

## Deafness and Orality: An Electronic Conversation

### Introduction

What follows is an edited digest of a wide-ranging conversation that took place on ORTRAD-L, the electronic discussion group sponsored by the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition, between February 4 and February 13, 1993. Like most such exchanges, it begins from a germ of an idea, an aside, or a question, and grows outward in many different directions, sometimes with a clearly sequential logic and sometimes with more of a summary or reprise texture. We present it here because of both its endemic interest for *OT*'s readership and its mimetic illustration of a new mode of verbal exchange and performance—neither “oral” nor “written,” precisely. Should this feature prove worthwhile, we may well present other “threads” from ORTRAD-L in the future.

To subscribe to the discussion, send the following e-mail message to [listserv@mizzou1.bitnet](mailto:listserv@mizzou1.bitnet), with no subject line: sub ORTRAD-L your name. First and last name are required for your subscription to be processed.

*Margaret Steiner:*

Here's another wrinkle to the “tertiary orality”<sup>1</sup> question. Eric [Crump] says that even for written language, most of us convert what we read into sound, and I know that that's what I do. But what about deaf

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<sup>1</sup> A previous discussion concerned fitting computer-mediated communication into Walter J. Ong's “primary” and “secondary” orality distinction (*Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, New Accent Series [London and New York: Methuen, 1982], pp. 135-37). “Tertiary orality” was suggested by Eric Crump as a possible term to describe the dual oral/literate nature of on-line conversation.

computer users? I have done no research among the hearing-impaired, but somebody out there who has can comment.

*Stephanie Hall:*

Marge, it is true that many prelingually Deaf people use written language very effectively even though they have never heard spoken language. Interestingly enough, this is especially true of second- or third-generation Deaf people whose parents signed to them. Sign languages are different from spoken languages, and from each other. American Sign Language is different in grammar and vocabulary from English, and different from British Sign Language as well.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A week after the cutoff date, the thread was briefly picked up again in another context, and Lois Bragg provided this more detailed description of ASL: “ASL, American Sign Language, indeed is a language and has its own syntax, wholly unrelated to that of English. ASL is a non-Indo-European language, related closely to French Sign Language, from which it branched off in the nineteenth century. (It is also wholly unrelated to BSL, British Sign Language, which is also wholly unrelated to English.) What [you are] evidently thinking of here is what we call MCE, Manually Coded English, an umbrella term for various invented systems of encoding spoken English into signs. . . . It is very easy to confuse an MCE system for ASL, and it happens all the time. Further complicating matters is a widely used pidgin, called PSE, Pidgin Sign English. I use this pidgin a great deal myself, and when you see me at an academic conference with an interpreter, this is the language we are using during the sessions. We switch to ASL for socializing. I can’t produce any MCE system, and read them with great difficulty.”

Stephanie Hall adds this comment: “ASL and other human sign languages most *certainly* are languages. ASL is *not* English. It took those of us doing research on these languages a very long time to convince linguists of this. Now this has been firmly established. . . .

“There are reasons why this confusion still persists. When people see interpreters on TV they often get the sense that what they are seeing is signs from English. And that is mostly true, with some ASL thrown in. Interpreters are hearing, and their job is to make English comprehensible to the Deaf. There is a long tradition of using signs in English Syntax as a language mixture (sometimes called a pidgin, but it is not) as a way of communicating between the Deaf and the hearing. But these conventions should not be confused with ASL used by the Deaf among themselves. This is rather like using Chinese vocabulary in English syntax and then having people say that Chinese is just English with funny sounds.

“But, for the record, ASL has its own grammar, vocabulary (which does not

So how do kids grow up in a home where a non-English visual language is used and without the ability to hear English spoken (lipreading is not a substitute), and yet write effectively enough to go to college, become professionals, and even write books and Ph.D. dissertations? While written language has a strong relationship to oral language, it does not absolutely depend upon it.

If you are interested in reading more about this, Madeline Maxwell has studied deafness and literacy. She had an article in *Language and Society* a couple of years back.<sup>3</sup>

*Eric Crump:*

That's a wrinkle-and-a-half, Marge, especially if we're talking about people who have been hearing-impaired from birth and whose only face-to-face language has been sign. If we accept Ong's pronouncement on the fundamental orality of language,<sup>4</sup> we might say that even sign language, though it has no auditory quality, is related to orality in the same way printed words are: it couldn't occur without prior oral language.

*Lois Bragg:*

lois bragg here, at the gallaudet university english department, being bombarded with private messages soliciting my response to the recent postings on orality and deafness (and doing deaf typing, a derivative of tty communication, which allows for no upper-/lower-case distinctions and

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correspond to English vocabulary on a word-to-word basis), and syntax. It is a highly inflected language. It generates its own new vocabulary (rather than acquiring words from other languages extensively as English does). It uses a visual directional syntax common to visual languages. It uses classifiers (like Navaho, I am told). In short, it is not only a language, it is a *very different language from English.*"

<sup>3</sup> "Some Functions and Uses of Literacy in the Deaf Community," *Language in Society*, 14 (1985): 205-21.

<sup>4</sup> *Orality and Literacy*, p. 7.

makes most marks of punctuation a two-key hassle).<sup>5</sup> to be perfectly honest, i havent felt quite up to joining this thread, for reasons that may become clear below. however, because ive gotten quite a bit from this net in its very short life, i guess i have some responsibility to give something (crotchety) back on a subject some folks seem to think i know something about. besides, its easier than answering all those private notes! so here goes. . . .

1) in my considered opinion, deaf culture is absolutely an “oral” culture. father ong is absolutely wrong on this point. asl (american sign language) is an “oral” language. and asl literature is an “oral” literature—perhaps the only true living “oral” literature in the western world. however, this point is neither readily apparent nor widely accessible because,

2) the deaf community is (regrettably) a closed community, for many reasons, not the least of which is the language barrier. entry to this community is absolutely dependent upon learning the language (asl), which aint easy, and, on top of that, having some sort of very close contact with deaf people. short of membership in the deaf community, there is no other way to get reliable information on the language or literature because,

3) you cant believe ANYTHING you read, including this posting. all issues, including and especially those that have appeared on this net, are hotly debated within the deaf community, and there is no such thing as a basic textbook or primer that isnt under fire from one sizable segment of the deaf community. as an example, i would say that in my opinion,

4) it simply is not so that “many” deaf people become effective writers of english, or that written english is not necessarily dependent upon audition/speech. i would bet my right arm (a big bet for a signer) that no one of the 200 members of the gallaudet faculty would fail to snort at that opinion, tho, god help us, we all very much wish it were true, and regularly behave as if it were. (what else can we do, when faced with a classroom full of shockingly intelligent students who come to us with grammar-school-

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<sup>5</sup> The TTY (teletypewriter), also known as the TDD telecommunication device for the deaf, and TT (text telephone), is a device with a keyboard, a one-line display, and a means of connection to telephone lines, which allows people who are deaf or who do not speak to communicate by phone. To preserve the distinctive “voice” resulting from this method, no attempt has been made to edit Bragg’s “deaf typing” into standard printing conventions.

level, ESL<sup>6</sup> reading and writing skills?) but if the truth be told, even the dullest member of the deaf community could spot my prose a mile away as the product of a late-deafened person with usable, auditory memory of the idioms, cadences, and tones of speech. the sharpest, of course, will recognize that my auditory memory has receded, in that my prose is now somewhat stilted—a sure sign that i read a lot and do not hear at all, which brings me to my final point:

5) please dont be put off by my tone in this posting! it is partly a tone-deaf, deaf tone. and partly that i saw the thread as something like that which a group of notable brain surgeons might achieve if they were to undertake the dating of *beowulf*: a worthy effort indeed (yup, im an anglo-saxonist). but i humbly advise english 501: old english, before they begin. and because i like to contradict myself,

6) i humbly advise harlan lanes *mask of benevolence*,<sup>7</sup> which you may safely (take it from me!) believe. and finally (will she never shut up?), im happy to grab the opportunity to say that,

7) our listowner<sup>8</sup> is a prominent aficionado of and advocate for deaf culture and asl, and is in fact the person who induced the NEH to recognize and provide for the needs of deaf academics.

*Stephanie Hall:*

Hello Lois, nice to meet you. I am a hearing signer and I had a Deaf Grandmother (Ethel Taylor Hall, Gallaudet class of 1900). I did my dissertation, and have published a few articles, on the social aspects of deafness, particularly folklore and sociolinguistics. This doesn't make me an expert either—just another one of the many voices adding to the confusion on this subject.

I agree with you that sign language is, in all the ways intended by this discussion, an oral language. Doesn't that sound strange?! In talking

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<sup>6</sup> English as a Second Language.

<sup>7</sup> Harlan Lane, *Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> "Listowner" refers to the individual who originated this discussion group.

about signs we usually contrast oral, meaning language physically spoken with the oral apparatus, with signed, meaning language physically spoken on the hands. But when it comes to “oral tradition” there is no significant difference between the signed and the spoken. Neurolinguist Ursula Bellugi<sup>9</sup> has looked at this and found that ASL happens, by and large, in the same part of the brain as spoken language (in an area just behind the left ear).

Fingerspelling is a different thing—a way of representing spoken languages on the hands (usually just a word here and there, but sometimes phrases). Now that is an interesting variation on this theme of oral writing. Perhaps fingerspelling is an example of writing orally?

I do think that the achievements of the Deaf in acquiring proficiency in writing spoken languages challenges the idea that writing is dependent on oral speech (an idea I think originated with Chomsky rather than Ong?). But I hope I didn't seem to overstate Deaf literacy. It depends on your perspective, I guess. Many hearing people are astonished to find out that there are around 100 Deaf Americans with Ph.D.'s, for instance. But if we are talking about improving education of the Deaf—certainly we need to do a lot better. Many of those Ph.D.'s will tell you they got their degrees in spite of, rather than because of, the educational establishment.

And you are right that there are gaps and difficulties in achieving literacy for people who do not hear language. Sometimes interesting ones in terms of oral tradition—because it is oral traditions that the Deaf have the least access to. It is possible to learn to write from reading and writing, but you don't learn what is talked. English idioms, slang, and cultural attitudes are often very difficult for the Deaf to absorb. So it is not surprising, for example, that of the writing published by prelingually deaf authors, there is quite a bit of non-fiction, some poetry, but very little fiction.

I've rambled on enough. Besides, I can't spell this early in the morning!

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<sup>9</sup> See Howard Poizner, Edward S. Klima, and Ursula Bellugi, *What the Hands Reveal About the Brain* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

*Theresa Skrip:*

It might be useful to make a distinction between the historical development of writing, typography, online modes of communication on the one hand, and the acquisition of individual speaking, reading, and writing skills on the other. Ong does not presuppose that individual people must be able to, themselves, physically speak to learn language. Even the old Chomskian argument for the “language acquisition device” would not claim that. Ong’s statements about the transition from orality to literacy are not statements about ontogeny.

I’d like to refer us, then, back to Eric’s comment that you first need a base oral language in which to operate before you can develop, historically and as a culture, writing as we know it now. If we were, as a species, completely unable to hear all those eons ago when we were just forming our basic ways of communicating, we undoubtedly would have developed some manner of communication with each other; however, this manner would likely have been much different from “alphabetization,” which is fundamentally a way of translating sound into text.

*Erica M. Dibietz:*

Hello Stephanie. . . and hello to you Lois (we meet again on the NET :)<sup>10</sup> I am particularly interested in what you both are writing as I am translating an assessment tool for substance abuse for use with the deaf/hearing impaired. I am fortunate in having some deaf counselors and an interpreter help me with this undertaking. They are providing me with some of the “nuts and bolts,” i.e. translating the english into ASL and adding some critical questions, i.e. education and medical info. BUT I need some theoretical underpinnings, i.e. why does this have to be translated etc. and you both speak to differences in those who are born

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<sup>10</sup> The colon followed by end parenthesis is called an “emoticon,” one of a group of typographic representations of facial expressions turned on their sides for the purpose of communicating to the discussants attitudes normally conveyed by facial expression, gesture, and physical appearance. The example above is the basic emoticon of friendliness or a joke; however, others are often quite imaginative. For instance, the sequence ;- ) means the speaker is winking, :-o registers shock or surprise, and 8-) represents a speaker who wears glasses.

deaf/h.i. and those who have lost their hearing at a later time and therefore have memory of spoken language. Can you give me some more specifics on this as well as references? I will be happy to cite you in my article. Many thanks and keep up the discussion.

*Lois Bragg:*

hi, this is lois again, with an omnibus posting in response to a new batch of private queries and net postings.

asl ranks third in the u s, behind english and spanish, for the number of people who use it as their primary language at home. this makes it by far the most widely used oral language. as such, it rewards study by oral-traditional scholars. dan, your student has a head start on havelock since she s studying asl.<sup>11</sup> i find a lot in his work on greek culture that looks deaf to me. (thats a compliment to all concerned.)

now, what do i mean by oral? stephanie halls explanation is good. in addition, i would point out that asl has no written form. linguists have developed several writing systems for asl, but they are universally shunned by deaf people. like socrates, perhaps, we want to keep our culture oral, and refuse to use them. as theresa skrip astutely guesses, they are not alphabets, but rather syllabaries or logograms, although i understand that an alphabet is in the works. we wont use it!

how is deaf culture oral? this looks like a good idea for an article, but let me just throw out a few things I copped from ong. (by the way, my quarrel with ong is merely that he refuses to believe that deaf sign languages are indeed natural languages, not manual codes of spoken languages. this is wrong, wrong, wrong, and stephanie hall has explained why.) lets see . . . in deaf culture, expression is formulaic, patterned, mnemonic, redundant, conservative, traditional, situational, concrete, empathetic, and participatory. asl syntax is additive rather than subordinative, and the literature is aggregative rather than analytic, and full of personification. how's that, jim? and yes, there is a class of professional "singers" who are the repositories of accumulated cultural knowledge, but

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<sup>11</sup> Refers to a request from Dan Melia for opinions on how best to introduce an undergraduate speech pathology major who studies ASL to the works of Eric Havelock on oral culture.



everyone takes a turn when the harp is passed and it's rare to find a deaf cædmon who is too shy or inept to sing.

there is quite a bit of published writing by deaf authors and it is largely non-fiction, as stephanie points out. more interesting, however, is the vast literature in asl, a tiny bit of which is available on videotape, the rest, as with all oral literatures, you have to catch at a deaf get-together. in asl, you will find a full range of literary/oral genres, including epics (there is a very good one called, in english translation, "deaf president now," which deals with the events at gallaudet in march 1988 and was composed shortly after that historic coup d'état),<sup>12</sup> drama, lyric poetry, folktales, jokes (lots of jokes), but not fiction, of course, for obvious reasons.

finally stephanie and i agree on all points she has brought up in her two recent postings except one: her contention on the ability to learn to read and write english through access to its writing system only. maybe we are just differing on the degree to which this is possible. stephanie, im sure you know bob johnson, scott liddel, and carol ertings "unlocking the curriculum,"<sup>13</sup> but for the rest of you folks, this is a seminal article written by three of my colleagues asserting the *theoretical* possibility of acquiring english literacy without speech. i say theoretical, because it is not possible to experiment on deaf children by withholding speech therapy to see if they can do it. i tried this experiment on myself by trying to learn a language written in a non-roman alphabet (russian) and it didnt work. i simply couldnt make heads or tails of it without knowing the sound values of the characters. i gave up after a couple of weeks of hell, and taught myself what i could of what russian might sound like by using the international phonetic alphabet equivalents for the characters and pitch charts for the syntax, and went through five happy semesters to tolstoi. i am told that i speak russian very poorly, and with a german accent, and write it like a

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<sup>12</sup> "Deaf President Now" was the student protest that closed Gallaudet University, brought the students into the streets of Washington and into the national news media, and resulted in the resignation of the recently appointed hearing president and the appointment of Gallaudet's first deaf president. The epic concerning this event was composed and is performed by Gil Eastman, a now retired member of the Gallaudet Theater Department faculty.

<sup>13</sup> Bob Johnson, Scott Liddel, and Carol Erting, *Unlocking the Curriculum: Principles for Achieving Access in Deaf Education* (Washington D.C.: Gallaudet University, 1989).

german, too, tho i read it ok. this experience seems analogous to that of prelingually deaf people who typically learn to read and write english by associating the written characters with their estimate of what the sound values might be. the result is a pidgin: the words are english, but the grammar is asl. (but now we are in a linguistics discussion, and stephanie and i should go off-list if we want to pursue it.) in fine, i would say that alphabetic writing is dependent upon the oral language it encodes.

with sincere apologies for the length of this posting, and a vow to break any further comments into discrete and better labeled chunks.

*Stephanie A. Hall:*

Lois, I love the idea of Deaf Cædmoms! I have met many myself. I am not sure we really disagree. Or if we do, I am not sure how we disagree. Since I am replying on list I will try to keep my reply relevant to the topic:

Lois's citation of Johnson, Liddell, and Erting is an important one, because it is essentially an applied challenge of the theoretical view that acquisition of written language is dependent on the acquisition of oral language. Some Oralist educators of the deaf took the notion of oral-before-written to a horrific extreme; isolating deaf children from signed languages and withholding the introduction of written language until spoken language was achieved. If Chomsky was right, they should have succeeded, but this system failed—and damaged the education of many deaf children.<sup>14</sup>

Johnson, Liddell and Erting are not proposing any such extreme experiment to prove that language can be taught through writing. They say only that the *primary* means for teaching writing to deaf children should be writing (page 17). They also say that children should be exposed to and acquire a natural language as early as possible so they will have a language on which to base further language learning. The only natural language the deaf can acquire is sign. (This is an overly short summary, see the monograph, *Unlocking the Curriculum: Principles for Achieving Access in*

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Pierre Oléron's preface to A. Van Oden, *Sign Languages of Deaf People and Psycholinguistics: A Critical Evaluation* (Lisse, The Netherlands: Swets & Zeitlinger, 1986), pp. 1-7. For a history of Deaf education in America, see Harlan Lane, *When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf* (New York: Random House, 1984).

*Deaf Education*, 1989).

They base their position on several studies that concluded that for the deaf, writing is the most successfully taught through writing, and that written language should be introduced at a very early age.

For me, as an ethnographer, the ethnographic evidence is most compelling. Deaf children of deaf parents are especially likely to succeed and to achieve a high level of literacy. The deaf must be doing something right that hearing educators are doing wrong. And it isn't too hard to see: deaf children in deaf homes acquire natural sign language. Deaf parents introduce writing at a very early age and children see their parents using TTYs and other writing to communicate. Sign language is used to talk about English. Speech is considered important too—but it is a *secondary* rather than a *primary* means of learning spoken language. And, perhaps most important, Deaf parents believe their children can succeed linguistically. Unlike hearing parents and educators, they do not underestimate their deaf children's potential.

I am not saying that hearing and speaking language does not affect literacy, of course it does. I am not saying that the Deaf can or do achieve identical competence to the hearing in written language—there are certainly differences. Only that the fact that some prelingually deaf people do achieve high levels of competence in written language and that they learn literacy *primarily* (not exclusively) through reading and writing challenges the idea that spoken competence in a language *necessarily* precedes literacy.

Sorry this got so long. I find it is hard to discuss *anything* about deafness briefly, it all gets so complicated. But also I think we get tangled up when we try and make short statements, because we seem to be saying things in extremes. I hope I have helped to make things clearer—or have I muddied it up some more?

*Lois Bragg:*

perhaps at this point in the discussion, some of you would like to see some writing samples from deaf, undergraduate english majors, to determine for yourselves to what degree they are commensurate with those of their hearing peers, and, thus, to what degree deafness interferes with the ability to acquire proficiency in a written encoding of an oral/aural language. since I have access to their files (because i coordinate the

program and am their advisor), i can pull such samples and tag them with respect to residual hearing (if any) and deaf/hearing status of parents, pending, of course, student permission. if anyone is interested, please let me know and ill go off-list with a d-list, where we can have a knock-down-drag-out fight over syntax and morphology.

in the meantime, i would like to point out that jim earl has made a very astute observation (unfortunately off-list) concerning the analogy between the deaf community with regard to english and the anglo-saxons with regard to latin. in both cases, we have a community using a low-prestige, oral language at home, and being schooled in a high-prestige L2, which is the language of literature and learned discourse. the validity of this analogy and what, if valid, we may learn from it, i dunno. as i told jim, i gave a paper on this very subject a couple of years ago, but it was orally composed and delivered, so poof! its gone. i can remember it all right because it was mnemonic (natch), redundant, concrete, empathetic, etc, but id sound like dweeb if i tried to translate it into english. the words above are jims.<sup>15</sup>

*Karen Colburn:*

Thanks to Lois and Jim and you others who are developing this conversation. I'm an Alaska Native, an actor, a Maine native, a graduate student. My undergraduate work was in French, German, Theology, with a lot of theatre courses. Presently, I am only beginning to look at what it means to be the daughter of an Alaska Native woman, fully acculturated, what DOES that mean. So, this semester I am looking at Native American Literature, a new course in the English dept. at Univ. of Maine. Yeah, so?

Well, your discussion of orality/literacy catches my attention. Especially when Lois points out that there is a recognizable difference in the writing of people in different levels of hearing. . . . Lois puts it much cleaner. We just read *Indian Boyhood* by Charles Eastman, and today the professor mentioned that it was actually his WIFE who wrote the ms., from the notes Charles made during his morning walks. He could talk (he could take notes), he could TELL his stories, but he couldn't WRITE them.

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<sup>15</sup> Response from "jim" (James W. Earl): "Lois—perhaps some of the words were mine, but I never said dweeb."

Neither could he write his weekly reports when he was serving as a government agent. This from a Dartmouth graduate, and a physician to boot. So what happened when this Sioux became literate?

So thanks, all, for your debate. I, for one, would love to see some examples of writing that illustrate observable differences in stages of hearing conversations, or just learning prose from reading.

*Lois Bragg:*

this is lois, thinking that some of you may be interested in a couple of conversations i had today with published deaf authors. around 7 30 this morning, not much to my surprise, i found myself on the gallaudet shuttle bus from union station to campus with the worlds only published deaf novelist.<sup>16</sup> i asked her why it was that so few deaf people attempt novels. her immediate answer was that deaf writers write for deaf readers, and that deaf readers arent much interested in novels, AND that prose fiction is a late development in all cultures. she pointed out that deaf writers of prose prefer autobiography, to which i responded that our lives are much stranger than fiction. this cracked up the whole bus and nearly produced an accident at 6th and k streets. end of ethnographic interview 1. but she did beg me, in passing, to point out to the list that jonathan swift doesnt count. duly noted.

then, this afternoon, i posed the same question to a well-produced (off-broadway) deaf playwright,<sup>17</sup> who has had a few of his short stories published. he told me that he writes short fiction only as an exercise for trying out ideas for his plays, a technique he learned from studying with derek walcott. (were showing off here.) he said he didnt quite know what the deal was with novels—why people write ‘em and read ‘em. he composes his dramatic scripts orally and then translates them into english. this comment recalled the technique of another deaf playwright who writes his scripts in facing-page translations: english on the right and english gloss with diacritics of asl on the left. this second playwright claims to think in both languages at the same time when he is writing drama. he also has a

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<sup>16</sup> Andrea Shettle, *Flute Song Magic* (New York: Avon, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Willy Conley.

couple of books of non-fiction, which he claims to have written by thinking in english. he claims that this is a big bore, and is happiest translating moliere into asl, tho there isnt a big audience for this work.

thank you to karen for her note on charles eastman, who wrote by dictating to his wife, tho he was a dartmouth grad and physician. looks to be a good analogy to me.

*Barra Jacob-McDowell:*

Like Karen, I have been reading this thread with interest. Also, it is not my field at all. I'm not certain if this is the appropriate place to mention this but will anyway; I'm curious about what feedback I might receive.

Every year while I was growing up, my blind grandmother would come and visit us for two months. She was undoubtedly the most important influence on my life; it's thanks to her that I have become a Celtic storyteller. When I was 7, I borrowed Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life* and read it to Gramma. We were both fascinated, and since the book had diagrams in the back for sign language, we promptly learned them. I searched out every book I could find to share with her. A year later Gramma, aged 80, was tricked into going to an eye doctor (she didn't believe in doctors much, and was convinced that her blindness was a test of her faith). Young doctor's diagnosis was cataracts which "could've been taken care of 38 yrs. ago." Most of the family pitched in to pay for the operations, and Gramma, having a crisis of faith, and scared to death of hospitals, was taken off for them and the very long recuperation necessary in those pre-laser days. I was not allowed to visit her. Wanting her to feel better, I wrote to Miss Keller c/o the Lighthouse for the Blind in NY. Everyone was astonished except for me when she sent Gramma a get-well card and an invitation for us to come to tea at her home, I think on Long Island in the spring. That card was the first thing Gramma wanted to see with her new glasses. We did go, just the 2 of us, by bus from my hometown in New Jersey, and were met in NY by her companion. I remember a long room filled with beautiful things to see and touch, fragile china, the great kindness of Miss Keller—and the communication problem. I had never been around any deaf person before, and I simply could not understand her speech. The solution was for me to sit between the two

ladies; Miss Keller felt what I said with one hand, while I spelled into her hand whatever Gramma said; she spelled her responses into one of my hands, and I spelled them into Gramma's with the other. Somewhat slow, but it worked. What has always intrigued me was the fact the Gramma could not simply look at my fingers to know what I was spelling. She had learned them by touch, and could not then nor in the remaining 4 yrs. of her life adapt to reading them visually. I was told by a college roommate who had a deaf friend from whom she had learned to sign, that signing is different for the deaf/blind than for the deaf, which makes sense.

After all this, here is my question: is it especially difficult for someone deaf who learned to sign as a sighted person later to make the transition to the other signing after losing sight?

*Lois Bragg:*

john "the lurker" mclaughlin missed seeing koko a couple of nights ago on tv.<sup>18</sup> believe me, this gorilla carries on conversations in asl. in that clip (anybody got the cite?—my kids came running for me and i didnt catch the name of the program) we see koko discussing her taste in men and selecting a date on the basis, she said, of his hairiness, thus proving that she is after all just a gorilla, though a language-using one. it wont do simply to correct aristotle by correcting his (historically contingent) misapprehension of language as necessarily oral/aural. add other modes in which language can occur, and his definition of humans as language-using animals is no better than the old featherless-biped definition. a plucked chicken eliminated that one, and koko eliminates this one.

*Enid Hilton:*

Hallo Lois. This is Enid Hilton from South Africa wishing to join in your very interesting discussion on "orality" and deafness. I am a teacher of the deaf and am curious to know why you are so adamant that you want to keep your culture oral. Would it not help pre-lingually deaf children to

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<sup>18</sup> Refers to a statement indicating that apes have only limited ability to manipulate symbols.

acquire more concepts and information if they had access to a written form of their language? At the moment they have to rely on another person to gain information if they can't read. The written form would enable them to learn independently to some extent. Also, if ASL was available in a written form, would hearing people not have more access to its literature, language, and culture?

You also say that the oral literature of the deaf does not include fiction "for obvious reasons." I am not clear that I know the reasons. Could you elaborate? If ASL was taught as a first, natural language to prelingually deaf children, would you not tell the children "deaf" stories through ASL to develop their imaginations? Would their teaching be focused primarily on reality?

Please bear with all these questions! It is exciting to be part of an international discussion. Oh yes, could you please send a reference for Father Ong whom you mention? Thanks. Bye for now.

*Paul Jordan-Smith:*

The note about Koko should be posted to the semiotic list, where it would doubtless receive a very lively response and possibly a sound drubbing. The semiotic view, especially of zoosemioticians like Sebeok,<sup>19</sup> is that signing of this kind does NOT a language make. There are lots of issues here, and a lot of problems, such as the presence of humans familiar to the animal and the possibility of unconscious signaling. This doesn't negate animal communication—but it calls into question animals communicating *in human language*. There's a respectable bibliography of studies undertaken, not just at the "animal trainer" level, but at the semiotic. Take a look at Sebeok's *Animal Communication, Perspectives in Zoosemiotics*, and a couple of the essays in *A Sign is Just a Sign*, as well as two anthologies edited by him and Jean Umiker-Sebeok: *The Clever Hans*

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<sup>19</sup> *Animal Communication: Techniques of Study and Results of Research* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968); *Perspectives in Zoosemiotics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972); *A Sign is Just a Sign* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); *The Clever Hans Phenomenon: Communication with Horses, Whales, Apes, and People*, ed. with Robert Rosenthal (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1981); and *Speaking of Apes: A Critical Anthology of Two-way Communication with Man*, Topics in Contemporary Semiotics (New York: Plenum Press, 1980).



*Phenomenon, and Speaking of Apes.*

*Theresa Skrip:*

Koko's pretty amazing, I agree. In fact, gorillas have an even better propensity for acquiring sign language than their cousins, the chimpanzees (see F.G. Patterson's "The Gestures of a Gorilla" in *Brain and Language*, 5 [1978]:72-97).

No one, I think, will argue that speech is not necessary for communication on some level. We know that animals communicate in a number of different ways; unfortunately, none of these ways are equivalent to human language. Even ape studies, as promising as they look, have failed to show that apes can sign with Ameslan,<sup>20</sup> Yerkish designs, Premack symbols, or other ape symbol systems using the same grammatically inferred relations that humans use when they communicate with language. When we see a string of ape signs, we might infer grammatical relations among them that the ape does not. For example, Terrace et al. (1979)<sup>21</sup> have argued that when the chimpanzee, Washoe, signed "water bird" for "swan," in response to the question "What that?" Washoe might have been identifying water and bird, but not using "water" specifically like an adjective, as we would. Others in the field have made similar criticisms of the conclusions drawn from ape language studies.

A further complicating factor in the "origins of language" debate (which is what we are really discussing now, I think) is that some neuropsychological research has suggested that lesions (as a result of injury or stroke, typically) in the area of the brain disrupting vocal speech also disrupt signing ability (see Kimura's research, especially 1979 and 1981).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Another name for ASL.

<sup>21</sup> H.S. Terrace, L.A. Petitto, R.J. Sanders, and T.G. Beyer, "Can an Ape Create a Sentence?" *Science*, 206 (1979): 891-902.

<sup>22</sup> D. Kimura, "Neuromotor Mechanisms in the Evolution of Human Communication," in *Neurobiology of Social Communication in Primates: An Evolutionary Perspective*, ed. by J.D. Steklis and M.J. Raleigh (New York: Academic Press, 1981), pp.

This would lead some to conclude (and they have) that vocal language and signing are controlled by the same areas of the brain.

One final point here is that in making apes learn to sign, we might be underestimating their true communicative ability in, if you will, “ape speak.” That is, some researchers (most notably Goodall<sup>23</sup>) have pointed out that apes have a huge repertoire of communicative sounds and sound combinations that are analogous in complexity to our own language but are not necessarily analogous in grammar, syntax, or abstraction to human language. I’m not trying to argue that apes, or any other types of animals, do not communicate. What I am saying is that they do not communicate in what we would understand to be “language” in the human sense.

*Lois Bragg:*

a quick answer to this question from barra jacob-mcdowell:

I was told by a college roommate who had a deaf friend from whom she had learned to sign, that signing is different for the deaf/blind than for the deaf, which makes sense. . . .

After all this, here is my question: is it especially difficult for someone deaf who learned to sign as a sighted person later to make the transition to the other signing after losing sight?

well, first of all, thank you for a great story.

the sign language that deaf-blind people use is just ordinary asl. the only way it differs is that there must be physical contact between the two people signing with one another, which will cause some changes in articulation, and some exaggeration of the articulation to replace the loss of grammatical features that would ordinarily be articulated in facial expression.

i think the point of confusion here is that helen keller did not use sign language, but rather fingerspelling, which is simply a method of spelling

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197-219. D. Kimura, “Neural Mechanisms in Manual Signing,” *Sign Language Studies*, 33 (1979): 291-312.

<sup>23</sup> J. Goodall, *The Chimpanzees of Gombe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

english words. hope this is helpful.

*Lois Bragg:*

this is lois, responding to enid hiltons posting today:

Hallo Lois. This is Enid Hilton from South Africa wishing to join in your very interesting discussion on “orality” and deafness. I am a teacher of the deaf and am curious to know why you are so adamant that you want to keep your culture oral? Would it not help pre-lingually deaf children to acquire more concepts and information if they had access to a written form of their language? At the moment they have to rely on another person to gain information if they can’t read. The written form would enable them to learn independently to some extent. Also, if ASL was available in a written form, would hearing people not have more access to its literature, language, and culture?

enid is right, of course: literacy is a good thing in general, and a good thing for a minority language. am i adamant about the deaf community staying oral? the community will either do what it has to do to survive, or it will perish. many people would say the latter would be a good thing, because deafness is a pretty serious disability. even deaf people who are proud of being deaf and of their membership in this minority community are quite aware of what it is to be unable fully to participate in civic life—I mean, WE cant join the army, either! but most of us want the community to survive and flourish, and so we stick to the old ways. if i may venture an analogy by paraphrasing i.b. singer, we keep kosher to avoid assimilation.

about writing systems for asl, i should mention that i, myself, am a big fan of sutton sign writing, a logographic system that includes an alphabet for loan words. for this, i am considered an eccentric. many of you will not be surprised that i can read it but not write it. the only person i know who can write it is my sister, who is, like many deaf people, a printer by trade, and who actually prints stuff written in it. she has no readers.

You also say that the oral literature of the deaf does not include fiction “for obvious reasons.” I am not clear that I know the reasons. Could you elaborate? If ASL was taught as a first, natural language to prelingually deaf children would you not tell the children “deaf” stories through ASL to

develop their imaginations? Would their teaching be focused primarily on reality?

i really wish that this net would take up this question about fiction being a literary genre dependent upon writing (if not printing). all i can say about the deaf community, as an oral culture, is that we dont do fiction, as a rule. there is a lot of prose narrative, but it is largely epic, legend, (pseudo)history, and (auto)biography. the last is quite stylized, and much more like hagiography than modern forms.

can we please change the subject now? im pooped. how about if you all help me and enid and explain to us what those "obvious reasons" are for the lack of fiction in oral cultures.

*Theresa Skrip:*

"Fiction," for me, is one of those messy words that I never really know the meaning of. Does anybody else feel this way?

Prose narrative, on the other hand, is a little less messy, I think. If we look at how narratives are structured, what we notice is that published prose fiction is often linear in nature and non-repetitive. This type of writing and reading requires us to think in ways that preliterate people would likely not think. That is, oral narrative depends on less linear, more repetitive forms and epithets so that audiences would be able to remember the characters and events as well as hear the speaker tell them (after all, tales were probably told in group settings where there were many distractions).

What I surmise from my readings in this area is that, as literates, we have certain expectations and values about narrative structure that are very different from what pre-literate (oral) people value. Prose narrative caters a great deal to the expectation and values of literate audiences (i.e., lack of repetition, linear narrative, parallel subplots, etc.). As a consequence, it is not surprising to me that prose narrative, or something akin to it, does not exist in pre-literate cultures. One further point is that without writing linear prose structure probably would not have developed.

I'm not sure what this all means for the deaf community, since the argument I'm making is, again, a historical one and says nothing about cultures where literacy is rampant. On the other hand, I do wonder about

one thing. Much prose narrative incorporates a good deal of metaphor and symbolic comparison. If generalization beyond the concrete is an issue for persons who are deaf, then there might be a relation between the two (i.e., amount of prose narrative being inversely related to level of abstract thought). I have some great doubts about this, though, and I know very little about development in individuals who are congenitally deaf.

*Stephanie A. Hall:*

Just a point of clarification regarding the Deaf, ASL, and narrative, before things get too confused here. There certainly is storytelling in ASL, fictional and otherwise. There are also plays, poems, and one or two genres of wordplay that don't exist in English. What Lois and I were wondering about is why the Deaf do not write fiction in *English*, a language that is, and can never be, the native language of any prelingually deaf person in the normal sense.

Deafness creates a unique situation regarding literacy. There are no completely successful and widely used ways of writing sign language, although there are about three systems being experimented with.<sup>24</sup> (Signwriting developed by Valerie Sutton is one that has some potential because it is relatively easy to learn, but there are problems representing very fine movements of the face and hands). There are conventionalized ways of glossing signs, but these are not standardized and omit a lot of inflection, etc.

So the Deaf use a non-written language and write in a language that is not their native language. In addition, not all deaf people acquire a

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<sup>24</sup> The first attempt at a "phonemic" system for writing American Sign Language was William Stokoe's *A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles* (Silver Spring, MD: Linstock Press, 1965). This work helped establish that signs, like words, have parts and that sign languages are languages. Based on Stokoe's work was the report by Marina McIntire, Don Newkirk, Sandra Hutchins, and Howard Poizner from a 1987 project to create a workable "phonemic" system for ASL, primarily for research purposes. This system included characters for facial expression as well as hands and hand movements. Valerie Sutton's *Sign Writing for Everyday Use* (Newport Beach, CA: Sutton Movement Writing Press, 1981), introduced a movement-based system derived from her system for writing dance. This is the first attempt to create a "phonetic" system that allows for writing movement in any sign language.

native language in the normal sense. Most deaf children are born into homes with hearing parents. Unless there are deaf adults, or an educational system that intervenes to teach the parents signs as soon as an infant is identified as deaf, the child is not presented with any language until after the normal period of language acquisition. This is true of the majority of Deaf children, meaning that in addition to not being able to hear, most deaf children are language-delayed. Depending on what happens in later education, this may be more or less of a problem. But problems some deaf people have in understanding linguistic concepts have more to do with this problem of language delay than with any differences caused by ASL or the deafness itself.

Native Deaf signers are generally more facile with both ASL and written English. So, please, don't generalize about signing as an oral culture preventing people from abstract thought—that just isn't the case.

I wish I could send a couple of Clayton Valli's poems across the net as examples of abstract ASL, or some of the folk stories collected by Simon Carmel, Susan Rutherford, and others.<sup>25</sup> Oh, well. If you ever get a chance to see storytelling in ASL, I recommend the experience.

*Karen Colburn:*

I send you all a comment in support of Stephanie's suggestion, that if you ever get a chance to see storytelling in ASL, do it.

I have been acting with a local professional, award-winning children's theatre company, the Theatre of the Enchanted Forest, which regularly uses a signer for deaf members of the audience. Each time this woman has "performed" with us, we have all been intrigued with watching her. (I think she also has been working with the Penobscot Theatre Company).

So, this could bring up some questions about "performance." Does

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<sup>25</sup> See Simon J. Carmel, "American Folklore in the Deaf Community," a videotape by Gallaudet College Television, Washington, DC in cooperation with the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, 1981, produced and directed by Simon J. Carmel; Susan D. Rutherford, "American Culture: The Deaf Perspective," a videotape made by The San Francisco Public Library with Deaf Media, Inc, produced by Susan D. Rutherford; and Clayton Valli, "Poetry in Motion: Original Works in ASL," a series of three videocassettes made by Sign Media, Inc., Burtonsville, MD, vol. 1.

the signer ever “upstage” the actors? If the one signer can successfully convey the multiple speakers on stage . . . why do we need so many actors? Or, rather, what about the possibility of a group of signers, all performing a play? And how much would the signers be able to convey, to a hearing audience unaccustomed to signing?<sup>26</sup>

There has been some mention of the smaller movements, gestures, of the face or hands, or slight variations to indicate tone, etc. . . . When we actors watch our signer during our shows, we see that she “catches” the characters. We see that, even when we can’t “read” asl. She does “perform.”

### **Postscript**

It is in the nature of such “threads” as this one that they lack a (textual) closure, tending rather to flow on into another related topic or sub-topic, perhaps to re-emerge later on in a new context. For this quality they may have something in common with storytelling in a living tradition, where performances punctuate and epitomize but do not subsume the tradition. At any rate, we look forward to more stories and storytelling on the ORTRAD-L net.

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<sup>26</sup> The sort of theater that Karen Colburn imagines here is alive and well, and approaching its thirtieth birthday. The National Theater of the Deaf (headquartered in Waterford, Connecticut) was founded in 1966, and has been on tour every year since then, playing mainly to hearing audiences. In addition to the NTD, there are various local deaf theater companies, such as the Chicago Theater of the Deaf, Deaf West (Los Angeles), New York Theater of the Deaf, Fairmount Theater of the Deaf (Cleveland), Callier Theater of the Deaf (Dallas), and many more. Gallaudet University (Washington, D.C.) has an active theater department, as does the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (Rochester, New York), which also sponsors a touring company.

Deaf Theater is performed in ASL. Hearing audiences who are not fluent in that language will depend upon voice-over translations, usually provided by two professional actors, one male and one female, who are employed by the theater company. Thus, the experience of Deaf Theater for a hearing audience is much like that of deaf people experiencing a hearing production with sign language interpretation.

## Participants

*Lois Bragg*, Assistant Professor of English at Gallaudet University, is the author of *The Lyric Speakers in Old English Poetry* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1991) and articles on various medieval literatures. She is presently at work writing a book on the Icelandic sagas, and, with Clayton Valli, setting up an annual ASL poetry competition.

*Karen E. Colburn* is an actor and assistant to the founder/producing director at the Continuum Theatre in Maine. A candidate for the Master of Arts in English at the University of Maine, she is currently writing her creative thesis, a playscript addressing Native American mother/daughter relations in increasingly assimilated social circumstances.

*Eric Crump* is the assistant director of the Writing Lab of the University of Missouri-Columbia and is a graduate student in English studying rhetoric, writing, and writing technologies.

*Erica M. Dibietz* is a Ph.D candidate at the Institute of Child Study, University of Maryland, College Park, currently working on transliterating the Addiction Severity Index for assessment of drug/alcohol use/severity for use in the deaf/hard of hearing population. Her article on substance abuse and mental health will appear in *Hospital and Community Psychiatry*, 1993.

*Stephanie A. Hall* is an ethnographic archivist with the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Her most recent publication on Deaf culture is "Monsters and Clowns: A Deaf American Halloween," *Folklife Annual*, 90 (1991): 122-31.

A certified teacher of the deaf, *Enid Hilton* holds a Master of Arts in applied linguistics. Currently she is in charge of language development programs for Deaf children at Fulton School, Gillitts, Natal, South Africa.

*Barra Jacob-McDowell*, also known as "Barra the Bard," is a Celtic storyteller who performs stories, poetry, singing, and the Celtic harp in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area. She also works as the Reserves Assistant at Hunt Library, Carnegie-Mellon University.

Writer and storyteller *Paul Jordan-Smith* is also the founding (and contributing) editor of *Parabola* magazine, and a graduate student in the Folklore and Mythology Program at UCLA. He serves as a staff member at UCLA's Office of Academic Computing.

*Theresa M. Skrip* attained her Master's degree in English Literature and Composition from the State University of New York at Binghamton, after which she taught for several years at the post-secondary level. Currently, she is a graduate student in clinical psychology at the University of Saskatchewan, performing research in children's understanding of friendship relations and interpersonal communication.



*Margaret Steiner* received her Ph.D in Folklore at Indiana University in 1988, and is currently writing a book based on her dissertation, an ethnography of singing in a border community in Northern Ireland. Her recent research focuses on the bilingual and bicultural singers in the Miramichi Region of New Brunswick, Canada; an article based on this research will appear in *Lore and Language* in 1993.