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A commentary on Groce's (1980) article, "Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language"

## The Resilience, Adaptation, and Evolution of American Sign Language

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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 adapts*<sup>1</sup> 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"<sup>2</sup> 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 fisherman, 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<sup>3</sup> 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.