

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SIGN LANGUAGE: A SYNOPSIS OVERVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

Sign Language is a naturally occurring language that developed as results of the need to communicate among the Deaf communities. Sign language is a language that occurs in the visual-gestural modality, this means that it relies mostly on the use of hands, face and upper torso. Like many other languages, Sign Language has undergone many transformations throughout its history; this essay traces and details the history or the development of sign language.

The beginnings of sign language

It still remains that no one knows for certain where Sign first originated, Sign is quite possibly older than humankind (Larson & Hallen, 1998). According to Schein (1947) when hominids became erect, their hands were freed for tool using as well as communication. Consequently, anthropologists regard the onset of Homo erectus as a possible date for the beginning of sign language about a hundred thousand years ago.

The Great Plains Indians developed a fairly extensive system of signing. Various theories of what the Indian's sign language was used for exist. One is that the sign system developed made it easier for the indigenous peoples to communicate with each other: "it was difficult and sometimes almost impossible for an Indian nation to acquire or speak intelligently any language but its own. Yet nearly all Indians possessed a means of ready communication between themselves through the medium of sign language" (Samarin, 1965) cited from (Larson & Hallen, 1998).

In the years before Christ, Aristotle proclaimed that speech and language were one in the same and that those who could not speak were untouchable. This pronouncement on the deaf cursed them for the next two thousand years (Larson & Hallen, 1998). They were denied citizenship, religious rights, and were often left out to die or fend for themselves in the times of the ancient Greeks. Because of this, the use of Sign was heavily looked down upon and shamed

During the time of the Renaissance that educators called into question the statement of Aristotle. The Italian physician, Girolamo Cardano proclaimed that the mute can "hear by reading and speak by writing" (Schein, 1952). It is interesting to note that even though this profound statement was made by an Italian, the sign language system used in Italy today is still only recognized as 'gestures' (Cameracanna, 2008: 238).

The concept of "Deaf", "Deafness" and "Hearing impaired"

Deaf (with a capital D) is used to describe those people who use sign language in a particular country in South Africa it is those who uses SASL (South African Sign Language) to communicate, and identify themselves as members of the signing Deaf community. These people may also identify themselves as “Culturally Deaf”. They are more likely to have been born deaf or become deaf early in life, are pre-lingual deaf and use sign language as a primary or preferred communication mode.

deaf (with a small letter, d) is a general term used to describe people who have a physical condition of hearing loss of varying degrees irrespective of which communication mode they use such as South Africa Sign language and lip reading, most deaf people rely on lip-reading to a greater or lesser extent

A hearing impairment (HI) is a full or partial decrease in the ability to understand sounds. The “hearing impaired” term is incorrectly intended to cover Deaf and hard of hearing individuals under a single category. Deaf and hard of hearing persons in many countries reject this definition because it fails to recognise any distinction between these two groups.

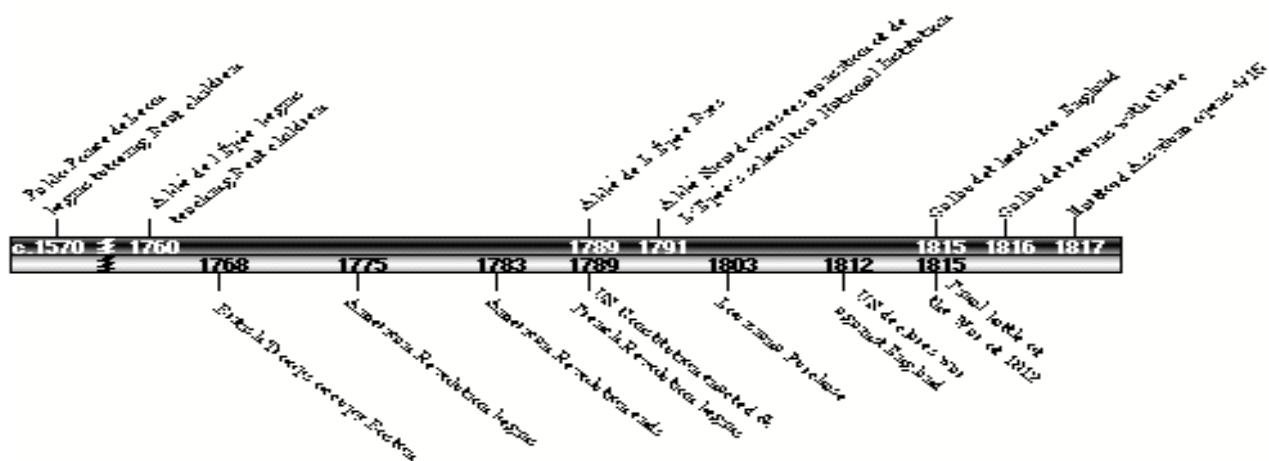
Deafness is the partial or complete loss of hearing. Deafness and Deaf people are as old as humanity itself but the earliest recorded history of the communication and education of Deaf people was in the 16th century. Deaf children of rich parents in Spain were placed under the care of a monk to be taught how to speak; this is because at that time speech was required in order to acquire wealth this marked the beginning of the oral vs. Sign Language controversy which raged for centuries.

The oral method involves teaching or communicating with Deaf through the medium of spoken language (speech). This method was highly developed in Germany and became known as the “German Method”, however, Sign Language was highly developed and taught in German Schools hence the appropriateness of the “French Method”. In 1880 an attempt to eradicate Sign Language from the face of earth was made. Educational conference attended by the educationalist and teachers in Milan (Italy) passed a resolution which banned the use of Sign Language in schools of the Deaf. This made Sign Language to become an underground language. Deaf children used Sign Language outside the classroom.

In 1960 a scientific research report on American Sign Language was conducted and it showed that Sign Language was a natural human language with its own grammar, independent of any spoken language. Sign language could be analysed at any level of spoken language.

The Historical Trends of Sign Language

Sign Language has a very long history, like many other languages, it has undergone many transformations throughout its history. It is believed that Sign Language stems from the first known sign language system, which was discovered in France during the mid-18th century. This part of the essay outlines and discusses the development of Sign Language country per se. It is important to note that there are other country's Sign Language apart from those listed below.



Deaf Education Timeline

France – France is considered as the home of Sign Language because of their struggle to ensure that Sign Language becomes a recognized language. France is the home of French Sign Language (FSL).

Charles Michel De L'Eppe, a French priest, is considered as the “Father of Sign Language and Deaf Education” because he established the first free public school for the deaf in Paris. One day he saw two deaf sisters communicating with each other through the use of sign language, and he realized the deaf could be educated by sign language

De L'Eppe standardized a sign language alphabet for French language and included this in a sign language dictionary that also included symbolic gestures that conveyed concepts as opposed to just letters. His sign language dictionary, and work on signing, as well as his work on educating the deaf community influenced sign language across the world.

Britain- Britain is a home to British Sign Language (BSL). British Sign language is a visual-gestural language which makes use of three dimensional space and the movement of hands and other parts of the body to convey meaning. It has its own vocabulary and syntax. One of the first official historical record of British Sign Language dates back to 1576, when a wedding ceremony was conducted in sign language in Leicester.

The History of the Deaf did not start to take a more positive direction until 1974 when it was agreed that British Sign Language is a language in its own right. From this point, great attention and respect became generated for British Sign Language from broader society and Deaf people became better able and equipped to express themselves in the educational arena. As such, the acceptance of British Sign Language as a viable and positive language and method of communication, presented the catalyst for Deaf children to be able to achieve both personally and educationally.

America- America is a home to American Sign Language (ASL). American Sign Language (ASL) is a complete, complex language that employs signs made by moving the hands combined with facial expressions and postures of the body. It is the primary language of

many North Americans who are deaf and is one of several communication options used by people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing.

The largest influence on the development of sign language in America was Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, a congregational minister. Gallaudet had a neighbour whose daughter was deaf and he was very interested in helping her find a way to communicate. In 1816, Gallaudet decided to travel to Europe, where many schools for the deaf had been founded by graduates of De L'Eppe's school. While in Europe he met Laurent Clerc, a recent deaf graduate. Clerc taught Gallaudet about deaf education methods and sign language. Gallaudet convinced Clerc to return with him to America to help set up America's first school for the deaf.

Australia- Australia is a home to Australian Sign Language popularly known as Auslan. At present, there are sixty-two handshapes listed in the Signs of Australia dictionary of Auslan (Johnston, 1998). Of these sixty-two handshapes, thirty-seven are the core handshapes used and the other twenty-five are seen as non-significant variations of these.

Auslan is the Language of Australia's Deaf Community. This community of some 15,000 deaf people (with many more hearing family members and friends), use Auslan in their daily lives. Auslan has its roots in British Sign Language (BSL), and to a lesser extent Irish Sign Language. (Johnston & Schembri, 2007) says that it is different from American and French Sign Languages. Auslan received formal recognition in Australia's National Language Policy (1987).

Auslan is a visually based language that takes full advantage of the use of space, with its own syntax (rules) and vocabulary and the ability to communicate a rich variety of concepts and subtle meanings. Auslan incorporates signs (established and productive), fingerspelling, body movements, facial expression, mouth and eye movements, mime and gesture (Johnston & Schembri, 2007).

South Africa- South Africa is a home to South African Sign Language abbreviated as SASL. South African Sign Language (SASL) is used by approximately 2 million deaf, hard-of-hearing and hearing South Africans (Peel, 2004). It is a unique and real language recognised as a first language by many members of the Deaf community in South Africa (Wits, 2013).

SASL on a process to be consider as an official language of South Africa. The South African government added a National Language Unit for South African Sign Language in 2001. SASL is not the only sign language used in South Africa, but it is the language that is being promoted as the language to be used by all Deaf people in South Africa, although the Deaf in South Africa historically do not form a single group.

In 1995, the previous South African National Council for the Deaf (SANCD) was transformed into the Deaf Federation of South Africa (DeafSA); this led to the development and adoption of a single sign language and the promotion of sign language over oralism (Department of Education, 2001).

SASL is the sign language that is used during television news casts in South Africa. Sign language is also used in the South African parliament, but different sign language interpreters

are known to use different signs for the same concepts. There are around 40 schools for the Deaf in South Africa, most using a variety of SASL. It is important to note that South African Sign Language is highly influenced by the American Sign Language.

South African Sign Language is not entirely uniform and continues to evolve. Due to the geographical spread of its users and past educational policies, there are localised dialects of South African Sign Language and signs with many variants. Earlier efforts to create reference material and standardise the language, such as books (1980 Talking to the Deaf etc.).

The Constitution states that a board named the Pan South African Language Board should be established to “promote, and create conditions for, the development and use of all Languages including Sign Language”. The Board does this through (Act 59 of 1995) of the board.

In 1874 in Cape Town, the first institution for the Deaf called “Grimley Institute for Deaf and Dumb” was established by an Irish Deaf woman named Bridget Lynne, she was a trendsetter. However nowadays, According to the South African Schools Act, Act 84 of 1996, all schools must have a language policy and that when selecting languages for instructions Sign Language must also be evaluated just like the other eleven official languages.

A universal Sign/ International Sign Language

Misinterpretations that sign language are universal is still very widespread, this is not true we do not have an international Sign Language system (Cambre, 2002:38).. There are hundreds of sign languages that have arisen independently where there are significant numbers of deaf people together. For example in South Africa we have SALS, in America they have ASL etc.

Signed language has most certainly been around since the time of the first deaf-mute as a basic way to communicate, until much later in the 1800’s that methods of sign that correlated with grammar and language of the area were developed (Sacks 1917) cited in Johnston, 1998).

There is no sign language that should be considered as primitive to any other just as no spoken language is more primitive than another. Each can adequately express feelings, emotions, etc. with an unlimited range of possibilities. The world’s sign languages that have arisen are as distinct and differentiated as the world’s languages.

The Difference between Sign Language and Spoken Language

The major difference between Spoken Language and Sign Language is that Spoken Language is produced by mouth, lips, and tongue as well as vocal chords and processed by the ear; however, Sign Language is produced by hands, facial expression and upper torso and then processed by eyes.

A common misconception is that sign languages are somehow dependent on spoken languages: that they are spoken language expressed in signs, or that they were invented by hearing people. Hearing teachers in deaf schools, such as Charles-Michel or Thomas Hopkins

Gallaudet, are often incorrectly referred to as “inventors” of sign language. Instead, sign languages, like all natural languages, are developed by the people who use them, in this case, deaf people, who may have little or no knowledge of any spoken language (Gregory, 1989).

Frishberg (1975) argues that sign languages differ from spoken languages because they are primarily expressed in the visual-gestural modality, rather than the oral-aural modality. This means that we do not listen to Sign Language but we view/ watch/ see.

CONCLUSION

Sign Language is a naturally occurring language that developed as results of the need to communicate among the Deaf communities. This essay revealed that Sign is quite possibly older than humankind; however, the first official Sign Language was in France. This essay also detailed the influence of different scholars towards the historical development of Sign Language.

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