When is ASL ASL?

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An educator from the Jericho Program in Burnby asked me for an opinion on Bernard Bragg's article on the "genericity" of American Sign Language (ASL) and the impact of English on ASL. Mr. Bragg, a well-known Deaf actor and "artist-in-residence" at Gallaudet University proposes a new look at ASL (figure 1). He suggests four categories:

- "Traditional ASL" which is the purest form of ASL
- "Modern ASL," a mixture of English and ASL elements
- "Englished ASL," which is similar to Sign English (not to be confused with Signed English)
- "Rarefied ASL" which is a poetic or artistic form of ASL.

Traditional ASL	Modern ASL	Englished ASL	Rarefied ASL
"Pure" ASL	mixed ASL and English elements	sign English (not signed English)	poetic or artistic signing

Figure 1: Bernard Bragg's concept of ASL

It is a timely topic as the current discussion on ASL is causing some confusion among parents.

American Sign Language is a young language which began in 1817 when Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet brought a Deaf teacher, Laurent Clerc, from the school for the deaf in Paris, France, to Hartford, Connecticut. There they established North America's first permanent school for the deaf. Clerc quickly realized that the local deaf children already had their own sign language ("Old ASL"). Rather than do away with it and impose his first language, French Sign Language (FSL), on the children, he chose to supplement their sign language with FSL signs. Thus began ASL. The Hartford school quickly became a success, and Clerc trained persons from other states to become teachers of the deaf. These persons then established new schools for the deaf in other states and Canada, spreading ASL throughout North America.

The 19th century was the "Golden Age" of Deaf education when most schools for the Deaf used ASL as their primary language of instruction, when there was a high proportion of Deaf teachers and administrators, and when these schools taught Greek, Latin, and sciences. Then along came the infamous 1880 International Congress on the Education of the Deaf which was held in Milan, Italy. This Congress rammed through a resolution endorsing an oral-only approach in the education of the deaf. It also resulted in the wholesale decimation of Deaf teachers and administrators from the schools for the Deaf. This led to a century-long "marriage" between Deaf education and Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology with disastrous results for a vast majority of the Deaf.

There is now a strong movement back towards the use of ASL and bilingualism/biculturalism (bi/bi) in education of the Deaf and the "purging" of English elements from ASL that was heavily contaminated after many years of experimentation with oralism, total communication, manually coded English systems, and so on. Also, evidence is growing in that young deaf children with free access to and fluency in a natural language have a better chance of becoming fluent in a second language such as English than those who do not have such access. In North America, this natural language is ASL.

ASL is currently being debated by professionals and Deaf persons. Exactly what is it and who uses it? How ASL should ASL be? Who should define what ASL should be? Mr. Bragg made things more interesting by proposing a "generic" definition to fit the situation today, citing the examples of many Deaf persons who use a lot of English in their everyday sign communication. It is a valid point. My Deaf colleagues and I do use much English in our sign communication out of habit. Such a habit is the consequence of the control of Deaf education by English-speaking hearing professionals for more than a century.

At what point does a natural language cease to be a natural language? When its basic structure becomes altered? When its vocabulary takes on the characteristics of another language? We probably will never have a precise fixed point. However, if we are to err, we should err on the side of the natural language itself, not the second language or even a mixture of the two. It means we should work as closely towards the purer model.

"Modern ASL" as proposed by Mr. Bragg is nothing much more than Pidgin Sign English (PSE). PSE has of late become an "unfashionable" term. PSE is a hybrid form of communication incorporating elements of both ASL and English, following the English syn-

tax. There is still wide disagreement with Mr. Bragg's choice of "Modern ASL" to describe this system. With due respect to Mr. Bragg, primarily a professional performer despite his nominal academic credentials in special education, he based his conclusions on informal observations and assumptions without submitting them to scholarly scrutiny. It is akin to Bill Cosby, a TV performer who has a Ph.D degree in education, making pronouncements on the linguistics of Black English. I remember [Deaf researcher] Carol Padden telling me fifteen years ago that she does not give much credence to "armchair experts" who dream up their theories about ASL and putting them into practice without first testing them. Mr. Bragg fits this description.

Jan Humphrey and Bob Alcorn, in their book, *So You Want to be an Interpreter?*, propose a more sensible term for PSE: "Conceptually Accurate Sign English" (CASE). they place it firmly on the English side of the sign communication spectrum. They also mention "Modern ASL" which lies between "Traditional ASL" and CASE on the spectrum, but on the ASL side. It appears that their own definition of Modern ASL differs from that of Mr. Bragg's, and I would be more inclined to trust their academic judgment over that of Mr. Bragg's. Dr. Humphrey is one of the foremost experts on ASL linguistics in Canada and Mr. Alcorn, a Deaf native ASL user, has a M.Ed. degree and is a Lecturer/ Researcher in ASL at the University of Texas.

PSE has for many years been a primary "contact" language between hearing persons who are not fluent in ASL and Deaf persons fluent in ASL. It is akin to the superimposition of French vocabulary on an English syntax. Does that make it a bonafide natural French language? Definitely not. In this light, is PSE a bonafide natural ASL? One can quickly see that Bragg's choice of "Modern ASL" to replace PSE is a misnomer. I shudder to think of Deaf children being taught primarily in this mode. After all, they had been taught in PSE for many years by many hearing educators without a good deal of success. PSE does not usually lead to full linguistic competence in either ASL or English.

Many seem to think Bragg's definition of "Modern ASL" is ideally suited for "bi/bi" education. It isn't. It leads to semi-lingualism in either language. I have met too many deaf children and adults who feel stilted in expressing their thoughts and feelings due to "semi-lingualism." Even I never (and still don't) felt wholly adequate in expressing myself in ASL or spoken/signed English. It can be a very frustrating experience for developing deaf persons. Research by Dr. David Mason, who is Deaf and a professor of Deaf education at York University, led him to conclude that a high degree of linguistic competence in a usable natural language such as ASL is the key to competence in another language such as English, paving the way to better academic and social functioning.

Mr. Bragg makes the valid point that there are variations of ASL. I'd like to note that there are also variations of spoken English, some incomprehensible to speakers of other varieties. Nevertheless, there has to be a central benchmark against which all variations must be measured. Practically all varieties, while differing on the phonological and semantical level, tend to be similar on the syntactical level. "Queen's English" is probably such a benchmark for the English varieties. "Traditional ASL" serves as the ASL benchmark. If one were to measure PSE or "Modern ASL" according to Bragg against Traditional ASL, it would quickly become apparent that there are dissimilarities on the structural level. It is a crucial point when it comes to defining a "natural language." PSE or Bragg's version of "Modern ASL" obviously is not a natural language.

There appears to be a growing enthusiasm among hearing educators for the Bragg version of "Modern ASL." While the acceptance of "ASL" on the surface is gratifying, we need to ask ourselves some hard questions. When we look back on the history of Deaf education, it is littered with failed communication systems embraced by educators. Following the 1880 Milan Congress, Deaf leaders accused hearing educators of enthusiastically embracing the oral approach not because the oral approach was "better" for deaf children than sign language, but because they were unable to communicate fluently with deaf children. In other words, the oral method shifted attention from the shortcomings of hearing educators to those of deaf children.

As the 20th century wore on, the oral method became discredited, but those holding power were, and still are, reluctant to concede and to give it back to the Deaf. They dragged their heels for a long time, adopting a succession of communication approaches, under the generic heading of Sign-Supported Speech (SSS) which allowed them to continue to use their strongest mode and language: speech and English. As the last thirty years showed, all forms of SSS apparently did not work well for a large majority of Deaf children. During the same time span, ASL gained renewed respectability as a natural language, and the increasing numbers of teachers fluent in ASL are enhancing the academic performance of Deaf children.

This raises a question: Is the seemingly enthusiastic acceptance of Bragg's "Modern ASL" another in the long series of "foot-drag-

ging" by such educators who feel inadequate about their ASL skills? Another question is raised: Are persons who are not fluent in ASL and not well versed in the linguistics of ASL really in a position to make judgments about it and/or to influence parents' choices for their children?

The number of Deaf children using traditional forms of ASL is growing. It is only fair to them that they have access to educators and professionals who are fluent in that language. Sign Language Interpretation programs such as the one at Douglas College insist that their students become fluent in Traditional ASL to become professional sign language interpreters. Some persons have wondered why they are not being trained to interpret in PSE or other SSS forms. The answer is that they are already fluent in English to start with and they need to balance it with fluency in Traditional ASL to be able to move effortlessly back and forth along the Sign Communication Spectrum. Professionals and educators have an ethical obligation to have this same degree of fluency to work with a wide range of deaf and hard of hearing children.