

## **Deaf Culture Question of the Week – April 19 – 23, 2010**

Bill Newell, Principal Washington School for the Deaf

Signs Have Parts – A Simple Idea

Who discovered that signs have parts and why was this discovery so important?

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

Answer: “c” Dr. William Stokoe, an English professor at Gallaudet University and a linguist, discovered that signs have parts and this discovery revolutionized our understanding of the signing of Deaf people and laid the foundation for bilingual education of deaf children.

Bill Stokoe was a hearing person who had no contact with or knowledge of Deaf people, Deaf culture or sign language prior to being hired at Gallaudet University to teach English in 1955. Read about Bill Stokoe here:

<http://gupress.gallaudet.edu/Stokoecompliments.html>

Like many hearing people hired to teach at Gallaudet Bill Stokoe found himself sitting in a sign language class to learn to sign. Naturally he would have to learn to sign if he were going to teach students at Gallaudet. At the time Bill Stokoe joined the Gallaudet faculty no one really regarded the signing of Deaf people as a true language. Most everyone believed that signing was a form of primitive gesture-like communication and couldn't possibly be comparable to other languages. Bill Stokoe, being a linguist by training, observed Deaf students outside of his sign language classes using a fluent form of signing that was much different than what he was learning in class. At that time, when

people taught others to sign they would teach basic vocabulary and encourage their students to sign and speak word for word in an English order. But Bill observed students using quite a different form of signing that seemed to him to follow different rules and worked very well from what he could see. Not being influenced by the prevailing prejudices of the time and because he was a scientist and a scholar he began to study the actual signing behaviors of his students rather than accept the “given knowledge” of the day.

Stokoe discovered that “signs have parts” and this was revolutionary because it meant that there was an underlying structure to how signs were formed. Just like words in a spoken language, signs can be broken down into parts and these parts are used to create the vocabulary of the language. The parts of each sign that Stokoe reported in his seminal work, *A Dictionary of American Sign Language: On Linguistic Principles*, were handshape, location, palm orientation and movement. Each sign is composed of these four parts. Later linguistic study of ASL has shown that some signs also require facial signals and therefore some linguists now consider there to be five parts to each sign. Whether four or five the idea that signs can be broken down and analyzed into parts was a watershed moment in the history of Deaf people and Deaf education. For the first time Stokoe called the signing of Deaf people a language and used the name American Sign Language.

For readers of DCQW who are interested in learning more about Bill Stokoe and about why “Signs Have Parts” was such a revolutionary idea I refer you to the below additional resources:

## References

- Maher, Jane **Seeing in Sign: The Works of William Stokoe** [ISBN 156368053X](#)
- Stokoe, William **Language in Hand** [ISBN 156368103X](#)

## External links

- <http://gupress.gallaudet.edu/Stokoecompliments.html>
- [http://deafwiki.org/index.php?title=William\\_Stokoe](http://deafwiki.org/index.php?title=William_Stokoe)
- <http://gupress.gallaudet.edu/Stokoeletter.html>

## References

1. <sup>^</sup> Stokoe, William C. 1960. [Sign Language Structure: An Outline of the Visual Communication Systems of the American Deaf](#), *Studies in linguistics: Occasional papers* (No. 8). Buffalo: Dept. of Anthropology and Linguistics, University of Buffalo.