Societal Responsibility and Linguistic Rights: The Case of Deaf Children

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If deaf people's linguistic needs are not met, deafness disables, potentially profoundly as to cognitive function, psychological well-being, and educational and economic possibilities. But if linguistic needs are met, deaf people can thrive within the larger hearing society. These needs should be met through linguistic models fluent in American Sign Language (ASL), regardless of whether the child also receives speech training and/or has a cochlear implant. Society must be informed that ASL is a bona fide language, so parents can make responsible decisions concerning their child's linguistic input. Deaf children must get adequate education so that literacy rates rise to the level of hearing peers.

Let us make a distinction at the start: the term *deaf* is an auditory one, referring to hearing loss, while the term *Deaf* is a cultural one, connected to American Sign Language (ASL; Padden & Humphries, 2005). We come forth as scholar-activists in response to a call by the *Journal of Research in Education* in 2006 for "papers on the legal, ethical, technical, psychosocial, or multicultural issues of people with disabilities (preschool age through adult)." This paper focuses attention on the particular paths of deaf children – detours not typically accessed, and, often not even noticed. Scholars of human endeavors tend to base conclusions on studies that do not include deaf people, an invisible minority. Focusing attention on deaf matters has two purposes: first, to persuade readers to actively protect full linguistic rights for deaf children; second, to encourage readers to look at their own research and teaching areas through d/Deaf eyes and do more inclusive work in the future. We are spreading the word to you, who are in a position to spread it further.

We have a wide range of experiences, professional and personal, with d/Deaf people/issues, and thus owe general thanks to our students, teachers, colleagues, friends, and particular thanks to Irene Leigh and Kristin Lindgren. Our interest here, however, is narrow: the linguistic needs of d/Deaf people, especially those who use ASL as their primary language and English as their written language, and the moral imperative to meet those needs.

How Deafness is Unique as a Disability

If a child does not hear and no one recognizes that fact early on, formerly a common situation in the USA and still common in much of the world (Lane, 1984; Peterson & Siegal, 1995), or if a child is not given appropriate support and receives inadequate linguistic input, the effects can be disastrous. By the time a child reaches 5 to 7 years of age (Krashen, 1973; Pinker, 1994), the brain's language mechanism changes; a child without sufficient linguistic input during that critical period for language acquisition is likely never to achieve fluency in any language, spoken or sign, and the chance for proper development of many cognitive skills related to language use is minimized (Peterson & Siegal, 1995), although certainly home signing goes beyond mere gesture (Goldin-Meadow, 2003). This situation disables.

Language is the strongest facility distinguishing humans from other animals (Pinker, 1994); it follows that depriving children

of language reduces their humanity. Language binds us to each other, allowing meaningful and intimate interactions. It is the foundation of culture, fundamental to human identity (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996; Weinberg & Sterritt, 1986).

Evidence that deaf people were considered subhuman until recently comes from the fact that it is only within the past few centuries that deaf people have been educated (Lane, 1984). As Winzer (1993) points out, who was taught, when and how through the decades, tells us much more about society's appreciation of the humanity of traditionally "disabled" people than it tells about the particular educational needs of those people. People without language are not simply isolated, they are reduced as humans in the eyes of society and in their own eyes; they are culturally impoverished in a way hard to imagine for people accustomed to the American scene.

Descriptions of the cultural destitution of deaf people around the world, particularly in rural areas, speckle the Internet. Wilson and Kakiri (2005) outline typical problems of d/Deaf in many countries. In Guatemala, for example, where 22 Mayan languages plus Spanish are spoken, Guatemalan Sign Language is not standard among the deaf, and many physically isolated deaf people live in dire poverty, economically and culturally (Bruce & Trant, 2003).

Today, fortunately, most deaf people in America, at least, learn a language. While it is difficult to get accurate numbers, for many it is eventually ASL. Mitchell, Young, Bachleda, and Karchmer (2006) report estimates on the number of deaf people who use ASL in America from 100,000 to 15,000,000 (the upper limit is clearly implausible). They discuss why it is difficult to get an accurate count and raise a call for changes to allow such a count. Pending further study, many continue to rely on Schein and Delk's (1974) 500,000 estimate. Moores (2006) reports that, while the number of deaf children learning ASL is decreasing because many of them are educated in oral-only settings and get a cochlear implant (CI), it is still strong because the Deaf community takes an active role in educational policy regarding deaf children.

Using a sign language, Deaf people are able to do anything that hearing and speaking people can do, other than hearing and speaking. And sign languages facilitate the cognitive development of deaf children just as spoken languages facilitate the cognitive development of hearing children (Corina, 1998; Emmorey, 2002; Neville, in press; Poizner, Klima, & Bellugi, 1990); they manage very well at human cognitive and other tasks.

In addition, ASL forms the basis of a culture. Not only do Deaf people share a language, they share common beliefs, ways of perceiving the world, and values, many based on their experiences as visual people whose way of gathering information differs from that of the hearing people who compose the majority culture (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996; Padden & Humphries, 2005). For members of this culture, it is an essential part of their identity.

Many Deaf people object to the classification of deafness as a disability (Lane, 2002). Indeed, there is a term for the belief that hearing is superior to not hearing: *audism*, which has as negative a set of connotations to those who are against audism as *racism* or *sexism* has to people who oppose racism or sexism (Humphries, 1977). Deaf people are able within their culture; it is only within hearing societies that their abilities might be limited by their deafness. Some are also successful and comfortable interacting with hearing people. Others avoid it, for a variety of reasons. And so, to various degrees, many are able to negotiate both the Deaf and the hearing worlds of which they are a part (Brueggemann, in press: Padden, 1996).

Nevertheless, most hearing people are unaware that Deaf culture exists. Witness the rise of media aimed to combat that ignorance, such as books like that written by Moore and Levitan (1992), cable television shows like the one put on by the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, the institution of

Deaf Awareness Week by the World Federation of the Deaf, and multiple Internet sites on the topic. This ignorance persists, although among college students there is a recent surge in interest, addressed below. Hearing people do not have extensive or even minimal social interaction with Deaf people (Cappelli, Daniels, Durieux-Smith, McGrath, & Neuss, 1995; Foster, 1988). Part of this, naturally, is simply the small number of Deaf people compared to hearing people. Part is the language barrier. But part is due to a common misperception: Hearing people unaccustomed to deaf people, upon hearing their speech, or seeing their written English, which often contains errors similar to a second language user's, may conclude they have a mental deficiency rather than a hearing loss (Gelb, 1989; Lane, 1984). They may see them signing and view it as a primitive, gestural means of communication. This misperception is one reason why it has taken so long for ASL to be accepted as fulfilling language requirements in secondary schools and universities (Wilcox, 1992). Even people who have Deaf family members, or work side-by-side with Deaf people, sometimes even teachers who have d/Deaf children mainstreamed into their classroom, can suffer to varying degrees from this erroneous suspicion (Osgood, 2006). Indeed, being diagnosed mentally deficient happens far too frequently for deaf people (Lane, 1984), even though the majority of them fall within the ordinary range of intelligence.

In support of the claim that most deaf people are of ordinary intelligence, consider data from the Gallaudet Research Institute (2005). During the 2004-2005 school year, the Center's Annual Survey of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children and Youth reports 37,500 children in special education programs across the USA. Of them, 15,037, or 40%, are reported as having one or more "additional condition other than deafness," including low vision, blindness, autism, learning disability, speech or language impairment, mental retardation, orthopedic impairment, attention deficit disorder, traumatic brain injury, emotional disturbance, or other health impairment. No information beyond deafness was available on 2,093 of the children in the study. The bare numbers, however, do not reveal the complexity of the issues involved; Braden (1994), who discusses the myriad effects of deafness on family dynamics and social interaction, shows that deafness negatively impacts verbal IQ, but has no effect on nonverbal IQ. In fact, deaf children of deaf parents perform better on IQ tests than hearing children.

Society's responsibility to the deaf person is crucial, for failure to meet that responsibility risks damning deaf people to a lower status, in the best case depriving them of the pride in their language that would allow them to develop strong, healthy identities within Deaf culture, and in the worst case depriving them of any language as a means to proper cognitive and social development and thereby truly limiting their ability to partake in humanity. It is essential to the psychological, social, and economic well-being of any person that he or she learn a language, any natural language, spoken or sign, well enough to have a full range of human interactions with others and belong to a culture. If the individual does not, as a result of misidentification or of inadequate response to a proper identification, then he or she is truly disabled. In other words, if society fails to meet the needs of deaf people, we actually create true cognitive and/or societal and/or economic disability of the types described above (Corker, 1998).

Societal Responsibilities

How can society avoid creating that kind of disability? First, all deaf children must have access to a natural language. Whether that means that they use a CI or hearing aids and the accompanying therapy successfully provides them with access to spoken language (O'Reilly, Mangiardi, & Bunnell, in press), or that their families learn ASL as best they can and use it with them consistently (Wilbur, 2000), comprehensible linguistic input is an absolute necessity. However, there is no denying that for deaf children, being bilingual is nothing but an asset (Chamberlain & Mayberry, 2000; Harris & Beech, 1998; Hoffmeister, 2000; Padden & Ramsey, 2000; Strong & Prinz, 2000; Wilbur,

2001). Society must recognize and encourage this.

Even deaf children who learn ASL as natives, from Deaf parents, still need to know English, since the written form is a necessity for leading a literate life and communicating with the majority of people, who do not sign. Spoken English is also of benefit – with voice where feasible, and without voice (mouthing and speechreading) if possible – since there is evidence that phonological awareness helps develop literacy among deaf children (Hanson, 1989; Hanson, Shankweiler, & Fischer, 1983; Hanson &Wilkenfeld, 1985; Luetke-Stahlman & Nielsen, 2003; Nielsen & Luetke-Stahlman, 2002; Sterne & Goswami, 2000), and, together with written English, voicing and/or mouthing and/or speechreading obviously broadens opportunities and options within mainstream society (Marschark, Lang, & Albertini, 2002).

Likewise, children who receive CIs or have access to spoken language with hearing aids still need to know ASL (Yoshinaga-Itano & Sedey, 2000). First, when hearing aids and implants are off, removed, broken, or need re-programming, the child does not hear. And everyone knows it. So the child's identity is not going to develop as a totally hearing child. Knowing ASL will serve several purposes for such a child, listed by the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center (n.d.). It gives the child immediate access to language by building on a child's strong sense of vision while the sense of audition is developing. It allows communication with others at all times, including when spoken language is not a possibility and when noise interference hinders the effectiveness of CIs. And, until it is ensured that hearing aids or an implant are offering a child the language access hoped for, ASL provides early comprehensible input. ASL also offers the child a way to develop a positive view of his or her identity as a deaf person (Stinson, in press).

So, three additional societal responsibilities are necessary to ensure the inclusion of successful bilingual Deaf members in the larger society. First, schools must educate everyone about basic linguistic matters, including the facts that no one language is better than another (see Chomsky, 1965) and that ASL is one language among many, all created equal (see Stokoe, 1960). It is especially important that this appreciation for language diversity be fostered in deaf children, who are unique in that they may learn a language that is not the native tongue of their family members. Second, public institutions must ensure that those who are not deaf, those who wield tremendous power and prestige in our society, use their privilege not to continue the unequal status quo, but rather to provide excellent linguistic and cultural models for deaf children. Finally, schools, through educational policies and practice, must ensure that all children become literate in the written language of the larger society, including children who cannot hear that language. If this happens, our educational system will be able to successfully educate deaf children in a way that ensures they do not have a disability.

Knowledge and Appreciation

As stated above, no child should be denied language. What that means with respect to the linguistic input given to a particular deaf child is complex. These children have a wide range of personal situations and the possible responses to deafness are, accordingly, just as wide.

Few deaf children are born to Deaf parents. The figure is certainly under 10%, and Moores (2001) puts it as low as 4%. The rest are born to hearing parents, many initially unprepared to deal with the choices they must make. Some offer their children only sign language. Others offer the child only spoken language, abandoning that effort only under the duress of undeniable failure. Still others offer both sign and spoken language from the start. Assistive technologies such as hearing aids are common, and CIs are becoming more common, with best results for the latter coming from consistent, persistent rehabilitation therapy. Yet, even then, they exhibit a still-unexplained failure rate of around 20% (O'Reilly, Mangiardi, & Bunnell, in press).

That parents are the ones to make these decisions on behalf of their child is unavoidable and regrettable. It is unavoidable because of the

critical age for language acquisition: Linguistic input is essential before the age of 5 to 7, and the earlier, the better, yet no child can be asked to make serious decisions at such a tender age. The parents simply must start the child down some language path in order to ensure proper cognitive development. However, it is regrettable because these decisions are intrinsic to the child's identity. Which language to learn and use, and with what effort or ease, are the sorts of decisions that lead people to easily make friends and feel good about themselves or to be isolated and possibly psychologically damaged (Brueggemann, 1999; Kent, 2003; Leigh, in press). The bioethical questions involved in making such decisions for deaf children are treated eloquently in Burke (in press).

Here is where a crucial societal responsibility comes in: It is imperative to supply the preparation necessary to make such decisions, and, preferably, in advance of the often very emotional point where people are faced with them. Schools must educate society about basic linguistic matters, for, as per the earlier discussion, language rights are human rights.

Let us step outside the situation of deaf people for a moment. Americans have appreciated a multilingual society and resisted language legislation since the birth of this nation. In 1780, John Adams proposed an official language academy, which the Continental Congress promptly rejected (Crawford, 1997). While English was and is still used in official documents, the USA has no declared official language. Bilingual and multilingual citizens have been the rule across America through these three centuries, and public schools have always served children who speak many different languages (Castellanos, 1983).

At the same time, however, language bigotry has been and is common in our history and present life (Valdés, 1999). This bigotry extends not just to languages other than English, but to varieties of American speech other than the standard (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998). Speech may be perceived as different for many reasons: It could sound odd because the speaker is not a native of English or uses a different variety, such as British or Australian, or because the speaker has a hearing loss and cannot regulate or form certain sounds, or because the speaker has a physical disability that affects language production, such as cerebral palsy, and so on. Regardless of the source of this perception, speech difference is judged, and a value is placed on that speaker's intelligence, social standing, and indeed, his or her worth as a person (Linn, 2000). These judgments can affect employment possibilities, access to housing and medical assistance and legal protection, the very way people are treated in the classroom (Baugh, 1999, 2000; Purnell, Idsardi, & Baugh, 1999). In other words, basic civil rights. And that is not even counting the effects of these judgments on social and personal identities (Jones, 2003).

Linguistic bigotry is born of ignorance. Many Americans still do not know that all natural languages (and there are some 6,000 in the world) are capable of expressing abstract thought, human emotion, creative urges, and complex ideas. Society has a responsibility to counter linguistic ignorance for the sake of the civil rights and human rights of many people, not just deaf people. The education our nation needs must include the information that not only are all natural human languages equal citizens, if you will, in a linguistic sense, but ASL is a natural human language, and, therefore, one more equal citizen.

Furthermore, one of the results of knowledge is appreciation. If you know your language is as good as anyone else's, you can use it with pride (Baugh, 2000; Rickford & Rickford, 2000). Consider the situation of immigrants, in particular of Spanish-speaking immigrants. As with other immigrant groups, once a family comes to America its home language shifts from Spanish to English over a three-generation span (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990, 2001a, 2001b). But for Spanish, at least, there are always new immigrants coming. And these immigrants and their descendants have let their language pride shine forth, as in the placards in California in the demonstrations against the

English Only Movement in the 1990s: *English si, Only no!*

That kind of language pride may also be rising among speakers of the non-standard variety of English called African-American Vernacular English (AAVE; a.k.a., Ebonics). While the controversy over Ebonics (Baugh, 2000) may not be over, the persistence and popularity of music and of media that use AAVE suggest a growing appreciation of the language, and works like that of Rickford and Rickford (2000), which discuss the cultural history and role of AAVE, help.

The Deaf Pride movement (Healy, 2006) has, likewise, led to appreciation of ASL. Before 1965 almost no one, including Deaf people, realized that ASL had the structural building blocks and communicative power of any other natural human language (Humphries, in press). Most people considered sign language to be hardly more than gestures. Others considered it broken English. Spoken language was assumed to be more complex, and capable of expressing a wider range of ideas and in greater depth; in short, superior. That erroneous notion has changed, starting with Stokoe, Casterline, and Croneberg (1965), and is gaining momentum with the work of linguists and social activists, such as Carol Padden and Carlene Canady Pedersen. Humphries (in press) outlines these changes in Deaf Americans' perceptions of ASL, and the rise of Deaf Pride. But the personal and social transformation is still ongoing.

Today one can find many DVDs of Deaf stories and poetry (Bauman, Rose, & Nelson, 2006). Performances by the National Theater for the Deaf and by wonderful Deaf poets, such as The Flying Words Project, allow hearing people who otherwise have no connection to Deaf culture to recognize the beauty of ASL. Perhaps that, and certainly the pure fun of using parts of the body other than the speech tract to produce language, have resulted in ASL having the fastest growing number of students among second languages studied at the university level in the USA according to a Modern Language Association survey (Hoover, 2003; Welles, 2004).

The trouble is, though, that again, the situation of deaf people has unique properties that set it aside from the situations of people who speak languages other than (standard) English. If you speak Spanish, for example, the chances are great the rest of your family does, too. The same is true if you speak some nonstandard variety of English. But that is not true of people who use ASL. The vast majority of deaf children grow up in a family in which they are the only deaf persons (Moores, 2001). If they learn sign, their family members may or may not also learn it. It is not uncommon for a sibling and sometimes even a parent of a child who uses ASL to have at best only a rudimentary skill in ASL. If these children do not have extensive exposure to Deaf culture outside the home, they may not discover the rich resources in sign theatre, storytelling, and poetry until they are teens or adults, or, perhaps, ever.

Children who use ASL as their primary language need to know that it is in no way inferior to the spoken language used by the hearing people around them, for if they believe that something as fundamental to their identity as their language is inferior, how can they help but feel inferior as human beings? At best, signing children should be introduced to other Deaf people and brought to events that allow them to develop and use ASL skills and that offer them the advantages that exposure to competent and creative use of their language offers to hearing people all the time (Stinson, in press). At the very least, they should be explicitly taught in school, along with hearing children, that natural sign languages (rather than any kind of manually coded version of a spoken language; see Lou, 1988) are bona fide natural human languages and that ASL has the same linguistic status as English or any other natural human language. That way they can experience the confidence and pride in their language that most hearing people take for granted.

Privilege, Power, Competence

One of the thorniest issues that faces people who interact with people who have disabilities stems from the fact that they often do not share that disability. In this sense, they are privileged with respect to the disabled person. That same kind of privilege is experienced by many people who work with or love members of oppressed minorities of any kind. And that privilege holds of hearing people who work with Deaf people. But, again, the situation is more extreme, and the ethical issues that arise are insistent.

Sign languages have a particular social situation that no spoken languages share. Recall: Well over 90% of deaf children live in hearing families. In families that offer their child ASL, often at least one parent and/or sibling learns some sign. And there are many hearing teachers and interpreters for the Deaf. Add to that the recent surge in popularity of ASL among university students, and we conclude that more hearing people sign (to varying degrees) than deaf people.

Hearing people who learned ASL as a second language (L2) are often the ones to expose deaf children to sign. Even children who acquire ASL through communication with native signers are heavily exposed to sign by interpreters, all of whom are hearing and most of whom are L2 signers. Most Deaf children are mainstreamed (Clark & Mattiacci, in press), so most deal with interpreters on a near daily basis. But now, with university students/ graduates knowing ASL to varying degrees and using it with Deaf children when the opportunity arises, possibilities for influence from spoken English and manually coded English to creep into ASL multiply (D. Yanke, personal communication, March 23, 2006). Languages often borrow from each other (witness in English *karioki* from Japanese, *genre* from French, *taboo* from Tongan/ Fijian), but in limited ways unless we have an invasion situation, where the influence can be extensive. With Deaf signers being so outnumbered, what will become of ASL? Hearing people, who have always held a position of privilege with respect to language, now also have a stunning power.

The issue is not just academic – it has practical and moral implications. Think of mistakes that L2 learners of English make. What if more people made mistakes than spoke naturally? Over time, mistakes would prevail, though probably with modifications. Certainly language change cannot be halted, nor do we advocate trying to do such a misguided thing. But it is important to recognize several facts if society is to protect the linguistic needs of deaf children.

Learning a second language as an adult, that is, past the onset of puberty, a second critical period for language learning (Krashen, 1973), is hard work, and one will almost undoubtedly never gain native competence. Many take multiple years of university language courses and still barely hobble along in a language. Typically an extended visit to a community where the target language is spoken helps enormously, but nothing compares to acquiring a language as a child.

This is as true of sign language as of spoken language. The Deaf child, surrounded by hearing L2 users of ASL, is often bombarded by poor language models. But in order to acquire a sign language (or a spoken one), one needs exposure to sufficiently rich and appropriate language input (Kegl, 2000; Mayberry, 1993). Poor signing by parents or anyone else is rarely enough to allow deaf children to develop adequate signing skills (Gregory, Bishop, & Sheldon, 1995). Yet many organizations serving the public don't require interpreters to be certified in ASL. All too often an organization puts out a call for help interpreting, and a hearing person who took an ASL course years ago steps forward. We may applaud the volunteer, but we must condemn the practice. Schools are also guilty of this (Clark & Mattiacci, in press). Even teachers may not be required to be fluent in the very language students are expected to learn.

Society must ensure that people who serve the needs of Deaf people, particularly of

children, be linguistically competent to do that. Think of the misinformation the Deaf child gets if the adult signs incorrectly. Acting upon wrong information could make the child do something entirely reasonable given his or her interpretation of the information, but that looks stupid to others. Worse, students can miss pertinent academic information, misunderstand assignments, even learn incorrect "facts" based on the poor ASL skills of teachers or interpreters. Think of the confusion the child may feel if the adult signs incorrectly. Children tend to trust adults when it comes to language use. So, Deaf children may lose confidence in their own signing. What if the child learns a new sign from this volunteer (or paid) incompetent signer, which is not, in fact, a real sign, and uses it with other Deaf children or adults, only to be ostracized or not understood?

Failing to provide good linguistic models and competent interpreters to Deaf children not only inhibits proper language development, it can seriously inhibit access to knowledge and profoundly damage self-esteem. The World Federation of the Deaf (n.d.) declares denying a Deaf child access to a quality education "tantamount to child abuse."

Literacy

There is a close link between illiteracy and poverty around the globe, from the personal to the national level (Adiseshiah, 1990). Again, though, the case of Deaf people is more extreme, since reading/writing may be the Deaf person's only way of connecting with the hearing world. When the written word becomes a primary means of direct communication, the need for literacy is raised to the level of a linguistic need.

Presently, American schools are failing to meet that need for Deaf people; as the discouraging statistics on literacy reveal, under 16% of Deaf high school students read above the sixth-grade level, and that figure falls drastically for African-American and Latino students, with many Deaf overall being functionally illiterate (T. Allen, 1994). Discussing why there is such a high rate of illiteracy among the Deaf and offering suggestions for positive change go beyond this paper (see S. Allen, in press; DeLuca & Napoli, in press). Our point here is more basic. Written language, as a link to hearing individuals and to the world in general, offers Deaf people possibly their best avenue to economic and political power. English is the language of commerce, of academia, of technology, and more. Denying an entire group of people access to those powerful arenas is ethically reprehensible. Effective education for the Deaf, including literacy in the dominant language, must be a societal priority.

Conclusion

Described here are some of the ethical considerations when working with deaf children. Society has a responsibility to these children, to offer them a life, a language, an identity, and an education on par with their hearing peers. Schools, in particular, must promote attitudes, knowledge, and equity in linguistic matters such that a bilingual life, one that includes both ASL and English (for the American or Canadian deaf child), is the norm. We cannot continue to allow deaf children to be denied language, literacy, equal access to information, privilege, and all the choice that is the hallmark of our society.

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