

Deafness

Douglas C. Baynton

Deafness is not what it used to be. Nor has it ever been just one thing, but many. Typically it refers to those who cannot understand speech through hearing alone, with or without amplification. Colloquially, it may also refer to any hearing impairment, as when a person is described as “a little deaf.” Professionals in education and communication sciences distinguish prelingual from postlingual deafness, in recognition of their different implications for speech and language learning. Within the deaf community, in contrast, the term “deaf,” as well as its signed equivalent, usually refers to people who identify culturally as deaf, and is sometimes capitalized (“Deaf”) to distinguish the culture from the audiological condition.

In the nineteenth-century United States, culturally deaf people frequently referred to themselves as “mutes,” while educators used “semi-deaf” as a synonym for hard of hearing, “semi-mute” for the postlingually deafened who retained intelligible speech, and “deaf-mute” or “deaf and dumb” for the prelingually deaf. Deafness also has long been a common metaphor for a refusal to listen or to learn, as when the French writer Victor Hugo declared that “the one true deafness, the incurable deafness, is that of the mind” (qtd. in Lane 1984, ix).

In 1772, British writer Samuel Johnson called deafness the “most desperate of human calamities,” a view expressed more often by hearing than by deaf people. Deafness acquired after early childhood is usually experienced as a loss and a sorrow, at least for a time. Of this

experience, we have many accounts. In her essay “Letter to the Deaf” (1836), British author Harriet Martineau confessed that becoming deaf as a young woman had been “almost intolerable,” but now, at the age of thirty-four, she realized her suffering had arisen almost entirely from “false shame” (248–249). John Burnet, who became deaf at the age of eight, wrote in *Tales of the Deaf and Dumb* (1835) that while deafness “shuts its unfortunate subject out of the Society of his fellows,” this is due not to being “deprived of a single sense,” but rather to the circumstance “that *others* hear and speak.” Were everyone to use “a language addressed not to the ear, but to the eye,” he maintained, “the present inferiority of the deaf would entirely vanish” (47). The poet David Wright, who lost his hearing at age seven, wrote in 1969 that despite its impact on his life’s trajectory, “deafness does not seem to me to be a disproportionate element of the predicament in which I find myself; that is to say the predicament in which we are all involved because we live and breathe” (1993, 7).

Acquired deafness begins as hearing loss but becomes something different, a state of being in all its complexity. Deafness from birth or early childhood begins as a state of being. Martineau observed that “nothing can be more different” than the two experiences, for “instead of that false shame, the early deaf entertain themselves with a sort of pride of singularity” (1836, 248–249). Wright maintained that he was “no better placed than a hearing person to imagine what it is like to be born into silence” (1993, 236). Historically the early deaf have been far more likely to form communities and develop a mode of communication better adapted than speech to the visual sense than those who acquire deafness later on.

Hundreds of distinct sign languages are in use around the world today, in which the shape, orientation, position, and movement of the hands, combined with

facial expression and movements of the head and body, generate a range of linguistic possibilities as vast as the combinations of sounds used in spoken languages. Yet aside from scattered references, we know little about deaf communities prior to the eighteenth century. The literary scholar Dirksen Bauman has described the search for them as “a bit like tracing the paths of fireflies: the field is mostly dark, except for scattered moments of illumination” (2002, 452). In Plato’s *Cratylus* (ca. 360 BCE), for example, Socrates briefly refers to deaf people who “make signs with the hand and head and the rest of the body” but elaborates no further. In seventeenth-century Europe, with the growth of great cities, observations begin to multiply: in London, for instance, the diarist Samuel Pepys recorded an encounter with a “Dumb boy” who communicated fluently in “strange signs” (November 9, 1666), while the physician John Bulwer wrote of “men that are born deafe and dumb, who can argue and dispute rhetorically by signes” (1644, 5). In Paris, the philosopher René Descartes observed that “the deaf and dumb invent particular signs by which they express their thoughts” (1892, 283), while in the Dutch city of Groningen, the physician Anthony Deusing described deaf people who communicated with “gestures and various motions of the body” (1656; qtd. in Van Cleve and Crouch 1989, 16). Isolated communities carrying a recessive gene for deafness have occasionally appeared in which the proportion of deaf people was such that all of their members, hearing and deaf, became fluent in a sign language. The anthropologist Nora Groce (1985) discovered such a community on Martha’s Vineyard that lasted from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century.

Deaf communities come into clear view in the eighteenth century due to urbanization and the advent of schools for deaf children. In 1779, the deaf Parisian Pierre Desloges wrote that while the communicative ability of deaf people in the French provinces was

“limited to physical things and bodily needs,” in Paris they conversed “on all subjects with as much order, precision, and rapidity as if we enjoyed the faculty of speech and hearing” (qtd. in Lane 1984, 36). The Abbé Charles-Michel de l’Épée encountered that community by happenstance, studied its sign language, and founded the National Institution for Deaf-Mutes in Paris in 1776. The school gathered young deaf people from across the country, provided them with an education, and introduced them to the urban deaf community. The school had a profound influence on deaf education globally, with teachers and graduates bringing Parisian sign language to other countries in Europe and the Americas, and later to Asia and Africa.

Schools for deaf students greatly accelerated the process of creating a sense of shared identity and distinct cultures. The existence of deaf communities and their languages became increasingly controversial in the latter half of the nineteenth century, spawning a campaign to exclude sign language from the schools. The movement for “pure oralism” was rooted in a burgeoning nationalism that led many nations to suppress minority languages, as well as interpretations of evolutionary theory that cast sign languages as relics of savagery, and eugenic fears that deaf marriages would lead to the proliferation of “defectives.” The movement achieved an important symbolic victory when the Milan Congress of 1880, an international conference of educators of the deaf, affirmed the “incontestable superiority of speech over signs.” Deaf people and their organizations rallied against pure oralism, arguing that complete reliance on speech inevitably impaired the educational and linguistic development of many if not most deaf children. Nevertheless, oralism soon became the new orthodoxy in deaf education and remained so until the 1970s.

While childhood disease had long been the most common cause of deafness, its rapid decline in Western

countries in the second half of the twentieth century meant that those born deaf became increasingly predominant in the community, a demographic shift with profound implications. Whatever successes supporters of oralism had been able to claim earlier in the century had been based largely on the prevalence of postlingually deafened children. Now, success was increasingly rare and educators began to reconsider long-held assumptions. The character of the deaf community also began to change, as native or early signers became the majority. A confluence of factors—among them movements for minority rights, changing attitudes toward the body, and a growing acceptance of cultural diversity—furthered the development of a deaf rights movement based on pride in sign language and deaf identity.

The academic field of deaf studies arose from this movement. Repudiating the pathological model of deafness, it focused on the study of deaf cultural attributes, among them linguistic practices, literatures, rules of etiquette, values, marriage patterns, and community institutions. Ethnic studies rather than disability studies was its primary model. The term “deafness” came to be used mainly to denote hearing loss, as opposed to “deaf” (or “Deaf”) cultural identity. “Deafhood,” first proposed by British scholar Paddy Ladd (2003), is sometimes used as an alternative. Recent work in the field, however, has brought considerations of the body and concepts from disability studies into deaf studies. A growing emphasis on the centrality of vision to the deaf experience, and the ways in which deaf people process visual information differently from hearing people, has led some to suggest that deaf people might be better referred to as “visual people.” Dirksen Bauman and Joseph Murray (2009) have proposed the concept of “deaf gain” (as opposed to “hearing loss”) to suggest that diverse sense experiences can lead to valuable alternative ways of understanding.

Today multiple forces are confounding older conceptions of deafness. University students and scholars now study sign language, a movement begun by William Stokoe's linguistic research at Gallaudet University in the late 1950s. In many areas of the world, the stigma of deafness has been much reduced, while opportunities for higher education and employment have improved. At the same time, the majority of deaf children no longer attend separate schools, disrupting the intergenerational transmission of deaf cultural values and languages. Minority groups generally remain cohesive and distinct commensurate with their exclusion by the majority; like other minority groups that have gained social acceptance, the deaf community has seen many of its organizations, which proliferated in the twentieth century, disappear. An oft-discussed question is whether this signals the end of deaf culture or merely its adaptation to changed circumstances.

When the use of cochlear implants in children became widespread in the 1990s, a National Association of the Deaf (NAD) position paper called it "ethically offensive" (1991), and many deaf people viewed it as "cultural genocide." Today, with implants increasingly common, opposition has diminished. The current NAD position, adopted in 2000, accepts implants as "part of today's reality" and calls for "mutual respect for individual and/or group differences and choices." Deaf people are very aware, however, that advances in implant technology, coupled with genetic and stem cell medicine, may in the foreseeable future mean an end to deafness itself. George Veditz predicted a century ago that "as long as we have deaf people, we will have signs" (qtd. in Padden and Humphries 2005, 77). What if there are no deaf people? Among wealthier countries, where implantation rates now range from 50 to 90 percent of deaf children, the continued existence of viable deaf communities is in doubt (Johnston 2004). Markku Jokinen, the

former president of the World Federation of the Deaf, argued in 2001 for a community defined by the use of sign language rather than deafness. But whether a sign language-using community can persist without some critical number of deaf members is an open question. The phenomenon of deaf communities was born of a particular moment in history that may now be coming to an end. It was technological developments in agriculture, industry, and transportation that made modern cities—and thus modern deaf communities—possible. A new phase of technological innovation may soon bracket the other end.