

Introduction

Despite the presence of deaf people at all times and in all societies, a systematized linguistic, political, and theoretical reflection on deafness and deaf people began to emerge only in the mid-twentieth century. In shaping this project—which has changed both the history of humanity and humanity itself—the study of sign language has played a very significant role. Unlike the centuries-old tradition of the study of spoken language, the linguistic study of signed language is just about sixty years old; nevertheless, it has had a tremendous impact on linguistic theory. As the Deaf community strives to achieve its human rights in general and linguistic rights in particular, sign language studies have set off social and political reverberations among its members. In this introductory chapter I explore those effects.

THOUGHTS ON DEAFNESS, DEAF EDUCATION, AND SIGN LANGUAGE

Before 1970, particularly in India, “sign” and “sign language” referred to symbolic gestures used in the theater, dance, secret codes, court etiquette, and so on, as well as those used by deaf people. Although “almost any statement about signs, gestural communication and sign language of deaf people” (Miles 2001b, 3) is strongly debated by different interest groups, these views relate to deafness, deaf education, and signs used by deaf people rather than to linguistic studies.

However, as a result of modern linguistic study of various sign languages, the notion of Indian Sign Language (henceforth, ISL) came to the forefront. This very coinage led to a sense of community formation, solidarity, and linguistic empowerment, and it actuated cultural, political, educational, and artistic movement in India as well. Moreover, with their politicization, deaf people in India subjectively and for the first time confronted the centuries-old notions about themselves and their language and began to strive for their rights as Indian citizens.

DEAF COMMUNITY AND OTHER CONSTRUCTS

In the early 1960s William C. Stokoe (1919–2000) began looking at the structure and constituent parts of American Sign Language (ASL). His research culminated in a groundbreaking monograph, *Sign Language Structure: An Outline of the Visual Communication System of the American Deaf* (1960). In the monograph, Stokoe proposed that each sign had at least three independent parameters—handshape, location, and movement—that are produced simultaneously in various combinations to form signs.¹ He demonstrated that the parameters are not combined haphazardly but instead follow linguistic rules; moreover, the syntax was every bit as complex and complete as that of spoken language. His pioneering work provided a system for describing sign language for the first time in history.

For the next four decades, Stokoe and his deaf colleagues continued his research on ASL. He, along with Dorothy Casterline and Carl Croneberg, created *The Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles* (1965). In 1972 he founded a journal, *Sign Language Studies*, which later became a vital forum for the dissemination and discussion of sign language and Deaf studies. Coauthored by Stokoe, David Armstrong, and Sherman Wilcox, *Gesture and the Nature of Language* (1995) is still one of the most influential books on linguistic theory.

The significance of Stokoe’s work on sign language, however, has been far greater. For it not only gave birth to a new discipline—sign linguistics—but also marked the end of the glottocentric view of language. His argument that “a symbol system by means of which persons carry on all the activities of their ordinary lives is, and ought to be treated as, a language” (1960, 14) served to actuate cultural, political, educational and artistic movements in the United States (Sacks 1987, 148). Sign language was now accorded its deserved recognition as a natural human language; it was recognized as having a “natural” structure and organization; the only difference was that it is expressed in a different modality. This in turn fueled a whole host of new questions about the phylogenesis of human language.

As an outcome of Stokoe’s monograph, a sense of linguistic empowerment among deaf people generated a faith in being “different,” which consequently led to the development of a new idiom, that of deafness as a “culture.” However, this construction of deafness as culture is not sufficient to define its membership. Woodward (1975) established the convention of

using an uppercase and lowercase distinction between “Deaf” and “deaf,” where the former refers to people who use sign language as their primary language, identify themselves as members of the Deaf community, and are culturally Deaf; the latter are those who are audiotically deaf and may or not sign. Padden (1980) also distinguishes between Deaf culture and Deaf community. Deaf and hearing people who work to achieve certain goals belong to the latter, and Deaf members of that group are also a part of Deaf culture. Similarly, Napier (2002) argues for the difference between “hearing” and “Hearing” to refer to those who are consumed by the hearing culture and are naïve about the Deaf community and to those hearing people who have internalized Deaf culture, respectively.

The Deaf community is not an ethnic or a religious community with clear-cut boundaries that demarcate its membership according to color, practices and beliefs. Rather, to be a member of the community is to make an individual choice. In other words, the Deaf community is an egalitarian, open-ended group whose membership involves not only audiological deafness but also several factors other than the primordial associations that operate within the hearing society. However, a number of subcommunities are in fact based on primordial factors such as religion, color, ethnicity, and region. The following observations by Baker-Shenk and Cokely (1980, 56) indicate various avenues for membership in the Deaf community:

1. *Audiological*: The audiological avenue does not define membership solely. A large number of deaf and hard of hearing people do not sign for a variety of reasons, and they do not observe Deaf culture and values. On the other hand, a number of hearing people born of deaf parents, or who know sign language, or are activists share the sign language, culture, and values of the Deaf community.
2. *Social*: The social factor is an important criterion in defining membership. It is essential to share and participate in all of the community’s social functions and to have a cordial relationship with the other members of the community.
3. *Linguistic*: Since the Deaf community is primarily defined by the use of sign language, membership depends upon a high level of fluency.
4. *Political*: The ability to advocate for issues that directly affect the Deaf community is another important factor in membership.

Perhaps most important of all is one's identification as a member of the community and one's acceptance by the other members of the community. This is called *attitudinal deafness* (ibid., 55). Thus, attitudinal deafness is the foundation for all such considerations and entails an understanding of, acceptance of, and identification with the culture of Deaf people.

The one criterion that remains constant throughout the different models of Deaf community membership (see Woll and Ladd [2003] for an overview of the different models of Deaf communities) is the knowledge of sign language. It has been the genesis of the formation of the community and its culture, and it shapes the identities of its members. Thus, it is through sign language that deaf people construct their "Deaf world view" and make sense of the world around them (Reagan 1995, 247).

Contemporary constructs of deafness are also defined by two opposing attitudes—one of deafness as a disability versus one of deaf people as a linguistic minority. These contemporary discourses are rooted in the activism and experiences of deaf people. Both constructs are nurtured by the campaign for equality and full participation in all spheres of social life and human rights, and both are given political meaning and power by personal biographies that detail the experience of being deaf in a hearing world.

The physiological (medical) model of disability, based as it is on the characteristics of an able body and its physical and/or cognitive functioning, views persons with an impairment as "abnormal," "disabled," and ultimately "handicapped" in fulfilling social roles.² In other words, deafness is categorized as a handicap. The emergence of this view gave rise to professional groups whose livelihoods and existence depend on bestowing "benevolence on *deaf* people defined as in need" (Gusfield 1989, 432; italics mine). Therefore, deafness becomes a "need" for intervention. Though the technology and the level of sophistication have changed in the decades that have followed, the core idea has remained the same: The role of such intervention is to make deaf people appear to be hearing. This amounts to a rejection of sign language in favor of spoken language and the adoption of lipreading as a sign of normalization (see Lane 1995, 2002).

The sociocultural model, on the other hand, views disability as a product of complex social structures and processes rather than as the simple and inevitable result of individual differences or biology. It suggests that it is not impairment in itself that causes disability, but the way in which

societies fail to accommodate natural aspects of difference between people. Material and cultural forces play a significant role in creating the collective social experience of disability (Oliver 1990). Disability, therefore, is caused by social, structural forces such as industrial capitalism (Finkelstein 1980), as well as by cultural forces and ideas (Shakespeare 1997) that shape disability labels and social roles.

Both models of disability accept a sense of loss, which is true among other interested groups, such as persons with visual or other physical challenges, and seek social integration with the hearing world through care, service, and assistance. However, the question of loss is contested in the case of deafness: Whereas late deafness and moderate impairment are associated with loss (hence supporting the disability construction), the Deaf community has argued that prelingual deafness is not so easily conceived of as such.³ The Deaf community views deafness not as a loss but as a gain, in terms of culture, of language, and of values. This is demonstrated in its members' resistance to the construct of a category of "hearing impaired" to include deaf and hard of hearing persons, as it overlooks the linguistic and cultural difference between Deaf and the hard of hearing persons. Individuals who are Deaf/deaf, unlike others who share the hearing culture, experience a different kind of exclusion related to language and culture (Thomas 2002). As Deaf/deaf people cherish their unique identity and seek an honorable integration into the larger social fabric in a manner that upholds the difference of their culture and language, they contest a characterization that suggests they have an impairment and/or a disability.

Such beliefs further establish deafness as a culture that disregards the disabled/nondisabled distinction and does not seek to discipline disability. In opposition to the disability construct, and with the arguments put forward for deafness as a culture, D/deaf people construct an argument in favor of linguistic minority status. Besides the demographic facts, there are several reasons to identify and validate D/deaf people as a minority vis-à-vis the hearing population. It is an acknowledged fact that, in all societies, deaf people have been subject to oppression or discrimination by hearing people with respect to their values, culture, and language. In developing societies, this still continues, and the majority of deaf children do not have access to education. In most cases, the educational ideology pursued for education for deaf persons runs contrary to their right to receive education in their mother tongue of sign language. Inasmuch as their sign language has been subject to oppression and their culture

and values have been suppressed, they qualify as a linguistic minority (Andersson 1994; Lane 1995).

Among the scholars who seek a solution in Sen's capability approach (for details see Sen 1992), which views disability as one aspect of human heterogeneity rather than as an abnormality, Terzi (2004) introduces the concept of "alternative functioning or of doing the same thing in different ways." She cites an example from Martha's Vineyard and argues that the use of sign language by deaf and hearing Vineyarders expanded the capabilities of deaf people. Under such a conceptualization, however, signing is emphasized as an alternative way of functioning rather than the most valued of all the other functionings of the signers. In other words, it still reiterates the audist's view and fails to accommodate sign language within the realm of natural human languages.

SIGN AND POWER: SIGN LANGUAGE IS A LINGUISTIC HUMAN RIGHT

It was necessary to politicize D/deaf people to ensure their participation in the social process. However, it is also a reality that dominant sociopolitical and cultural notions of disability marginalize deaf people, and mere reservations cannot result in a positive change, just as caste discrimination is prevalent despite its prohibition under law in India. For social engineering to be a success, we must recognize the unequal power relations between deaf people and hearing people with regard to the former's use of sign language.

Sign language is subject to unique sociolinguistic factors because membership in a language community is usually not inherited from one's immediate environment. Only a minority of deaf children have deaf parents; the majority are in fact born to hearing parents. Since these parents use spoken language, their deaf child can neither hear nor use it with any facility. In such cases, despite their love and sympathy for the child, communication with the child is limited, often neglected, and the deaf children express themselves through idiosyncratic home signs. Since deaf signers have an individual history of sign language acquisition, depending on the onset of their social contact with other signers through schools and clubs for deaf persons, there exists a continuum of sign use in terms of both lexis and structure even within the same generation.

Martha's Vineyard, an island off the coast of Massachusetts, had a high rate of deafness due to endogamous community practices that resulted in both deaf and hearing siblings in a family. As a result of the high percentage of deaf people on the island, both the deaf and the hearing Vineyarders used to sign what later came to be known as Martha's Vineyard Sign Language, a village sign language. In Martha's Vineyard, the equal power relations in all facets of social, economic, and political life between deaf and hearing residents enabled the development and vitality of this context-independent language from the early eighteenth century to its extinction in 1952. The Vineyarders' sign language became the one of the sources of ASL (Groce 1985).

Sacks (1990) mentions five deaf Mexican siblings who used elaborate home signs, but, in the absence of the right social setting, they neither developed a stable phrase structure nor systematized the meaning of their gestures. In Noya (Guatemala) and on Grand Cayman Island and Providence Island, social marginalization inhibited language formation. As a result, the indigenous sign systems remained static and context dependent, without syntactic structure, for many generations (Ragir 2002). These stories show that merely using signs and/or having a group of signers is not sufficient for the development of sign language.

On the other hand, in Nicaragua in the late 1970s, a school for deaf children provided fertile ground for the development of Nicaraguan Sign Language from the mutually unintelligible, context-dependent home signs (Senghas 1995). Based on her experience with the Nicaraguan Sign Language Project, Kegl et al. (1999) proposes that the critical number of children required to generate a language is about ten, and Ragir (2002) adds that historical continuity is also essential. When the home sign users come together in schools and clubs for deaf persons and start sharing each other's signs, aspirations to social cohesion lead to the formation of a signing system that utilizes the home signs of the signers as its substrate and tends to be distinct from that of the previous users. With successive generations of users, the signing system becomes more stable and developed and is acquired by the signers natively. Thus, it becomes a new sign language (Senghas 1995). It is in these venues that most personal and social information sharing occurs, and close relationships are established. These focal points of the Deaf community are where deaf individuals develop a sense of self that is different from the image they encounter in the hearing world, where they identify as a cultural/linguistic minority.

The acceptance and the use of sign language thus ensure the participation of the community in social processes. For deaf people, its recognition is fundamental to a guarantee of equality, community, and freedom. In other words, sign language is a *linguistic human right*, one that is essential for the sustenance of a dignified life.

Linguistic human rights are implied at two levels: the individual and the collective. Individuals' rights include having an identification with their mother tongue and having that identification respected by others. It necessarily entails the right to learn and to use their mother tongue. Collective rights are the rights of minority groups to exist (i.e., the right to be different). They include the right to enjoy and develop their language, to establish educational institutions, and to have control over the curricula and medium of instruction. It also involves representation in the political affairs of the state, as well as the autonomy to administer matters internal to the groups, at least in the fields of education, religion, culture, information, and social affairs. Any restriction on these rights is considered an infringement of fundamental linguistic human rights.

The linguistic rights of deaf persons are violated at both levels. In some deaf education programs throughout the world, sign language is forbidden, and deaf children are subjected to various methods intended to make them acquire spoken language. This approach is called oralism. Some schools employ signing methods that create manual codes that represent lexical items and the structure of oral language. Such institutional efforts are in violation of Articles 17, 19, 29, 30, and 40 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Even in cases where education is imparted to deaf people in oral and/or manual modes other than sign language, this linguistic human right is violated inasmuch as it subordinates their natural first language, the language of their self-expression. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), therefore, identifies oralism in formal education as an instance of linguistic genocide. At the collective level, deaf persons constitute a minority community. Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1994, 107) define a minority as follows:

A group which is smaller in number than the rest of the population of a State, whose members have ethnical, religious or linguistic features different from those of the rest of the population, and are guided, if only implicitly, by the will to safeguard their culture, traditions, religion or language. Any group coming within the terms of this definition

shall be treated as an ethnic, religious or linguistic minority. To belong to a minority shall be a matter of individual choice.

Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights has far-reaching significance for granting linguistic rights to deaf people, in that it requires countries to minimally recognize deaf persons as a (linguistic) minority, to take steps to protect them against discrimination, and to guarantee them positive language rights.

Despite all of these formulations, however, sign language continues to be suppressed, in violation of the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. This denial results in a loss not only for deaf individuals and their community but also for the whole society, given that the guarantee of linguistic rights also promotes linguistic and cultural diversity.

In *The Ecology of Language*, Einar Haugen (1972, 325) defines the relationship between language and ecology as “the study of interactions between any given language and its environment.” Today, ecological linguistics argues that “empowering languages and making them more competitive by giving them grammars, lexica, writing systems, and school syllabi is a recipe that ignores a basic ecological fact: *what supports one language may not support another*. Each language requires its own ecological system” (Mühlhäusler 2002, 376; italics mine).

Under this conceptualization, an evaluation of sign language provides interesting insights. If one were to carry out a linguistic impact assessment (the analogy to an environmental impact assessment) of sign language, one would discover that sign language is an isolate, the property of only monolinguals in a multilingual world. Therefore, the first and foremost issue that needs to be addressed is the creation of ecological conditions for the societal vitalization of sign language (*ibid.*, 38). The issue here thus is not the *preservation* of a linguistic ecology, but rather the *promotion* of one.

Although ecological linguistics considers “language” that is associated with nation-states and sustained by political entities, educational institutions, information technology, and so on as a cultural artifact (Haugen 1972), it is imperative for a national network of signers to be formed for the development of Deaf communities and sign language, as this in turn will sustain sign language in other aspects of policy, education, diversity, linguistic rights, and so on. Such an effort must take place in the form

of a bicultural program in sign language and speech that brings deaf people and hearing people together yet allows them to be different. Sign language thus needs affirmative action, by which an artificial ecology is constructed wherein sign language can initially flourish so that it may later be assimilated into a natural linguistic ecology.

THE INDIAN D/DEAF COMMUNITY

In 2001 the deaf population in India was estimated at 14 million,⁴ thereby comprising 1.4 percent of the total Indian population.⁵ It would not be incorrect to say that most of the deaf population, as well as those around them, perceive deafness as a handicap and conceive of themselves as having a disability and of hearing people as “normal.” This identity is, however, governed by the structural and cultural forces acting on the deaf population. However, with the increasing politicization of its members, such constructions are now being challenged. The educated members of the community identify themselves as “Deaf,” a linguistic minority. With a greater involvement with other Deaf communities around the world through the Internet, educated constituents have shaped the Indian Deaf community’s desire for dignity, equality, and justice.

In India, the provisions for deaf persons provided under the Disability Act have failed, as is painfully evident, to ensure their empowerment. The same applies to the claimed minority status (as is evident in the case of the minorities in India). In India, the National Commission for Linguistic Minorities, Ministry of Minority Affairs, identifies linguistic minorities as “any group of people whose mother tongue is different from the principal language of the state.”⁶ This criterion encompasses sign language users in India. However, deaf people have not yet gleaned any benefit from this provision. As a matter of fact, D/deaf people’s lack of access to resources has resulted in their inability to build alliances with other groups who experience social discrimination and has in fact become an obstacle in ensuring their participation in the social process.

On the other hand, the most marginalized group of lower castes in the Hindu caste hierarchy, called *dalits*, receive the benefits of the caste-based reservation system, an affirmative-action measure practiced in India. If we draw a parallel based on the social discrimination against the *dalits*, whose growing participation in the social process has been significantly ensured by the reservation policy, it becomes clear that it is imperative to