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A commentary on Bruggemann's (2009) essay, "ASL in the Academy"

## **ASL in the Academy: We Have Come a Long Way, but 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.