The Sociolinguistics
of Sign Languages

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Recent history has included some major events in both the American Deaf community* and around the world, and many of the events have been fundamentally sociolinguistic in nature. For example, 13 years ago, in March 1988, the campus of Gallaudet University erupted into a week of protests stemming from the selection of Elizabeth Zinser as the seventh president of the 124-year-old institution. The outcomes of the Deaf President Now (DPN) movement are history: the resignation of the newly appointed president and of the chairman of the Board of Trustees, the reconstitution of the board to contain a majority of deaf people, the selection of a deaf president and the promise of no reprisals against the protesters.

In *The Sociolinguistics of Society*, Ralph Fasold (1984) observes that the essence of sociolinguistics depends on two facts about language: first, that language varies, which is to say that "speakers have more than one way to say more or less the same thing" (p. ix); and, second, that language serves a broadly encompassing purpose just as critical as the obvious one of transmitting information and thoughts from one person to another. Namely, language users use language to make statements about who they are, what their group loyalties are, how they perceive their relationship to interlocutors and what kind of speech event they consider themselves to be involved in. Critical to an understanding of the events at Gallaudet University is the critical purpose that language serves in defining one's identity, group loyalty, relationship to interlocutors and understanding of the speech event.

The major demand of the protest was for a deaf president, and the issues underlying that demand are fundamentally sociolinguistic in nature. On the one hand, it was repeatedly declared with disdain during the protest that Dr. Zinser could not sign and had only just begun learning sign language. On the other hand, in remarks following her resignation, Dr. Zinser stated that signing is important symbolically to the Deaf community, and that it is important for members of the board to "learn a little sign . . . just a few basic phrases, some

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* I have adopted the use of "deaf" (with lower case *d*) as an adjective referring primarily to hearing loss and the use of "Deaf" (with upper case *D*) as an adjective referring to social collectivities and attitudes arising from interaction among people with hearing losses. This distinction is employed throughout the volume.

warm sentences when they meet people around the school" (*Washington Post*, 12 March 1988). For deaf people and their supporters, Dr. Zinser's lack of knowledge about the Deaf community was directly linked to and symbolized by her lack of knowledge of American Sign Language (ASL). The reality of her linguistic repertoire and the language choices at her disposal made clear and inevitable statements about who she was, what her group loyalty was, and how she perceived her relationship to her interlocutors. And those statements simply could not be reconciled with the qualifications that the Deaf community required of the next president.

With her observation that signing is important symbolically within the Deaf community and her recommendation that board members "learn a little sign", Dr. Zinser focused on the symbolic role of signing while ignoring the fact that signing is, first of all, a communication system. The high symbolic value of sign language derives in part from the fact that signing allows people to communicate unhindered, with a focus not on the medium but on the message. To suggest patronizingly that board members "learn a little sign . . . some warm sentences" was to patently misunderstand the sociolinguistic reality of Deaf communities and to misperceive the particular form of interplay between communicating information and defining the social situation in Deaf communities. The protest was fundamentally a sociolinguistic event because of the central role of that interplay: *How* information is communicated – with ASL, with some manual code for English, with spoken English – inevitably defines the social situation and one's place in it. The place that Dr. Zinser was proposing to define for herself was simply unacceptable.

Related to the issue of sign language being first of all a communication system that allows unhindered communication is another event in recent history having sociolinguistic import. This is the publication in February 1989 of a paper entitled *Unlocking the Curriculum* written by Bob Johnson, Scott Liddell and Carol Erting. The paper takes a critical look at Deaf education in the USA. The authors state that the failure of Deaf education is due to "deaf children's fundamental lack of access to curricular context at grade level and from the general acceptance of the notion that below grade-level performance is to be expected of deaf children" (p. 3), and that the problem of access is largely a language-related issue. It is fair to say that the paper has been a catalyst for a vigorous and ongoing debate among teachers, administrators and parents of deaf children all over the world. It has been translated into French, Spanish, German, Thai, Japanese and Italian and has provided part of the inspiration and theoretical support in many locations for the implementation of programs that use the natural sign language of the community as the medium of instruction (e.g. the Learning Center for Deaf Children in Framingham, MA; the Indiana School for the Deaf in Indianapolis; and the California School for the Deaf in Fremont).

It has been followed by insightful work on the nature and consequences of language policy and planning in Deaf communities (see, for example, Ramsey, 1993; Nover, 1995). Language policy and planning in any situation are by definition sociolinguistic activities, and they necessarily include an examination of the functions of language in society and attitudes to language and are not limited to a description of language forms. Insofar as *Unlocking the Curriculum* gets to the heart of language policy and planning as it pertains to Deaf education, its publication and the debate surrounding it are sociolinguistic events.

The third event is the Deaf Way conference held in Washington, DC in July 1989. It was the first conference of its kind focusing on the language, culture and history of deaf people, at which over 5,700 deaf people from all over the world were in attendance. Quite apart from the vast sharing of information that took place about the numerous and diverse Deaf communities around the world, the conference was a sociolinguistic event in that it had the effect of reinforcing the reality of a Deaf cultural identity, an identity that is shaped in part by the use of natural sign languages. As Carol Erting (1994) states in the introduction to the Deaf Way Volume, "The Deaf Way has become a reference point . . . even for Deaf people who did not attend. It set a standard for accessibility, respect, pride, and perhaps most of all, celebration of a rich heritage and the determination to improve life for Deaf people around the world" (p. xxx).

Sociolinguistically, then, the Deaf community is currently very active. Issues of empowerment and self-awareness are closely tied to issues of language use, as are the practical changes being proposed and implemented all over the world – in some cases rapidly – in the education of deaf children. It may be useful to examine where we have been and where we are going, as far as sociolinguistics of sign languages is concerned.

Studies of sociolinguistic issues in the American Deaf community find their beginning in the late 1960s, with Stokoe's (1969) characterization of language use as diglossic, following Ferguson's (1959) model. Subsequent studies included examinations of the linguistic outcome of contact between ASL and English, with claims that the outcome was a pidgin (e.g. Woodward, 1973c; Woodward and Markowicz, 1975; Reilly and McIntire, 1980), studies of variation within ASL (e.g. Battison *et al.*, 1975; Woodward and Markowicz, 1975; Woodward and DeSantis, 1977a; 1977b), studies of language maintenance and choice (Lee, 1982), studies of language attitudes (Kannapell, 1993 [1985]) and studies of language policy and planning (e.g. Johnson *et al.*, 1989; Ramsey, 1989; Nover, 1995). It is fair to say that all the major areas of sociolinguistics have been examined to some extent as they pertain to the Deaf community. These include areas such as regional and social variation, bilingualism and language contact phenomena, language maintenance and choice, language attitudes, language policy and planning, and language and social interaction.

Research certainly has not been limited to the American Deaf community, but has been carried out as well in countries all over the world. However, even though each of the major areas has at least been touched on, the earliest socio-linguistic research in the Deaf community was shaped and perhaps limited by at least four interrelated considerations:

1. the relationship between the spoken language of the majority community and the sign language, particularly in educational settings;
2. limited knowledge of the linguistic structure of the sign language;
3. doubts as to the actual status of the sign language as a "real language";
4. application of spoken language sociolinguistic models to sign language situations.

As concerns the first, it is interesting to notice that the bulk of early sociolin-guistic research in the American Deaf community, for example, had to do with the interrelationship between English and ASL. A lot of attention was given to one outcome of language contact, traditionally known as PSE (Pidgin Sign English) and to characterizations of the sociolinguistic situation as diglossic or as a continuum and so forth. I suggest that where linguistic research energy has been directed is a reflection of where societal energy has gone. For example, the focus in American Deaf education since its inception in 1817 has been largely on how to teach English to deaf children, with a variety of philosophies and methodologies. Not until recently has there been any focus on the use of ASL in educational or other social settings. And the same is true for Deaf communities around the world. Research on language contact, for example, is by and large research on the contact between spoken languages and sign languages. It is not that contact does not occur between sign languages; it is simply that this kind of contact is only now beginning to receive research attention.

The second and the third considerations contribute to this state of affairs. For one thing, it is probably safe to say that the sociolinguistic studies of a language accompany or follow linguistic descriptions of a language, but they do not precede those descriptions. That is, it is difficult to describe what sociolinguistic variation looks like in a language until we have at least some basic understanding of the structure of the language. In fact, some early descriptions of variation in ASL describe as variable features that in fact are not variable at all (Lucas, 1995). Of course, sociolinguistic research will be hindered by notions that what we are investigating might not really be a language.

The fourth consideration has to do with the application of models developed for spoken languages that may not be entirely suitable for sign languages. My research with Clayton Valli illustrates how these considerations can affect sociolinguistic research. We have investigated a kind of signing that results from the contact between English and ASL and has features of both languages (for a full description of the project, see Lucas and Valli, 1992). Our description

of what we call contact signing naturally led us to a review of language contact phenomena in spoken language situations, but it also made us see the necessity for a very basic distinction between contact between two sign languages and contact between a sign language and a spoken language. Clearly this distinction is motivated by the presence of two modalities, so that what happens when two sign languages are in contact will probably be different from what happens when a sign language is in contact with a spoken language. It was in trying to illustrate the distinction with examples that we realized where the focus in language contact studies has been. That is, although we were able to think of and casually observe examples to illustrate the outcome of contact between two sign languages, our search for empirical research on lexical borrowing, code switching, foreigner talk, interference, pidgins, creoles and mixed systems – all as they result from the contact between two sign languages – turned up practically nothing.

Sign languages borrow from each other; bilingual signers code-switch between two sign languages; a native signer of one sign language uses a reduced form of that language with a non-native signer or demonstrates interference when using another sign language; and pidgins, creoles and mixed systems could conceivably come about given the right sociolinguistic conditions. It is not that these things do not happen, but rather that researchers have only just begun to look for them and describe them. Early research attention turned elsewhere, to focus on the relationship between the spoken language and the sign language. The Deaf community has been looked at all too often within the framework of spoken language sociolinguistics, and labels from spoken language situations have been applied too hastily to sign language situations. One problem with this is that it leaves the impression that the situation has been adequately described, when in fact it turns out to be a lot more complex than we thought. For example, the term "pidgin" as applied to the Deaf community needs to be re-examined. Not that pidgins cannot occur; they probably can. Many other terms used in sociolinguistics to describe oral language use such as "lexical borrowing", "code mixing", "code switching" and even "bilingualism" also merit re-examination. Indeed, some researchers have already re-examined some terms; for example, Lee's (1982) re-examination of the term "diglossia" and Cokely's (1983) re-examination of the term "pidgin".

It is fair to say that each of the four considerations that seem to have governed the study of sociolinguistics in Deaf communities is changing. Our knowledge of the basic linguistic structure of sign languages is increasing every day, and the notion that sign languages are not "real languages" is happily an endangered one. Research is being undertaken in all areas of sociolinguistics, including multilingualism, bilingualism and language contact, variation, discourse analysis, language policy and planning, and language attitudes. Much of this current work is discussed in this volume. Studies on all aspects of the sociolinguistics

of Deaf communities are currently in a period of rapid development. The focus is being extended beyond the relationship between sign languages and spoken languages to the relationship between sign languages, and research on sign languages is beginning to provide crucial insights into the nature of spoken languages as well. For example, work on the differences between signing and gesturing (e.g. McNeill, 1992) has provided insight into the role of gesture in spoken language discourse.

The answer to "Where are we going?" seems to be in three parts. First, we are in the process of studying all aspects of the sociolinguistics of Deaf communities all over the world, and I anticipate that with these studies we will be able to show strong parallels between the sociolinguistics of spoken languages and the sociolinguistics of sign languages. Second, at the same time, mainly because of the fundamental difference in modality – that is, a verbal–aural system compared to a visual–manual one – I anticipate that studies on the sociolinguistics of sign languages will show that the models developed for spoken languages cannot be automatically applied to sign language situations, and that phenomena unique to sign languages will be revealed. We already see this in the contact phenomenon of fingerspelling (the unique contact between the writing system developed to represent a spoken language) and sign languages. I expect that other such unique phenomena will also emerge. Moreover, there is also a current focus on cross-linguistic studies that compare sign languages to each other and to spoken languages. Third, extensive studies of the socio-linguistics of Deaf communities will no doubt provide insights into aspects of spoken languages, aspects that may have been overlooked. The issue here is that sociolinguistic studies will become a two-way street, on which spoken language and sign language studies inform each other.

I close this chapter with some reflections on the importance of sociolinguistic research for Deaf communities. In discussing what guided him in the preparation of the dictionary of American Sign Language (DASL) as early as 1957, Stokoe cited the thinking of George Trager and Henry Lee Smith: "They insisted that language could not be studied by itself, in isolation, but must be looked at in direct connection to the people who used it, the things they used it to talk about, and the view of the world that using it imposed on them" (Stokoe *et al.*, 1965: 333). This sociolinguistic perspective clearly guided the inclusion of Croneberg's appendices in the DASL, appendices that showed "how language and culture as well as deafness formed a special community" (1965: 334). The importance of studying the sociolinguistics of sign languages is two-fold. First, the recognition that ASL has a sociolinguistic life like other systems that we recognize as languages reinforces the status of ASL as a real language. And as we see in this volume, the study of sign language sociolinguistics has also contributed to our understanding of spoken language sociolinguistics. Second, the study of sign language sociolinguistics has had a direct impact on the lives

of deaf people in terms of educational and employment opportunities. Indeed, it seems fair to say that this impact has been very tangible. Research on sign language sociolinguistics has helped lead to the recognition of sign languages as real languages and has had the effect of legitimizing them. This legitimization has allowed for the discussion of what the medium of instruction should be in Deaf education and to the question as to why it should not simply be sign language. This discussion has led to the improvement of Deaf education at all levels and to, as Johnson, Liddell and Erting said in 1989, the unlocking of the curriculum, at least for some deaf students. It has led to the improvement of services for deaf people, such as interpreting, and has opened up new career paths for deaf people as teachers both of deaf children and adolescents and as teachers of sign language. The research on sign language structure and sign language sociolinguistics which Bill Stokoe initiated has ultimately contributed to the continuing empowerment of deaf people all over the world.