Language, Storytelling, and Meaning in Human Life

What We Can Learn from the Deaf

By

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In memory of

Leslie Fiedler
1917-2003

and

Paul Garvin
1919-1994

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Chapter 1

Vico's Magnet: A Native Language is Every Child's Birthright

Humans invented language. So says the innocent.
Language invented humans. So says the cynic.

— Percival Everett, *Glyph*

The writing sample of a deaf American college student that you are about to read might well mystify you. What happened to this kid and how did she get into college? For professionals (teachers, psychologists, social workers) who work with deaf children and for those who have a deaf family member this sample will seem typical. But for other potential readers, including philosophers, ethicists, linguists, college professors, school teachers, parental rights activists, home schoolers, and, most of all, new parents of a deaf infant, its dysfluency may well be confounding. The sample comes from a guide for grading the written English of deaf college students who were enrolled in two-year associate degree programs, and in my judgement as a teacher of American deaf adults for over thirty years, all the samples given in this guide are typical of significant demographics of deaf college students today, as well as of a substantial number of deaf adults with post-secondary certificates or degrees. While there are certainly deaf high school and college students and deaf adults whose written English is commensurate with their educational levels, this grading guide was developed

and issued by a highly ranked private institution that awards it a grade 8 out of 10, 80%, a B in a freshman class composed entirely of deaf students. So, within the demographic of deaf adults enrolled in post-secondary education, this is B work.

The student is summarizing a story she had just seen as a nonverbal cartoon about a series of comically failed suicide attempts, something on the order of Fredrik Backman's *A Man Called Ove*. The students' task was to summarize, in written English, what they had just seen, and they were aware that it would be graded only for grammatical correctness. Here is one student's rendering of the story.

> The cartoon showed that Mr. Koumal tried to kill himself and then he tried the gun that pointed to his temple of his head, but the gun didn't go off and he tried to see what was wrong and the gun went off and splitted the bottle into halves. He was disappointed. Then the next step he did was to hang himself, so he hammered a nail to a wall. The nail went right through the other man's wall and the other man got a hammer and hammered it back to Mr. Koumal's wall and Mr. Koumal missed and didn't hang himself. Then the next step was to jump off a bridge, he jumped off a bridge but did not go into the water instead he went into the boat. Then later a robber met Mr. Koumal and sticked out his gun and demanded for his money. He looked so scared, so he gave him all he can. The robber took off and he felt much better.[1]

To be clear for readers who may have been told that "Deaf English" or "deafisms" are the result of interference by the native

[1] Kathleen Crandall, "Written Language Scoring," p. 44.

sign language that the deaf writer is assumed to have, this passage gives no indication of having been influenced by any signed language. Far from it. Hearing learners of English as a second language tend to carry the grammatical habits and common idiomatic expressions of their first language, the language in which they have native fluency, into their new language, in the manner of, say, a native speaker of Russian omitting the articles ('the,' 'a') in English, because his native language, Russian, does not have articles. Think Boris Badenov, the dastardly Russian cartoon spy who always referenced the heroes Rocky and Bullwinkle as "moose and sqvirrel" rather than "the moose and the squirrel." Well, American Sign Language (ASL) is like Russian and Latin in that it has no articles either, but missing articles is not what we see here. And although grammatical errors like "splitted," "sticked," and "demanded for" might be errors made by *beginning* students of English as a second language, this writer has apparently been studying English for at least thirteen years of primary and secondary schooling. Beyond these puzzling features, however, is a pervasive sense of dysfluency, a dysfluency that lies not in any native-language influence or in any of the grammatical errors but rather in the absence of any sense of *why* Mr. Koumal is doing what he's doing, what his goal is, how his actions relate to that goal and to each other, what each action adds up to in the larger scheme of the cartoon as a whole, and how his trouble is ironically, and happily, resolved by a mugger. There is only workmanlike sequencing ("Then the next step," "Then later"), but no point to the story, no sense of agency on the part of either Mr. Koumal or the summarizer, no reason why Mr. Koumal did what he did, or why this student is summarizing it.

Deaf adults who are writing like this student, walking a character through his paces without any notion that the character has any purpose whatsoever, are not people who are gaining fluency in a second language by using their first as a springboard or model. Rather, they are people who do not have native fluency in any language at all, and have next to no experience with human discourse, that is to say, with meaningful linguistic exchange with another human being. They have lived their whole lives *deprived of effective linguistic experience,* and are now attempting adult fluency in English without understanding *why* people engage in discourse, let alone why they might tell a funny/sad/ironic story as a moral lesson. And they face this task equipped only with memorized lists of grammar rules and exceptions, memorized phrases and a small basic vocabulary. This writer has seen depictions in the video cartoon of a nail, a rope, a bridge, a boat, water, and a gun, and she knows the English words for these things and remembers the order in which they appeared in the cartoon. But it seems she cannot imagine there is anything in the cartoon beyond a pointless sequence. For this writer, Mr. Koumal is a pinball that simply "goes" here and not there, into the water or into the boat. In short, there is no sense of any point at all, let alone any comedy, pathos, irony, or moral lesson, and no awareness of Mr. Koumal as having agency in his world or of the writer herself as an agent who is retelling a story. And she gets a B.

How did we get to this place, a time and situation in which a sizable number of deaf Americans are arriving in our post-secondary classrooms with language abilities no greater than those of a very young child, their writing mechanical and transactional rather than contextual and motived, and dotted with odd grammatical errors? Enrolling these young adults in college and letting them flounder

as this student is doing suggests that they, the members of the next generation of deaf Americans, are not our collective obligation at all! Who is responsible for setting these students up for failure, or, perhaps worse, for unearned and unmerited credentials that simply postpone a young person's inevitable failure? As children, these deaf human beings were deemed their parents' problem to solve, no matter how poorly educated, lacking in means, or ideologically addled those parents might be. How did we come to accept that it is quite possible for a young person to be enrolled as a student in a prestigious private institution of higher learning who is yet lacking the linguistic competence needed to deploy even the basic notion of cause and effect? Where, exactly, does the impasse lie that has prevented so many deaf children from acquiring competence in language sufficient to grasp and convey the point that all these "steps" undertaken by Mr. Koumal are part of a story with an ironically happy ending? In the case of this writing sample and its author, who is presumed not to suffer from aphasia, something (or a combination of somethings) continued for the twenty years of her life before she entered college and attempted to summarize a narrative with the paragraph reprinted here. *Something* is wrong when we as a society are not accepting social responsibility for our children, whatever their talents or deficits, and that's the topic of this book.

As discussion proceeds, readers will notice that aspects of our society's failures to provide deaf babies and children with the linguistic immersion that their developing brains need are increasingly common among babies with typical hearing. And that some of the features of the lifelong impairments induced by these social failures during a child's infancy are increasingly evident in children with typical hearing. Pundits lay the blame on the pervasive

presence of smart phones or on the transformation of what used to be the nuclear family into a nondescript group of individuals in a defined legal relationship, or on the demise of the family dinner hour, the neighborhood school or church, or the loss of untargeted, unscheduled play with other children. Be that as it may, my hope is that readers, in recognizing that, hey, this is not just a deaf thing!, will come to see the deaf experience as a bellwether of what we all can so easily lose.

Some History of America's Deaf Children and Deaf Education

> She was learning English, but English isn't just a language is it?
>
> Claire Louise Bennett, *Checkout 19*

Historically, deaf children were never expected to acquire any language at all. They typically remained with their families doing what other family members did: trapping tonight's supper, milking cows, weaving carpets to sell to tourists. With the increasingly complex social and cultural arrangements of the modern world, however, came the need for every adult to be able to engage in linguistic discourse in order to be married, inherit property, get a green card, acknowledge Jesus as their personal savior, or even just to be at some given place at some given time. It was then that deaf children became a difficulty for families and societies. To turn a deaf child into a person who can function as a member of a human social group would now mean that that child had somehow to acquire language. When the first school for deaf children in the U.S. opened in 1817, its founder, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet (1787-1851), was in service to the Calvinist establishment of Hartford,

Connecticut, and he had a definite goal: to provide his pupils with enough language to enable them to make a confession of their faith and become members of the church. Heading the new American Asylum for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, and assisted by a deaf Frenchman, Laurent Clerc (1785-1869) who had been both a pupil and a teacher at the deaf school in Paris, Gallaudet found himself charged with almost two dozen souls aged nine to fifty, all but one of whom had never been exposed to language. He began not by exposing the pupils to the natural sign language (LSF, la langue des signes française) that Clerc brought with him from the streets of Paris, which would have made some sense, but rather by developing the English equivalent of what Clerc and his teachers used at the Paris school: methodical signs.

The French methodical signs were simply an encoding system by which written French could be transcribed into gesture, employing lexical items (nouns, verbs, adjectives) from LSF with a set of invented gestures to indicate French particles or functors, including the affixes for genitive and plural nouns and for tense markers in verbs, and the free particles (prepositions, etc.) required to predicate, that is, to utter a statement of any sort. The American psychologist and friend of the deaf Harlan Lane (1936-2019) gives an example of how the English sentence "Try to understand me" would appear in methodical signs: the sign meaning "try" + plural + imperative + the sign for the preposition "to" + the sign meaning "under" + the sign meaning "stand" + infinitive + first-person singular + accusative.[2] The Paris school used methodical signs to dictate French as a means of teaching how the language is properly written, just as French schools for hearing children still use dictation to teach written French. But English was never taught

[2] Harlan Lane, *When the Mind Hears*, p. 63.

that way to hearing Anglophone children so it was an odd choice to make for deaf children who arrived in Gallaudet's classroom without any native language available for classroom instruction. The natural LSF, which would have been a more reasonable choice for the classroom, he adapted for sermons and prayer, clearly intuiting that the natural sign language gave his pupils the necessary linguistic exposure and conveyed the necessary linguistically framed concepts (God, the soul, faith, salvation), unlike methodical signs, which had to be decoded into a written language morpheme by morpheme. Thus, he and Clerc incidentally established the conditions in which American Sign Language (ASL) was generated and nurtured by his deaf pupils, who took the teachers' gesturally coded methodical signs and Gallaudet's chapel language to the dorms and the playground and ran with it. Unfortunately, though, Gallaudet and Clerc's choices established the pernicious practice of teaching in coded English rather than in demotic ASL, and this practice is still widely used today.

In the classroom, Gallaudet's methodical signs proved to be an extremely complicated and tedious method of coding a written language that was, of course, entirely unknown to the pupils and that had to be supplemented, or jump started, by memorizing lists of words and phrases. Examples of the latter are Gallaudet's list of antonyms, such as 'discernible'/'undiscernible,' 'perspicuous'/'imperspicuous,' and 'manifest'/'undescried,' and his list of easy-to-confuse phrases like "so as," "such as," and "as to." It's hard to imagine how these would have coded into methodical signs, and both the 25¢ vocabulary ('imperspicuous'?) and the phrases of nothing but function words (so, as, such, to) are all bugbears for deaf college students still today. Many of my students in college composition classes and private tutoring, all much better educated and much more sophisticated than Gallaudet's 1817

pupils, react with disgust when told that "few" and "a few" have opposite semantic values, that "critical of" and "critical to" employ "critical" in different senses, and that "liberal" and "libertarian," "socialist" and "socialite," have unrelated denotations. Why did it never occur to Gallaudet to consider how a ten-year-old who had spent his lifetime communicating with only a primitive and transactional signaling system (home signs) could have made sense of any of these lists, let alone a five-sign sequence to encode the word "gives"— those for verb, present, third person, singular, and "give"? Can children who have not yet acquired any language ever even form a concept of the attribute "undescried"? Gallaudet's pupils didn't know linguistic discourse from Adam, and some of them surely did not even know their own names.[3]

The Asylum soon stopped using methodical signs in favor of the natural sign language, the language used in chapel that Gallaudet always called "the native language of the deaf and dumb." Many former pupils, especially those who had become teachers themselves, held high hopes that the natural sign language that was emerging in Hartford and that we now know as ASL would really become the *native* language of the deaf, and that residential schools would forever after use it as the language of instruction. But these hopes were soon frustrated. For one thing, the school was oblivious to the consequences of the fact that its pupils were arriving without exposure to any language at all. While it's true that pupils from Martha's Vineyard, where a recessive gene in the isolated insular gene pool ensured a significant deaf demographic, arrived at the school with a native sign language, deaf children from the

[3] On the methodical sign sequence for "gives," : see Lane, *When the Mind Hears*, p. 62, p. 62. Gallaudet's word and phrase lists are archived at the American School for the Deaf in West Hartford, Connecticut, and are summarized in Sayers, *Life and Times*, pp. 126-28.

Vineyard did not begin to enroll in Gallaudet's school until ten years after its founding, by which time the natural sign language from Paris was well on its way to morphing into its offshoot, ASL.

Compounding that mistake of failing to realize that the first pupils had no notion of what language might be was the fact that they were all far too old to acquire a first language anyhow. Gallaudet seems to have assumed that a human being can acquire his first language at the age of ten, or even into middle age as some of his first pupils were. And in this belief he was, and is, not alone. Although there is now general agreement among cognitive psychologists that first-language acquisition can occur only before puberty, or even before age five — Eric Lenneberg stipulated, in 1967, that it occurs before the lateralization of the brain and the consequent end of its plasticity, which would be around age four or five — the grading guide from which our sample was taken is an instance of the pervasive assumption among American colleges and college programs and a great many college instructors that their adult students have already learned English as a first or second language, *and,* if as a second language, that they have the linguistic competence in ASL to brush up on (correct) their English in the two or four years of prescribed study before graduation. How often did I see my colleagues boasting that one of their students had "worked, and worked, and worked, and worked" until he passed the pre-college exit exam and was now able to enroll in the first credit-bearing composition course for incoming freshmen? Since when did first-language acquisition or second language mastery become a matter of working (rather than exposure)? Answer: since twenty-year-old adults who never experienced natural language acquisition started to be accepted into college. What these students are "working" on is memorizing targeted lists, rules, templates, and

what we used to call dance steps, not learning — let alone acquiring — English. As the American novelist and essayist Ta-Nehisi Coates (b. 1975) puts it, "Imagine learning to swim by reading and memorizing the steps of a front crawl but never jumping into a pool."[4]

Gallaudet might have known that humans have a limited developmental window in which to acquire language and that the age at which a person became deaf and the age at which he started his schooling were significant factors in his success or failure to learn. Granted that this fact was not fully understood until the twentieth century, his experience might have suggested to him the importance of age, since his own wife, who was born deaf and had grown up with a considerably older deaf sister and a nearby deaf cousin her own age, was far better prepared for school and for learning English than was that older deaf sister who had grown up without any linguistic partner at all. Sophia Gallaudet's English never went beyond basic — Gallaudet's letters to his wife remained on the level of a child's first reader and their son would later boast that Sophia could read a letter with 219 different words in it[5] — but her sister was so disabled by her childhood language deprivation that she never was able to take in information given to her even in the incipient sign language, let alone read or write English. The pupil Clerc married, who had been language-deprived until she enrolled at age twenty-four, and therefore between Sophia and her sister in age, seems to have been able to learn some basic signing but never acquired any English at all. In contrast, Gallaudet's favorite pupil, George Loring, the youngest pupil in the Asylum's first class, had

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[4] See Arden Neisser, *The Other Side*, p. 190. Lenneberg, *Biological Foundations*, p. 176. Coates, *The Message*, p. 72.

[5] Sayers, *Life*, p. 128.

not become deaf until age two and a half. Loring was regarded as highly intelligent (and I'm sure he was) but he was coming to his schooling with something that none of his classmates had: a good couple of years' early exposure to linguistic discourse (in spoken English) during the critical period for first language acquisition.

A related blind spot was the failure to recognize the role that lived experience has on language acquisition. Experience with sensory perceptions creates the building blocks for our mental concepts, our conceptual webs and clusters and mental models of the world, and our memories. But Gallaudet never saw any prospect that the school might enable deaf children to become fully adult human beings discoursing with others about the world and infused with insatiable curiosity, intense receptivity to life and language, and the ability to acquire, store, and manipulate a large number of those mental concepts and memories. Gallaudet knew that his pupils had catastrophically poor understanding of intentions, causes, prediction, and categorization, and yet he expected them to become literate enough in English to read the King James translation of the Bible by having the definitions of decontextualized abstractions like "faith" and "undescried" either memorized or transcribed into the often nonsensical representations with which methodical signs encode English.

Behind Gallaudet's claims for sign language lay unexamined assumptions that would have struck many of his European contemporaries as arguable at best. Many of those assumptions were tragically mistaken: that "the language of signs," unlike oral-aural (spoken) languages, was natural, original, and specially designed by God, and that any God-given language was naturally both universal among humankind and, unlike spoken languages, was forever fixed, immutable since Adam and Eve received theirs

direct from their creator. Unlike the flawed spoken languages resulting from the "confounding" of languages after God struck down the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:9), the sign language, Gallaudet believed, was univocal and transparent in its denotation of mental concepts or ideas, which concepts he thought were already present in the human mind from birth. He regarded the necessary underdeterminacy of oral-aural languages (in which meaning has to be negotiated and cannot simply be determined by reference to a codebook) as a bug, not a feature that, in fact, makes language *language* instead of a mere code.

When discussion returns to these notions to unpack their significance for childhood language acquisition, it will be evident that Gallaudet was already on the wrong track before he even started, what with his belief in innate ideas and in the one-on-one relationship between words and their semantic value. Together, these assumptions led to his expectation that language could just be walked back to its divine origins (as a signed language) to restore its reliability as a code. As will be shown, the commonsense view, reaching back into Antiquity, that words merely designate ideas or entities had already been challenged in the eighteenth century, when it began to be understood that far from designating what is already present in the mind or available to the senses, language instead accomplishes new awarenesses, providing each individual user of language as well as every cultural group bound together by a common language with a way of being in the world. Language can effect such things because of — not in spite of — its "inherent and inevitable" underdeterminacy, as British cognitive scientist Thom Scott-Phillips (b. 1976) put it. It is language's underdeterminacy that creates for each speaker and signer the need to recognize the intensions of the utterance in context, the knowledge of time,

place, situation, intended audience, cultural mores and expectations, and so on. Designating, coding, and decoding require only association, which a computer can easily handle and a lab rat can readily be trained to do. Human language, in contrast, is holistic, and the use of any word activates the entire lexicon. Discussion will return frequently to these points.[6]

Today, ASL has become a true native language for a small subset of deaf children, those who were born to Deaf parents and are thus exposed to signing *from birth*. Every other deaf person who signs ASL learned the language after infancy, either as a second language in which they may or may not have native-like fluency, or as a first language after a language-deprived childhood, in which case they most definitely do not have native-like fluency. Contrary to popular belief, ASL is now rarely used in classrooms, where most teachers and the largely uncertified cadre of sign-language interpreters hired by cash-strapped public schools, as well as the vast majority of deaf children, speak English while simultaneously engaging in some kind of manual code that looks like ASL only to the uninformed. In Gallaudet's day, the shining promise of the signing classroom had been that the language of signs, framed as the native language of the deaf and dumb, would attain the dignity and earn the respect given to English by the American public. I would argue that it was Gallaudet's archaic worldview, outmoded arguments, and failure to see that children had to be acquiring sign language at much, much earlier ages all played directly into the hands of the oralists (proponents of training deaf children to lipread and to produce artificial speech) later in the century as they systematically eliminated classroom use of ASL. Led by Alexander Graham Bell,

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[6] Scott-Phillips, *Speaking Our Minds*, quotation from p. 2; Charles Taylor, *Human Agency*, see especially pp. 226-46.

the goal was assimilation — "to assure that deaf children become true Americans, patriotic and English-speaking." If that sounds anything like the McCarthy Era of the 1940s and 1950s, there is a reason it does: J. Edgar Hoover would both hunt down communist sympathizers and sit on the board of the A. G. Bell Association. The doctrine of oralism, stocked with little more than inspirational stories, would prove to be persuasive for generations of parents and educators.[7]

Essentially, though, Bell and Gallaudet were alike in understanding language as nothing more than a transactional tool for making sincere (non-ironic) inquiries and requests and for relaying true information in response. Both men were advancing their ideas without much in the way of theory, philosophy, or even operating principles. Gallaudet was so far behind the times as to be making sixteenth-century arguments for answers to nineteenth-century questions about how to educate a deaf child to become a thinking adult and language-using member of society. As for Bell, he was so up-to-date that he was appealing to the new and trendy American eugenics movement in an effort to preclude "a deaf variety of the human race." As the American historian Douglas Baynton suggests, deaf education was stuck in these ruts until well into the second half of the twentieth century. And even an unbiased view of the state of American deaf education today will conclude that we haven't advanced significantly beyond such ideas. In many cases, we have regressed.[8]

It wasn't always so. The eighteenth-century founders of deaf education in France and Germany sought out foundational ideas

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[7] Quotation from Bell in Arden Neisser, *The Other Side*, p. 31.

[8] Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*. See also Greenwald and Van Cleve, "'A Deaf Variety.'"

in philosophy, and they shared with working philosophers what they were learning about teaching deaf children, always seeking answers to conundrums like *Where do our mental concepts come from?* and *Can one think without language?* These men (and they were all men) were looking at the big picture. Samuel Heinicke (1727-1790), who founded the first German school for the deaf, sought out the Königsberg philosopher Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788), the founder of the anti-rationalist Counter-Enlightenment, who believed that reason serves only to show us our own limitations, or, as Hamann put it, "reason is not given you to make you wise by it, but to recognize your folly and ignorance."[9] Hamann set off a firestorm by publishing his skeptical views of reason in a Königsberg newspaper in 1771, in the form of an anonymous essay he entitled "Night Thoughts of a Skeptic," but which was actually his own translation of a section of David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740). In this passage from Hume's *Treatise* translated and published by Hamann, Hume speculates about the limitations of reason and the primacy of imagination in our cognitive processes. Experience and habit, Hume says, operate through the imagination and are the keystones of all our cognitive processes. Even cause and effect reasoning is just an illusion of the imagination: any "connexion, tie, or energy lies merely in ourselves, and is nothing but that determination of the mind, which is acquir'd by custom. [...] We have, therefore, no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all." To save ourselves from "total scepticism," we engage in the common human practice of forgetting about our limitations and thinking of something else. Heinicke, following Hamann in giving up on any recourse to reason, pondered questions about whether children can develop concepts (such as, perhaps, the attribute "undescried"?) before

[9] Hamann to Kant, 1759 June, in *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10, p. 15.

they acquire language and, if so, how?, or how deaf children could be taught to understand that the written word is not simply a free-standing label attached to an object or action but rather a part of a vast web of human discourse. Since Hamann, and subsequently Heinicke, did not believe that human reason could answer questions like these, their alternative (default?) posture seems to have been like Hume's: reliance on habit, tradition, and experience. This is the worldview that informed Heinicke's schooling of his deaf pupils.[10]

In sharp contrast to the anti-rationalist Germans but in the same spirit of seeking out the big picture on cognitive development, Charles Michel de l'Épée (1712-1789), who founded the first deaf school in Paris, and his successor, Clerc's own teacher Roch-Ambroise Sicard (1742-1822), had both become immersed in the work of the Enlightenment *philosophe* Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715-1780). Condillac's sensationalism (the theory that all knowledge is derived from sensory perception) and nominalism (the theory that general ideas or concepts are only names without any reality in the world) had a profound influence on l'Épée's and Sicard's pedagogical principles. Condillac, for his part, repaid the favor of their interest by visiting the school. But the Frenchmen's clerical training encouraged them to believe, as Gallaudet did, that, *pace* Condillac, languages conveyed universal ideas and, indeed, divine truths. Thus, when l'Épée turned his attention to "developing" the natural signed language used by Deaf Parisians into a code for written French, he believed that the natural signed language's iconic, sensationalist (sensory) gestures were provided to the deaf by nature and could be shaped by human reason (and French

[10] Hume, *Treatise*, Bk. 1, Pt. 4, Sec. 7. Heinicke, "Uber die Denkart." See also discussion of Hamann's "Night Thoughts" in Egginton, *The Rigor of Angels*, pp. 13-14.

syntax) into a universal language that would convey universal ideas and divine truths. Both l'Épée and Heinicke, like Gallaudet and Bell after them, were very wrong on many points. Unlike Gallaudet and Bell, however, these earlier teachers were actively feeling their way through the growing philosophical literature on human cognition and language. They and the philosophers with whom they corresponded believed that the situation of the deaf would help illuminate the big picture of human cognition: how we think, where language comes from, and what it means to be human.

Since those heady days, deaf education in the U.S. has been adrift, untethered to any big picture or big idea, any network or schema of concepts, any worldview that would encourage us to link our home and classroom practices for deaf children with our society's best understanding of what it means to construct mental models of the world and to "know" a language. Social science research on deaf children is today presented "atheoretically" and every idea outside the authors' field of expertise is passed over in silence.[11] In the U.S. today, the old state deaf schools are mostly gone, our deaf children dispersed, "mainstreamed" into isolation in their neighborhood schools to sit in classrooms with more or less uncertified ASL interpreters charged with interpreting classroom instruction from a teacher more or less unacquainted with any aspect of what it means for a child with a rapidly developing brain to have been deprived of ordinary exposure to conversation with others for her whole life. In most cases, there isn't even any inquiry into whether or not these children have already acquired a signed first language from their parents and peer group (if they even had a peer group),

[11] Peter V. Paul and Stephen P. Quigley, *Language and Deafness*, p. 59; Marschark *et al.*, Eds., *Relations of Language and Thought*, p. 4.

or have, instead, spent their early childhoods regarding communication as merely a transactional tool. As a recent commentary on interpreted education reminds us, interpreters are not language teachers, and even those with certification find it a complex challenge to relay information to children who do not have a first language and whose mental worlds are severely underfurnished. If English is to be taught as a second language, as it presently is, then these children must be given a first language from infancy, *by immersion in fully adequate language*.[12]

Cochlear implants are almost universal now among children of the educated and comfortable (medically insured) classes, though children of deaf parents and those born and raised into the lowest American castes can continue to reach school age with their deafness intact. But cochlear implants do not make a child hearing, not by a long chalk. CI surgery has historically destroyed the human cochlea in the process of implanting a prosthetic device, and, although technology will surely improve in many respects, it does not now and quite probably never will provide anything approaching the natural auditory perception of a mother's voice that allows for meaningful unscripted linguistic interaction with the world from the moment of birth. They certainly do not compensate the child for the months stolen from him by lack of exposure to language before implantation. We'll return to this point later in this chapter. Gene therapy, the shiny new thing, will soon become available, but only for children with the rare otoferlin mutation who have not had their cochleae destroyed by prior implantation of that digital workaround. In the meantime, children who are implanted or whose parents are hoping to regenerate their hearing with gene therapy remain, just like the plain old deaf children of previous generations, irremedi-

[12] See Christine Monikowski, "Language Myths."

ably language-deprived by their isolation during much of the critical period for language acquisition. And they are impaired by the consequently underfurnished worldviews and the missing sense of themselves in those worlds, all the aspects of a human life that only early linguistic interaction can provide.

In this, deaf children with hearing parents are much like the children from the American underclasses, those who have been cared for in households where no one plays peekaboo with the infant. These children, much like many deaf children, enter school without having overheard much spoken discourse between adults and with a history of being addressed only for the purpose of bare-bones directives, never for pleasure or play. These are the children Paolo Freire (1921-1997) and Donaldo Macedo (b. 1950) have written about so powerfully. Educators in the U.S. tend to analyze these children's trouble with school as a matter of a nonstandard dialect of English being spoken at home, and to urge a diglossic education that respects the home dialect *while teaching fluency in the national standard*. Many deaf children, however, have no home dialect, and even hearing children growing up in extreme poverty might have a home dialect only to the extent that they understand verbal signals in that dialect to require specific behaviors from them, not a home dialect in which stories are told and games are played.

Basil Bernstein's theory of language codes, developed in the 1960s, took a bit different tack on language-deprived children. Instead of seeing standard/nonstandard forms of a national language, Bernstein describes "elaborated codes" vs. "restricted codes." Children of the working class (as the underclass was characterized in the previous century) are socialized to interact linguistically using a "restricted code" that is largely context-dependent and heavily reliant on shared assumptions and shared tacit knowledge within

the speech community. In contrast, children of the comfortable and educated classes are socialized to use an "elaborated code," which can make indirect references to remote matters about which there are fewer shared presuppositions. Bernstein's model is fruitful in thinking about the deaf child's training in a restricted code and her need for linguistic exposure to an elaborated code. But as I will argue, the challenge faced by all these children, both the deaf and the impoverished, is that their brains have been developing in an environment of sharply restricted codes, and they reach school age with identities, concepts, ambitions, and mental models of the world formed by those restricted codes. Schools could provide exposure to increasingly elaborated language through discourse, conversation, storytelling, the give and take of human linguistic interaction, and the all-important life experiences and memories of these social interactions. Instead, they offer only the "mindless, meaningless drills and exercises" for no other purpose than to fill in a workbook, as Macedo puts it. And for deaf children, all this drilling is done in unevenly coded English.[13]

Why does anyone think this approach is working?

My Angle

> Stories happen only to those who are able to tell them.
>
> Paul Auster, *The Locked Room*

First, what are my credentials in the field of deaf education? I am not a deaf-ed teacher, or a psychologist, or a sign language interpreter, or the mother of a deaf child, nor was I born deaf. Rather,

[13] Bernstein's model is discussed in Naomi S. Baron, "Contextualizing 'Context.'" Macedo, *Literacies of Power*, p. 16.

I was born and raised as a typical kid who had a pretty good idea of what I'd find congenial and be good at, expectations about how I would live my life, and plans to realize these expectations. High school was a bore, but my boyfriend and I were reading Sartre, Camus, Bertrand Russell (this last discovered by me through his writings on atheism, a topic of great interest to me at the time), and Alan Watts (but, hey, it was the '60s) as well as Hermann Hesse, whom I now realize we were drastically misunderstanding — *The Glass Bead Game* is a *parody?* With the insouciance and confidence of the sixteen-year-old I was, I figured on being a philosopher and, as a sideline, raising goats. Not sure where the idea for goats came from — perhaps an issue of *Organic Gardening*?

But in college, somewhere between my phenomenology class and my Heidegger seminar, so to speak, my auditory faculties began to vaporize, first gradually as I kept and milked one goat and worked through an English Ph.D., then all at once as I was nearing my first faculty tenure review, which resulted in dismissal on the grounds that I could no longer hear students who wished to present compelling reasons for me to change their grades. That was true, I couldn't hear them, and in fact couldn't even hear a fire alarm. My job lost, my prospects doubtful, my friends, husband, and children backing away, I sat down to consider my choices. There were two, neither of them very appealing at the time. One choice was to throw in the towel and accept the end of my career, my permanent exclusion from my family's daily lives, and all hope of any future social interaction — in other words, accept a lifetime sentence to solitary confinement (with an excellent library, however), which I could regard in a more positive light as a great opportunity to betake myself to an isolated rural retreat and get back to keeping goats. The other choice was to pull out of the indifferent (at best)

or downright cruel academic world of the hearing (one ASL interpreter labeled my colleagues and fellow members of the Modern Language Association "all cold-shoulder people") and turn instead to sign language and the world of deaf post-secondary education.

I picked Door #2, taking night classes in ASL at the local deaf club, then landing a temp position as a visiting professor at the National Technical Institute of the Deaf (NTID) at the Rochester Institute of Technology, and then in short order moving on to a tenure-track position at Gallaudet University, the world's premier liberal arts institution for the deaf and hard-of-hearing. I had learned all about the alleged Deaf cliquishness in my ASL classes, and, if true, I knew it was possible that I would be just as isolated in the Deaf World as I had been in the hearing since I did not share the deaf childhoods that had formed my new colleagues and students. But nothing ventured, nothing gained, and much to my astonishment at both NTID and Gallaudet I found myself graciously accepted by my Deaf colleagues and students, though, truth be told, with more than a hint of bemusement as they watched me muddle my way through classes, faculty meetings, and get-togethers with my new friends — bowling and Scrabble, the National Gallery of Art and the Folger Shakespeare Library, ASL poetry readings and plays. I should add here that the Rochester chapter of ALDA (the Association of Late-Deafened Adults) and in particular its leader, the late Rick Skyer, played a big role in my coming out and in accepting what had happened to me. In ALDA, I was no longer the only deaf person in the world whose employer had pink-slipped her and whose spouse had walked away from our marriage as a bad job. It was in ALDA that I learned that hardly any hearing person out there has what it takes to adapt to a suddenly deaf spouse or assistant professor whose future deafhood had never been part of the wedding vows or the hiring contract.

But while I knew I'd been thrown a life preserver by the signing deaf academic community, I was shocked and dismayed by the extremely low level of most of my students' linguistic competence. "Deafness" is presented in this country primarily as a speech and hearing disability, and as for language itself, I knew that my great-uncle, a graduate of the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf, certainly knew how to read. Family lore has it that he was the only member of the immigrant generation to subscribe to a daily newspaper, and an English-language newspaper at that. Everything he knew about life in the United States came to him from the deaf school, that daily paper, and a younger sister who was also the only other member of the family to learn ASL. So what calamity, I wondered, had befallen those students whose written English I found so unaccountably damaged?

My ASL teachers were not a lot of help, shrugging off my questions by saying that Deaf culture did not value English fluency. There's a grain of truth in that: it's very common and, perhaps, only natural to claim that what is viewed as a defect or shortcoming by the wider world is actually a cultural marker to be proud of. On campus, the subjects of language deprivation and agrammatism, and even Deaf English, were kept under wraps, banned from all open meetings (as I painfully learned later when, as an officer of the Faculty Senate, I tried to introduce the topic at a meeting between the Faculty and the Trustees and was told by the Chairman of the Board that I did not have the use of the overhead projector and should just sit down).

Of course, these topics were often discussed privately among members of the English Department. We told ourselves that the history and philosophy departments could simply carry on as though students were really reading and understanding the

assigned books, but we, who were supposed to be grading on written performance, could only shake our heads. Our hands were tied: just like the instructors in other departments, we had to teach the students who had been admitted to the university and make sure that no more than one or two failed the course they'd enrolled in so as not to scare others away from our departmental course offerings. But because we were grading their writing, it was impossible for us to pretend that all of our students were doing college-level work — or even elementary-school-level work. We knew they weren't. No one wanted to face the plight of the students who sat in our classrooms for a semester without any effective linguistic facility and then were let to move on with a B. Certainly, none of us would openly recognize and admit that our students' deficiencies were intractable. It was all about how *we* could work under these conditions.

Decades later, when I was facing retirement, new hearing sons- and daughters-in-law, and the prospect of grandchildren, I got myself a cochlear implant in preparation for interacting with a greater number of hearing people than I had been accustomed to do, ensconced in deaf spaces as I had been. As advertised, the cochlear prosthesis provided a whole lot of computer simulated digital sound, though having only one ear implanted meant that I got no sense of where the sound was coming from — you need two ears for that, just as you need two eyes for depth perception. Some of the sounds that the CI picked up in its microphone and transduced to my auditory nerve, like doorbells and cat meows, were relatively easy to match with their sources and human-life-world meanings, while others, like dog barks, remain hard to identify because they sound like they could be anything from someone coughing to someone trying to start up his chain saw. But any