Revisiting Martha’s Vineyard and the Concept of Shard Signing for American Society

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Martha’s Vineyard as an Inspiration

Jody H. Cripps
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The Society for American Sign Language Journal (SASLJ) is pleased to present a special issue: Revisiting Martha’s Vineyard and the Concept of Shared Signing for American Society. I would like to start by stating that there has been a steady production of research and scholarship over the years on the shared-signing phenomenon in communities and societies throughout the world. I welcome the recent publication by Albert Bickford and Melanie McKay-Cody (2018). One good example of a shared-signing community that used to prevail in the United States is Martha’s Vineyard, an island off the Massachusetts coast. Deaf and hearing populations on the island were known to be signers. To be clear, the hearing islanders continued to speak English as their primary language, but they also signed and were able to communicate with deaf islanders. If you have not, I encourage you to read Nora Groce’s groundbreaking 1985 book on the shared-signing phenomenon of Martha’s Vineyard, shown below.

It is important for us to remember that Martha’s Vineyard is not the only place that fostered a positive sociolinguistic lifestyle for deaf Americans. Some version of a shared-signing community phenomenon prevails in Rochester, New York. The long-time presence of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (with its large enrollment of deaf students) on the Rochester Institute of Technology campus has significantly influenced the city over the years. I recall a CBS Sunday Morning segment called “Sign City” that covers this topic. I have
personally observed an increasing number of deaf people marrying hearing people in the last few decades, with the hearing spouse or partner frequently knowing and using American Sign Language (ASL) on a daily basis. Their household becomes a shared-signing space. We all know that deaf parents frequently have hearing offspring who may become fluent in ASL. These children help maintain a shared-signing household with their deaf parents. In our deaf history, while Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet may be a hearing person, he is also a signer who had a profound impact on the education of deaf children in this country—and he married a deaf woman. The fact that the couple’s hearing offspring continued to work with the deaf community is remarkable.

At the same time, I am fully aware that American society is largely made up of only spoken-language users. I may be a researcher and scholar by occupation, but I also experience life as a culturally deaf person. Living in South Carolina, I socialize frequently with deaf people. We use ASL for communicative purposes on a daily basis. Any time that I leave my house, I encounter nonsigning hearing people (in my workplace, restaurants, car repair shops, medical offices, and so on). I cannot help but wonder why hearing people in our society cannot be signers in addition to being speakers. I also wonder about the impact of ASL classes offered in high schools and colleges/universities on our society. Deaf people have begun to experience ordering in ASL at fast food outlets, for example. Some workers at these establishments have studied ASL as a language, and I wonder whether our society is moving closer to resembling Martha’s Vineyard.

I hope that you can see why I have put together this special issue for SASLJ. I believe that we need to take Martha’s Vineyard more seriously, especially considering how society can change for the better concerning all citizens. For this issue, I have selected four articles published between 1980 and 2012 that I think are groundbreaking and socially impactful. I was fortunate to receive permission to reprint the following articles:


In addition, I have recruited scholars from around the country to write fresh commentaries on the selected articles. Alphabetically, these scholars are Bryan Eldredge of Utah Valley University, Robert J. Hoffmeister of Boston University, Judy Kegl of the University of Southern Maine, and Russell S. Rosen of CUNY–Staten Island. The general organizational guidelines for each commentary include (a) an introduction to the article, (b) the significance(s) of the article to the field of deaf/ASL studies, and (c) how the article contributes to the understanding of the prospects for shared signing in the contemporary United States.

Also, Albert Bickford of Summer Institute of Linguistics International accepted my invitation to write an afterword for this special issue. I must thank him and all the contributors who participated in this special issue for their time and reflection on the social relevance of a shared-signing phenomenon concerning the deaf and hearing populations.

I would like to close my Editor’s Note by mentioning videos and recent developments taking place on Martha’s Vineyard. Some islanders are pursuing a social movement to revive Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language by teaching islanders the signed language (see, for example, these columns from *MVTimes*, Bowker, 2020 and the *Vineyard Gazette*, Mead, 2016).

The first video that I encourage everyone to view includes Joan Poole-Nash, who has a long family history with Martha’s Vineyard and is a shared-signing community researcher and scholar. This video demonstrates vocabulary comparisons between Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language and ASL. In the second video, Benjamin Lewis, who taught ASL at the University of California–Los Angeles, provides an equally insightful perspective on his trip to Martha’s Vineyard. Perhaps this issue will lead to a new sense of purpose and inspiration associated with the function and value of ASL, not only for the deaf community but for society at large.
Comparing MVSL and ASL
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzZsZrtdIIA

A Visit to Martha’s Vineyard
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Ioi7COpA7A

References


A commentary on Groce’s (1980) article, “Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language”

The Resilience, Adaptation, and Evolution of American Sign Language

Robert J. Hoffmeister
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When Judge Samuel Sewell of Boston arrived in 1715 on Martha’s Vineyard (MV), the first person he met was “deaf and dumb.” This chance meeting was the beginning of a story of how island isolation and genetics contributed to the incidence of deafness on the island of MV. This paper under review is from Groce’s (1985) dissertation and book, Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language.

MV, being an island, was naturally closed off from the mainland. As a result, few islanders married non-islanders. This separation reduced the influence of the mainlanders on community life in MV and resulted in a high incidence of hearing loss among the MV settlers. The number of deaf people on the island was considered normal, such that no one even mentioned whether a community member was deaf or hearing. As a result, deaf individuals were psychologically, socially, culturally, and economically integrated into the island community.

The impact of genetics is displayed in one family with seven children, two of whom were deaf. Although this situation is rare today, it is not an uncommon situation in families headed by deaf parents. Groce points out that this unusually high incidence of hearing loss on the island attracted the attention of a teacher from Boston, Alexander Graham Bell (AGB). Through his research, using the American School for the Deaf enrollment as his initial database, he tracked surnames of deaf people and “soon found that practically every family in New England with a history of deafness was in some way connected with the early settlers of Martha’s Vineyard, but he was unable to account for the fact that a deaf parent did not always have deaf children, and so he abandoned the study” (Groce, 1985, p. 2). Two outcomes of AGB’s work are the negative expansion of genetics research in play today and the positive observation that “Martha’s Vineyard offers what I feel to be a good example of the way in which a community adapts1 to a hereditary disorder” (p. 2).

Groce states, “In modern society the emphasis has been on having ‘handicapped’ individuals adapt to the greater society. But the perception of a handicap, with its associated physical and social limitations, is tempered by the community in which it is found” (p. 3). As a result of the islanders’ acceptance, the deaf were easily integrated into Vineyard life. One interviewee responded, “You see, everyone here spoke sign language” (p. 3)—thus, the title of this paper and Groce’s other texts.

The MV islanders adapted to what we see as a “handicap” today, not with a view toward correcting the handicap but with a view toward “adapting” the environment to accommodate access not only for the “handicapped” but for everyone. Because deaf and hearing in the community learned signed language, the benefit to all is bilingualism. For all the islanders who learned signed language in childhood, it played an important role in community life for all adults, not just for the deaf. Deaf people were so integral to the community that most, if not all, the “up-islanders”2 carried out most of their interactions in signed language. The deaf of the island “were never excluded”—if anything, they were included in all the affairs of the island.

Deaf people owned land for farming, created businesses for trade, became fishermen, worked alongside hearing islanders, married, and had children. Some of their partners were deaf, and some were hearing. Community gatherings both formal and informal included the deaf and included signed language as part of everyday life, and so it was seen as nothing unusual. Groce points out that including the deaf was so normal that if a deaf or hearing person missed something that was said, they would simply restate the communication for that person. This “participation of the deaf in all day-to-day work and play situations” is juxtaposed with the “manner in which those handicapped by deafness were treated in the United States during the same period” (p. 4). At times, even the hearing communicated with each other in signed language. For example, workers on a fishing boat used signed language when noise or distance interfered with using spoken language. Code switching also

1 Italics are my emphasis.
2 Up-island refers to the section of MV where many of the deaf people lived.
occurred in many circumstances, when hearing people would insert signs or signed phrases within spoken sentences. These were normal occurrences within bilingual populations.

Most importantly, deaf people “were on an equal footing, both socially and economically, with the hearing members of the community, and because they held town offices, married, raised families, and left legal and personal documents, there must have existed some sort of sign language system that allowed full communication with family, friends, and neighbors” (p. 5). Treating the deaf as equal participants in the community did not appear to engender American Sign Language (ASL) as good or bad: It was just natural. Interestingly, as part of this natural acceptance, there did not seem to be any mention of the “mourning stages” of acceptance of a deaf child, as today’s professionals have proposed as necessary. Today’s professionals have been influenced by many researchers to believe that hearing parents of deaf children are required to pass through stages of acceptance of their deaf child much like those in the grieving process following the death of a loved one. There is no mention by the MV islanders that having a deaf child was seen as a burden or a negative circumstance in one’s family. All that was needed was for everyone to learn signed language, thereby eliminating a major barrier to learning language. The fact that the deaf islanders participated equally in community affairs demonstrates that having full access to a signed language allowed one to develop and learn enough information to function as typical adults—people who marry, have families, raise children, work (in a trade or profession), pay taxes, and eventually die. These are the expectations of a life well lived. The environment of the island allowed deaf and hearing people to function within the expected social norms of the community.

It is not clear how a signed language first began on MV, but it does present the notion that humans are innately disposed to learn a language, whether that language is signed or spoken. Groce’s work substantiates the fact that ASL existed long before the establishment of the American School for the Deaf in 1817. She also suggests the past and present existence of a number of “distinct” signed languages within the United States. This assertion is somewhat complicated because she is using signed languages as a generic term, which I believe would include the signing used by Native Americans. Her evidence for distinct signed languages is drawn from the stated inability of some islanders to understand current or modern ASL. This situation would not be evidence for a different language but more supportive of a dialect variation, similar to that seen in the writing of Old English scripts. Old English texts are not easily comprehended today but are still considered English. Because of technology and mobility, modern ASL has become a standard dialect. Dialect variation exists, but none is so different as to not be understood by most fluent deaf signers. Modern ASL is heavily influenced by French Sign Language (FSL). All languages are influenced by other languages, and ASL is no different. First, technological terminology and concepts have rapidly expanded vocabulary in the United States. This increase in new vocabulary is no different for the deaf. For example, as terminology expands in English, its new meanings are incorporated into ASL. As new concepts are developed, new terminology or signs that are incorporated are usually based on already known signs related to the concepts. The new signs are developed and adopted by the community. Secondly, in the United States, and probably many other countries, the expansion of signed-language use by the hearing requires adaptation and register variation by deaf signers to accommodate these new signers. This interaction may introduce new concepts beyond technology. Finally, with the push by hearing educators to modify and create artificial signs as those signs are learned by young deaf students, acquisition principles are implemented that modify these artificial signs to make them fit into linguistic framework of ASL. As with any language, signed or spoken, influences from within and without the language affect its evolution.

What this article quantifies is that languages require users to survive. The current trend to avoid exposing deaf children to a signed language affects future users. As users of a language diminish, fewer and fewer deaf children are exposed to signed-language input. This reduction in exposure can lead to language death. The positive side of the future of signed languages is the increase in younger generations’ interest in them. Ironically, signed language’s expanded use among the hearing may influence future generations of medical and educational professionals to see that becoming bilingual can be very advantageous for the deaf of the future.

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3 I purposely did not use normal, as it engenders too much individual definition.
"Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language"¹

Nora Groce

University College London

For many generations on Martha’s Vineyard, deafness was no bar to a full social life.

The fifth of April, 1715, had not been a good day for Judge Samuel Sewell of Boston. On his way to the island of Martha’s Vineyard there had been trouble finding a boat to cross Nantucket Sound. The vessel then lay for hours without wind, and once it was across, the horses had to be pushed overboard to swim for shore on their own. Sewell and his company reached shore at dusk—cold, hungry, and in bad humor. Finding a group of local fishermen nearby, the judge engaged one of them to guide him to Edgartown and later noted in his diary: “We were ready to be offended that an Englishman . . . in the company spake not a word to us. But,” he continued by way of explanation, “it seems he is deaf and dumb.”

This Englishman was indeed deaf, as were two of his seven children. His is the first recorded case of what we now know to be a form of inherited deafness that was to appear consistently within this island population for more than 250 years and affect dozens of individuals. Probably one or several of the small number of settlers who originally populated the area brought with them a trait for hereditary deafness. As long as the “gene pool” remained limited in the small island population, this trait appeared with high frequency in subsequent generations. Put another way, the founders of this isolated society had a greater likelihood of perpetuating the trait for congenital deafness than if they had been part of a larger, changing population.

Martha’s Vineyard offers what I feel to be a good example of the way in which a community adapts to a hereditary disorder. Lying some five miles off the southeastern coast of Massachusetts, the island was first settled by Europeans in the early 1640s. The population, of predominantly English stock with some admixture of indigenous Wampanoag Indian, expanded rapidly, owing to a tremendously high birthrate. Families that had fifteen to twenty children were not uncommon and twenty-five to thirty not unheard of. Although several hundred households are listed in the census records of the mid-eighteenth century, only about thirty surnames are to be found, and during the next century and a half only a handful more were added to the original group of names.

After the first generation, marriage “off-island” was rare. While Vineyard men sailed around the world on whaleships, merchantmen, and fishing vessels, they almost invariably returned home to marry local girls and settle down. Women married off-island even less frequently than did the men. Contact with the mainland was said to be more sporadic than with foreign countries. In the nineteenth century, islanders claimed that more of their men had been to China than to Boston, only eighty miles away. Even today, many islanders have never been to the island of Nantucket, barely eight miles to the east.

Throughout then seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, marriage patterns on the island followed the customs of any small New England community. Most of the islanders, however, can trace their descent to the same small nucleus of original settlers, indicating that although they were unaware of it, considerable “inbreeding” took place. The result was during these two and a half centuries, within a population averaging little more than 3,100 individuals, hereditary deafness occurred at a rate many times that of the national population. For example, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, an estimated one out of every 2,730 Americans was born deaf. On Martha’s Vineyard the rate was closer to one out of every 155. But even this figure does not accurately represent the distribution of deafness on the Vineyard.

Marriages were usually contracted between members of the same village, creating smaller groups within the island’s population characterized by a higher frequency of deafness. The greatest concentration occurred in one village on the western part of the island where, by my analysis, within a population of 500, one in every twenty-five individuals was deaf. And even there the distribution was not uniform, for in one area of the village during this time period, one out of every four persons was born deaf.

Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language

The high rate of deafness on the island brought only occasional comment from island visitors over the years. Because most of the island deaf lived in the more remote areas of the island, few off-islanders were aware of their presence. Vineyarders themselves, used to a sizable deaf population, saw nothing unusual in this, and many assumed that all communities had a similar number of deaf members. Almost nothing exists in the written records to indicate who was or was not deaf, and indeed, only a passing reference made by an older islander directed my attention to the fact that there had been any deaf there at all.

While most of my information on island deafness has been obtained from the living oral history of islanders now in their seventies, eighties, and nineties, part of my genealogical data was acquired from the only other study of this deaf population. I came to know of it when an 86-year-old woman I was interviewing recalled that her mother had mentioned a "teacher of the deaf from Boston" at one time taking an interest in the island deaf. This "teacher of the deaf" turned out to be Alexander Graham Bell, who, having recently invented the telephone, turned his attention back to his lifelong interest in deafness research. Concerned with the question of heredity as it related to deafness, Bell began a major research project in early 1880s, which was never completed.

Nineteenth-century scholars, without the benefit of Mendel's concept of unit factor inheritance (which only received widespread circulation at the turn of the century, although it had been published in the 1860s), were at a loss to explain why some but not all children of a deaf parent were themselves deaf. Selecting New England because of the older and unusually complete records available, Bell believed that by tracing genealogy of every family with two or more deaf children, he could establish some pattern for the inheritance of deafness. He soon found that practically every family in New England with a history of deafness was in some way connected with the early settlers of Martha's Vineyard, but he was unable to account for the fact that a deaf parent did not always have deaf children and so he abandoned the study. Although Bell never published his material, he left dozens of genealogical charts that have proved invaluable for my research—particularly because they corroborate the information I have been able to collect from the oral history of the older islanders.

Since Bell's time, scientists have found, through the construction and analysis of family pedigrees and the use of mathematical models, that congenital deafness may result from several causes: spontaneous mutations involving one or more genes; an already established dominant or recessive inheritance, as Mendel demonstrated; or factors otherwise altering normal development of the ear and its pathways to the brain. Human populations, of course, cannot be studied with the same exactness as a laboratory experiment. However, the appearance of apparently congenitally deaf individuals is far too frequent on Martha's Vineyard to be more coincidence, and the evidence collected thus far points to a recessive mode of inheritance.

While the genetic nature of a hereditary disorder in small populations is something that both anthropologists and geneticists have studied, there is another question, rarely addressed, that is of equal importance: How does the population of a community in which a hereditary disorder exists adjust to that disorder—particularly one as prominent as deafness? In modern society the emphasis has been on having "handicapped" individuals adapt to the greater society. But the perception of a handicap, with its associated physical and social limitations, is tempered by the community in which it is found. The manner in which the deaf of Martha's Vineyard were treated provides an interesting example of how one community responded to this type of situation. "How," I asked my informants, "were the island deaf able to communicate with you when they could not speak?" "Oh," I was told, "there was no problem at all. You see, everyone here spoke sign language."

From the late seventeenth century to the early years of the twentieth, islanders, particularly those from the western section where the largest number of deaf individuals lived, maintained a bilingual speech community based on spoken English and sign language. What is of particular interest is that the use of sign language played an important role in day-to-day life.

Islanders acquired a knowledge of sign language in childhood. They were usually taught by parents, with further reinforcement coming from the surrounding community, both hearing and deaf. For example, recalling how she learned a particular sign, one elderly woman explained:

When I was a little girl, I knew many of the signs, and the manual alphabet of course, but I didn't know how to say "Merry Christmas," and I wanted to tell Mr. M. "Merry Christmas." So I asked Mrs. M., his wife. She could hear and she showed me how. And so I wished Mr. M. "Merry Christmas"—and he was just so delighted.

This woman then described how she taught her son, now in his late seventies, how to speak the language:

When my son was perhaps three years old, I taught him to say in sign language "the little cat and dog and baby." This man, who was deaf, he used to like to go down to our little general store and see people come and go. One day when I went down there, I took my son there and I said to him, "Go over and say 'how-do-you-do' to Mr. T.," the deaf man. So he went right over, and then I told him to tell Mr. T. so-and-so—a cat, a dog, and whatever.
And wasn't Mr. T. tickled! Oh, he was so pleased to know a little bit of a boy like that was telling him all those things, and so he just taught my son a few more words. That's how he learned. That's how we all learned.

Particularly in the western section of the island, if an immediate member of the family was not deaf, a neighbor, friend, or close relative of a friend was likely to be. Practically all my “up-island” informants above the age of seventy remembered signs, a good indication of the extent to which the language was known and used. In this section, and to a lesser extent in the other villages on the island, sign language formed an integral part of all communications. For example, all informants remembered the deaf participating freely in discussions. One remarked:

If there were several people present and there was a deaf man or woman in the crowd, he'd take upon himself the discussion of anything, jokes or news or anything like that. They always had a part in it, they were never excluded.

As in all New England communities, gathering around the potbellied stove or on the front porch of what served as a combination general store and post office provided a focal point for stories, news, and gossip. Many of the people I have talked to distinctly remember the deaf members of the community in this situation. As one man recalled:

We would sit around and wait for the mail to come in and just talk. And the deaf would be there, everyone would be there. And they were part of the crowd, and they were accepted. They were fishermen and farmers and everything else. And they wanted to find out the news just as much as the rest of us. And oftentimes people would tell stories and make signs at the same time so everyone could follow him together. Of course, sometimes, if there were more deaf than hearing there, everyone would speak sign language—just to be polite, you know.

The use of sign was not confined to small group discussions. It also found its way into assembled crowds. For example, one gentleman told me:

They would come to prayer meetings; most all of them were regular church people, you know. They would come when people offered testimonials, and they would get up in front of the audience and stand there and give a whole lecture in sign. No one translated it to the audience because everyone knew what they were saying. And if there was anyone who missed something somewhere, somebody sitting near them would be able to tell them about it.

The deaf were so integral a part of the community that at town meetings up-island, a hearing person would stand at the side of the hall and cue the deaf in sign to let them know what vote was coming up next, thus allowing them to keep right on top of things. The participation of the deaf in all day-to-day work and play situations contrasted with the manner in which those handicapped by deafness were treated in the United States during the same period.

Sign language on the island was not restricted to those occasions when deaf and hearing were together, but was used on a regular basis between the hearing as well. For example, sign language was used on boats to give commands and among fishermen out in open water to discuss their catch, I was told:

Fishermen, hauling pots outside in the Sound or off Gay Head, when they would be heaven knows how far apart, would discuss how the luck was running—all that sort of thing. These men could talk and hear all right, but it'd be too far to yell.

Indeed, signs were used any place that distance prohibited talking in a normal voice. For example, one man remembered:

Jim had a shop down on the shore of Tisbury Pond, and his house was a ways away, up on the high land. When Trudy, his wife, wanted to tell Jim something, she'd come to the door, blow a fish horn, and Jim would step outside. He'd say, “Excuse me, Trudy wants me for something”; then she'd make signs to tell him what she needed done.
On those occasions when speaking was out of place, such as in church, school, or at some public gatherings, the hearing communicated through signs. Such stories as the following are common: “Ben and his brother could both talk and hear, but I’ve seen them sitting across from each other in town meetings or in church and telling each other funny stories in sign language.”

Island people frequently maintained social distance and a sense of distinct identity in the presence of tourists by exchanging comments about them in sign language. The occurrence of what linguists call code switching from speech to sign also seems to have been used in certain instances. For example, I was told:

People would start off a sentence in speaking and then finish it off in sign language, especially if they were saying something dirty. The punch line would often be in sign language. If there was a bunch of guys standing around the general store telling a [dirty] story and a woman walked in, they’d turn away from her and finish the story in sign language.

Perhaps the following anecdote best illustrates the unique way island sign language was integral to all aspects of life:

My mother was in the New Bedford hospital—had an operation—and Father went over in his boat and lived aboard his boat and went to the hospital to see her every night. Now the surgeon, when he left him in her room, said they mustn’t speak, Father couldn’t say a word to her. So he didn’t. But they made signs for about half an hour and Mother got so worked up, they had to send Father out, wouldn’t let him stay any longer.

Sign language or rather sign languages—for even within this country there exist a number of distinct languages and dialects—are languages in their own right, systems of communication different from the spoken languages used by hearing members of the same community. It has often been noted that American Sign Language, the sign system commonly used among the deaf in the United States today, is influenced by French Sign Language, introduced to America in 1817. The data from Martha’s Vineyard, however, clearly support the hypothesis, made by the linguist James Woodward, that local sign language systems were in use in America long before this. By 1817 (the year the American School for the Deaf was founded in Hartford, Connecticut), deaf individuals on Martha’s Vineyard had been actively participating in island society for well over a century. Because they were on an equal footing, both socially and economically, with the hearing members of the community, and because they held town offices, married, raised families, and left legal and personal documents, there must have existed some sort of sign language system that allowed full communication with family, friends, and neighbors.

It may prove difficult to reconstruct the original sign language system used on the island during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but study of this question is currently under way. Whatever the exact nature of the original language, we know that it later grew to acquire many aspects of the more widely used American Sign Language, as increasing numbers of deaf island children were sent to the school in Hartford during the nineteenth century. The combination of the indigenous sign system with the more standardized American Sign Language seems to have produced a sign language that was, in many respects, unique to the island of Martha’s Vineyard. The most common remark made by islanders who still remember the language is that they find it very difficult or are completely unable to understand the sign language spoken by off-islanders or the translations for the deaf that are beginning to be seen on television.

The use of sign language as an active system of communication lessened as the number of individuals in the community with hereditary deafness gradually disappeared, the last few dying in the 1940s and early 1950s. This decrease in the number of deaf can be attributed to a shift in marriage patterns that began in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when both hearing and deaf islanders began to marry off-islanders. The introduction of new genes into the once small gene pool has reduced the chance of reappearance of “island deafness.”

As the number of islanders born deaf dwindled, younger generations no longer took an interest in learning sign language, and the older generations rarely had the need to make use of it. Today, very few people are left who can speak the language fluently, although bits and pieces of it can be recalled by several dozen of the oldest islanders. A few signs are still kept alive among those who knew the language and on a few of their fishing boats. As one gentleman, well along in his seventies, told me recently:

You know, strangely enough, there’s still vestiges of that left in the older families around here. Instinctively you make some such movement, and it means something to you, but it doesn’t mean anything to the one you’re talking to.
This is a reprint of an original article published in Natural History Magazine in 1981. The first in a series of publications by me on hereditary deafness on Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts, my Vineyard research was the basis of my PhD dissertation at Brown University. After this publication, I went on find that the island’s hereditary deafness could be traced to the English county of Kent in the 1660s and to hypothesize that this original 17th-century rural Kentish sign language may have combined with French Sign Language at the Hartford School in the early 19th century, to contribute to the new and evolving ASL. Summary of the full thesis was published by me in 1985 as “Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha’s Vineyard” (Harvard University Press).

In the years since publication of this article, the fields of sign-language studies, deaf studies, disability studies, global disability studies, and allied disciplines have all moved forward significantly. The “social model” of disability and the bio-psychosocial model of disability are also now widely used to describe points raised in this article. I am now a director of the International Disability Research Centre at University College London and am pleased to have this paper reprinted, but I am keenly aware of all the important studies and publications that have appeared in the intervening years. I encourage readers to seek out this important and growing body of research and advocacy.

—Nora Ellen Groce

Assimilating and Differentiating Societies and Their Relationship to Genetic Patterning: Does It Take a “Them” to Make an “Us”? 

Judy Kegl
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In their article “Origins of the American Deaf World,” Lane and colleagues dig into primary sources available in our scattered historical record in the way that Lane made his personal scientific trademark. This time, the authors build a picture of the emergence of a thriving deaf community in New England and, by extension, to the United States as a whole. But that’s not all there is to it. The authors look in a more nuanced way at three communities that constituted considerable input to this deaf community—families of deaf people from the Henniker, New Hampshire area; from Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts; and from the Sandy River area of Maine, who relocated from the Vineyard after the American Revolution.

Lane et al.’s account of the emergence of an organized social community and identity on regional and national levels is more complex than the general account that typically attributes the emergence of the American Deaf Community to the founding of the American Asylum for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut (1817), and to the creolization of multiple preexisting signed languages, including Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language, among others, with the sign language brought to the school by Laurent Clerc and Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet to form what we now know as American Sign Language (ASL). To get a perspective on the communicative milieu in Hartford in those early years, we need to look more closely at the social contexts from which the students at that first American Asylum for the Deaf came. Lane et al. look at the cultural as well as the genetic underpinnings of three communities that contributed to the emergence of the deaf community in New England and find them to be very different in nature—different in a way that speaks to the nature of emergent communities in general.

I am honored to be able to discuss this paper. I was already living and working in Maine when Lane contacted me for help in finding individuals who could do the leg work in the Sandy River area to turn up documents related to the deaf population from the Vineyard who had settled there. Two of our local interpreters who lived in the area, Shannon Locke and her mother, Sherry Walrath, took on the task. It was fascinating to see this side of the project. It is also worth looking back on the formidable task that the authors of this article undertook. I was at Northeastern with Lane when he was writing When the Mind Hears (1989) and recall the huge filing cabinets filled with the historical artifacts in French as well as in English that he amassed and drew upon to pull together that major opus—everything from dictionaries and historical treatises to census reports, birth and death records, clippings from newspaper articles, diaries, and personal letters. Each one required legwork to seek out and acquire. In preparation for this commentary, I talked with Locke about her work for this project. She described finding those times between her day job as an educational interpreter to drive sometimes hours to libraries, newspaper archives, churches, and town halls to track down any and all snippets of documented commentary on or by deaf individuals during those times that could indicate whether they were seen as and saw themselves as a distinct “class” or self-identified cultural community. Compare this with today: I was able to use this article to build for myself a family tree in Ancestry.com. With each individual’s name, within days I was able to verify the pedigrees presented in this article and expand upon them. With each new entry to the tree came a leaf, Ancestry.com’s symbol for “ancestry hints,” offering potential other family members or records related to that individual. While I could expand the pedigree, I found no inaccuracies in terms of heritage and deaf family members from what Lane et al. had acquired.

1 Notice that I do not say LSF (langue de signes française) here, because what was implemented at that first school in Hartford was initially more of an Anglicized version of signed French adapted to use in an English setting (see Kegl, 2008)—hence, our persisting initialized signs for SEE (voir), LOOK AT (chercher), TOILET (toilet), and so forth that are not found in LSF. Nonetheless, LSF came to Hartford in the person of Clerc and others who followed him and certainly played a major role in the emergence of ASL.
While I knew quite a bit about the Martha’s Vineyard case, having participated with Joan Cottle Poole-Nash and the New England Sign Language Society in the initial interviews with her great-grandmother (in her 90s), grandfather (in his 70s), and his friends who had been fishermen/lobstermen in the Chilmark community, I knew little about the contribution made by the community in Henniker and even less about the community closer to home in Sandy River. Insight into these communities is a critical piece that had been missing from our understanding of the origins of our American deaf world. Whether deaf people in contact do or do not cohere into a distinct deaf community within the larger social is critical to understanding the origins of signed languages.

Some catalyst appears to be needed to lead deaf individuals to cohere as a separate class within a wider community. In 1986, I was invited to submit a paper to a special session at a conference in Cardiff, Wales, on the sociolinguistics of signed languages. My paper was called “Alienation as an Impetus for Social Cohesion: What if Everyone Here Really Didn’t Speak Sign Language?” It was triggered by observations made by Poole-Nash in her research on Martha’s Vineyard, my own study of the precursor contact gesturing that served as the input to the emergence of Nicaraguan Sign Language, and my experience doing a pedgewise with Romy Spitz on the culture of deaf individuals on Corn Island in Nicaragua, where a walk down the airport runway, a large social gathering place on the island, would allow one to see hearing and deaf lobstermen apparently “signing” to each other with ease. I challenged the notion that this “signing” was a fully fledged signed language and raised the possibility that the majority of these utopian situations where everyone signed involved something closer to bumping up a home sign system to the community level—a possibility that I believe should be considered for many of the village signed languages that have been termed, perhaps prematurely, “young languages.”

In my first contact with the vocational school for the deaf in Villa Libertad in Managua (1986), it was striking that the students (all in their late teens) and faculty would to the untrained eye appear to be “signing.” Among the population was a high proportion of hearing students diagnosed as having dyslexia. When I first arrived at the vocational school, all the students (both hearing and deaf) interacted with each other silently, using an elaborate gesturing system that, while highly communicative, evaded systematic linguistic description. The teachers tended to speak with some gestural support and taught vocational skills through demonstration and copying. The communication was more of a trade jargon between contact gesturing systems. Sign choices were variable, even among an individual’s own signing. There were multisign utterances and some conventionality, but individuals would sign actions by using their whole bodies as agent/actor, and the action gestures (while combinable in an utterance) tended to have a single participant role expressed for each (Kegl et al., 1999). As I read about “young, village sign(ed) languages,” similar characteristics seem to be mentioned.

As reported for Martha’s Vineyard (Poole-Nash, 2014), individuals in this vocational school community were not singled out as deaf versus hearing, nor did they identify as such. It truly appeared to be an elaborated communication system and social network akin to home sign bumped up to a community level. Rather than lumping village signed languages or the school-based blended hearing and deaf communities, as in Villa Libertad, into the pool of languages in general, they need to be distinguished from both family-based home-sign systems and family-based signed languages. They are deserving of special attention in their own right and may be a key to understanding the process of language emergence. In this article, Lane et al. are focusing our field on exactly this critical enterprise in their discussion of “assimilative and differentiating societies,” bringing to the table genetic, genealogical, historical, and sociolinguistic evidence. Some of their genetic findings are complemented by a variety of studies on how assimilative communities with a recessive gene for deafness function to maintain the use of signing and may actually indicate a marriage preference for signing as opposed to hearing status (Gialluisi et al., 2013). The nature of that signing is the question.

Despite decades of intermarriage on the Vineyard among populations carrying a recessive gene for deafness that yielded high proportions of deaf members of the Chilmark community, marriages of deaf people between other deaf people (assortive mating) or even deaf children of deaf parents (vertical transmission) were rare. As a result, while at any time deaf individuals lived in the community at large, successive generations of deaf family members were rare. Diaries and letters of the era refer to deaf members of the community in no way that singles them out as a unique social class within that island community. I saw a similar lack of differentiation when studying the members of the culture on Corn Island in Nicaragua. When first discovered, deaf individuals living literally blocks from one another would make no effort to seek each other out.

2 These were not actually the initial interviews done in a research capacity. Interestingly, while William Labov was on the Vineyard in 1961 doing his master’s degree research for study of a socially motivated vowel change among on-islanders and off-islanders, among his subjects was Donald Lamar Poole, a native member of the Menemsha/Chilmark fishing community and Poole-Nash’s grandfather. While we were videotaping him, eliciting any signs and information that he could remember, he noted that this felt much like when that strange little man decades before was asking him and his fishermen friends how they pronounced different words and collected stories from him. He noted that Labov had asked about the signs as well. Sadly, when I contacted Labov about this, he said that he had indeed taken copious notes on the subject at the time but never ended up writing about it. The data were in his filing cabinet and, sadly, destroyed in a flood.

3 For an extensive review of home sign and the richness of communication that it can convey, see Morford (1996).
In contrast, in the Henniker community, a dominant genetic trait was expressed, and nearly every generation had deaf children of deaf parents. Not only did many deaf-deaf marriages occur; comments in the social media of the time also indicate a deaf identity and community. The Gazette’s report about a large birthday party for Nahum Brown comments, almost apologetically, that while Thomas Brown's new wife, Sophia Sumner Curtis from Maine, was hearing, she knew sign language, and that one of the storytellers, although hearing, was a very good sign-maker. The public records all speak to a strong deaf community and deaf identity. This presence of a deaf identity and coherence as a deaf community is reinforced by the deaf organizations established by Brown and others in this community. The American Asylum for the Deaf in Hartford clearly contributed to this coherence, exporting deaf teachers to deaf schools throughout the country, but initially those individuals appear almost overwhelmingly to have come from these genetically dominant family groups with successive generations of deaf family members. And when members of the Martha’s Vineyard and Sandy River, Maine, communities intermarried with members of the Henniker community, they typically relocated to that culturally deaf center in Henniker or to the area surrounding the American Asylum for the Deaf in Hartford.

The community least explored in this article is the one in Maine, including 30 towns established by the Vineyard families carrying the recessive GJB2 gene, who resettled there shortly after the American Revolution crippled the whaling industry and free land was offered (Poole, 1976), as well as by four independent deaf family groups of different genetic heritage, including that of Brown's second wife, Curtis. I am inspired by this article and the new resources available for online genealogical research to pick up the gauntlet, and I have convinced Locke to join me. I encourage any and all to do so as well both here and with the many village signed languages and emergent languages throughout the world.

References


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4 With five deaf siblings, one would expect that she would.
Origins of the American Deaf-World: Assimilating and Differentiating Societies and Their Relation to Genetic Patterning

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The Deaf-World in the United States has major roots in a triangle of New England Deaf communities that flourished early in the nineteenth century: Henniker, New Hampshire; Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts; and Sandy River Valley, Maine. The social fabric of these communities differed, a reflection of language and marriage practices that were underpinned, we hypothesize, by differences in genetic patterning. In order to evaluate that hypothesis, this article uses local records and newspapers, genealogies, the silent press, Edward Fay’s census of Deaf marriages (1898), and Alexander Graham Bell’s notebooks (1888) to illuminate the Henniker Deaf community for the first time and to build on prior work concerning the Vineyard community.

Henniker, New Hampshire

The first great American Deaf leader was Thomas Brown (1804–1886), who was born in Henniker, New Hampshire, thirteen years before the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb opened in Hartford, Connecticut, and who died in Henniker six years after the Congress of Milan. We begin with his story.

Thomas Brown’s grandfather, also named Thomas, lived in Stow, Massachusetts, with his wife, eight daughters, and a son, Nahum—the first, as far as anyone knew, Deaf-Mute in the family (see Figure 1). The senior Thomas Brown was the grandson of Jabez Brown, who emigrated from England and settled in Concord, Massachusetts. Jabez’s son, Joseph, moved to Stow, where his son, Thomas, was born and raised, took up the trade of blacksmith, and in 1763 married Persis Gibson.

In 1785, fearing debtor’s prison, Thomas Brown set out by himself for Henniker, a virtual wilderness some hundred miles away where his wife’s family, former residents of Stow, had moved. Thomas had contracted a hard currency debt that he was unable to pay due to the rapidly depreciating value of colonial currency. His troubles stemmed from an abundance of “fiat money,” money printed by the colonies during the American Revolution that was not backed by coin. Because too much of this money was printed, Thomas’s money lost its value. According to his son, Nahum, he once took a bushel of fiat money and dumped it into a grain bin in the attic (Thwing, 1868). Increasingly lenders wanted repayment in British gold, pounds, or other hard currency. Thomas, not being able to repay his debt, fled to Henniker.

On arriving, Thomas made a clearing and built a log cabin that stood for nearly a century and came to be known as the Brown House. Then, according to one account, he sent word to Nahum, his 13-year-old Deaf son, to hitch two yoke of oxen to a sled, load the furniture and food, bundle his mother and sisters atop the load, and, armed with a goad, prod the oxen 100 miles through the snow to Henniker (it is not clear how he would have told Nahum to do this) (Thwing, 1868). According to another account, Nahum preceded his father to Henniker and was living with his uncle; it was his father, Thomas, who brought the family (Braddock, 1975; Cogswell, 1880).

The contemporaries of Thomas Brown Sr. described him as smart, energetic, and fond of books; in later years he held minor elected posts. His eight daughters—tall, blue-eyed, and good looking—were said to be brilliant, witty, and well educated; most became teachers. Neighbors and relatives had a harder time judging Nahum’s intellect since he was Deaf; he was called plucky, skillful as an axman and hunter, a model farmer, and a first-rate teamster of oxen and horses. Of course, no one thought of his becoming a teacher or even of his going to school.

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2 In this article, the authors use capital D in Deaf throughout, as they are writing about people who are culturally Deaf.
3 The primary sources for the pedigrees of which figures 1–3 are excerpts are Banks (1966); Gordon (1892); Cogswell (1880); Mayhew (1991); E. A. Fay’s census of Deaf marriages (Fay, 1898); the data forms for Fay’s census in the Gallaudet University Archives; and the records of the New England Historic Genealogical Society. The pedigrees are incomplete and may contain inaccuracies, as these sources occasionally contain conflicting information.
Figure 1: Excerpt from the genealogy of Jabez Brown and descendants in New Hampshire

Key:
- = Individual born hard of hearing who became Deaf
- = Genosanguineous marriage
- = Deaf person
= female
= male
= multiple kin

A single date indicates the birthdate.
Curiously, the first deed of land to the Browns that is recorded was 100 acres to Nahum, who was only 17 at the time. Perhaps his father could not afford to buy land some four years after moving to Henniker, and it was Nahum's mother's family that bought the land and gave it as a gift to Nahum, endeavoring to provide for their Deaf grandchild. The elder Thomas Brown died when he was 82—old enough to outlive two of his three wives; to attend the marriage of his son Nahum to Abiah Eastman, a hearing woman of the town; to witness the birth of their daughter, Persis, in 1800, and their son, Thomas, in 1804, both Deaf; and to hear of the opening of the first school for Deaf students—in Hartford in 1817. His grandson Thomas would enroll there five years later.

As a young man in Henniker, Nahum did not wear shoes; in order to chop wood, he stood on warm planks in the doorway of his family cabin. The many chores he performed as the sole male child with eight sisters prepared him for a life of responsibility and hard labor. According to his son Thomas, he worked hard from dawn to dusk and was known as a good parent and neighbor (T. Brown, 1860). He never learned to read or write, however, and communicated in pantomime or “natural sign.” His wife served as his interpreter and aided him in such activities as buying and selling cattle.

Like his father, Nahum had a long life, dying at age 88. He raised his two Deaf children, Persis and Thomas, and saw them marry and raise his five grandchildren, three of them Deaf. The following generation brought nine great-grandchildren, five of them Deaf. In an era when being born Deaf was most often attributed to maternal fright (Groce, 1983), Nahum and his family must surely have been puzzled.

Nahum saw his son Thomas become educated, among the first Deaf-Mutes in the nation to do so, and emerge as a preeminent Deaf leader, beginning at midcentury. Five years before Nahum's death, a group of Thomas's friends gathered in the Brown household to draft a constitution for the first enduring Deaf organization in the United States, the New England Gallaudet Association of Deaf Mutes. Nahum's sight had begun to fail. He suffered severe headaches and became blind first in one eye and then the other. “During his helpless and blind situation,” son Thomas related, “he would sign for [us] to come and see what he wanted. With his arms moving slowly, he understood the movement of our hands” (T. Brown, 1860, p. 12; Swett, 1859). Just before his death, he signaled for his wife to come near; with her hands upon him, he passed peacefully away.

When Thomas Brown was 18—a slender, powerful man with a large head, gray eyes, and a facial tic from a childhood encounter with an ox—he enrolled at the American Asylum. The town of Henniker annually voted funds to assist Thomas in paying his educational expenses until the state legislature undertook to pay for Deaf-Mute pupils from New Hampshire (T. L. Brown, 1888). Thomas and his sister Persis, four years older, were both considered bright—Thomas was “shrewd, wild but not vicious”—and both could no doubt have attended the school, but Persis was bound by a marriage contract to a hearing carpenter from Henniker, Bela Mitchell Swett, and was not free to go (Childs, 1861).

Thomas studied under the founders of American Deaf education, the Deaf Frenchman Laurent Clerc and hearing American Thomas Gallaudet, and under an intellectual leader of the profession, Harvey Peet, who would later direct the New York School for the Deaf (Lane, 1984). Thomas, we are told, was an excellent student; at the completion of his five-year course, he agreed to stay on for two years as monitor and carpentry instructor. However, at the end of that period, 25 years old, he declined to become a teacher at the Ohio School for the Deaf and returned instead to Henniker to help his parents work their 123 acres. (After the death of his father and a protracted family wrangle over the settlement of Thomas Sr.'s estate upon his third wife, Nahum had sold his house and land in what later became the center of town and had moved to a farm in West Henniker in 1825 while his son Thomas was away at school in Hartford.)

In view of Thomas's tireless efforts in later years to organize Deaf people, to honor their leaders past and present, and to promote their interests, one wonders to what extent and in what ways his years at the American Asylum developed his early consciousness of Deaf people as a distinct social group. The Central Society of the Deaf in Paris, with its annual banquets honoring Deaf language, history, and leaders, began shortly after Thomas left school, so he could not have learned about it while he was a pupil of Clerc's, although no doubt he learned of it subsequently, for it was clear to American educators of Deaf students that their methods derived from the French, and transatlantic visits were made in both directions.

Perhaps the sense of Deaf people as a distinct group was in the very air at the American Asylum in the 1820s. After all, a single language was emerging that connected Deaf people despite wide differences among them in region, family circumstances, isolation, and former methods of communication; with it, a sense of we-who-use-this-language might naturally have emerged. Indeed, the first initiative for creating a Deaf state was organized by a group of seniors at the American Asylum just two years after Thomas left (Chamberlain, 1858). It was, however, short-lived.

Chilmark, Massachusetts

One of the scattered enclaves of Deaf people that were gathered and to some extent amalgamated by the schooling of their number at the American Asylum was the Deaf community of Martha's Vineyard; it was indeed the largest single source
of pupils at the asylum for several years. While at school, Thomas met Mary Smith, whose family came from the Vineyard, where Deaf people—especially in some remote communities “up island,” such as Tisbury and Chilmark—were quite common. Three years after his return to his father’s farm in Henniker, Thomas made the journey to the coast, where he took a boat for the Vineyard, six miles off the Massachusetts shore, and then traveled a day on horseback to arrive at the village of Chilmark, where he and Mary were married (April 1832) in the presence of her many Deaf and hearing relatives and friends.

Mary Smith’s mother, Sally Cottle, was hearing; she was the daughter of Silas Cottle (hearing) and Jerusha Tilton (Deaf; see Figure 2 for Mary’s maternal ancestry). Jerusha’s mother and father (Mary’s great-grandparents) were cousins and descendants of Governor Thomas Mayhew, who bought Martha’s Vineyard in 1640 from the two patentees under royal charter then disputing ownership of the island. Jerusha’s father, a Tilton, also traced his island ancestry back to one Samuel Tilton, who had come to the Vineyard in 1673. Because the Tiltons early intermarried with the Skiffes, Mary was also descended from James Skiff, who in 1699 purchased land on the Vineyard, settled in Tisbury, and sold the remaining tracts there to friends. Jerusha’s maternal great-grandmother was James Skiff’s daughter.

Mary’s father, Mayhew Smith, was hearing, but her paternal grandfather, Elijah Smith, was Deaf and married a hearing woman; he was descended from the island’s first Smith, John Smith, who arrived in 1653 (see Figure 3 for Mary’s paternal family tree). Mary had eight hearing siblings and one older Deaf sister, Sally, who also attended the American Asylum. Sally married a hearing cousin, Hariph Mayhew, who had seven Deaf and three hearing siblings. Mary’s brother, Capt. Austin Smith, married Levinia Poole (she was hearing and also descended from Samuel Tilton); they had four children, two hearing and two Deaf. One of their Deaf children, Freeman, married a deaf cousin, Deidama West. (There is no record of the other three children marrying.) Deidama had three Deaf siblings and four hearing. Deidama’s parents (mother, Deaf; father, hearing) were distant cousins, both descended from Gov. Thomas Mayhew, and her father was descended from the first recorded Deaf person on the island, Jonathan Lambert, a carpenter who arrived from Barnstable in 1694.

In her work on the Vineyard Deaf population, Groce identified 72 Deaf individuals, of whom 63 could trace their ancestry to James Skiff, 32 to Samuel Tilton, and 9 to Jonathan Lambert (Groce, 1985). Most of the Deaf people on the island had all three of these colonists in their pedigrees. Remarkably, Groce found that all three families were linked before they arrived on the Vineyard. In 1634 a minister named Lothrop and some 200 members of his congregation and their servants, all from parishes in an area in the English county of Kent known as the Weald, arrived in Boston harbor. They made their way to Scituate, where half the population was from the Weald, and then to Barnstable on Cape Cod. In 1670 several of these families moved to the Vineyard when James Skiff, who was from Kent, sold land in Tisbury. In the ensuing decades, more of these families—Tiltons, Lamberts, and others—moved across Vineyard Sound, settling in the Chilmark area (Banks, 1966). Because of the very early appearance of Deaf people on the island and because not all the known Deaf Vineyarders can be traced to a common Vineyard ancestor, Groce concludes that the island’s Deaf heritage, and thus Mary Smith’s, originated in the Weald and arrived on the island with the colonizing families.

The colonizers were drawn to the Vineyard by availability of farmland, the long growing season, the surrounding sea that abounded in lobster and fish, and the numerous ponds, where game birds were to be found, along with fish and shellfish of vast variety. The sandy soil was adapted to sheep raising. The Indians were friendly and taught the islanders how to catch whales—every family on the Vineyard had a member aboard a whaler by the time of Thomas’s marriage (Freeman, 1807; Poole, 1976; Mayhew, 1956). In 1700, 400 people lived on the Vineyard; the population stopped growing about 1800 at some 3,000. Not surprisingly for this relatively isolated community whose ancestors were from the same parishes, most people married someone to whom they were already related and who was from their own village on the island (Groce, 1980). A symptom of this practice was the proliferation of the same family names: An 1850 census counted 132 Mayhews and 87 Tiltons in Tisbury and Chilmark (Groce, 1985). In 1807, 32 names composed three-fourths of the island population (Groce, 1981).

Mary Smith’s marriage to a man from off-island was thus an anomaly, one brought about by the opening of the American Asylum and the desire of families on the Vineyard to see their Deaf children educated. The number of Deaf people gradually rose, peaking at 45 around the time of Thomas’s marriage. Groce (1985) estimates that, later in the nineteenth century, 1 in every 155 people on the Vineyard was born Deaf (0.7 percent), almost 20 times the estimate for the nation at large (1 in 2,730, or 0.04 percent). An 1830 census found 12 Deaf people in Chilmark; no doubt Mary Smith was one of them. The town’s population was 694; hence 1.7 percent of the town was Deaf, whereas only 0.01 percent of the population in the neighboring islands was Deaf—a ratio of more than 100 to 1 (Burnet, 1835; Deaf and Dumb, 1895).

The marriage of Thomas Brown and Mary Smith was anomalous in a second sense: Unlike the practice on the mainland, most Deaf people on the island married hearing people. On the mainland only about 20 percent of Deaf people’s marriages were to hearing people; on the Vineyard it was closer to 65 percent—and it was even higher before the opening of the American Asylum (Groce, 1985). The high rate of mixed marriages on the Vineyard was probably a reflection of, and contributor to, a broader feature of life on the island—the blending of Deaf and hearing lives.
Figure 2: Excerpt from the Mayhew-Tilton-Skiffe-Lambert pedigrees as they relate to Mary Brown's maternal ascendants on Martha's Vineyard. Mary Smith, the wife of Thomas Brown, is marked by an arrow.
Like Mary Smith (and her Deaf grandmother, Jerusha), most children born Deaf on the Vineyard had two hearing parents, as well as many hearing siblings, the more so as birth rates were high on the island (Groce, 1980). Another reflection of and contributor to this blending was the widespread use of a sign language among both Deaf and hearing people, no doubt with varying degrees of fluency (Bahan, 1998). The language may have originally been British Sign Language brought over by the colonizers. When Martha’s Vineyard sign elicited from elderly hearing residents in 1977 were presented to a British Deaf signer, he identified 40 percent of the signs as British Sign Language cognates. (An ASL informant found 22 percent overlap [Bahan & Poole-Nash, 1995].) There have been twelve generations since Jonathan Lambert settled on the Vineyard, so Martha’s Vineyard Society for American Sign Language Journal, Vol. 4, No. 2 [2020], Art. 1

Figure 3: Excerpt from the Mayhew-Tilton-Skiffe-Lambert pedigrees as they relate to Mary Brown’s maternal ascendants on Martha’s Vineyard.
sign language has had lots of time to diverge from its origins, the more so because most Deaf children, like Mary Smith, were sent to the American Asylum, where they encountered other sign language practices, and most, unlike Mary, returned to the island.

Bahan and Poole-Nash maintain that Deaf people on the Vineyard were thoroughly assimilated and, as with Deaf people in the Mayan community studied by Johnson (1994), they valued their village more than they valued the company of other Deaf people: "Being Deaf itself is irrelevant, as Deaf people have access to everyone in the village" (Bahan & Poole-Nash, 1995, p. 19). In accord with this “village-first” value in assimilative societies, the Mayan villagers, according to Johnson, tended to identify first with their family, then with the village, and then with Mayan society. When Johnson gave a party for all the Deaf people in the village and their families, he learned that it was the first event in the village that singled out Deaf people. Similarly, Groce relates that on the Vineyard “[a]ll these [Deaf] people were included in all aspects of daily life from their earliest childhood. . . . One of the most striking aspects of this research is the fact that rather than being remembered as a group, every one of the Deaf islanders who is remembered is remembered as a unique individual” (Groce, 1980, p. 95).

Mary Smith would find her life quite changed when she took up residence on the mainland in the intensely Deaf Brown family, far from her hearing family, numerous relatives, and friends on the island. She decided to take with her some remembrances of her island home—a whalebone, some big beautiful seashells, and shark teeth with scrimshaw sailor carvings on them (Colby, 1961). And then Mary and Thomas began the trek to Henniker. Their descendants would have the combined Deaf heritage of the Vineyard, some six generations deep, and of the Henniker Deaf enclave, merely a generation old at that time.

Back to Henniker

Thomas and Mary settled on his parents’ farm; his father was 60, his mother 66, and strong hands were sorely needed. More than that, Thomas brought to the task many natural gifts. He was a good horseman. He drove his own oxen and won prizes at the county fairs in Concord, New Hampshire, for drawing a load with a large boulder, over a ton, the allotted distance. He won awards for plowing and for his colts, and Mary drew a premium of $2 for a nice lot of cheese she had prepared (Anon., 1869a). Thomas raised cattle and poultry and grew fruit, wheat, and hay. He divided the large farm into lots of pastureage, tillage, orchard, woodland, and so on, and each lot had a name. Those that have come down to us were figures in Deaf education, such as Gallaudet, Clerc, and Peet (Chamberlain, 1886). He kept his accounts carefully and was frugal, practical, and methodical (T. L. Brown, 1888; Anon., 1861). Some years were very hard: At times early and severe frosts killed the crops; some seasons were extremely dry, and then small fruit withered and fell from the trees and clouds of grasshoppers settled on the fields, devouring everything (Cogswell, 1880).

The close-knit family and Deaf community made the hard times bearable, even rewarding. In addition to his father, Nahum, and sister, Persis, the family included Persis and Bela’s two Deaf sons, Thomas B. Swett (called Nahum in honor of his grandfather), born the year Thomas went off to school, and William B. Swett, two years older. In 1837 Thomas B. Swett went to the American Asylum, and Mary gave birth to a hearing daughter, Charlotte, but illness took the infant’s life within a year. Then, two years later, William Swett went off to school, and Mary gave birth to a Deaf son, Thomas Lewis Brown. On return from Hartford, the Swett boys took Deaf wives. William married Margaret Harrington, a Deaf woman from Ireland, whose Deaf brother had also married into a large Deaf family. William had a colorful career as an explorer, showman, mechanic, writer, and artist before settling down. William and Margaret had three hearing children, two of whom died quite young, and two Deaf daughters, who married Deaf men. William’s brother, Thomas Swett, and his wife Ruth Stearns had four children—three Deaf and one hearing.

Joseph Livingstone, a Deaf carpenter who owned the blind and sash company where William worked, lived with the Swetts. Sometimes Deaf workmen would live on the Brown farm (for instance, Joel Lovejoy, one of the Deaf Lovejoys from Concord, New Hampshire, and Josiah Smith, who had Deaf relatives in Hillsboro). In addition, a nearby Deaf couple—the Goves—were close friends. (Abigail Clark Gove was from two towns away, New Boston, home of the Deaf Smith clan, who were good friends of the Browns.) So it was quite a little community that worked, celebrated, and prayed together at the interpreted services in the Congregational Church (Colby, 1961). However, the Deaf community extended beyond Henniker and into contiguous towns. Thomas Brown socialized with Thomas Head and his family in Hooksett and George Kent and others in Amherst (both two towns away from Henniker); Mrs. Head was from a large Deaf family in nearby Francetown, one town away from Henniker (Anon., 1869b; 1874; Turner, 1880). In his notebooks devoted to genealogical studies of Deaf people, Alexander Graham Bell lists all the Deaf people in New Hampshire according to the Seventh Census of the Deaf and Dumb, conducted in 1880 (Bell, 1888). Including only towns that are contiguous to Henniker, or at one remove, we find an additional 13 Deaf residents, for a total of 27, including Henniker itself.

A different gauge of the size of the Deaf community in and around Henniker may be had from the 1887 publication of cumulative enrollments at the American Asylum since its opening in 1817. Six children from Henniker enrolled, as did an
additional 38 from townships contiguous or at one remove, for a total of 44. Both the census and enrollment measures are in one respect underestimate of the Henniker Deaf enclave because participants could certainly live more than two towns away and, indeed, with the coming of the railroads, could live a considerable distance away. On the other hand, presumably not all Deaf people within easy reach of Henniker chose to participate in its social life.

As midcentury approached, an idea germinated in Thomas’s mind that would prove epochal: the largest gathering of Deaf people to be assembled anywhere, any time in history. Brown proposed that the mutes of the United States should gather to show their gratitude to Thomas Gallaudet (who had retired from the American Asylum in 1830) and Laurent Clerc (who, at 65, was still teaching). Later events would reveal that Brown likely had a political agenda that went beyond gratitude and sought to counteract the inherent diaspora of Deaf people by gatherings that could also serve as a basis for improving their lot. When Brown, no doubt leveraging off his standing in the New Hampshire Deaf community, suggested a tribute to Gallaudet and Clerc and asked for contributions, “the flame of love ran like a prairie fire through the hearts of the whole Deaf-Mute band, scattered though they were through various parts of the country” and $600 was soon raised (Rae, 1851, p. 42).

Two hundred Deaf people—some from as far away as Virginia—and two hundred pupils of the American Asylum gathered in Hartford for the ceremony in which beautifully engraved silver pitchers were presented to the founders of American Deaf education. Significantly, the engraving was rich in symbolism from Deaf history: On one side of the pitcher, Gallaudet and Clerc are shown leaving France; the ship is at hand, and beyond the waves their future school can be seen. On the other side is a schoolroom with Deaf pupils. On the front is a bust of Clerc’s teacher, Abbé Sicard, and around the neck are the arms of the New England states (Syle, 1887). For the presentation, a procession made its way to Hartford’s Center Church, in the presence of the governor of Connecticut, and then Brown, towering above the celebrants, his red beard streaked with gray, gave the welcoming address, the first of several orations in sign. In their replies, Gallaudet and Clerc reviewed the progress of Deaf education from France to the United States. At an evening gathering, there were toasts, addresses, and resolutions, and many Deaf participants stayed on through the weekend in order to enjoy a religious service interpreted into sign language.

As it turned out, the 1850 tribute in Hartford was the forerunner of conventions and associations of Deaf people in the United States. The following year Thomas Gallaudet died; at his funeral, Clerc announced that Thomas Brown and others would form a society of Deaf people and frame a constitution in order to raise funds for a Gallaudet monument. In 1853 a convention was held for that purpose in Montpelier, Vermont, with Deaf participants from that state, as well as from Massachusetts and New Hampshire; many used free passes provided by the railroads. Brown reported on successful fundraising for the monument and urged the formation of a permanent society “for the intellectual, social and moral improvement of Deaf-Mutes” (Convention of Deaf-Mutes, 1853, p. 4). A committee under Thomas Brown was appointed to organize such a society.

Accordingly, less than a year later, on January 4, 1854, Deaf representatives from each of the New England states gathered at the Brown household in Henniker for a week to frame a constitution for the New England Gallaudet Association. From the resolutions of thanks for hospitality, it appears that some representatives were lodged in the Brown home, others at the Swetts, and still others at the Goves. The constitution the representatives drafted envisioned the publication of a newspaper by and for Deaf-Mutes, the Gallaudet Guide and Deaf Mutes’ Companion. Thomas Brown was chosen president of the new organization, which was scheduled to convene at the same time as the Gallaudet monument unveiling in Hartford in September of that year.

In the fall, Deaf-Mutes from “all parts of the union” gathered at Hartford for the unveiling of the Gallaudet monument. Among other Deaf orators, whose sign was interpreted for hearing members of the audience, Thomas Brown gave a speech reviewing the history of Deaf education. Deaf artist Albert Newsam designed the monument, and Deaf sculptor John Carlin created the panels. Indeed, “the whole monument was to be the exclusive product of Deaf-Mute enterprise” (Rae, 1854, p. 19). As planned, the “Henniker Constitution” was read and adopted, and officers were elected, with Thomas Brown president. Thus was the first formal organization of and for Deaf people created in the United States (Chamberlain, 1854).

The second biennial meeting of the New England Gallaudet Association took place in Concord, New Hampshire, in 1856 (Chamberlain, 1857). A listing of the members that appeared shortly thereafter showed 44 from Massachusetts (including 4 Mayhews and 3 Tiltons from Chilmark); 34 from New Hampshire (mostly from towns close to Henniker); 30 from Connecticut; 19 from Vermont; 11 from Maine; 7 from Rhode Island; 1 from Illinois; and 1 from Louisiana. At this meeting the eminent Deaf minister and teacher Job Turner dubbed Thomas Brown “the mute Cincinnatus of Americans” because he was so ready to drop his plough and come to the aid of his fellow mutes. The honorific, Mute Cincinnatus, stuck.

The construction of Deaf people as a distinct class had clearly emerged. It was not too great a step to imagine an enclave of Deaf people much larger than that to be found in the vicinity of Henniker or, for that matter, at the American Asylum. The idea of a Deaf commonwealth, debated at length at the 1858 meeting of the New England Gallaudet Association, responded to the yearnings of many (Chamberlain, 1858). The following convention was held in 1860 at the American Asylum, with some 300 attending (Anon., 1860; Chamberlain, 1860). Brown gave the presidential oration, and Laurent Clerc took the assembly to...
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historic sites in Deaf history, such as the house in which he met the little Deaf girl Alice Cogswell, who had inspired efforts to found American Deaf education. In the evening the conventional Deaf banquet was held with its toasts, orations, and resolutions.

In 1860 Thomas's friend and collaborator, William Chamberlain, began the association's publication, the Gallaudet Guide and Deaf Mutes' Companion, one of the earliest periodicals in the United States printed exclusively for Deaf readers. The publication contained news of Deaf meetings, marriages, illnesses, and deaths and discussions of Deaf issues, such as education, and of broader social issues, such as slavery and religion. (Prior to this publication, the proceedings of the Gallaudet Association's conventions and their communications were judged sufficiently important to be carried in the American Annals of the Deaf, and all members of the association received a subscription to the Annals upon joining.)

Just at the time when his network of Deaf friends and associates was the strongest yet, Thomas, age 56, suffered a series of personal losses. The year before, he had lost his father, Nahum, age 87, who gradually became blind and helpless. Then, two years later, his wife Mary died, 61 years old, after an excruciating, yearlong illness. Some months later death took his mother, Abiah, age 85. Then Bela Swett and Bela's grandchildren, Addie and James, died. Bela's son, Thomas's nephew, William B. Swett, deeply depressed at the loss of his children to diphtheria, left to pursue the life of an adventurer and guide in the White Mountains. Thomas's son, Thomas Lewis Brown, age 20, graduated from the American Asylum and accepted a position as a teacher in the Deaf and Dumb Asylum at Flint, Michigan. It was not uncommon in that era for a widower to remarry; Thomas's thoughts turned to the scion of one of the large Deaf families in Southern Maine, Sophia Curtiss.

Sandy River Valley, Maine

In the period after the American Revolution, several of the families on Martha's Vineyard—among them, Tiltons, Smiths, Mayhews, and Wests—decided to migrate to southeastern Maine. They had had enough of the despotic rule of Governor Thomas Mayhew. Then, too, with the growing population, the extensive land required for sheep raising was becoming scarce. The war had crippled the whaling industry, which was increasingly centered in the South Pacific. And Massachusetts offered free land in the province of Maine (Poole, 1976).

The first settlers from the Vineyard went to the Sandy River Valley, abundantly forested with all sorts of game and streams that teemed with fish, such as trout and salmon. Other Vineyarders soon followed, creating the towns of New Vineyard, New Sharon, New Gloucester, and twenty-seven others. Intermarriage among the Vineyard families continued on the mainland, while some of the settlers gave up and returned to the island, and still others married into unrelated Deaf families on the mainland. Twenty-seven Deaf pupils enrolled at the American Asylum between its opening and 1887 who gave one of these thirty towns as their residence. This includes large Deaf families such as the Rowes and Campbells in New Gloucester, Maine, and the Lovejoys in Sidney.

However, significant numbers of Deaf people lived in nearby townships—for example, the Sebec branch of the Lovejoys; the Jacks and Jellisons in Monroe; the Browns, Jellisons, and Staples in Belfast; and the Berrys in Chesterville. The Lovejoy-Jellison-Berry family of southeastern Maine has the distinction of being one of only two early American Deaf families in the Northeast with three or more consecutive generations of Deaf people (with the first born before 1800); the Brown-Swett-Sanders family of central New Hampshire was the other (Jones, 1996). Sophia Curtiss's family was apparently from Leeds, Maine (two townships away from New Sharon, three from Sidney), but moved to New Gloucester; she and her parents were hearing, but she had four Deaf and two hearing siblings, who intermarried with Deaf Rowes and Campbells. Perhaps Thomas met Sophia through her brother George, who overlapped with him at the American Asylum. The wedding notice in the National Deaf-Mute Gazette (successor to the Guide) reveals both Brown's stature and the need to explain his mixed marriage: "Mr. Brown is too well known to need any notice at our hands. His wife is a hearing lady whose relationship to and constant intercourse with mutes enables her to use their language" (Anon., 1867). Thomas and Sophia were married in Yarmouth, Maine, in November 1864 and then took up residence in Henniker.

Thomas continued his life as a farmer—and Deaf leader. In 1866 the New England Gallaudet Association met in Hartford to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the American Asylum. Some 500 people heard Brown give the presidential address, in which he announced that, after twelve years of service, he would resign in favor of his vice president (Chamberlain, 1867). Two years later the Deaf-Mute's Friend (successor to the Gazette) published a letter from Thomas Brown, proposing a national convention of Deaf-Mutes. According to an eminent Deaf teacher and journalist who endorsed the suggestion in the following issue, Brown had first made this proposal "to the convention in Syracuse in 1865"—no doubt the meeting of the Empire State Association of Deaf-Mutes (T. Brown, 1869).

In the same year, 1869, Thomas's sister, Persis, died, as did Laurent Clerc (Chamberlain, 1869b). Thomas, 65 years old, won awards at the state fair and cattle show. His son, Thomas Lewis, came home from Michigan to host a large birthday party for his father. Just as the Gazette reassured its readers that Brown's new wife knew sign language, so the Friend explained to its readers
that one of the storytellers at the birthday party “although a hearing man is a very good signmaker” (Swett, 1869, p. 123). In 1874 Brown took on the presidency of the Clerc Monument Association (T. L. Brown, 1888), and four years later he founded the Granite State Deaf-Mute Mission and was elected president (Tillinghast, 1878).

William B. Swett followed in his uncle’s footsteps in promoting Deaf welfare: He published (with William Chamberlain) the Deaf-Mute’s Friend; he was a director of the Deaf-Mute Library Association; he was business manager of the Boston Deaf-Mute Mission; and he founded a school of industrial arts for Deaf adults, which shortly added an educational program for Deaf children; it continues today as the Beverly School for the Deaf (Swett, 1874).

Thomas Brown was a trustee of his nephew’s school in its early years (T. L. Brown, 1888). In 1880 the first national convention of Deaf people in the United States was convened just as Brown had proposed—except for the venue: It was held in Cincinnati, not Hartford, and Brown, 76 years old, could not attend. He did, however, attend the meeting in New York in 1884 and then traveled to the Vineyard with his son Thomas Lewis to visit the friends of his late wife (T. Brown, 1884). Thomas Brown died on March 23, 1886.

**Assimilative and Differentiating Societies**

The story of Thomas Brown and the emergence of the first American organizations of and for Deaf people that he led can be seen as the story of emerging class consciousness, which surfaced clearly in the mid-nineteenth century. The formation of the numerous societies of Deaf people over which he presided; the explicit goals of the first enduring organization, the New England Gallaudet Association, which he founded: “We, Deaf-Mutes, desirous of forming a society in order to promote the intellectual, social, moral, temporal and spiritual welfare of our mute community . . . ” [italics added]; the ritual-like rehearsal at meetings of the great events in Deaf history; the raising of monuments to important figures—all these testify that Brown and his associates saw the Deaf community as a distinct group with a language and way of life that should be fostered. “That these conventions tend to keep alive the feelings of brotherhood and friendship among the mutes at large cannot be disputed,” wrote William Chamberlain (1869a). Consequently, he supported the gatherings of “the children of silence.” In the silent press, Brown was referred to as the “patriarch of the silent tribe” (David, 1879), and his eulogist stated that Brown was always ready to do his share “for any plan which promised to promote the welfare of his class” (T. L. Brown, 1888). (“Class” here clearly refers to the “tribe,” i.e., the Deaf-World, and in this article we use the term in this sense.)

In stark contrast, the accounts available to us of the lives led by Deaf and hearing people in Tisbury and Chilmark during the same era are marked by an apparent absence of events and structures that would set Deaf people apart from hearing people. These accounts do not reveal any leader, any organization, any gathering place, any banquet or other ceremony, any monuments—indeed anything at all that suggests that Deaf people on the Vineyard had class consciousness. Now that we have made this bald claim, something contradictory may well come to light, but it seems unlikely that the difference in degree will be eliminated by future discoveries.

The pedigrees that we have constructed (of which excerpts appear in Figures 1–3), although they are incomplete, have led us to the hypothesis that a difference in the genetic basis of the Deaf societies in the two locations is responsible for the difference in the emergence of class consciousness. Other possible explanations come to mind, foremost among them, perhaps, differences between the two locations in language and marriage practices. After presenting the genetic hypothesis, we will argue that those differences are, like class consciousness, heavily influenced by the genetic difference.

The hereditary difference between hearing and Deaf people can be traced to any of numerous genes, most often acting singly. As a result, the occurrence of Deaf and hearing people in the family tends to follow the “laws of heredity” first spelled out by Austrian botanist Gregor Mendel in the mid-nineteenth century (but not widely recognized until the end of the century). Mendel identified two main patterns of genetic transmission, called dominant and recessive.

The Brown family of Henniker exemplifies the dominant pattern of inheritance (or transmission). To the best of our knowledge, none of the twenty-three ascendants of Nahum Brown whom we found was Deaf. But Nahum and some of his descendants in every generation were Deaf, indicating that the genetic difference in this family began with Nahum. If the pattern of genetic transmission was dominant in Nahum’s family, then on average half of his children would inherit that genetic difference and be born Deaf, whereas the other half should be born hearing. Within a small margin of statistical sampling, this is just what happened. Slightly more than half (nearly 57 percent) of Nahum’s descendants were Deaf: 12 out of 21. All Deaf members of the family had a Deaf parent (except Nahum, of course), and all Deaf members who married had at least one Deaf child.

The Mayhew, Tilton, Lambert, and Skiffe families of Martha’s Vineyard (Figures 2 and 3), who intermarried extensively both before and after arriving on the island, exemplify the recessive pattern of inheritance. In this pattern, many people in the family will possess the critical gene and yet not be Deaf themselves (hence the term recessive). If both parents have that gene, then one quarter of their children will be Deaf; but if only one parent has it, none of their children will be Deaf, unlike dominant
transmission. Many Deaf children will not have Deaf parents (because their parents must be carrying the gene but may not be Deaf themselves). The odds of both parents having exactly the same recessive gene are much greater if they are related to one another. Intermarriage among relatives is most likely in a community that is isolated—and Martha’s Vineyard is a prime example. Many Deaf children on the Vineyard had no Deaf parents, and many Deaf parents, provided they married hearing people, had no Deaf children (cf. Figures 2 and 3). Consequently, far fewer than half the descendants of any progenitor are Deaf; the families of Deaf people have many more hearing people.

In dominant transmission such as we believe occurred in Henniker, then, every generation is likely to have Deaf children: Each Deaf person receives a Deaf heritage and may pass it along; each generation of his or her parents and grandparents, children and grandchildren will likely contain Deaf individuals. Marriage between relatives is not necessary for such generational depth to occur. In recessive transmission such as we believe occurred on the Vineyard, on the other hand, a Deaf person may have cousins, uncles, aunts, grandparents, or more distant relatives who are Deaf, but it is less likely among the immediate family when compared with dominant transmission. That Deaf person may readily have hearing parents or hearing children, or both; generational depth is less likely, and marriage among relatives is characteristically required for any Deaf family members to occur at all. In such a setting, the Deaf person may feel a part of a rather extended family that includes hearing people because he or she is related to so many people in the community. But that Deaf person may not feel like a crucial link in the chain of Deaf heritage.

A clear result of the difference in genetic patterning in the two communities is that the Henniker community necessarily had far fewer hearing people as an integral part of the family structure compared to the Chilmark community. The numerous hearing children of Deaf parents (called codas) in Chilmark would be likely to acquire sign language as a native language; they and their Deaf siblings would thus form a critical mass within the family for sign-language use. The Deaf children of hearing parents would learn the language from their parents, if they knew it, or, if not, from Deaf peers, elders, and codas, and they would seek to use it with their own parents and hearing siblings. Numerous hearing relatives in the community might also be motivated to master the sign language, at least to some extent, to communicate with their Deaf relatives. Thus, the difference between Henniker and Chilmark in the spread of sign language into the hearing environment may be traceable, in part, to the difference between them in genetic patterning.

The incidence of mixed hearing and Deaf marriages on the Vineyard seems to have been more than triple that on the mainland, as cited earlier. This difference may be attributable, at least in part, to the more widespread use of the sign language among hearing people because a common language greatly facilitates meeting one’s life partner in the first place and then developing a deep interest in and affection for that person.

Finally, we hypothesize that the differences in language use and marriage practice, which are underpinned in part by the differences in genetic patterning, mediate in turn differences in class consciousness. What we are suggesting is that it takes a “them” for an “us” to develop, and the blending of hearing and Deaf lives on the Vineyard, because of shared family life and language (underpinned by genetics), discouraged the construction of hearing people as “them.” Conversely, many members of the Henniker Deaf enclave had Deaf parents, Deaf grandparents, and Deaf great-grandparents, and the boundary with the surrounding hearing community was relatively sharply demarcated. That said, other factors may also have fostered Chilmark blending, such as a sense of isolation on a remote island and an awareness of shared ancestry.

Recent findings concerning Deaf people and hearing residents of a village in Bali help to evaluate the notion that Deaf genetic patterning, marriage and language practices, and class consciousness are related. Of the 2,185 people in this village, 2.2 percent are Deaf (Winata et al., 1995). Following Branson, Miller, and Marsaja (1996), we refer to the village as Desa Kolok (“Deaf Village”—not its official name). The genetic patterning in Desa Kolok is recessive as on the Vineyard, and, as on the Vineyard, marriages between hearing and Deaf people are completely acceptable. There are sixteen families in Desa Kolok with two hearing parents and at least one Deaf child, so it is clear that there is more blending of hearing and Deaf lives in the nuclear family than in Henniker, which had no families with hearing parents and Deaf children. However, the blending of hearing and Deaf lives in Desa Kolok may not have been as great as on the Vineyard; in Desa Kolok, the twenty families with a Deaf parent (or two) had 75 percent Deaf children. Thus, among those families with Deaf children, more families than not had a Deaf parent, and the children in those Deaf families were themselves predominantly Deaf.

Beyond the blending of hearing and Deaf lives within the nuclear family in Desa Kolok, cultural and social forces ensure widespread contact between Deaf and hearing people. Of particular note, Balinese villages are kin-based, and Deaf people grow up in house yards shared with their hearing relatives. Thus, with respect to the mixing of hearing and Deaf lives, the extended family of the Desa Kolok house yard may be more like Vineyard families than like Henniker families. Perhaps for this reason, the use of a sign language in Desa Kolok is nearly universal, and Deaf people are integrated in many facets of social life, including

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4 Recent studies have shown that mutations in the gene GJB2 are very common among people who were born Deaf and as many as 1 in every 40 people in the general population have at least one mutated copy of the gene (Green et al., 1999). If this gene was widespread on Martha’s Vineyard, marriage among relatives would not necessarily have been required for offspring to be Deaf.
groups organized for work and for some religious practices. Moreover, hearing attitudes toward Deaf islanders, many of whom are relatives, are generally positive (Hinnant, 1998, 1999; Branson et al., 1996). Thus, the evidence from Desa Kolok suggests that the mixing of hearing and Deaf people in the family determines their mixing in community life, as we hypothesize was the case on the Vineyard.

It is not clear to us whether Deaf people in Desa Kolok lack class (i.e., group) consciousness, as we hypothesize was the case on the Vineyard. On the one hand, certain activities in Desa Kolok are associated with Deaf villagers who also have specific roles with regard to certain festivals, which might engender such group consciousness. Moreover, being Deaf restricts one's prospects outside the village and participation in some skilled labor and in musical events (Hinnant, personal communication). On the other hand, "the Deaf villagers interact freely and equally with other villagers" (Branson et al., 1996, p. 42). Perhaps the mixed evidence for group consciousness is a reflection of an intermediate status for Desa Kolok between Henniker and the Vineyard with regard to the blending of hearing and Deaf lives.

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**References**


ASL in the Academy: More Work Remains

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Bruggemann’s 2009 article outlines developments that are contemporary with the time of its publication. It touches on legal, pedagogical, and professional issues with American Sign Language (ASL) in the academy, the term that she designs for higher education institutions. She discusses the growth in programs, student enrollment, and faculty in the teaching and learning of ASL; research studies in the linguistics of ASL; and arguments for and against ASL as a language, as a foreign language, and for inclusion in the academy. She also identifies ASL as being undercounted in the number and distribution of ASL programs in the academy and in national language organizations, such as the Modern Language Association (MLA) and the Association of Departments of Foreign Language (ADFL).

The article showcases Bruggemann’s frontline observations of ASL at academic and national language organizations and provides a historical overview of ASL in the academy and professional organizations. Bruggemann accurately describes how ASL’s presence in the academy owes much to Stokoe’s pioneering research at Gallaudet University on deaf people’s language in the 1960s. Since Stokoe’s work, such organizations as the American Sign Language Teachers Association (ASLTA) and the National Association of the Deaf (NAD), each of which are affiliated with the signing deaf community, have worked with state education departments in recognizing and incorporating ASL as one of the foreign languages for students to take to meet foreign-language requirements in the academy. As Bruggemann notes, national language organizations, such as the MLA and the ADFL (which still host national conferences), have increasingly held sessions that focus on ASL, although sporadically.

As Bruggemann notes, the attitudes and administrative structure of the academy and the orientations of the departments that house them shape the place of ASL in the academy. ASL is offered in special education, English, and linguistics departments, each with different purposes and approaches in the teaching and learning of ASL at various colleges and universities. In some cases, such as Bruggemann’s former university, the Ohio State University, such departments as special education and speech and audiology emphasize the use of sign language to connect spoken and written English for deaf and hard-of-hearing learners. Other departments, such as English and linguistics, focus on and teach the linguistic and cultural aspects of ASL.

Bruggemann, just like other individuals in the field, has commented at national ASL conferences that ASL has faced resistance from colleagues who teach other languages and fear that ASL might siphon off their student enrollments. This point is largely unfounded, as many students take ASL after taking other languages. In addition, the MLA and the ADFL are struggling to include ASL in their programs. While they continue to redefine what language is and recategorize the world’s languages, they have not yet been able to consistently recognize and include ASL in the list of world languages at its conferences.

Bruggemann, and many individuals in the field, add that the deaf community is tired of defining, seeking approval, and justifying the existence and worth of ASL study. She calls for people to move on and work on the potential, promise, and power of ASL—that is, to look at what the signed language could and can do for the academy, students, researchers, and the deaf and hard-of-hearing members in the community.

To assess the significance of the article to the field of deaf and ASL studies, the following commentary looks at developments on these issues since the 2009 publication of Bruggemann’s article.

There is now increased visibility of ASL and an increasing scope of different applications of ASL in the academy, including infant education, education of individuals with disabilities other than deafness, the entertainment world, and social media. There are increases in the number of colleges and universities offering major and minor programs in ASL, in student enrollment and faculty teaching the language, and in more widely available curriculum and instructional materials, both online and in hard copy. I am glad to note that ASL’s visibility has also expanded. Other than special education departments, ASL programs in the academy continue to be housed in English and linguistics departments, but they are also increasingly housed either in its department or in the department of world languages. The number of Internet-based signed-language education and literature
Offerings has skyrocketed. The last two have affected the perception of sign language for learning purposes because the Internet moves the perception of signs from 3-D to 2-D and has increased the formalization of ASL as a language and as an art form.

New organizations and journals that focus on ASL have cropped up. In pursuit of continuing work in ASL in the academy and national organizations, the Society for American Sign Language (SASL) organization was created in 2015 and publishes scholarly works on ASL in the Society for American Sign Language Journal (SASLJ). The SASLJ covers a wide range of topics that are not typically addressed in other journals, such as theoretically sound pedagogical means for connecting ASL to English literacy and misconceptions regarding signed music and ASL literature.

Despite these developments, some issues remain 12 years after the publication of Bruggemann’s article. There exist different pedagogies of ASL in the academy due to varying philosophies of the departments that house ASL. Research studies on ASL as a pedagogical variable in instruction, curriculum, and assessment are still insufficient, suggesting that inadequate attention is given to signed-language pedagogy and learning. An increasing number of hearing people learn ASL through non-academy venues, such as the Internet and online programs, which results in outside-of-academy transmigration of signed language in the general population. This development has the potential to generate different versions of ASL and threaten academy-based programs. In addition, hearing babies continue to learn ASL to a greater extent. Yet deaf babies, particularly in hearing families, still may not be exposed to signed language, creating language deprivation. Furthermore, there remains a lack of research studies on demographics, distribution, and numbers of ASL classes, students, faculty, and programs in the academy.

Why are developments in ASL uneven within and across the academy and national language organizations? I would argue that the uneven developments are explicable by the varying ideologies that people hold regarding ASL as a language, ASL as a foreign language, and signing deaf people as a language community. Those ideologies shape ASL’s recognition, adoption, location, and dissemination in the academy and national organizations and teacher qualifications, curriculum, and research at the academy. The issue is how to shift individual and institutional ideologies to make changes that will favor ASL in what Bruggemann sees as a language, as a cultural artifact, and as a defining characteristic of a community.

For the future, we need to think critically about what “ASL as a language and a cultural artifact” can do to provide the capacity for giving full support to signers and how American society can embrace ASL for the benefit of the American people. The time for action on this is never later: It is now. Fear and inaction are damaging forces on their own.
American Sign Language and the Academy: The Little Language That Could

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Once upon a time, and not so very long ago, American Sign Language (ASL) was barely known to the Modern Language Association (MLA), an organization of more than 300,000 members in one hundred countries whose “members have worked to strengthen the study and teaching of language and literature.” Until 1997, in fact, ASL was listed in only the definitive MLA International Bibliography under “invented” languages—followed directly by the Klingon language of Star Trek fame. In 1997, the MLA formed the Committee on Disability Issues in the Profession (CDI). Spurred on by some members of the MLA’s newly formed CDI and grounded in remarkable linguistic scholarship over the previous three decades that has documented the unique but also common language features of ASL (Klima & Bellugi, 1979; Stokoe et al., 1965), a formal request was made to the MLA that ASL be included among the “natural” languages, alongside Spanish, German, French, and the like. The MLA bibliographers, staff, and executive director, then Phyllis Franklin, listened intently to our argument. We gathered a substantial record of linguistic scholarship not only about ASL but also about sign languages around the globe, demonstrating the foundational nature of sign languages as languages and illustrating their unique contributions to both the study and the expression of language as we had come to know it in oral/aural and print-dominated cultures.

Yet, some forty years after William Stokoe’s groundbreaking dictionary on ASL and despite considerable linguistic research pouring in from all around the globe that could easily prove that ASL is indeed a natural language, a real language, even a wondrous language (as indeed all languages are), we are still trying to “invent” ASL as an entity within such key academic organizations as the MLA and within the academy generally. Scholars of ASL literature, literacy, and linguistics continue to struggle to find a comfortable place within the MLA—especially deaf scholars, whose access is still limited at the MLA conferences, and ASL teachers, who might belong to the national American Sign Language Teachers Association (ASLTA) but who generally do not hold terminal degrees and often teach only part time, at most, in colleges and universities around the country.

It is time to move on. It is time to move away from the defensive outsider and approval-seeking positions that ASL has typically occupied in the academy, especially in relation to other foreign and modern languages. It is time to move our discussions, perspectives, and placements of ASL into a position of potential, promise, and linguistic-cultural power.

In the spirit of that move, I will ground all the points I make in this [discussion] by invoking ASL as the little language that could: the little language that could in fact turn out to be anything but little for those students who get the chance to learn it during their college years; the little language that could make us think hard about what language is and can do, challenging and yet also affirming our ideas and beliefs about languages and culture; and the little language that could rumble and steam right through the established stations of language and literature programs in the academy, potentially overtaking some of the bigger trains.

The use of the “little engine that could” narrative is not incidental. As a moralistic children’s story with a decidedly (American) nationalistic slant in the 1930s, authored by a pseudonymous “Watty Piper” and featuring the little blue engine as female against her stronger, tougher male counterparts, the metaphor/narrative reconstructs much of the Deaf community’s considerable efforts to assimilate and paint its (deaf) faces as American in the first half of the 20th century in particular (Buchanan, 2001; Burch, 2002).

An Academic Home for ASL?

Take but one brief and bold example of the challenges offered by the little language that could: ASL offered to American college students and confirmed as credits on their transcripts as a foreign language. In the United States, how can an American college and deemed as credits on their transcripts as a foreign language. In the United States, how can an
language also be a foreign language? What nation declares its own language to be foreign? Perhaps, then, what ASL helps illuminate is the very (odd) nature of terms like “foreign” (as opposed to “modern”) used in describing languages during an era of fluid and frequent global interactions. With American Sign Language, the poles and grounds for “national” versus/and “foreign” more or less dissolve.

Just as ASL questions the placement of adjectives like “foreign” and its own place within a construct of “foreign,” it also articulates—and complicates—questions of disciplinary and departmental boundaries in the academy. We might think of ASL as the engine with no house—a gypsy language, as it were. Sheryl Cooper’s 1997 dissertation on the academic status of sign language programs in institutions of higher education in the United States demonstrates ASL’s wanderlust. Although 36.8 percent of the programs and administrators that Cooper surveyed recommended placing ASL among the modern or foreign languages, this percentage obviously did not constitute a majority, let alone a strong one. Interestingly enough, 12.6 percent recommended that sign language be a department of its own, a situation that does not commonly exist for any language. Meanwhile, 10.5 percent placed it in speech pathology/audiology departments, and a nearly equal number suggested that it be placed in any one of five different places: Deaf Education, Deaf Studies, Interpreting, Linguistics, or Special Education (Cooper, 1997).

Such variation in views regarding ASL’s academic affiliation highlights the challenge of administrative structure for ASL in the academy. And this challenge, I argue, illustrates how much ASL has gathered steam in challenging the university overall and our ideas about language departments, more specifically. Consider for a moment what it means when a language can stand on par with other modern languages in the university structure—even occupy a space all its own—but can also be placed in domains alongside the professional instruction of those who “help” or “service” deaf and hard-of-hearing people. Imagine for a moment if we taught so-called developing-world languages only within departments that might send professionals to relevant developing countries to “help” their people or if religion (through missionary work) or medicine (through general health care or even AIDS research or care programs) became the predominant home for such languages. What a “foreign” idea that would be!

At my own institution, Ohio State University, we have built an ASL program that gives students general-education credit (GEC) in a “foreign” language, in a unique answer to the “placement” question posed by Cooper’s dissertation. The program is now in its sixth year. Our ASL program for undergraduate foreign-language credits has spanned and involved three different colleges. Initially, the two introductory courses, ASL I and II, were taught in the College of Humanities, under the wing of the English department. And, while “under the wing” does have significant metaphorical potential, both positive and negative, we argued that we could place part of the ASL program in that position because at Ohio State we have nothing like an American Studies program. English Studies, where American language and literature is typically taught at Ohio State University, is the closest fit. We could also argue that ASL would best be housed in the English department because the department is widely familiar and has a long track record of running a significant number of the university’s required general-education and basic-level courses—courses like the first- and second-year required writing courses and Introduction to Fiction, Introduction to Poetry, and so forth. The English department knew well how to handle the business of all those students in introductory, skills-based courses. (And this argument has, I would add, proved to be all the more important as we have worked to iron out policies and procedures for hiring qualified teachers, for continuing the professional development of our teachers, and for addressing students’ concerns and complaints.)

Students who have completed ASL II can then move to the third- and fourth-level courses in the sequence (four courses in a language are required for the completion of the general-education foreign-language requirements at Ohio State). These last two courses can be taken either in the College of Education and Human Ecology (in the Department of Teaching and Learning) or in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences (in the Speech and Hearing department). What we have tried to set in motion, then, is a triangulated program in which students get at least two (and possibly even three) different disciplinary entries into, and intersections with, the language. The content of each course—the actual skills to be learned—is supposed to remain the same for each level of the course, no matter where that course is taught. The teachers and coordinators have worked out a kind of standard curriculum and syllabus for each course; while variation is allowed in an individual teacher’s approaches and activities, the key objectives and elements for the courses remain the same, no matter where they are being taught. In theory, at least.

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4 See Christopher Krentz on the “foreign” and “familiar” nature of ASL, especially within American universities, in “Proposal for ASL to Satisfy Foreign Language Requirements,” at http://artsandsciences.virginia.edu/asl/18.html
5 Even though this idea might be somewhat “foreign” to many people, as someone who grew up deaf/hard-of-hearing in the years right before “mainstreaming” become a popular form of deaf education, I could (and would) just as easily argue that I, for one, would like nothing more than if every speech pathology/audiology professional, every physician in training, and every special education teacher (indeed, every teacher, “special” or not) learn some basic ASL.
6 See Ohio State University’s American Sign Language Program Website at http://asl.osu.edu/
We are still not sure how all this is playing out in practice. The ASL program is currently undergoing an extensive “outcomes” assessment, as well as engaging in its own study of itself via focus-group discussions of students, teachers, and program administrators across the three colleges/units. ASL at Ohio State is new, and we are in fact still driving it without a dashboard of standardized assessment measures in place. In some ways, this reminds me of how I learned to drive growing up in western Kansas: My parents and grandparents turned me loose behind the wheel of Granda’s old blue Ford pickup in the big, open cow pasture behind their farm house, gave me some basic instructions on gears, clutches, brakes, accelerator—and then let me go. It was exhilarating to get the feel of the thing, bumping along over gopher holes with dried cow patties flying behind me, creating a little dust cloud to mark the path I had taken, and not worrying about which way I should turn or go next. And I learned well the basics of the machine and its movement by driving this way. But soon I wanted more: a road to travel, a radio that actually worked, a destination and goal, a more finely tuned knowledge of navigation involving blinkers, lights, different driving conditions, and—most important of all—the ability to travel and negotiate with others also on the road.

In thinking about ASL’s attempts and abilities to navigate and negotiate with other languages currently on the road, let me dwell for a moment on our own enrollment numbers and issues at Ohio State. With approximately 300 new students enrolled each quarter in our ASL I classes and also up to 300 students on the waiting lists for that first-level course every quarter (some students wait up to four quarters), ASL is obviously a language that is very popular with our students these days. And that popularity on my own campus has been borne out by a recent survey completed by the Association of Departments of Foreign Language (ADFL) and published in the ADFL Bulletin in 2004. Whatever the reasons for ASL’s considerable popularity—and we do have some sense of those various reasons from our survey of students in the ASL I course—the evidence does seem to indicate that ASL has the potential to threaten other languages being offered on college campuses.7

I use that verb “threaten” quite deliberately. For, in a university fiscal environment where budgets are now built on enrollments generated—the “butts in seats” budget, as I have heard it called at my own university—ASL constitutes a potential “cash cow.” When one adds to its revenue-generating status the fact that foreign and modern language enrollments on college campuses overall have been noticeably lower over the past decade or so (although they are now showing a slight increase again), the threat of one language “stealing” seats from another becomes very real. At Ohio State University, in fact, our Foreign Language Center (FLC)—which houses virtually all the other languages taught at our huge university—would not initially touch ASL with the proverbial ten-foot pole when we began trying to build the program six years ago.

After six successful years with the ASL program located across three colleges (but not as part of the FLC)—from 2002 through 2008—we have just recently reconfigured the program again so that it is now squared (as opposed to triangulated in three areas), and the FLC does, in fact, house the key administrative coordinator who will help right the angles better among the other three original units invested in the program. In the original construction of the ASL program, however, it was explained to me, while the FLC faculty were not at all “philosophically opposed” to the language, they also did not want to take on the sizable faculty resistance that would likely be encountered from colleagues who taught German, Italian, French, and so forth, who feared that ASL might begin to siphon off their already dwindling enrollments. Only enrollment in Spanish-language classes, it seems, remains unaffected by ASL enrollments. Yet, our own survey at Ohio State has shown us that ASL does not really seem to be threatening enrollment in (other) languages, since many of the ASL students already have another language enrollments on their record or are declaring their interest in ASL as a result of direct family or other personal or professional interests.

Moreover, when our FLC proposed and received significant funds from the SBC-Ameritech communications company some years ago in order to establish research and innovation in instruction using various technologies as part of its presence in Ohio State’s new World Media and Culture Center, ASL was not included in that funding proposal. On this matter, I could not help pondering the irony of Alexander Graham Bell’s legacy in relationship to deafness and deaf people: his early role as an oral-focused teacher of the deaf (including his future wife); his place as the son and husband of deaf women; his niche in the American eugenics movement, carved out predominantly because of his work on charting and graphing the “marriages and progeny” of deaf people in order to prove that when deaf people married deaf people, they tended to produce deaf children

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7 Some of the data we have collected from students who are enrolled in ASL 101 (the first-level course) over a three-year period show us that undergraduates enrolled in the ASL I class are students from the following colleges: (1) 56 percent from Arts and Sciences, including the Colleges of Arts, Biological Sciences, Humanities, and Physical Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences; (2) 15 percent from Health, Medical, and Biological Sciences; (3) 14 percent from Journalism and Communication; (4) 3 percent from Human Ecology; (5) 3 percent from Education; (6) and 6 percent other colleges. The student survey also indicates that, while 44 percent of the students enrolled in ASL 101 claim they are taking it primarily to fulfill their general-education language requirement, 56 percent of the students are taking it for other reasons and do not need it for their general-education requirements. Of those 56 percent who are taking it for reason other than just to meet the language requirements, 39 percent claim they are taking it because of some “affinity” for the language because of an ongoing or previous personal interest in ASL and/or deaf culture; because they have a deaf friend or neighbor; because they have a deaf family member; just to learn more about deaf people and communicate with them; or because of their own current or partial deafness. In addition, 28 percent of the students taking ASL 101 say they have chosen it as an “alternative” to learning other languages because it is “interesting,” “new/different,” “nontraditional,” or “unique” or because the student is a “visual learner.”
and that therefore their marriage should be discouraged and even forbidden; and his invention of the telephone, which resulted from his search to find an oral/aural mechanism to help teach his method of oral instruction, called “Visible Speech,” to deaf students. Thus, when SBC-Ameritech, the offspring of the once-powerful Bell phone company, provides significant funding for the study of foreign languages at my university that conveniently does not include ASL, Bell's legacy seems to continue to haunt us.

The Association of Departments of Foreign Language (ADFL) Survey

But perhaps we should not look backward, yet again, to Bell’s toll on ASL and the American Deaf community. Perhaps we should instead cast our gaze forward to the 2002 ADFL survey and study the face that ASL is showing us, at present and for the future. The report, published in the Winter–Spring 2004 issue of the ADFL Bulletin and written by Elizabeth B. Welles, presents not one but many interesting faces for ASL. What I want to do here is outline a few of the faces that I find most interesting and prominent. Let me confess before I go any further that, much like a witness profile, my sketch will be, at its best, probably only sketchy. I also want to clarify that the ADFL survey covers foreign-language enrollments up to 2002 in institutions of higher education. This is important even to me because the program at Ohio State, as but one significant example, has been built since 2002.

Among undergraduates and graduates at four-year (or plus) colleges, ASL ranked fifth in language course enrollments, with Spanish, French, German, and Italian placing ahead of it. This constitutes a shocking 432 percent increase in ASL enrollments at four-year colleges since 1998. When the ADFL began its survey, in 1986, ASL did not even exist in numbers on the survey. This ADFL report also tells us that ASL has been recorded in the ADFL survey of foreign-language enrollments only since 1990 and that it “has shown a tremendous increase for each survey since then as more institutions begin to report it.” As the report tries to analyze this trend, however, my own analysis finds the report’s analysis considerably lacking. That is, I want to suggest that there is much left unidentified as to the impact and place of ASL within the ADFL and its official surveying. As Welles begins to work through the massive data now piling up for college enrollments in ASL, she indicates: “The comparison of the 1998 and 2002 institutional figures is particularly useful for explaining the enormous growth of ASL [because] the bulk of the increase occurred through the reporting of institutions that had not responded previously” (2004, p. 142).

But why, we should ask, did these institutions previously not respond? Were they perhaps not asked the right questions to begin with? If the right kinds of questions weren’t being asked in order to elicit responses about ASL offerings and enrollments in the past, would it be surprising that the ADFL was not really receiving any responses? We know that ASL was not even listed in the MLA International Bibliography as a “natural” language until 1998; this is the place and point at which I began this [discussion]. It would probably be hard for an institution’s response regarding its ASL offerings even to be “heard” if the language itself had not yet been placed in the MLA International Bibliography.

It seems possible that at this point even the ADFL and MLA do not yet know exactly what questions they could, should, or would ask regarding ASL’s entrance and growth in colleges and universities across the United States. It is only through some solid affiliation with such organizations as the American Sign Language Teachers Association (ASLTA) or with the full participation of ASL and Deaf Studies scholars in the MLA and the ADFL that we are likely to get the right questions—followed by some meaningful answers—about ASL in the academy.

I do not presume to have all the questions (much less the answers) that should be offered, since, as I suggest, framing them would require the collective knowledge of a body of ASL and deaf scholars and teachers. However, I might quickly outline a few key questions:

- Are there patterns in the kinds of colleges offering ASL?
- Where is ASL located within the structures of these colleges in relation to the other languages offered there?
- Is it included among the modern languages or located elsewhere in the college’s disciplinary structure?
- What are the reasons students give for their interest in taking ASL classes?
- What do students say they gain from taking ASL as a language?
- How do overall enrollment patterns (entry level, retention, completion of a sequence of courses) in ASL classes compare to those for other languages taught in U.S. colleges?
- How does the teaching pool (faculty, part-time, graduate student) in ASL offerings on college campuses compare to the teaching pools in the other languages offered?
- How many “native” users of ASL teach it in comparison to the percentage of “native” users who teach other languages?
- How does the professional development and research base in ASL linguistics, teaching, and literature compare to that in other languages?
The 2002 survey report published by Welles in 2004 does in fact suggest some food for further thought, while leaving a lot unchewed. In puzzling over the formidable increase in ASL enrollments, Welles (2004, p. 15) offers the following explanation:

Besides student interest, the increase recorded in 2002 also has to do with a change in the nature of our survey. For over thirty years we have elicited enrollment data on less commonly taught languages by requesting information about “other languages” rather than listing them individually on the survey form. Through the 1998 survey, ASL was in this category, but with the enrollments reported in that survey it joined the list of the more commonly taught languages, then numbering fifteen. As a result, in 2002 ASL was among the fifteen languages about which we explicitly requested information. Many institutions that had not reported their existing ASL programs in 1998 did so in this survey. If these institutions had previously reported their existing ASL enrollments, the remarkable growth in ASL in the current survey might have been more evenly spread out across the three surveys from the 1990s. But it is also notable that 187 new programs were created between 1998 and 2002 to meet growing demand.

There are several things I find interesting in this explanation for the skyrocketing increases in ASL enrollments between 1998 and 2002. First, it is almost as if institutions are being scolded for not reporting their ASL enrollments and for somehow creating a false sense of “remarkable growth.” Shame on us for hiding our ASL programs! But we might look at the explanation another way—in 1998 the re-placement of ASL in the MLA bibliography was only just under way. How, then, would one report and register a language not yet even sanctioned as a language by the very authorities conducting the survey? (I think here of the way that the 2000 U.S. Census finally allowed citizens to check more than one identity box—and people did so in astonishing numbers.)

Why, then, was there no mention in this report of the exclusion of ASL as a recognized “body” within the politics of the ADFL and the MLA in the years before 1998? Why is there not a more careful and thorough attempt to explain the growth in study of a language that enrolled students in numbers somewhere between those for students studying Ancient Greek and Biblical Hebrew in 1998 but then rose 432 percent in its numbers to take fifth place behind Spanish, French, German, and Italian (all languages that did not increase enrollments by more than 30 percent in those same years)? Why is this remarkable increase brushed off in a single paragraph that ends really before it even begins any real discussion or consideration, simply saying that “it is also notable that 187 new programs were created between 1998 and 2002 to meet growing demand.” Notable, indeed. Yet, somehow, even the more phenomenal weight of ASL offerings in two-year colleges—where it now places second in numbers, behind only Spanish, and has seen a 457 percent growth in the past six years—goes utterly unnoted in this report. What are we to make of these omissions?

I do not have the answers to this seemingly rhetorical question, and I realize that an organization such as the ADFL may not often focus exclusively on one language. I intend not to point fingers only at the ADFL or MLA but, in fact, to beckon us all to the table to discuss this together. That is, I believe that the question of ASL’s clear presence in current college language offerings but its absence in overall discussions about language (and culture) learning within higher education is a question that we—meaning not only academic organizations such as the MLA and the ADFL but also scholars of Deaf Studies and ASL (and organizations such as the ASLTA)—ought to be taking up. And taking up together.

**Pointing: Toward Politics, Power, and Philosophy**

Let me first turn back to my subtitle, “The Little Language That Could,” and gesture toward at least some of the important and interesting things we can learn through the study and use of ASL and contact with it. I want to point to what I hope is a significant amount of promise and potential for the future of ASL in universities like my own and then take us back to what I believe are some of the biggest challenges and potential crises we still have ahead of us for ASL instruction in higher education.

First, the potential. The unique nature of ASL—its performance and passage as a nonprint, nonwritten, visual, and embodied language—is, of course, one of the most significant things that students of the language learn about, through, and with ASL. Consider, for example, the role of new technologies in relation to ASL. What happens to a language like ASL in the wake of digital and video technologies that can now enable sign-language literature to be “published” and shared across distance, time, and space? These are the kinds of questions students and future scholars and teachers of ASL can explore about the little language that could. At my own university, for example, we had some of our ASL students consider these very questions as they participated in a project funded by Battelle Foundation Awards for “technology and human affairs.”

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8 See http://english.osu.edu/asldmo/default.htm
“The ASL Literature and Digital Media Project,” further funded by a local central Ohio organization called the DEAFund, involved three groups of people: local, national, and international sign-language storytellers and poets; a troupe of digital media people, including students learning about digital media technologies alongside people who use these technologies as part of their daily work in various studios around our large campus; and students in contact with ASL from at least three groups: deaf and hard-of-hearing students in central Ohio, grades 9–12, who participate in CHIPS, the Columbus Hearing Impaired Program; students in grades 7–12 at the Ohio School for the Deaf, in Columbus; and college students (mostly hearing) enrolled in ASL courses at Ohio State. These three groups met for three primary events over the course of two days in May 2005: a three-hour dialogue between scholars and critics who had written about ASL literature and some of the ASL authors and performers who had created that literature; a public evening performance of ASL literature; and all-day workshops where participants learned some of the fundamentals and techniques for creating their own ASL literature. All of these events were recorded with multiple video cameras (in order to capture the language itself in more of its 3-D dimensions). The summer of 2005 was then spent editing and creating a master DVD of the three events for further public distribution.9

To date, ASL poetry and storytelling exist in limited degree and quantity on videotape and DVD/CD-ROM. But the movement of ASL literature into the digital realm—online and thus potentially shared globally and free anywhere a person can get to a networked computer—is a fairly new phenomenon. And the potential is vast for the further development of sign-language literatures.

Yet we also still have some advances to achieve in the teaching and learning of ASL. And, while I am buoyed by the potential of endeavors and events like the ASL Digital Media Project, I am also admittedly a bit deflated by the daily teacher shortage we face as we ride on the crest of that 432 percent enrollment increase wave. We have a crisis already near at hand in the adequate instruction of ASL in both higher and public education: We simply do not have enough qualified teachers to meet the demand for these courses. Sometimes we have very qualified interpreters who love the language and also like the idea of teaching ASL; sometimes we have native signers from the deaf community who have taught community-service courses in ASL; and sometimes we actually do have a few truly skilled and qualified language instructors. But it is not easy at this point in the history of ASL instruction, particularly at the college level, to find someone who knows the language well; who knows how to teach a skills-based and skills-level language-program course at the college level where a student’s ability to attain skills at one level can seriously affect that student’s ability to succeed at the next level; who knows what it means to teach the average college student, someone between eighteen and twenty-two years old; who knows what it means to teach in a freshman-sophomore-level general-education required course; and who is willing to only teach part time (and with no real benefits) at our university while also trying to earn a living elsewhere.

As I keep having to remind administrator after administrator in meetings too numerous to remember, just because someone is able to “speak” and “use” the English language, or even write it, does not necessarily mean that he or she is equipped to teach those skills to young college students. The same principle applies to ASL use and to ASL instruction, specifically to college-level instruction of ASL. We simply do not yet have the programs to train the needed teachers or even to establish the qualifications we would want those teachers to have. The American Sign Language Teachers Association (ASLTA) has been working on the training, qualification, professional development, and ethical issues for ASL teachers for almost two decades now, although, by its own admission, it is still an organization largely focused on secondary (9–12) instruction of ASL.10

In addition to the valuable work of the ASLTA, we also need the MLA and its ADFL—and they need us. We need to work together, in affiliation, to establish teacher hiring, professional development, promotion standards for ASL teachers, and the programs that train such teachers in a way that will allow ASL to continue as a unique language among the others so often offered at our colleges and high schools, while also permitting ASL to function equally on the language-learning playing field. American Sign Language—its scholarly research, its literature, and its pedagogical theories and practices—needs a place at the ADFL executive committee table and also in the MLA delegate assembly. From our place at the MLA and ADFL tables, we can watch and learn, among other things, how to negotiate for standards and employment with benefits, dignity, decent pay, and advancement for all those ASL teachers now joining the academic ranks, largely without a Ph.D. in hand and with only part-time employment.

And, as we find our place at those existing tables of language power, we will also need to borrow and adapt knowledge from them to inform the ways we create our own new responses to and knowledge about issues that are important and unique to ASL. There are at least four major considerations we need to hold before us when we place ASL within the academy. First, we need to consider how a college ASL program can help provide access and equity at that institution to deaf and hard-of-hearing members in the community it serves and surrounds. Second, we need to ensure that we develop ASL responsibly—with caution and careful deliberation—in the academy so that we maintain its linguistic and cultural integrity in the face of the cash-cow role

9 See the American Sign Language (ASL) Literature and Digital Media Project, Ohio State University, at http://english.osu.edu/asldmo/default.htm
10 See http://www.aslta.org/index.html
it potentially plays. Third, we need to consider how an ASL program within higher education can best work to "give back" to the deaf community, finding ways to invite, involve, and invest in the skills and presence of local deaf people. Finally, we cannot ignore the fact that it surely means something for the shape and change of ASL when so many hearing students in American higher education are eager to learn it, while deaf or hard-of-hearing kids all across the country are still all too often kept away from learning ASL.

These are four of the most significant issues we will need to continue to address as ASL grows in the academy. I want to end by emphasizing as strongly as I can our need to organize our political and intellectual forces to advance the promise of ASL literature and language instruction with dignity and grace, with quality and care, and with all the could that we can muster.

Since this essay was first written in 2008/2009, much has changed for the landscape of ASL in college/university credits, landscapes, value, and recognition overall. Hooray.


The next MLA report on language instruction in higher education will take place in Fall 2021.

—Brenda Jo Brueggemann

References


Reverse Integration: Centering Deaf Children to Enrich Everyone

Bryan K. Eldredge
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Thirty-odd years ago, I first met a few culturally deaf persons, and my life took a dramatic turn. I ended up acquiring American Sign Language (ASL), marrying a deaf woman, working as an interpreter, and then becoming a university professor engaged in a lifelong endeavor to better understand humanity through the study of deaf people. From my encounters with deaf people, I made two distinct observations: first, deaf people’s world differed from mine in subtle but significant ways. The second and more profound observation was that deaf people’s view of themselves was different than I had imagined possible. Previously, I held the common assumption of deaf people as “broken” hearing people. Seeing that they saw themselves as normal made me wonder how my own experiences generated my worldview and ask myriad other questions about the limits of my imagination.

It is somewhat ironic that it is the potential to influence hearing people like me that makes “American Sign Language for Everyone: Considerations for Universal Design and Deaf Youth Identity” by Supalla et al. (2012) so powerful. It is a call for deaf education reform and for the language rights of deaf students, but it uniquely situates that reform in re-framing deaf students from outsiders, mainstreamed into hearing classrooms with or without interpreters, “to champions of language that potentially benefits all of greater society to which they belong” (Supalla et al., 2012, p. 2; emphasis added).

The authors’ starting point is that the special education model cannot provide an environment that allows deaf students to gain English literacy in the way that is most efficient; specifically, deaf students best master English literacy when ASL is the language of instruction (Chamberlain & Mayberry, 2000). Deaf students are forever peripheral in hearing classrooms because reading instruction there assumes that students can hear (p. 4). Given this, the authors ask:

Should Western countries advocate inclusion whereby all individuals learn how to sign and it is no longer confined to special education to what is currently considered by society as a disability group? (p. 2; emphasis in original)

Supalla et al. conclude that universal design (UD) provides a new paradigm that will prioritize sign-language proliferation (p. 3). The application of UD here produces a language-rich environment for deaf students on the promise that ASL benefits both deaf and hearing children beyond the classroom.

This opening of signing environments to deaf children is critical to deaf studies because “[t]he fight for bilingual education has been central to Deaf activism from the 1980s to the present” (Bauman, 2008, p. 17). In its early stages, deaf studies sought to prove the legitimacy of ASL and the culture of the people who used it. Having accomplished that, deaf studies had to consider in what ways it was still relevant. Deaf people have a language and a culture, but that makes them just like lots of other groups (Humphries, 2008). The second wave of research focused on variation and variable power relations within the deaf community, and the field has now moved on to ask “what it is about Deaf Culture that is valuable to human diversity” (Bauman, 2008, p. 3).

Supalla et al’s article is valuable to society generally because it shows how language ideologies and the policies that they engender sustain power differentials. The work’s great contribution is its presentation of a way around the incompatibility of the language ideologies that educational legislation and policy embody with deaf people’s own ideologies. The authors identify and explain the incompatibility of special education and the needs of deaf children and presents UD as a viable resolution. They point out that “[i]ndividualization serves as a hallmark of special education” (Supalla et al., 2012, p. 4) and that this essential design feature puts special education at odds with deaf students’ needs. Deaf students need signing to be central rather than peripheral. Special education’s best attempts to integrate deaf students via interpretation, note taking, and similar services cannot constitute authentic modes of communication. Integration’s denial of authentic forms of social discourse for deaf students amounts to systematic discrimination, the exact opposite of what integration hopes to achieve.
Yet putting deaf students together smacks of segregation and is antithetical to integration, which is taken as an *a priori* good (de Meulder & Haualand, 2019). In response, Supalla et al. use UD to reconceptualize integration as “conventional integration” (p. 5), to be contrasted with what they term “reverse integration.” This proposal is transformative.

In reverse integration, hearing children integrate into schools for the deaf, where ASL is the primary language. The authors explain:

> UD provides an opportunity to expand our current paradigm of inclusion or integration to be one where deaf students are at the center of their educational environment along with their hearing peers (and the hearing students are enriched in the process along with their deaf peers). (p. 5)

The authors note examples prior to the 2012 publication where some charter schools for deaf students, Gallaudet University, and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf have all admitted hearing students. Since then, some public schools have experimented with the notion. The Utah Schools for the Deaf have allowed some hearing children to attend their preschool.1 Associate Superintendent for the Deaf Michelle Tanner notes that, in a classic irony, parents of hearing children are lined up to get their kids into the program, while parents of deaf children are reticent (M. Tanner, October 26, 2020).

Reverse integration is significant to deaf studies because it brings together theoretical and pragmatic considerations. Sign-language spread has long been a theoretical deaf-world aim, but it is pragmatically difficult outside the few shared-signing communities where deafness is unusually common. Using UD to institute reverse integration jumps the track from segregation’s one-way benefits—that is, deaf children learn English best through ASL—to a two-way argument: Hearing and deaf children benefit from learning together in ASL.

Deaf children benefit from a curriculum that places them and their language in a central position, using it to teach literacy. An ASL-centered curriculum promises what all true education (as opposed to rehabilitation) offers: literacy, greater access to society, better employment opportunities, and a voice in society.

Immersing hearing children in ASL via reverse integration promises additional benefits to deaf populations. Most obviously, ASL will become widespread in the community, used by retail workers, potential employers, educators, health professionals, and so forth. Deaf people will move more easily in the community at large and will face less discrimination, an effect already seen to a degree when the explosion of ASL classes in the U.S. and Canada produced more hearing signers (p. 7). Additionally, increased enrollments in signing schools will open teaching positions to deaf adults who can serve as language models.

Reverse integration becomes practical through the application of UD principles because it provides a way to respect integrationist values. Indeed, reverse integration closely mirrors the dual language immersion (DLI) programs that place native English speakers into K–12 schools using another language (Spanish, Chinese, Russian, etc.) as the primary language of instruction. Reverse integration offers the same value as DLI programs, including cognitive, social, and economic gains, but with ASL, the benefits can be greater.

In learning a signed language, students get medium-specific benefits. Supalla et al. cite the example of fishermen from Martha’s Vineyard who used signing to communicate from boat to boat, where spoken language was inaudible. Other hearing people find the signing medium valuable too. Australian aborigines sign in a variety of settings, including while hunting, where speech is taboo; during initiations; in times of mourning; and in situations where evil spirits might overhear speech (Power, 2013). And hearing parents who use baby sign with their infants find it indispensable for chastising children discretely, as in church and behind the gaze of others.

Supalla et al. also note that hearing students immersed in ASL may better adjust to hearing loss common with aging (p. 7). I suggest another practical benefit of ASL over other languages. Inevitably, some of these students will produce deaf children. At least four of my former ASL students had deaf babies. When they signed up for ASL, they had no idea that they were preparing homes for the next generation of deaf children.

Clearly, reverse integration offers benefits to hearing students. But perhaps the greatest benefit from the creation of a shared signing space can be enjoyed by everyone in a society. Supalla et al. explain:

> If hearing students learn ASL in schools, through increased natural interaction with their deaf peers, deaf students would more likely feel that they are equal to their hearing counterparts. Hearing students learning ASL in school serves as an equalizer and parallels deaf students learning English through the school system. (p. 8)

A society that more fully includes all of its members holds promise for all.

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1 Utah law does not allow them to attend K–12 classes.
Kusters (2014) notes that the mixture of languages used in shared-signing communities, such as Adamorobe, Ghana, constitute a form of deaf gain, contributing to human diversity and to the diversity among human communities. Bauman and Murray (2014) refer to this kind of deaf gain as “deaf contribute” (p. xxviii). Supalla et al.’s reverse integration model promises deaf gain of this sort by creating a unique form of shared-signing communities, further adding to the diversity of human communities. But it simultaneously offers a different type of deaf gain that benefits individuals. Bauman and Murray refer to this individual deaf gain as “benefit” (p. xxiv). Signing schools create a nexus where each group’s bilingual needs are met: Deaf children get access to English literacy, and hearing children get a second language and a chance to see the potential for ways of being they have never imagined, a mixture of contribute and benefit.

Of shared-signing communities, Kusters notes, “What sets these communities apart is that deafness and deaf people are inherent in the habitus of these communities, the shared sign language part of their linguistic mosaics” (2014, p. 301). It was a lack of these elements in my own habitus that made my introduction to deaf people so startling. Reverse integration aims to avoid a spoken-language-centered habitus like mine by creating shared-signing communities full of authentic communication that morphs from personal benefit to societal betterment.

References


American Sign Language for Everyone: Considerations for Universal Design and Youth Identity

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Introduction

While western society is best described as a speaking society, signed language is used by a subgroup of the population—among Deaf people. The capitalized “D” in the term Deaf represents a Deaf culture framework cultivated through Deaf Studies, initiated in the 1980s. Deaf Studies scholars and researchers have demonstrated that an individual who experiences hearing loss has a tendency over time to become part of a community that is close-knit and displays the qualities of a cultural group. American Sign Language (ASL) serves as the primary basis for this Deaf socio-cultural and political phenomenon (Baker & Cokely, 1994; Carbin, 1996; Lane, 1999; Lane, 2010; Lane et al., 1996; Padden, 1980; Padden & Humphries, 1988; Rutherford, 1988). ASL possesses its own distinctive structure, as do spoken languages used around the world. This reinforces the concept that Deaf people are part of a cultural and linguistic minority.

This paper is intended to engender thought-provoking discussion to address the current experience of deaf children, youth, and adults in society and the role of universal design to enhance that experience for both deaf and hearing individuals. The authors propose that universal design has the unique potential to create a very different reality—an environment in which deaf people are truly at the “center” of society alongside their hearing neighbors and in which hearing individuals are enriched by this change.

While deaf people communicate perfectly well within their own community using signed language, the experience that they, as well as deaf people who do not know signed language, have in society at large is less than optimal. Spoken language constitutes a barrier for deaf individuals to fully participate and contribute to society. This not only limits deaf individuals from realizing their potential; it also impacts the benefits society could gain from their equal participation. One avenue for exploration is the concept of Universal Design.

The term universal design was coined originally by architect Ronald L. Mace to describe the designing of all products and the built environment to be both aesthetic and usable to the greatest extent possible by everyone, regardless of age, ability, or status in life.2 In 1963, Goldsmith, author of Designing for the Disabled (1963/2011) initiated the concept of free access for people with disabilities. This concept gained most traction with the creation of the dropped curb on all sidewalks—now a standard feature of our environment in many western countries. It has been legislated in the United States through the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, followed by the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 in Australia.3 We propose the following basic Universal Design question for consideration:

Should western countries advocate inclusion whereby all individuals learn how to sign and it is no longer confined to special education or to what is currently considered by society as a disability group?

This proposition is relevant to deaf students living in Ontario, Canada, where the majority (92%) are mainstreamed as special education students in hearing public school board programs. Ninety-seven percent of deaf students attend these local public schools dominated by spoken language (Malkowski, 2011). Mainstreamed education for deaf students is even more dramatic across Canada, with 99% of deaf children (junior kindergarten to grade 12) enrolled in regular schools, and less than 1% attending the provincial schools for deaf students. Although schools for the deaf are known for providing rich

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ASL for Everyone

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SIGNING ENVIRONMENTS, integration in non-signing schools has been a priority in Canada. A similar situation occurs in the United States; over 85% of deaf students are placed in a regular public school setting (e.g., Stinson & Kluwin, 2011). We suggest that the special education/disability model undermines the identity and potential of deaf students by identifying them as special needs. Instead we propose reframing and identifying deaf students as champions of language that potentially benefits all of greater society to which they belong.

To understand the concept of Universal Design (UD), we must first gain a greater understanding about deaf youth identity and their role in society (Small et al., 2012). Deaf youth need to develop as productive members of society while maintaining their identity. This includes becoming proficient in ASL. Unlike English or any spoken language, ASL is fully accessible to deaf children for language acquisition and mastery (Supalla & McKee, 2002; see Supalla & Cripps, 2008, for further discussion on the concept of linguistic accessibility). Addressing the issues deaf youth face with English is also critical for improving their well-being, especially in terms of learning to read and becoming literate in a language they do not hear. Viewing this challenge from the Deaf culture model perspective, we can address the critical role of ASL in the development of English literacy for deaf students to become fluent readers.

J. H. Cripps and Supalla (2012) explained that the power of spoken language is so immense that it penetrates practically every aspect of daily life. The Canadian and American public is frequently narrow in their thinking that language must be spoken. The UD paradigm provides an opportunity to reexamine spoken language as the undisputed language of instruction in schools and provides an expanded notion of inclusion or what it means to be integrated in the mainstream. Although the Deaf community and its members have advocated against society’s preoccupation with spoken language over the years, they have not gained a solid platform for dialogue, nor have we seen significant social change. The common recurring theme in Deaf Studies research and scholarship is oppression associated with signed language. The fact that culturally deaf people do not perceive themselves as disabled is especially relevant (see Lane et al., 2011, for the most recent discussion on the topic of disability in the Deaf community). We do not dispute the realities of language oppression and what the perceptions are, but we do believe that more can be done and that a different approach must be considered. Thus, if culturally deaf people do not identify themselves as having a disability, then the question becomes how deaf people AND society at large can benefit from a paradigm shift, and what directions for change must be considered for individual societies to follow.

Think of the deaf child or youth as a visual learner. What does this visually based child need in order to feel truly included in all social and academic situations? What is needed for this child to learn in a visual environment? What is needed for their literacy development? What could Universal Design offer visual learners? To be provocative for a moment, we can “step outside of the box.” If we step away from thinking of integration as we know it and disconnect it from “disability,” we can extend the inclusion paradigm to incorporate the visual environment in Universal Design to include signed language for all.

For this reason, UD is a worthy paradigm to explore, especially for the prospect of signed language proliferation. Many would likely be curious about what society has to say about the basic notion that signing should and could be part of mainstream culture even to the extent that speaking is. This paper is intended to raise questions and provoke dialogue and consideration of possibilities not yet explored.

Historically, there have been many accommodations of people with disabilities into society. Deaf people have experienced accommodations, but their integration into society is far from realized. With access to language (spoken vs. signed) at the core, it is not difficult to understand why traditional inclusion or integration practices have been controversial to the Deaf community as well as within the field of education. UD theoretically represents a broader perspective and potentially offers inclusion or integration a more successful outcome. As such, ASL is presented as a component of UD that potentially benefits society at large as well as deaf individuals and culturally deaf people. If accepted as part of UD, ASL would reduce or help eliminate the tension currently experienced between hearing and deaf individuals in our society and could potentially benefit all.

Socialization and Literacy are Key

For the education of deaf students, we propose a more expanded integration model than has been explored to date. Current conventional integration practices place deaf students in a regular public-school setting, often with supports that separate them from the mainstream while keeping them in the setting, and hope for the best in regards to their academic and social success.
Students are often relegated to the periphery. A lack of opportunity for socialization for deaf students when the schools use spoken language is one important consideration. According to J. H. Cripps and Supalla, the impact on the socio-emotional welfare of deaf students is adverse (e.g., being lonely and frequently ostracized by non-signing hearing peers; see Calderon & Greenberg, 2003, for review on the well-being of deaf students).

A critical part of education involves learning to read during the early elementary school years. This impacts students’ overall success and identity as learners. Students need to “learn to read” in a timely manner so that they can “read to learn” as expected in more advanced grades in school. Western societies anticipate that their citizens (including those who are deaf) will be literate, so schools have this important task. Literacy is the foundation on which academic success rests and, as such, must be given particular attention.

J. H. Cripps and Supalla identified the dominance of spoken language in the education process and in literacy education in public school settings. Public school’s emphasis on spoken language is especially evident when it comes to teaching students how to read. Although research on the benefits of signed language proficiency in relationship to English literacy for deaf students has been available for many years, consistent use of signed language in curriculum, instruction, and assessment (CIA) with deaf students has not been established. In terms of best reading instruction practices, deaf students require pedagogy that allows them to learn to read in English through ASL (see Supalla & J. H. Cripps, 2011, for review of ASL Gloss for teaching English literacy to deaf students). Since signed language is what deaf students can naturally access, a process of transitioning from ASL to written English must be comprehensively addressed in CIA. Reading standards would serve as the basis for CIA alignment that suits the needs of deaf students as a group (see Supalla & Blackburn, 2003, for further discussion on how CIA can be aligned with the standards for a school with deaf students in attendance). That said, having ASL as primary in teaching English literacy would likely require so much from the regular public school that the placement of deaf students in such settings would be deemed not feasible.

This raises the important question: Do the needs of deaf students and ASL exceed the capacity of special education? We suspect the answer is yes. Current conventional integration as defined by special education places pressure on deaf students to conform to how hearing students are taught reading. The barriers that deaf students experience in the classroom lie in the fact that reading instruction practices are based on the assumption that all students can hear and enjoy access to English. Hearing students, whether they know English or are learning English (as a second language), can sound out the words in print (as part of developing decoding skills) and participate in reading aloud sentences, for example. Deaf students cannot.

J. H. Cripps and Supalla explained that CIA was fixed or rigid and assumed to be the “right” way for students with or without disabilities until very recently. The primary job that special educators had was seeing that deaf students’ needs were met, but with the spoken language orientation of CIA, the task became impossible. Special educators were doing the best they could under the circumstances. Although there has been significant positive effort and CIA alignment is now widely promoted in schools for all students, we still believe that the solution goes beyond a special education model when it comes to the education of deaf students.

How do we know this? The answer lies in the very basis of the special education model. According to the individualized education design, it is not so much about whether a child is deaf, visually impaired, or has another disability, but that all students with disabilities have special needs. Individualization serves as a hallmark of special education. Thus, whatever need(s) deaf students have as a group is overlooked by design. To demonstrate this flaw, special educators would have a hard time coping with this question: How can we meet the needs of deaf students who know ASL and need to learn to read in English? Here one would have to “segregate” deaf students as a group instead of breaking up the group to try and serve individual needs. Any reference to ASL for CIA considerations would be perceived as something specific to being deaf and thus undermining integration. So, pursuing conventional integration, by necessity, makes special education biased toward spoken language.

Many special education programs provide services such as interpreters for access and resource services that pull students out of the classroom to provide additional support one on one. Here, too, the special education model does not address full inclusion or integration as we believe educators would truly like to see. The “interactions” taking place through interpreters, auditory systems, and note takers cannot be described as authentic. In what we tend to call an inclusive environment, deaf students must expend increased effort in attempts to establish direct and deep interactions with fellow students and teachers in their academic setting. Rarely are they effortlessly in the center of interactions. In contrast, for deaf children, Deaf Cultural Space embodies an empowering environment that goes far beyond inclusion. Deaf Cultural Space includes “ASL, Deaf culture, Deaf role models, and an environment where students are already in the core of the system both in academic studies as well as in the social arena where much learning takes place by osmosis” (Small & J. S. Cripps, 2012, p. 36). UD provides an opportunity to expand our current paradigm of inclusion or integration to be one where deaf students are at the center of their educational environment along with their hearing peers (and the hearing students are enriched in the process along with their deaf peers).
Integration: An Enrichment Model

J. H. Cripps and Supalla proposed that schools for deaf students be revamped under the name of signed language schools. Reverse integration would allow hearing students to attend the historically deaf schools. The signed language schools would be open to deaf and hearing students in keeping with an enrichment model of education (Hornberger, 1991) where members of the majority language in society are enriched by the minority language. In addition, any hearing or deaf student with a learning disability could continue to receive special education services within the signed language schools (paralleling what takes place in spoken language schools). Deaf students enrolled at spoken language schools will participate in the special education process, but the inaccessibility of CIA will likely result in redirecting deaf students to signed language schools. Hearing siblings of deaf children and hearing children of deaf parents who would likely attend the signed language schools and many hearing parents who provide signed language for their hearing newborns, as is increasingly popular, may wish their children to be enrolled and enriched in the signed language schools.

With an enrichment model of reverse integration and UD, the dilemma of segregation as is currently evident in traditional deaf education would be avoided. With the signed language schools, ASL would be designated as the language of instruction for all students, deaf and hearing alike. Students who hear would be proficient in ASL upon enrollment or willing to learn signed language through immersion with deaf students and others who know ASL. This would not be an unreasonable expectation given the expectations of French language schools in Ontario, for example. Likewise, all students attending signed language schools would undergo reading instruction based on ASL to obtain literacy skills in English. Classroom discourse would be conducted in signed language and reading materials would be provided in written English. This is with the critical understanding that the students become literate in English through ASL. Students would also become literate in ASL, learning the signed literature of well-known poets, storytellers, etc. Auditory capacity or spoken language knowledge for learning to read will not be used to the detriment of deaf students. Deaf and hearing students would have full and equal access to the curriculum, instruction, and assessment. We know from research on deaf children with deaf parents that their English literacy and academic achievements are comparable to their hearing peers and surpass that of deaf children with hearing parents (Israelite et al., 1992). This gives credence to the potential of a signed language environment in attaining literacy and academic success. As well, there is much literature on the benefits of signed language for hearing children in early language development as well as on other developmental measures (Pettito, 2000).

Deaf youth identity would be maintained, if not strengthened, when an aligned CIA is in place. Deaf students will have the opportunity to develop English reading skills and become highly literate, made possible through signed language–based pedagogy. This includes deaf students being able to socialize with hearing peers effectively (when signed language is widely used throughout the school setting) and being deaf not framed as disability in the education process. The signed language school will provide a context for direct, real, and meaningful interaction between the two student bodies, whereas the spoken language school cannot do so. Deaf students would not be isolated, as there is strength in numbers, and deaf and hearing students would integrate both in and outside of the classroom. Extracurricular activities would take place in signed language and would be accessible to all. Students attending the signed language school will come to understand how deaf and hearing populations relate. The educational environment will naturally incorporate Deaf culture throughout, since the language is tied to the culture and literature.

We expect that the reading difficulties long known for deaf students as a group (e.g., Marschark & Harris, 1996; Musselman, 2000; Padden & Ramsey, 1998) will cease through the alignment of CIA. We also anticipate that deaf schools that have historically produced lower academic outcomes will, in turn, be elevated in quality to be on par with speaking schools. Reverse integration in practice will result in having signed language schools as a new option for the public. Hearing students will have the benefit of being enriched by the signed language and culture.

J. H. Cripps and Supalla emphasize that reverse integration with signed language is not new; it has already been implemented in a few charter schools in the United States. Charter schools are public schools that provide alternative public education. In the signing schools, teachers are employed to sign throughout the day, and both deaf and hearing students are encouraged to enroll. The Deaf community is supportive of the founding of signing charter schools (and many of the founders are deaf).

In Canada, charter schools exist in the province of Alberta but do not yet include signing schools. Charter schools that practice reverse integration in the United States, however, are producing a new generation of hearing students who use signed language in addition to speaking. As they grow into adulthood, they will become contributing members of society that will eventually reflect their signing backgrounds.

Proliferation of ASL throughout Society

The notion of signed language schools coincides with ASL becoming a popular language to learn and use among individuals who are not deaf in Canada and the United States. The timing cannot be better for the enrichment model of integration to be implemented in signed language schools since increasingly more people in general are learning how to sign.
Signed Language Programmes in Canada

Baby Sign programming for families serves as one avenue that fosters ASL proliferation as well as signed language classes offered in high schools, colleges, and universities (Kurz & Taylor, 2008; Rosen, 2008; Wilcox & Wilcox, 1997). The latter creates a strong incentive among hearing students to study ASL to meet language requirements previously reserved for spoken languages (e.g., French, Native Languages, Classical and International Languages in Ontario). In the United States, ASL is growing faster than spoken languages offered for study, according to the *New York Times* (December 8, 2010), and ASL is now the fourth most popular language to study after Spanish, French, and German. This media attention is significant, as the public takes note of options for language study. The implications for the Deaf community are significant, as more people become signers. Culturally deaf people themselves are frequently instructors of ASL in classrooms (e.g., Cooper et al., 2008). Deaf culture awareness and improved communication opportunities (such as ordering food in a restaurant with a server who knows how to sign) are all new to culturally deaf people’s experiences.

We note that there are some differences when considering Canada and the United States. In Canada, ASL is offered for foreign/second language study, but to a lesser degree as compared to the United States, while Baby Sign programming is more popular in Canada. It appears that families are eager to improve communication between primary caregivers and toddlers. Signing is becoming part of the household where it was previously limited to speaking. Reduced levels of frustration and better communication abilities for toddlers are part of the Baby Sign’s increasing popularity (Acredolo & Goodwyn, 1996; see Doherty-Sneddon, 2008 for review of research literature on Baby Sign). The impact on society is evident, as signing is now becoming part of mainstream culture.

As signing proliferates, hearing people who are accustomed to speaking only would benefit from using signed language when talking over a distance, in a noisy environment, through a window, or when one needs to be quiet in a completely quiet environment. Losing hearing is a serious matter for the elderly, as they frequently find themselves socially isolated (e.g., Ciorba et al., 2012). Many elderly who suffer hearing loss do not use a hearing aid for a variety of reasons (e.g., Oberg et al., 2012). In a society that speaks and also knows signed language, the change from having full hearing to partial hearing would not be so traumatic for the elderly or for their family members and friends. This will become even more pertinent as the baby boom generation ages and as the next generation, used to listening to loud music through headphones, ages. As it states in the introduction to the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA) (Government of Ontario, 2005), “increasing accessibility will help prepare Ontario for the future. As the population ages, the number of people with disabilities will increase. Visitors and tourists, along with their friends and family, will need to travel, shop, use programs, services, and information and to access buildings, parks, and other places in a way that is accessible to them.”

With our focus on deaf youth, the widespread use of signed language would be critical to social change. If hearing students learn ASL in schools, through increased natural interaction with their deaf peers, deaf students would more likely feel that they are equal to their hearing counterparts. Hearing students learning ASL in school serves as an equalizer and parallels deaf students learning English through the school system.

As more hearing members of society become signers, the less “disabled” by society are deaf people. This includes downplaying the preoccupation of deaf individuals developing the capacity for spoken language in order to participate in society since more people would know how to sign. Creating a platform for full-scale proliferation of ASL in Canada and the United States will serve as a strong countermeasure to the cochlear implant technology (which attempts to make deaf children “hearing” and for them to rely on spoken language exclusively; see Humphries et al., 2012, and Kushalnagar et al., 2010, for ethical issues associated with denial of signed language exposure). If hearing students learn ASL in school, hearing parents with deaf children will less likely be afraid to expose their deaf child to ASL. They would not feel that they have to choose between signed or spoken language. Deaf children with cochlear implants today are exposed to spoken language only in Ontario (with rare exceptions) and continue to be part of special education in schools. This would not be needed.

Ambitious Agenda in New Zealand

In New Zealand, we see full-scale signed language proliferation seriously addressed. The signed language in use is New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL). A parliamentary bill passed in 2006 resulted in a move by Ministry of Education officials to

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6 To our knowledge, many of the officers of the national organization American Sign Language Teachers Association (and its state and local affiliates) are deaf (http://www.aslta.org/). The impact of ASL instruction includes signed language teaching becoming an increasing employment opportunity for culturally deaf people.


Standards/background.aspx
ensure that signed language is part of the curriculum taught in public schools throughout New Zealand. New Zealanders are expected to become signers through the education system. NZSL is recognized as an official language alongside English and Maori (an indigenous language used by natives to New Zealand prior to Europeans’ arrival). Signed language is viewed as no longer in the realm of special education (Dyson, 2007; see McKee, 2005–2006, for review of the NZSL legislation). Deaf culture with its emphasis on the use of signed language is integral to the everyday life of New Zealanders.

Martha’s Vineyard in the United States

Martha’s Vineyard off the Massachusetts coast in the United States had widespread use of signed language from the eighteenth through mid-twentieth centuries (Groce, 1985; Bahan & Poole-Nash, 1996) due to a large proportion of deaf individuals compared to the deaf population reported off-island. The unusually strong deaf hereditary traits produced a unique socio-linguistic phenomenon. Hearing and deaf islanders thus became signers for linguistic access on behalf of all islanders without note of who was deaf and who was hearing.

Consequently, deaf Vineyarders enjoyed access to daily life on the island in terms of social, political, and employment opportunities. “Disability” was rendered irrelevant as it related to deaf islanders. The benefits of signed language were universal. Hearing islanders who fished used signed language among themselves, especially when they needed a way to communicate between boats out at sea, for example. With the decline of the deaf genetic pool and disappearance of deaf islanders over time, this lifestyle as described on Martha’s Vineyard became historic. However, what took place on the island could be someday duplicated. Martha’s Vineyard serves as a model for true integration and what society can do.

Gallaudet University and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf

A more current example of ASL proliferation close to home is Gallaudet University, in Washington, D.C., the only liberal arts university in the world that uses signed language for instruction and in the environment. Gallaudet University was established in 1864 to serve deaf students, but there was a significant change in policy in 2001.8 Gallaudet University now enrolls hearing students (based on a quota) as part of its effort to promote reverse integration while maintaining a signing environment. Hearing students enrolled at this higher education institution are expected to sign and attend all classes that are signed.

Similarly, the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) established in 1965 is one of the colleges and shares grounds with the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). It practices an enrichment model with reverse integration of hearing students with deaf students and includes classes with signed language instruction. It presents somewhat more complex dynamics as it is housed within the RIT grounds—a hearing-based institution. However, hearing students may enroll in NTID courses and study their course content in signed language–based classes.9

Together, these higher institutions of learning can serve as models for reverse integration and enrichment models concerning deaf students, hearing students, and UD in elementary and high schools.

UD is evolving, with potential for expansion as follows:

Work in the area of UD is being approached from differing perspectives. Some applications of UD are drawing heavily on the architectural roots of the concept and are building on the Principles of UD (North Carolina State University, 1997). Others are looking more holistically at what “universal” might mean in higher education settings and exploring inclusive strategies (Scott et al., 2003, p. 1).

Universal Design Concept Applied Broadly

ASL as a product and signing as an environment are clearly not architectural in nature, but what we have discussed in regards to signed language proliferation resembles the history of people in wheelchairs who rallied for ramps, a well-known architectural design. The need for ramps was once considered unique to those in wheelchairs. However, after years of advocacy and financial expenditures for the installation of ramps in Canada and the United States, individuals who do not have any significant mobility “disability” now reap the benefits of ramps. Users are not only people in wheelchairs, but anyone pushing a baby stroller, or

8 Admissions.gallaudet.edu/Admissions/HUG/HUG_Program.htm
9 Once again, the prevalent signed language use at RIT/NTID spilling over to Rochester, New York (where the institution is located), received media attention, evident with a New York Times article (December 25, 2006). The city’s transformation with so many people knowing how to sign is described in the article as something that will influence the rest of the country in the near future. The title of the article, “Where Sign Language Is Far from Foreign,” is part of the UD vision for ASL discussed in this chapter.
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grocery cart, or in need of an incline versus a step. Authentic integration is realized when all individuals experience the benefits of this architectural design firsthand.

The Deaf community has unfortunately not yet experienced UD applied to visual fire alarms in all public places for safety. They have, however, experienced UD regarding other public access, such as captioning. Culturally deaf people fought for captioned TV programs in the 1970s and 1980s. Initially only news programs were captioned. Other TV programs followed, and today almost all TV programs are captioned. What is key to UD is how captioning has become mainstreamed over time and is used by individuals who can hear on many occasions (Burgstahler, 2012). In a gym or bar, for example, TV programs are frequently shown with captions. The bar is either too noisy to have the TV audible or has multiple TV sets with different programs shown at the same time. A hearing person would not be able to follow the programs auditorily (i.e., the information being spoken from different programs would conflict with each other). A person working out in the gym experiences a similar situation with multiple TV programs being shown at the same time. Captions have solved the problem of “accessing” TV programs in those situations (although admittedly it does not address these situations for blind customers). Captioning, once thought to be something specific to deaf people, now has invested interest among the deaf and hearing public such that its use should be ensured for a long time.

**Limitations of Interpreting Services**

The Disability Studies scholar Sheryl Burgstahler admitted that the popular practice of employing signed language interpreters for deaf students in higher education settings is not part of UD (2013, p. 3). Deaf students attending regular universities in Canada and the United States are frequently provided with the option of having a signed language interpreter. Deaf students who rely on signed language interpreters in the classroom are without a signing environment beyond the confines of the classroom. One can assume that deaf students are highly social beings just like those who can hear, yet it is hearing students who have access to the entire university and college life. Deaf students with interpreters do not have this access. This is precisely why Gallaudet University is an important example of a true UD model. An enrichment model with reverse integration provides a dynamic among deaf and hearing students that far surpasses the limitations of settings with interpreters for “access.”

Signed language interpreting services are frequently provided to help integrate deaf students in Canadian and American public schools. However, the provision of signed language interpreting services inadvertently supports the status quo of limited integration. Interpreters are not at recess or in the lunchroom when deaf students struggle with socialization. The interpreter being a third party in the classroom is awkward and not natural to the socialization process between peers and for communication with the teacher. Research by Canadian interpreter and former David Peikoff Chair of Deaf Studies Debra Russell bears out these findings (Russell, 2012). Interpreters cannot serve as the answer to true integration.

If widespread signed language use in Canada and the United States is highly desirable, we believe that there are two basic routes to accomplish this. One would be the mandate for students in the educational system to take ASL classes like they do math, science, history, and other content areas. This will result in having all students knowing ASL. This will be different from how the signed language classes have been offered through the foreign/second language setup (where students make a choice between ASL and other foreign/second languages and only some students become signers). The offering of ASL classes would take place in all spoken language schools. This is still only a partial solution, as students would miss the enculturation that happens through natural interaction in a fully signing environment. (We know from the situation in Ontario where students take French classes that students’ French language competency is limited since it is not an interactive immersion educational experience.) The other route is attending a signed language school with reverse integration. There, hearing students will be immersed in signed language. It is through these two routes that all youth in society will know how to sign and eventually society as a whole would know sign.

**Conclusions**

Currently, the majority of young deaf students are at risk for not learning or mastering ASL in a timely fashion (Snoddon, 2008). A rich signing environment as provided through a signed language school would play a significant role in ensuring that all students become fluent signers. With a UD model there would be increased opportunities for hearing parents of deaf or hearing children to learn ASL and to use it in their natural environment—not only at home with their immediate family. This applies to

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10 The common provision of interpreting services does not address the need for deaf students to experience direct instruction by teachers. If hearing students are entitled to spoken language instruction in school, the same should be true for deaf students with signed language. As a full-fledged human language, ASL is supposed to function as well as English or any spoken language. Teaching reading to deaf students also requires the use of ASL in direct instruction if they are to become literate, supported through a well-aligned curriculum, instruction, and assessment program.
parents of both deaf and hearing students with the reverse integration model. Spoken language schools could also operate with hearing students learning ASL (through classes) as part of creating social change, with everybody acquiring ASL in due time.

In educational terms, all students would be entitled to a signed language education in their schooling (see Padden, 2003, for the emergence of signed language education as a concept). Current conventional integration practices continue to sustain a disability/special needs model. Hearing people being strictly speakers have been seen as the “norm,” and the status quo has been maintained at the expense of many members of society. An expanded UD reverse integration model with deaf and hearing students from kindergarten through higher education would provide the following:

- ASL would be recognized for use in the environment.
- ASL would be recognized as a product that is of benefit to society.
- Audism would be diminished. Spoken language would not retain a superior position in society, and ASL would take its just place with specific benefits for all.
- ASL would be recognized for its utilitarian value in such circumstances as communicating in a noisy environment, across a window, in a quiet zone, etc.
- ASL will also be recognized for its rich heritage, with its own literature, history, body of knowledge, just as any language carries.
- ASL will be a Universal Design language due to its status as a signed language with implications for integration practices, linguistic accessibility, optimal reading instruction practices, and true inclusion.

UD offers a way of shifting from an emphasis on disability as deaf youth establish their sense of identity in schools to one that provides an environment for deaf students to feel a true sense of “agency”—where they are key players, in the center of interactions and central to their environment alongside their hearing peers. “Agency” draws upon unique competencies that enrich our society (Small & Cripps, 2012, p. 41). Hearing students acquiring ASL can similarly feel a sense of pride in becoming enriched by the signed language and culture in which they are engaged.

With this framework, ASL would be seen as a valuable product leading to the creation of a signing environment as part of everyday life in society. With UD, the education process favors everybody, not one group over another.

References


11 The notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or to behave in a manner of one who hears (Humphries, 1977).


Malkowski, G. (2011). Removing attitudinal barriers: Eliminating all forms of discrimination, sign language cleansing and barriers to democracy, higher education, employment and civic opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing children and
ASL for Everyone

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Can We Return to Martha’s Vineyard?

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This issue of Society for American Sign Language Journal (SASLJ) includes two distinct but related groups of articles and commentaries. Four contributions (Groce, Hoffmeister, Kegl, and Lane et al.) look to the origins of American Sign Language (ASL) in early-19th-century New England and the social environments where it arose. The others (Brueggemann, Eldredge, Rosen, and Supalla et al.) look at the present state of ASL and its possibilities for the future. The first group focuses on languages that existed independently of schools, whereas the second group is focused on the role that educational institutions may play in creating a better future. Together, they challenge us to consider how ASL fits into American society and how sign languages fit into societies generally.

The historical articles and their accompanying commentaries, particularly that of Lane et al., contrast two possible patterns of sign language use in society. Both involve deaf1 people, but in different ways. On the island of Martha’s Vineyard, a recessive gene for deafness caused deaf people to be scattered broadly across many families. The type of society that developed is called by Lane et al. an “assimilative society” (following Bahan & Poole-Nash, 1996); it is now often called a “shared-signing community” (Bickford & McKay-Cody, 2018; Kisch, 2008, 2012). As Groce (1985) describes both in her article and her subsequent book, and the other contributions reiterate, large numbers of people, deaf and hearing, could communicate effectively in the local sign language, and a person’s hearing status was not a strong component of their social identity. In Henniker, New Hampshire, on the other hand, deaf people were concentrated in a few families due to a dominant gene for deafness. What developed is what Lane et al. call a “differentiating” society2, clearly distinct from the surrounding hearing society and in which deafness was a key component of identity. The foundation of the American Asylum in Hartford, Connecticut, reinforced this differentiating society by bringing together deaf children from all over New England, resulting in the formation of not only ASL but also the American Deaf community.

Thus, broadly speaking, the two patterns of sign language use in society are shared-signing communities and Deaf communities. These two may, however, be difficult to distinguish in particular situations. (Were there in Henniker, prior to the founding of the American Asylum, perhaps some elements of a shared-signing community?) This fuzziness of the boundary between them underlies the other four contributions to this volume. Supalla et al. and Eldredge focus on ASL’s use as the language of instruction in primary and secondary education, while Brueggemann and Rosen look at ASL (as-a-second-language) programs in colleges and universities. Both recognize that the use of ASL in the United States is currently deaf-centric within a Deaf community. Yet they envision a time when ASL use may be more broadly distributed among the hearing population, leading to a return to something more like a shared-signing community, such as existed on Martha’s Vineyard at the time when ASL first formed. If such a situation were to develop, educational systems would undoubtedly be important in fostering and sustaining it.

The same two types of societies are found worldwide. Sign languages, with rare exceptions, develop only in the presence of substantial concentrations of audiologically deaf people. There are two main reasons for having such concentrations, leading to the two different social patterns.

In places where there is a relatively high incidence of genetic deafness maintained over several generations due to a restricted gene pool, as occurred on Martha’s Vineyard, a sign language tends to develop that is used by both deaf and hearing—a shared-

1 Although it has been common to distinguish between big-D (cultural) Deafness and little-D (audiological) deafness, such a distinction is difficult to maintain when discussing the types of communities in this essay, where there may not be a clear Deaf identity. Therefore, I capitalize Deaf only when talking specifically about Deaf communities and their languages, leaving other instances lowercase and vague or making the distinction (if necessary) in other ways.

2 Bahan and Poole-Nash (1996) call this a “suppressing community,” a term that they attribute to Ted Supalla.
signing community, often called a "village sign language" (Zeshan & de Vos, 2012). Typically in these situations, deaf people compose 1%–4% of the general population, sometimes even more. This is high compared to the 0.1% that is typical in most societies but is still small compared to the total number of signers because so many hearing people sign. Hearing people learn how to sign because most have a deaf relative, neighbor, or friend, and they learn the language in the home and neighborhood. Deaf people are surrounded by hearing signers and learn the language as much from them as from other deaf people.  

The other common situation in which deaf people become concentrated is in deaf schools, where most (usually all) of the students are deaf. In some ways, this is like the higher concentrations of deafness in the deaf families in Henniker, but there are also differences. Except for those students who come from deaf families, sign language acquisition is often delayed until students arrive at school. Relationships built during school persist in adulthood, resulting in a Deaf community, centered around audiologically deaf people who sign. Although the Deaf community may include "honorary members"—hearing family and friends, teachers, interpreters—the proportions of hearing people who sign are much less than in shared-signing communities, and the community is clearly deaf-centric, with a much higher percentage of deaf signers than in shared-signing communities. Most hearing people in broader society have no contact with people who sign. The community is typically spread across a much larger geographic area than in a shared-signing community. Deaf people often marry other deaf people, building on relationships developed in school. As a result, strong multigenerational deaf families may develop, although this is not always the case. James Woodward (personal communication) has noted that in southeast Asia, it is very rare for deaf people to have deaf parents, much less common than in the United States. Despite the impact of mainstreaming educational practices on the Deaf community, schools still remain one of the primary places where deaf people learn to sign and thus are critically important for establishing and maintaining the Deaf community.

The above provides only a broad-brush characterization of the two social patterns. Particular societies in particular countries may show a mixture of these characteristics, and, of course, the situations of individual people and families vary even more. Still, the two types of societies are distinct enough that it proved quite easy to classify the sign languages in Ethnologue (Eberhard et al., 2021) into two groups, resulting in currently (as of the 2021 edition), 128 Deaf-community sign languages and 21 shared sign languages. Ethnologue does not list all the sign languages that are known in the world 4 and especially undercounts shared sign languages, which are often unknown outside a small local area. So, it may well be that hundreds of shared sign languages exist, the one on Martha’s Vineyard being only one of the more famous.

Compared to Deaf-community languages, shared sign languages tend to be fragile. As happened in Martha’s Vineyard, if the gene pool expands, new deaf people may no longer be born into the community, and the sign language may fall into disuse. Also like what happened in Martha’s Vineyard, the deaf people in the community may learn a national sign language in schools (Kisch, 2012; Kusters, 2015; Lanesman & Meir, 2012; Nonaka, 2012), begin to identify more with the national Deaf community, and even move away from their home community. They may maintain the shared sign language only for communication with hearing family and friends (Dikyuva, 2012; Lanesman & Meir, 2012). Ironically, then, it tends to be hearing people who are the main factor keeping the language in use in its old age, and they, as Groce has found, are the last users to pass away. Hoffmeister, at the end of his commentary, points out that "languages require users to survive," and, one might add, sign languages require deaf users to survive. 5

In passing, it is worth noting that the introduction of a national Deaf-community language to a local shared-signing community does not necessarily lead to the immediate demise of the local language. The sign language on Martha’s Vineyard continued into the 20th century, despite the prominence of ASL in the rest of the country. Lanesman and Meir (2012) note how Algerian Jewish Sign Language survived for more than two generations alongside Israeli Sign Language, although it is now fading. For now, at least, deaf people in Al-Sayyid (Israel; Kisch, 2012) and Desa Kolok (Indonesia; de Vos, 2012) are maintaining both sign languages, but it remains to be seen how long the local language will survive. I am personally familiar (Bickford et al., 2021) with a situation in a Zapotec community in Oaxaca, Mexico, where at the time of my visit in 2004, only two of the local deaf citizens had attended deaf schools and learned Mexican Sign Language. Although these two had tried to interest other deaf members in the community in learning Mexican Sign Language, they were met with striking

3 As Kegl notes in her commentary, there is an issue of how to distinguish shared sign languages from nascent sign languages that she describes as “home sign bumped up to a community level.” Presumably shared-signing communities begin as home sign, then broaden to community use, and over generations develop more complexity and uniformity until they are fully developed languages. How and when that transition takes place is still an open research question.

4 There is no definitive list of sign languages anywhere, if such a thing were even possible. Ethnologue documents the sign languages that are included in the ISO 639-3 standard; we know that many more exist but are waiting for applications to be made by people who know specific situations well. We hope that over time, more can be added to ISO 639-3 and Ethnologue, to bring us a better overall understanding of the world’s sign languages. Wikipedia includes articles on many other sign languages that have been claimed to exist, but it is unclear how many of these are distinct, and they lack the scholarly review and confirmation that is inherent in the ISO 639-3 process.

5 Even Plains Indian Sign Language, famous for its use as a lingua franca among hearing people on the Great Plains, has always had deaf users. Now, its use is fading due to its function as a lingua franca being replaced by English and its use among deaf people by ASL (Bickford & McKay-Cody, 2018; McKay-Cody, 1998).
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disinterest. (Interestingly, in light of Lane et al.’s observations, these two are from a deaf family: a brother and sister whose father was also deaf.) Still, over time, the pattern seems to be that local sign languages experience language shift to national sign languages.

Is it possible that a hybrid of the two types of communities could develop? Could a Deaf-community sign language, such as ASL, expand beyond a close association with deaf people, so that the language would be broadly known and used by hearing people? If that were possible, something of the dynamic of Martha’s Vineyard could be re-created throughout American society, one in which deaf and hearing were on more of an equal footing, as in a shared-signing community. However, it would also have the breadth of distribution and stability of a Deaf community. This is the vision raised by the second set of papers, and articulated especially by Supalla et al. They propose “reverse integration” in schools, an application of universal design principles: “Should western countries advocate inclusion whereby all individuals learn how to sign and it is no longer confined to special education or to what is currently considered by society as a disability group?” (emphasis in original).

Indeed, as the second group of contributions points out, an expanded Deaf community is already developing in some places, with the proliferation of interest in both baby sign programs and in sign language classes for hearing students at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Campuses of Gallaudet University and National Technical Institute for the Deaf already practice reverse integration, as do a few charter schools. The benefits have even spilled over into some surrounding communities, such as Rochester, New York (as noted by the editor’s introduction to this volume). How to move forward toward this vision for the future, particularly in colleges and universities, is the focus of Brueggemann’s and Rosen’s papers, with their concern to find a permanent, solid, and stable place for ASL in the educational system.

This vision for full inclusion based on widespread knowledge of ASL raises some important and potentially difficult questions. Who “owns” ASL? Is it primarily for deaf people, or does it belong to all people? Is it even possible to own a language? How much are deaf people willing to share ASL with hearing people? The authors in this volume who are deaf are clearly open to sharing, but how much will the Deaf community as a whole accept this? Many see the advantages for deaf people if more hearing people know how to sign. My experience, as a hearing person learning ASL in adulthood for professional purposes, without prior connection to the Deaf community, has been that most deaf people have gladly welcomed me into their midst. However, what happens when hearing signers increasingly invade job opportunities previously prioritized for deaf people, such as teaching ASL? Will certified deaf interpreters diminish in importance as hearing interpreters increase their ASL proficiency and ability to communicate effectively to a wide range of deaf people with varying language skills? Of course, increased openness to deaf people in society may increase job opportunities in a wide range of fields so much that loss of opportunity in these other deaf-specialized positions will not matter. Still, how will it all play out?

The hearing community also needs to wrestle with its own questions. Are its members willing to give up the characterization of deafness as a disability? Will they accept deaf people as normal or continue to feel that deaf people need to be fixed? After all, deafness is a disability not because hearing itself is so essential to modern life but primarily because hearing people don’t know how to sign (and sometimes refuse to learn). Are hearing people willing to accept responsibility for past linguistic oppression of deaf people and do something to change it? Are enough hearing people willing to invest more than a token effort in learning ASL to develop sufficient proficiency to create a truly inclusive society? Will they support a vision of ASL for all? Are they willing to actively encourage and enable deaf children to acquire ASL early, or will baby sign be the exclusive privilege of hearing babies? Are they willing to support basic education for deaf and hearing people in schools that use ASL as the primary medium of instruction, or will they insist that schools must always teach in English?

I have no answers—but these are the types of questions that are raised by the papers included here. We must consider them seriously if we want to move forward (and return) to a day when the experience on Martha’s Vineyard again becomes normal.

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6 These questions are not unique to sign languages but also arise in connection with smaller spoken-language communities. Some are very happy to have their languages known to the wider world, while others are very protective, even forbidding outsiders to learn the languages or allowing them ever to be written down.
References


