The Sign Language's New Look

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If deafness is a communication handicap for the person who is deaf—and it certainly is—it also handicaps the vocational counselor or instructor who wants to communicate with a deaf client.

It does so because early profound deafness brings with it a language deficit; hence the communication barrier cannot be sidestepped by simply resorting to writing.

Communication is always possible with deaf persons who could read and write well before they became deaf or who learned the English language in spite of their handicap. But when a deaf person is severely handicapped, unable to read more than very simple English and unable to write at all clearly, the situation becomes progressively more difficult for everyone. Not only will the deaf person be less able to convey his thoughts and feelings to others, but others who wish to guide or teach him will be less able to get through to him. It will also be more difficult to assess fairly his abilities and to evaluate his progress toward rehabilitation.

With severely language deficient deaf clients, rehabilitation workers have generally relied heavily on the sign language. Even lessons in the English language may be taught by an instructor who uses the sign language and finger spelling to discuss word meanings and English sentence structure. This is a natural thing to do, of course, since sign language is obviously the mode of communication preferred by most deaf adults, and since it may be functional even in persons who cannot read or write English.

But as a tool for teaching English, sign language has its limitations. Most of these limitations stem from the fact that...
sign language has its own rules governing "word" order or sentence structure. It is not just another way of writing English—in the air instead of on paper. Persons with normal hearing who learn sign language may use signs as if they stood for English words. Highly literate deaf people may use signs in a way which parallels closely English words and sentences. But sign language does not depend for its existence on a counterpart in English. Signs are symbols for concepts, just as words are. They refer directly to the concept for which they are a symbol, not first to an English word and therefore to the concept tied to the word. Many English words have no sign language equivalent, just as many gestures, natural and sign language, defy translation into words.

Moreover, English word order often differs from sign gesture order even when the words and gestures seem to be symbols of the same thing. Of course, there are many possible sequences of words to make up the same sentence as far as meaning is concerned, both in English and in sign language. But there are preferred word orders in English, sequence patterns which are used far more frequently than their alternatives. And although there may be some overlapping between English word order and sign language gesture order, a sentence generated in sign language will often differ considerably from a sentence generated in English, even when both sentences were framed to convey the same thought. Conversely, a sentence generated in English may be too long or too involved to render comfortably in signs.

Sign language simply is not built to handle a sentence like "The job for which you are applying is filled." There is no specific sign for job. There is no present progressive verb form is sign language (are applying). There is no past participle to use as a predicate adjective (filled). The concept can be conveyed well enough in sign language: You ask for job? Sorry. Full.

Unfortunately, such a literal rendering of signs in English makes the sign language look inferior to English as if it were English in a corrupt form. But sign language is not just another form of English, more visible and not as good. It happens to be different, and although this does not necessarily imply inferiority, it does make sign language as it is an awkward instrument for teaching English.

For rehabilitation personnel the vocabulary limitations of the sign language are immediately troublesome. How do you explain to a deaf client that he should take his complaint to the foreman, not the plant manager, when there are no commonly used signs to distinguish them? How do you discuss tools or pieces of equipment without referring to them by their sign language name? It does not work very well to
spell the English name in the manual alphabet. Severely language handicapped clients will probably have as much difficulty reading words spelled on fingers as on paper.

A second vocabulary characteristic of sign language is the absence of signs for those little English words that are used so often and make such a big difference for determining tense. There are no specific signs for is, am, are, be, was, or were. The sign for truly is sometimes used in place of such copulative verbs, and there is a sign to indicate the past, or ago. But the construction of a sentence with the verb form of to be clearly indicated is not a characteristic feature of sign language. Another important grammatical feature of English is absent in sign language is a way to indicate participles through special endings, -ing or -ed. This affects both tense and voice, since both may involve the use of participial constructions. The passive voice, for example, is awkward to translate into signs and is unlikely to be generated in the sign language.

There have been efforts to modify the sign language to make it more like the English language or to improve ease of translating English into a visible manual form. Two past and two current contributions to this movement are worth noting.

Dewey Coats of the Missouri School for the Deaf made a lasting impact upon sign language usage by promoting the use of lead-letter signs for specific English words. A lead-letter sign is one which incorporates the first letter of the English word which it is to translate into the gesture itself. For example, there is a sign for any kind of road or path which is made by the two hands, palms facing and slightly apart with the thumbs up, moving forward from the body. By forming the letters p, w, l, r, or h, with the hands while executing the sign, one can refer to a path, a way, a lane, a road, or a highway. Anyone who knows the sign will understand the concept to which the sign refers. Anyone who also knows the various English words for the concept may also be able to infer which English word the speaker has in mind. Mr. Coats was particularly interested in enriching the sign language by referring to a specific English word out of a group of synonyms and by providing with the basic sign a clue for the word to which it referred.

This movement was called Manual English, and it received considerable publicity through a series of articles in The Silent Worker (now known as The Deaf American), by Max Mossel, also from Missouri. Highly literate deaf people especially appreciate the added flexibility which such a technique adds to the sign language, and it is not difficult to find examples of Manual English in current sign language usage.

The second previous effort, which took place in Michigan,
made use of sign language modifications in a rehabilitation setting to encourage more effective communication and to provide some support for English language usage. Among those who participated in these efforts were David Anthony and Richard Johnson at Lapeer, Mich., and Mrs. Edna Adler at Lansing. Although differing in details, the efforts of these and other individuals at Lapeer and Lansing emphasized clarification of certain aspects of the English language by means of signs and the creation of new signs for specific words or parts of words. The signs developed at Lapeer were used for words regardless of their contextual changes in meaning. A glass was a glass, and it was signed the same way whether it referred to a drinking glass, a piece of window glass, or glasses to wear on the face. Signs were invented for copulative verbs (am, are, is, was, etc.) and for word endings appropriate for both nouns and verbs (-ing, -tion, -en, -ment). These modifications of the sign language helped severely handicapped deaf persons make progress in reading, writing, and other language skills.

The success of the Michigan rehabilitation projects and the pioneering work of Dewey Coats and Max Mossel led to the planning of a workshop to develop better communication techniques for severely handicapped deaf people. The workshop was held in August 1967 in Knoxville, Tenn., with the support of an RSA training grant to The Catholic University of America. Dr. Hans G. Furth and Dr. James Youniss were project directors and Mrs. Edna Adler was chairman.

The purposes of the workshop were (1) to develop a sign language vocabulary tailored to the personal, social, and occupational needs of low verbal deaf people, (2) to develop Manual English as a training tool for rehabilitation centers, (3) to devise suitable word endings, new signs, and lead-letter signs which would provide language-restricted deaf people with clues for greater reading skill and for more adequate self-expression in writing, and (4) to consider how to document innovations developed at the workshop as a training tool for rehabilitation centers.

Innovations which the workshop participants felt would be useful were recorded on videotape. Later a manual will be produced which will include a description of the sign language modifications developed at the workshop, together with guidelines for their use with severely handicapped deaf clients in a rehabilitation setting.

A second current project to modify sign language in order to enlarge upon its usefulness, in this case with deaf persons of exceptional ability, is being conducted at Gallaudet College with the support of the U.S. Office of Education. Existing signs are being modified, and new signs are being invent-
ed in order to facilitate lecturing simultaneously in speech and in sign language. Six hundred new signs have been generated by this project, of which 300 to 400 are expected to remain in use.

The need is great for more adequate and more precise tools for communicating by and with deaf people. Fortunately, the sign language of the deaf is available as a completely natural and very useful tool. Although there are limitations in its usefulness, recent efforts to modify it have generated innovations which have been effective with deaf persons over a wide range of abilities. Further application of these and other improved techniques of communication are likely as rehabilitation centers apply themselves to the communication and language needs of their clients.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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