



“Letters to the Editor”

A Response to the American Sign Language Special Topic Issue of the NECTFL Review

To the Editor:

It was with great interest that I read your Fall issue devoted to American Sign Language. Timothy Reagan's clear and cogent distinctions among natural signed languages, pidgins and manual codes for English are among the best explanations I have seen in twenty years in the fields of teaching and interpretation. His arguments for the study of ASL and the resources he provides give strong and ready help to any wishing to institute the teaching of ASL in their programs. Linda Wallinger's article is a wealth of practicalities showing that and exactly *how* it can be done.

I am writing to address some of the issues raised in Robert Belka's article, *Is American Sign Language a "Foreign" Language?* I do so with a rueful recognition of the irony involved in arguing for the teaching of American Sign Language to students who can hear when so many who are deaf or Deaf have not had nearly the same opportunity to study the signed language that many believe is their birthright. Because a medical view of deafness still pervades the education of d/Deaf people, the focus is too often on repairing or augmenting the auditory channel to the brain rather than capitalizing on the visual channel to develop the language that would open the world—including literacy in spoken/written languages—to their eyes.

Mr. Belka's point that study of a second spoken language can elucidate one's understanding of other spoken languages is well-taken. Students at Gallaudet University, the nation's only liberal arts university devoted to serving d/Deaf people, study Spanish, French or German and, thereby, gain a greater understanding of how English works. I would like to suggest that one benefit of studying a signed language for hearing students is that it does not rely on the same modality with which students are accustomed. Study of ASL stimulates right-brain activity and the development of visual-spatial skills that study of a second spoken language does not. This might be particularly germane for architects, artists, and engineers as well as for those considering direct work with the Deaf community as teachers, interpreters or counselors or those who might be drawn to it for personal or family reasons.

Mr. Belka's comment that “a student learning German stays in the hearing world” suggests that he recognizes that d/Deaf people do indeed inhabit a different world, a separate culture with its own norms, values, traditions and world view which, while it intersects at many points with general American (hearing) culture, is nonetheless distinct from it. It's almost as if he is urging that students study foreign language but nothing *too* foreign, nothing beyond the bounds of a “hearing” norm and mindset.

When we are faced with something foreign to us, we try to make sense of it in terms of our own experiences. Mr. Belka's frequent use of the world “silence” and phrases like “silent world” reveals his understandable audiocentricity.

Silence, among people who are d/Deaf, means “no communication,” not “no sound.” Gesturally too, Mr. Belka sees but does not always understand. A raised middle finger does not necessarily carry the same emotional weight and intent in the Deaf community as it does in general American (hearing) culture and might aptly be translated in some circumstances as “to forsake utterly” or “to turn one's back on.” Mr. Belka reveals another common misconception when he refers to “the highly emotional, personal nature ...” of ASL. People who hear and speak are often taken aback by what they perceive as the ferocity or emotionality of signed conversations. The spatial and non-manual grammatical aspects of ASL often lead non-users to conclude, incorrectly, that the parties are angry or highly emotional.

While ASL has some obviously iconic signs and while non-signing people can often communicate gesturally, as Mr. Belka's endnote suggests, the majority of ASL signs are as arbitrary as the spoken or written words of English or German. If this were not so, people would not need to study ASL, they would simply be able to figure it out on their own. Primates may be able to approximate a few vocabulary items and mirror the syntax they learned from those who introduced them to signs, but they are far from able to learn or use ASL. Mr. Belka's persistent use of the phrase “gestures and facial expressions” devalues the lexical, grammatical and syntactic complexities of American Sign Language.

Mr. Belka also devalues ASL by inferring that its comparatively smaller vocabulary makes its study a less worthwhile or useful pursuit for most students. He quotes Berlitz: “that the 5,600 signs in the ASL dictionary...would not be sufficient to sign the Sunday edition of The New York Times which contains on average 25,000 words.” First we must ask what is meant by “to sign”? Can The New York Times be translated into ASL? Yes. Can the ideas in it be fully and deeply discussed in ASL? Absolutely.

Just as there is not a word-for-word relationship between spoken languages, there is no word-for-sign relationship between English and ASL. English, as a linear language, modifies concepts by affixing additional morphemes to base words. ASL modifies concepts by altering one or more of the sign parameters (movement, handshape, location, palm orientation, non-manual grammatical signals) of the base sign. Consider the English verb “improve” which requires the addition of the bound morpheme “ment” to change it to a noun. The ASL sign also has a verb form and a noun form, the difference between them is a movement modification/repetition rather than the addition of another morpheme/chereme. Negation often occurs with an alteration of the non-manual grammatical signal only and no change in the manual aspects of the lexical item. Students of ASL often struggle with the visual detail and the simultaneity with which elements of meaning are conveyed in this non-linear language.

Mr. Belka argues that “the most limiting aspect of ASL is the finite nature of visual language.” It is no more finite than spoken language, which lasts the length of a breath. I

would argue that video constitutes the “written” form of ASL and preserves it as effectively and faithfully as orthography preserves spoken texts. Although he is not familiar with them and although they are not long dead, I would nonetheless submit that the work of ASL poets Clayton Valli and Ella Mae Lentz would fit Mr. Belka's or anyone's definition of literary genius. Those who acquire a sufficient degree of fluency in ASL can study their work. As one who does not speak German, I must content myself with translations to access Goethe's or Rilke's genius.

Mr. Belka argues that ASL's limitations make it incompatible with the national *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*. He cites two standards in particular—two of his objections can be addressed by broadening one's definition to include visual-gestural languages alongside aural-oral ones and making the appropriate adjustments in activities. The third, that “students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language” can certainly be met in terms of visual-spatial skills related to the visual and performing arts and mathematics.

Mr. Belka contrasts study of a spoken language, German, with the study of a visual-gestural language, ASL, and finds ASL wanting for all hearing students but those with deaf relatives. He argues that the learner of ASL cannot travel to a place where ASL is the dominant language (He's evidently never been to any Deaf Heritage Festival or Deaf club), visit historic sites (even French Deaf make the pilgrimage to the grave of America's first Deaf teacher, Laurent Clerc), or participate in rich traditions (Deaf Way, the international gathering of d/Deaf people from around the globe, ASL Storytelling Nights). I would submit that Deafness is not about hearing—or the lack of it—but about a rich and satisfying tradition of visual language and close-knit community life. It is a language and community that is “foreign” (as in unknown) to most Americans and well worth studying for its own sake. For those who want to earn their livelihoods through their work with this community, it is imperative.

Sincerely,

Jan Niedermaier, Ed.M., C.I. and C.T.

A Response from Robert Belka

To the Editor:

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to Jan Niedermaier's letter which was critical of my article that questioned whether hearing students learning ASL have the same experience they would have if they were to study a traditional “foreign” language.

Language is the defining characteristic of humans, but it is only through post childhood acquisition of a second language that a person is able through comparison to obtain a conscious knowledge of how language functions and how it influences how we articulate the world. In my view no person can claim to be educated who remains ignorant of how natural human languages function. That knowledge

is best obtained through gaining a functional competence in a second language. Whether a person gains that competence through the study of ASL or through a more traditional "foreign" language is irrelevant. Why, then, do I persist in maintaining that educational institutions and students themselves should be more discriminating in deciding which languages ought to be learned? And why do I believe that ASL is not a "foreign" language?

In my case, my mother is native German and my father's side is replete with German ancestry. So there was a natural curiosity on my side to learn the language through which my progenitors viewed the world. In addition, great advances in medicine, music, philosophy, the natural and social sciences, politics, and technology have come (and continue to come) into the world through the German language and culture. Whereas modern America has a relatively short history as a transplanted European civilization with significant contributions from indigent populations and African and Asian immigrants, German historical sites date back centuries, and I can visit those sites and vicariously experience life in different times through reading the literature of the period. Since the culture and civilization of Germany is so complex, it would be difficult to find a area of specialization from which Americans who speak German could not draw comparisons and learn.

The area of signed languages is no exception. There are more Internet sites in German than any other language save English. For example, if one types in "Gebärdensprache" (Gestural language) on the Internet, a host of sites in German appear. A central site is the "Institut für Deutsche Gebärdensprache und Kommunikation Gehörloser" (Institute of German Sign Language and Communication of the Deaf). The institute is a branch of the linguistic faculty of the University of Hamburg. "Deutsche Gebärdensprache" or "DGS" is the German equivalent of American Sign Language, i.e., the natural language of the deaf born into the German culture. Besides preparing bi-lingual interpreters to bridge the communication gap between deaf and hearing Germans, the institute sponsors and publishes research on gestural languages, is preparing lexicons for the German deaf in computer terminology, linguistics, psychology, and more concrete subjects like home economics and carpentry, and publishes an international bibliography of sign language research. Since international papers are generally prepared in English, I was surprised to learn that there were more German publications (285) on sign language research than in English (259). Research about sign languages was being done in 15 of the traditional foreign languages commonly studied in the world (English, French, German, Italian, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Portuguese, Norwegian, Japanese, Arabic, Finnish, Greek, Russian, Chinese). This means that linguists in countries where those languages are spoken are researching natural languages of the deaf in their respective countries.

One of the traditional reasons for "foreign" language study was to complement research in one's native language in an area of exper-

tise. And because some cultures have excelled in specific areas, some graduate degrees require students to demonstrate reading proficiency in the language of that culture. That has to be one of the considerations when one decides which second language to learn.

No natural language is simply "aural/oral" or "visual/gestural" by nature. Words or signs cannot be learned out of context. They must be repeated in situations that are associated with other sensory impressions. When a child's neural connections in the auditory cortex of the left hemisphere of the brain "hear" the word "nose" whenever mom points to her own nose or touches the child's nose, they learn to differentiate that sound and create a circuit. This circuit makes a connection with visual and tactile neural connections. Although individual bits of information are acquired and stored in separate regions of the brain, the brain's neural activity is interconnected and simultaneous. These inner-brain connections allow meaning to be assigned. All learning is a process that establishes new connections among networks. When the auditory circuit for the word "nose" is activated, the visual and tactile circuits associated with the picture and touch of "nose" are also engaged (See: Genesee, Fred. *Brain Research: Implications for Second Language Learning*. EDO-FL-00-12 <<http://www.cal.org/eric11/digest/0012brain.html>>). Signed languages are learned the same way, i.e., a circuit is established that makes a connection between the sign and sight and other sensory perceptions that accompany it.

Vision plays a major role not only in the acquisition but also in the performance of language. Spoken languages are accompanied by visual cues such as facial expressions, body posture, and gestures that may negate, change or emphasize the meaning of the words expressed. These visual cues are simultaneous with the utterance. Because of that, I do not accept the idea that spoken languages are any less lineal than signed languages by nature. Both signs and words are expressed in a temporal manner.

Reading and writing are other visual and intellectual skills that a learner of a second spoken language must acquire. They make it possible for a student to experience the past and to research the present. A video tape of an American student speaking French is not an acceptable substitution for writing an essay in French.

Another obvious difference between a signed and spoken language is the way words and signs are created. Used individually or arranged in combination, the 44 phonemes in English, for example, could produce an infinite number of words. Signed languages use four cheremes (hand shape, position of the palm, movement, and length of the arm). Signs must be visually distinguishable from one another. These restrictions on creating a sign are what I meant about the finite nature of signed languages.

While I believe that all natural languages of the deaf are distinct from the natural languages of the hearing, I do not believe that

they are completely separate. Shared kinesics, iconic signs, initialized signs, the creation of new signs in lexicons from the specialized vocabulary in the spoken languages are obvious connections. In every case, signed languages share a written language with the traditionally taught spoken language. In addition, both the gestural and the spoken languages are dependent upon context for meaning. That context is supplied by human activities and artifacts present in the culture. The belief in a national unity, religious beliefs, political affiliations, economic transactions, public transportation, clothing, housing, foods, ideas of morality, etc. are as diverse and reflective of the American culture among the deaf as among the hearing in America. The case can be made for a deaf culture distinct from, and foreign to, typical American culture. One could also argue that the deaf culture in America represents a subculture; that is more like America than national cultures of China, Russia or Germany. If American students were learning DGS (German sign language) or any of the other natural deaf languages that are imbedded in the national cultures of the countries mentioned earlier, certainly no one would argue that the students were not learning a foreign language or culture.

The article stated that there is no separate national state of deaf Americans. I did not "argue that the learner of ASL cannot travel to a place where ASL is the dominant language." Certainly it is as natural for the deaf to come together, to marry each other, to live lives influenced by their common needs and ideas, as it is for the Mormons, a sub-culture I was born into. I consider deaf Americans to be as American as I am. While some may consider ASL to be the language of their "birthright," one must have some feeling for the parents to whom 90 to 95% of the deaf are born. Parents may feel that other sign systems are more appropriate for their children to learn because they make assimilation into their family and the entire American community easier. Must deaf children be stigmatized as "think hearing" or deaf (instead of Deaf), if they choose to learn a sign language that includes ASL signs but is "tainted" by English word order and grammatical markers? Being deaf is a handicap. It is not an indication of a person's character or intelligence. It is more than a "medical condition," it undeniably has social and cultural ramifications. I do not pity them, I admire them. Their languages are as rich and complex as spoken languages and worthy of acquisition and performance by hearing students. I stick by the basic premise of the article. There are basic differences among signed and spoken languages. As a consequence, the reasons for selecting a particular language may be as varied as the languages themselves. Since it takes a great deal of time and effort to become proficient in any second language, and since the outcomes in how one's life is influenced will be different for each language studied, the choice of which language to study should be of concern.

Sincerely,
Bob Belka, Ph.D.