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COMMUNICATING WITHIN DEAF COMMUNITIES: AN INSIGHT INTO AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

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COMUNICAREA ÎN CADRUL COMUNITĂȚILOR SURDE: O PERSPECTIVĂ ASUPRA LIMBII SEMNELOR AMERICANE

Abstract

This paper aims to offer an insight into the history of American Sign Language and its development as a language, as well as to analyze the way in which hearing people perceive the Deaf Community and sign languages as means of communication. In today's society the topic is considered taboo, or a sensitive subject nevertheless, because the deaf community is seen as a minority whose members suffer from a disability, implicitly excluding the possibility of them having developed cognitive abilities or a way of communicating that could be considered a language – which is completely false. It is therefore important to normalize this topic and be informed about the culture of deaf people and their way of communicating, precisely to use the right terminology and to address the community in a non-discriminatory way.

Keywords: American Sign Language, deafness, Deaf Community, languages, minority, communication, gestures, linguistics, grammar

Rezumat

Această lucrare își propune să ofere o perspectivă asupra istoriei limbii semnelor americane și a dezvoltării acesteia ca limbă, precum și să analizeze modul în care persoanele auzitoare percep comunitatea surzilor și limbile semnelor ca mijloace de comunicare. În societatea actuală, subiectul este considerat tabu sau, în orice caz, un subiect sensibil, deoarece comunitatea surzilor este văzută ca o minoritate ai cărei membri suferă de un handicap, excluzând implicit posibilitatea ca aceștia să fi dezvoltat abilități cognitive sau un mod de comunicare care ar putea fi considerat o limbă - ceea ce este complet fals. Prin urmare, este important să normalizăm acest subiect și să fim informați cu privire la cultura persoanelor surde și la modul lor de comunicare, tocmai pentru a utiliza terminologia corectă și pentru a ne adresa comunității într-un mod nediscriminatoriu.

Cuvinte-cheie: Limba semnelor americane, surditate, comunitatea surzilor, limbi, minoritate, comunicare, gesturi, lingvistică, gramatică.

A Brief History of Sign Language

The idea of Sign Language only appeared around 300 years ago, in the eighteenth century, along with the first documented case of deafness in America, which came as a result of Thomas Bolling's marriage with his first cousin, leading to three deaf children (Costello 2008, p. XI). Deaf people born before that time simply were not given the gift of language, and their communication with the other family members or other persons around them was limited at a conventional set of signs and gestures, which they have established together. Over the years, research has shown that "Sign languages arise spontaneously wherever deaf people have an opportunity to meet regularly" (Sandler 2006, p. 3), and these languages are "acquired by children raised in deaf families without instruction, and along a timetable that is similar to that of hearing children acquiring spoken language". The identification of Sign Language as a language arose in the context of a French priest, Abbé Charles-Michel de l'Épée, one day encountering two deaf sisters signing to one another, him automatically perceiving their means of communication as language. The man then proceeds to ask the girls to teach him how to sign and he uses signs to teach them French, so that they could also express themselves in the dominant language (PowerfulJRE). By gathering other deaf people from around the country, the priest later manages to lay the foundations of the first school for people with hearing difficulties, Institut National de Jeunes Sourds de Paris¹. The first permanent American school for the deaf was later founded by Thomas Gallaudet (Yule 2020, p. 238). He came all the way to France, where he met Laurent Clerc, a former star pupil of the National Institute, at that time a brilliant professor (Costello 2008, p. xi). Gallaudet automatically invited Clerc to follow him to America, so they could together develop this educational system on that continent as well (Yule 2020, p. 238). On their way to America the two men exchanged knowledge, and by the time they arrived Laurent Clerc was already able to understand English, while Thomas Gallaudet knew some elementary signs. The two adapted the gathered information, and they also used signs deriving from French, and therefore started creating American Sign Language (*Ibidem*).

American Sign Language as a Language

Before proceeding to establish why Sign Language functions as an independent language, a definition of the term should be identified. In his dictionary of Sociolinguistics, Joan Swann addresses the concepts of *sign language* and *signed language* separately, as they are to some extent different. He defines the former as "a visual-gestural language used by Deaf people as their primary means of communication" (Swann 2004, p. 279). "Sign languages are rule-governed linguistic systems and are structured at different levels of analysis: semantics, syntax, morphology and phonology. Sign languages used

¹ National Institute for Deaf Youth of Paris.

in different countries are usually not mutually intelligible. Research into the structure of sign languages started in the 1970s and is a growing area of linguistic and sociolinguistic research” (*Ibidem*).

Swann further describes the term *signed language*, also tracing some distinctions between it and the previously defined *sign language*: “Sometimes found with the same sense as Sign Language, but also used to describe artificially designed sign systems which represent the morpho-syntactic structure of a spoken language in a visual modality. Signs from the national sign language are borrowed, but arranged according to the word order of the spoken language (to give e.g. ‘Signed English’); additional signs are also invented to represent inflections (such as a special sign for the third-person-singular inflection -s in English). Signed languages are not naturally used by Deaf people because they are slow and cumbersome. They are, however, quite commonly used in the education system by hearing teachers and support staff” (*Ibidem*). According to Swann’s definitions, the main differences between *Sign languages* and *signed languages* consist of the context in which they are used, their origins, as well as the structure of the language, meaning the order of the words in a sentence. It has therefore been established that Sign Languages are complex linguistic systems - not merely a set of conventional signs ora set of conventional signs nor a one-to-one translation of the corresponding spoken language.

American Sign Language² is not just a mere translation of the spoken and written English, as some may assume (Yule 2020, p. 238), but a language of its own, as it has its own grammar, which is different from the grammar of other languages. Oxford English Dictionary defines *language* as “The system of spoken or written communication used by a particular country, people, community, etc., typically consisting of words used within a regular grammatical and syntactic structure; (also) a formal system of communication by gesture, esp. as used by deaf people”, therefore supporting the statement that American Sign Language is a language on its own. Another definition of *language* was given by Edward Sapir,³ who described it as “a purely human and noninstinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols” (Swann 2004, p. 162). As a comment to this definition Joan Swann adds that nowadays “we would add signs, not just vocal symbols, to this characterisation on the basis of SIGN LANGUAGES, in which the symbols are visual rather than auditory” (*Ibidem*, pp. 162-163), thus classifying Sign Languages as a form of non-verbal communication. Some important questions that should be kept in mind when debating whether deaf people can produce spoken language or not are: Are they completely deaf or just hard of hearing? When did they lose their hearing? Were they born deaf, or have

² The abbreviation ASL will also be used in this article, standing for *American Sign Language*.

³ I am aware of the fact that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is a controversial topic in the field of Linguistics, and that their ideas were disputed. I have however decided to use just a part of their theory, the one that complements my research.

they gradually lost their hearing later in life? Were they born in a hearing or in a deaf family? Have they ever heard spoken language? As the answers to these questions vary from person to person, it would be wrong to generalize that all deaf people are unable to speak. Therefore, concepts such as *deaf and dumb* or *hearing impaired* may be perceived as controversial, or even offensive, as some people belonging to the Deaf community are in fact able to produce sounds, even though they may not be actual words⁴, and they “prefer to view deafness not as a handicap but as a shared experience underlying their sense of community” (Costello 2008, p. VII).

Historically, American Sign Language has also been influenced, undergoing some formational changes, such as signs requiring both hands becoming one-handed, or the other way around. Some of the most common trends identified in the evolution of sign languages are known as *centralization*, *assimilation* and *abstraction* (*Ibidem*, p. XXIX). *Centralization* refers to a change in the space of signing, meaning that most gestures become limited to “a signing space within easy view of the listener – roughly from the waist to the top of the signer’s head and extending about a foot out to each side of the signer” (*Ibidem*). Furthermore, a tendency has also been identified for signs requiring only one hand to migrate towards the center, allowing the signer to use more detailed gestures, as they are closer to the listener’s visual field (*Ibidem*). *Assimilation* consists of the adaptation and slight modification of two separate signs that make up a compound, so that the result is unitary and easier to comprehend. “For example, in the sign for *agree* (*think + same*), certain movements of the two component signs have disappeared, and the resulting compound simply joins the final positions of both” (*Ibidem*). *Abstraction* was considered the most noticeable change, requiring “signs that originated through pantomime to lose their iconic quality” (*Ibidem*). This trend implied the restriction of rather unusual gestures or unique facial expressions connected to mimes and led to these types of signs being “smoothed out through assimilation, until the iconic origin of the sign is no longer apparent” (*Ibidem*, p. XXX).

⁴ When referring to Romanian Sign Language and the Romanian Deaf community, the term deaf and dumb [surdomut] is even perceived as offensive by the members of the community. They do not consider themselves dumb, precisely because they are capable of producing sounds. Furthermore, in Romanian there is a subtle distinction between the terms limbă [language] and limbaj (in English there is no different term for the Romanian limbaj; the English equivalent would also be language), as the latter usually suggests a form of simplified communication. Therefore, specialists and Deaf communities generally consider the Romanian concepts of limbajul semnelor and limbaj mimico-gestual [gesture-based language] imprecise and inappropriate, despite the second one being an official term in the Romanian Legislation, stating that they do not reflect the real complexity and linguistic status of Sign Language. According to DEX, the term *limbă* includes the concept of *limbaj*, one of the definitions for *limbă* being: “Limbajul unei comunități umane, istoric constituită, caracterizat prin structură gramaticală, fonetică și lexicală proprie.” (dexonline).

American Deaf Culture

The American Deaf Culture is way more complex than how it may seem to hearing people, as it involves a series of concepts used to define and describe them as individuals, based on their personal background, as well as their means of communication with one another and with other people around them. Traditionally, deaf people have always been considered members of a minority. However, it would be “difficult to pinpoint a place and time where deafness began to be viewed from a cultural and linguistic minority perspective, but within Deaf communities, this awareness has always been present” (Higgins 2016, p. 4). As Sign Language started to gain recognition and be seen as an individual language, most of the hearing population also became aware of the fact that the Deaf community represents a cultural group of its own – “Deaf people view themselves as belonging to a distinct cultural group, bound by common experiences, a shared language, and a rich history of cultural practices and traditions” (*Ibidem*, p. 5). In the cultures of some different countries, this acknowledgement has not been fully achieved yet, but some “key publications that were generated from within the Deaf community” (*Ibidem*) have helped raise awareness, such as: *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* by Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Inside Deaf Culture*, by the same deaf scholars, *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community* by Harlan Lane and *A Journey into the Deaf-World* by Harlan Lane, Robert Hoffmeister, and Benjamin Bahan (*Ibidem*).

The transmission of Sign Language and the way in which deaf persons communicate with one another and with the hearing people around them play a great role in defining the (American) Deaf Culture. Therefore, an important term concerning this issue is that of *oralism*, which refers to a policy, a “method of instruction in the primary grades” (Mindess 2006, p. 77). This method was implemented as some teachers, despite having good intentions, considered that using Sign Language to communicate with deaf pupils would have a negative impact on the acquisition of the written and spoken English language (Yule 2020, p. 237). As it was assumed that what deaf students really needed was to get accustomed to spoken English, oralism became a common practice in the deaf education of the 20th century and implied deaf pupils exercising English speech sounds and developing the ability to lip-read (*Ibidem*). However, this method turned out to be far from successful, as it led to a very small percentage of students capable of producing actual speech sounds in English and an even smaller percentage of pupils who could lip-read (*Ibidem*). What seemed to have better results, instead, was the interaction between the children in these schools, who used certain signs to communicate with one another, despite it being forbidden, leading to the flourishing of American Sign Language as well as to stronger social connections (Mindess 2006, p. 77). As only a few children had the chance to learn American Sign Language at home, as their native language, coming from deaf families, this interaction between the

pupils was not only seen as a “survival tactic” (*Ibidem*) which concluded with a clear distinction between the hearing personnel of the school and the community built by the deaf students, but also as an effective way of educating each other, both academically and culturally, as “the cultural transmission of ASL has been mostly carried out from child to child” (Yule 2020, p. 237).

On a larger scale, the transmission and the cultural development of American Sign Language can also be seen through the contact between two or more Sign Languages: for example, ASL and LSM, standing for *Lengua de Señas Mexicana*, which is the dominant Sign Language in Mexico (Brentari 2010, p. 47). A significant number of deaf people from Mexico have settled, at least for a while, in the United States of America, for multiple reasons, such as “better employment opportunities, better support services such as sign language interpreters or accessible telecommunications, and even better educational opportunities for their children” (*Ibidem*, p. 60). As crossing the border in both directions is a quite common practice, the constant interaction between the two communities has led to a strong and visible influence of ASL on LSM, where the speakers of LSM in Mexico can easily identify different interferences between the two Sign Languages, despite having LSM and Spanish play a great role in their communication, for example with the other family members (*Ibidem*).

The Particularities of Sign Language

When talking about Sign Language in general, there is one important aspect which should be taken into consideration: it is not universal (Liddell 2003, p. 1). What this means is that, just as spoken Romanian is different from spoken German, which is different from spoken French, Romanian, German and French Sign Language are also different from one another. As far as the English Language is concerned, there are also multiple varieties used by the Deaf communities. For example, American and British Sign Language represent separate languages, which use distinct signs and even a different alphabet. About 300 different forms of Sign Language are being used worldwide. However, the concept of “International Sign” also exists and it is used in different contexts, such as meetings, congresses and events, “when signers of different linguistic backgrounds come together” (Kusters 2021, p. 392). International Sign, or short IS, usually includes signs from multiple Sign Languages, so that it can address people belonging to as many Deaf communities as possible, therefore being more accessible and easier to acquire (*Ibidem*).

As it has been established that Sign Languages are individual languages because they have their own grammar (Liddell 2003, pp. 1-2), another important particularity that should be kept in mind is that this grammar may seem atypical to people who have never encountered a deaf person or have never seen members of a Deaf community communicating with one another through signs. For example, verbs in American Sign Language do not have inflections, as they do in the spoken

language, meaning that a verb will be signed by its base form, starting from the lexeme, regardless of the time or grammatical person, which will either be expressed through separate signs or through direction. Certain signs are used to place the action on a timeline, thus reflecting the tense that is meant to be expressed in the sentence. For example, the sign *finish* is used after a verb when referring to a completed action in the past. It therefore creates the equivalent of Past Simple in the spoken language and it is used in rather simple statements, such as *I saw a white dog in the park*. Time signs, such as *yesterday*, *last week*, *last year* etc. also indicate an action belonging in the past, but “are usually placed at the beginning of the sentence, before the topic, which tells the watcher when the rest of the sentence takes place” (ASL Grammar Guide 2023, p. 3). Space and distance, however, are used to indicate the person that is being talked about or the people involved in the action. For instance, some verbs requiring an object, such as *give*, *help*, *send*, *tell*, are also known as (multi-)directional verbs (*Ibidem*, p. 8), since they need to use direction in order to distinguish the object from the subject. Therefore, the structure *I give you* will be signed starting from the signer (*I*) and moving towards the indirect object, the recipient (*you*), where the sign will end. The structure *you help me*, on the other hand, will be signed in the opposite direction, starting at *you*, as the person who helped, and ending at *me*, as the signer, the person who was helped (*Ibidem*).

Another interesting aspect of Sign Language refers to the stages of child language development. Around the age of four months “deaf infants engage in sign babbling” (Todea, 2024), which is different from the proper Sign Language, just as the babbling⁵ produced by hearing infants is different from the spoken language (Costello 2008, p. XII). Furthermore, as opposed to the spoken language, where two phonemes cannot be pronounced at the same time, Sign Language allows the simultaneous use of multiple signs, as they represent gestures and can be expressed through different means, such as hands, eyes or eyebrows (Todea, 2024).

A Glossary of Specific Terms

In order to understand the way in which communication through Sign Language functions, it is important to acquire the specific terminology. In this regard there is a series of words and structures that are used to describe the Deaf community overall, the space determined by the interaction⁶, the means of gestural expression

⁵ The term *babbling* generally refers to the sounds made by babies in an attempt to communicate with other family members. These sounds do not entirely follow the grammatical (morphological, phonological etc.) norms, therefore representing the babies’ interpretation of words. In the case of deaf babies, *sign babbling* refers to the reinterpretation of signed words based on the babies’ linguistic capacity, meaning they do not sign the standard form of the words, but rather a simplified version.

⁶ The distance and relationship between the signer and the watcher.

that contribute to the understanding of the action or the position of the fingers and hands while signing.

The term *CODA* is particularly common for members of the Deaf communities. It stands for *Child/Children of Deaf Adults*, as 90% of deaf people are born into hearing families (Yule 2020, p. 237). Nowadays, people identifying as CODA have a wide knowledge as far as Sign Language is concerned, since it is the means of communication they use in their family, but, more than 300 years ago, this type of interaction was quite problematic, as Sign Language was not fully developed, nor identified as a language. 300 years ago, deaf people were considered lucky if they had “genetic deafness” (PowerfulJRE) in their family, meaning that they could sit together with the other members and create language. Problematic was, however, the case in which a hearing family included one isolated deaf person, therefore compromising the communication between them (Corina 2009, p. 953).

The ASL Grammar Guide mentions the terms *signing space* and *sight line*: “The placement of signs in the space around the body gives important context to conversations in ASL. This is referred to as the signing space” (ASL Grammar Guide 2023, p. 6). *Sight line* refers to the imaginary trajectory formed by the signer’s hand movement when signing. Space and distance represent essential elements in Sign Language, and even the slightest change in signing can have a completely different meaning. A *sight line* is usually created when the signer refers to something or someone outside his universe, for example *you*, *he*, *they*, or something in the distance. This line also “gives meaning to pronouns in ASL” (*Ibidem*) and it usually starts with the signer and ends with the watcher or with the person it is being talked about, if they are not “within view” (*Ibidem*, p. 7). The signer would point “to their own chest to indicate ‘I’ or ‘me’” (*Ibidem*, p. 6) and “directly forward at the watcher to indicate ‘you’” (*Ibidem*). Therefore, it is important to pay close attention to the *sight line* created by the signers, as it may suggest different relationships between them and the people around them, or it may indicate that a certain idea or message is being addressed directly to the recipient. (*Ibidem*, pp. 6-7)

The *referential shift* is to some extent connected to the *sight line*, but it focuses more on the forms of non-verbal communication, such as the position of the body, or the signer’s gaze, rather than on the hand movement that indicates the relationship between the interlocutors, as it happens when it comes to the *sight line*: “The use of eye gaze, head shift, body shift (which includes the head and shoulders), and ASL words to indicate a person (other than oneself) or an object. Referential shifting is very common in storytelling. For example, an ASL person may employ referential shifting during a “reported speech” to indicate a shift in point of view. The ASL person adjusts their eye gaze and shifts their head away from the audience when taking on one character’s role and then breaks eye contact, shifts eye gaze, and shifts the body again to indicate when they are returning to the narrator role” (American Sign Language as a Second Language (2021)).

Non-manual markers are connected to paraverbal communication. Just as the pitch or the tone of the voice add meaning to messages in spoken languages, *non-manual markers* represent “an action that gives context or meaning to what is being signed” (ASL Grammar Guide 2023, p. 4). When signing, facial expressions play a very important role, especially when addressing a question, whereas the viewer must perceive the interrogative character of the message, which is usually transmitted through the eyebrows. “When asking yes/no questions, the eyebrows are raised with the final sign. Signers will also lean forward slightly and hold the final sign. [...] Rhetorical questions, in which the signer intends to answer their own question, are also accompanied by raised eyebrows. Typically, the signer leans slightly back and raises their eyebrows when asking the rhetorical question, then leans slightly forward, returning the brows to normal, to answer it. When asking wh- questions that use WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY, WHICH, or HOW, the eyebrows move downward with the final sign” (*Ibidem*, pp. 4-5).

A *person marker* is the ASL equivalent of the English suffixes which indicate the fact that someone is doing an action, for example, a person who sings is a *singer*. The *person marker* is considered a morpheme in ASL and consists of both arms against the body, with the elbows almost at a 90° angle, the forearm facing forward, and the palms of the hands oriented towards each other. The arms will then move vertically, from top to bottom, and the entire sign will be added to the one representing the action. Therefore, the word *singer*, for example, will be signed as SING + PERSON MARKER (Costello 2008, p. XV).

The Perception of Sign Languages and the Deaf Community

In order to conduct an intercultural analysis regarding the perception of Deaf communities and Sign Languages in the broader sense I have created a survey addressed to individuals involved in the academic field of Philology, whether as students, teachers and/or academia professors or researchers, which aims to examine not only the cultural and linguistic perception of the community, but also the way in which the deepened knowledge of one's dominant languages' grammar interferes with the understanding of the grammar of American Sign Language.

My research included 50 participants: 44 women, five men and one non-binary person. Half of the respondents are between 18 and 25 years old, 9 are between 26 and 40 years old and 16 between 41 and 60. Regarding their occupation and their involvement in the field of Philology, 28 participants are students, one is a former Philology student, and is now no longer involved in this field and 21 respondents are teachers or academia professors, out of which more than half have at least 15 years of teaching experience, and one professor also being a researcher in the field of Theoretical Linguistics. Most participants – 36 – come from an urban area, and almost all respondents, precisely 43, speak Romanian as their mother

tongue, while seven speak Hungarian. More than half of the participants speak three other languages beside their mother tongue, the most common being English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, as well as some Nordic languages: Norwegian and occasionally Swedish and Danish.

Out of the 50 participants 37 have already encountered a deaf person, while 13 have never been in the position of communicating with one. In the case of the 37 respondents the communication was to a great extent based on improvised language, either writing or miming or pointing to things, and sometimes speaking more clearly, articulating the words so that the other interlocutor could lipread. All participants agreed upon the fact that the Deaf Community represents a minority, which should under no circumstances be ostracized, as they are still members of society and human rights should apply to everyone equally, regardless of one's condition. 30 participants perceive deaf people as persons suffering from a disability, two respondents stated that deaf people "just didn't get as lucky", and one respondent considers that deaf people do not have a well-developed cognitive capacity. Regarding the participants' attitude towards deaf people, 27 consider themselves equal to them and they feel just as comfortable around deaf persons as they do around hearing persons. Three respondents consider themselves equal, yet they feel uncomfortable around deaf people, most probably because of the linguistic barrier, and one participant even feels inferior to the Deaf Community. As far as the culture is concerned, only few participants agreed with certain statements mentioned in the survey. To be more precise, four respondents think that deaf people suffer from a language impairment and it is therefore impossible, or almost impossible, for them to communicate, and out of these four, one participant also considers deaf people dumb, with the meaning of "unable to produce speech sounds". The linguistic perception of the Deaf Community also represents an important issue addressed in the survey. Seven respondents think that sign languages are just varieties or translations of the dominant languages, such written and spoken English in the case of American Sign Language. Five participants stated that sign languages are universal and two others stated that sign languages do not have grammar. Three respondents consider sign languages to be creole languages, but almost all participants – 44 out of 50 – agree that certain classes and/or events should be organized in order to raise awareness and help hearing people be informed regarding the Deaf Community, their language and their culture. All participants consider that it would be beneficial for more hearing people to learn sign language, not only because it would facilitate communicating with deaf people, but also because it would be a personal asset. 44 respondents do not know how sign languages were created, while 6 can assume or even know the origins of sign languages. The participants were also required to rate the intelligibility of sign languages on a scale from 1 to 5,

1 meaning they find them very difficult to follow, and 5 meaning they can easily comprehend sign languages, leading to the following answers: 1-7 responses, 2-3 responses, 3-25 responses, 4-10 responses and 5-5 responses. A possible interpretation of this outcome could be that most participants chose to be neutral, probably because of the limited interaction with deaf people, as the majority of the respondents used an improvised form of communication and some of them have never even encountered a deaf person.

Conclusions

Sign Languages are thus to be considered independent, as, by having their own grammar, they are more than just simple translations or underlying varieties of the corresponding dominant languages. Deaf people have a culture and a language of their own, which arose from their need to communicate, just as hearing people do. This topic should be popularized and especially normalized in society, as deaf persons are entitled to the same rights and do not deserve to be marginalized for the simple fact that they represent a minority, and, as the general knowledge about this community is currently low, it would be useful to take action in this direction, both to improve intercultural communication and for one's personal development.

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