Introduction

It is not at all surprising to find that the eventual form of a book on a new field such as sign language has greatly altered in writing. The requirements of the field in terms of the community of deaf people, the body of educators of deaf children, the parents and all of the professionals concerned with deaf people have combined to pull the content in several different directions at once. In the end we decided to concentrate on those topics that were most central to our own professional backgrounds in psychology and linguistics and to try to provide a link between these different fields. It has been impossible to meet all the needs of everyone we hope will read this book, and some of the chapters can only be considered introductory accounts; we are, however, happy if this book is seen as an introduction to sign language, since it would be false to pretend we have discovered even most of the answers. It is still premature to believe that sign language grammar is fully accessible to hearing researchers. What we have tried to do is to set down a framework on which other researchers might build and from which professionals may be able to develop a coherent practice for their work with deaf people. We hope we have largely avoided the dogmatic presentation of ‘truth’ which has blighted work with the deaf, and particularly with deaf children, for so many years. It is not our intention to prescribe methods for solving deaf people’s ‘problems’ but rather to highlight the richness and value of deaf people’s lives and language so that the professional approach can be made more meaningful and respectful.

Dignity is perhaps the key word. It is this feature which has been denied deaf people in the rush for success in speaking or educational achievement. The most important value must be integration and involvement in society, but this cannot be achieved by pressure to succeed. It must be a sharing and an offering which takes into account the dignity of deaf people. Two aspects seem critically important and have been greatly undervalued. They are, firstly, the need for access to information and, secondly, the right to choose. Even those deaf people who have left school without ‘society’s valued spoken language’ retain a basic right to access to society’s information. In addition, they have the right to choose their means of access to this information. It can be through sign language or
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spoken language or through some mixture, and the deaf child must be given the range of provision from which this latter choice can be made. To view sign language in this political sense is a rather strange idea for most people and really only understandable in the context of the history of deafness. The understanding of sign language and its users is the first step to breaking down barriers for all those in the deaf world.

Our intentions in writing this book are reflected by the four sections into which it can be roughly divided. In the first (chapters 1–4) we wish to introduce the reader to deaf people and their language in a way which is accessible to all those interested. Chapter 1 describes the community of language users and examines their relationships with the hearing society in which they live. Not only can we see how sign language has been developed and used by deaf people in all their interactions, but we can also see why the situation of hearing people has tended to work against their access to the deaf community. Chapter 2 focuses on the language itself and sets out some of the factors which confirm the language status of British Sign Language (BSL); this is a general introduction and most of the issues raised are tackled more fully in later chapters. Chapter 3 explores the history of sign language and its use; previous books have concentrated on education and methods, but here we have tried to focus on the writings which deal directly with deaf people and their language. Chapter 4 deals with the issues surrounding the language acquisition of deaf children; in the past, this has only been examined in spoken language terms, but increasingly researchers have looked at sign language acquisition. This section shows how gesture and sign are different and explores the relationships between early acquisition of words, signs and gestures in both deaf children and hearing children. In addition, it is in this period that we see the early development of the language skills central to our study of BSL.

In the second section (chapters 5–8) we describe in detail what we know of BSL as a language. BSL has only recently been the subject of linguistic analysis, but already a great many features of the language have been described which were previously unrecognised. Research on other sign languages has contributed to these discoveries and we also discuss that work in these chapters. Most importantly, we refer frequently to features of spoken language to help our explanation of sign language features. We do this for two reasons: firstly to help non-specialists to relate the discussion of sign language structure to what they know of their own language and, secondly, because any understanding of how sign languages work must be constructed upon features of spoken language which have already been well researched. Linguists in the past have been at such great pains to show that forms of language such as writing are subsidiary to spoken language, that sign language has been ignored or misunderstood;
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However, despite the striking differences between signed and spoken languages in channels of communication and articulators used, they show remarkable similarities. It is by looking at these similarities and differences that we can gain a better understanding of language generally.

In chapter 5 we present the elements which are found in sign language and compare them to the elements of spoken language. A way of writing down signs is introduced as a preliminary to the discussion of sign form. In chapter 6 the discussion centres on signs themselves, how they come into existence, change over time, and alter their meanings. The role of fingerspelling and other loan signs is also described. Chapter 7 is devoted to a preliminary description of the morphology (the grammatical processes which individual signs undergo). Morphology and syntax together make up the grammar of a language, and it is in the description of BSL grammar that we can see the role of non-manual as well as manual elements in greatest detail. Chapter 8 describes the comparative study of different sign languages. Just as spoken languages form related families, so also do sign languages, and these relationships are presented along with discussion of the question of language universality.

In the third section (chapters 9 and 10) we draw on psychological techniques to examine sign language. Chapter 9 uses data from a large study of hearing people’s use of BSL to compare spoken and sign language learning. Theories already in existence go a long way towards explaining the poor levels of sign language learning and use, and raise questions as to the validity of current sign language training techniques in the UK. A linked appendix (appendix 2) elaborates an alternative approach to sign language teaching. Chapter 10 tackles a core issue for psychologists: the question of internal representation when the form cannot easily be based in speech. The developments in the field of cognitive psychology have in recent years considered how speech-based codes provide the means for the learning and memory processes. If deaf people use a different type of code, i.e. a sign-based code, and still achieve effective functioning, then many of the psychological theories have to be re-examined.

A significant aspect of sign language is how it is to be used in bridging the gap between deaf and hearing communities and this is the focus of the fourth section. Chapter 11 tackles sign language interpreting, and chapters 12 and 13 deal with education. Not surprisingly, in view of the learning problem seen in chapter 9, we have discovered major problems in sign language interpreting, particularly from BSL into English. The task of the interpreter in spoken language situations is compared with that of a BSL interpreter. We can see that lack of training facilities and the peculiar requirements of the situation reduce the effectiveness of the BSL interpreter’s performance. In dealing with education in chapters 12 and 13 we enter a difficult world where different views are strongly held and often strongly
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expressed. Our review tries to match up the methodologies propounded with the actual results obtained and finds that very rarely has effective research been done. The choice of method, in the face of deaf children’s poor achievement in English learning, has been, and still is, a matter of belief and commitment rather than informed questioning. Our examination leads us to the conclusion that BSL knowledge is critical to the teacher’s functioning, but that methods can be developed by the bilingual teacher which vary in their emphasis on speech, sign and written English, according to the priorities of the situation.

In the final brief chapter we bring together the views which have developed from our original starting point. The status of BSL allows a meaningful cooperation with deaf people in education and communication, and recognition of this provides us with hope for the future.

Finally, there should be a brief explanation of terminology. The term *sign language* is used to refer to the language of deaf people, parallel to *spoken language* of hearing people. Where a specific national language is referred to, capitals are used, e.g. *British Sign Language* (BSL) or *American Sign Language* (ASL), in the same way as we use capitals for the spoken languages English, French, Japanese, and so on. We also talk about learning *sign* as we would talk about learning a spoken language; the practice of this is *signing*, equivalent to *speaking*. When discussing a specific lexical item we refer to a *sign* which is the equivalent of a *word*.

In relation to the systems of signing current in the UK the generic term is *signed English* though this is not a precisely formulated approach as are those systems which appear in the USA, such as Signing Exact English or Seeing Essential English or even Signed English. The term to cover all these approaches, both in the UK and elsewhere, is *Manually Coded English* (MCE). Whenever these are used with speech simultaneously it is likely that a *Total Communication* approach is being used.

In practice these terms should not conflict though, like any attempt at regularising a still developing terminology, they will initially seem overly complex. Just as we need these distinctions in talking about spoken language we also need them for sign language.

In writing down signs we have used a well recognised convention of capitalising the sign glosses or translations to English as in GIVE or GIVE-REPEATEDLY, where the hyphen indicates that there is only one sign. For fingerspelling we have used lower case separated by dots as in j-o-a-n-a. The full notation system used is described in appendix 3 and for the complete description the reader can consult this section.
1. The deaf community

British Sign Language is a language of movement and space, of the hands and of the eyes, of abstract communication as well as iconic story-telling, but most important of all, it is the language of the deaf community in the UK. It is not a new language nor is it a system recently developed by hearing people; rather it is a naturally occurring form of communication among people who do not hear. It is a language which until recently has been ignored and therefore completely underestimated in its potential. It is different, often strikingly so, from English, but it shares features and grammatical processes with many other spoken languages. Increasingly, linguists have come to analyse it as a true natural language. It differs from other languages in one major respect of its features: it does not rely on spoken words.

Since one of the primary concerns of all education has been the acquisition of spoken communication as the most acceptable means of interaction, people who are unable to communicate through speech are regarded in some measure as inferior. When they go on to develop their own means of communication, which is usually not that of their parents, then the majority of the community tend to ostracise them and may ascribe to them levels of competence well below that of the rest of the community. Deaf people are one such group, set apart from the hearing community. It is perhaps not surprising that their language is only now coming into the open. A major reason for this is probably a growing international concern for, and recognition of the rights of, minority groups. The idea that deaf people can form such a group rather than be considered educational failures within the mainstream is a relatively new possibility for educators and researchers alike. The nature of this group of people and their communication is the focus of this book.

Adequate statements of what the deaf community consists of have proved to be notably elusive for students of the literature. The term ‘community’ to some extent identifies a separateness of existence and mode of operation which people have found difficult to use to describe deaf people. The way in which the deaf community is defined is by and large a product of the understanding, or lack of it, by society as a whole. There seem to be two extremes of attitude which
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highlight this: the first is a view that the principal characteristic of deafness is the lack of something, i.e. hearing and/or communication ability; the second is the acceptance of an identity of deafness which stresses the group feelings of deaf people and the effectiveness of their communication.

Associated with the first position are attitudes such as those found by Bunting (1981) and Kohl (1966):

Forty-seven per cent of the public thought that one half or more of deaf people try to hide their deafness largely because they do not want to appear different . . . most people accepted that the deaf were isolated and had difficulties getting on with people at work . . . (Bunting, 1981: 1–2)

Myklebust (1964) claims that there is a qualitative difference in the behavior and personality of deaf individuals. He attributes this to the qualitative difference in experience the deaf have, and shows as a descriptive basis that the deaf are socially immature as compared to the hearing and even to individuals who are hard of hearing. (Kohl, 1966: 9)

In practice, as Baker and Cokely (1980) point out, these are views from ‘the outside’, but might be seen more kindly as simply statements arising from society’s values and level of understanding at that time. Baker and Padden (1978) express views somewhere between the two:

The deaf community comprises those deaf and hard of hearing individuals who share a common language, common experiences and values and a common way of interacting with each other and with hearing people. The most basic factor determining who is a member of the deaf community seems to be what is called ‘attitudinal deafness’. This occurs when a person identifies him/herself as a member of the deaf community and other members accept that person as part of the community. (Baker and Padden, 1978: 4)

In effect, this too raises a number of issues. It includes everyone who has a hearing loss, even the hard of hearing. It also seems circular – ‘those who share’ are the community; to join you have to want to share. However, the evidence would need to show the degree of commonality of language, experience and values. The key is probably in the concept of ‘attitudinal deafness’ whereby the individual expresses himself/herself through identification with a group with whom communication is shared. As will be described later in this chapter, deaf people do not form the same sort of geographical or historical community as is associated with, say, migrant groups, but the identity of deafness and the strength of belief in its language form seem just as strong. Perhaps this can be most effectively described by those who are deaf:

It is the pleasure gained from mixing with other deaf people that makes one remain a member of the deaf “in-group” – the British deaf community. So powerful is the attraction of social interaction with deaf people that others, on making contact with the deaf but who have not skill in BSL, learn to sign and become members of the community. These
latecomers are the post-lingually deaf, orally educated deaf and deaf people who are educated in schools for the hearing. (Lawson, 1981: 166–7)

In these four quotations one can see the clear distinctions which Baker and Cokely (1980) recognise in the approaches to understanding the society of deaf people: the clinical-pathological (usually views of the hearing community and often based on psychological or educational data), and the cultural (usually views of the deaf people themselves and linguists, primarily couched in terms of the unifying factor of shared sign language). Baker and Cokely (1980) point out, quite rightly, that these are not simply differences of attitude: they have profound implications for the way deaf people are treated. The first approach emphasises what is lacking in deaf people and makes as its top priority the ‘normalisation’ of deaf people, while the second implies acceptance (though not always understanding) of deaf people as a separate group with their own organisation and traditions.

Unfortunately, this discussion does not bring us much closer to defining the community as such. One can see the educational view as being very powerful. Deaf people may be identified as those who have gone to deaf schools or who have had special provision made because of their hearing problems; in addition educational examination will show them to have specific problems with many of the standard subjects in school. The fact that we do know a good deal about deafness in school children has tended to create the basis for the clinical-pathological framework. The assumption that deaf people find similar problems in adult life has been easily made by many hearing people but:

It is not true, as it is often assumed, that all deaf people need the constant support and assistance of the social work services. Most deaf people manage their personal, domestic and working lives as well as other members of the community. (BDA working party, 1974)

In fact, Lawson’s (1981) deaf ‘in-group’ would claim to have virtually no need for social services geared to the handicapped.

The definition of the deaf community is thus not greatly helped by an examination of school performance, nor can it be seen simply in terms of hearing loss, which is the other base for the clinical-pathological framework. Not all deaf people wish to be associated with the deaf population and many of them choose to work and socialise with hearing people rather than simply withdraw into isolation. However, the fact remains that all members of deaf ‘in-groups’ have a measurable hearing loss (thus hearing people in deaf groups may aspire to the status of ‘friends of the deaf’ rather than members of a deaf community, according to Markowicz and Woodward, 1975). The degree of this loss may be variable over a wide range because of the changing policies concerning
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diagnosis and provision of hearing aids. Older people may have had a relatively minor hearing loss but because of lack of hearing aid provision when they were young may see their identity as deaf. Fifty per cent of the 41–65-year-old pre-lingually deaf population ‘never’ wear a hearing aid, and this is primarily because they were not available in their youth (Kyle and Allsop, 1982b). There are, therefore, specific difficulties in seeing hearing loss as the determiner of deaf community membership.

Higgins (1980) perhaps unravels the strands most effectively. He sees ‘belonging to the deaf community’ as arising from a conscious choice to identify with the deaf world and from participation in its activities, though both are complemented by hearing loss. Many writers have gone further and see sign language as the core and principal criterion for membership (Markowicz and Woodward, 1975; Lawson, 1981). While this may be emerging as the identifier in the USA, deaf people in Britain may see it as a less strong determiner although an extremely important component in community life (Kyle and Allsop, 1982b). Language is a much more complex factor than it appears in other ethnic groups and the linguistic insecurity about BSL that we have described suggests that its use is not a simple criterion for membership (Kyle et al., 1984).

Baker and Cokely (1980) perhaps present the most satisfactory view, in that they see centrality of membership of the community as determined by a number of overlapping criteria with no one factor sufficient in itself. These determiners are audiological (having a hearing loss), linguistic (understanding and using sign language), social (participation in deaf social life) and political (influence in the organisation of the community). Within each component centrality is measured by the strength of positive attitude. The core members are those who do not feel deafness itself is a problem, who have early facility and pride in signing, who are seen constantly at social gatherings of deaf people and who enjoy the confidence of their peers and therefore are consulted or elected as leaders in the organisation of deaf activities. Central members are often deaf people whose parents are deaf and who naturally view their peers in relation to the deaf club. These need not be leaders in the sense of academic or employment success. Lawson’s (1981) picture of the community emphasises the same points, at least structurally, with deaf people of deaf parents as central figures and hearing people, by and large, only peripherally involved.

These seem to be the most consistent of the theoretical views of the community and it remains in this chapter to detail the practicalities of community life. Much of the theory is based on knowledge of the American deaf community and, as can be seen from Loncke (1983) on the Flemish deaf community, the basis for the theories may not be universal. However, the understanding of the ‘community’ as set out above gives support to Freeman, Carbin and Boese (1981) in their statements on the importance of deaf culture. In
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their usage, culture is distinct from community in that it includes the knowledge, belief, art, morals, and law as well as the practices of members of the community. These are mainly mediated by language, so deaf culture, like all cultures, is carried through the language.

Freeman, Carbin and Boese’s view is that involvement in deaf culture (for example, reading deaf magazines, seeing deaf theatre groups) is essential to an understanding of the community. This culture is not in any way sinister nor is it based on handicap: it exists because of a natural need for identity. In the USA Deafpride is an organisation set up specifically to maintain, and give an understanding of, the culture and heritage of deaf people. Freeman, Carbin and Boese propose that this cultural acceptance is vital to the well-being of deaf children and to the bi-cultural, bilingual experience which may be the best approach in education and development.

In the UK, while these views are shared, the structure and characteristics of the community may be different from those in the USA. Most notably there is no higher educational centre (such as Gallaudet College in the USA) where deaf people may come together. The learning and experience generated in these formative years of college tuition in the USA may have to be gained rather differently and the community is different as a result.

Berger and Luckman’s (1966) views on how cultures construct their reality are particularly useful here. The hearing view of people who cannot hear may be counterproductive in evaluating what is meaningful to deaf people. Just as in any group separated in some way, deaf people through their language negotiate and agree on a construction of reality. This reality need not be identical with hearing people’s views. We have frequently had the experience that deaf people questioned about such and such a happening will simply shake their head and say ‘it’s the deaf way’. They are very clear in the division between what deaf people accept and what a hearing person will understand. Layne (1982) examines this specific interview situation in the USA and Seidel (1982) extends the theory. The implication is simple: there is a need to understand the deaf community at a deeper level through its language. This can only be attempted in preliminary form in this book since we are not yet able to share the constructions of knowledge available to deaf people. Our purpose is therefore to describe some aspects of the British deaf community in terms of the structure we can observe and its characteristics, as examined in a series of interviews by a deaf interviewer (Kyle and Allsop, 1982b).

The British deaf community: structures

The community of deaf people is unusual in many respects, since it does not form a geographical nucleus. Deaf people do not live in the same street or area of
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town. They do not all work in the same places. They are not usually found in jobs
where communication with other members of the community is essential and they
may not have direct access to the media controlled by the larger community. In some parts of the UK they meet only once or twice a week and they spend most of their time in a hearing world. This produces a community pattern which is rather fragmented in the time spent together but extremely closely bonded in the friendship of the members.

It is a complex sociological group which is greatly strengthened by the
tendency to marry other community members. Schein and Delk (1974) maintain
that more deaf than hearing people remain single, but of those who marry, over
80 per cent marry other deaf people. Kyle and Allsop (1982b), in a personal
interview study of the deaf population in an English county, found 35 per cent of
deaf people were single (in comparison to 25 per cent of the hearing population),
but of those who married, 92 per cent married another deaf person. This
inevitably affects the type of communication at home, as single people living
with relatives are more likely to use speech and lip-reading. Even this difference
makes generalisation about the community very difficult. However, it is possible
to examine individually some of the key structures or groups important in the
maintenance of community life. These areas will be considered under the
headings: the deaf social club; the mobility of deaf people, i.e. inter-club activity;
the professionals who work with the community – social workers, teachers,
parents and interpreters.

The deaf social club and its role
The role of the deaf social club has varied greatly over time, almost certainly as a
function of hearing society’s interest. Batson and Bergman (1976) noted striking
developments in references to deaf people in literary works. Views have varied
from that of the ‘simple deaf individual isolated from the world and its evils’ –
something of an idealised picture of silent nobility – through the ‘social failure
and handicapped person’ to a more accepting view in current literature, where
the linguistic structure aspects of the deaf community’s sign language are
emphasised. Very few authors, deaf or hearing, have identified themselves as
members of the deaf community and so even some deaf authors may not
provide a wholly accurate description of the deaf world. Accepting even a weak
principle of language relativity, it is an almost impossible task adequately to
explain the principles of organisation and values of the deaf community in
written English. Nevertheless it is possible to examine at some level the
functioning of the deaf community in the UK. As one might expect, the central
environments for deaf interaction are the social clubs which exist throughout
the UK.