September 2020

Afterword: Can We Return to Martha's Vineyard?

J. Albert Bickford
SIL International, Dallas International University, and University of North Dakota

Recommended Citation
Bickford, J. Albert (2020) "Afterword: Can We Return to Martha's Vineyard?," *Society for American Sign Language Journal*: Vol. 4 : No. 2 , Article 11.
Available at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/saslj/vol4/iss2/11

Afterword:
Can We Return to Martha's Vineyard?

J. Albert Bickford

SIL International, Dallas International University, and University of North Dakota

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 deaf[1] 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" society[2], 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.

1

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.[3]

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).

2

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?[6] 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.

---

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

Bahan, B., & Poole-Nash, J. C. (1996). The formation of signing communities. In *Deaf studies IV: Visions of the past—Visions of the future, Conference Proceedings* (pp. 1–26). Gallaudet University.

Bickford, J. A., & McKay-Cody, M. (2018). Endangerment and revitalization of sign languages. In L. Hinton, L. Huss, and G. Roche (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Language Revitalization* (pp. 255–264). Routledge.

Bickford, J. A., Merrill, E. D., Dufoe, S., & Trujillo T., A. I. (2021, March 5). *Language use among deaf and hearing people in a Mexican Zapotec community*. Texas Linguistic Society 2021, Austin, TX. https://www.sil.org/resources/archives/88527

de Vos, C. (2012). The Kata Kolok perfective in child signing: Coordination of manual and non-manual components. In U. Zeshan and C. de Vos (eds.), *Sign languages in village communities: Anthropological and linguistic insights* (pp. 127–152). De Grouter Mouton, Ishara Press.

Dikyuva, H. (2012). Mardin Sign Language: Signing in a "deaf family." In U. Zeshan and C. de Vos (eds.), *Sign languages in village communities: Anthropological and linguistic insights* (pp. 395–399). De Grouter Mouton, Ishara Press.

Eberhard, D. M., Simons, G. F., & Fennig, C. D. (2021). *Ethnologue: Languages of the world* (24th ed.). SIL International. http://www.ethnologue.com

Groce, N. E. (1985). *Everyone here spoke sign language: Hereditary deafness on Martha's Vineyard*. Harvard University Press.

Kisch, S. (2008). "Deaf discourse": The social construction of deafness in a Bedouin community. *Medical Anthropology*, 27(3), 283–313.

Kisch, S. (2012). Demarcating generations of signers in the dynamic sociolinguistic landscape of a shared sign-language: The case of Al-Sayyid Bedouin. In U. Zeshan and C. de Vos (eds.), *Sign languages in village communities: Anthropological and linguistic insights* (pp. 87–125). De Grouter Mouton, Ishara Press.

Kusters, A. (2015). *Deaf space in Adamorobe: An ethnographic study in a village in Ghana*. Gallaudet University Press.

Lanesman, S., & Meir, I. (2012). The survival of Algerian Jewish Sign Language alongside Israeli Sign Language in Israel. In U. Zeshan and C. de Vos (eds.), *Sign languages in village communities: Anthropological and linguistic insights* (pp. 153–179). De Gruyter Mouton, Ishara Press.

McKay-Cody, M. R. (1998). Plains Indian Sign Language: A comparative study of alternative and primary signers. In *Deaf studies V: Toward 2000—Unity and diversity, Conference Proceedings* (pp. 17–77). Gallaudet University.

Nonaka, A. M. (2012). Language ecological change in Ban Khor, Thailand: An ethnographic case study of village sign language endangerment. In U. Zeshan and C. de Vos (eds.), *Sign languages in village communities: Anthropological and linguistic insights* (pp. 277–312). De Gruyter Mouton, Ishara Press.

Zeshan, U., & de Vos, C. (Eds.). (2012). *Sign languages in village communities: Anthropological and linguistic insights*. De Grouter Mouton, Ishara Press.