

The units of American Sign Language are composed of specific movements and shapes of the hands and arms, eyes, face, head, and body posture. These movements and shapes serve as the 'words' and 'intonation' of the language.

What is meant by *visual*? Since American Sign Language uses body movements instead of sound, 'listeners' (or 'receivers') use their eyes instead of their ears to understand what is being said. And because all linguistic information must be received through the eyes, the language is carefully structured to fit the needs and capabilities of the eyes.

A. History of American Sign Language

George W. Veditz, a Deaf teacher who became the president of the National Association of the Deaf in 1904, said "As long as we have Deaf people, we will have Sign Language".³ Information collected from many different countries shows that Veditz was right. Throughout history, wherever there have been Deaf people, there have been signed languages that they or their ancestors have developed: Chinese Sign Language (Yau 1977), French Sign Language (Sallagoity 1975), Thai Sign Language (Reilly & Suwanarat 1980), and so on. Why do Deaf people develop and use signed languages? So they can effectively communicate with each other.

Languages do not have to be "vocal-auditory"; that is, they do not have to use sound. In fact, various scholars through the centuries have argued that the first languages used in pre-historic times were gestural languages.⁴ There is even some evidence suggesting that the vocal apparatus necessary for speech did not develop until later on.⁵ In any case, because Deaf people do not hear and therefore, cannot efficiently use a language composed of sounds, they use a different kind of language better suited to their communicative needs—a visual-gestural language.⁶

We do not have much information about the deaf people who lived in America before 1817. We assume that some came from Europe or the British Isles, and that others were born here. Some of those who came from other countries probably brought with them a knowledge of the signed language used in their country. So perhaps a few deaf people in a Spanish colony used Spanish Sign Language, and others in an English colony used British Sign Language and so on. When a signed language was not known—for example, deaf children born of hearing parents in America would not have known a foreign signed language—it is likely that the deaf individuals created their own signs, often called *home signs*. We do know that deaf people in different areas probably had very little contact with each other since there were no public transportation services and no schools or organizations for deaf

³A videotape of Veditz's very stirring 1913 speech, entitled *The Preservation of Sign Language*, is available through the Gallaudet College library.

⁴Condillac (1775), Valade (1866), Hewes (1974, 1975).

⁵Lieberman & Crelin (1971).

⁶Actually, a large percentage of Deaf people have some degree of residual hearing. That is, many Deaf people can hear some sounds with differing degrees of distortion. Hearing losses exist on a continuum. With the statement above, we are simply noting that a loss of hearing often means that a person is unable to use (i.e. send and receive) a spoken language efficiently or at all.

people to bring them together. So it makes sense to assume that several different signed languages or types of signing were used in America before 1817.

What happened in 1817? As the famous story⁷ goes, a man named Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, who was a graduate of Yale University, was training to become a minister. He met a young deaf girl named Alice, the daughter of his neighbor, Dr. Mason Cogswell, a well-known doctor in Hartford, Connecticut. Gallaudet tried to teach Alice to read and write a few words and had some success.

Cogswell was impressed by Gallaudet's initial efforts and encouraged him to become involved in establishing a school for deaf people in America. The clergyman's association of Connecticut had reported years earlier that there were approximately 89 deaf people in the state.⁸ The need for a school was clear. So Cogswell and a group of concerned citizens raised funds to send Gallaudet to Europe to learn about methods for instructing deaf people.

Gallaudet first went to Great Britain to learn an "oral method" of instruction used by the Braidwood Schools in Scotland and near London. This method used speaking, reading, and writing, and was strongly against the use of signs. However, the directors of these schools refused to reveal their method. Similarly, the director of the London Asylum (also using oral methods) refused to give Gallaudet the information he wanted.

Fortunately, the director of a school for deaf students in Paris, a man named Sicard, was in London with two of his deaf pupils—who were also teachers at the Paris school, Jean Massieu and Laurent Clerc. They were giving demonstrations of the French method of instructing deaf students. This method used signs from French Sign Language (created by French Deaf people) with an added set of signs called *les signes méthodiques* (in English, *methodical signs*). These methodical signs were invented by Abbé Charles de l'Épée, the founder and first director of the school in Paris. Épée's methodical signs were used for certain grammatical words or parts of words that are found in spoken and written French (such as 'le' or 'la', meaning 'the') but that are not needed in French Sign Language. These signs were supposed to help deaf students translate from their signed language into written French.

Gallaudet was impressed by the presentations of Sicard, Massieu, and Clerc. He asked Sicard to teach him the French method of education using signs, and Sicard agreed. So Gallaudet went to Paris and there began to learn French signs from Massieu and Clerc, and the teaching method from Sicard.

After a short while, Gallaudet wanted to return to Hartford and convinced Clerc to go back with him to help establish a school there. During the 52-day voyage to America, Clerc continued teaching signs to Gallaudet, and Gallaudet taught Clerc the English language—Clerc's third language (after French Sign Language and French).

⁷Lane (1976, 1977).

⁸Based on the finding that the deaf population is usually about .1% of the whole American population, Lane (1977) estimates that there were about 2000 deaf people in America during the early 1800's. Schein & Delk (1974) report a total of 6,106 prelingually deaf people in America in 1830, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

Then on April 15, 1817, with funds from the state of Connecticut, the U.S. Congress, and other sympathetic groups, Gallaudet and Clerc established the Institution for Deaf-Mutes—later renamed the American Asylum at Hartford for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, and presently called the American School for the Deaf. Clerc remained there as an instructor for over forty years. During that time, Clerc also trained some hearing people, who later became the directors of schools for deaf students in New York, Kentucky, Virginia, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Quebec.

Until recently, it was supposed that deaf people in America suddenly started learning and using French signs in 1817, and that they didn't have any language before that time. However, as discussed earlier, common sense tells us that possibly several different signed languages were used by the 2000 or more deaf people living in this country in the early 1800's. Certainly they were not all just waiting around for someone to give them an effective way of communicating!⁹

In addition to this type of reasoning, there is also linguistic evidence which demonstrates that there must have been at least one other signed language used in America before Gallaudet and Clerc established the Hartford School. This evidence involves looking at *cognates*—words or signs in one language which are historically related to words or signs in another language. For example, we can look at words in German and English and see that many of them are similar, that they seem to have come from the same "language family".

Cognates

Modern German

Haus
Fisch
grune
helfen

Modern English

house
fish
green
to help

By studying a large number of these cognates, like 'Haus'—'house', linguists have found out that German and English are historically related, and that they both came from the same source language called "proto-Germanic".

⁹Right before publication of this text, an article was published in the magazine *Natural History* ("Everyone Spoke Sign Language Here" by N. Groce, Vol. 89, No. 6, pps. 10-16) which reported on an exciting discovery. It seems that a large number of deaf people lived on the island called Martha's Vineyard during the late 1600s up to the early 1900s. These people and the hearing people in their community used a signed language together—which was taught to their children (hearing and deaf) and quite comfortably incorporated into their community activities. Thus, this information confirms the claim that one or more signed languages were used in America before the arrival of Clerc and Gallaudet.