

“Deaf People Can Beat Up Hearing People”

There is a great deal to be seen in the tilt of a hat on a man.

—John Steinbeck, *The Pearl*

ONE EVENING late in the summer of 1998, I was at home talking to my brother on the telephone when the doorbell rang. Asking my brother to hold on for a moment, I answered the door to find my friend Andrew.¹ His visit that evening was unexpected, but not unusual. We first met six years earlier when he moved to Utah to attend college. I remember being impressed at the time by his easygoing nature, his intelligence, and his conspicuously native American Sign Language (ASL). Andrew, like his parents, is Deaf.²

After inviting Andrew in, I explained that I was on the phone and would just be another minute. I led him to my makeshift office where he waited while I excused myself from my call and hung up. I knew that Deaf cultural norms required me to provide some information about the call, so I briefly summarized it for him. As I did, I registered confusion on Andrew's face. Thinking that perhaps he had misunderstood my explanation, I restated my summation, to which Andrew nodded understanding. I assumed that this was the end of it.

Over the next hour, we discussed syllabus content for a Deaf culture class Andrew was preparing—the reason for his visit—and chatted about unrelated but mutually interesting topics. When it came time for Andrew to leave, I accompanied him to the door, where he hesitated and said with obvious reticence that he needed to ask me something. This sudden change in tone simultaneously piqued my curiosity and worried

me. Andrew proceeded to tell me that he was really confused by my speaking on the telephone. He asked, “Are you really hard of hearing?”

Now I was confused. I couldn’t imagine why speaking into a telephone would make Andrew think I was hard of hearing. That’s what hearing people do. Then he signed, “I always thought you were Deaf. Are you really just hard of hearing?” The source of his confusion crashed on me: Andrew wasn’t trying to figure out if I was hearing or hard of hearing. He had believed I was Deaf!

“I’m hearing,” I said, and I saw Andrew’s confusion turn to mystification.

People with whom I have associated briefly have mistaken me for a Deaf person a number of times, but this was different because Andrew and I had known each other for years. Although we didn’t always live in the same place, the possibility that Andrew might not know I was hearing seemed inconceivable. Certainly I had introduced myself as hearing when we first met. And, just as certainly, at some point Andrew must have seen me interpreting or performing some other hearing activity. Apparently, however, he had forgotten, leaving us both with the feeling that the ground beneath us had just turned soft.

We stood there in silence for a minute, and I considered how this new information might affect our relationship. Finally, not knowing what else to do, we laughed about it, and Andrew told me I should take it as a compliment, which I did. But even as we laughed, I could see on his face that he was still trying to reconcile this new information with his previous belief. The pieces were suddenly out of place. I was no longer who he thought I was, and I worried that he might think I had been pretending to be Deaf, an obvious and egregious breach of etiquette.

When Andrew left, I told my wife, Julie, who also is Deaf, what had happened.³ She, too, was stunned—not that someone might assume that I was Deaf, because, she said, my signing “looks Deaf” and I am careful to behave in culturally appropriate ways around Deaf people. She was shocked that Andrew in particular might not know I was hearing because we had known each other for so long. Certainly this essential fact about me was out in the open.



AT THIS point, I ask the readers’ forgiveness for my beginning this work with a personal narrative, particularly one that appears to tout my

own skills. This book isn't about me, but for some very specific reasons having to do with the history of anthropological work and the relations between Deaf and hearing people, I do think it is important that you know something about me. Even so, this is not the primary reason for my narrative. My purpose for sharing this story is to give a concrete example of the uncertain nature of identities and how the ideas we have about others govern much of our interactions with them. The relationships among the discourse circulating in the DEAF-WORLD and individual identities of d/Deaf people is of intense interest to me, and it is these relationships—as they exist in one small corner of the DEAF-WORLD—that are the focus of this book.⁴

The chapters that follow address two key questions:

1. What role does discourse play in the construction of Deaf identities?
2. By what means do ideas about language in the community I have studied affect the discourse that shapes identities?

I conducted my research in Utah Valley (roughly Utah County, Utah). My theoretical training in linguistic anthropology led me to search for clues to these questions in the contextually situated signed discourse that circulates within that area's community. Rather than inviting people into a lab, I needed to go where they went and do what they did as best as I could. Participant observation is an established methodology in anthropology, and I used it to conduct my fieldwork for about 18 months in the early 2000s. I attended both formal and informal activities, and I often carried a palm-sized video camera to record everything, from greetings to speeches. Not surprisingly, my camera sometimes affected behavior, but people eventually grew used to (and bored with) the novelty of having me record everything. For the most part, life seemed to go on in much the same way as before my fieldwork began. The conversations and interactions I recorded are the basis for this research, and beginning in Chapter 3, I present my analysis of them as clues to answering my two guiding questions. I also kept detailed field notes and conducted some 30 formal interviews with community members to gain insight into the significance of the primary data. All of this was in addition to the hundreds of informal interactions and discussions I engaged in during my time in Utah Valley.

Using these data, I show here that among the Deaf people I studied in Utah there exists a set of linguistic ideologies that valorizes some forms

of language over others. The linguistic ideology circulating within the community associates certain forms of signed language with DEAF-WORLD membership, and the effective use of these forms serves to establish a culturally Deaf identity among the participants. Beyond this connection, when other forms of signed language are used in combination, this is closely associated with an elevated status within the DEAF-WORLD. These sign language forms are associated with traditional storytelling practices within the community and are characterized by an ASL style that most fully exploits signing's three-dimensional medium, the signing space.⁵ I will also demonstrate that there is a relationship between individual claims to Deaf identities and the formation and maintenance of the DEAF-WORLD itself. The replication of language forms and discourse practices that sufficiently match past performances generates a sense of continuity between past and present.

MY INTRODUCTION TO THE DEAF-WORLD

To begin addressing the questions that guide this book, let's return to the topic of my own identity. I was born hearing and had no contact with culturally Deaf people until I was nineteen years old. Sure, I had viewed interpreters on television, and probably had seen Deaf people in person at some point (though I don't recall specific instances). I knew that some people signed, although the hard of hearing people in my world (including most everyone over the age of sixty on my dad's side of the family) just talked really loud, misunderstanding much of what was said. For the most part, signing Deaf people just weren't on my radar.

When I was eighteen, I came home for a weekend from my freshman year of college. My younger sister and older brother told me they had signed up for a community education course in "sign language" taught by a Deaf man who lived in my hometown of Roosevelt in rural Northeastern Utah. I was surprised to learn that there were any Deaf people in the area. My mom told me there were actually several and that they even had a small group who met together with one of the local Mormon congregations. This raised my curiosity, and I asked my sister how to sign my name. When she fingerspelled B-R-Y-A-N, I got lost in her halting movements. She had only been to one or two classes, after all. What I remember most from this exchange was my surprise that my sister spelled out my name rather than producing some single sign that

would be *Bryan*. Even so, it wasn't something I spent more than a few minutes thinking about.

The next summer I began my service as a missionary for the LDS (Latter Day Saints) church. I was assigned to Oakland, California, and while other missionaries in the area were working with more than a dozen language groups, I only had to communicate in my native English, which in retrospect still needed plenty of work. We had one day a week, called preparation or P-day, to take care of personal errands like shopping and laundry. Being nineteen-year-olds, we did our best to complete those activities as fast as possible so that we could have free time before returning to our responsibilities at five p.m. On the first P-day of my mission, about twenty missionaries assigned to the area got together to play flag football. I was surprised when two of them were signing. One of them was Deaf, Elder Olsen, a six-foot-10-inch-tall former college basketball player, and his assigned companion, a hearing guy I'll call Elder Brown. I was pretty fascinated with their signing. More truthfully, I was amazed that they could make any kind of sense out of it. I couldn't even tell where one sign ended and the next began. This strong sense of wonderment has, sadly, faded over the years. Now I find myself assuming that signed conversations are transparent to everyone, although I see every day that they aren't.

On that first meeting, I asked the hearing Elder Brown how to sign, “Have a nice day.” He rehearsed it with me until I could approach Elder Olsen and spring it on him. Elder Olsen graciously smiled and repeated the sentiment back—very slowly. From that moment on I continually pestered Elder Brown for phrases, most of which I put to use in our occasional basketball games. I focused on really important things like, “That's a foul, you big oaf!” Given the 100-pound difference in our size, I'm grateful Elder Olsen understood it to be good-natured ribbing.

Soon thereafter, several of us began attending a basic sign language class that Elders Olsen and Brown taught on Tuesday evenings. I would practice with my companion during the week; we spelled out most things, but we did try to center our discussion on things related to our limited vocabulary. It seemed to be an endless process of learning words that I didn't know how to sign, and this drove my need for new vocabulary.

One P-day I wanted to tease Elder Olsen by telling him, “You are ugly,” so I asked Elder Brown, “What's the sign for *are*?” I thought it a simple question, but Elder Brown's answer has impacted virtually every

aspect of my life—from my professional career to my choice of a spouse. His answer was this: “You don’t.”

Up until that point I had conceived of sign language as a system of gestures used to represent English. In this respect I was like billions of other hearing people. Elder Brown explained that American Sign Language was a completely different language from English and that while it could express the concept of someone being ugly in ASL, it did so without the *be* verbs that English used. He told me that it wasn’t a matter of “leaving the *be* verbs out”—they just didn’t exist in ASL. Suddenly it was as though a curtain that had encircled me for my entire life was lifted and new vistas hitherto never imagined abruptly came into view. This possibility that ASL and English had different grammatical structures and that ASL could possibly get by without this little verb that anchors so many English sentences ignited a fire of curiosity. My requests for new vocabulary now turned to questions about the structure of ASL, about how or whether Deaf people would say one thing or another, and about whether Deaf people “miss” sound the way hearing people assume they do or whether it just didn’t exist, like the *be* verbs.

For the next three months I continued to attend the small community classes Elders Olsen and Brown taught and to practice my signing whenever I could, but then I was reassigned to Fremont, some 40 minutes away. When I arrived at my new posting, I found that there had been two Deaf program missionaries in that area until a month before I arrived but that they had both been transferred to other states. One month later, two new Deaf program missionaries arrived, again one Deaf and one hearing. I broke out my limited ASL and enjoyed the sense of wonder in communicating with someone in something other than English, a wonder amplified by doing it in silence. I worked hard to learn as much as I could. I bought an ASL book and memorized hundreds of words over the next few weeks. Usually the Deaf program missionaries couldn’t understand my new signs because my interpretation of the two-dimensional drawings in the book didn’t often resemble anything in ASL, but they were patient with me, probably because I was trying and because my lousy sign production was good entertainment.

Eventually those two missionaries sent word through the mission leaders that I was picking up the language quickly and suggested that maybe I should be reassigned to work in the Deaf program. Five months later I was transferred to Seattle, Washington, where I spent the next sixteen

months. During that time I had only Deaf companions. I thought my signing was getting pretty good in California, but when it is the only means you have to communicate with a person with whom you spend every minute of every day, your limitations become magnified. Despite the frustration and doubts, each time I met Deaf people it seemed like a peek into a strange and secret world.

It was through these interactions that I experienced what H-Dirksen Bauman described as “becoming hearing” (Bauman 2009). My daily interactions with Deaf people brought into focus my own ethnocentrism; I was a fish out of water, and for the first time I began to see the qualities of that water, while simultaneously experiencing a new world. On one memorable day, I recall sitting in a small apartment with my Deaf companion and a Deaf teenager of about sixteen. This teen caught me off-guard when he remarked that being Deaf was an advantage because Deaf people could beat up hearing people as their signing constantly exercised their arms. It was an expression of “Deaf Gain” before Bauman and Murray pointed out that there was such a thing (2009), and this claim struck me in a couple of ways. First, while I doubted whether the amount of exercise signing affords would have any meaningful advantage in a fight, my Deaf companion seemed to be in complete agreement. More significant, in retrospect, was my own response. It didn’t occur to me at the time to think that this might be a ridiculous statement or something I could chalk up to teenage bravado or even some kind of Deaf naïveté. Rather, I distinctly recall wondering, “Interesting! I would never have considered that. I wonder what else Deaf people see that I haven’t thought of before.” Some basic form of that question has driven much of my life since that time. After I completed my missionary service, I became certified as an interpreter (although I haven’t interpreted professionally in a couple of decades), married a Deaf woman, began teaching ASL classes, and earned graduate degrees in linguistics and linguistic anthropology. And now I’m writing this book.

Telling you about me is an attempt to answer calls for a clear view of the information filter that is the researcher. Over the past several decades, ethnographers have taken a good deal of criticism for representing people against a backdrop of an ever-present, all-knowing ethnographic voice—one that is disembodied and never seen.

My personal disclosure also addresses a problem that has plagued Deaf people for hundreds of years. Deaf people’s history is replete

with hearing people's claims to expertise in the field of deafness, and those same people have held power over Deaf lives, often to devastating results, leaving deaf children without a language. Many of these "authorities" have had precious little contact with Deaf adults, and all too often, they have exhibited a blatant disregard for the ideas, opinions, and wishes of Deaf people (Padden and Humphries 2006; Lane 1984a). As a result, some Deaf people—notably the late Dr. Yerker Andersson, former chair of the Deaf Studies Department at Gallaudet University and former president of the World Federation of the Deaf—have called for researchers, analysts, and commentators on things deaf related to be explicit about their backgrounds (Lane 1993). I think this is a good thing. While I believe that anyone has the right to describe a people and that descriptions should be judged on their accuracy and insightfulness rather than by who offers them, the historical context Deaf people live in makes the need for transparency real.

My opening narrative is a step in that direction; it reveals important information about me and about my relationship to Deaf people. From it, you have likely surmised that I am hearing, I am married to a Deaf woman, I have Deaf acquaintances and close friends, and I have used ASL for a number of years. It also shows that I possess knowledge or experience that a Deaf man would think helpful in the preparation of a syllabus in a Deaf culture course, and my ASL skills and cultural behaviors are honed sufficiently to have inadvertently misled a culturally Deaf friend of several years into thinking that I am Deaf.

I have noted that my opening exemplifies a central concern of this book: the pliable nature of identities and the ways individuals interpret actions, including language use, as markers of identities. My account portrays me in a favorable light (with the notable exception that perhaps I have come away looking a little surer of myself than I ought to be) within a context where issues of researchers' identities are important. Erving Goffman (1967a) famously calls this favorable portrayal "face" and observes that we pay a great deal of attention to maintaining a positive face. Hill and Zepeda (1992) note that most people try to present a "best identity" for themselves unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise, such as discouraging the attentions of an unwanted suitor, for example. The account presents me as a hearing person who moves easily between the hearing world and the DEAF-WORLD. The narrative makes me something of an insider—at least from an outsider's point of view—and lends me

credibility as someone who might legitimately know something about Deaf people and their ways. This illustrates a central point of this work: people *negotiate* identities in the context and flow of daily interaction. They either display or conceal certain aspects of their experiences, knowledge, abilities, and attitudes to reflect or suggest certain realities.

But this is a two-way street. People not only project images of themselves, they also make judgments about others based on “clues” that they believe reflect others’ identities. As Ben Bahan points out in reference to the baggage packed into speech,

Even a person’s size, height, weight, age, race, gender, and sexual orientation may be determined, along with the speaker’s intelligence level, education, societal class, quality of employment and much more—all from a spoken word. (2014, 247)

Finally, and this is important, each person involved in a given interaction may see themselves and others differently from the way others do. This is because each person sees different parts of an interaction as clues, and each interprets the clues differently. In short, while people usually want to make themselves look good, it doesn’t always work out because the sending and receiving of signals about our identities are extremely complex.

As a result, each reader might interpret my opening story as indicating a variety of traits about me. One trait that I intend to suggest is a kind of “insider status” in the DEAF-WORLD. That kind of status lends me credibility as a researcher and a writer about the ways Deaf people interpret each other’s actions. But the story also obscures other, less favorable realities. For example, a close and thorough study of my ASL would indicate differences between it and that of native signers, and my experiences as a hearing person ultimately assure a view of the world that differs significantly from Deaf people’s views. No matter how much experience I gather living among Deaf people, I will always lack the experience of *living* Deaf, and I am constantly aware of the differences in my ASL and that of Deaf people’s.

In truth, my identity, like any other, is neither stable nor widely agreed upon. Some Deaf people might legitimately point out things about me or my behavior (including my signing) that indicate that I am hearing. Similarly, Deaf people’s identities are similarly complex and dynamic. Whether Deaf or hearing, all people construct and interpret identities

through the intercourse of daily life. This book assumes a perspective that places significant weight on language as the medium through which identity negotiations occur. This is not to say that identity negotiations are always recognized as the “subject matter” of discourse. As we will see in subsequent chapters, people do sometimes talk directly about identities, but *what* we say (i.e., the denotative dimension of discourse) is not always as important as *how* we say it (Hoza 2007).