

Book Review

Title: *The Study of Signed Languages, Essays in Honor of William C. Stokoe*

Editor: David F. Armstrong, Michael A. Karchmer, & John Vickrey Van Cleve

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Reviewer: Sally Y. Nhomi

During the 1950s, William Stokoe convinced sceptical language scholars that signed language could have all of the complexity, structure, precision and expressiveness of any spoken language, established sign language as a subject worthy of scholarship, and helped legitimize the teaching of sign language to deaf children. Appropriately, this volume offers eclectic examples of the ways with which signed languages might be studied, and a variety of reasons *why* signed languages should be studied. It should appeal to anyone with general interests in language studies, sociology and/or cultural studies, as well as to researchers of signed languages or Deaf culture.

Included are historical and theoretical perspectives: Douglas Baynton describes social trends with which respect for signed languages varied in the U.S. during the 1800s. Roger Fouts and Gabriel Waters, Adam Kendon, Scott Liddell and Sherman Wilcox critique academic prejudices which have inhibited research on signed languages, such as biases in language origin theories and tendencies for “language” to be conceptualized as something spoken and heard. Frank Wilson shares the theory that human development of the ability to manipulate hands with skill enabled new forms of interpersonal cooperation, and suggests that gestures accompanied the earliest forms of human language.

Other essays address issues of diversity: Ceil Lucas, Robert Bayley, Mary Rose and Alyssa Wulf describe how age, ethnicity, gender, religion, community membership and educational and professional status can affect how an individual uses Sign Language, and, in turn, shape the individual’s stature within the community of Sign Language users. For example, graduates of Gallaudet are said to use “elite” signs that are often unknown outside Gallaudet. From a different vantage point but drawing similar conclusions, Glenn Anderson describes the need for increasing respect for the linguistic integrity of the sign language used in Black Deaf communities. Britta Hansen details how Danish deaf children in isolated communities require bilingual mastery of sign language and literacy skills. The potential benefits of teaching sign language to non-deaf children are also explored: John Bonvillian reports on trials involving children with autistic disorders. Olga Capirci, Cristina Caselli, Jana Iverson, Elena Pizzuto and Virginia Volterra find that teaching manual gestures and spoken words simultaneously can enhance language development in early childhood.

Carol Padden and Jennifer Rayman close the book with a call for continued research on American Sign Language (ASL) toward perpetuating its heritage, pondering how to do this while allowing for diversity, growth and change. That questions which are universal among custodians

of languages are being raised with regard to ASL indicates considerable progress since Stokoe's day. I think he would be pleased.