

LANGUAGE AND THE MAINTENANCE OF ETHNIC BOUNDARIES
IN THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Harry Markowicz and James Woodward
Linguistics Research Laboratory
Gallaudet College

In this paper¹ we attempt to present first, a definition of the Deaf² community, and second, a demonstration of the importance of language in maintaining the integrity of its social organization.

The extensive literature on deafness consists for the most part of psychological studies of deaf individuals. The purpose of these investigations is usually to compare the intelligence and performance of deaf people with those of hearing people. The results yielded by this type of research have been contradictory. Some studies conclude that the deaf are inferior to hearing people in some aspects of intelligence and performance (Myklebust 1960), while others find similar kinds of distribution in the two groups (Furth 1966).

The important point to note about these studies is that there is no recognition of the effects of the Deaf experience and of the Deaf subculture on the testing situation (Lunde 1960). The assumption is made by the testers that the only difference between the two groups is that one has the ability to hear, while the other does not. In other words, deaf people are viewed as hearing people, with the exception that they can't hear.

Some professionals who work with deaf people have recently begun to recognize the existence of a Deaf minority, with a hierarchical social structure, its own culture and language (Lunde 1960, Vernon & Makowsky 1969, Meadow 1972). Members of the Deaf community include the profoundly deaf, the hard of hearing, the prelingually and the postlingually deaf, those who have intelligible speech as well as those who don't. The particular degree of hearing loss does not appear to be a criteria for membership. Rare instances of hearing members, for example some hearing children of Deaf parents, are also reported in the literature (Schlesinger 1972, Furth 1973). These ascriptions, however, may be questionable since they are made by hearing researchers who are not themselves part of the community.

On the other hand, there are also both deaf and hard of hearing people who have to contact with the Deaf subculture. They do not identify with this minority and the members do not accept them into the community. A study (Padden & Markowicz 1976) has been recently undertaken at Gallaudet College, a liberal arts college for hearing impaired students, involving the small minority of new students who had been previously enculturated in the hearing community. Before entering Gallaudet College, this group of students had not interacted with other deaf people and they knew no sign language. The primary objective of that study is to follow the students' acculturation process and to note the kinds of cultural conflicts they encounter. After six months of submersion in the Deaf subculture, there is evidence that these students are still excluded from normal social interaction with fellow-students who are part of the Deaf community.

The most obvious barrier to participation in the Deaf community is linguistic. Gumperz (1975) expresses the intimate relationship between a community, its culture and its language: "Language is simultaneously a store or a repository of cultural knowledge, a symbol of social identity, and a medium of interaction." The primary language of the Deaf community is American Sign Language (ASL). Besides being its vernacular language, it serves also as the principal identifying characteristic of its members (Stokoe 1970, Woodward 1973a, Padden & Markowicz 1976).

The language situation in the Deaf community can best be described as a bilingual-diglossic continuum between ASL and English (Stokoe 1970, Woodward 1973a). Although the community is bilingual, most of its members do not have native competence in English. A small minority – some of the most highly educated prelingually deaf, the hard of hearing and the postlingually deaf – are proficient in English. Using reading tests as a measuring instrument, Furth (1966) found that by age 16 only 12 % of the deaf population demonstrates native-like competence in English.

For the most part, prelingually deaf people are very limited in their ability to communicate orally. Their mechanically acquired speech is generally unintelligible to most people. They cannot easily depend on lipreading since this skill is difficult and presupposes a knowledge of the spoken language. Writing also depends on knowing English, but in addition, it is a tedious and slow mode of communication. By necessity interaction with hearing people is limited.

In cross-cultural interaction "the majority culture expects to be addressed in its own language" (Weinreich 1968). However, professionals who work with deaf people usually communicate through a system of coding English into a manual-visual channel by stringing out individual sign-words into English word order. The use of this system, called manual English or sign English, depends on knowing English. Since most deaf people do not have complete control of this language, a continuum of language varieties has developed between ASL and English. These intermediate varieties have been shown to exhibit pidgin-like

characteristics (Woodward 1973b, Woodward & Markowicz 1975). Variation along the ASL-to-English continuum is regular, rule-governed, and correlates with a hierarchy of gross social variables. For example, people who are Deaf, people born of Deaf parents, people who learned signs before the age of six, and Deaf people who attended some college use language varieties that more closely approach "pure" ASL, while people who are hearing, people who have hearing parents, people who learned signs after the age of six, and Deaf people who have not attended any college tend to use language varieties less like "pure" ASL (Woodward 1973a).

Diglossia is another important aspect of the Deaf subculture. Signing that approaches English along the continuum serves as the "H" variety and tends to be used in formal interaction, such as in church, the classroom, lectures, and in conversation with outsiders. Signing that approaches ASL is more like the "L" variety in that it is used in less formal situations, such as intimate conversations. English is usually considered superior to ASL, while ASL is often regarded as ungrammatical or non-existent. Sign language diglossia appears to be as stable as other diglossic situations.

Although extensive interaction may occur between members and outsiders, some sectors of activity are not normally included in cross-cultural relations. Extended communication involving an outsider does not occur in the ASL end of the continuum. If a hearing person joins a conversation among Deaf people, code switching to an English-like signing is the immediate response. In this way, hearing people are prevented from learning ASL, and consequently, certain areas of the Deaf subculture remain inaccessible to non-members.

Marital patterns among Deaf people can be used to illustrate this point. Fay (1898) records an 85 % rate of endogamous marriage. Rainer et al (1963) in a survey of New York, found that 95 % marriages of women born deaf and 91 % of marriages of women who became deaf at an early age were endogamous. Because the rate of postlingual deafness was much higher in the past due to disease, one can hypothesize that marital patterns have changed very little since the turn of the century and probably before that in the U.S. Deaf community. Woodward & Markowicz (1975) also point out that since not all women in the study by Rainer et al were necessarily members of the Deaf community, the percentage of marriages across the ethnic boundary is possibly reduced even further (Woodward 1975a).

Social deafness appears to vary from the behavior of the so-called "Deaf-Deaf" to behavior that is characteristic of hearing people. Cultural values manifested in the different degrees of Deaf behavior can be placed on a continuum similar to the language continuum described above.

While Deaf cultural values and behavior viewed objectively appear to rank on a continuum, members of the Deaf community dichotomize others as either members or non-members. These categorical choices are made by means of patterns of certain socially significant features.³ Thus, a boundary is drawn

around the Deaf community and it can be viewed as an ethnic group with which members identify on the basis of a basic identity (Barth 1969). Ascription to the Deaf minority group seems primarily to be based on two criteria: 1) attendance in a residential school for the deaf, and 2) communicative competence in ASL (Stokoe et al 1965).

The following demographic facts help explain why the socialization of deaf children takes different patterns. Ten percent of deaf children are born of Deaf parents. Their enculturation naturally takes place in the home. For the other 90 % who have hearing parents, socialization depends largely on the schools they attend. About half of this group attend residential schools for the deaf where they are socialized into the Deaf community by older children and their peers who have Deaf parents (Meadow 1972). Most young deaf children do not have any contact with Deaf adults.

The other half of the deaf children with hearing parents attend special day schools for the deaf, or else they are integrated into regular schools. Generally, deaf children who do not have Deaf parents and who do not attend residential schools identify with the hearing society in which they function with varying degrees of success. They do not normally interact with the members of the Deaf community. However, as noted above in reference to the Gallaudet study (Padden & Markowicz 1976), some individuals become acculturated into the Deaf community later in life. Presumably, their new social identity in the Deaf community is more satisfying than the social role they acted out previously in the hearing community.

Deaf children differ from their counterparts in other ethnic groups in two important ways. First, as stated above, enculturation into the Deaf subculture does not generally take place within the home. Deaf children of hearing parents often feel alienated from their families. Contact with Deaf adults is extremely limited and it is not unusual for young deaf children to imagine that they will grow up to be hearing adults. This accounts for the important role played by Deaf children of Deaf parents and older Deaf children in the process of enculturation of young deaf children.

The second difference from children of other ethnic groups is due to the fact that hearing impaired individuals are viewed as requiring the assistance of various specialists in the field of deafness, e.g. audiologists, speech therapists, teachers of the deaf, and counselors. Deaf people normally find themselves cast in the roles of pupil, client, patient, employee, while the individuals who play out the dominant roles of teacher, doctor, speech therapist, audiologist counselor, and employer, are usually hearing people. In these asymmetrical interactions, deaf people are often treated as defective hearing people, while their membership in a subculture is ignored or denigrated. Such encounters may have contributed to the formation of a "conquest" culture (Aceves 1974). Like certain other minority groups, the Deaf community generally does not participate in the control of its own institutions (Vernon & Makowsky 1969). In terms of its

economic, political, and social relations to the hearing society, the Deaf minority can be viewed as a colony.

Language varieties serve to delimit interaction within and between the Deaf and hearing communities. Signing that approaches ASL is primarily used within the Deaf community for intimate interactions of members. Thus, the use of ASL-like signing serves to integrate Deaf people into the community and to assign to them social roles, while at the same time it excludes outsiders from intimate interactions with members.

Pidgin Sign English (PSE) serves as a linguistic and cultural buffer that allows for only minimal interaction between the hearing and Deaf communities and then only for a limited group of hearing and Deaf brokers (Woodward & Markowicz 1975). This group includes mostly college educated Deaf individuals - about 1-2 % of the Deaf population, and hearing professionals. PSE allows the transmission of information in a code native to neither Deaf nor hearing individuals, but in a channel to which the Deaf person is clearly more attuned. Information useful to the community and its members can be obtained without sacrificing cultural integrity and group solidarity. There is little chance that hearing people can actively introduce new and contradictory ideology into the community in a language other than ASL.

ASL serves as the primary criterion for identification of self and others as members of the Deaf subculture, and for the promotion of solidarity within the group. This social function is so important to the group that some community members may on occasion misidentify as a Deaf person a skilled hearing signer whose signs approach ASL, especially in the extensive use of constructions like directionality in three dimensional space to represent agent-beneficiary relationships (Woodward 1975b). This is an extremely rare situation, since most hearing signers are thwarted from learning ASL by the diglossic pressure that insures that Deaf signers will attempt to approach English when signing with an outsider. The misidentification is more likely to occur in locales where it is rare for hearing people to sign at all, much less approach the language varieties that the Deaf community identifies with. Some foreign Deaf individuals, even of Deaf parents (Battison, personal communication), and some Deaf community members who acquired signs late in life, are also misidentified as hearing people (see also Kantor, 1977).

In rare situations where hearing individuals manage to thwart the diglossic pressure, conflicts will arise as to what social role this person should have in relation to the Deaf community, since hearing people are not supposed to sign like Deaf people. There seems to be two possible solutions to this conflict: a change in interaction patterns or continued interaction on the same (interpersonal) level. The most common way of handling this conflict is to reinforce the diglossic situation by code-switching to English-like signing⁴. This may be viewed as a sanction for violation of expected cultural values and linguistic norms. This diglossic reinforcement effectively excludes the hearing

person from deep integrative or interpersonal interaction, since ASL, not English, is used by most Deaf people for these functions. This re-erection of cultural-linguistic boundaries should be viewed as part of the ethnic identification of insiders and outsiders in the Deaf community. By switching to PSE, the Deaf community member has properly relabeled the hearing person as an outsider. Thus, the hearing person is excluded from intimate personal interaction with the Deaf community, thereby contributing to the maintenance of its autonomy and integrity.

The other way of handling the conflict of identification is to continue interacting in ASL. This implies the possibility of future intimate interaction. The use of ASL means that the hearing person is not rejected as an outsider, but is incorporated into the community structure. This incorporation, however, does not necessitate membership in the Deaf community but rather something like the status of friend to the community. Some skilled hearing signers who can approach ASL may be able to continue for an indefinite time in the role of special friend.

The definition of the Deaf community proposed in this paper appears to account for both the assumed cultural continuum between the Deaf subculture and the majority culture, and the fact that cognitively there exists a dichotomy along ethnic lines. Illustrations of linguistic behavior in the Deaf community support the claim that its language situation plays an important role in the maintenance of an ethnic boundary. Thus, it contributes to the maintenance of the positive social identities and satisfying in-group interaction of its members.

NOTES

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- (2) Throughout this paper we use the convention of capitalizing the word "Deaf" when it refers to any aspect of the Deaf community and its members. Uncapitalized "deaf" refers to the audiological condition of deafness.
- (3) While we have not yet developed a specific theoretical model to handle these data, we feel that some modification of Bailey's (1973) wave model may account for the situation.
- (4) The code-switching response can be easily observed. The pressure to switch to English with a hearing person is extremely strong. Woodward (1976 : 216) reports the following example from linguistic consultants who were

consciously trying to give him data for ASL. As White hearing researchers we have faced some problems in effectively penetrating Southern Black deaf communities. There is still a large amount of understandable distrust which has hampered a real in-depth study of the communities. Also as mentioned before, it is difficult to record Black signs because the signers switch toward White English signs with us. We have a beautiful example on videotape of two supposedly 'low-verbal' (the best translation of which is non-English) Black deaf signers. Both haltingly hypercorrected their Pidgin Sign English (Woodward 1973b, Woodward & Markowicz 1975) signing MY BE NAME BE... and laboriously proceeding to spell their names. I immediately cut off the camera and signed not to use 'straight English sign' but just to 'converse'. As soon as I got the camera on, they launched into one of the most animated 20-minute story-telling scenes I have seen. The problem, however, is how much of their signs were really the way they would normally converse among themselves? All of the other people in the room were White, and there was a White deaf counselor interviewing them."

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