

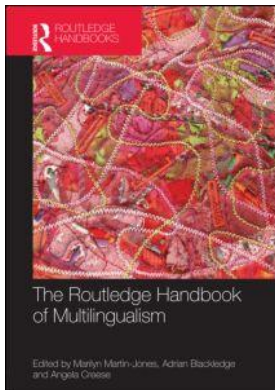
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Sign language and the politics of deafness

Bencie Woll and Robert Adam

Introduction

In the context of Western society, the existence of the deaf community, deaf people's social identity, and the experience of deafhood (Ladd 2002) are the consequences of their experiences in the hearing world, not just as a result of exclusion but in equal part stemming from a desire to create structures alternative to those of hearing society. To be deaf is to have a hearing loss; to be deaf is to belong to a community with its own language and culture. Deaf communities parallel other minority linguistic communities in terms of linguistic and cultural oppression; by its very virtue of being a minority culture, the deaf community and its culture are oppressed by the majority culture (*ibid.*). In the deaf community the problems of communication and interaction with non-signing, hearing people are avoided. Through interaction with other deaf people, the individual is able to develop an awareness and acceptance of self. Through participation in the various organizations that make up the community, individuals are able to acquire a sense of self-esteem, which may be impossible to develop within the hearing world.

The deaf community in this sense represents a most complex response to the threat posed by a hearing and speaking majority society and the difficulties of communication that the deaf person experiences in the wider community. In this chapter we will discuss the different types of deaf communities that have emerged, their languages and culture. Deaf culture comprises a range of activities that are sufficiently powerful to nullify the negative experiences of daily life and enable deaf people to develop an acceptance and celebration of both the individual and collective deaf self. By sealing off those aspects of their lives that really matter, deaf people have made the existence of a positive deaf identity possible.

On a global level, the World Federation of the deaf released a survey report 'Deaf People and Human Rights' (Haualand and Allen 2009) that found that most deaf people did not have basic human rights; 19 countries do not recognize deaf people as equal citizens; and only 44 countries have legal recognition of sign language. Of equal concern is the very small number of countries (23) that provide bilingual education to deaf children in both sign language and spoken/written language. This chapter will illustrate the situation of sign language communities around the world in the light of political and linguistic policies.

The deaf community

Sign language

There are numerous studies that explore deaf identities and describe how deaf people create communities based on three factors: communication, deafness and mutual support (Higgins 1980; Lane 1984; Markowicz and Woodward 1978; Padden and Humphries 1988; Woll and Lawson 1982). All these concepts of deaf community conceive deaf social and cultural lives as being underpinned and driven by forms of communication that differ from those of the majority society. This differentiation primarily consists of the choice of a sign language as a preferred language. The centrality of these languages is reflected not only in the social and political organization of these communities, but in their strong cultural tradition of sign-play, jokes, story-telling and poetry. In the most practical sense, then, the central fact of deaf community membership is seen as linguistic membership.

Attitudinal identification

Membership of these deaf communities is also seen as determined, not by audiological measurement of hearing loss, but by self-identification as ‘deaf’, and reciprocal recognition of that identification – ‘attitudinal deafness’ (Baker and Cokely 1980). Individuals with minor hearing losses may be full members of the deaf community, whereas other individuals with profound hearing losses may not identify with deaf communities. When deaf people make the latter decision, deaf community members refer to them as preferring to try and live in the ‘hearing world’. On a closer consideration of the boundaries or margins of these deaf communities, the issue is confused by different and in fact virtually opposing sets of terminology used by the two different communities. A good example is cited by Padden and Humphries (1988) who point out that to describe someone as acting as ‘hard of hearing’ in the American deaf community, is to comment that a deaf person has the behavioural and cultural characteristics of a hearing person. In English, such an expression would contrast with a hearing, rather than deaf norm.

Attitudinal deafness is seen by some writers as reflected in ‘ethnic identity’ as it applies to membership of a deaf community. In sociological and anthropological literature, ethnicity involves two features: ‘paternity’ defines members of a group in biological terms: in the case of the deaf community, this is a hearing impairment, and additionally for some community members, deaf family members. The other feature, ‘patrimony’, refers to customary patterns of behaviour and shared values: ‘... ethnicity is a social force, created from within the community, that both results from and [creates] interaction and identity with the group’ (Johnson 1994: 103).

Solidarity

Both the linguistic and attitudinal differences, reinforced by restricted access to society, underpin a deaf solidarity and a sense of identification among deaf people who share similar experiences (Ladd 2002). In its highest forms of expression, this community is actually referred to as a nation, as in Berthier’s proposal from the 1840s that ‘la nation des sourds-muets’ (the deaf–mute nation) should directly elect one representative to the French Parliament (Mottez 1993).

Conceptual solidarity is also perceived to exist across national boundaries, leading to the sense of belonging to an international deaf community. This was reported as long ago as 1815 in an account of Laurent Clerc’s visit to the Braidwood school in London:

As soon as Clerc beheld this sight [the children at dinner] his face became animated; he was as agitated as a traveller of sensibility would be on meeting all of a sudden in distant regions, a colony of his countrymen ... Clerc approached them. He made signs and they answered him by signs. This unexpected communication caused a most delicious sensation in them and for us was a scene of expression and sensibility that gave us the most heartfelt satisfaction.

(Laffon de Ladébat 1815: 33)

Haualand (2007) discusses the transnational state of the deaf community in contemporary terms. To understand deaf culture, 'there is a need to go beyond national and territorial borders to grasp what deaf culture, society and identity are about. The deaf community is characterized by its scattered translocality; members may live at considerable geographical distance from one another' but still participate in a transnational ritual, which both reinforces and redefines deaf culture every time it takes place.

It is generally agreed that in Western societies, deaf residential schools and deaf clubs have formed the two cornerstones of the deaf community concept. In residential schools, deaf children came together, learned sign languages and began the process of accessing the wider deaf community. Despite continued attempts to suppress sign language throughout the twentieth century, schools maintained their role in ensuring the continuity of sign language use and the passing on of deaf culture and deaf historical traditions from one generation to another.

Similarly there is widespread agreement that deaf clubs provided a crucial central focus for deaf adult life, not merely creating and maintaining the language and culture of childhood, but extending the deaf experience into all the organizational forms required in adulthood – local, regional and national; social, cultural and political. Between them, these two cornerstones provide the context in which a sign language can be created and sustained, thus encompassing what is traditionally understood by the deaf community concept.

The minority status of the deaf community has led to the development of the concept of audism, which was first proposed by Humphries (1977) and re-introduced by Lane (1992), who moved the discourse to include social structures and institutions as well as systemic oppression of deaf people, as distinct from individual attitudes towards deaf people. In analyzing solidarity within the deaf community, deaf researchers have used this framework to analyze the threat and challenges posed by the majority hearing community, particularly Gertz (2008) who discusses how audism may manifest itself on a par with 'dyconscious racism' in which some of the values of the majority are internalized by individual members of a minority group.

International structures

The international deaf community is highly organized, with international political organizations (for example, the World Federation of the deaf¹) as well as international sporting organizations representing deaf people (especially, the International Committee for Sports for the deaf (CISS)).² The WFD, the international non-government organization representing deaf people, was established in Rome in 1951. Today there are over 130 member bodies of the federation, which meets every four years at its General Assembly, usually taking place at the same time as the World Congress of the deaf. There are also six regional secretariats, and one regional cooperating member (the European Union of the Deaf). Each Ordinary Member is a deaf national organization representing deaf people, which must have a majority of deaf people with

a governing board with a majority of deaf people. Often these national organizations are made up of branches that are either deaf clubs or regional associations of deaf people in the different countries.

The WFD also has B consultative status with the United Nations, which means that on all matters relating to deaf people the WFD is the first point of contact. A recent collaboration between the WFD and the United Nations was the proclamation of the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which has been signed and ratified by more than 20 countries around the world. This Convention among other things mentions the ‘recognition of sign languages, recognition and respect for deaf culture and identity, the promotion of bilingual education in sign languages and the national languages as well as accessibility to all areas of society and life, including legislation to secure equal citizenship for all and prevent discrimination as well as the provision of sign language interpreting’ (Haualand and Allen 2009). As previously mentioned, these rights are not a reality for most deaf people around the world.

Deaf sports are represented by the International Committee of Sports for the deaf, which was established in Paris in 1924 and holds the Deaflympics Games and the Winter Deaflympics Games every four years. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1955 admitted the CISS as an International Federation with Olympic standing, and the Olympic flag has flown at all Games since 1985. Participation in all events is contingent on proving a hearing loss of more than 55 decibels in the better ear.

History of deaf communities

It is probable that people who communicate by gesture or sign have existed as part of humanity from its inception (indeed sign languages are now considered by some theorists of the evolution of language to represent the first form of human language (cf. Armstrong and Wilcox 2007), although this is highly contentious. In the West, the first written evidence of the existence of deaf individuals or groups communicating by gesture or signs can be found with the rise of the Mediterranean societies in the fifth century BC. From that time onwards, Greek philosophers like Herodotus, Socrates, Aristotle and Plato, and their equivalents in Jewish and Roman society, philosophized about the nature of deaf people’s existence and their place in society (see Lang 2002) and discussed their situation in law: the Mishnah (the first-century compendium of Jewish law) discusses the legal status of signing, hints at the existence of a deaf community: ‘A deaf-mute may communicate by signs and be communicated with by signs’ (Danby, 1933: 4) and considers the situation of deaf individuals being married to other deaf individuals (ibid.).

Deaf ‘emergence’ from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century

The clearest evidence for the existence of deaf communities before the creation of deaf education comes from the Ottoman Court from the fifteenth century onwards, where successive Sultans maintained as many as 200 deaf people charged with various responsibilities, including teaching sign language to the rest of the court (Miles 2000). Several were among the Sultans’ closest companions. One reason for this is intriguing – speech was seen as an undignified method of communication in the presence of the Sultan, and sign language was felt to be more appropriate.

From the fifteenth century onwards, for a number of complex reasons, including the impact of the Renaissance with its revival of Greek philosophy, there was a considerable increase of interest in Europe in the education of deaf people. Two opposing perspectives can be seen. One focused on the development of deaf people’s speech, discouraging contact with other deaf

people. The other saw the experience of deaf people as providing insight into larger philosophical questions, exploring deaf people's ability to make sense of the world through vision, their ability to communicate in depth with each other and the communicative power found in sign language itself (see Rée 1999). Little is known about the signing of deaf people in Britain before the establishment of deaf education. It is likely that wherever deaf people were in contact with each other or where there were families with more than one deaf member, some form of signing was found. The earliest British account of signing in a legal context is in the parish record of a wedding in Leicestershire in 1575:

Thomas Tillsye and Ursula Russel were married: and because the sayde Thomas was and is naturally deafe and also dumbe, so that the order of the forme of mariage used usually amongst others which can heare and speake could not for his parte be observed ... the sayde Thomas, for the expression of his minde instead of words, of his own accorde used these signs.

(St Martin's Parish Register 1575, quoted in Cockayne 2003: 493)

An early account of deaf people's lives and communication is found in Richard Carew's (1555–1620) description of a young deaf man, Edward Bone (cited in Jackson 2001). Bone was the manservant of the Member of Parliament for Cornwall. Carew describes Bone's abilities in lip-reading and signing with his employer and how he met regularly with a deaf friend, John Kempe, who lived in a neighbouring village. There are sporadic references to signing throughout the seventeenth century, one of which appears in the first book on sign language in Britain, *Philocophus*, published in 1648 and dedicated to two deaf brothers: 'What though you cannot express your minds in those verball contrivances of man's invention; yet you want not speeche; who have your whole body for a tongue' (Bulwer 1648). Other contemporary writers also noted that sign languages were unrelated to spoken languages: 'The deaf man has no teacher at all and though necessity may put him upon ... using signs, yet those have no affinity to the language by which they that are about him do converse among themselves' (Dalgarno 1661). The earliest record in the USA of a deaf person who communicated through sign language is of Sarah Pratt, who was born in 1640 and is the subject of an essay published in 1684 (Carty *et al.* 2009). Her signed communication with her husband was 'Analogous to verbal expressions', and they could 'communicate any matter much more speedily (and as full) as can be by Speech'. She and her husband lived in New England and she was able to own land and participate in community life, and quite significantly, in church fellowship.

How sign languages come into existence

All of the quotes in the section above describe what has been called 'home sign' – gestural communication systems developed by deaf children who lack input from a language model in the family. For such individuals, communication develops from gestural input from hearing adults combined with the child's own creation of gestures. Frishberg (1987) set out a framework for identifying and describing home-based sign systems. Unlike sign languages, home sign does not have a consistent meaning-to-symbol relationship, does not pass from generation to generation, is not shared by one large group and is not the same over a community of signers. However, home signs are the starting point for new sign languages that develop when deaf people come together.

In the Old Bailey (Central London Criminal Court) records from 1725–1832, 31 references to people as 'deaf and dumb' are found (Hitchcock and Shoemaker 2008). Deaf people not

only appear as prisoners but also as witnesses and complainants. Clearly, at this time the Court permitted deaf people to take part in criminal proceedings in all capacities, and hearing people, who were for the most part members of their family, work colleagues or employers, were brought in to interpret for them. For example, in a 1771 case, a person, ‘with whom he had formerly lived as a servant was sworn interpreter’ and ‘explained to him the nature of his indictment by signs’ (Stone and Woll 2008). Thus it is clear that some form of home signing existed and was recognized before the creation of education for deaf children.

By far the greatest amount of historical description and sociological research data, and consequently, theories about ‘deaf communities’ has been concentrated on European and North American society. There is widespread agreement that, although it may not be possible to define the boundaries of deaf communities, they are broadly understood to consist of those deaf people who use a sign language. In recent years, concern about the nature of these boundaries has grown, from both within and without those communities. In part this is due to the increasing headway made into the numbers of those formerly classified as ‘deaf children’ as a result of technological developments twinned with the educational ideology of oralism. These developments, and deaf children and adults’ response to them, has resulted in community boundaries becoming cultural ‘battlegrounds’, where socializing patterns and contending cultural allegiances have become politicized.

Moreover, the socializing patterns of both middle-aged and young deaf people during the last 30 years have changed to the extent that deaf clubs, the traditional centres of deaf community and culture, perceive their continued existence to be threatened. These developments, which resemble similar patterns in wider Western societies, suggest that defining deaf communities will become increasingly problematic.

Extending research to other deaf communities

There have been recent attempts to extend theorizing about deaf communities to cover a wide variety of non-Western societies that have significant deaf membership, ranging from tribes to farming communities, to towns both small and large.

The most recent literature on deaf communities, notably Bahan and Nash (1996); Lane *et al.* (2000); Ladd (2002); and Woll and Ladd (2003), has begun the process of offering conceptual frameworks and models intended to include the various manifestations of deaf existence in different parts of the world. Woll and Ladd explore multidimensional models of deaf communities, based on attitudes, social choices and the size of the deaf population relative to the hearing population.

In Europe and North America, around 1 in 1,000 children is born deaf, and fewer than 1 in 20 deaf children is born to deaf parents. Such cultures, with few deaf people, exhibit negative attitudes to sign language. Different life opportunities for hearing and deaf people in these contexts can be described as an ‘oppositional community’ with bi-directional conflict between hearing and deaf members (Woll 2008). In such a community, hearing status defines access to society, with consequently lower socio-economic status and educational achievement of deaf people; the rate of marriage between deaf people is high; and the hearing community have little or no awareness of the deaf community and little knowledge of sign language. Most European and North American deaf communities in the past 200 years can be described as of this sort.

Communities in developing countries, where only one or a few deaf people live, partly resemble the oppositional community model, but life choices and experiences for deaf and hearing people in a non-industrialized community are similar in terms of literacy and

occupation. In other societies, there are deaf communities that can be viewed as inseparable from the hearing community. In such communities, often small and isolated, with a high incidence of deafness, the socio-economic status and educational achievements of deaf members are largely equivalent to those of hearing members, and there exists considerable knowledge of sign language by the latter. In such communities there is a very low rate of marriage between deaf partners, and no apparent separate community of deaf people. Examples of such communities include those of Martha's Vineyard, Bali and the Yucatan (see below). In many of these societies, some might contest the existence of any deaf community, as there are limited cultural or social consequences of deafness and little sense of deafhood (Ladd 2002).

One possible model for Western society would be societies where the socio-economic status and educational achievement of deaf people is not highly differentiated from that of hearing people, but where deaf people would be empowered to gather together and where the hearing members would manifest an awareness of the existence of those deaf groupings, including various degrees of communication skills with deaf people and some knowledge of sign language.

Case studies

In recent years there have been a growing number of studies of deaf communities that differ from the Western model. These have often perceived by both deaf and non-deaf people as representing an idyllic opposite to the deaf communities of Europe and North America, with language, ethnic identity and solidarity thought to be common to hearing and deaf people.

These include Grand Cayman Island (Washabaugh 1981), Providence Island, off the coast of Colombia (Washabaugh *et al.* 1978), the Urubu of Amazonia (Ferreira-Brito 1984), the Yucatan Maya (Johnson 1994) the Enga of New Guinea (Kendon 1980), Martha's Vineyard (Groce 1985), etc. Discussion of all of these is beyond the scope of this chapter, but specific cases will be presented below.

Martha's Vineyard

The best-known account of a community where signing played a part in the lives of most people, hearing and deaf, is Groce's (1985) study of Martha's Vineyard, an island off the coast of Massachusetts, USA. Some areas of this island had a high incidence of genetic deafness throughout the nineteenth century. Groce (1985) and Bahan and Nash (1996) report that deafness was regarded as just normal variation among people, comparable to handedness. Most deaf people were married to hearing people and were well-respected and economically active. A sign language specific to the island formed an integral part of interaction, including prayer meetings, and in settings where distances were too great for spoken language conversation. However, town business was conducted using hearing family members as interpreters. Over time, as intermarriage with people from outside the community increased, the percentage of deaf people decreased and the multigenerational nature of the community changed. The last deaf members of the community died in the middle of the twentieth century, and the sign language and community are now extinct.

Yucatan

Johnson (1994) describes a Yucatan Mayan deaf community. Just over 3 per cent of the village population is deaf, and both deaf and hearing people are farmers. Hearing people appear to have a high degree of competence in the village's sign language. However, the deaf members are

not fully integrated socially. Only three of the seven deaf men are married (all to hearing women), and none have deaf children. None of the deaf women is married, and they report that it is impossible for them to marry. Despite this limited integration with hearing villagers, they do not identify with deaf people from outside the village.

Bali

In the community of Desa Kolok on the island of Bali (Branson *et al.* 1996), 2 per cent of the 2,000 village residents are deaf, and marriage between hearing and deaf villagers is the norm. Deaf members of the community have equal status in decision-making at local community level, although few are reported to participate. Those who do, use family members to interpret, as not all village members are fluent in sign language. In earlier times, village deaf children received no formal education, although there has been a school for hearing children for over 50 years. Recent moves to offer specialist deaf education have resulted in the placing of deaf children in a school located outside the village and this has begun to alter the linguistic and social dynamics of the community.

In two of the examples above, the emergence of deaf schools, which did so much for deaf communities in general, appear to be destroying what are now seen as idyllic communities. It may be pertinent to ask what sort of community deaf people actually prefer, as it would appear that community changes have in the end taken place as a result of their own choices.

Al-Said Israeli Bedouin

Kisch (2008) has described a Bedouin tribe of around 2,000 people, of whom over 10 per cent are deaf. Deaf children are better educated than hearing children, as they attend a deaf school where Hebrew is taught, and hearing children often do not attend school at all. The deaf children therefore develop a degree of literacy in the majority language, which is a key to employability, and they are fully economically integrated. Although all hearing members of the community have some knowledge of the tribe's sign language, only hearing people in families with a high percentage of deaf members are fully fluent.

Nigeria

Schmaling (2000) provides a thorough and grounded description of a well-established deaf community within the Hausa tribe in Northern Nigeria. There is an oral tradition that deaf people have always had meeting points in towns and villages for sharing information and experiences. Their sign language is the main subject of Schmaling's study. The deaf community has its own leader, the Sarkin Bebaye ('Chief of the deaf') whose office is regarded as that of representative of the deaf, paralleling the system of chiefs that is one of the basic organizational principles of Hausa society.

Deaf people are well integrated into hearing Hausa society, and interaction and communication between deaf and hearing people is high. Many hearing people are able to converse with the deaf freely and effectively through signing, at least on a basic level. Hearing people do not feel ashamed of 'talking' with their hands; they generally try to use their hands as much as possible when communicating with deaf people and accept signing as an appropriate medium of communication. Schmaling discusses a number of features that may account for the high level of integration of deaf people in Hausa society, including life in extended families and a generally high incidence of deafness (and disability) in Hausa society.

Unlike the other communities described above, there is clear evidence of a level of what might be called 'deaf consciousness' among the deaf members. Schmalting does report that there is a danger that this state of integration may weaken, as individualization within Hausa society increases with a concomitant loss of traditional societal values.

Nicaragua

The apparently recent emergence of sign language in Nicaragua has been well documented (see Kegl *et al.* 1999), but the development of the community itself is less well known. Senghas and Kegl (1994) report on the social factors involved in the development of this community from an anthropological perspective. Unusually for reports of this kind, their focus is on the internal dynamics of the deaf community as well as on relations with the hearing community.

It is claimed that until the mid-1990s, there were no deaf children of deaf parents, that interaction between deaf people was limited, and there was a near total absence of a multi-generational deaf community structure. The modern deaf community began to form as schools were established, consisting primarily of teenagers and young adults, and is described as having an egalitarian, grass-roots quality. This community incorporated deaf, hard-of-hearing and dyslexic people (all educated together). As time has passed, the two latter groups have gradually separated from the deaf community and the deaf community itself has become more hierarchical and stratified. Because this is a community so clearly in a period of rapid change, Senghas and Kegl's observations highlight the importance of viewing all communities as dynamic entities.

Education and the deaf community

As deaf educational establishments began from the 1760s onwards to bring together large numbers of deaf children and adults, sign languages also began to flourish (cf. de l'Épée 1984 (original date 1776)). Although it can be argued that deaf people can maintain satisfactory lifestyles while existing outside education systems (cf. Desloges 1984 (o.d. 1779)), especially where there are high enough numbers of deaf individuals within a community, there is no doubt that the concentration of deaf children and adults within a residential school system is important in maintaining a sizeable and healthy deaf community where the percentage of deaf people within a given population is small. Deaf education therefore was, and, continues to be, the battleground on which the communities' future existence and quality of life is contested.

Use of sign languages in schools varies greatly around the world and even within countries. Since as the beginning of general deaf education in the early nineteenth century, some schools have used a form of sign language for instruction and some have used the spoken language, relying on residual hearing, lip-reading and speaking (part of the philosophy of oralism). Whether taught manually (predominantly before the 1880s) or orally (predominantly from the 1880s to the 1980s), deaf children were usually educated in deaf schools with other deaf children and they usually managed to learn some sign language even though attitudes to signing in schools were often negative.

Since the 1980s sign languages have been more accepted in schools, but simultaneously there has been a very strong move towards mainstreaming deaf children. This has had serious social and linguistic consequences on sign language and the signing community. Some deaf children informally learn sign language once they arrive at primary schools but are neither formally taught the language, nor are exposed to it as a language of instruction. Their access

to sign language may be via school staff (teachers, classroom aides and communication support workers) and other pupils, who all vary greatly in their competence. It is widely understood that deaf teachers are able to provide the best sign language role models to children but their numbers vary greatly around the world. For example, in the USA over 20 per cent of teachers of the deaf are deaf signers, while in England there are fewer than 5 per cent, and in Mexico there are none in the public sector. In Scandinavian countries, almost all deaf children, including those with cochlear implants, receive bilingual education.

The classroom has become an area of interest with respect to the cultural transmission patterns for deaf people. Ladd (2007) refers to colonialism and how the educational system has a strong colonizing influence on deaf children; children are not being taught to be deaf adults but because ‘their languages and cultures are suppressed, colonised, in order to be “replaced” by the “hearing” languages and cultures’ they are being taught to function as hearing people.

Studies consistently show superior sign language skills in deaf children from deaf families compared with deaf children from hearing families (Paul and Quigley 1994), as well as persistent inadequacies in the language environment provided by education systems that report using sign language (Ramsey 1997; Greenberg and Kusché 1987). Herman and Roy (2006) found that many deaf children do not achieve age-appropriate levels of British Sign Language (BSL).

Sign languages and sign language dialects

The main reason for dialect differences within many sign languages can generally be traced to schools, where signs have been developed spontaneously by children and then used for many years, and even by the teachers. BSL exhibits extensive regional variation despite the relatively small area of the country because Britain had 46 deaf schools that were independently set up and administered during the nineteenth century. Schermer (2004) describes five regional dialects of Sign Language of the Netherlands (SLN) based on the five deaf schools. Vanhecke and de Weerdt (2004) have described the regional variation of Flemish Sign Language (VGT) based on five main regions of Flanders, each with its own school. Significantly, Irish Sign Language (ISL) has very little regional variation because there were only two main deaf schools in Ireland, both in Dublin. American Sign Language (ASL) also has surprisingly little regional variation, given the size of the country and its deaf population, probably due to the centralizing effects of Gallaudet University and the original Hartford Asylum, where initially all teachers of the deaf were trained.

Education in many countries has also had a profound effect on national sign languages because educational systems are shared between nations. French Sign Language (LSF) has had the greatest impact on the world’s sign languages and its influence can be seen clearly in ISL (Burns 1998), ASL (Lane 1984) and in some dialects of BSL (particularly where BSL has been influenced by ISL). In each case, educators were influenced by the French deaf education system and brought LSF back to their own countries. Other sign languages have also had this sort of influential role. For example, Swedish Sign Language (STS) has influenced Portuguese Sign Language (LGP) through its use of the manual alphabet, after a Swedish educator helped to found a deaf school in Portugal. ISL, originally heavily influenced by LSF, has also had considerable impact on sign languages around the world. Irish nuns and Christian Brothers have taught in Catholic schools for deaf children in countries including India, South Africa and Australia and the influence of ISL is noticeable in the sign languages in these countries (Aarons and Akach 1998).

ASL, itself originally influenced by LSF, now has a major impact on sign languages around the world through education. Gallaudet University attracts foreign deaf students who take

ASL back to their own countries. The USA has been especially generous in providing teacher training in many Third World countries. Andrew Foster, a deaf African American, led a movement for the establishment of schools in African countries where ASL was introduced as the language of tuition (Lane *et al.* 1996). In Nigeria today, ASL taught in schools is mixing with the indigenous sign languages (Schmaling 2003). Even when ASL is not deliberately taught in schools in other countries, the presence of fluent signers of ASL can exert an influence.

Diversity within deaf communities

In recent years researchers have begun to look at the existence of what are termed here as 'subcommunities' existing within the wider deaf communities, and there have been a number of studies of gay, Black, Jewish, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, etc. subcultures within those communities. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss these in detail, it is possible to see that the same factors that influence the nature of deaf communities generally can also be applied to a consideration of these subcommunities. Some subcommunities have only recently developed. Gay and lesbian deaf people have only recently emerged from centuries of prejudice to declare themselves and develop their own groups (Lane *et al.* 1996). There is some evidence to show that a distinctive sign dialect exists in ASL, known as GSV (Gay Sign Variation) (Kleinfeld and Warner 1996).

In other examples, however, the majority of the deaf community can be viewed as acting as an oppositional community, and in its turn creating an oppositional minority deaf community. The earliest example in Britain is the Roman Catholic deaf community, who were educated in their own deaf schools (with their own very different sign languages, not dialects, which originated from ISL) and their own clubs. In some cities, such as Liverpool and Manchester, the degree of integration was greater than in others, such as Glasgow. In the last 20 years, most of the overt barriers of prejudice have come down.

The clearest example of an oppositional subcommunity can be found in the USA and South Africa, where Black and White deaf schools were strictly segregated and where there was very little interaction between the two races for the better part of two centuries (Anderson and Bowe 2001). In this example, it would seem fair to suggest that there were actually two separate communities, with their own distinct paths of origin and development (Hairston and Smith 1983). In the case of the USA, the fact that both use ASL, albeit distinctive dialects (Aramburo 1989), would appear to contradict the analysis of separation, but it is possible to construct such use of ASL as, in effect, a colonizing language brought from White deaf people to Black schools. However, the existence of a common language (as contrasted, say, with the situation in 'hearing' South Africa), has enabled an acceleration of Black and White deaf contact. Research is needed to ascertain the degree to which this acceleration has resulted in a unified community. In South Africa, where change has been more recent, where there are more languages to integrate, and where there is a relative absence of a deaf professional class to form a bridge, there is clearly some way to go (Aarons and Akach 1998). It is interesting, however, to note the extent to which new deaf television programmes in South Africa are being used as a medium to unify both the sign languages and the communities.

The British Black deaf community differs from those above in that this is a very new community, which began with the deaf children whose parents migrated to Britain from the Caribbean and Africa from the 1950s onwards, and which is only just beginning to develop a distinctive social network and dialect of BSL (James 2000; James and Woll 2002). A similar

pattern can be found with Asian deaf people. In some areas the small number of Black/Asian deaf people has resulted in apparent integration with the White deaf community. In others, however, the extent of racism experienced by Black/Asian deaf people has caused them to withdraw from the White community altogether (Taylor and Meherali 1991), and this may have served as the impetus towards creating their own subcommunities.

Comparable American subcommunities formed by immigration, such as the Hispanic and East Asian deaf communities, have not yet been substantially researched. A pressing issue for these subcommunities is the extent to which they have access to their hearing equivalents. Gay deaf and lesbian groups report significant contact, and it has even been suggested that this contact is more extensive than for the rest of the deaf community. By contrast, however, other groups have found it difficult to access the languages and cultures of their originating communities. For example, Dively (2001) describes the experiences of Native American deaf people, and describes two important themes characteristic of other deaf subcommunities: limited participation within Native American culture, and difficulty in maintaining their Native American identity in the wider deaf community. This is paralleled by research in Britain on the experiences of deaf people of Asian backgrounds (Chamba *et al.* 1998).

The hearing community and sign language

It has been estimated that for every deaf person who uses BSL, there are nine hearing people who have some knowledge of the language. There has been national broadcasting of television programmes using BSL for over 20 years, and around 20,000 hearing people take basic-level examinations (equivalent to 120 hours of study) in BSL every year (Woll 2001). Furthermore, many more parents, siblings and friends of young deaf children have begun to sign, and many more professionals working with deaf people have done likewise. The creation of the profession of interpreting, deaf Studies and interpreting programmes at universities, and the numbers of deaf young people attending those universities has resulted in hearing and deaf students beginning to form friendships. This has had the effect of creating small 'subcommunities' of deaf and hearing signers in certain locations, ranging from Fremont in California and Rochester in New York to Wolverhampton and Preston in Britain. There is also a general shift in the siting of deaf community activity, especially among young deaf people, from deaf clubs to more public settings; this has served to make deaf communities and languages more visible, and contributed to the developments above.

Summary and Conclusions

The last 20 years has seen a surge in deaf confidence and pride, partly due to the revelation of the linguistic complexities of sign languages. In many places it has meant an improvement in the status of the community and its language. However, there has been limited consideration of social and cultural issues, and of the internal and external factors responsible for creating, maintaining, and changing deaf communities, compared to the amount of linguistic research that has been carried out. Until resources are available to study deaf communities in a consistent manner, progress will be slow.

If we are to assist in mitigating any negative developments that the future might bring, and in encouraging positive ones, we need to be able to take up positions and models that enable us to perceive deaf communities in ways as flexible as the ones they are themselves developing.

The deaf community in the twenty-first century

In the twenty-first century, deaf communities are not only becoming more complex, but may even be reinventing themselves in different ways. Indeed, the unique status of deaf communities may itself be a challenge. To define deaf people simply as disabled is to overlook the linguistic foundation of their collective life. To define them only as a linguistic group may possibly overlook the very real sensory characteristics of their existence, both positive (a unique visual apprehension of the world out of which sign languages have been constructed), and negative (communication barriers are not simply linguistic, but auditory too).

Any study of the deaf community, like other minority communities, cannot be separated from a study of its relationship with the majority language community which surrounds it, and its internal relationships, from the transnational level to the individual level. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, there are two contrasting futures. On the one hand, there are pressures, such as the decrease in opportunities for deaf children to use sign language with their peers as a result of the move to mainstream education, and a possible decrease in the deaf population as a result of medical intervention and advances in genetics. On the other hand, there is increased interest and demand from the hearing community for courses in sign languages, increased use of sign language in public contexts such as television, the potential for legislative recognition of the rights of deaf people to use their language, and increased pride of the deaf community in their distinctive language and culture. The future is finely balanced.

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Related topics

Multilingualism and public service access: interpreting in spoken and signed languages; linguistic diversity and education; discourses about linguistic diversity.

Notes

- 1 www.wfdeaf.org
- 2 www.deaflympics.com/

Further reading

Bahan, B. (2008) 'Upon the formation of a visual variety of the human race', in H-D. Baumann (ed.) *Open Your Eyes: Deaf Studies Talking*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

(This chapter reflects on the visual nature of the deaf community and invites the reader to rethink how deaf people are perceived: 'people of the eye' may be a more appropriate paradigm especially as the visual nature of the community manifests itself in its language and grammar, in how deaf people interact and in deaf arts and culture.)

Carty, B., Macready, S. and Sayers, E. E. (2009) "'A grave and gracious woman": Deaf people and signed language in colonial New England', *Sign Language Studies*, 9: 297–323.

(This journal article provides an historical insight to how sign language was used in America prior to the establishment of schools for the deaf, possibly challenging current thought on how sign language was brought to the USA.)

Hauland, H. (2007) 'The two-week village. The significance of sacred occasions for the Deaf Community', in B. Ingstad and S. Whyte (eds) *Disability in Local and Global World*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

(This chapter is an ethnographic study of the international or rather, transnational deaf community at the Rome Deaflympics Games where the various aspects of the multilingual and multicultural Deaf community manifests itself in a time and place, and its own space.)

Sutton-Spence, R. L. and Woll, B. (1999) *The Linguistics of British Sign Language: An Introduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(This book is an introduction for the non-specialist linguist and sign language learner.)

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