

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – Oct. 5-9, 2009

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Signs Have Parts - A Radical Idea

Who made the claim that signs could be analyzed into parts and therefore the signing of Deaf people was a true, natural language?

- a. Laurent Clerc
- b. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet
- c. Alexander Graham Bell
- d. William Stokoe

Scroll down for the answer.

Answer: “d” William Stokoe.

Why was Stokoe’s claim considered “radical”?

In 1965 William Stokoe, a professor and chairperson of the Department of English at Gallaudet University, made an "outrageous" claim. He published two books, *Sign Language Structure* and *A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles*. In these books he claimed that the signing of Deaf people was actually language. For the first time he named this language American Sign Language (ASL). To get a sense for why his claim was so radical read the opinion about sign language expressed by a contemporary of Stokoe, Professor A. van Uden of the Netherlands who was a strong advocate for oral education of deaf children:

Thus communication using signs is similar to the communicative coding systems of animals and is less of a human behavior, less 'distant' from emotions, primary feelings and subjective attitudes. So it is understandable that a chimpanzee can learn to use signs, even to combine them into a series of 2 and 3 signs as a 'signal language.'
[vanUden (1977). A world of language for deaf children, p. 140]

Further, quoting Buytendijk, van Uden writes:

Very many deaf children as early as 3 and 4 years old cannot point at all! They only grasp or reach like an animal would, and no animal points. The action of pointing is a bodily expression of the mental objectification, i.e., to intend something as different and opposite to the pointer." (Quoting Buytendijk, 1957; in van Uden, p.142.)

Certainly Professor van Uden didn't believe that ASL was a language. He also had a very low opinion of deaf people who used sign language and the innate abilities of young deaf children to learn language, use language and even think. He believes that signing is more like an animal signaling system than a human language.

Of course we recognize how wrong Professor van Uden's opinion was. Since Stokoe's groundbreaking analysis of the signing of Deaf people, ample research has demonstrated that ASL is indeed a true, natural, human language and we know that deaf children who are raised from birth surrounded by ASL develop their capacities for human language, communication and cognition achieving the same milestones as any child. However, the legacy of thinking demonstrated by Professor van Uden still lurks beneath the surface when considering the education of deaf children. Approaches to education that would deny deaf children access to the most accessible, natural language for them from birth still impact and seriously disable many young deaf children.

But, what does "Signs Have Parts" mean? And why was Stokoe's assertion so important?

Stokoe's claim was that sign-words just like the words of any language could be broken down into parts. Words in spoken languages are made up of sounds. At a basic level we understand that words are made up of vowel sounds and consonant sounds and by manipulating these sounds (called phonemes) an infinite number of words can be created. For example, the word /bat/ can be changed to /bad/ by changing the end consonant sound from "t" to "d". Or if the first sound is changed to "h" (/hat/) a new meaning is created. Or if the vowel sound is changed from "a" to "e" (/bed/) another new word is created. You can see that a large number of words can be created by changing just one part vowel or consonant sound.

Stokoe claimed that sign-words worked in the same way. He claimed that each sign was made up of four sub-parts - one (or more) handshapes, locations where the sign was made, movements and palm-orientations; that is, which direction the palm of the hand was facing while the sign was being made. These four parts were categories with a limited set of possible aspects in each category. Therefore, there were a limited set of handshapes that were acceptable in ASL, a limited set of locations where signs could be made, a limited set of movements and a limited set of palm-orientations. Each sign-word needed to include at least one handshape, location, movement and palm-orientation in order to be a sign-word in ASL. Here is an example.

SUMMER is made up of the following parts:

Handshapes - index finger changes to x handshape during the execution of this sign (It has two handshapes)

Location - the sign is made at the forehead (one location)

Movement - the sign moves across the forehead (one movement)

Palm Orientation - the palm faces downward during the execution of the sign (one palm-orientation. The palm remains in the same orientation throughout the sign.)

Change just the location to under the nose and now the meaning is UGLY. UGLY has the exact same handshapes, movement and palm orientation as SUMMER. Only one parameter has changed, the location.

Now change the location again to the chin area of the face. Now the meaning is DRY. Do you see that these parts are functioning in the same way as the sound parts (vowel and consonant sounds) do with spoken language words? An infinite number of sign words are created by manipulating these four parts of signs.

The fact that sign-words were created by manipulating sub-parts (Stokoe called these sub-parts "cheremes" from the Greek meaning "of the hands"). The parallel in spoken languages is the word phonemes. All this means is the "sound parts" vowels and consonants that make up spoken words.

Anyway, the idea that the signing of Deaf people was a true, natural language of course is really the catalyst for the recognition that Deaf people for a cultural/linguistic group, that Deaf people should have a significant and primary voice in their own affairs (Deaf President Now!) and that ASL could actually be a first language for deaf children with English learned as a second language (Bilingual education).

Signs have parts may have been a "simple idea" but it was also a radical and revolutionary idea. It is an idea that has led to liberation from oppressive policies and educational practices advocated by people like Alexander G. Bell and Professor van Uden.

Bill Stokoe died in 2000 but his legacy remains. Often it is fundamental and simple ideas that revolutionize our world. Certainly Bill Stokoe's claim that signs have parts was one of these ideas.