as well as in sign codes, a distinction that, if not clear now, will become so in the chapters to follow. Semiology also seems to fit our concern with both the scientific and the cultural aspects of sign. It is offered here without foreboding but with some anticipation of minor controversy. If controversy arises, that will be to the good, for such debates typically stir increased attention to a subject.