

THE SIGN LANGUAGE OF THE DEAF AND DUMB.

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THE MEANS OF COMMUNICATION WITH THE DEAF AND DUMB ARE VARIOUS.

1st. Such *signs* as the dumb may make from infancy to indicate hunger, pain, anger, pleasure, &c., which become intelligible to those intimately associated with them, though they may be unintelligible to strangers, and cannot possibly be called a "sign language."

2nd. *Facial expressions*, accompanied or not accompanied by speech, such as anger or pity, on the part of hearing people; which expressions become intelligible in a degree to the deaf and dumb, although without any sound being heard. But such facial, or even oral movements, could not be called an "oral" language.

3rd. *A system of signs constructed upon some intelligent principle*, which may be taught to a number of deaf and dumb as well as to hearing persons; and if such signs should have any easily intelligible meaning in themselves, they might then, in a perfectly legitimate sense, be called a "sign language." Such a system of signs would evidently be a great advance upon the limited number above suggested, and it is such a system that is and has been in actual existence for about a hundred years (constituting the so-called "*sign language of the deaf and dumb*,") which it is the object of this paper to illustrate and explain.

4th. There is yet another method of communicating with the deaf and dumb, viz., *by teaching them to watch the*

lips, tongue, and throat of a person when speaking slowly and distinctly, and at the same time pointing to tangible objects, so that the deaf person learns in time to associate certain positions of the vocal organs with certain objects; and, further still, he is taught to imitate those positions and movements of the lips, &c., and at the same time to breathe out gently, and he then produces a sound appreciably resembling the spoken words. Thus, in some sense, he sees what is said to him, and he speaks back in reply without hearing a word on either side. This is called, technically, the "deaf and dumb oral language."

5th. The *finger or alphabet* deaf and dumb language requires a knowledge of spelling and reading, which implies a somewhat more advanced education; for the fingers must be placed in such positions as to resemble as nearly as possible the capital letters of the alphabet, and then the words are spelt in these capital letters by the one side, and are read from the letters by the other. This is, perhaps, the most generally known system of communicating with the deaf and dumb that is employed by hearing persons.

Lastly. A slate, or paper, and a pencil, for actually writing and reading what it is desired to convey, is the last, and often the first resource (because of its obvious advantages) that is employed by the educated deaf and dumb, even when they are themselves familiar with the "sign," "finger," or "oral" systems.

ORIGIN AND ORIGINATOR OF THE SIGN LANGUAGE OF THE DEAF AND DUMB.

The common belief in the time of our Lord's sojourn upon earth was that a deaf and dumb person was one possessed by a devil,* and even to almost our own time

* Matt. xii, 32; Mark ix, 25; Luke xi, 14.

this popular impression seemed to attach to these unfortunates; for, in the absence of the natural human faculties, they seemed scarcely to be human beings. Their inability to make their wants or thoughts known, and to communicate with their fellows, made them apparently mere brute beasts, and they were so often treated as such (being buffeted and pelted from place to place) that their hands became habitually against every man, and every man's hand was against them; most violent conduct being often the result, until their condition was miserable in the extreme.

The earliest recorded attempt to teach the deaf and dumb was made in 1750 by a Spanish monk, of Sahagum, named Pedro de Ponce, who instructed *four* deaf and dumb pupils in speech—what would now be called the “oral system.”* His example was followed by de Carrion, also in Spain; by Wm. Holder in England, and by Wallis, Professor of Mathematics in Oxford, before the end of the century. By Dr. Amman, also, in Holland, whose system was pursued by Kruse of Leignitz, in Germany, and was perfected by Heinicke, who died in 1790 and is considered as the real founder of the German or “oral system” as at present known. (*Rep. Deaf and Dumb Com.*, 1889, pp. li, lii.)

These attempts were, however, isolated, and were limited in their application to a very small number of pupils, to as few as four only, in the first case mentioned

* “So long ago, however, as A.D. 700, an Englishman, John de Beverley, then Archbishop of York, discovered the possibility of teaching a deaf mute to speak and to understand spoken language by watching the lips of the speaker, and he succeeded in instructing *one* deaf mute at any rate, in something of the Christian religion” (*National Cyclopædia*, art. “Deaf and Dumb,” p. 439). But neither teacher nor pupil left a successor, and it was not until after the lapse of above a thousand years that the attempt was successfully revived by the Spanish monk in the case of the four pupils above mentioned.

above. But in 1712 was born in France a man who became an ecclesiastic ; and, as the Abbé de l'Épée, was filled with pity for these wretched outcasts from society. In 1740 he began to devise a system by which indefinite numbers might be taught to communicate with each other, and possibly with hearing people also, and by which their intelligence might be cultivated and their moral and religious sentiments evoked ; so that they might be raised from the level of dangerous brute beasts, and become elevated and useful members of society. With this object he gradually invented what is now called the "sign language" of the deaf and dumb, and after years of work he was followed by the Abbé Sicard, who brought his system to the still more complete condition in which it still exists in active daily work, in every French and English speaking community. The more the details of this system are studied, the higher is the estimation in which it will be held, and the stronger will become the feeling that its author must have been possessed by little less than inspiration from above to have conceived and executed such a method as it is the object of this paper now to illustrate and explain.*

The first object to be accomplished was to find some medium that could be readily grasped and remembered even by such a vacant and apparently blank mind as that of the ordinary deaf and dumb of his day, and thus to gain some means of mental and practical communion with him and others ; and it is in the selection of such media that the first rudiments of his system are to be found. Take,

* "His great object being to impart instruction to the deaf and dumb, he spent his whole income, beside what was contributed by benevolent patrons, in the education and maintenance of his pupils, for whose wants he provided with such disinterested devotion that he often deprived himself of the necessities of life, restricting himself to the plainest food, and clothing himself in the coarsest apparel. He died in 1789."—Gates' *Dict. Gen. Biog.*, 4th ed., 1885, p. 391.

for example, a man, a woman, and a child, as the commonest and most tangible objects to be brought before his mind, or the more abstract and advanced ideas of "day" and "night." What was the simplest sign and the most easily executed, and most easily remembered that could be adopted for the representation of a man? At that date beards were commonly worn, and the Abbé selected this as his type of a man, and the hand pulling a real or imaginary beard is universally understood by every deaf and dumb person of French or English origin as meaning a man.

But a "woman"—what of her? At that date ringlets were commonly worn by French women, and the forefinger of each hand making an imaginary corkscrew on the side of the face was the sign for a woman, until ringlets went out of fashion. At the present date the forefinger moved over the side of the face and chin, to indicate the absence of a beard, and therefore a woman,* is the modern sign. The deaf and dumb language has evolved that change out of changed circumstances.

But a child? A boy is a small man—therefore the sex is indicated by the plucking the beard, and the childish age by stooping down and spreading out the hands about the level of the knees. A girl would similarly be indicated by the imaginary ringlets and the hands held out at the imaginary childish height. A baby would be an imaginary something gently tossed in the arms, or lying in one arm

* There is some complexity about the modern sign for "woman." The finger passing over the smooth face is in some Deaf and Dumb Schools the sign for "girl" not woman, who is represented by the three fingers placed on the palm of the hand or on the forehead, which is the finger-alphabet letter "M." and generally indicates the "M"—woman—the mother. But in the Liverpool school and some others the children make no distinction between woman in general and mother in particular. Thus, if a lady or any other woman calls at the school to visit it or to see the master, the deaf and dumb messenger informs the master that an "M" wants to see him, as if every "woman" was a "mother" in the estimation of the deaf and dumb child. (See p 274)

and gently stroked by the other hand, accompanied by looks of affection on some occasions, but possibly by a different expression, if indicating a teething child in the small hours of the morning.

So much for tangible visible objects, but how were more abstract ideas, such as day and night, to be represented by signs?

Day is always naturally associated with light, and that with the sun, while night is equally associated with darkness, or with the moon. But the sun, whenever it is visible, is round, and so, more or less, is the human face. The finger, therefore, drawing a circle round the face, is the "sign" for day, or for light, while two fingers closing the eyelids is the sign for darkness, and the fingers passed along one side of the face indicate a crescent (the typical condition of the moon), which therefore represents night.

After the above indication of the principle upon which the Abbé de l'Epée constructed his "sign language" in its most rudimentary stage, we may now give a few more illustrations of this language to show how wonderfully it was constructed for raising the intelligence and cultivating the observing faculties of his poor defective pupils.

Man, woman, child, and baby, have been already considered, but how was nationality to be indicated? For a man might be of any nation under the sun. The Abbé first symbolised the man, and then looked out for some striking characteristic of the nation that could be easily remembered, and as easily illustrated. For example—

A Scotchman. Sign—1st, a man in the abstract; then work the elbow up and down from the side, and twiddle with the fingers of both hands as if playing the bagpipes: and finally convert the simple Scotchman into a Highlander by cutting off his garments at the knees by a movement of the hands asunder.

An Irishman. 1st, a man ; 2nd, the right arm raised over the head flourishing an imaginary shillelagh, one leg also being raised in triumph.

A Frenchman. 1st, a man ; 2nd, French shrug of the shoulders.

An Englishman. What characterises an Englishman in the eyes of others we ourselves should never have guessed. In the Abbé's eyes an Englishman is a handshaking man. Therefore, 1st, a man ; 2nd, imaginary handshaking.

An American. Eminently a handshaking man. Therefore, 1st, a man ; 2nd, handshaking ; and 3rd (to distinguish him from the Englishman), an imaginary hat on one side of his head, with an imaginary depression in the crown—"a billycock."

QUALITIES OF THE MAN AS WELL AS NATIONALITY—GOOD, BAD, &c.

Good is always represented by one thumb held up. Very good by two thumbs. Bad or very bad by one or both little fingers turned downwards or outwards.

These signs, therefore, after the sign for the man, woman, or child, indicate their quality.

ANIMALS.

A horse. The two hands holding imaginary reins, and the imaginary rider rising and falling in the saddle.

A donkey. The two open hands held up to the sides of the head, and moved gently backward and forward, to represent his ears.

A cow. The two closed hands drawn in a curved direction sideways from the temples, to indicate the projecting unbranched horns.

A deer. The two thumbs on the temples, but the fingers spread widely apart to represent the antlers.

A goat. The two hands held up vertically from the top of the head, and an imaginary beard pulled.

A pig. The closed hand grasping the nose to represent the snout, with or without, afterwards, a corkscrew movement of the finger behind the back to indicate his little twisted tail.

A dog and a cat. Here domestic life, with observation of the *habits* of the animals, is brought into play. You want to call your dog, and you whistle for him. The deaf and dumb man sees the puckering of the mouth, though he hears no sound; but he finds that the dog pricks up its ears, but possibly does not come immediately. You next snap your fingers, which the deaf man also sees, but does not hear, and he finds now that the dog sets off to come. Lastly, you pat your leg, with a "good dog," and your object is obtained. The dumb man calls his dog in the same way by going through the above manœuvres; but they would fail entirely with a cat. The sign for it is, therefore, drawing out an imaginary waxed moustache for its whiskers, and gently stroking an imaginary cat lying on your arm, with a "poor pussy" issuing from moving, though inaudible lips.

Rat and mouse. Both these have whiskers also. How then are they distinguished from a cat in the *sign* language? By reference again to their habits. If a terrier is looking for a rat he watches at a moderate sized *hole*. Therefore the "sign" is—1st, pulling imaginary whiskers; 2nd, joining two or three fingers into a cone, and making them just show through an imaginary good sized hole, formed by the thumb and the longest finger. A mouse, on the contrary, would be one finger projecting through a *little* hole, made by the forefinger and half the thumb.

A bird. The two arms flapping like wings. Just so ; but a bat has wings, and so has a butterfly. Add, therefore, the hooked forefinger in front of the nose to represent the bird's bill.

A butterfly. The two open hands placed together side by side and moved to indicate the large wings, the two thumbs being raised between them, and separated at the tips, to show the erect antennæ.

A fish is always opening and shutting its mouth, and moving its small front fins. Therefore, lay one hand on the back of the other, and let the thumbs project on each side. Moving them imitates the fins, and lifting up and down the upper hand is a telling representation of the fish's constant swallowing.

CONNECTED THOUGHTS AND ACTIONS AS REPRESENTED BY THE SIGN LANGUAGE.

The above representations have referred only to tangible or visible objects, but the Abbé went far beyond this rudimentary, though indispensable foundation (or alphabet of signs, if we may so express it) ; and the following will be an illustration of the intelligence brought to bear in constructing the sign language, and the education of every mental faculty in the deaf and dumb resulting from instruction in it. I have selected *The Lord's Prayer* as taught to them by this system.

Our. "I" and "my" are represented by the finger touching the chest for "I," and by the closed hand, grasping some imaginary object and touching it, for "my." But "our" conveys the meaning of a number, which is indicated by the two arms embracing some imaginary large number, and then being brought to touch the chest.

Father. This term of course implies the sign for a man ; but there is no simple sign known that would easily

indicate the complex relationship of father, brother, uncle, &c. The finger alphabet is therefore brought in here as an assistant, and the finger letter F, followed by the pluck of the beard, shows the "F-" man—the father.

Which art. The deaf and dumb do not require or indicate every word, and these words are not therefore "signed."

In Heaven. The hand and eyes lifted up as to the sky.

Hallowed. The hands gently waved, as if a bird was fluttering.

Be. Indicates futurity. Sign—the finger beckoning to some imaginary object or person in front. "Was," indicating a past object or event, the fingers would be directed backwards, over the shoulder.

Thy. The closed hand pointed at some imaginary person in front. (*Thou*—only one finger used for pointing).

Name. The finger traces the sign of the cross on the forehead, because a child's "name" is given to it at baptism, when it is also signed with the sign of the cross.

Thy. As above—whenever the word occurs.

Kingdom. *King* implies a man; therefore use the sign for man, and supplement it by the hand on the top of the head to indicate the crown. *Kingdom*—after signifying "king," spread out the hands over some imaginary globe in front to indicate the kingdom.

Come. The finger or hand is moved in a beckoning manner.

Thy will. "Will" has so many meanings, *e.g.*, wish, order, determination, &c., that its signs are various. In the Lord's Prayer the body is usually inclined forward, as a token of submission or obedience.

Be done. "Be" as above. "Done"—the hands

place some imaginary object on one side. When any piece of work is finished it is generally laid on one side, hence the origin of the sign.

On earth. The hands spread out over an imaginary globe.

As. The two forefingers placed side by side and held up. "As like as two peas" is a proverb. The two fingers are the sign of resemblance.

In Heaven. See above.

Give. The hand held out in a supplicating manner.

Us. The forefingers of each hand approaching each other as if to enclose a number, and then touching the chest to indicate more than one "I."

This Day or *Day by Day.* The finger travels round the face to indicate the sun or "day," and touches the cheek once for "this day"—twice for two days—and a succession of taps for daily, or an indefinite number of times.

Our. See above.

Daily. See above.

Bread. This word would be without meaning to an Esquimaux who has never seen "bread," and he would translate it "blubber"—an Irishman would think of potatoes—and a Scotchman of oatmeal food, but all would understand "food to be taken by the mouth." The sign is therefore the finger put into the open mouth.

And. The open fingers brought together to indicate unity. "But"—the fingers or hands moved apart, to indicate severance.

Forgive us. "Forgive"—Rub out from an imaginary slate or book the record of any account against us of whatever nature it may be, and then shake hands in token of complete forgiveness. "Us." See above.

"Our" "Trespases," or "Debts." Explained above.

Imaginary bad record upon a slate or paper, shown to be a bad one, by the projecting little finger.

"As" "we" "forgive." See above.

Them, or Others. Touch the tips of a number of fingers to indicate many separate persons.

(That) owe us debts, Hold out one hand empty, and strike it with the other fingers in a threatening manner, to indicate debt and insistence of claim.

Or, *that Trespass against us.* Write upon imaginary slate or paper the items of debt or trespass, and hold it up to the debtor or offender, and then rub it out and shake hands.

And. See above.

Lead us. "Lead"—Take hold of some imaginary robe or garment, or the person's own hand, and move on one side, as if drawing the person after you. "Us." See above.

Not. Shake the head, or move the hands as if in disapproval.

Into. The finger put into a ring, formed by the thumb and finger.

Temptation. Beckoning to an imaginary person with the finger, accompanied by a wink or expression of face to indicate evil.

But. See above.—Separate the hands.

Deliver us. Stoop down, and use the hands as if lifting some imaginary person up from the ground or out of a pit. "Us." See above.

From. Not expressed.

Evil. Little finger for "evil." A circle described in addition for "all evil." Two fingers held up and separated at their tips would indicate horns, and the little finger adding "bad" to the horns would imply "the Devil," "the Evil One" of the Revised Version of the N. T.

For or because. Not usually signed in the Lord's prayer. It is difficult of representation by a simple sign, and it is represented arbitrarily in different ways by different speakers.

Thine is. See above. "Is" is taken for granted.

Kingdom. See above.

Power. Clenched hand.

Glory. Waving of hands to indicate flickering light and glory, as shown in paintings.

Ever and ever. Hands moved so as to represent a circle, and therefore something endless.

Amen. Clap hands.

SPREAD AND ULTIMATE DIFFUSION OF THIS "SIGN LANGUAGE."

After the Abbé de l'Epée had worked for some years, his great success became noised abroad, and a Mr.* or Dr. Braidwood, of Edinburgh, went to Paris to learn the system from him; and in 1760 commenced a private school for the Deaf and Dumb of a class able to pay for the instruction; and his nephew, Dr. Watson, some years afterwards, commenced a similar school in London. Both countries thus deriving the system from the same French source. At a later period, a Mr. Gallaudet, of New York, a descendant of a Huguenot family which left France on the revocation of the Treaty of Nantes by Louis XIV, heard of the system and its success, and came to Edinburgh hoping to obtain instruction in it from Mr. Braidwood, that he might introduce it into America for the benefit of the Deaf and Dumb there. But Mr. Braidwood abruptly declined to teach him, and unreservedly alleged as his reason—jealousy, lest he might open a rival

* I have not been able to discover which he was.

school in Glasgow. Gallaudet therefore went to London to seek instruction from Dr. Watson, from whom he received a like refusal, though less openly explained. He therefore went to Paris, and remained for three years in the establishment of Abbé de l'Epée and his successor Abbé Sicard, who gave him the further valuable assistance of allowing him to take back with him to New York one of his own trained teachers, a Deaf and Dumb man named Clerc. On his return to America he opened the Harford School for teaching the Deaf and Dumb, and it became the parent stock from which every subsequent Deaf and Dumb School in America took its origin. He became eventually the official organizer of American schools, and his son, Dr. Gallaudet, from whom I heard this narrative, was, at his father's death, appointed the official inspector of all the Deaf and Dumb schools under the American Government influence.

Thus it will be seen that England, Scotland and America all received the same "sign" system from the same source, viz., its French inventor; and as Belgium was at that time a part of France it also received it; and the "language" became cosmopolitan among all the French and English speaking peoples, with the following interesting result. In 1790 the Abbé died, and in 1890 it was decided to hold a centenary commemoration in Paris of this noble and wonderful man, to which a party of a dozen or more deaf and dumb youths went from Liverpool, headed by Mr. J. Wilson Mackenzie, also deaf and dumb, whose high reputation as an artist in this city shows what eminence can be attained even under such a serious drawback. When they arrived in Paris they found themselves in possession of a common language derived from their Parisian hosts, and they had no difficulty in mutually understanding each other, though on the one

side none of them knew a word of French, and an equal ignorance of English existed on the other side.

The case would have been different in Germany, or among German speaking people, for they have always favoured the "oral language," originated as it had been by Dr. Amman, as already mentioned, and subsequently brought to high perfection by the famous Heinicke (see p. 259). One universal language throughout the world, such as this "sign language" almost promised to be, is, therefore, still a desideratum, though it may possibly yet be realised; for both the sign and the oral systems are now being taught together in Deaf and Dumb Schools, though the preponderance is still in favour of the sign language in this country.

The marked and incontestible difference in favour of the *sign* language is that it can be taught to *large* classes at a time, so that a comparatively small number of teachers, and a consequent moderate expense is involved. While the "oral system" requires such close observation and conscientious attention on the part of the scholar that only a very small number (half a dozen to a dozen at the most) can be taught at one time, and a very much larger number of teachers is therefore indispensable. Indifferent or idle scholars, and also those who are mentally sluggish or of limited brain capacity, make no progress in it, and there is no excitement in its machinery to keep the indifferent scholar amused or interested. It is also so much more difficult of attainment that, while five years careful work will produce a fairly competent "sign" scholar, seven years at least are requisite for even moderate competence in the "oral" language. And when acquired and practised with even more than average skill the sounds which pass for words are so slowly emitted and grasped, that the communication is a trying one on both

sides, and is continually dropped in favour of the sign system even by those who know them both. There is also so much more life and intelligence brought into play by the sign than by the oral language, that the deaf and dumb themselves prefer it, and the difference of expression of pleasure and of rapid appreciation of the subject when expressed in the two different methods is strongly marked. I have observed a whole deaf and dumb company convulsed with laughter at jokes or points made in the sign language, which have been received with painful gravity, owing to the attention required for appreciating them, when expressed by the oral system.

The "Education Department" now wisely requires both systems to be taught in State-aided schools, while showing an apparent favour for the oral in preference to the sign system, founded upon the Report of the Royal Commission on the Blind, Deaf, and Dumb, issued in 1889. In estimating the true value of this report on this particular question it is necessary to bear in mind that the Commission was originally formed with reference to the blind only, and fourteen of the eighteen commissioners were appointed while that was its sole object. The deaf and dumb were added as an after-thought some months afterwards, and four additional names were added, who represented the deaf and dumb interest. From special and exceptional circumstances one or two of these were in some sense committed to the oral system before appointment, but it is my confirmed belief that both the teachers in deaf and dumb schools, and also those who have had the longest and most practical acquaintance with the deaf and dumb prefer the sign system for general use, while willingly encouraging the addition of the oral system for the benefit of the more limited number who possess the time, the means, and also the intellectual capacity for

making use of its more exacting requirements. The increased number of years in school now required by the Department, and the grants in aid of the schools now officially made, have removed the greatest obstacles to the benefits to be derived from the oral system.

There is one medium of communication between hearing people and the deaf and dumb that it is in the power of the Education Department to create without the necessity for any new commission or any legislation, and I should strongly urge it as a great boon to the deaf and dumb, and also as a source of enjoyment and amusing instruction in all Kindergarten schools aided by Government grants. That is the *compulsory requirement of instruction in the Finger Alphabet language in all such schools*. To the children themselves, learning to spell on their fingers would be fully as much instruction as learning to spell upon a slate, and at the same time it would be a source of amusement and interest to them, not unlike such "acting songs" as—

"This is the way we wash our clothes," &c.,

which are sung and acted with such zest as part of the daily teaching. At the infantile period of school life the letters would be easily mastered, and they would never afterwards be forgotten, and it would be an inexpressible boon to many a deaf and dumb inmate, male or female, of a workshop to feel that they could communicate in such a way with their fellows in the shop, or with the foreman, instead of being practically isolated, forlorn, and solitary workers in an otherwise busy community. Existing masters or mistresses of such schools could learn the finger language without the least difficulty if they do not already know it, and no hardship would be imposed upon either teacher or scholar in requiring such an addition to the present curriculum.

GREAT VARIETY IN THE SIGNS EMPLOYED IN DIFFERENT PLACES.

It must not be inferred from the foregoing account and illustrations of the sign language that it is a hard and stereotyped system, such as ancient Sanscrit or Hebrew. On the contrary, every large deaf and dumb school, or collection of deaf mutes, inevitably produces signs of its own that may or may not be intelligible to other schools just as the various counties, and even separate towns in England, have their individual forms of expression, tones, and (in general terms) dialects that may differ widely from those of other districts—yet the basis of all is still English; and even such separate dialect speakers would be more intelligible to each other than would Germans and English, or French and English. As an illustration of this, the late head master of the Liverpool Deaf and Dumb School found many peculiar signs prevalent in it with which he had never met in the Yorkshire* and Edinburgh Schools in which he had for years been a teacher; and many of their signs were equally unknown to each other, or to the Liverpool School. But the basis of all was the sign language of the Abbé de l'Epée, and a very little effort enabled him to add to his knowledge, and to make his sign language richer than it was before, by adding Lancashire signs to those of Yorkshire and Auld Reekie.

With this short and imperfect sketch of the sign language of the deaf and dumb we may bid a temporary farewell to its great inventor; but we shall probably enrol him in our thoughts in the future as among the worthiest and greatest of the benefactors of that large host of poor and miserable which the world had contained for centuries, and that he at last did so much to elevate and to bless.

* The school in Doncaster is the officially recognised school for deaf and dumb children from all parts of Yorkshire.