

December 2021

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Recommended Citation

Snoddon, Kristin (2021) "Are There Really Deaf People Who are Languageless?," *Society for American Sign Language Journal*: Vol. 5: No. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/saslj/vol5/iss2/4>

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Are There Really Deaf People Who are Languageless?

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Schaller, S. (2012). *A man without words, 2nd ed.* University of California Press. Paperback. 220 pages. \$24.95

When I was first approached about writing a review of the second edition of Susan Schaller's *A Man Without Words*, I had some reservations—and I still do. First published in 1991, the book was reissued in 2012 with new material. In the late 1970s, Schaller moved to Los Angeles and encountered Ildefonso, a pseudonym she gives to a twenty-seven-year-old Indigenous undocumented migrant from rural Mexico who was “never exposed to education or signed language” (p. 30). The author first met Ildefonso in a community college class where she was hired to work as a signed language interpreter. Schaller was entranced by Ildefonso and began working with him to communicate and learn American Sign Language (ASL) and English in addition to concepts and information such as names, time, and history.

The first twelve chapters of this book consist of short vignettes describing the author's encounters with and reflections on working with Ildefonso. The remaining six chapters and afterword narrate Schaller's search for information about other deaf adults who grow up without learning a national signed language or going to school. (The term “national sign language” is used by the World Federation of the Deaf to refer to one or more signed languages that make up the linguistic ecology of a country.) The book also explores her desire to find Ildefonso again years after they stopped working together at the college. This part of the book contains further musings regarding the nature of language, communication, and deaf people who grow up without having the opportunity to experience a rich signing environment. For me, deaf children of deaf parents or of hearing parents who receive early and comprehensive support for learning a national sign language represent an ideal situation for language acquisition. These children are exposed to numerous signers (as found in any deaf community) and do not experience barriers to a wide range of human interactions. Moreover, if hearing children normally have language made available to them, we should expect the same for deaf children.

From reading the publisher's description of the book, I wondered about whether Schaller's accounts of teaching and befriending a so-called “languageless” deaf person would hold up against more contemporary understandings of language deprivation. I also contemplated how the book would appear in the face of a growing number of critiques by signed language anthropologists of the concept of languagelessness itself. For example, Erin Moriarty Harrelson (2019) discusses how the communicative practices of rural deaf Cambodians are marginalized and devalued by a view that sees only national signed languages as legitimate. In her fieldwork in rural Nepal, E. Mara Green (2014) studies “natural sign” as a mode of signing used between interlocutors when one or all individuals do not know Nepali Sign Language, a national signed language that emerged following the founding of the first deaf school in Kathmandu in 1966. I wished Schaller would take into consideration that deaf people are known for creating a signed language when there is no established national sign language at hand.

Some chauvinism, too, is evident in Schaller's book; she initially views Ildefonso as “a wordless man” with an “alien mind and life” (p. 31) and a less “cohesive view of the world” than a “year-old baby” (p. 28). As she begins to teach Ildefonso, she compares herself to an explorer of the New World (p. 31) and “a god” (p. 75). One chapter of the book is devoted to comparing Ildefonso with Ishi, the last speaker of the Yahi tribe in California who revealed himself to white settlers in 1911. Schaller claims that “in some ways, a languageless person remains aboriginal” (p. 106), and she compares Ildefonso's “mimes and gestures” with “intertribal communication” (p. 107). Near the end of the book, the author encounters a roomful of deaf undocumented residents from Mexico who communicate with each other without using ASL or (as far as we know) one of the signed language varieties of Mexico. Schaller states, “I felt like a time machine had flown me back to the Neanderthal age” (p. 182). All of this is highly problematic and reinforces racist stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as primitive.

There is some valuable and relevant content in the book; perhaps the most important takeaway is that deaf children and deaf adults who experience language deprivation can learn and contribute as community members and citizens in society. We must remember that deaf individuals who do not have full access to a natural language during the critical period for first-language

acquisition often experience poor educational and health outcomes. It is vital for governments and health professionals to recognize the role of signed language in deaf children's healthy development and ensure young deaf children and their families have access to signed language services (see, for example, Murray et al., 2019). Society must recognize the potential of and uphold the right to language acquisition and education for all deaf children, youth, and adults, including those who experience language deprivation.

In *A Man Without Words*, Schaller also distinguishes between language deprivation in deaf children and accounts of "children who survived alone in the wilderness, children adopted by animals, and children abused and imprisoned" (p. 149). The author argues that these experiences are different: "Deafness is not wildness, and the isolation of languagelessness alone is not the isolation of the woods or a basement or imprisonment on a chair" (p. 156). In spite of not knowing a national signed language, and even if they experience poverty, many deaf children grow up in loving families. As Schaller states, "Ildefonso had a sense of morality and expressed ideas and convictions about how people should live and treat others. ... Ildefonso knew he was human, in spite of not always being treated as such" (pp. 156–157). In the end, Ildefonso knew and used ASL, acquired U.S. resident status, and gained full-time employment as a hospital gardener.

In the book's afterword, Schaller writes, "We are foreigners to a deaf person, even when she or he is our own baby" (p. 204). Yet I think the reverse is often true: deaf people are viewed by many hearing people as alien and unintelligible, and therefore of little interest. Audre Lorde (1984) has remarked on the "endless ways in which we rob ourselves of ourselves and each other" (p. 44). How often have we robbed ourselves of others based on language, culture, and educational differences? Schaller's book is a testament to what she gained by being open to another.

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