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SIGN LANGUAGE RESEARCH AT THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

A language that can't be heard-sign language-is the major form of communication used in Deaf Communities. One reason why tertiary education for deaf people in Europe and America has been so successful is that local sign languages have been used extensively in teaching through sign language interpretation.

To promote the use of Hong Kong Sign Language, which in turn, will promote the educational level and social status of deaf people, a group of scholars in The Chinese University of Hong Kong is actively editing what will be the most comprehensive three-way dictionary (sign language-Chinese-English) in Hong Kong and the first grammatical reference book on Hong Kong Sign Language. Today, The Chinese University of Hong Kong Deaf Education Fund was inaugurated to promote sign language research, teaching, interpreter training, and interpretation services in Hong Kong.

Dr. James Woodward, Lecturer in Linguistics in the English Department at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, is responsible for coordinating the project entitled "Asian-Pacific Sign Languages/Deaf Studies Research and Training Program." He points out that according to currently accepted U.N. statistics 2 to 3 people out of every 1,000 become deaf at birth or at a very early age. In Hong Kong, there is an estimated 12,000 to 18,000 people who were born deaf or lost their hearing when they were very young. Since language is the most important medium for people to pursue knowledge, deaf people face difficulties in educational settings where instruction is only in spoken language. In fact, compared with "handicapped" people, deaf people have greater difficulty in integrating into mainstream society. Thus, deaf people often form an independent community within the larger hearing community. Their educational level is normally lower than people with other "handicaps", such as blindness. Deaf people in Hong Kong have never had access to local university education that provides regular and complete special services, such as interpreter and note-taking services. Only a few deaf people in Hong Kong have been able to pursue university education, and most of these deaf people have had to go abroad to do so.

Dr. Woodward, who has been conducting research on issues related to sign languages, deaf-hearing communication, and deaf education since 1969, pointed out that since sign language is one of the most important elements in their social identity, deaf people want to have sign language included in education and teaching.

Since sign languages have such important roles to play in Deaf Communities, the United Nations and the World Federation of the Deaf have previously established a set of guidelines urging countries in the world to strengthen their local sign language education. As early as 1864, the President and Congress of the United States of America signed into law the establishment of the world's first liberal arts university for deaf people, Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. Gallaudet University currently has roughly 2,000 students, almost all of whom are deaf. Gallaudet uses both English and American Sign Language in the education of deaf students currently enrolled there. Dr. Fat Lam, the first deaf person from Hong Kong to receive a Ph.D., received his undergraduate training at Gallaudet University before going on for his Ph.D. at The University of Montana. Dr. Lam is currently employed at Gallaudet University as a Professor of Mathematics.

Dr. Woodward also says that because Hong Kong still needs teaching materials for



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Hong Kong Sign Language and professional sign language interpretation training programs and services, it is extremely difficult for deaf students who have completed secondary education to continue receiving education in local universities.

In recent years, linguists in Europe, the United States and Canada have actively been conducting research in sign languages. Some Asian countries have also started to investigate their local variety of signing. The current project at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, however, is the first and most comprehensive sign language research program focusing on the Asian-Pacific region. The main objectives of the Asian-Pacific Sign Languages/Deaf Studies Research and Training Program is to examine, record, and describe sign languages used by deaf people and to edit comprehensive sign language dictionaries and sign language grammatical reference books with the hope of promoting sign language research, teaching, and interpretation, thus strengthening communication between deaf and hearing people. The editing of the dictionary and grammatical reference book on Hong Kong Sign Language started in 1992 and is expected to be completed in 1995.

The research group under the coordination of Dr. Woodward have received a grant from the university to start this program under the university long term strategic research scheme. This program would last for at least six years and includes 16 research projects, concentrating on 5 areas of research in the Asian-Pacific region: 1) Sign Language Linguistics, 2) Sign Language Teaching, 3) Sign Language Interpretation, 4) University Level Deaf Education, and 5) Deaf Awareness. Since Hong Kong and China, especially Southern China, shares many linguistic similarities, Dr. Woodward hopes that the results of the projects under this program will benefit not only deaf people in Hong Kong but also the estimated 4,000,000 deaf people in China.

The researchers in this program come from the Linguistics Program in the Department of English, the Department of Translation, and the Department of Journalism and Communication. There will also be professional sign language interpreters and sign language teacher trainers from abroad. Some of the researchers are deaf themselves.

Since the completion of all projects under this program demands an extremely large sum of money, Dr. Woodward is currently seeking funding from international agencies. Today, he is formally announcing the establishment of The Chinese University of Hong Kong Deaf Education Fund, hoping to receive donations from the private sectors. The Chair of the English Department, Dr. Chou Ying Hsiung, will represent the university to receive the first donation to the fund which is being made today by the Hong Kong Association of Secretaries.

21 May 1994

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