A Celebration of the Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles: Fifty Years Later

Article *in* Sign Language Studies · January 2016

DOI: 10.1353/sls.2016.0012

CITATIONS
0

READS
79

2 authors:

Julie A. Hochgesang
Gallaudet University
13 PUBLICATIONS **37** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Marvin Miller
Gallaudet University
1 PUBLICATION **0** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

SPECIAL FEATURE

A Celebration of the *Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles*: Fifty Years Later

Julie A. Hochgesang and Marvin T. Miller

The *Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles* (Stokoe, Casterline, and Croneberg 1965) or DASL spearheaded an age of linguistic exploration in signed languages that is still ongoing today. The seminal DASL dared to present signs in their own right without relying on written English translations and revealed how signed languages could be examined as real and natural languages. "Here not only the invaluable help of Carl [Croneberg] and Dorothy [Casterline] but also the insights of other signers added to our knowledge" (Stokoe 1993, 131). Also revolutionary was the dictionary's ordering of data—lexical signs were listed in the order of their handshapes, rather than the alphabetical order of their English translation equivalents.

The year 2015 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the DASL's publication. In order to commemorate the fiftieth year, the Department of ASL and Deaf Studies hosted a campus-wide celebration on December 1, 2015. As part of his BA Deaf Studies internship, Marvin Miller videotaped interviews from people involved with the DASL or the Linguistic Research Lab (LRL) at Gallaudet University. These

Julie A. Hochgesang (Deaf) is an assistant professor in the Department of Linguistics at Gallaudet University. Marvin T. Miller (Deaf) is a Deaf Studies major (slated to graduate in May 2017) in the Department of ASL and Deaf Studies at Gallaudet University.

interviews were showcased in a nineteen-minute video along with several live presentations at the December 1 celebration. This article draws from these interviews (both pre-recorded and live). The Linguistics Department at Gallaudet University was also involved in this celebration, particularly on Twitter[1] where a quick guide to DASL notation was disseminated and notations of ASL signs were periodically posted. Figure 1 shows a sprinkling of some of the ASL notations and signs that were shared.

Who Was Involved in the Event?

Since the impact of the DASL is exponentially huge, it is simply impossible to interview every person who has felt its impact. The people featured in this article represent a small slice of the American Deaf and signed language research communities. This list is not meant to be representative but to begin to provide an inkling of the immense impact DASL has had. For the list of participants in this article, we reached out to people who were at Gallaudet during the time of the development of the DASL (1961–1965) or the existence of the LRL (1971–1984), or are otherwise associated with these events.

In the next section, we alphabetically list brief biographies for each participant. Participants are identified as Deaf or hearing in the bios because such information is accessible at live events (a great deal of the information included here is taken from the live event in December 2015) but not in publications unless explicitly stated. Since this article will become a part of the historical record regarding DASL, the authors felt it was essential to describe the academic and Deaf/hearing identity of each participant. As is evident from the list of bios, there is a balanced mix of both Deaf and hearing participants, which we feel is cause for celebration given how early research was primarily conducted by hearing researchers. We hope the authors of the DASL would have found it a cause for celebration too.

Participants

Ben Bahan (Deaf) is a professor in the Department of ASL and Deaf Studies at Gallaudet University. Bahan specializes in Deaf Studies, ASL literature and linguistics, and sensory orientation studies.

1. The hashtag #DASL50 can be entered in the search feature on social media sites, especially Twitter, to view pictures, videos, and messages from that event.

FIGURE 1. Some ASL signs with their English glosses and DASL notations.

Charlotte Baker-Shenk (hearing) was one of the authors of the original Green books"—a series of five texts including *American Sign Language: A Teacher's Resource Text on Grammar and Culture* and *American Sign Language: A Teacher's Resource Text on Curriculum, Methods, and Evaluation* and three students' texts.

MJ Bienvenu (Deaf) is a professor in the Department of ASL and Deaf Studies at Gallaudet University. She specializes in semantics, lexicography, ASL screening, and curriculum development.

Dennis Cokely (hearing) is a professor at Northeastern University in the Department of ASL-English Interpreting. He directs the Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures as well as the World Languages Center.

Harvey Corson (Deaf) was the executive director for the American School for the Deaf. In 1988, he was one of the deaf candidates running for president at Gallaudet. He was the provost at Gallaudet from 1990 to 1992.

Carol Erting (hearing) is the provost for Academic Affairs at Gallaudet University. She has conducted ethnographic research in deaf homes, schools, and classrooms with a focus on language, culture, and literacy especially concerning collaboration among researchers, teachers, and caregivers.

Genie Gertz (Deaf) is the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Gallaudet University. Her work has focused on deaf education and advocacy for the Deaf community.

Robert E. Johnson (hearing) was a professor of the Department of Linguistics at Gallaudet University (now professor emeritus). He specialized in signed language phonetics, phonology, morphology, and fingerspelling as well as signed language isolates

Barbara Kannapell (Deaf) is a sociolinguist and a consultant on Deaf culture. She recently retired from the Community College of Baltimore Country where she taught ASL and Deaf issues for eleven years. She was also associated with Gallaudet for twenty-five years as a research assistant and linguistics specialist and served as chairperson of the President s Council on Deafness.

Arlene B. Kelly (Deaf), a professor in Gallaudet's Department of ASL and Deaf Studies, specializes in cultural and historical studies, mostly on Deaf women. She spearheaded the DASL50 December 1 event at Gallaudet University, mentoring Deaf Studies major intern Marvin A. Miller.

Barbara LeMaster (hearing) is a professor in the anthropology and linguistics departments at California State University at Long Beach. Her work includes descriptive linguistic and sociolinguistic analyses of signed languages in Deaf communities.

Ella Mae Lentz (Deaf) is an ASL poet who also teaches and does advocacy work within the Deaf community. She is one of the co-authors (along with Cheri Smith and Ken Mikos) of the *Signing Naturally* ASL curriculum series.

Carol Padden (Deaf) is a dean of Social Sciences at UC, San Diego, and a professor in the Department of Communication. She studies language emergence, new signed languages, signed language structure, and language and culture.

Laura-Ann Petitto (hearing) is the co-principal investigator and science director of the National Science Foundation-Gallaudet University s Visual Language and Visual Learning, VL2, as well as the scientific director of the Brain and Language Laboratory for Neuroimaging, BL2. She is also a full professor in the Department of Psychology at Gallaudet University as well an affiliated full professor in the Department of Psychology at Georgetown University.

Tiffany Williams (Deaf) is a Gallaudet Board of Trustees representative and daughter of Judy Williams, who was a Deaf woman, and the first researcher to document bilingual language acquisition in the home by studying her two Deaf children.

James "Woody" Woodward (hearing) is an adjunct professor in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Hawai'i, Mānoa, and is an adjunct professor in the Centre for Sign Linguistics and Deaf Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. His work has focused on the documentation of unstudied languages of Asia and the Pacific.

The following section is a mixture of questions that were asked by Marvin Miller before the event and the content of the live talks during the December 1 event. The general aim of the questions was to learn more about the influence of DASL on work done in signed language research and associated fields (e.g., interpreting, deaf education) as well as the American Deaf community.

Marvin Miller's Textual Introduction from the Video

When we celebrate our ASL as a true language, we usually think of Dr. William C. Stokoe. Indeed as observed in Maher (1996), Gil Eastman called Bill Stokoe the father of signed language linguistics. The story began in the 1950s with the third Gallaudet President Leonard M. Elstad who decided that they needed a curriculum expert and hired George Ernst Detmold. Dean Detmold implemented massive changes to Gallaudet College to ensure accreditation within five years. In 1955, he also hired his best friend and classmate from Cornell, Dr. William C. Stokoe, to teach English and chair the English Department. Both were never trained in the field of Deaf education. They came with fresh eyes on what the Deaf people were truly capable of.

Stokoe took sign language classes from Elizabeth Benson and "quickly realized that the signs he was being taught was very different from the signs his students were using" (ibid., 43). The signs students used? Those were considered "slang" and "inappropriate for formal situations" (ibid., 43). As quoted in Maher (1996), Stokoe said "I thought there was much more to what the students and deaf members of the faculty were doing than just putting English words into signs or fingerspelling. . . . it looks to me that they've got a real language here" (54).

In April 1960, Stokoe published the first paper on signed language structure. Within months, Stokoe received a $22,000 grant from the National Science Foundation to develop the first ASL dictionary. This money was used "'to continue his analysis of the sign language of the deaf in the United States. . . . Professor Stokoe, Mr. Carl Croneberg, and Miss Dorothy Sueoka [later Casterline] of the college will investigate the sentence patterns and the dialect differences of the language during the two-year period of the grant.' It was this research that ultimately led to the creation of the dictionary, which Robbin Battison

and others believe was 'the most important thing that Stokoe created, the first true dictionary of sign language'" (ibid., 86). Stokoe recruited his two Deaf colleagues, Croneberg and Casterline. Casterline was a Deaf woman from Hawai'i. With a bachelor's degree in English, Casterline had a keen eye for details, and she transcribed ASL signs. She was skilled with using a VariTyper (an electronic typewriter) with specially created fonts for designation (*dez*), tabulation (*tab*), and signation (*sig*)—also known as handshape, location, and movement. Croneberg, a Swedish Deaf man, had a master's degree in English and taught English classes. He did an early ethnographic and sociological portrait of the American Deaf community and regional dialects. Croneberg knew more than four languages including Swedish, German, English, and ASL. After four years of hard work, the *Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles* was published.

The initial reaction was silence and skepticism. Among linguists, the reaction was different. On April 15, 1971, Stokoe was "kicked upstairs to a new lab" (ibid., 109)—the Linguistic Research Lab (LRL). The resistance to the idea of ASL as a real language remained. With time, the impact from DASL and LRL began to be felt in many areas, such as linguistics, ASL instruction, performing arts and poetry,

Dorothy Casterline. Gallaudet University Archives.

bicultural and bilingual education, Deaf culture studies, ASL neurolinguistics, and beyond. The Gallaudet Linguistics Department is now chaired by a Deaf man, Dr. Paul Dudis, known for his work on ASL depiction. Today, ASL is commonly said to be the fourth most-used language in the United States. Gil Eastman wrote and directed an original play called *Sign Me Alice* and noted that "Stokoe taught me to be aware of sign language and to appreciate its beauty" (ibid., 93). Judy Williams planted the first seeds for Deaf bilingual education in 1969 by writing a paper on teaching ASL and English to her two Deaf children. Dr. James "Woody" Woodward presented a paper on Deaf bilingual education in 1973. He also taught linguistics at Gallaudet and wrote several more papers on bilingual education. His class led Barbara Kannapell to write a term paper on Deaf bilingual education. Years later, Marie J. Philip led the effort to introduce bilingual and bicultural (bi-bi) education at The Learning Center in Massachusetts. Robert E. Johnson, Carol Erting, and Scott K. Liddell wrote "Unlocking the Curriculum: Principles for Achieving Access in Deaf Education" in 1989. At Gallaudet, the publication of DASL eventually led to creation of many new programs on campus—the Department of ASL and Deaf Studies (which offers a bachelor's degree in ASL, a bachelor's in Deaf studies, a master's in cultural studies, and a master's in sign language education), the Department of Linguistics (which offers a master's and doctorate degree in linguistics), and the ASL Diagnostics and Evaluation Services center.

The mission statement of Gallaudet University states that it "is a bilingual, diverse, multicultural institution of higher education that ensures the intellectual and professional advancement of deaf and hard of hearing individuals through American Sign Language and English." As of 2007, all freshmen students are required to take the General Studies Requirement (GSR) 103 course "American Sign Language and Deaf Studies."

How did you get involved with the Linguistic Research Laboratory (or any of the earlier work on ASL)?

Carol Padden: When I was in high school, I ran into someone who told me about this new field called linguistics. I was fascinated. My

mother taught English literature. My family often talked about language and related questions. I was thinking about studying some field related to language. So linguistics—the scientific study of language—seemed to be a good fit for me. . . . I transferred to Georgetown University and people were telling me about the work that Bill Stokoe was doing then in the Linguistic Research Lab. I set up an appointment with Bill and told him that I was interested in working in his lab because I wanted to get into linguistics. Bill knew my mother because they both were in the English department. Bill knew my parents. He knew my brother, my family. Bill was eager to start work with me and invited me to join his lab. I was nineteen then. I started work in 1974. . . . I was lucky to be there at a time that felt like the start of the study of signed language linguistics.

James "Woody" Woodward:[2] My lottery draft number was 18 (out of 365) and by August I was told that I would be drafted and to report for my army physical. Because I had spent a year living in Asia and had taken on more of an Asian perspective on the war, I decided I did not want to be a combatant in this war. Instead I looked for an alternate to fulfill my obligations to the US government. To make a long story short, I followed the advice of the chair of the Chinese Department at Georgetown, whose wife had taken some classes at Gallaudet, and tried to apply to teach English and Linguistics at Gallaudet University. When I called Gallaudet I was connected with William Stokoe, who was then still chair of the English Department. Apparently I was the first person with a background in linguistics to apply to Gallaudet and Bill seemed happy to hire me. My draft board gave me a deferment for working at Gallaudet. I was hired only two weeks before Fall 1969 classes were to begin and Gallaudet provided me with two weeks of training in Sim-Com[3] before I had to start teaching Freshman English. I asked for an interpreter but was told that

2. The text is printed here verbatim from his submitted written English text.

3. Sim-Com is short for Simultaneous Communication, an educational method in which participants use both spoken language and sign language simultaneously. See Liddell 2003 (pages 2–4) for a discussion about this method.

Gallaudet faculty had to sign for themselves. When I entered the classroom, I discovered that most of the students in the class were strong signers with not particularly strong English skills. I was able to communicate some of my problems to the students and asked for their advice about improving my signs. The students suggested I join them whenever possible in Rathskellar, which I diligently did every night I was not studying at Georgetown for my master's degree in linguistics.

Ella Mae Lentz: Around 1973, when I was a freshman, I took a class called "sign language translation for theater" under Eastman. The class was ground-shaking for me in how I thought about ASL. They kept encouraging us to be natural, to use our natural language. It felt so wrong to me then. To be on stage and to bring my natural everyday mode of communication with me? No! That couldn't be done. We the students went back and forth with the teacher. But Eastman kept encouraging us. I finally went for it. I looked at the script and the English words there and thought about what the ASL translation would be. It was a slow transition for me. To take the English words, extract the meaning, and fully visualize how to produce it in ASL in a way that I would naturally do it with other Deaf people. It went slowly but at last I got it. And it was so much better. It was real. It was right. My Deaf experience became a part of my acting. It was like I was freed. That was quite a process. It stuck with me. Still today, I still look inside myself and think about how best to say it in ASL. That exploration of myself, that analysis of how language works inside me is ongoing. As it should be.

Robert E. Johnson: Well, the first time I saw sign language. I had gone to a meeting of Deaf people. My wife at that time was an audiologist so I had to go and pick her up. She told me that the meeting was finished at 9. But you know Deaf people and their sense of time. So when I arrived at 9 and didn't see my wife, I went in and watched Deaf people talk about Total Communication and mainstreaming . . . at that time the state of Oregon wanted to close the Deaf school and move all of the kids to a hearing school to be mainstreamed. Well it wasn't called mainstreaming then but that's

what it was. So at that meeting, a whole bunch of Deaf people came together to discuss this . . . I saw this Deaf man stand up and talk about the role of sign language in the Deaf community. I watched in awe. You have to understand, at that time, I was already a linguist. Then I was studying American Indian languages. In the two languages I was studying, I was working with the last speaker of both languages. Those two languages were about to be extinct, to die. So I was looking for other languages. I looked at this man and I thought this could be interesting. You have a community. You have a language. And you have a separation in the middle of America. As a linguist, I thought it was fascinating. So the next day I went to the library at the university to look up ASL. It was there that I found the DASL. That was my first contact. Again, I was already a linguist. I could take the DASL and read it and understand. It made sense to me. I accepted that ASL was really a language. It has phonology. It has a way of putting down signs. So I went through the DASL and became very interested. From that point on, that was all I did. No more Indian languages. Just ASL. So with time, I started to take sign language classes. And when it was time for my sabbatical from OSU, I decided I wanted to go to Gallaudet for one year. I started to correspond with Stokoe. When I got to Gallaudet, I spent one year in the LRL. I think this was 1978. The academic year of 1978 to 1979. Somewhere about then. It was interesting for me because at that time the lab had Woody (James Woodward), Stokoe himself, Carol Padden (she was an undergraduate at Georgetown then) and various others. I got to know Stokoe well during that first year. He was an interesting man. I realized that he was very intelligent and able to see things that other people couldn't see. Bill wasn't the best signer. He couldn't, from his own experience, really see the difference between ASL and English. But he could see the role of the language in the community. The importance of the language for children. And so on. That was my first experience with Stokoe.

MJ Bienvenu: When I started looking for a job, Dennis Cokely (who I had already worked for before) told me about Bill Stokoe. So I went to his research lab. When I went in the lab for the first time, I had no idea what it would mean to work in the LRL. I was

blown away. I learned so much. About ASL. About the analysis of signed languages. And even the politics behind ASL.

What was it like for you as a Deaf person in your social circles or as a hearing academic working on signed language research—working on the idea that ASL was a real language on an equal footing with English?

Barbara Kannapell: When the dictionary first came out, people were asking "What's that? ASL?" They turned the pages in puzzlement and didn't know what to make of it. I traveled the country giving workshops related to our work. When I would say that ASL is a real language, people would get in an uproar. They denied it. They fought about it. We would go back and forth. See my hair? It's completely gray. Looking back now, wow, it was just crazy. One thing I would stress during my traveling lectures at that time was that you cannot take ASL away from me. It cannot be removed. ASL is an integral part of me. My language is me.

Harvey Corson: I remember the discussion among students here at Gallaudet. They remarked on learning new information about research going on here. It was said that sign language had structure. Linguistic structure. We were amazed by this. Then many years later, I became the provost here at Gallaudet. At that time, we established the Blue Ribbon Task Force on which many scholars sat. We appreciated the fact that we had Dr. Bill Stokoe serving on that task force along with others. The work of that task force led to the establishment of the Department of ASL and Deaf Studies, which was established in 1994 or so, with Dr. Yerker Andersson as the first department chair.

Carol Padden: I remember people saying "linguistics? What's that? Why are you studying sign language? Why the term *Ameslan?* Just call it *sign language*. You don't have to make it technical like it's Ameslan. You don't have to call it the American Sign Language." People didn't want to use that term [American Sign Language] back then. I remember being taken aback by their responses. The people I was working with at that time in the LRL, we felt like—at that time we were on the fourth floor I think of College Hall—

whatever number it was, it was the top floor. We felt isolated up there. We were like a special group of people who were set apart from the rest of the campus and we were looked at with confusion. The rest of the campus would keep asking us questions about what we were doing. I remember someone saying to me "so you're studying the linquistics [*sic*]?" He couldn't spell it right. Nobody agreed with what we were doing. It was just us working together who "got it." And oddly enough, we would go give talks in other places, and to conferences where others understood what we were doing. They agreed with our work. But back at Gallaudet, many people really resisted the work. They didn't fully understand what it meant. . . . So many people at Gallaudet would tell us to give up and they kept questioning [the value of] our work. They were also unclear why hearing people would work on such a project when they weren't planning to become teachers or otherwise work with the Deaf . . . they were really skeptical of hearing people who just wanted to study the language. Today we get it. We understand that. But in 1974, 1975, no way. It was a tough time. . . .Bill was looked on as someone a little odd. But it takes someone like that to do something novel . . . when I was nineteen years old, I started working with Bill. Bill wasn't that skilled of a signer. He could articulate the signs well but not fluently. But he was very motivated and driven. He would constantly ask me questions about how signs worked and why I would produce them a certain way. He dedicated in a lot of work to explaining the phonology of ASL. You have to understand—today we talk about the phonology of signed languages all the time. It's the standard material when we teach linguistics. But at that time, people were really puzzled by the work he was doing. Analyzing signs based on linguistic principles? A lot of people didn't know what to make of it. Some dismissed Stokoe as just a hearing person who didn't know what he was doing . . . but slowly people started to understand. . . . Bill was a master at bringing together new ideas and many started to grasp and discuss those ideas and to be inspired by them. They let themselves get involved in his work and helped suggest new directions in his work. It was an interesting time—an interesting dialogue among people from that time. . . . But back then, we didn't get

recognition for the work we were doing. In 1975 I think it was, we even hosted a wine and cheese party for campus people to come and learn more about the LRL but no one showed up. Today Bill's name is mentioned everywhere. He's been honored time and time again. But at that time, very few people knew why we were doing what we were doing. And did I know back then? I think I did. I think I knew we were doing something right. But back then, it was hard to foresee what would come of it but today in 2015, it's nice to look back and see how much change has happened. It has been forty years now (since I got involved). What will happen forty years from now?

MJ Bienvenu: I remember there was this meeting at the Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD) here in Washington, DC. People were talking about the problems with deaf children. It was one problem after another. I looked around the room in exasperation. I was sitting there just feeling so tired of the same old attitudes. Stokoe got up and asked the room whether they were aiming to create broken hearing people or successful Deaf people. The room was stunned into silence. The facilitator of the meeting, Carl Kirchner, looked at him and then at his watch and immediately called to close the meeting. No one wanted to answer his question. I was in awe. It really was such an important question. What is really the goal of Deaf education? Eventually that led us to think about bilingual education, to think about what it means to have our own language, to think about what it means to be a successful Deaf person. And on and on.

James "Woody" Woodward:[4] Having majored in linguistics and having worked a bit on minority languages in Taiwan, it seemed very natural to me that ASL was a real language and that because ASL was a minority language the English using majority would not readily acknowledge, accept, or respect ASL. I saw the situation as very similar to users of Taiwanese who were told that they spoke a dialect of Chinese when they really used a language distinct from Mandarin. In my nights at the Rathskellar, I quickly noticed that the grammatical structure of the students' signing I was seeing was

4. The text is printed verbatim from his submitted written English text.

not English and clearly not "broken" English but a completely different language with its own grammatical structure. I also noticed different registers of signed conversation and code-switching and code-mixing with English grammatical structure. My training in linguistics made it easy for me to understand the idea that ASL was a different language from English.

Dennis Cokely: Well, of course it was really exciting. Deaf people were analyzing their own language. And there was this sense of pride in thinking they had their own complex language. So much more too. It was amazing. But I remember one time out front of the Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD), there was this Deaf man who got in a terrible argument with me. It was one for the books. We went back and forth, back and forth . . . the Deaf man kept criticizing the work, kept criticizing the claim that ASL was a language. But he himself was an incredibly skilled user of ASL. He wasn't signing English. So even though there was a sense of pride starting to be felt in some members of the community, there were still plenty of people who had not yet accepted that ASL was a language just like English.

Robert E. Johnson: The three of us (Johnson, Liddell, and Erting) wrote "Unlocking the Curriculum." Right away, it started this huge fight. We sent the paper out to all of the Deaf schools in the country. To every Deaf program in the country. The impact was huge. Because it was seen as very radical.

What were the discussions or debates like during that time within the Deaf community?

Carol Padden: As an example (of the arguments we had on the Gallaudet campus), people would get into arguments about the name of the language. Some people didn't like *Ameslan*. Some wanted simply "the sign language." They would argue back and forth on this. So many proposals were circulate. . . . When I was on the Gallaudet board some years later, we thought we should have a communication policy. But at the time, most people didn't want to use the phrase *American Sign Language*. They wanted to use *Sign Communication*. I couldn't figure out why people were resistant

to calling it *American Sign Language.* I tried to explain that there needed to be a name for the language that Deaf people in America were using. It couldn't be called simply *sign communication* as if it were a universal language. Each unique signed language needs to have its own name. I tried explaining, but to no avail. But now this kind of resistance is gone. I see many around today who used to resist the term but now they use it as if it were a completely normal name, which of course it is.

Robert E. Johnson: When they set up the linguistics department here at Gallaudet (in 1981), I helped start the department and was the first chair. I intended to stay for only five years. But I stayed for thirty-one. From the time I arrived at Gallaudet and on, I saw there was a difference between what people said and what they did . . . so policies, practices, and attitudes were very often anti-ASL. Or they wanted to lump ASL in the category of communication while English was a language. Or they would say that ASL was fine for social purposes but not for education.

James "Woody" Woodward:[5] It should be remembered that Stokoe, Casterline, and Croneberg's work had already been published four years before I arrived at Gallaudet, and much of the faculty objections to Linguistic Research on ASL had already been aired in departmental and faculty meetings. It is difficult for me to comment on what the debate was like in the Deaf community because I was new, I was an unskilled signer, and my primary contact was with freshman students who did not really discuss any ideas about the status of ASL with me. What was discussed was that the students couldn't understand most of the signing that hearing teachers used and that students wanted to see the hearing teachers improve their signing. While there could have been a lot of discussion going on in 1969, by the time the LRL was set up as a separate unit in 1971, there was starting to be a gradual acceptance of the possibility of ASL being a separate language from English. Certainly, there were probably a number of people at Gallaudet who didn't accept ASL as a separate language in 1971, but it was more difficult

5. This is not translated from ASL, instead it is a direct quotation taken from a written English letter shared with us for the December 1, 2015, event.

to formally object to ASL research with the establishment of the LRL as a formal unit at Gallaudet.

MJ Bienvenu: When it hit me that ASL was a language, I was at a workshop . . . at that time I was already teaching "signing," and when I heard about the workshop, which was to talk about the "rules of ASL," my first reaction was extreme annoyance. First you're telling us that Deaf people make all these errors when using English. And now you're telling us that Deaf people make errors while using "sign"? I went to the workshop with immense reluctance and ready to battle their claims which I thought would be totally wrong. When I was in the workshop, which was led by Carol (Padden), I raised my hand and asked about why they were talking about "rules" when they didn't exist and really we didn't need them. Carol looked at me and signed two ASL phrases that were completely ungrammatical (both are shown in figure 2).

(a depicting sign to indicate the thickness of an object) and "cars" fingerspelled
*"be really thick cars"

(a depicting sign to indicate a long line of people) and "water" in ASL
*"a long line of people water"

FIGURE 2. MJ shows two phrases that are ungrammatical in ASL. *Note:* In linguistics, an asterisk preceding an utterance indicates that it is ungrammatical or unacceptable by the users of the language community.

I stared at her because it was completely incoherent. She didn't make sense when she used the signs together like that. Then she said "that's what it means to have rules in ASL." I was speechless. My whole life changed in that instant, in that one moment. I was just stunned. After that, I completely threw myself into the study of ASL. As I went along and learned how ASL was a real natural language, my perspectives completely changed. I was planning to major in business and after that maybe work in a bookstore. But when I really understood that ASL was really a language and I got into that, my life changed. I was "born-again Deaf". . . my friends started to get sick of me when we would talk because I would continually analyze their language use. I jumped at each eyebrow raise. It got to the point where I would totally focus on how they were saying what they were saying that I did not pay attention to what they were actually saying. I think there were a lot of us young people at that time who really got into it. We would talk with each other and get in these deep discussions. Some of my other friends were thinking it was dull. But we thought it was completely exciting. . . . And I looked at my Deaf parents anew. They weren't ignorant. They did have a language. It changed my opinion of them—I didn't look down on them anymore; rather I looked up to them.

From the Live Talks on December 1, 2015

Marvin Miller: Fifty years ago, the first dictionary about ASL was published . . . even if it is technical and somewhat hard to read, it changed the world. DASL changed our world. Things weren't the same for us after that.

Ben Bahan: Ben Bahan reads one sentence from the DASL preface "the editors hope that the dictionary itself will give evidence of the institution's devotion to the liberal arts and humane sciences that continues to 'pervade all the work of the college.'" Bahan notes that forty-five years later (about 2010), Gallaudet university has finally recognized itself as a bilingual institution and that the hopes of the dictionary continue.

Carol Erting: [Carol Erting worked with Bill Stokoe in the Linguistic Research Lab.]

I met Bill Stokoe myself only seven years after DASL had been published for the first time. At that time I was completely new to the Deaf community. I had no idea that ASL was even a language. And really that idea itself—that ASL was a language—was new too. It was new to the Deaf community as well.

At that time, it was common to view ASL as "gesture" or even "broken English." At that time, I worked with parents of Deaf children—even some parents who were Deaf themselves—and when I mentioned "American Sign Language," the parents would look at me puzzled and say "American Sign Language? ASL? No, no, no, no, that's not a language." I realized that the schools at that time were ignoring the Deaf community, ignoring the language itself. That was in 1972. For me now to be here today in the year 2015 at Gallaudet University, which has declared itself a bilingual university, is thrilling. I am proud we now acknowledge the importance of ASL in education, in the lives of people in the Deaf community. I wish Bill himself were here today. I wish he could see this. Bill passed in 2000 at a time when the university finally started to recognize and honor his work.

Genie Gertz: This is history in the making, following historic work. While the DASL was published fifty years ago, the work actually had started before that. In the 1960s, Stokoe and his team worked together to create a seminal paper drawing on the work of that time about what "language" was, and that led to declaring American Sign Language as a language. In 1965, a team of researchers published the *Dictionary of American Sign Language.* The DASL had a huge impact here at Gallaudet University, in the United States, and even internationally. It led to other declarations about the existence of Deaf culture and recognitions of other aspects of the Deaf community. All of that started with the dictionary itself that influenced our consciousness. The DASL made people really start thinking about ASL as a language for the first time. Over time, we recognized and accepted ASL as a language, and that led to recognition and understanding of Deaf culture. The impact reverberated, leading to where we are today, with Gallaudet University as a bilingual university, with the establishment of a Department of ASL and Deaf Studies, as well as other related departments. It

all started with the publication of the *Dictionary of American Sign Language.* We are here today to celebrate the DASL and its effect and influence on the world.

I would like to close with a quote by Margaret Mead, the famous anthropologist, who stated, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world." We have to recognize this team that worked on DASL, whose impact was everlasting over the years, and changed the world.

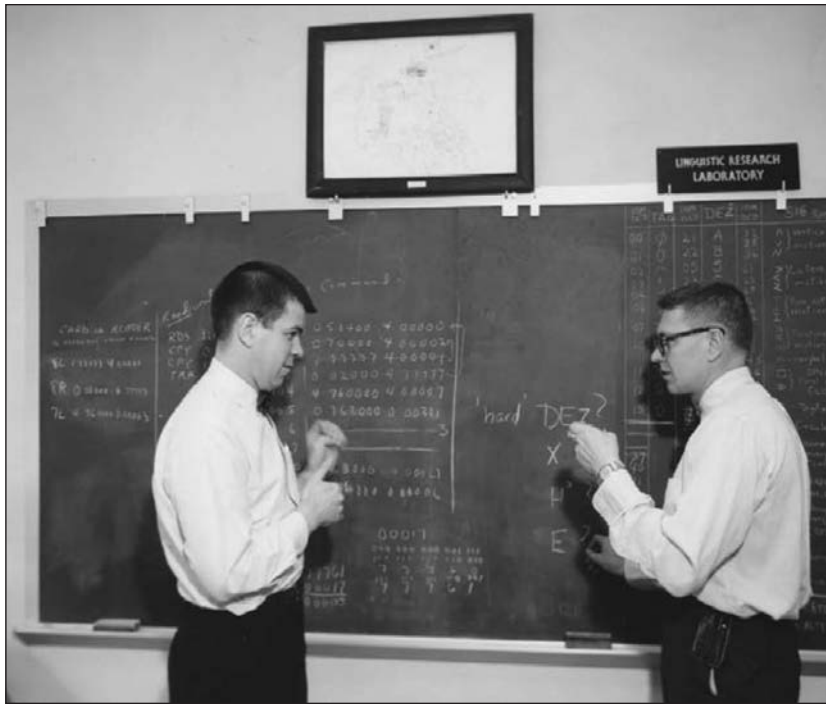
Ben Bahan: [Ben Bahan produced the ASL sign for "MOTHER" and asked the audience what it meant. The audience mostly answered either "M-O-M" (fingerspelled) or "M-O-T-H-E-R" (fingerspelled).] "That's how we've been writing down signs. We'd write it down using written English. Sometimes we'd add what it looked like by drawing a hand by the chin. All of this time, that's how we've been writing down signs. So when people looked at the written representation, they saw the English translations and couldn't see how ASL could be a language in its own right. So, Stokoe basically asked that question, "how can we write down a sign?" From when Stokoe started working at Gallaudet in the 1950s, he kept asking that question. Stokoe met Traxler and Smith, two linguists who worked on English phonetics. Stokoe joined their summer institute to study under them and learn their notation system. They collaborated on creating a notation system for ASL. It was like doing mathematics. Stokoe presented this work in his 1960 paper "Sign Language Structure." In that paper, Stokoe proposed dividing the sign into parts: handshape and so on. That proposal shook the foundations. For all that time before, we had been using a system based on speech. People couldn't see how to treat gestural movements in its own right. Stokoe was the first to propose that signs be broken down into parts. Stokoe was able to get a grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the Society for Learning Council and Gallaudet College. That work led to the DASL. Now back to the sign for "mother," it could now be represented based on the handshape used to represent the idea as well as its placement and movement. The DASL had a system for representing the sign itself using its own notation system. It was ground-breaking. A new way of looking at the language. And

actually analyzing it. The impact was multi-fold. People didn't realize that the sign could be broken down into parts. That it could be systematically analyzed. It was a breakthrough.

Barbara LeMaster: I was an undergraduate student at UC Berkeley in the late 1970s. One of my linguistics professors required me to write an analysis on some language. I asked if I could write about ASL. He said no, it was not permitted. When I asked why, he replied that he wasn't sure if it was actually a language. But before I graduated, ASL was offered as a class and is still offered today. Back to my undergraduate school experience, later one of my anthropology professors wanted me to write a paper about the culture of another community. I asked if I could write about the American Deaf culture and he replied that it was not permitted because there was no Deaf culture. I persisted and said that if I wrote a paper on it, he might change his mind. There were 300 students in that class. Ten papers would be selected for publication in the university journal. Mine was one of them. In the early 1980s, I went to UCLA for my master's program and there you need to study a language other than English. I suggested ASL but their response was the same, "Uh, I'm not so sure ASL is a language." I collected all of the linguistic work related to ASL at that time starting with DASL and that first paper written by Stokoe in 1960. I handed in all of that with a letter explaining why I should be able to study ASL. Ultimately my advisor said yes I could study it because it was indeed a language. Still, it was quite a struggle to even get them to consider my request. Today at UCLA, there's no such struggle. They fully accept that ASL is a language. It's even taught there now. At the university where I work now—California State University at Long Beach—they've just established an ASL and Deaf Culture program."

Laura-Ann Petitto:[6] Thank you for holding this event in honor of Dr. William Stokoe. I had the most profound pleasure of being in Dr. Stokoe's Linguistic Research Laboratory (LRL) from 1978 to 1979. I was invited by Stokoe to take up a research position in

6. The text is printed verbatim from her submitted written English text, which was translated into ASL at the December 1 event by Arlene B. Kelly.



Carl Croneberg and William Stokoe. Gallaudet University Archives.

his LRL after I had submitted a paper to his journal, *Sign Language Studies* (SLS). In that paper, I conducted the first study ever with Dr. Gloria Marmor in which we scientifically evaluated Total Communication (TC). We performed psycholinguistic analyses of TC and discovered that it is detrimental to young deaf children—an impediment to their acquisition of ASL and an impediment to their acquisition of English. After our submission to SLS, Stokoe invited me down to Gallaudet with a full fellowship to study the phonological patterns and regularities of ASL—also among the first studies of their kind.

Being in Stokoe's laboratory was one of the most extraordinary and wonderful years of my life. I owe much to Stokoe. You can still trace his inspiring influence on me after decades of working with him. I went on to discover the tissue in the human brain that processes the phonological level of language organization in the

brains of both Deaf and hearing people—and I discovered that this tissue is identical in the brains of Deaf and hearing people, thus demonstrating that signs and speech have equal biological status. More recently, our Visual Language and Visual Learning (VL2) and Brain and Language Laboratory (BL2) teams have gone on to discover how the smallest building blocks of signed languages, like sign-phonetic, sign-syllabic units, and other units (which I refer to as "Visual Sign Phonology"), play an important role in promoting reading success in young Deaf children. Deaf children decode sign-phonetic and sign-syllabic units and letters on the page in the same way that hearing children decode sound phonetic units and letters on the page en route to reading mastery. This discovery about sign-phonology, propelled within me by our dear "Bill" Stokoe, has stunning translational implications for the education and academic success of all deaf children, irrespective of etiology or language exposure.

I still miss Bill Stokoe and think about him often. His legacy definitely lives on in my BL2 and in my students who study signed and spoken phonology in the human brain, and especially Visual Sign Phonology that can be a powerful tool to facilitate reading success in all deaf children. That would have made Bill Stokoe very, very happy.

Ben Bahan: Bahan talks about how he got involved with the Linguistic Research Lab in 1978. He was a senior in college and needed an internship experience. He got a job as a research assistant under Charlotte Baker-Shenk. He had to take a linguistic structure class first. Then he worked with Charlotte and Dennis Cokely on a new book that came to be known as the Green Book.

Dennis Cokely: Cokely talks about becoming a Linguistic Research Lab (LRL) rat. He would teach at Kendall during the day and then spend the nights at LRL engaging in dialogue with others there. In 1978, he began work on the Green Book with Charlotte. In 1980, he was hired by Stokoe as a full-time research associate. Cokely returns to the DASL and says it has not just one gift but three gifts—first, it was an extraordinary vision that Deaf people have a language and a culture; second, it was a tool that could be used

Carl Croneberg, Dorothy Casterline, and William Stokoe. Gallaudet University Archives.

for analysis and documentation of ASL; third, it sparked the energy needed to establish the LRL. LRL, while one of its focus areas was, of course, research, also offered social justice. The work was for a group of people—they didn't do the work just to research the language. They did it to ask questions about a community—to ask about the implications of the linguistic work for Deaf children, for Deaf people, how Deaf people can have access, and so on. Cokely was one of the last two people to work full-time at LRL before it closed.

Charlotte Baker-Shenk: I've always been curious about power. Who has power and how do you get it? What does behavior look like in those who have power? I've always been curious about it . . . I'll return to that idea later. Now let's look at culture—it's like something people just breathe in, often unaware of it. Sometimes, the air that people breathe in is not healthy. Sometimes that air has poison inside it. When people breathe it in, it can cause illness. Culture is sometimes like that, too. Sometimes people take in something that is toxic, something that makes them sick. They may

be unaware of it, that they're taking in something bad. It's important to step back and look at it from the outside. To assess what's going on. I was not here in 1960 or 1965. I got here in about 1975. It seemed that, up until then, the power dynamics were different. Remember I was talking about culture? Think about all of what has been said today. It seemed that the culture at that time was full of negative messages: "Deaf can't. They're not intelligent. They have no language. Their behavior isn't right." The Deaf didn't fit the hearing perspective. The Deaf were "broken" from a hearing person's perspective. And the hearing people had the power. The hearing way was "right." During my time, I saw a gradual cultural shift. While I'm not Deaf, I am a woman and I have experienced some of that oppression, which helped me empathize some with the Deaf experience . . . the work of DASL and LRL led to the realization that the culture of that time was not healthy. . . . where before hearing people were considered the experts, Deaf people became the experts. The field has changed . . . before hard of hearing people had more power because they had at least a bit of hearing (making them more like hearing people). But then power began to shift to the Deaf people who were native signers and immersed in the culture. That was a completely new idea. How did that even happen? To us today, this is obvious. But it wasn't at that time. People then were blind to the obvious. They were breathing and living toxic ideas. It took a person who did not have that mind-set, who did not subscribe to the old mindset to see Deaf people for who they were. Bill was a humble man. . . . he always welcomed anyone at his door. That was my experience. A kid myself straight out of graduate school in California, I went to Bill to ask for a job in the LRL. But I was too afraid to actually ask him. He agreed to meet with me, and we talked the entire day, but I was still too nervous to make my request! So I asked if I could return the next day with more questions. Bill looked surprised but kindly agreed. The next day we talked until I could finally build up the courage to ask for a job. Bill immediately welcomed me. I've heard about similar experiences from many others. Bill was a generous person. . . . Bill respected Deaf people and worked with them as a team. He never tried to put himself on top. He was

willing to share, to learn from Deaf people. That's why the world changed. I was honored to work with Bill and others who were involved in the LRL.

James "Woody" Woodward:[7] I was the first linguist to be hired at Gallaudet. The DASL was the first dictionary about Deaf people. I was the first linguist to go out in the world to other countries and train Deaf people to do fieldwork. If it were not for the work of the DASL, there would not be the same understanding of language at Gallaudet (which ironically happened much more later than those who were outside of Gallaudet) and even further around the world.

MJ Bienvenu: The work that has been done at Gallaudet has had untold impact on the world. People from all over traveled to Gallaudet to visit the LRL. England. Switzerland. Sweden. France. Germany. Later Asian countries would engage in research of their own. South America, too. Africa. All over. It got to the point where many countries in the world have discovered something about their signed languages. Deaf communities have their own signed languages all around the world. The DASL did not just impact Gallaudet, it did not just have a local impact. It had a worldwide impact. . . . Fifty years ago from that little book to today to this where we all have come together to celebrate this. Here we are. Great history, great change, great impact. Really DASL is bigger than you think. To that little book, thank you.

Tiffany Williams: Thank you for inviting me to talk about my mother Judy Williams. Like Bahan said, Judy may have had a short life but she made a huge impact. Especially in our family. Maybe some of you are not familiar with my mother, especially those of you who are young. There are four generations of Deaf in my Deaf family. Communication is strong. Signing is important, very important in our family. Signing was and is the natural mode of communication in our family. So for my mother when she got

7. This was translated from written English to ASL by MJ Bienvenu at the December 1, 2015, event. The translation of ASL text is presented here.

to Gallaudet, to the linguistics department, it was obvious to her that ASL was a language. Like others have said today about the struggles with ASL being seen as a real language, my mother saw and experienced the same struggles about bilingualism. She wrote a beautiful paper in 1968 where she recognized that bilingualism was real. Judy had two deaf children—me and my brother. . . . She used our family experience to research how language was acquired—both ASL and English. Her product was both of us. People looked at us and saw how we could express ourselves well in both ASL and English. The last line in my mother's paper supported the importance of children having communication early as young children, "Unfortunately there is not a school in the United States that uses [ASL] as a medium of communication between teacher and pupil except in the advanced department. That is too late." That can be seen in today's philosophy in Deaf education. She contributed to the contemporary claim that children should have access to ASL early, and that will lead to later success in reading and writing English. That was pretty forward thinking for that time. 1968! But really, we were a Deaf family. It was common sense to us. But how my mother expressed herself and used the word *bilingual* was transformative. Today Gallaudet supports the bilingual mission. I imagine my mother is now looking down at all of us today with pride.

Ben Bahan: Bahan recounts a conversation he had with Ursula Bellugi of the Salk Institute. Bellugi started a project studying the acquisition of ASL. Bahan asked how she got started. Bellugi explained that she was already working in the field of child acquisition and started to wonder about deaf children and how they acquired language. The first thing she did? Picked up the DASL and started looking through it. It became the background of her work that led to the establishment of a team at the Salk Institute. "DASL is a book that went far. Like the little book that could.

Conclusion

As Stokoe (1993) in his article about the development of the dictionary puts it, "The monograph, *Sign Language Structure* [1960], was the

difficult, the challenging task, the *Dictionary of ASL* was the hard, the arduous one. To do the former I had to break the code, to discover how the language worked, how people could take the vague, inchoate, sprawling realm of gesturing and make it into a system for building words" (127). People are still continuing the work, discovering how the language works. Not just for ASL but for many other signed languages.

Note

Stokoe took over the journal *Sign Language Studies* from Mouton Press in 1972 first as editor then as publisher in 1975 (Maher 1996). A great deal of the early DASL-inspired work by signed language linguists like Woodward and Markowitz was included. "Stokoe wanted to use *Sign Language Studies* to share new information generated by his researchers and others in the field" (ibid., 137). The journal is now forty-three years old, taken over by Gallaudet University Press in 2000, edited by David Armstrong through 2009, turned over to Ceil Lucas in January of 2010. In all that time, hundreds of papers about sign language structure and use have been published.

Acknowledgments

Arlene B. Kelly was Marvin Miller's BA internship supervisor, with support from MJ Bienvenu. Most of the participants' text in this article was translated from ASL to written English by Hochgesang. Whenever possible, the translation was verified by the original contributors. The conversational tone of the messages shared in the pre-recorded interviews and the live talks at the December 1 event was maintained to keep that "interview" feeling. If otherwise, the translated text is not in quotation marks or there is a note identifying the text as the originally submitted text (in written English).

References

Johnson, R. E., S. K. Liddell, & C. J. Erting. 1989. "Unlocking the Curriculum: Principles for Achieving Access in Deaf Education." Working paper 89-3. Washington, DC: Department of Linguistics and Interpreting and Gallaudet Research Institute.

Liddell, S. K. 2003. *Grammar, Gesture, and Meaning in American Sign Language.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Maher, J. 1996. *Seeing Language in Sign: The Work of William C. Stokoe.* Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.

Stokoe, W. C. 1960. "Sign Language Structure: An Outline of the Visual Communication Systems of the American Deaf." Studies in Linguistics: Occasional Papers (No. 8). Buffalo, NY: Dept. of Anthropology and Linguistics, University of Buffalo.

———. 1993. "Dictionary Making, Then and Now." *Sign Language Studies* 79: 127–46.

Stokoe, W., D. Casterline, and C. Croneberg. 1965. *A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles.* Silver Spring, MD: Linstok Press.

Williams, J. 1968. "Bilingual Experiences of a Deaf Child." Paper presented in Linguistics 701 (Prof. Wm. C. Stokoe), Gallaudet College, November 1968. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED030092)