

Sign Language Teaching in the Age of Cochlear Implants

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In Europe and America, sign languages have been passed down through generations of deaf people and evidence indicates that these sign languages date from the 17th or 18th centuries. More specifically, British Sign Language (BSL) can be traced back to the first school for deaf children established in 1750 and American Sign Language (ASL) to the first school for deaf children, founded in 1817. However, records show sign language in colonial America and Spanish Sign Language existed in the Deaf Communities of the 17th century.

The precise number of sign language users around the world is unknown. In the United States and Canada, there are an estimated 200,000-300,000 users of ASL. In the United Kingdom, there are around 23,000 signers. Across Europe, every country has at least one sign language, but many have several: for example, in Switzerland both French Swiss Sign Language and German Swiss Sign Language are used. However, it is not known how many sign languages are used in Africa, the Middle East, Asia or South America. In fact, the number of sign languages which exist world-wide is unknown. It is estimated there may be around 6000 spoken languages in the world; there may be a comparable number of sign languages.

There are many reasons for studying sign languages. First of all, to understand human language. Studying sign languages furthers our knowledge of language acquisition and helps us understand language society and language use. Moreover, studying sign languages gives us insight into language evolution: how human language began, how it evolves over time and how languages change across generations of users.

It is virtually inconceivable that any truly new spoken language could emerge nowadays, but there are cases of new sign languages around the world. Deaf people may appear in a small area and over time – if not exposed to an existing sign language - they develop a new sign language. Research has been conducted into the case of a new sign language in Israel. This sign language is used by a closed community of Bedouins with a high incidence of deafness. There are 3000 people living in the community which includes 150 deaf people. Sign language has now been used by three successive generations - by both the deaf and hearing members of the community.

These new sign languages give us a rare opportunity to watch a language in its early moments of development. For example, we can see which language structures develop early on and those which take more time.

Students want to learn more about human languages generally and about human language in a different modality. Currently, ASL is one of the two fastest growing languages taught in American colleges and universities – the other language is Arabic. ASL is also becoming one of the most widely taught languages in high schools – after Spanish, French and Japanese.

It may seem that the explosion of interest in sign languages is in contradiction with the explosion of medical attention to deafness. However, ultimately, science needs the voices and ideas of all its many disciplines and all the people it aims to help. Sign language teaching in the 21st century is not only about teaching communication, it is about expanding our knowledge of the world and the people who live in it and also about expanding our knowledge of the human mind and its creative capabilities.