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### Providence Island

Providence Island is an isolated Caribbean island. Although it is governed by Spanish-speaking Colombia, the first language of hearing islanders is an English creole. At least 19 of the island's 2500–3000 people were born deaf. Most people on the island know and use Providence Island Sign Language (PROVISL), although signers in the eastern part of the island sign differently from signers in the western part. There is also some sign variation between villages within each of these two general areas.

#### HISTORY

Research to date shows no relationship between PROVISL and any European or South American sign language. PROVISL developed indigenously and appears to be about 100 years old.

The first permanent settlement of Providence occurred around 1787 by 10 English-speaking whites and 12 blacks. By 1835 there were 342 English-speaking inhabitants. The population of Providence did not greatly expand until around 1900. Caesar Newball (born circa 1880) probably was the first deaf person to live on Providence and the first fluent user of PROVISL. Since Newball's time, PROVISL has expanded in use so that the great majority of both deaf and hearing people on Providence are competent in PROVISL. *See* HISTORY: Martha's Vineyard.

#### STATUS

PROVISL is autonomous from oral languages on Providence Island; its dialect variation is not related to that of oral languages. PROVISL is used for all everyday activities between deaf and deaf and between deaf and hearing islanders. It is not used in education, however, since education is controlled by nonislanders. Hearing people sometimes employ a word order similar to English when they sign, but there is no formal sign continuum for hearing people. Deaf people do not approach English word order when they sign. There is also no diglossic situation between PROVISL and any other signed varieties, since there is no separate deaf community on Providence Island. *See* SOCIO-LINGUISTICS: Sign Language Continuum.

Most of the hearing people on Providence have very positive attitudes toward deaf people and PROVISL. Studies indicate that 70 percent of the

hearing population believe that the union of two hearing persons is more likely to cause deafness on Providence than the union of a deaf person with a hearing person or with another deaf person. Deaf people are viewed as equally or more intelligent, equally mature, and less likely to have mental problems, or at least no more likely to have mental problems, than hearing people. Finally, while the introduction of a cash economy on Providence Island is creating specialization of jobs and resulting in some discrimination against deaf people, deaf workers still receive the same pay as hearing workers for the same jobs.

#### PHONOLOGY

PROVISL has a relatively small set of handshapes—in fact, one of the smallest in the world. This offers a unique insight into the minimum number of handshapes necessary for a sign language. PROVISL has the following distinctive handshapes: 1, 5, S, O, F, bO, C 2. (The handshapes X, Y, I occur very rarely at the phonetic level in PROVISL; however, it is possible to derive all X and I handshapes from an underlying 1 handshape. Y handshape occurs only in one morpheme of the language, BOAT-MAST.)

PROVISL has the expected gross locations of arm, trunk, face, hand, and zero tabs. However, it also has leg and any-tab signs. These last two locations are not commonly found in sign languages. Leg tabs are either upper or lower leg (including foot). Arm tabs are either upper or lower arm. Trunk tabs include shoulder, high, mid, low, ipsi (same), and low center. Face tabs include entire face, high, mid, low, side of face, ear, and neck.

Orientation is not distinctive in PROVISL for leg, arm, trunk, or any-tab signs. It is distinctive for face, hand, and zero tabs. No systematic analysis of movements in PROVISL has occurred.

From the evidence to date, PROVISL has one of the most extensive systems of distinctive nonmanual markers at the phonological level. One study reports that 25 percent of a list of citation forms of signs had some kind of nonmanual movement associated with the sign. Most of this movement was mouth (not speech-related) movement, followed by eye movement. Also fairly commonly found were shoulder, trunk, nose, and leg movement. Signs such as PUSS (CAT), DOG, SMALL-PIG; MAN and FATHER; WOMAN and MOTHER; HOW, ASK, DON'T KNOW as well as many other signs are distinguished only by nonmanual markers.

#### SYNTAX

There is little systematic research on the syntax of PROVISL. However, the following principles are of interest. In terms of word order, PROVISL has: (1) preferred subject-verb word order in intransitive

sentences; (2) preferred subject-object-verb word order for transitive sentences; (3) preferred noun-adjective-numeral-determiner word order for noun phrases; (4) preferred verb-negative word order; and (5) same word order for statements and questions.

Like most subject-object-verb languages, PROVISL allows variation in this word order. Also, like most noun-adjective languages, PROVISL allows variation in this word order.

Time is represented syntactically (by a separate sign), not morphologically (as part of the verb sign). Some sections of the island distinguish present (not signed), PAST (with the outward ipsi movement), and FUTURE (with inward movement). Other parts of the island distinguish present (not signed) and NONPRESENT (with outward ipsi movement).

Modal verbs like CAN are incorporated nonmanually into the verb sign.

#### SUMMARY

PROVISL provides important insights into the nature of language. The sociolinguistic interaction of deaf and hearing people on Providence Island demonstrates that it is possible for deaf people to be integrated into hearing society, if hearing people adapt to the needs of deaf individuals. Furthermore, PROVISL, with its small number of distinctive handshapes, yet its extensive use of nonmanual expression, illustrates important constraints on sign language phonology. Finally, the use of constructions such as subject-object-verb word order and present/nonpresent time clearly shows that PROVISL has an autonomous grammar from the oral languages used on the island.

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#### Puerto Rican

Puerto Rican Sign Language (PRSL) is related to, but distinct from, the sign language used in the mainland United States.

#### POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS

Puerto Rico is an island in the Caribbean, approximately 100 by 30 miles (160 × 48 kilometers), politically designated a commonwealth of the United States. The people are thus United States citizens and English is one of their spoken languages. Since,

however, the island was a colony of Spain for many years, much Spanish influence is still evident, and Spanish is the first spoken language for most of the island's inhabitants.

The deaf population is estimated at from 8000 to 40,000 individuals by rehabilitation and educational agencies, although Puerto Rico was not part of the deaf census conducted by the National Association of the Deaf in 1974. Several reasons can be given for supposing that even the larger figure may be an underestimate. Deaf children on the island may be educated either at the San Gabriel School for the Deaf in Puerto Nuevo (within the San Juan metropolitan area) or in any of nearly 30 special classrooms operated by the Department of Instruction around the island. However, there are no educational facilities for deaf students beyond primary level, and therefore some families move to New York, Florida, Illinois, or other parts of the United States while their deaf children are in school. Some of these deaf individuals may choose to return to Puerto Rico upon reaching adulthood and may have no contact with the rehabilitation system after that. In farming or fishing communities in outlying areas of the island, deaf individuals may live within their family units throughout their whole lives, never becoming part of the educational system and never receiving rehabilitation services. These people would probably not be included in the estimate above.

#### ORIGINS

The history of PRSL is related to the history of public education for deaf children. In 1907 an American order of nuns, the Dominicans, came to San Juan and founded the San Gabriel School for the Deaf. They introduced the sign language used in the United States at that time, namely American Sign Language (ASL), to the instructional setting in Puerto Rico as part of the combined method of instruction. The location of the school changed at least twice within the San Juan area, and in the 1950s the administration of the school also changed. A Spanish teaching order, the Benedictines, introduced the oral method at this time and forbade the use of signing in the school. The spoken language that was emphasized during the tenure of the original order was English, but Spanish became the language of instruction in both deaf and hearing schools. In the 1970s a Lutheran group from Canada founded a school in the Luquillo area, which uses English and Signed English as the mediums of instruction. Also in the 1970s instructors from the New York University Deafness Research and Training Center gave special training courses in Signed Spanish for rehabilitation workers including counselors, instructors at the vocational training center, and interpreters. At least four persons were