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# *American Deaf Culture*

An Anthology

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Editor



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the mishap that occurred while hooking me up. The doctor explained that the device was hooked up perfectly and should be operable once I have the outside device attached, but he explained that his assistant had made a mistake and cut a little too deep, thus cutting my facial nerve, and leaving one side of my face sagged."

"Your face seems OK to me. I think your dream implies that you have some degree of denial of your deafness but your desire to become hearing is overcome by your fear of change," my roommate consoled me sarcastically.

"What? Me deny my deafness? The heck I am: I'm too proud to undergo such cosmetic surgery!"

"It's only one possible interpretation of your dream," he stated. Nevertheless I felt insulted and returned to bed.

I woke up and felt the blood drain completely from my face. In sheer terror, I glanced around the room, watching and waiting for hints that this last dream had become reality. I realized it was too early to tell, since the sun had not yet crept over the horizon. I shuffled to my roommate's room and tapped his shoulder lightly. He jumped out of bed in deep fright, and flicked on the light. He glanced up at me looking horrified and said, "You are as pale as a ghost. What happened?"

I didn't reply. I just stood there in complete daze.

"Sit down." My roommate guided me to a seated position and asked again, "What's wrong?"

I signed, one sign at a time, very slowly, "Me Hearing."  
AAAIIMIIIGGGGGHHHHH!

# 3

## Inside the Deaf Community

Barbara Kannapell

WHEN I think of communication the first thing that comes to my mind is the free flow of communication in the Deaf Community.<sup>1</sup> Deaf people feel so comfortable in communicating with each other at deaf clubs, church services for the deaf, or any event for deaf people given by deaf people, as opposed to the discomfort that they feel outside of the Deaf Community.

Then, what is communication? Eileen Paul wrote an article, "Some Notes On Communication...", in which she defines the meaning of communication which is most relevant to that in the Deaf Community:

Usually when we try to discuss what communication is, people think it is about transmitting ideas from one person to another. In order to understand communication, we have to go deeper than that. "Communication" comes from two Latin words—"com" with an "un"—which means "one." Literally, the words mean something about "becoming one with," and it related to the word "communion." So, communication is not just a question of transmitting ideas; it is a process of sharing our feelings too.

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<sup>1</sup> See Carol Padden's article (this volume) for the definition of Deaf Community.



It is a process of letting another person know what things meant to us.

Communication is a process of sharing what things mean to us with ourselves and with other persons.

This last statement is the theme throughout this paper. I will show how it is relevant to the communication in the Deaf Community.

Now, let's look inside the Deaf Community. The question I'd like to ask is: "What makes deaf people feel at ease in communicating with each other?" I will offer three explanations.

## The First Explanation

Deaf people can understand each other 100 percent of the time, whereas outside of the Deaf Community they get *fragmentary information* or *one-way communication*. Fragmentary information means that the deaf person may get 50, 60, or 70 percent of the information communicated through a not-so-skilled interpreter, or through a hearing person who uses speech or who has just learned Sign Language.

One-way communication can mean an interpreter who can express from voice to sign, but can't interpret from sign to voice. It can also mean a hearing person who can express him/herself in Sign Language, but cannot read the signs of a deaf person. Deaf people experience this kind of one-way communication very often when they are with hearing people.

## The Second Explanation

Deaf people share a common language—American Sign Language (ASL). ASL seems to be the primary communication mode we use among ourselves. Everything else—English in different forms—is the secondary communication mode for some deaf people. It does not necessarily mean that all deaf people are fluent in ASL. It can mean that those who are not fluent in ASL are skilled in English, or it can mean that they have no skills in English. It is possible that there are deaf people

who are bilingual in varying degrees. I'd like to show some variations in communication styles in the Deaf Community:

*ASL monolinguals.* Deaf people who are comfortable expressing themselves only in ASL, and in understanding only ASL. They have no skills in English.

*ASL dominant bilinguals.* Deaf people who are more comfortable expressing themselves in ASL than English, and are able to understand ASL better than English (either printed or signed English).

*Balanced bilinguals.* Deaf people who are comfortable expressing themselves in both ASL and English, and who are able to understand both equally well.

*English dominant bilinguals.* Deaf people who are more comfortable expressing themselves in English, and who are able to understand English (in printed English or signed English) better than ASL.

*English monolinguals.* Deaf people who are comfortable expressing themselves only in English (oral or signed English) and in understanding English (in printed or oral or signed English). They have no skills in ASL.

*Semi-linguals.* Deaf people who do have some skills in both English and ASL, but are not able to master either language fully.

Based on these variations, I would like to raise several questions: 1) Who is really in the core of the Deaf Community, and who is on the fringe of the Deaf Community? 2) Are English-dominant bilinguals and English monolinguals in the core of the Deaf Community, or are they on the fringe? 3) Are there deaf people who use only ASL and understand only ASL (ASL monolinguals)? In other words, are there deaf people who know absolutely no English?

Within the Deaf Community, deaf people have a complex system of evaluating who should be in the core or on the fringe of the Deaf Community. It is important to mention here that the degree of hearing loss is not the most important requirement for being in the core of the Deaf Community. Deaf people just identify themselves as deaf or hard of hearing, no matter what their degree of loss is. They do not need to show their audiogram to enter the Deaf Community. Sharing a common



language seems, however, not to be enough to be admitted to the Deaf Community.

### The Third Explanation

"Communication is the process of sharing what things mean to us with ourselves and with other people." I think this is the most important explanation of all. Deaf people share what things mean to each other, i.e., the word "deaf" means different thing to deaf and to hearing people. Also, the word "hearing" has a different meaning for deaf people. Deaf people communicate those meanings through ASL. Such meanings extend to the following:

*The bond of communication and strong relationships.* Deaf people experience a strong bond of communication because they have common topics to share which are based on common experiences, such as the history of deaf people, school experiences, family experiences, sports, movies, stories and jokes. They develop strong relations based on these common experiences with other deaf people. Many deaf people develop strong relationships during school years and maintain these relationships throughout their lives. This feeling may be carried over from residential schools, where they developed a strong bond of communication for the purpose of survival skills.

*Cultural beliefs and values.* Carol Padden offers a good explanation of cultural beliefs and values in her essay in this volume (Chapter One). These beliefs and values are also related to the complex system of evaluating who should be in the core of the Deaf Community and who should be on the fringe. For example, deaf people have a way of evaluating who behaves like a deaf person and who behaves like a hearing person.

If a deaf person behaves like a hearing person, other deaf people will sign "hearing" on the forehead to show "he thinks like a hearing person." Thus, he is on the fringe of the Deaf Community, depending on his/her attitudes. Conversely, if a deaf person behaves like a deaf person, other deaf people may sign "strong deaf" or "fluent ASL," which means that the per-

son is culturally deaf. Thus, he or she is admitted to the core of the Deaf Community.

If a hearing person wants to meet a deaf person, the rules of the Deaf Community dictate that he/she must be introduced as a "hearing" person in the Deaf Community. Then, the deaf person being introduced will ask questions such as "you from Gallaudet?" or "from deaf family?" or "teach deaf children?" If the hearing person has something to do with working with deaf people, or comes from a deaf family, a deaf person would be satisfied, since this would meet his/her expectations of a hearing person. But, if the hearing person is just interested in learning ASL as a foreign language and has nothing to do with deafness, deaf people will become suspicious and on guard. It is true that a few hearing people who have nothing to do with the education of deaf children or who come from a deaf family may eventually be admitted to this Community. These are just two examples relating to cultural beliefs and values in the deaf Community.

*Feeling equal.* The bond of communication and strong relationships and similar cultural beliefs and values are equated with feelings of equality among deaf people. Within the Deaf Community is the only place that deaf people experience equality with others. Usually, deaf people do not feel equal with hearing people outside of the Deaf Community.

Thus, ASL is a powerful tool for identity in the Deaf Community, along with the cultural beliefs and values that are expressed through ASL. This suggests that ASL is the cultural language of the Deaf Community.

However, I want to emphasize that the knowledge of ASL alone seems not to be enough to qualify a person to be in the core of the Deaf Community. Everything else—shared common experiences, and cultural beliefs and values which are attached to ASL—also seem to be important requirements for admittance to the core of the Deaf Community. A deaf person who is in the core of the Deaf Community is considered to be "culturally deaf."

The more culturally deaf a person becomes, the further he or she moves into the core of the Deaf Community. I suggest



that the Deaf Community can be compared to the majority community of hearing people in terms of language supremacy. Deaf people experience ASL supremacy in the Deaf Community similar to hearing people's English supremacy in the majority community.

In relation to deaf people's experience of ASL supremacy, we also need to look into the functions of ASL in the Deaf Community. Language can serve many functions, i.e., Pidgin Sign English functions as a way for deaf people to communicate with hearing people. ASL serves as a way for deaf people to communicate with each other, but there is much more to it than just a function of language. There is a symbolic function in relation to identity and power, and we often keep our use of ASL limited to ourselves to preserve these factors of identity and power.

As a protection of our own identities, deaf people keep thinking that hearing people cannot learn ASL, but really deaf people exert their power in using ASL. For example, we can talk about anything we want—right in the middle of a crowd of hearing people. They are not supposed to understand us. In a classroom, for example, deaf students often talk about the hearing teacher right in front of him or her. They may say "understand zero" or "it went over my head" in ASL. The hearing teacher is not supposed to understand ASL.

If hearing people understand ASL, then deaf people are no longer in power using ASL. Here is what happened to me several years ago: I realized that a deaf friend of mine and I were no longer in power using ASL in front of two hearing friends. One of them knew no Sign Language, but the other one knew ASL fairly well. As my deaf friend and I began a deep personal discussion, the hearing person who knew ASL was able to understand us and felt awkward interpreting to the other hearing person what we were talking about.

I did not expect her to understand our discussion in ASL or to interpret to the hearing person because hearing people are not supposed to understand the conversation of deaf people in ASL. That's how deaf people experience ASL supremacy. ASL is the only creation which grows out of the Deaf Community. It

is our language in every sense of the word. We create it, we keep it alive, and it keeps us and our traditions alive.

I suggest another reason why deaf people do not use ASL with hearing people: Language choice reflects identity choice. Somehow, deaf people learn not to use ASL with hearing people in their school years. Deaf persons choose ASL or English depending on the identity the system wants for them. When they are with hearing people, they try to communicate in English—trying to use voice or sign in English or both at the same time. When they are with other deaf people, they feel more like themselves and use ASL, and experience a strong sense of group identity.

I also suggest that in relation to the theme of this paper again, these words, "hearing person," "speech," and "English," are equivalent. When a deaf person meets a hearing person, the word "English" is strongly attached to that hearing person, so a deaf person tries to communicate on a hearing person's terms—using voice or signing in English order or both.

All those explanations of why deaf people do not share ASL with hearing people support this statement:

"Communication is a process of sharing what things mean to us with ourselves and with other persons." This statement can be rephrased as follows: Deaf people share what things mean to them with themselves and with other deaf people. They do not usually share their own special meanings with hearing people probably because 1) Hearing people will never understand what it is like to be deaf; 2) Deaf people do not have a chance to share what things mean to them with hearing people; and/or 3) Deaf people think hearing people are not interested in hearing what we would like to share with them.

I can tell you from my experiences of sharing what the deaf experience or world means to me with deaf and hearing people. I needed to develop trust in myself before I could share my world with deaf and hearing people. The more I share with them, the more they share with me. In other words, we need to respect ourselves as deaf persons and respect our language first before we can share what the deaf world means to us with other deaf and hearing people.

In conclusion, I see this paper as only a beginning in the understanding of the meaning of communication in the Deaf Community.

# 4

## *Notes from a 'Seeing Person'*

### **Ben Bahan**

I WALKED into a dentist office and was asked by a pretty receptionist if she could help me.

"I am deaf," I said, which is the usual thing I would say to prevent any misunderstanding.

"Hi, Dave, I am Susan. Is there anything I can do for you?"

I suddenly realized she didn't understand me, so I pointed to my ear and shook my head "no."

Susan's face turned pale. I was tempted to say, "BOO," but was afraid she would have a heart attack. I could see the newspaper headlines: DEATH MAN SCARED RECEPTIONIST TO DEAF.

### **Hearing People Panic**

Too many people freeze when they see or hear the word "deaf" when it is tagged with a person in front of them. They probably never met a deaf person before or never dreamt they'd meet one. They do not know what to do.

I have a burning desire to know what made them not know what to do. One apparent reason would seem to be: they

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