

SIGN LANGUAGE

On the third day of the Workshop we spoke about sign language starting in a breakfast conversation between all the participants. Our questions were based in Oliver's Sacks' book "Seeing Voices". Here we quote some of the book's extracts to try answering the questions.

Can we think without language?

"...deafness can have far more serious consequences than blindness, developmentally speaking..."

"...A congenitally deaf child isn't so lucky: unless someone realizes very early that he's not talking because he can't hear, his grasp of communication may never progress beyond the rudiments..."

"...About one child in a thousand, however, is born with no ability to hear whatsoever. Years ago such people were called deaf-mutes. Often they were considered retarded, and in a sense they were: they'd never learned language, a process that primes the pump for much later development. The critical age range seems to be 21 to 36 months. During this period children pick up the basics of language easily, and in so doing establish essential cognitive infrastructure."

Is Sign Language a natural language or a code?

"Those not conversant in Sign may suppose that it's an invented form of communication like Esperanto or Morse code. It's not. It's an independent natural language, evolved by ordinary people and transmitted culturally from one generation to the next. It bears no relationship to English and in some ways is

more similar to Chinese--a single highly inflected gesture can convey an entire word or phrase."

"The hearing can have only a general idea what this is like--the gulf between spoken and visual language is far greater than that between, say, English and Russian. Research suggests that the brain of a native deaf signer is organized differently from that of a hearing person."

Do prelingually deaf people speak when they sleep?

Sacks writes of a visit to the island of Martha's Vineyard, where hereditary deafness was endemic for more than 250 years and a community of signers, most of whom hear normally, still flourishes.

"By the mid-nineteenth century, scarcely an up-Island family was unaffected, and in some villages the incidence of deafness had risen to one in four. In response to this, the entire community learned Sign, and there was free and complete intercourse between the hearing and the deaf."

"...even after the last deaf Islander had died in 1952, the hearing tended to preserve Sign among themselves, not merely for special occasions (telling dirty jokes, talking in church, communicating between boats, etc.) but generally they would slip into it, involuntarily, sometimes in the middle of a sentence, because Sign is "natural" to all who learn it (as a primary language), and has an intrinsic beauty and excellence sometimes superior to speech.

When Shacks visited the island he met old people that are still signers although they do hear and talk.

"I saw how some of the oldest inhabitants still preserved Sign, delighted in it, among themselves. My first sight of this, indeed, was quite unforgettable. I drove up to the old general store in West Tisbury on a Sunday morning and saw half a dozen old people gossiping together on the porch. They could have been any old folks, old neighbours, talking together-until suddenly, very startlingly, they all dropped into Sign. They signed for a minute, laughed, then dropped back into speech."



He also met a woman in her 90s. As he describes:

"She sometimes fall into a peaceful reverie As she did so, she might have seemed to be knitting, her hands in constant complex motion. But her daughter, also a signer, told me she was not knitting but thinking to herself, thinking in Sign. And even in sleep, I was further informed, the old lady might sketch fragmentary signs on the counterpane-she was dreaming in Sign.

Such phenomena cannot be accounted as merely social. It is evident that if a person has learned Sign as a primary language his brain/mind will retain this, and use it, for the rest of that person's life, even though hearing and speech is freely available and unimpaired. Sign, I was now convinced, was a fundamental language of the brain."

Can we perceive past memories or abstract ideas without language?

"Joseph case, an 11 years old boy being

... only signed languages have at their disposal four dimensions-the three spatial dimensions accessible to a signer's body, as well as the dimension of time

deaf since was born but don't achieve a sign language until 11 he first went to a school. Previously deprived of opportunity-for he had never been exposed to Sign-and undermined in motive and affect (above all, the joy that play and language should give), Joseph was now just beginning to pick up a little Sign, beginning to have some communication with others. This, manifestly, gave him great joy; he wanted to stay at school all day, all night, all weekend, all the time."

"It was not only language that was missing: there was not, it was evident, a clear sense of the past, of "a day ago" as distinct from "a year ago." There was a strange lack of historical sense, the feeling of a life that lacked

autobiographical and historical dimension, the feeling of a life that only existed in the moment, in the present"

"Joseph saw', distinguished, categorized', used; he had no problems with perceptual categorization or generalization, but he could not, it seemed, go much beyond this, hold abstract ideas in mind, reflect, play, plan. He seemed completely literal-unable to judge images or hypotheses or possibilities, unable to enter an imaginative or figurative realm."

"Human being is not mindless or mentally deficient without language, but he is severely restricted in the range of his thoughts, confined, in effect, to an immediate, small world."

Are there any characteristics of sign language that speech does not have? (Sign's Language Structure, time-space-syntax)

The single most remarkable feature of Sign that distinguishes it from all other languages and mental activities is its unique linguistic use of space... We see then, in Sign, at every level -lexical, grammatical, and syntactic- a linguistic use of space: a use that is amazingly complex, for much of what occurs linearly, sequentially temporally in speech becomes simultaneous, concurrent, multileveled in Sign..."

"...see signing not as a succession of instantaneous" frozen" configurations in space, but as continually and richly modulated in time, with a dynamism of "movements" and "holds" analogous to that of music or speech"

"... only signed languages have at their disposal four dimensions-the three spatial di-

mensions accessible to a signer's body, as well as the dimension of time."

In a signed language narrative is no longer linear and prosaic. Instead, the essence of sign language is to cut from a normal view to a close-up to a distant shot to a close-up again, and so on, even including flashback and flash-forward scenes, exactly as a movie editor works. . ."



Thus, in this third decade of research, Sign is seen as fully comparable to speech (in terms of its phonology, its temporal aspects, its streams and sequences), but with unique, additional powers of a spatial and cinematic sort-at once a most complex and yet transparent expression and transformation of thought.

The quotes are extracted by Oliver Sack's book *Seeing Voices. A Journey to the World of Deaf*, Harper Perennial, New York, 1990. The quotation is made by Katerina Psegiannaki.