The Sociolinguistics of Sign Languages

This is an accessible introduction to the major areas of sociolinguistics as they relate to sign languages and Deaf communities. Clearly organized, it brings together a team of leading experts in sign linguistics to survey the field, and covers a wide range of topics including variation, multilingualism, bilingualism, language attitudes, discourse analysis, language policy and planning. The book examines how sign languages are distributed around the world; what occurs when they come in contact with spoken and written languages; and how signers use them in a variety of situations. Each chapter introduces the key issues in each area of inquiry and provides a comprehensive review of the literature. The book also includes suggestions for further reading and helpful exercises.

The Sociolinguistics of Sign Languages will be welcomed by students in Deaf studies, linguistics and interpreter training, as well as spoken language researchers, and research in teachers of sign language.

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of what we call contact signing naturally led us to a review of language contact phenomena in spoken language situations, but it also made us see the necessity for a very basic distinction between contact between two sign languages and contact between a sign language and a spoken language. Clearly this distinction is motivated by the presence of two modalities, so that what happens when two sign languages are in contact will probably be different from what happens when a sign language is in contact with a spoken language. It was in trying to illustrate the distinction with examples that we realized where the focus in language contact studies has been. That is, although we were able to think of and casually observe examples to illustrate the outcome of contact between two sign languages, our search for empirical research on lexical borrowing, code-switching, foreigner talk, interference, pidgins, creoles and mixed systems all as they result from the contact between two sign languages turned up practically nothing.

Sign languages borrow from each other; bilingual signers code-switch between two sign languages; a native signer of one sign language uses a reduced form of that language with a non-native signer; interference occurs when using another sign language; and pidgins, creoles and mixed systems could conceivably come about given the right sociolinguistic conditions. It is not that these things do not happen, but rather that researchers have only just begun to look for them and describe them. Early research attention turned elsewhere, to focus on the relationship between the spoken language and the sign language. The Deaf community has been looked at all too often within the framework of spoken language sociolinguistics, and labels from spoken language situations have been applied too hastily to sign language situations. One problem with this is that it leaves the impression that the situation has been adequately described, when in fact it turns out to be a lot more complex than we thought. For example, the term “pidgin” as applied to the Deaf community needs to be re-examined. Not that pidgins cannot occur; they probably can. Many other terms used in sociolinguistics to describe oral language use such as “lexical borrowing”, “code mixing”, “code switching” and even “bilingualism” also merit re-examination. Indeed, some researchers have already re-examined some terms; for example, Lee’s (1982) re-examination of the term “diglossia” and Cokely’s (1983) re-examination of the term “pidgin”.

It is fair to say that each of the four considerations that seem to have governed the study of sociolinguistics in Deaf communities is changing. Our knowledge of the basic linguistic structure of sign languages is increasing every day, and the notion that sign languages are not “real languages” is happily an endangered one. Research is being undertaken in all areas of sociolinguistics, including multilingualism, bilingualism and language contact, variation, discourse analysis, language policy and planning, and language attitudes. Much of this current work is discussed in this volume. Studies on all aspects of the sociolinguistics
of Deaf communities are currently in a period of rapid development. The focus is being extended beyond the relationship between sign languages and spoken languages to the relationship between sign languages, and research on sign languages is beginning to provide crucial insights into the nature of spoken languages as well. For example, work on the differences between signing and gesturing (e.g. McNeill, 1992) has provided insight into the role of gesture in spoken language discourse.

The answer to “Where are we going?” seems to be in three parts. First, we are in the process of studying all aspects of the sociolinguistics of Deaf communities all over the world, and I anticipate that with these studies we will be able to show strong parallels between the sociolinguistics of spoken language and the sociolinguistics of sign languages. Second, at the same time, mainly because of the fundamental difference in modality—that is, a verbal–aural system compared to a visual–manual one—studies of sign languages will show that the models developed for spoken languages cannot be automatically applied to sign language situations, and that phenomena are unique to sign language. We already see this in the contact phenomenon of fingerspelling (the unique contact between the writing system developed to represent a spoken language) and sign languages. I expect that other such unique phenomena will also emerge. Moreover, there is also a current focus on cross-linguistic studies that compare sign languages to each other and to spoken languages. Third, extensive studies of the sociolinguistics of Deaf communities will no doubt provide insights into aspects of spoken languages, aspects that may have been overlooked. The issue here is that sociolinguistic studies will become a two-way street, on which spoken language and sign language studies inform each other.

I close this chapter with some reflections on the importance of sociolinguistic research for Deaf communities. In discussing what guided him in the preparation of the dictionary of American Sign Language (DASL) as early as 1957, Stokoe cited the thinking of George Trager and Henry Lee Smith: “They insisted that language could not be studied by itself, in isolation, but must be looked at in direct connection to the people who used it, the things they used it to talk about, and the view of the world that using it imposed on them” (Stokoe et al., 1965: 333). This sociolinguistic perspective clearly guided the inclusion of Croneberg’s appendices in the DASL, appendices that showed “how language and culture as well as deafness formed a special community” (1965: 334). The importance of studying the sociolinguistics of sign languages is two-fold. First, the recognition that ASL has a sociolinguistic life like other systems that we recognize as languages reinforces the status of ASL as a real language. And as we see in this volume, the study of sign language sociolinguistics has also contributed to our understanding of spoken language sociolinguistics. Second, the study of sign language sociolinguistics has had a direct impact on the lives
of deaf people in terms of educational and employment opportunities. Indeed, it seems fair to say that this impact has been very tangible. Research on sign language sociolinguistics has helped lead to the recognition of sign languages as real languages and has had the effect of legitimizing them. This legitimization has allowed for the discussion of what the medium of instruction should be in Deaf education and to the question as to why it should not simply be sign language. This discussion has led to the improvement of Deaf education at all levels and to, as Johnson, Liddell and Erting said in 1989, the unlocking of the curriculum, at least for some deaf students. It has led to the improvement of services for deaf people, such as interpreting, and has opened up new career paths for deaf people as teachers both of deaf children and adolescents and as teachers of sign language. The research on sign language structure and sign language sociolinguistics which Bill Stokoe initiated has ultimately contributed to the continuing empowerment of deaf people all over the world.
Table 2.1 Percentages of signers in various European countries who replied they could always understand another signer from (a) a town 100 kilometers away and (b) their own town

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>100 kilometers away</th>
<th>Own town</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>67</td>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

approximately 100 kilometers away. Much of this needs to be interpreted cautiously. Bristol residents were more aware of strong “Bristol” dialects that they might not understand but only considered the speech used in other towns in a more general way. A similar interpretation may need to be made of the EUD data.

We should also note that signers sometimes underestimate their ability to understand sign dialects. Another study showed that British signers were frequently able to understand the content of video clips of signers from around the UK with relative ease, despite claiming that they did not understand other dialects (Woll, 1991). Clearly, lexical variation counts are not necessarily perfect guides to mutual intelligibility in languages.

**Historical relationships**

One of the great achievements of comparative linguistics over the last 200 years has been the construction of language “family trees”. Using clues from similar words and grammars and available knowledge of a language’s history, linguists have placed languages into families and described their relationships to each other. The relationship of sign languages can also be traced, but the relationships are different from those of spoken languages. Anderson (1979) is one of the few linguists to have attempted to create “family trees” for sign languages. Figure 2.1 shows Anderson’s suggestions for relationships...
Fig. 2.1 Proposed relation of “South-West European Sign Languages”
Source: Anderson, 1979

Notes: a simple year 1875 – indicates a fingerspelling alphabet (others from Carmel, 1977, no year noted)
a year in parenthesis (1780) – indicates introduction of an education method
a year italic 1835 – indicates a dictionary of verbal descriptions of signs
a year asterisked *1898 – indicates a dictionary with some illustrations as well
Bilingualism and language contact*

Jean Ann

...People say our signs [in Singapore] come from Australia, China, and America. So I am worried that [this means that] we do not have our own sign language ... Also, why are there so many signs for the same thing? Which is the right sign? ... Why can't everyone just sign the right way?

Excerpted from a fax to the author from a Singaporean deaf person, 1994

It is probably true that no language group has ever existed in isolation from other language groups, and the history of human language is replete with examples of language contact leading to some form of bilingualism.

François Grosjean, Life with Two Languages (1982: 1)

Spoken languages have always been in contact with each other, and there have always been linguistic and sociolinguistic consequences of this phenomenon. Languages come into contact through their speakers, who are brought together under different sorts of conditions, including political turmoil, immigration, education and geography. Indeed, languages are sometimes said to be “in contact” within bilingual individuals (Grosjean, 1992: 309). The immense and engaging field of the study of language contact points up interesting linguistic situations. For example, examination of the current position of English in the world confirms that English is an extremely prestigious language that is learned as a second language with great frequency. It is the world’s lingua franca; that is, it is the language chosen by speakers of diverse languages in the hearing world for many sorts of needs, from science and technology to business and scholarship. In multilingual areas of the world, pidgins based on English have sprung up. Given this, it is almost impossible to imagine that English-speaking scholars once lamented the fact that English was barely spoken outside of a very local area, and had neither a dictionary nor a written grammar.

The study of language contact in the Deaf world, given the sustained, even overwhelming contact between sign languages and spoken languages, for one example, might have been seized upon first by researchers. However, despite its

* I am indebted to Ceil Lucas and Bruce Peng for a great number of helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. Yang Hao, Chen Li and Chen Chun assisted me with the Mandarin data.
Singapore

Singapore is a tiny Southeast Asian island nation situated at the southern tip of Malaysia among the islands of Indonesia. It is a case of a multilingual country which does not attempt to solve its language conflicts by dividing the country and enforcing regional boundaries along linguistic lines. Its ethnic situation is complex – four major ethnic groups live in an area of 226 square miles – and its linguistic situation is even more so. As Pakir (1994: 158–159) explains:

Officially Singapore’s population of 2.6 million has the following ethnic components: 77% Chinese, 15% Malay, 6% Indian, 2% others, which includes Eurasians, Europeans, and Arabs . . . Such heterogeneity does not reflect the actual complexities of the linguistic situation in Singapore, since each of the three major ethnic groups (Chinese, Malay, Indian) also employs a variety of languages and/or dialects. Traditionally, the ethnic Chinese speak one or more of the following: Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese, Hakka, Foochow, Mandarin and of course, the well-known, Chinese dialects. The ethnic group labelled Malay speak Malay generally but Javanese and Boyanese are also spoken. The ethnic Indians speak a variety of languages: Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu (which are Dravidian in origin) and Punjabi, Hindi, Bengali, Gujerati (which are Indo-Aryan languages).

The government of Singapore has imposed order upon this situation by practicing a policy labeled as “pragmatic multilingualism” (Kuo and Jernudd, 1994: 72). Four official languages – Mandarin, Malay, Tamil and English – are, in principle, treated equally. In actuality, the languages are not equal in historical, social or political senses, and each is used toward a particular end in Singapore. Malay was selected as the national language since it is the major language in the region (Indonesian and Malay are essentially the same language) and “proficiency in Malay is believed to help build rapport with Indonesia and Malaysia” (Kuo and Jernudd, 1994: 83). Malay, once used as a lingua franca in Singapore, now serves a ceremonial role, and virtually no one of non-Malay descent learns it. Mandarin is the native language of very few of the Chinese ethnic majority in Singapore. However, it is the official language of the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Owing to these considerations, the Singapore government periodically pushes the highly successful “Speak Mandarin” campaign. Posters which can be seen everywhere urge, “For Chinese Singaporeans, [Mandarin is] more than a language.” Government attempts to unify the Chinese community through language have been successful in many senses: many Chinese have acquired Mandarin as a second language. Tamil, on the other hand, is the language which the government would like to use to unify the Indian community in Singapore. However, attempts have not been very successful since “at best, half of all individuals classified as Indians appear to use Tamil to any extent . . . Thus the position of Tamil as an official
other sign languages) is undergoing huge changes, and that perhaps these changes are detrimental to the long term survival of natural sign languages.

**Loan vocabulary in spoken languages**

For the remainder of this chapter, we focus on outcomes of language contact in sign language situations that produce unique results, unlike what is found in spoken language situations.

In spoken language literature, a very full and captivating research program involves the study of the linguistic results of language contact; that is, what kinds of things happen to languages themselves when they come into persistent contact with other languages. We examine here a few examples that focus mostly on phonology, although it is important to keep in mind that these sorts of phenomena can also take place at the morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels.

Generally, languages deal with the words they borrow in two ways. First, a borrowing might obey the phonological constraints of the new language and might therefore change considerably from its original form. Second, a borrowing might not be required to conform to the constraints of the new language and might retain some or all of its original form, with the possible consequence that the loan would remain somewhat outside the phonological system of the new language. A few cases (Japanese, Mandarin, Hausa and Spanish loanwords from English) illustrate how languages require that the new word be restructured to fit the new language.

Japanese and Mandarin have very restricted syllable structures in comparison with English. In fact, each language has as its phonological base a finite set of syllables (113 in Japanese and 398 in Mandarin; De Francis, 1984: 111) which combine with each other, and other phonological material (such as tone in Mandarin) to produce the words of the language. Simplifying details, neither Japanese nor Mandarin can tolerate consonant clusters in the same syllable. English, on the other hand, is a very different sort of language. It has some 8,000 syllables, far more than either Japanese or Mandarin, and its possible syllable structures include some with up to three consonants in the onset of a syllable.

When English words of certain sorts are borrowed into Japanese, one of the classic phonological restructurings that occur is that consonant clusters are broken up with vowels to conform to Japanese syllable structure. Thus, English words like *strike* and *Christmas* are rendered as Japanese loanwords as *sutoraiku* and *kurisimasu*, respectively. And in Mandarin loanwords, the closest Mandarin syllables are chosen to represent the sound of the foreign word faithfully. The Mandarin rendering of the trisyllabic Romanian surname,
preceded by hash). Davis (1989: 97, again, following Liddell, 1989) refuted the notion that a fingerspelled event is essentially an English event. Neither spoken nor written English has any manual handshapes or morphemes to lend, and so, Davis reasoned, fingerspelling was simply a representation of an English event, but not the event itself. He likened it to the English phonological event of pronouncing the letters that are used to spell a Spanish word such as *junta* [jei yu ꞏ n ti ei]. Lucas and Valli (1992) also argue against the idea that “fingerspelled loan signs” are borrowings from English to ASL, although it is undeniably the case that there is contact between the English and ASL. Lucas and Valli (1992) point out that loans are generally restructured to fit the new language to some extent, since there could be missing phonemes, differing syllable structures or different intonational structures. But in sign languages, sometimes the borrowing language and the lending language appear to have the same phonological tools at their disposal, such as in the case of signs which have recently been adopted by ASL signers for place names. If Lucas and Valli (1992) are on the right track, then the sign is not restructured at all, but even so, apparently fits seamlessly into the new language. This would be a curious situation indeed if it occurred in a spoken language contact situation.

**Fingerspelling in the acquisition of ASL.** Acquisition issues have also been examined with respect to contact phenomena in sign languages. For example, Kelly (1995) discusses the acquisition of fingerspelling in a young deaf child of deaf parents. The parents used ASL to communicate with the child who had been exposed to fingerspelling since shortly after her birth. Kelly analyzed videotaped interactions of the parents with the child. Her research turned up some interesting findings. First, the child fingerspelled to herself at age two. This finding accords with others in the literature. Second, the child invented a fingerspelled name for her doll at 30 months (#SILA) which was a name unknown to her or her family, but phonologically consistent with English. The child showed signs of recognizing lexicalized forms which were fingerspelled but she did not necessarily understand the same words when they were just fingerspelled. Examples are RICE (not recognized by the child) and #RICE (easily recognized by the child).

**Acceptability and structure of initialized signs in Langue Des Signes Québécoise (LSQ).** An interesting line of research (Machabée, 1995; Machabée and Dubuisson, 1995) examines both linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of a sort of sign which occurs in many sign languages that make use of fingerspelling systems. This is known as initialized signs. Initialized signs are signs which are created partly by using the handshapes which correspond to the first letter of the translation of the sign into a spoken language, in this case, French. These two studies established linguistic criteria on which to decide
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whether or not a sign in question was indeed an initialized sign. They then tried to ascertain whether deaf Québécois accepted the signs or not. Class 1 signs are “fingerspelling reductions” and Class 2 signs are produced in the LSQ signing space. The researchers found that initialized signs in Class 2 space were less easily accepted, while initialized signs in Class 1 space were more easily accepted. Although they did not carry out a formal study on acceptability of all the possible contact phenomena – such as mouthing and fingerspelling – they did pick up indications that mouthing and fingerspelling (unless it occurs too frequently) seem to be much more acceptable to deaf people than initialized signs.

**Syntactic restrictions on BSL fingerspelled loans.** In an interesting paper, Sutton-Spence (1998) reveals a puzzle: in a corpus of 19,400 BSL fingerspellings, a paucity were verbs and a great number were nouns. She notes that this state of affairs obtains in many contact situations. She advances some possible reasons for this. First, she considers class size; namely, that in English nouns constitute 60 percent of the vocabulary while verbs constitute 14 percent. Naturally then, there are fewer English verbs to borrow. She rejects class size as an explanation because the number of verb loans in BSL is far smaller than 14 percent. Second, length of contact between the two languages is considered: nouns are borrowed before verbs, so perhaps the great number of nouns and the paucity of verbs is due to the fact that the two languages, BSL and English, have not been in contact long enough to have verb borrowings. But Sutton-Spence also rejects this idea, because BSL and English have been in contact for at least 200 years. Finally, she focuses on what she considers a syntactic explanation for the paucity of fingerspelled loan verbs: they have to move through space to add inflection while they are changing handshapes, and this violates BSL phonology.

**“Loan” vocabulary from sign languages with “character signs”.** Not every sign language makes use of a fingerspelling system. In Taiwan Sign Language (TSL) for example, fingerspelling does not exist. However, another method capable of representing parts of Chinese written language exists in TSL. This system makes use of signs known as “character signs”. Essentially, character signs are signs that represent all or part of a Chinese character. They are not plentiful – it is estimated that there are 30–40 character signs in TSL, for example (Smith and Ting, 1979: 29; 1984; Smith, 1989) – but they have very interesting properties. To understand character signs, a little information about Chinese spoken language is needed. A written Chinese character which means “introduce” and is pronounced jie (suppressing information about tone which is irrelevant here), has a corresponding character sign as in Figure 3.1. And another character which is pronounced gong (again, suppressing irrelevant
observed in many European sign languages, including Italian Sign Language (Padden, 1991), Sign Language of the Netherlands (Schermer, 1990), British Sign Language (Turner et al., 1998) and German Sign Language (Ebbinghaus and Hessman, 1996).

**Pidgins and creoles**

One of the most compelling areas of sociolinguistics is the study of pidgins and creoles. Pidgins are languages which result “from colonial expansion . . . which have evolved from master–servant type of contact between speakers of European tongues and speakers of so-called ‘exotic’ languages” (Todd, 1984: 12). The conditions under which a pidgin could arise are very special. Among them are that the groups of speakers among whom the pidgin develops do not share the same language, and the speakers need to communicate for a restricted set of reasons. The native languages of each group are regarded as widely disparate in status and there is little access to native speakers of the European language. Not all pidgins are based on English, but some 61 English-based pidgins currently exist in the world. Given the description of the circumstances under which pidgins develop, it should not be too surprising that a pidgin characteristically has some vocabulary and some syntactic structures from the language of the socially dominant group, and some from the languages of the non-dominant groups. Pidgins are typically restricted in form and in function. They, and their speakers, are often looked down upon.

If contact between the groups among whom the pidgin develops remains superficial – that is, if no demands are put on the pidgin to be able to be used for additional purposes – then the pidgin never expands grammatically, and it remains a limited and restricted communication system. When the groups of people who speak the pidgin are no longer in contact, it falls out of use and dies. Pidgins are often short lived: they tend to die when the need for them dies (Todd, 1984: 3). Such was the case with the American soldiers and the Vietnamese who created a pidgin that ceased to be spoken with the end of the Vietnam war. But in certain spoken language situations in which there is sustained contact between multilingual communities, it is sometimes the case that a pidgin becomes useful to its speakers and continues to expand to fit all the communication needs of its speakers. When this happens, a pidgin is said to be stabilized. Sometimes a stabilized pidgin becomes the native language of speakers who find it useful; in this case it becomes a creole. The native speakers of a creole are children, and they play a crucial role in its development, expanding the creole along both linguistic and sociolinguistic dimensions. That is, a creole’s linguistic properties and sociolinguistic uses change; it begins to expand its grammar and lexicon, as its speakers use it for ever-increasing social purposes. The end product of the process of creolization is a full-fledged language. Todd (1984: 16) explains
to contact signing with hearing people. That claim was seriously challenged by Lucas and Valli’s work; among other things, they found that some signers use ASL with both deaf and hearing interlocutors, and that sometimes deaf people switched from ASL to contact signing in the presence of deaf researchers. Lucas and Valli (1992: 38) also noted that natural sign languages have structural similarities; that is, that they are, indeed, structured more like each other than unlike each other.

Another relevant line of questioning should also be discussed here. It has been argued that ASL was originally a creole about 200 years ago. It has been argued that it was created when the signers of the American mainland and the signers of French methodical signs met (J. Woodward, 1978). But Fischer (1978), citing many examples of ASL grammatical features, claims that ASL still looks like a creole. She claims that in every generation deaf children recreolize ASL due to the fact that most of them don’t learn ASL from deaf parents but, rather, from other sources. Among these are hearing parents who may sign a sort of “pidgin sign English” (and not ASL) with their children, which the children creolize. Fischer (1996) supports her view of creolization by citing evidence from the number systems of ASL and French Sign Language (LSF).

Code switching and code mixing

While borrowing is generally regarded as the integration of an item from one language into a new language, code switching and code mixing are quite different. Both refer to a complete switch from one language to another without integration into the first language. Although these definitions are somewhat controversial, generally, code switching is defined as occurring across the borders of a sentence. Code mixing is defined as occurring within a sentence (Lucas and Valli, 1992: 34). An example of code switching follows. In this conversation, a group of Mandarin speakers are discussing finishing a basement. A free translation of Mandarin appears in parentheses:

Speaker A: Zhèi gè cái jǐ qiān yuán jiù kěyǐ wán chén le.
(“It’s only several thousand dollars to finish.”)
Speaker B: Hěn guì a!
(“Very expensive!”)
Speaker A: Bù, zhèi ge bù guì-jiaò ní zhàng fū, “if you want to finish it, take a summer job!”
(“No, it’s not expensive – tell your husband), ‘if you want to finish it, take a summer job!’”)

Notice that the switch from Mandarin to English occurs at a sentence boundary. Examples of code mixing of Mandarin–English bilinguals follow. In (1) through (7) the speakers introduce English nouns into Mandarin...
sentences, while in (8) an English verb is introduced and in (9) an adjective is introduced:

1. Huàn yí gè muffler. (“Change the muffler/Get a new muffler.”)
2. Nǐ yǒu bù yǒu cellular phone? (“Do you have a cellular phone?”)
3. Nǐde phone number shì shénme? (“What’s your phone number?”)
4. Nǐ mǎi le house mèiyǒu? (“Did you buy your house?”)
5. Nǐ gěi wǒ yí gè call. (“Give me a call.”)
6. Wǒ zhūhē yī tào apartment. (“I rented an apartment.”)
7. Zheì gè yǒu shenme difference? (“How is this different?”)
8. Nǐ call wǒ! (“Call me!”)

Spoken language situations of this sort have been well documented. Code switching and code mixing behavior is well attested among hearing bilinguals. Interested readers might begin with Kachru (1992) and references cited there.

Turning our attention now to sign language situations, we note that the only ones described so far are those that involve a sign and a spoken language. This fact confounds matters since, as Lucas and Valli (1992) mention, if we were to follow the criteria for code switching and code mixing for spoken languages exactly, what code switching would mean is that a bilingual stops signing and starts speaking at a sentence boundary. Code mixing would mean that, within a sentence, a bilingual stops signing and starts speaking a word or phrase. But this does not describe what occurs in the contact situation between, say, ASL and English. This is because what is described for spoken languages is clearly sequential. That is, in code mixing a bilingual is speaking a sentence of one language and adds a word or phrase from another, but the switch to the other language and back to English necessarily occurs in a sequential order. So, for example, the sentence uttered by a Mandarin–English bilingual, “Is it ‘convenience’ – ma?” is basically English. The bilingual is trying to find out if one synonym for a particular English word is “convenience” and adds the Mandarin yes–no question marker ma to the end of her English sentence. Crucially, the elements of both English and Mandarin are sequentially ordered. In the sign language contact situation they studied, however, Lucas and Valli (1992) note that the situation was very different. Although the term “code mixing” (rather than code switching) more accurately describes sign language contact cases, even code mixing is misleading because it implies sequentiality. They found that the phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical and pragmatic features of two different languages are most often produced simultaneously, [so] assigning stretches of discourse to ASL or to English seems like a fruitless exercise and also misses the point. The point
(b) Observe deaf bilinguals signing together. What is their signing like? Are there “borrowed” items? If so, what exactly is “borrowed”? Make a list (or a videotape) of all the signs you suspect to be “loans”. Are there any examples in your data which are better explained as code switching or code mixing?

2. Examine the following children’s poem from Todd (1984: 275). It is an example of Tok Pisin, a creole currently spoken in Papua New Guinea. Translate it:

```
dis smol swain i bin go f maket

dis smol swain i bin stei f haus

dis smol swain i bin chop sup witi fufu

dis smol swain i bin chop no nōtāg

an dis smol swain i bin go wi, wi stei fhaus
```

3. How would you characterize the sign language situation in your country, if there is one, in terms of its bilingualism? Explain as much as you can. Does it resemble Canada, Belgium, Singapore or Switzerland, or does it have features of each of these countries? Are there features of Martha’s Vineyard, Desa Kolok or the Yucatec Mayan village? Would you say there is a diglossia? What are the features of the Deaf community’s bilingualism?

4. The Singaporean deaf person who wrote the fax quoted at the beginning of this chapter had several serious questions about language contact in her country. Based on what you have learned in this chapter, write a sample answer to her fax.
in the French of Charmey, Switzerland with the age and gender of the speakers. Somewhat later, Fischer (1958) studied the variable use of -in’ and -ing in the speech of New England children. He found that -ing was associated with formal situations such as testing and -in’ with informal interviews. In addition, he found that girls tended to use a greater percentage of the standard form than boys, who typically preferred the -in’ form. Finally, Fischer noted differences between the speech of “model boys”, children who excelled in school and were favored by their teachers, and “typical boys”, who were physically strong and domineering. As we might expect, the -ing form predominated in the speech of the “model boys”, while the -in’ form predominated in the speech of the “typical boys”.

Labov’s (1972a) study of language change on the island community of Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts marks the transition between early studies of linguistic variation and the development of modern variationist sociolinguistics. Labov studied changes in the pronunciation of the diphthongs (ay) and (aw) in words such as spider, pie, fry, mow and outhouse. These variables were selected because they met the three criteria that Labov had established for a variable to be a useful focus of investigation:

First, we want an item that is frequent, which occurs so often in the course of undirected natural conversation that its behavior can be charted from unstructured contexts and brief interviews. Secondly, it should be structural: the more the item is integrated into a larger system of functioning units, the greater will be the intrinsic linguistic interest of our study. Third, the distribution of the features should be highly stratified: that is, preliminary explorations should suggest an asymmetric distribution over a wide range of age levels or other ordered strata of society. (1972b: 8)

On the basis of interviews with slightly more than one percent of the permanent population, stratified by age, ethnicity, occupation and area of residence, Labov found that islanders with the most positive attitudes toward Martha’s Vineyard centralized the onsets of these diphthongs most frequently. Speakers with neutral or negative attitudes centralized them much less frequently, preferring instead the pronunciation common among the mainlanders who vacation on the island every summer. The correlation between centralization and attitude towards life on the island can be seen clearly in Table 4.1. Labov concluded that “when a man says [rət] or [həs], he is unconsciously establishing the fact that he belongs to the island, that he is one of the natives to whom the island belongs” (1972b: 36).

Large-scale urban studies

Later in the 1960s, Labov in New York (1966b) and Shuy et al. (1968) and Wolfram (1969) in Detroit carried out studies of sociolinguistic variation on a much larger scale than Labov’s original study on Martha’s Vineyard. These
in sociolinguistic variation has sought to relate the results of empirical studies conducted in the language community to work in formal linguistics. Guy (1991), for example, developed an exponential model, based on lexical phonology (Kiparsky, 1982) in order to account for the different rates of retention of final consonant clusters (i.e. -t, d) in past tense, semiweak and monomorphemic clusters. He predicted that final -t, d would be retained in the ratio of $x : x^2 : x^3$ as a consequence of a deletion rule operating one, two and three times for words of different morphological classes. The results of empirical study, later replicated by Santa Ana (1992) and Bayley (1997), confirmed the prediction.

More recently, Wilson and Henry (1998) explored the relationship between Chomsky’s (1986; 1995) principles and parameters framework and sociolinguistic studies of variation. They suggest that dialects are “constrained and partly defined at the level of grammar by internal operations of the language faculty” (Wilson and Henry, 1998: 13) and that understanding parameter settings can enable sociolinguists to identify which structures are liable to change. Finally, the development of optimality theory, which attempts to provide a formal account of variation, has given rise to increased dialogue between variationist sociolinguists and formal linguists (see, for example, Antilla, 1997; Guy, 1997; Nagy and Reynolds, 1997).

Sociolinguistic variation and language change

Up to this point, we have been concerned with sociolinguistic variation at the synchronic level. However, studies of sociolinguistic variation have also proven important in explaining language change (Labov, 1984). It is evident that all living languages undergo change. It is also evident that change does not take place immediately. Rather, new forms are gradually introduced into a language and, for a considerable period, sometimes lasting for many generations, both old and new forms are in variation. As we would expect, innovative forms are more common in the language of young people than in the language of their elders. This fact has enabled sociolinguists to employ the concept of “apparent time” to model ongoing linguistic change in communities around the world. That is, students of language variation have examined the distribution of older and innovative linguistic forms by age group (as well as other social factors) in order to predict the course of linguistic change.

The work of Bailey and his associates on Texas and Oklahoma dialects of English (Bailey et al., 1991; 1993) offers a convenient example of how studies of synchronic variation may be used to model linguistic change. Bailey and his colleagues drew on random samples of the populations of both states in order to assess the general direction of linguistic change; then they compared their results with data collected 15 years earlier for the Texas portion of the Linguistics Atlas
low facial location and complex movement, again all compositional features. On the basis of questionnaire data, they claimed that the signs that tended to become one-handed were those with no outward movement, made in a salient facial area, produced lower on the face and characterized by complex movement. They also reported that Southerners used two-handed forms more than non-Southerners, that older signers used two-handed signs more than younger signers, and that African American signers tended to use the older two-handed signs more often than white signers of the same age.

Finally, DeSantis (1977) examined variation in signs that can be produced on the hands or at the elbow, such as HELP or PUNISH. The analysis was based on videotapes of free conversation and on responses to a questionnaire. But for the study were collected in France in the summer of 1975 and in the USA in the spring of 1976. Ninety-nine signers participated, including 60 from France and 39 from Atlanta, Georgia. The results were similar for both French and American signers. Men used the hand versions of the signs more frequently, and women used the elbow versions more frequently.

Morphological and syntactic variation. Woodward (1973a; 1973b; 1974) and Woodward and DeSantis (1977a) explored the variable use of three morphosyntactic rules: negative incorporation, agent–beneficiary directionality and verb reduplication. Negative incorporation is a rule in ASL whereby negation is indicated in a verb by outward movement, as in DON’T-KNOW, DON’T-WANT and DON’T-LIKE, as opposed to KNOW, WANT and LIKE. Agent–beneficiary directionality is the term used by Woodward and DeSantis for verb agreement. For example, in the verb “1st-person-GIVE-to-2nd-person”, the hand moves from the signer to a space in front of the signer; in “2nd-person-GIVE-to-1st-person”, the hand moves from a space in front of the signer to the signer. What Woodward and DeSantis refer to as verb reduplication entails the repetition of the movement of the verb as a function of aspect, as in STUDY-CONTINUALLY or STUDY-REGULARLY. For the study of these three rules, data were gathered from 141 signers (132 white and nine African American signers). Other social variables included whether or not the signer was deaf (i.e. some signers were hearing, non-native signers), whether or not the signer’s parents were deaf, the age at which sign language was learned, whether or not the signer attended college, and gender. Signers were shown examples of the linguistic variables in question and asked to indicate on a questionnaire whether or not they used the forms presented. The overall results showed that deaf signers who had learned to sign before age six and who had deaf parents used the form of the rules being investigated that was closer to ASL. Internal linguistic constraints were reported only for agent–beneficiary directionality: a continuum of semantic features ranging from “extremely beneficial” to
of the sign THINK assimilates to the palm orientation of the sign MARRY. We see weakening when holds are deleted or when a two-handed sign becomes one-handed, as in CAT or COW. Substitution can be seen when a table top or the signer’s knee is substituted for the base hand of a two-handed sign or in the version of the sign DEAF that begins at the chin and moves to the ear, as opposed to beginning at the ear and moving to the chin. Addition is seen when movements are added between holds. Finally, the process of analogy is seen when a one-handed sign becomes two-handed.

In terms of morphosyntactic variation, we may expect to find variation in co-occurrence relations, as found in spoken languages. Recall the example of the co-occurrence of negative items in spoken English, so that a sentence such as Ain’t nobody seen nothing like that before, with three negative items co-occurring, is acceptable in AAVE, while the sentence No one has seen anything like that before, with only one negative element, is preferable in middle class standard English. We are not exactly sure what variable co-occurrence relations might look like in ASL, but a possible candidate for investigation is the co-occurrence of non-manual signals with lexical signs or with morphological or syntactic units. For example, must a given non-manual signal (such as the mouth configuration in the sign NOT-YET) co-occur with the manual sign? Is there any variation in the morphological and syntactic non-manual signals that occur with manual adverbs and sentences? Another kind of morphosyntactic variation concerns the fact that certain items – for example, adverb placement in spoken English – can occur in different positions in a sentence. Again, item permutation is an area that has yet to be explored in sign languages. One possible candidate in ASL is the placement of interrogative signs (WHO, WHERE, WHAT, WHEN, WHY, FOR-FOR) in sentences and also their repetition.

**Internal constraints on spoken and sign languages**

Table 4.7 summarizes the internal constraints on variable units. Earlier studies of variation in ASL focused on compositional constraints. That is, variation was seen to be conditioned by some feature of the variable sign itself. For example, Battison et al. (1975) hypothesized that thumb extension in signs such as FUNNY or BLACK was conditioned by the number of other fingers extended, the secondary movement of the sign and other features of the sign itself. Sequential constraints are those that have to do with the immediate linguistic environment surrounding the variable, such as the handshape or palm orientation of the sign immediately preceding or following the variable sign, as we see with one-handshape signs. Functional constraints have to do with the role that the function of the sign has in the variation, as we will see in our discussion of the ASL sign DEAF. The constraint of structural incorporation
With respect to ethnicity, demographics and oppression may work doubly against our understanding of language use in minority deaf communities. The linguistic and social diversity in the Deaf community is just beginning to be explored by researchers (Lucas, 1996; Parasnis, 1998), and many questions remain about how ethnic minority deaf people self-identify and how they use language. Are the boundaries of these groups such that they form coherent groups whose ethnic identity is stronger than their Deaf identity? Or do the members of these groups construct a separate minority Deaf identity? Is it reasonable to acknowledge multiple potential language influences? Is the use of a particular variant related to a person’s identity as a deaf person, or as an African American deaf person, for example? Through the social network technique of contacting potential informants, Lucas et al. (2001) described in more detail below, uncovered one way in which identity and age have intersected to create a situation of oppression in the middle class. Lucas et al. were unable to find any African American deaf people over age 55 who were members of the middle class, that is, who had a college education and were working in professional occupations. This finding suggests that political, social and economic factors intersect with race and ethnicity in ways that have profound effects on minority language communities like the Deaf community.

With respect to gender, several questions emerge that are also related to the minority language community status of Deaf people. Those yet to be answered include: Is there a solidarity in language use between men and women in a language minority group because of oppression from the outside and shared experiences rooted in being deaf? Or are usage differences as pronounced as in other communities?

Other differences in social constraints arise from the unique characteristics of Deaf communities. The question of the language background of signers who participate in studies is one such characteristic. Most participants in variation studies acquired the language under study as a native language from native-speaking parents, as well as from exposure in their everyday environment. In Deaf communities, some participants had neither of these kinds of exposure to the language at the earliest stages of their development. Even deaf parents may not be native signers. It may seem that this problem conflicts with the goal of describing use of a particular language. However, if all signers who learned a natural sign language from people other than their parents were excluded from sociolinguistic studies, such studies would be invalidated, because they would not be representative of the community. Researchers should simply take account of the language background of their participants while drawing conclusions from the data. If the analysis is qualitative, the language background of the participants should be expressly stated in the report, and taken account of in the analysis. If the analysis is quantitative, the influence of language background differences on the variables being investigated may be included as a factor in the statistical model.
A related constraint is the school background of informants. Whether the signers attended a residential or mainstream school may influence their signing. Some questions related to this issue are: Did the signers acquire a natural sign language at a very early age from signing adults, or did they learn it at a later age, having entered the community later? At what age did they acquire the sign language in use in their community? Did their language models use an artificial system such as Signed Exact English (SEE) or the natural sign language of the community?

Three recent studies of variation in ASL

A number of recent studies of linguistic variation in sign languages reflect the changing perspective on the nature of sign languages. In this section, we describe three of these studies: Hoopes’ study of pinky extension, Collins and Petronio’s (1998) study of variation in Tactile ASL, the language of the US Deaf-Blind community, and Lucas et al.’s study (2001) of variation in the form of the sign DEAF. These three studies adopted theoretical frameworks that incorporate recent insights into the nature of ASL. They also illustrate the range of contemporary investigations into variation in ASL and other sign languages. Hoopes (1998) is an exploratory case study based on data from a single signer. Collins and Petronio’s (1998) study is also exploratory. The authors aimed to understand the parameters of variation in the language variety of a group that had not previously been studied systematically. Lucas et al. (2001) is a large-scale study based on a representative sample of the US Deaf population.

An exploratory case study of a phonological variable

Signing with one’s pinky extended on some signs has been anecdotally discussed as a possible phonological variable. Signs like THINK, WONDER and TOLERATE (the latter two illustrated in Figure 4.3a and 4.3b) can be signed either with the pinky (the fourth finger) closed or fully extended. Hoopes (1998) sought to determine whether pinky extension showed patterned variation that correlated with phonological, syntactic or discourse constraints, and to consider functional explanations for these correlations. He set out to describe this potential variable as part of one individual’s signing style, and to discuss possible constraints on the use of pinky extension (PE). In this study, Hoopes decided to focus on the signing of a single individual because, as numerous studies have shown, individuals normally use all of the variants that are common to their community, even within the same conversation (Guy, 1980).

The signer for this study was a 55-year-old Euro-American deaf woman, who was deafened in infancy; she was the only deaf member of her immediate
These durations were averaged and then compared with the duration of tokens of the same lexemes (i.e. signs) without pinky extension. The following possible constraints were investigated for this subset of tokens:

1. duration of the sign;
2. preceding or following pause;
3. repetition of the sign.

Some potential occurrences were excluded from the pool of tokens. Occurrences in fingerspelling were excluded because it was assumed that in these cases PE resulted from processes other than those that could cause pinky extension in lexical signs. Also excluded were instances of “lexicalized” pinky extension, in which case the non-PE variant and the PE variant would not co-occur in the signing of one individual. Lastly, signs in which pinky extension did not occur over the full production of the sign were excluded.

The analysis of the full 100 tokens, not including the prosodic analysis, consisted of comparing percentages of tokens in each of the sub-groupings of the constraints. In the prosodic analysis, Hoopes compared the average duration of the signs with and without pinky extension.

The findings indicated that the frequency of occurrence of pinky extension did in fact vary and did correlate with linguistic factors (handshape and syntactic category) and the one social factor analyzed (degree of social distance). The most intriguing finding, however, was that pinky extension tended to co-occur with prosodic features of emphatic stress. Specifically, it tended to occur:

1. with lexemes used repeatedly within a discourse topic;
2. before pauses; and
3. with lexemes lengthened to almost twice their usual duration.

This suggests that pinky extension is itself a prosodic feature of ASL that adds emphatic stress or focus to the sign with which it co-occurs. It is quite analogous to stress in spoken language as indicated by a stronger signal as a result of greater articulatory effort.

It should be noted that sociolinguistic methodology was crucial to this last finding, i.e. that pinky extension played a prosodic function in the variety used by the subject. Prosody has largely been ignored by linguists working within either the Chomskian or the earlier structuralist framework due to the tendency of these frameworks toward categoricity. Prosody tends not to be subject to categorical rules. But, as Hoopes’ study shows, when one searches for factors that constrain, but do not absolutely determine, the occurrence of a linguistic form, the patterning of prosodic features emerges.
Defining variables and constraints. The third issue that the studies described here share with all studies of sociolinguistic variation is a concern that what is being investigated is, in fact, a sociolinguistic variable. The three studies are on a frontier, as they are some of the first studies of variation in ASL in about 20 years. The hope is that we now know enough about the structure of ASL in order (1) to identify what varies, (2) to describe this variation and (3) to quantify it. The first steps in variation analysis are to define the variable and the envelope of variation. That is, what forms count as instances of the variable? Are the forms that vary indeed two ways of saying the same thing?

The three studies required, first, a consideration of what features were noticeably variable. These variables might be found at any level of linguistic structure, from phonology to discourse. For a quantitative study like Lucas et al., the hope was that these variables would also correlate with both linguistic and social factors. For qualitative studies like Collins and Petronio, in which a language variety is being described in detail for the first time, the goal is that the variables that are described will uniquely identify the community being studied and will be amenable to further quantitative or applied work.

An additional issue that arises early in a variation study concerns specifying the factors that may potentially influence a signer’s choice of a variant. Lucas (1995), for example, investigated the potential effects of eight separate linguistic factors on the choice of a variant of DEAF. As it turned out, most of these constraints proved not to be statistically significant. However, the labor of coding for many factors was not in vain. The study demonstrated that Liddell and Johnson’s (1989) hypothesis that variation in the form of DEAF is influenced primarily by the location of the preceding sign is, at best, incomplete. The studies discussed in detail here are at different stages in the process of identifying constraints. Collins and Petronio’s study, because its purpose was simply to describe the differences between visual and Tactile ASL, set out to note features that were known to be unique to tactile signing. The researchers knew that being Deaf-Blind is a conditioning factor for some changes in language use, but the question was “what linguistic changes take place?” Hoopes and Lucas et al., on the other hand, needed to propose constraints, both linguistic and social, on the variables to be quantified. A central theoretical issue for variation studies is the identification of internal constraints on the variables. As Labov states, the issue “is to discover whatever constraints may exist on the form, direction or structural character of linguistic change” (1994: 115). Phonological constraints on the variables considered by Hoopes and Lucas et al. could include the segmental phonological environment or suprasegmental, or prosodic, environment. Other linguistic constraints could be morphological, syntactic or related to discourse topic or type of discourse.

As for social constraints, the researcher’s knowledge of the community should inform what factors are considered in the model of variation. Hoopes did not design his study of pinky extension to take into account social constraints.
face-to-face communication or in computerized chat rooms) or if it is less interactive (as in the pre-taping of a televised speech or the writing of a book).

Examination of the organization of discourse begins with the delineation of units of analysis, or discourse units. According to Schiffrin (1994), unlike the hierarchically structured phonological, morphological and syntactic units to which linguists are accustomed, discourse units do not clearly fit the notion of hierarchies. Discourse units have been described as being as large as entire encounters (see, for example, Schegloff, 1972; Schegloff and Sacks, 1973; Goffman, 1974). They have also been described as being as small as a single turn in conversation (Sacks et al., 1974). Structural analyses of discourse can focus on propositions, reference and cohesion, topic and sub-topic, and even style issues. Regardless of the size of the unit of analysis, it is ultimately the examination of an utterance and its relationship to other utterances or types of utterances surrounding it that allow analysts to examine discourse structure.

**Discourse action and interaction**

Discourse can also be studied in terms of the impact it has on people and events. Through the use of a variety of linguistic tools, conversants are able to enact or comment upon real-world events. Language can affect social relationships at a macro-level. For example, an utterance such as “I hereby pronounce you husband and wife” is a linguistic behavior that changes social relationships for people from a variety of religious backgrounds. Language also affects interaction at the micro-level. For example, as Tannen (1986) points out, differences in conversational style can cause miscommunication and frustration between friends and family members.

When examining the acts conveyed through language, it can be seen that a single utterance can fulfill a variety of functions, including (but not limited to) requesting information, promising, or asserting. A single utterance can simultaneously fulfill more than one function. For example, uttering “Would you shut the door, please?” is both a question and a request. Likewise, a single function can be conveyed through more than one utterance. By focusing on function, it is possible to gain information about sequential structure mentioned above. For example, if one were heard to utter “Would you shut the door please? It’s so cold in here!” then the assertion can be seen in relation to the request, i.e. as an explanation for it (van Dijk, 1997a: 14).

Acts conveyed by discourse can be direct or indirect. The request to close a door can be as direct as “Please shut the door” or as indirect as “Hmm, the door is open again . . .” People use their knowledge of communication to respond appropriately (or inappropriately), with gravity or with humor. Whether
or not an utterance conveys a certain intent can be subjective. A speaker might intend to insult an addressee but fails if the addressee does not feel insulted. Conversely, an addressee might feel insulted by an utterance, even though an insult is totally unintended by a speaker. In order to analyze how a particular utterance functions, one could analyze at least four aspects of the utterance:

- what happens just prior to the utterance and what a speaker or signer thinks is true about the addressee's thoughts and abilities;
- what the speaker/signer is thinking or intending;
- what is required in a given language for an utterance to be recognized functionally; and
- what is true about the world as put forth within the utterance.

This is one way of approaching the analysis of what conditions make utterances work between interlocutors. Discourse analysts can study the acts that are explicitly and implicitly conveyed by discourse, and the underlying rules that people bring to the uttering and interpreting of them.

Just as language provides a source for accomplishing certain acts, it is also a primary link allowing people to come together and interact with one another. Language is the behavior through which people communicate, and to do so they must have ways of beginning conversations (and ending them), initiating, maintaining and yielding turns, introducing or shifting topics, being polite (or rude) and, generally, conveying any of the myriad of acts alluded to above (such as insulting, requesting, agreeing, arguing, persuading, etc.). Analysts of discourse also study the ways in which people accomplish these aspects of interaction. If it is possible for a speaker or signer and an addressee to have different feelings about whether or not the addressee has been insulted, then interaction requires some cooperative effort focused on constructing and deconstructing the ideas and thoughts that are intended. That is, conversational partners work together to jointly negotiate their interactions. This is true regardless of whether the interaction is a casual conversation, an interview for a job or with a medical doctor, or a formal presentation in which the presence or absence of audience laughter and backchanneling causes the presenter to make adjustments to the style and content of the presentation.

**Context and discourse**

Unlike the objective principles and laws that govern the physical environment, human interaction is variable. In order to truly understand the structure of discourse, and the social factors that impact upon it, it is necessary to examine the context in which the discourse occurs. Yet, as van Dijk (1997b) points out, context is as difficult a construct to define as is discourse. Nevertheless,
discusses this ability to frame behavior in human interaction. Linguists then apply his analysis of how interaction is framed and how people frame their relationships to one another through their discourse.

Gumperz contributes an anthropological perspective. Like Goffman, he focuses on both the impact of society and the individual on a given encounter. Gumperz’ work examines the ways an individual interprets an interaction. He describes a variety of contextualization cues that can be used as conversational strategies to aid in the interpretation of discourse within a particular interaction; these are based on the specific individuals who are present, and their cultural and subcultural backgrounds.

Because interactional sociolinguistics is focused on interpretations that are unique to a given encounter, the data are based on naturally occurring interactions. These data are recorded and transcribed, as a basis for analysis. A growing body of research on sign languages has applied this theoretical framework, including the work of:

- Mather (1991) as applied to tty (teletypewriter, a text telephone device) telephone conversations between deaf interlocutors;
- Winston (1991; 1992; 1993; 1995) as applied to the use of space in ASL monologic discourse; and
- Roy (1989a) and Metzger (1995; 1999) as applied to interpreted discourse.

These studies are addressed later in this chapter.

**Ethnography of communication**

Perhaps in keeping with its anthropological foundation, the ethnography of communication is one of the broader approaches to discourse. According to Schiffrin (1994: 137)

Not only does it focus upon a wider range of communicative behaviors than the other approaches, but built into its theory and methodology is an intentional openness to discovery of the variety of forms and functions available for communication, and to the way such forms and functions are part of different ways of life.

Developed by Dell Hymes (1972), the ethnography of communication includes both the notion of speech acts and the role of macro-level social, specifically cultural, experience in communication. Hymes refers to the knowledge that an individual brings to interaction regarding language use and structure as his or her “communicative competence”. This communicative competence focuses on the ability to communicate in the situations of daily life. He contextualizes speech acts by associating them, in a given analysis, with the situation and event in which they occur. Data are collected via the ethnographic participant
Discourse analysis is concerned with both the structure of interaction and the knowledge that participants bring to it in order to communicate and understand one another effectively. However, conversation analysis is much more focused on the structural sequences within conversation. For example, the focus of analysis is on the description of events within a conversation, such as the opening up of the last phase of a conversation. In this sense, conversation analysis is less likely than other approaches to dwell on the competence of the participants. The focus is more on structural aspects of the conversation (which in turn reflect participants’ knowledge and linguistic competence).

Schegloff (1972) and Schegloff and Sacks (1973) note that one event common in conversational discourse is the use of an utterance which requires a second part or a response of some sort to fill a next-position slot. Such “adjacency pairs” account for numerous aspects of interaction, including the manner in which people negotiate the beginning or ending of a conversation. One form of adjacency pair is the “summons–answer” sequence found in spoken telephone conversations (Schegloff, 1972). Adjacency pairs are found in greetings and also in conversational closings (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). They provide evidence of the relationship between context and language use. That is, it is possible for contextual events, such as the flashing light of a telephone tty ringing, to provide the first part of a summons–answer sequence. In spoken language studies, this accounts for the seemingly three-part greeting exchange found in telephone conversations:

“Hello?”
“Hi! This is Dawson. How are you?”
“Oh, hi, I was just thinking about you!”

Adjacency pairs can also be used to negotiate the turn exchanges within a conversation. This happens explicitly to signal turn exchanges within a tty conversation, through the use of typed GA (Go ahead).

Recorded conversations and a transcription system are used to capture a conversation and to describe it in a manner that is unbiased about what is relevant. For example, pauses, inbreaths, etc. would all be transcribed by a spoken language conversation analyst. Although there is no conventional transcription system in place for the analysis of sign language following this approach, features that have been included in transcription include head and body movement, eye gaze, facial expression, spatial location of articulators (see Winston, 1993) and even gestures that are not linguistic per se, but are part of the gestured communication common to most languages, be they spoken or signed (see Liddell and Metzger, 1998). To gain insights into the relevant structural features, there is generally a preference toward analysis of a larger corpus of data.

This approach to the analysis of discourse can be found in a variety of sign language studies. For example, Dively (1998) applies the work of Schegloff...
The use of constructed action and dialogue in ASL allows for discourse features, such as the conversational historical present (Wolfson, 1979), that are also found in other languages, albeit with different linguistic features. This aspect of sign language discourse has also been examined, following various theoretical perspectives, in many sign languages, including British Sign Language (Morgan, 1999), Danish Sign Language (Engberg-Pedersen, 1995), Swedish Sign Language (Ahlgren, 1990a) and Québec Sign Language (Poulin and Miller, 1995). Thus, the use of space for referential shift purposes is clearly an integral feature of the discourse of many sign languages.

Cohesion

Cohesion in discourse refers to those linguistic features that allow the discourse to be constructed and understood in a coherent manner. Cohesion can be identified based on linguistic structures that link different parts of discourse, such as referring terms (for instance using a pronoun to refer to a prior lexical noun, for example). In signed discourse, cohesion can be found not only lexically and grammatically, but also spatially. The analysis of the use of space for cohesive purposes in sign languages comes in large part from the work of Winston (1993; 1995) and her examination of cohesion in ASL, particularly the mapping of comparative discourse frames in an ASL lecture. In her examination of an ASL lecture on poetry, she finds that the signer establishes one side of the signing space to refer to poetry as art and the other side to refer to poetry as science. Once the concepts have been established in this way, the signer can refer to one or the other side of the signing space and the addressees can interpret him to be referring to the concepts and comparison he has previously established. In fact, the addressee finds that the signer refers to his introductory spatial map as many as 700 utterances later, even when it is embedded within a separate comparative discourse frame (Winston, 1995: 96).

In the Oklahoma City Bombing narrative, cohesion can be seen in the spatial reference that is first established with an index after the first mention of Oklahoma City:

HAVE TWO STUDENT FROM O-K-A C-I-T-Y IX-loc
and I have two students who are from Oklahoma City.

Then, at the end of the narrative, the signer refers twice to the same spatial location, indicating reference back to this prior spatial indexing:

FIND POSS-3 SEVERAL FRIENDS DIE PRO-3 (wh) IX-loc TOO
I found out they lost several friends that day.

S-O PRO-3 KNOW SOME PEOPLE IX-loc. WOW LOOK-AT WONDER.
TOUCH-HEART WOW
the role of imagery and detail common to literature can often appear in daily conversational discourse.

In addition to the more literary monologic discourse found in ASL narratives and poetry, some analysis of formal lectures has also been conducted, as seen in the previous sections. For example, Roy (1989b) with a discussion of discourse markers and Winston (1993) with a discussion of cohesion are both based on the analysis of lectures in ASL. Some preliminary research has also been conducted on the discourse of sermons, as signed by deaf pastors. Richey (2000) finds that in ASL sermons, the use of questions to the congregation as an interactional involvement strategy is a unique feature not often found in the spoken English discourse of hearing pastors. Clearly, a wide variety of both conversational and monologic discourse genres has received the attention of sign language discourse analysts.

A word about sociolinguistic factors is also relevant here. Like all sociolinguistic research, sociolinguistic factors such as age, ethnicity and gender can play a role in the occurrence of such features. For example, Martinez (1995) finds that in FSL, male signers in her study had longer turns than their female partners. Moreover, Bruce (1993) in a study of six deaf dyads, including both white and African American deaf signers, finds that the use of verbal and non-verbal backchanneling is different for the African American and the white deaf signers, and that African-American–African-American dyads used backchanneling differently from African-American–white dyads.

In addition to such sociolinguistic factors as gender and ethnicity, sign language communities generally include a unique variant used by deaf signers who are also blind. While sighted Deaf community members use a visual sign language, Deaf-Blind signers often use a tactile variety of that language. For example, Collins and Petronio (1998) find that Tactile ASL exhibits variation from visual ASL at a variety of linguistic levels, including phonological, in terms of movement, orientation and location, and morphological, in terms of the presence or absence of facial configuration with the co-occurring muscle tension and movement patterns that conveyed adverbial and adjectival information in their data.

Clearly, research regarding the impact of sociolinguistic factors on discourse suggests that a great amount of research remains to be done both across sign languages and within sign languages in order to study the features of signed discourse within different genres and based on a variety of sociolinguistic variables.

Conclusion

Discourse analyses of sign languages make clear the necessity for examination of sign language discourse at levels above the sentence, both for the improved understanding of sign language structure and for the understanding of language
in general. These studies also have practical implications for professionals in a variety of fields. For example, for educators – regardless of whether they are engaged in first or second language teaching – developing discourse-level skills in learners is essential in order to be able to interact smoothly, coherently and successfully. It also has implications for the field of interpretation. Interpreters generally are expected to convey equivalent messages when translating between two languages. Interpreters who attempt to provide equivalence at a lexical or sentential level are potentially missing aspects of the discourse as a whole (such as cohesion). Discourse analysis of sign languages provides important information, both theoretical and practical.

A large portion of the linguistic work performed since Stokoe’s ground breaking findings in the 1960s has focused on theoretical issues and formalist perspectives. Discourse analysis is grounded in the fact that language is used when people interact, and that the study of language in use can provide information to support or refute theories generated non-empirically. Sociolinguistic research by discourse analysts about visual languages and the Deaf communities that use them is increasing globally. This functional perspective is, perhaps, long overdue in the bulk of sign language research. It is likely that the analysis of signed discourse based on the approaches described here will contribute immensely in the years to come to our understanding of both sign languages and language in general.

Suggested readings

This chapter draws heavily from both the spoken language literature and the sign language literature on discourse analysis. For a general description of discourse analysis and issues that motivate this interdisciplinary field, van Dijk (1997a; 1997b) is an excellent source. Regarding the approaches to the analysis of spoken language discourse, Schiffrin (1994) provides a comprehensive overview of the six approaches summarized in this chapter. She not only provides detailed descriptions and comparisons of the approaches, but also includes sample analyses for each. These two books provide information about the field that is neither limited to one approach or to one theoretical perspective. For more specific information on a given approach or methodology, see the citations within that section of the chapter.

An exceptional source for the study of sign language discourse is Lucas’ series Sociolinguistics in Deaf Communities, since every volume includes at least one chapter that focuses on sign language discourse. Specifically, volume 5 of the series, Storytelling and Conversation: Discourse in Deaf Communities (Winston, 1999) contains eight chapters that address the signed discourse of a variety of countries and is based on a variety of approaches. Additionally,
educational settings, and of language status and power are rarely resolved easily. Such decisions seldom avoid a considerable degree of controversy and conflict. As Altbach observed:

Language is a key to the intellectual situation in many Third World nations. Language also plays a role in the distribution of knowledge, since the medium through which material is communicated determines accessibility. Many Third World nations are multilingual states in which questions of language policy are often politically volatile. (1984: 234)

Such controversy is especially common where language policies are concerned with the provision of education. This is understandable, since, as Kennedy has noted:

The close relationship between use of a language and political power, socioeconomic development, national and local identity, and cultural values has led to the increasing realization of the importance of language policies and planning in the life of a nation. Nowhere is this planning more essential than in education, universally recognized as a powerful instrument of change. (1983: iii)

The role of language planning as a component of more general social and educational planning and policy analysis is, in short, an important facet of understanding development in many societies. Language planning as an element of national development strategy can best be understood as the deliberate attempt to change or in some way alter existing language usage, and thus to resolve various types of language problems and controversies (see, for example, Cobarrubias and Fishman, 1983; Kennedy, 1983; Christian, 1988; Cooper, 1989; Lambert, 1990; Tollefson, 1991). As Eastman cogently asserted: “Language planning is the activity of manipulating language as a social resource in order to reach objectives set out by planning agencies which, in general, are an area’s governmental, educational, economic, and linguistic authorities” (1983: 29).

Language planning activities can focus on issues of language status (status planning), on issues of internal development (corpus planning), or on combinations of these two types of language planning activities (see Cobarrubias, 1983b; Williams, 1992: 123–147). Status planning refers to efforts by a government or institution to determine what language or languages are to be used in particular spheres of use. The identification of a country’s “official language”, for instance, constitutes status planning, as would a decision about what language should be used in schools. Corpus planning is often a result of status planning; it refers to efforts to standardize, elaborate and perhaps “purify” a language selected for use in a particular sphere of language use (see Cluver, 1993: 59).

Language planning activities – both status planning and corpus planning – serve a number of different, although sometimes overlapping, functions: language “purification”, language revitalization, language reform, language
some way. However, it is also important to note that even languages that have high economic and political status have on occasion been the objects of purist movements (see Jernudd and Shapiro, 1989). For example, there have been numerous efforts in recent years to stop the use of Anglicisms in modern French (which is critically referred to as Franglais in French), although terms like le week-end continue to be far more popular in daily speech than the historically preferred la fin de semaine (see Ball, 1997: 207–220). Similar phenomena have been noted in Spanish (Mar-Molinero, 1997: 168–170) and German (in which the equivalent of Franglais is now Engleutsch) (Stevenson, 1997: 212–216). Indeed, even in English there have been such purist efforts, as with the “Saxonist” movement in the late nineteenth century, which attempted (generally unsuccessfully) to reform English by replacing “foreign” terms borrowed from French and Latin roots with terms of Germanic origin (Baron, 1981).

Language revitalization refers to various kinds of activities intended to promote the status and usage of a language that has, in some sense, previously in decline (or even, in some cases, a dead language, i.e. one that has ceased to have native users). As King recently defined it, “language revitalization is ‘the attempt to add new forms or functions to a threatened language with the ultimate aim of increasing its uses or users’” (1999: 111). Language revitalization is primarily an example of status planning, although elements of corpus planning (especially in terms of lexical expansion) are also likely to be involved. Examples of the former abound: the use of Swahili in Tanzania is an example to which we return below, but other cases in the post-colonial world are common as colonial languages are replaced by (or are required to share official status with) previously dominant indigenous languages. The revival of dead languages is considerably rarer; the best example is the revival of Hebrew as a modern spoken language in Israel (see Nahir, 1988; Sáenz-Badillos, 1993). Other instances of the revival of languages in advanced states of decline also exist: the revival of Irish Gaelic is well documented and is a powerful case in point (see Hindley, 1990; Ó Riaigéin, 1997).

Language reform takes place, both formally and informally, in many languages accorded official status in the modern world. This includes lexical and orthographic reform as well as occasional syntactic reform. Language reform as a type of language planning activity is, therefore, essentially corpus planning. The reform of written Chinese in the People’s Republic of China is an instance of language reform (see Tai, 1988; Chen, 1999), as are the reforms of Ibo and other indigenous languages in Nigeria (Nwachukwu, 1983; Emenanjo, 1990), Turkish (Dogancay-Aktuna, 1995) and Norwegian (Haugen, 1966), among others. Indeed, there are relatively few official languages in the modern world that have not been subjected to deliberate efforts at language reform (see Cooper, 1989; Tollefson, 1991; Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997).
label “total communication”, is the dominant philosophical approach to Deaf education today. Since the 1960s, however, there has been a growing debate among manualists about what type of signing should be employed in the education of deaf children (Woodward, 1982; Reagan, 1985; Bornstein, 1990). At the heart of this debate has been the creation and use of manual sign codes for spoken languages.

Although the development of manual sign codes for spoken language is an international phenomenon (see, for example, Paget, 1951; Kyle, 1987; Penn and Reagan, 1990; Serpell and Mbewe, 1990), the emergence and educational implementation of manual sign codes has taken place primarily in the USA, where the strongest commitment to their use remains. In the US context, several distinct approaches to the creation of artificial manual sign codes can be identified, although the major systems are closely related, sharing both common historical roots and underlying social and linguistic assumptions. Further, artificially constructed systems of signing all have as their principal target population deaf children at school, and all of these systems rely on teachers of the Deaf and, to a lesser extent, parents of deaf children, for their successful implementation.

The first artificially constructed manual sign code to be developed in the USA was created by a young deaf immigrant from Britain, David Anthony, in 1966. This system, initially intended for use with mentally retarded deaf children (Wilbur, 1979: 204), was no doubt inspired in part by the Paget–Gorman system in use in Britain (see Crystal and Craig, 1978). Anthony’s system provided the base for what was eventually to become Seeing Essential English (SEE-I). Beginning in January 1969, groups of deaf and hearing people began meeting in Southern California to develop signs and guidelines for Seeing Essential English. As Gustason and Woodward recount, “a working committee of five [were] elected. Sign classes were taught by these five, and papers with written descriptions of each sign were utilized in these classes. The papers were mailed to interested persons” (1973: v). Disagreements and differences of opinion about certain features of manual signing, however, led to the breakup of this original group in 1971 and, as a consequence, SEE-I now coexists with both Signing Exact English (SEE-II) and Linguistics of Visual English (LOVE) (see Wilbur, 1979: 204–205; Schein, 1984: 66–67; Ramsey, 1989). A further addition to the array of artificial manual sign codes in the USA has been Signed English, designed for use with preschool children, which shares a number of the general characteristics of SEE-I and its progeny while attempting to remain relatively simple syntactically, semantically and structurally (see Bornstein et al., 1975: 295–296). In fact, this expanding diversity of artificial sign systems has even been the subject of humor in the Deaf community, as can be seen in the ASL play, “Sign Me Alice”, written by the deaf playwright Gilbert Eastman (1974).

The differences among the various manual sign codes are nevertheless significant, since those systems which more closely parallel the structure of English
social and ideological positions related to the nature of deafness and the status and role of the Deaf community in Deaf education (see, for example, Woodward, 1982; Padden and Humphries, 1988; Sacks, 1989; Schein, 1989; Lane, 1992; Parasnis, 1998).

Central to the ideological and political positions about deafness and the Deaf that seem to be embedded in the efforts to create the various manual sign codes has been a tacit rejection of what has been called the sociocultural paradigm of deafness (see Woodward, 1982; Reagan, 1985; Johnson et al., 1989; Lane, 1992; Paul and Jackson, 1993). Rather than conceptualizing the Deaf as a distinctive cultural and linguistic community, advocates of the various manual sign codes in effect adopt the medical, or pathological, view of deafness (although, to be fair, few do so explicitly, and some claim to accept elements of the sociocultural paradigm). The result has been a situation in which educators of the Deaf can see the acquisition of English as not only pragmatically appropriate, but also ideologically legitimized, since deaf children are seen as learning not a second language, but rather as acquiring their own language and gaining access to their own culture. The problem with such a view, in essence, is that it could be taken to delegitimize the presence and status of the Deaf cultural community, as well as the language of that community.

The construction of artificial manual sign codes can thus be argued to constitute, in short, a series of efforts to impose languages on a dominated and oppressed cultural and linguistic minority group. Efforts to encourage the use of various manual sign codes in Deaf education can, on this account, be seen as attempts to reinforce the subservient role of the Deaf even in the matters most important to them and their survival as a community. Further, the creation of artificial sign codes to allow spoken languages to be presented in a visual/manual modality suggests not only assumptions about the superiority of spoken languages, but also demonstrates the continued pattern of hearing hegemony found in the education of the Deaf. In short, the development, presence, and use of manual sign codes in the education of deaf children can be seen as a typical pattern of colonial oppression, in which the dominant group (in this case, the hearing culture) utilizes language and language policy as a tool to maintain its cultural and linguistic dominance, and all in the name of “doing good” for the oppressed, and presumably “disadvantaged”, group (see Woodward, 1982; Reagan, 1988; Johnson et al., 1989; Gregory and Hartley, 1991; Gregory, 1992; Lane, 1992; Branson and Miller, 1993).

Having said this, it is important to note that such a view is very much a minority one, not only in the Deaf community but also among those involved, both personally and professionally, in the education of deaf children. Complicating the picture is the tension between members of the core Deaf cultural community, who identify themselves as an oppressed cultural community trying to protect their language and culture from outsiders, and the hearing parents of
countries. They differ even more, in many instances, from government policies and practices.

This discussion brings us to the issue of language rights and the Deaf. The medical and sociocultural perspectives of deafness not only lead to different understandings of deafness and the Deaf, and to different social and educational policies for the Deaf (see Johnson et al., 1989; Walworth et al., 1992; Baynton, 1996; Safford and Safford, 1996: 90–121), but also lead to very different approaches to the issue of language rights in the Deaf community. For those accepting a medical model of deafness, discussions of language rights are, basically, irrelevant. The Deaf do not constitute a minority group in the sense intended in the passages but, rather, are seen as disadvantaged members of a particular spoken language community. Thus, the medical perspective leads to what is essentially a compensatory view of language rights, which focuses on ensuring access through what is assumed to be a common language. This means that interpreting services and similar support will be provided to the Deaf, because this is a way of compensating for a deficit. Although well meaning, such an approach is profoundly paternalistic, and is clearly grounded in an understanding of deafness as a disability. The alternative conceptualization of language rights and the Deaf, which has been forcefully articulated by Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (1994; see also Reagan, in press) among others, is grounded in the sociocultural view of deafness. The sociocultural view of deafness leads to an empowerment approach to language rights for the Deaf, in which signed language and other supports are called for not as a means to correct a disability, but rather because the Deaf, as a cultural and linguistic minority, should be entitled to them as basic human rights (see Nover, 1995). Also at issue here is the matter of how one defines “mother tongue” in the context of the deaf child; a matter of no little complexity, to be sure (for a very thorough discussion of this topic, see Bouvet, 1990: 119–133). Here, then, The UN Declaration of the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities is clearly relevant, even though, as Harlan Lane and his colleagues have argued, internationally recognized language rights are “almost universally violated when it comes to signed language minorities” (Lane et al., 1996: 422).

In recent years, for example, there have been ongoing debates in many parts of the USA about whether ASL should be offered as a foreign language in secondary schools and in colleges and universities. Central to these debates has been the question of whether ASL is in some sense less “real” or “legitimate” than spoken languages. This is a position that ignores more than 30 years of linguistic research on the nature, structure and uses of ASL (see Wilcox, 1988; Reagan, 1997; Wilcox and Wilcox, 1997). The recognition of ASL as a “real” language, generally for purposes of academic foreign language credit (especially with respect to secondary schools), is one that has been gradually
Which reminds me that the funniest thing I saw over the whole holiday period was the Queen’s Speech as interpreted into sign language by a splendid blonde lady in a long blue dress. Her hands flew like birds to convey the message to the deaf; all the relevant emotions crossed her face in a constant flux of sun and cloud. It was an Oscar winner, a triumph of language mime, and nailed alongside her by the miracle of TV technology, the royal visage spoke and stared out in granite immobility. I hope HM and millions of the deaf enjoyed it as much as we did. But my guess is that a back-room electronic wizard is making urgent inquiries about emigration.


The language stands for being Irish, the whole ethnic component, and it stands for one other thing. It stands for what is old-fashioned, agricultural, archaic, not entirely of this world or this time, and that doesn’t help.

Reference to Irish in an interview with Joshua Fishman, 1975, reprinted in *Ó Murchú (1994)*

We all form attitudes and opinions – sometimes positive, sometimes negative – about languages, such as British Sign Language (BSL) or Irish referred to above, and varieties of languages, such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Received Pronunciation (RP). We may feel that one language or variety is “elegant”, “expressive”, and “musical”, while another is “vulgar”, “backward” and “ugly”. All levels of language use, whole languages, language varieties, pragmatics and discourse, the meaning and structure of words and sentences, and pronunciation and accent, are subject to such opinions and we endow some language forms with prestige, while we stigmatize others.

From the linguistic viewpoint, all languages and all varieties of languages are equal. Evaluative judgments are socially conditioned; the languages, varieties and features that receive less favorable evaluation do so because the individuals who use them are socially stigmatized (Romaine, 1989). Coupland and Jaworski (1997), therefore, warn us that in the examination of language
unacceptable, particularly by younger members of the Deaf community. In Ireland, a constitutional referendum on abortion was held in the early 1990s. Some disagreement arose among Deaf television presenters of the daily “News for the Deaf” broadcast as to the most appropriate sign for the word ABORTION. One presenter used a sign that appeared to represent the removing and dropping or disposing of the fetus from the stomach area, while the other suggested a stabbing movement. The national press reported the controversy about the two signs. Over time the former sign has become more prevalent among younger deaf people while older deaf people rarely use either sign, as abortion remains a taboo subject for them (Conama, personal communication). Similar examples of signs that are considered offensive can be found in other sign languages. New “politically correct” signs are introduced that are more widely acceptable. In many cases, it has become common practice when naming a country to borrow the sign from the natural sign language of that country. Other signs that are considered distasteful are sometimes replaced by fingerspelling. In the USA, the sign meaning “gay” is often fingerspelled for this reason (Kleinfeld and Warner, 1996).

Attitudes toward language groups

In situations where two language groups exist in close proximity, the negative attitudes of the majority group to the group without power and prestige can be adopted by the minority group to such a degree that members downgrade themselves. Lambert refers to this as “subtractive bilingualism”. We mentioned his matched guise technique and his 1960 study above, which found that both English-speaking and French-speaking respondents in Canada rated the speakers of English more favorably. Although it may seem remarkable that the French speakers would evaluate the English speakers more highly, this study clearly illustrates the type of attitudes that exist within and between two language groups, where one is dominant politically, economically and culturally.

Further studies carried out in Canada, and in other countries such as Britain, Israel, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Spain, Switzerland and the USA, have revealed similar results. A study by Giles (1970), examining the reactions of British students to a variety of accents, found that in terms of status, aesthetic quality and communicative content, Received Pronunciation was rated most favorably, regional accents were in the middle ranks and urban accents were rated least favorably. Carranza and Ryan (1975) investigated the reactions of Mexican Americans and Anglo-American students to speakers of English and Spanish and discovered that English speakers were rated more favorably on scales of integrity and attractiveness by both groups of students. In Paraguay, Rubin (1968) found that speakers of Guaraní were considered to be “ill-bred”, “less...
Within hours there seemed to emerge a new, calm, clear consciousness and resolution; a political body, two thousand strong, with a single will of its own. It was the astonishing swiftness with which this organisation emerged, the sudden precipitation from chaos, of a unanimous, communal mind, that astonished everyone who saw it. Sacks (1989: 135)

These are the words of Oliver Sacks as he describes the events that took place at Gallaudet University over a period of one week in March 1988. Gallaudet – the only university for deaf people in the world – is considered by many to be the “Mecca” of the Deaf community. However, in all its 124 years it had never had a deaf president. Following the resignation of Jerry C. Lee earlier that year, a hearing person who was both unable to sign and who was unfamiliar with the Deaf world, was selected as the new president over two deaf finalists. The university erupted into a week of protests which culminated with the resignation of the newly appointed president and the chairman of the Board of Trustees, the reconstitution of the board to contain a majority of deaf people, the selection of a deaf president (Dr. I. King Jordan), and the promise of no reprisals against the protesters (Gannon, 1989).

The issues around what happened at Gallaudet University are of fundamental importance not only in the USA, but also to Deaf communities worldwide. Taylor and Mason (1991) refer to the events as potentially the single most significant positive episode in deafness any of us alive today have ever witnessed. It offered encouragement to other Deaf communities because of its success. Organizations such as “Deaf Pride” and “Deaf Awareness” in the USA, the “National Union of the Deaf” in Britain, the “Irish Deaf Society” in Ireland and “Deux Langues Pour Une Education” in France were founded to encourage an appreciation of Deaf identity, and along with the various national organizations, intensified their lobbying for legislation to improve the status of natural sign languages, and to ensure deaf people’s rights.

In North America and in Europe this lobbying has met with some success. In 1983, Sweden became the first country in the world to implement legislation legally recognizing their native sign language. A small number of other countries have since followed their lead. The Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990, created a precedent in terms of equal opportunities and equal rights. Although it does not directly refer to ASL, it does state that a person may not be discriminated against solely on the basis of their disability. In 1988, members of the European Parliament voted unanimously to pass a resolution on the official recognition of the sign languages of the member states. The resolution called on each state to abolish any remaining obstacles to the use of sign.

To date, no specific laws have been passed as a result of the European Parliament’s resolution, and it was not until almost 10 years later, at the request


