Concluding Thoughts

The Future of American Sign Language

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In an earlier paper (Padden 1990), American Sign Language (ASL) was described as a kind of "collective memory" in which generations of deaf people "remember" the language through using it and passing it down to succeeding generations. This memory was sustained despite the fact that until very recently, there were no recognized grammars of ASL, and there were very few institutions for preserving and maintaining the language. The paper focused on changes of the last thirty-five years in which, as we all know, there was a surge of scientific and popular interest in sign languages, particularly in the United States. We now have grammars of ASL, and institutions dedicated to sign language study and preservation. As the paper described the impact of these changes on the American Deaf community, it stopped short of asking questions about what lies ahead for the future of the community and their language. How will this community continue to "remember" its language into the future?

It seems questions about the future of ASL and its community are very much on people's minds. When we lecture about sign language, we find this topic finds it way in questions and comments from
our audiences: Will sign language survive the ambitions of technology and genetic engineering? While on the one hand the popular media is full of news of advances and achievements of medicine and biotechnology, there has also been a resurgence of cultural pride in Deaf communities around the world. Classes in ASL are remarkably popular in colleges and universities in the U.S., and sign language is featured in some of the most popular programs on American television. Even as we try to talk about the vibrancy of the deaf community today, the future is thrust in our faces as a warning. It is not hard to feel a sense of foreboding, as George Veditz must have when he gave his 1913 lecture exhorting the preservation of “the sign language.” He warned of “pharaohs who knew not Joseph’ taking over the land and our American schools” (Veditz 1913). Then, a growing fascination with oral education in Europe was spreading to the United States, threatening to betray a tacit agreement between deaf people and their educators to allow the use of sign language in education. Now nearly a century later, schools for the deaf openly advertise ASL as the language of instruction, but their enrollments are far smaller than they used to be. A massive shift away from institutions and toward mainstreaming in public schools has removed much of the population that used to attend these schools. The role of deaf schools in the maintenance of ASL has always been regarded as important, but how can the language be maintained when deaf children are dispersed across numerous small public schools? At a time when awareness of the language is high, indeed the total number of people learning ASL (hearing and deaf) is greater than it has ever been in its history, the paradox is that the threat of language death is still there. In circumstances like these, how do we imagine the future of ASL?

Some of the most profound changes of the last thirty-five years can be traced to a shift in ideas about human languages in general, and sign languages in particular (Padden 1990). Where the idea of a sign language in the nineteenth century meant a language unlike any other (Baynton 1996), by the middle of the twentieth century, ASL joined the family of “natural languages,” including spoken languages, allowing it to claim a status of equality. The twin concepts of “natural language” and then “human culture” in the scientific community filtered into a popular vocabulary that deaf people began to use for themselves (Humphries 1996). Using a rhetoric of inclusion into the family of languages and human cultures, there came also a rhetoric of civil rights that led to legislation to include equal access to employment, public utilities, and facilities. More recently, legislation has been passed to expand this access to include private and corporate facilities such as in hotels and small businesses. Aside from the expansion of rights, what is important about these acts of legislation is that they changed public spaces for deaf people.

Furthermore, along with these changes—indeed, as a result of them—there was a significant shift in deaf people’s work lives. Deaf people began to be employed in places they had never been before, and they began to circulate in spaces they had never before visited. As they traveled in new spaces, they began to imagine different modes of interaction among themselves and with hearing people (Padden 1990). They began to take on new kinds of jobs, quite different from the “solitary” trades that characterized jobs for deaf people in the early part of the century. An example of this shift is illustrated in the work life of Don Padden (Padden’s father). Shortly after he graduated from Gallaudet College in 1945, he was hired to join the faculty. But because his income was small, he supplemented his pay with a job as a printer at the Washington Post on weekends. He worked with a group of deaf men, all printers by trade. About 1965, he stopped, and his union card lapsed. At this time there was a shift toward professionalization in deaf education, when teaching became a class-conscious profession and teachers began to separate themselves from workers from other types of similarly paid jobs, such as printing. One important result of this shift was a growing divide in the deaf community, separating an emerging professional middle class from the working class of printers, bakers, shoe repairers, carpenters, and other kinds of labor that many deaf men and women continued to do at that time. The effect was to change how deaf people met together and on what terms (Padden 1990).

At almost exactly the same time as the growth of the deaf middle class came the dismantling of some of the traditional institutions of the American Deaf community. The massive shift toward public schooling of deaf children throughout the 1970s moved deaf children away from
schools for the deaf to local school districts (Schildt 1988). In the early 1970s, one of the largest schools in the country, Indiana School for the Deaf, had nearly 750 students; today it has 321. Utah School for the Deaf has about 40 students, as more students are enrolled in their local schools throughout the state. Despite campaigning by the deaf community, Nebraska School for the Deaf finally closed its doors in 1998 when enrollment dwindled to 28 students. Many of these schools were built in the period between 1850 and 1900, when institutions were ideally large, pastoral, and paternal. Often these schools were located in the center of the state, however isolated that place might be, reflecting the belief that resources were best located centrally so that travel was equidistant from its furthest corners. Today some of these locations are too distant by modern standards from urban centers where many deaf children live. Economics affected other schools; the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf’s rolling estate was sold in 1975 to a small private college when the school could no longer afford to maintain its extensive lawns and its massively large buildings. To this day, alumni of the school continue to hold out hope that the campus can be bought back, but it is hard to imagine how to amass the large enrollments that the school once had.

The falling out of favor of such institutions led to dismantling the neatly separate physical boundaries that these schools helped to maintain. The Maryland School for the Deaf, located in what was once rural Frederick, had the stately look of many schools for the deaf—a large brick building supported by enormous colonial style pillars and a sharp-edged iron fence around the perimeter of the campus. The school was physically separate from the neighborhood, set aside by the enormity of the buildings, and the large sign at its entrance proclaimed it as an institution for the deaf. Residents of Frederick did not walk onto the campus, instead they walked carefully around it and next to it. The students left the confines of the school only under strict supervision. Now those boundaries have faded; the iron fence is only decorative. The school remains to this day pleasantly separate, as any school might be, but is not forbidden territory. In fact, many of these schools have been rebuilt and redesigned to look more like public schools and less like asylums. The buildings are built closer to the ground and more sprawling, more decentralized than the older majestic buildings.

The spaces of these schools show that as physical boundaries changed and became more permeable, symbolic boundaries rose to prominence in a new way. Instead of iron fences, semantic boundaries of naming and categorization separated those who knew about the culture from those who did not. Some of these names were harsh, and just as barbed and pointed as the old fences. The language of the community makes fine distinctions between qualities of knowing the culture, whether one learned the language from deaf parents, or learned it later in life, whether one used more English in signing than other stylistic forms. Some deaf schools, too, began to describe themselves differently, not as “residential schools,” harking to an era of forced isolation, but as bilingual schools, where the distinction between them and other schools is their teaching philosophy and commitment to ASL as a language of education.

The geography of deaf education has changed from sending children off to remote institutions to sending them to their neighborhood schools, in effect fractionating the ways they can meet each other. Deaf communities that developed around deaf schools will no longer have the school to anchor them if the school has closed. Deaf clubs built in those communities in the shadow of deaf schools have become curiosities and anachronisms, populated mainly by the old and nostalgic. More and more “places” of the community are borrowed spaces. Instead of meeting at deaf clubs owned by members of an association, we rent hotel space and host conferences about Deaf Studies and ASL teaching, but the spaces are not ours, they are rented for the weekend. Instead of being schooled in institutions for the deaf, many of us are educated in public schools, sometimes in portable classrooms next to the asphalt playground, again borrowing space from school districts. In Fremont, California, a group of deaf senior citizens has successfully petitioned the City of Fremont to award them city space next to the deaf school for the purpose of building a retirement home. Is this a last gasp of holding onto an experience that harkens to an earlier time, of spending one’s last years in visible sight of a deaf school? Will the next generation of deaf people care as deeply about where they want to live?

The landscape has been altered, and we need to look upon it differently. The question is how? Cultural events in contemporary deaf communities have taken on a new prominence, as events formerly
exclusively within the community are moved to public places to become visible to others. San Diego, California, is an example of a contemporary Deaf community held together more by events than by institutions. The reason in part is because San Diego has never had a residential school; its deaf children until 1953 were sent to Berkeley to attend the California School for the Deaf. When a second school in Riverside was built by the state, deaf students from the southern part of the state transferred there. In recent years, there has been yet another shift. Now fewer children travel from San Diego to Riverside, instead they remain in the county, placed in the programs that local school districts run for them. After public mainstreamed schools, there are community colleges as well as universities. Both San Diego State University and the University of California, San Diego, have programs for training teachers of the deaf. San Diego State University has a graduate program for training rehabilitation counselors of the deaf. Several community colleges offer ASL classes as well as interpreter training programs. The social services center, Deaf Community Services of San Diego, has a bookstore, provides interpreters and vocational counseling as well as several other programs. San Diego is also home to one of the leading Deaf publishing companies, DawnSign Press, as well as a long-standing sign language research program at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies. These “sites” are not primarily social spaces but rather educational or service spaces, yet the events they offer, ranging from classes with other deaf students to poetry readings, research colloquia, and other sign language events provide a context for signers to meet.

The availability and frequency of deaf cultural events remain somewhat sparse. There are weekly religious meetings such as those of The Deaf Christian Fellowship of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Deaf congregation of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Aside from religious worship, the only weekly gatherings available are a deaf bowling league popular among older members of the community and for younger deaf men and women, a Friday night coffeehouse event at Café Crema in Pacific Beach. At the latter, both hearing signers and deaf people gather to socialize. With no real institutional support to sustain gatherings, these kinds of coffeehouse gatherings exist unstably, sometimes disintegrating with the invasion of curious hearing people eager to meet deaf people and practice their sign language. Perhaps the only reason that Café Crema has lasted a few years is that one of its purposes from the beginning was to allow deaf and hearing signers to interact. It is public knowledge that this is not a Deaf-only event but this does not prevent irritations from arising when beginning signers ask deaf people to help them fulfill a homework assignment for their ASL or interpreting class. The forum of the coffeehouse allows for the building of relationships within the community, as a venue for the symbolic work that takes place in conversations about deaf culture and identity as well as personal anecdotes that position the boundaries between deaf and hearing people. Other regular events include a monthly Deaf pizza night and open-captioned movies along with some events sponsored by the local chapter of the Southern California Recreational Association of the Deaf.

In areas like San Diego, culture circulates in more elusive ways through quasi-institutions and events in the discourses of the community. Nostalgically, we look to a once vibrant past when neatly bounded places such as the deaf clubs were sites for playing cards, telling stories and sharing jokes, even meeting future spouses. Hearing people rarely ventured inside these spaces except for those born or married into the culture. As the places for regular gatherings and cultural performances have become fewer and fewer, concerns about the maintenance and circulation of cultural forms that bond people together in communities of shared identities become greater. Physical boundaries that once created a cohesive sense of place in the community have been replaced with less obvious boundaries. The security once found in places that belonged to us is no longer to be found.

This leads to the question of whether fluid communities like San Diego's can sustain a sign language. Can fluid communities bear the burden of what Veditz beseeched the community to do in 1913, to find ways to “to keep and pass on [the language] to coming generations?” San Diego’s community exists in the shadow of other more durable and institutionalized communities like Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., New York, San Francisco, and Chicago. For much of American Sign Language’s remarkably long history—spanning nearly 200 years—
there was a steady growth in the number of deaf schools, which led to the establishment of deaf clubs and deaf associations in nearly every state. The result has been a strong national presence in maintaining a sign language with little regional variation for a long period of time. But these institutions are fading; some are being reinvented, others are being closed outright. If deaf children don’t live in residential schools, but live at home with their families and attend local public schools borrowed from others, is there still a sense of “there” anymore, as William Leach asks about the dispersal of space in modern American life (Leach 1999)? Will the new geography of education and social life, dispersed over a large and diffuse area, lead to a splintering of a national community and then eventually to the demise of the language? If the language continues to exist, will it survive only in regionalized form, as the strain to hold a national variety together starts to fall apart?

One way to imagine the future is to look at research on present-day sign languages of different ages. Wendy Sandler, Irit Meir, and Mark Aronoff have begun describing the sign languages of Israel. Even within a small country like Israel, there can be several sign languages, of different ages and of different origins. Israeli Sign Language, the national sign language, is between 40 and 50 years old, and can be traced to the German Sign Language used by deaf immigrants arriving in Israel from Berlin and other cities between 1935 and 1945. In recent years, immigrants from Russia, Morocco, Algeria, and Iraq have brought an influx of sign languages from those regions, adding to the vocabulary of Israeli Sign Language. Also interesting in this region of the world are sign languages of very recent origin, as in the case of the appearance of a deaf family in a Bedouin community. Traditional and of Muslim faith, Bedouins keep apart from the Israeli social system, thus creating conditions for the independent development of a home sign language. There are also a number of Arab and Druze villages where because of intermarriage, the incidence of deaf members in these villages is higher than it would be in a larger population. Over time, it appears that a local signing system has developed linking the deaf people in the villages. Religious ties have made possible development of a separate signing system, but over time proximity to the Israeli deaf community and access to Israeli schools has brought deaf Arabs and Druzes into contact with Israeli Sign Language.

When new sign languages were described by the anthropologists William Washabaugh (Washabaugh 1986; Washabaugh, Woodward, and DeSantis 1980) and Rolf Kuschel (Kuschel 1974), their examples were cases of sign language creation in geographically remote areas of the world, from Providence Island in the Caribbean to Rennell Island in the Pacific. In the case of Israel, the new languages are being created within a small space, demarcated by ethnic and religious boundaries, as Arab and Bedouin communities stay separate from the rest of Israel. Within the United States, Susan Goldin-Meadow and her colleagues have documented sign inventions by deaf children without access to ASL because their parents did not elect to send their children to schools where they would interact in a deaf community. A deaf child is born into a family of speakers, and in full view of parents and relatives, creates an independent sign language out of the gestural material of the world around the child. The parents for any number of reasons, do not know about a community of signers, or are shielded from this community, and the child continues to develop a sign language to communicate with siblings, friends, and parents (Goldin-Meadow 1993; Goldin-Meadow and Mylander 1983; Goldin-Meadow and Mylander 1984). The story of new sign languages, indeed about language communities and groups, shifts from sign languages on islands surrounded by oceans to sign languages separated only by area and a few miles.

The phenomenon of sign languages created within one generation, like Israeli Sign Language and home signs by American deaf children is age-old, as conditions of distance, either symbolic or geographic, of deaf people from each other make it possible for it to happen again and again through history. When we compare the structure of American Sign Language, which is at least 200 years old, with recent sign languages such as Israeli Sign Language, or very new sign languages such as those in small Bedouin and Arab communities, we can see both backwards and forwards as we project into the future how sign languages will change.

At least one lesson can be learned from this work on new sign languages: sign languages are easily amenable to invention. Even today, new sign languages are still being created, by ethnic groups separated by custom or by families separated by ideology in the case of hearing families who do not want their children to associate with signers. A single
def child in a hearing family can contrive a workable system, which
might become the raw material of a sign language or a deaf family in an
Arab village can find other deaf members in a neighboring village and
join signing resources. The iconicity and the visual nature of gestures
may be both the basis of how sign languages are created and how they
can survive over time. Gestural candidates for such concepts as “up” or
“down,” or body parts such as “eye” or “head” seem to produce iconically
obvious sign candidates. Once incorporated in a grammar, iconically
transparent signs rapidly become conventionalized and quickly lose their
gestural or iconic rigidity. Clearly there is a great difference between sign
languages that have survived many generations and those that are brand-
new. But, it could be argued that iconicity is the saving feature of sign
languages: It remains durable in all sign languages, overlaid by conven-
tionalized and grammatical forms, even obscured by them, but it never
entirely disappears (Taub 1997; Aronoff et al. forthcoming).

There is also another lesson from new sign languages. Sign lan-
guages can be invented many times over, but grammatical development
and complexity seems to depend on the presence of an institutional
core. When Nicaragua’s newly stable government built a school for deaf
children at Bluefields, the children who began to attend the school de-
veloped a sign language out of the individual home signs of the children
(Horgan 1995; Osborne 1999). The continued presence of young chil-
dren at the school over time created not only children whose own forms
were more complex, but the language available for newer arrivals at the
school was richer, contributing in turn to grammatically rich productions
by children who came more recently to the school (Senghas 1995). The development of the new language was swift, attesting to the
flexibility and the resources of the visual mode, and it recreated in mod-
tern times what must have been the start of sign languages like ASL,
which likely had regional forms before the first permanent school was
founded in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817. The disappearance of the
sign language on Martha’s Vineyard, which co-existed with the Hart-
ford and New England varieties, is most likely due to migration as the
language accompanied the deaf residents who left the island for the
New England mainland (Grose 1985; Lane 1999). The new school
at Bluefields not only brought a community of children and adults
together, it created social and cultural conditions for sustaining develop-
ment of a grammar.

In the modern age, technologies of communication and transporta-
tion have yielded a fluid geography of communities and identities. In
this environment, where people who share linguistic and ethnic back-
grounds are dispersed throughout urban areas, a sense of community
and identity becomes fragile. Indeed, the very concept of a shared cul-
ture rooted in a physical place may begin to break down. Telecommu-
nications and other technologies of travel and communication have
enabled communities to stretch farther over time and space; in effect,
communities are no longer defined by the unity of space. One can hop
on a plane and travel from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C., in a
matter of hours or send an email message halfway across the globe in
seconds. Vast distances that once required lengthy time to communi-
cate across have been shortened and time and space compressed. Post-
modern anxieties about time-space compression have yielded concerns
about the maintenance of community. If our sense of “place” is not de-
derived from a physical space, how can our community be maintained?
Will the future promises of an America, where more and more deaf
people have access to text pagers allowing for real-time digital print
conversations between remote parts of the world, weaken deaf commu-
nities tied to specific localities?

The observation that communities are not tied to particular geo-
 graphical neighborhoods is not really new, nor is it directly tied to the
penetration of all kinds of telecommunications devices into the daily
buzz of different relationships. Communities are not necessarily iso-
metric with places. Doreen Massey writes that “places have for cen-
turies been more complex locations where numerous different, and fre-
cently conflicting communities intersected” (Massey 1994). Religious,
political, and ethnic communities have experienced this flux and dis-
persed long before the telephone and the Internet stretched relations-
ships over time and space. These technologies have not necessarily
brought with them a change in the fundamental practices of commu-
nity but instead may have made more visible some of the cultural work
that must go on to create identity and community. Community and
identity are not static—they require continual re-creation. They are not
necessarily natural inhabitants of a place unified in space. Pan-ethnic communities such as those of Native Americans and Latinos as well as the Deaf community are examples of such fluid communities that require extensive cultural work through explicit talk and performance to remain cohesive (Sommers 1991; Weibel-Orlando 1999). Though we may not have a visible neighborhood to provide a sense of stable ground for the maintenance of Deaf culture, our stories, and our discourse carry the burden of forming the symbolic structure of our way of life. Cultural events provide a chance for this kind of cultural work, constructing "places" out of the temporary and boundaries out of words.

The anxieties many of us have at present about holding communities together are valid. In increasingly complex and diverse societies, the fabric of community life appears to be fragile indeed. But, perhaps identities and communities have always been fragile. Their fragility has just been obscured by other stabilities of place and institution. When we look at how different communities, despite lack of geographical cohesion, have managed to maintain and create community, we can see the symbolic work of remembering, rebuilding, and recreating the culture through various practices.

It is through cultural performances of ceremony, ritual, and festival in display events that we meet together to self-consciously and unself-consciously reflect upon our identities and connections to the community. Within the symbolic work of such performance, social tensions can be played out and resolved temporarily. Symbols and emblems are woven in and out of the action of performances to stitch deeper meanings into the fabric of interconnectedness between peoples. Borders are hemmed in and seams mended, emotions pricked. Whether at the signed poetry performance, the coffeehouse discussion or the church service, deaf people and their hearing allies continually worry about the positioning of those symbolic boundaries and the survival of American Sign Language. The hope of their own survival into an uncertain future is symbolically and literally tied to the survival of American Sign Language. Just as Veditz and his compatriots worried about the survival of their language almost 100 years ago, in some way, our constant anxiety about the demise of sign language (and its culture) has served as the

salvation from peril. This constant anxiety and expectation of the demise of the culture, moves us forward into a constant cycle of rebuilding and preparing for the rebuilding of the culture. Acting out this anxiety in positive ways provides us with the hope that we will not let go.

We close with a description of a photograph on the wall of the president’s residence at Gallaudet University. It was taken most likely in the late 1880s or early 1890s, a panoramic wide shot of the main grounds of the campus, from the President’s House to Faculty Row and includes the old Gymnasium and College Hall. A party of young men are standing, scattered around the lawn, nastily attired with walking canes and dark suits. As we look at their profiles and haughty arrangement across the lawn, we are struck by a sense of ownership that these men had of the land. The space of Gallaudet University is extraordinary indeed, 100 acres of land where deaf people have congregated since the founding of the university in 1864. Their confidence in place is palpable. But this stiffly proud collection of white men seems an anomaly, for now Gallaudet admits women and students of color. The old buildings in the photograph still exist, but interspersed among them are high-rise dormitories and modern brick structures. The pastoral campus of the waning years of the nineteenth century is gone as is segregation by race and gender. What we have to look forward to in the future is not that communities become fluid, but that as communities change and shift, they need to exist in the face of durable and stable places like Gallaudet. As communities become more fluid, the stability of places like this campus become even more significant.

As we face the challenges of maintaining cultural identity in the face of technological innovation, population diversity, and migration, we need to write a new description of the community that recognizes forces of regeneration and renewal and, at the same time, recognize the need for stability of place in different forms. As we continue to describe sign languages, especially those newly created and those existing for longer times, we will see that the human dimensions of language capacity and grammatical structure depend deeply on cultural institutions such as the school and the deaf associations, whose crucial role is to make possible durability and complexity.
References


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