The D/deaf–H/hearing Debate

Napier, Jemina.

Sign Language Studies, Volume 2, Number 2, Winter 2002, pp. 141-149 (Article)

Published by Gallaudet University Press
DOI: 10.1353/sls.2002.0006

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/sls/summary/v002/2.2napier.html
The D/deaf–H/hearing Debate

Jemina Napier

This commentary explores the role and status of hearing people within the Deaf community, in particular, sign language interpreters. Of the various literature that has been written about the Deaf community, its language and culture, most of the works have discussed the notion of culturally Deaf people who identify as a member of the Deaf community as a linguistic and cultural minority group. Pathological definitions have been disregarded in favor of social models of deafness, whereby it is purported that Deaf people are disabled by society in that they are not given access to information, rather than being regarded as people with disabilities. Deaf people are described as sharing a sense of pride in forming an identity based on their linguistic and cultural experiences (Brien 1981; Erting, Johnson, Smith, and Snider 1994; Gregory and Hartley 1992; Higgins 1980; Lane 1993; Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996; Padden 1980, 1989; Padden and Humphries 1988; Turner 1994; Wilcox 1989).

Woodward (1972) established the convention—now prevalent in the literature—of using the upper- or lowercase letter D/d to classify the status of D/deaf people. “Deaf” people are those who identify themselves as members of the Deaf community and regard themselves as culturally Deaf, whereas “deaf” people are those who do not sign and regard themselves as having a hearing impairment.

Several authors have discussed what it means to be a member of the Deaf community, suggesting various criteria to determine
whether someone is a member of the core community or on the periphery (Kannapell 1989; Kyle and Woll 1985; Ladd 1988; Lawson 1981). Different models ascribe different levels of membership depending on hearing loss, use of sign language as a first or preferred language, whether born to D/deaf or hearing parents, and level of contact with the community. One of the most familiar models of the Deaf community is that devised by Baker and Cokely (1980), which suggests four “spheres” of life in which people can become involved in the Deaf community—through audiological status (i.e., deafness), political support of the goals of the Deaf community, social contact within the community, and linguistic fluency in the sign language of the community. One of the central features of this model is the term “attitude,” whereby somebody might satisfy the criteria for all four “spheres” but still needs to have the right attitude toward Deaf people, their language, culture, and minority status in order to be accepted into the community.

The majority of models and discussion of the makeup of the Deaf community seem to accept the inevitability that hearing people will be members of the community—up to a point. The focus in this context is often on those hearing people that have Deaf parents or siblings and have therefore grown up in the Deaf community, acquired sign language from an early age, and become enculturated to the Deaf way of life. One particular paper even acknowledges that hearing people who learn sign language later in life might have more proficient sign language skills and know more about the Deaf community and its culture than D/deaf people themselves because of their access to education (Corker 1997).

Regardless of the theories that acknowledge that it is possible for nondeaf people to become members of the Deaf community, the theories do not always work in practice. One can still argue that there is a “fractious interdependence” (Napier 2001) between Deaf and hearing people involved in the Deaf community, especially in relation to sign language interpreters.

With regard to the role of sign language interpreters in the Deaf community, the general philosophy has changed in line with the consensus that the community is a linguistic and cultural group. The notion of the interpreter as a conduit or machine who does not have
an impact on interaction is now out of date. Although it is recognized that a conduit approach is appropriate in certain contexts (Pollitt 2000), most writings advocate for an interactive model of interpreting, whereby interpreters are expected to be bilingual and bicultural and to use their knowledge and understanding of the majority and minority cultures to make linguistic decisions and ensure the success of any communication event (Bridge 1997; Cavell and Wells 1986; Cokely 1995; Humphrey and Alcorn 1996; McIntire 1986; McIntire and Sanderson 1993; Metzger 1995, 1999; Mindess 1999; Napier 1998; Page 1993; Roy 1993, 2000; Scott Gibson 1992; Stewart, Schein, and Cartwright 1998). There are implications, however, when considering community membership. If the only hearing people who are truly accepted into the community are those that are bilingual and bicultural, how can these people become linguistically fluent and acculturated in the first place if they are not accepted into the community?

Ozolins and Bridge (1999) question whether sign language interpreters can ever truly understand Deaf culture if they are not Deaf themselves, therefore implying that sign language interpreters cannot become bicultural. In another paper (Napier, forthcoming), I have questioned how easy it is for sign language interpreters to naturally acquire sign language and therefore become bilingual.

The problem constitutes a “chicken-and-egg” type of situation. Originally, interpreting work was performed by welfare officers working with Deaf people, the majority of whom had Deaf parents (Flynn 1990; Scott Gibson 1994). These people had grown up in the community, internalized Deaf culture, and believed in the goals of the Deaf community (McDade 1995). The welfare agencies adopted a patriarchal approach to helping Deaf people, which was later rejected by Deaf people in favor of professional interpreting services. This allowed them to receive—via interpreters—access to information in their preferred language, without being patronized as “needy.” Through the process of professionalization, however, sign language interpreters were seen to alienate themselves from the Deaf community as the values of Deaf culture were rejected in favor of the professional values of the hearing majority (Pollitt 1997, 2000). Phillip (1994) suggested that the reciprocation that previously existed
between Deaf and hearing people in the community is no longer highly valued. The chicken-and-egg scenario has occurred as a consequence of the Deaf community’s requiring professional, skilled interpreters, which has led to the establishment of training courses that allow hearing people with no previous connection to the Deaf community to become qualified interpreters. But now that this has happened, it seems that some of these hearing people who have become involved in the community are criticized for their lack of understanding of Deaf culture. So which is preferable—the chicken or the egg? One issue that is often overlooked is the reason the hearing people with no previous Deaf connection become involved in the community in the first place. Surely by making that choice, these hearing people are electing to ally themselves with the Deaf community, its culture, and values.

Bienvenu (1987) and Sherwood (1987) acknowledged this issue in their discussion of the notion of a “third culture.” Their papers recognized the fact that Deaf and hearing people do come from different cultures but that sign language interpreters have a foot in both worlds, therefore the “third culture” allows for Deaf and hearing cultures to “meet in the middle” and as a consequence establish mutual understanding. Although some of the points Bienvenu raises are questionable (where the sentiment of reciprocity is taken a little too far),1 the notion of a “third culture” goes some way toward recognizing that hearing people can comfortably feel that they are a part of the Deaf community. Although hearing people can never truly empathize with Deaf people about what it is like to be Deaf, they can identify with the Deaf community linguistically, socially, and politically, albeit not audiologically (Baker and Cokely 1980).

For readers of this commentary, this is surely not a new concept. Many will be familiar with the following scenario: A hearing person (child of Deaf parents, sign language interpreter, etc.) is engaged in conversation with Deaf people who are criticizing the hearing majority for their ignorance of the Deaf community and its culture, and the hearing person receives the comment, “We don’t mean you, you’re

---
1. For example, it is suggested that if a Deaf person wants to make a phone call, a hearing person should agree to make that call without asking any questions or making any protest. I would argue that the whole concept of reciprocation is based on tacit agreement and negotiation, not demand and supply.
different—not like those hearing people.” Within this comment is an implicit understanding that certain hearing people are accepted into the community. Gallimore (2000) talked of three different groups of hearing people—those who know nothing about the Deaf community and its culture, those who know something but not a lot (e.g., beginner sign language students), and those who are part of the Deaf community (e.g., interpreters). Status of community membership is often clearly delineated in the use of sign language by Deaf people, with a different emphasis put on the sign for “hearing person” to indicate whether they know nothing or a little or whether they are an accepted member of the Deaf community. The same kind of emphasis is often used with the sign for “deaf person” to indicate whether a person is Deaf or deaf.

Therefore in signed languages a convention exists for identifying Deaf or hearing members of the Deaf community. A written convention also exists for identifying whether people with a hearing loss are culturally Deaf or audiologically deaf. So is it feasible to use a written convention for identifying those hearing people who are involved in the Deaf community, but reverse the convention? In all the literature, hearing people are invariably referred to with the letter “h” in lowercase. By inverting the D/deaf convention, I propose the following convention: Hearing people are those consumed by the Hearing culture; they are ignorant or naive about the Deaf community and its culture and typically regard deafness from a pathological point of view; hearing people, however, are those who have internalized Deaf culture, ally themselves with Deaf people, and are regarded as members of the Deaf community.

As someone who grew up in the Deaf community and who now works as a sign language interpreter, trainer, and researcher, I resist being labeled as a Hearing person along with the Hearing majority. In the same way that deaf people are not regarded as being fully Deaf, I do not regard myself as being fully Hearing. I have suggested this convention in many classes I have taught and discussed the idea with Deaf friends and colleagues, and many have responded positively to the concept.

In proposing this convention, I acknowledge that there are potential flaws. When considering the characteristics of oppressors as outlined by Baker Shenk (1986), one must concede that there are
hearing people involved in the community that do not necessarily have the best interests of Deaf people at heart, so although they are involved in the community, they might not have the right “attitude.” Should they be regarded as Hearing or hearing? However, if the Deaf community adopts a completely new convention, as mooted by Bahan (1997) and Jokkinen (2000), that refers to language rather than audiological status—people will be known as sign language users—the D/deaf–H/hearing debate will become obsolete to an extent. A new dilemma would then arise with regard to the necessity of distinguishing between people previously known as “Deaf” and those previously known as “hearing.” Sign Language Users (Deaf) and sign language users (hearing), perhaps? But then how would we refer to “deaf” and “Hearing” people?

A review of some of the literature related to the Deaf community, Deaf culture, and sign language interpreting indicates that hearing people—and sign language interpreters in particular—can become members of the Deaf community. Some people have suggested that, in recognition of this acceptance, a written convention be adopted to differentiate these people from the Hearing majority. It is acknowledged that the propounded convention might not be the ideal, but the purpose of this commentary is to fuel discussion on this issue among researchers, teachers, interpreters, and the Deaf community at large.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to all participants in workshops or classes I have taught where this topic has been discussed for contributing to the consolidation of my ideas. Thanks also to my friends and colleagues who proofread the article and offered constructive criticism.

References


———. Forthcoming. Auslan/English Interpreters: Actual or Perceived Bilinguals.


