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The Formation of Signing Communities[1]

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Overview

In this paper we examine the life of one signing community that prospered from before the founding of the American School for the Deaf until the early 1950s. This community on Martha's Vineyard was unique because there was a high concentration of deaf people in a small geographic area where hearing people signed as well. There have been and are few signing communities that are similar elsewhere in the world where both deaf and hearing people sign.

First, we will look at how different deaf[2] communities have been formed around the world. They appear to be formed in two different ways, which generally correlate with how deaf people have been treated and how the signed languages of the deaf have been viewed by hearing society. The two different type of communities are: suppressing communities and assimilating communities (T. Supalla, personal communication, March 9, 1995).

In Western societies in particular, deaf people have been allowed to participate in society, but the use of sign language is subtly discouraged. In many instances, there is even a conscious effort to suppress sign languages, particularly in schools and pedagogical practices. When suppression occurs, signing Deaf communities generally form in spite it, so hearing people have not been successful in eradicating the use of sign language among Deaf people. An example of this subtle discouragement can be found in the question a hearing person might ask a deaf person when meeting him or her for the first time, "Can you read my lips?" This message transmits a set of expectations; it says to deaf people, "Your participation in our society depends on following our terms."

Many Western societies (e.g., the USA and European nations) have suppressed sign language, hoping that with oralism Deaf people would be

[1]We thank the following people: Ted Supalla, Nancy Frishberg, Bob Johnson, Yutaka Osugi, Judy Kegl, and Bob Hoffmeister for sharing their work and replying to our inquiries. We are solely responsible for any inadequacies found in the paper.

[2]We have capitalized the word "deaf" only in those cases where we refer to a culturally Deaf society that recognizes itself as such. Most of the signing communities discussed in this paper do not distinguish between deaf and hearing groups.

assimilated into the hearing world. An ongoing case is that of Nicaragua, where there was complete suppression and annihilation of the Deaf Community and its language, but after the Sandinistas revolution the Deaf Community has reemerged (see, for example Kegl, 1994; Senghas & Kegl, 1994; Senghas, A., 1994).

In some societies, deaf people have been totally assimilated. This happens when both the deaf and hearing people in that society know and use sign language. These societies view sign language, rather than speaking and reading lips, as the natural way to communicate with deaf people, and hearing people sign whenever they are in the presence of deaf people. There are several communities that have formed like this in various places around the world. It is important to know that each of them is unique in its own way. They are not structured in exactly the same ways; however there are commonalities they all share, which will be discussed later in this paper. They are in geographically isolated places such as islands, forests, or mountainous regions. Some of these communities have vanished; some are still thriving. Examples of these signing communities are Chilmark on Martha's Vineyard (Groce, 1985; Poole, 1979, 1983), Yucatec Mayan village in Mexico (Johnson, 1994), Adamorobe village, Ghana (Frishberg, 1987), Providence Island (Washbaugh, 1986; Woodward, 1978a), and Urubu, Brazil (Farb, 1973; Kakumasu, 1968).

In order to provide a picture of what life is like in an assimilating community, we will discuss the narrative history of Martha's Vineyard in section 2. In section 3 we examine the sign language used in Martha's Vineyard. Then in section 4 we compare patterns of suppressing and assimilating communities.

Narrative History of Martha's Vineyard

History from 17th-century Kent, England, to 19th-century Chilmark

Chilmark is a small town on the island of Martha's Vineyard that lies five miles off Cape Cod, Mass. How did it happen that a deaf community developed on Martha's Vineyard? To find out, it is necessary to trace the ancestors of the deaf people back to their homes in England.

Groce (1985) traced the genealogies of the deaf people of Martha's Vineyard back to common English ancestors from an area in the county of Kent called the Weald. It was a landlocked, sheep-raising region, whose people married within their own villages, or nearby villages, so that most people in a small area were related to one another. Hence, they shared some of the same genes. It is impossible to know what the incidence of deafness was in the Weald, prior to the migration to the New World, as few records were kept of the lives of common people in 17th-century England.

However, Groce found anecdotal evidence that suggests that a Deaf Community existed in the Weald around that time. Sir George Downing, an English politician who came from the Weald, had a number of deaf people in the spy networks that he ran in London. The following story, which took place about 30 years after people from Kent began their migration to the New World, is recorded in the diary of Samuel Pepys:

In 1666, in London, Pepys and Downing were attending a party, when a deaf messenger came to give report of a fire that was spreading in the city.

"... and he made strange signs of the fire, and how the king was abroad, and many things they understood but I could not ..."
(Pepys in Groce, p. 30)

So it seems there existed a sign language capable of expressing complicated ideas, and that both deaf and hearing people used it, around the time that some of the people of the area packed up and moved to the New World.

They moved for both religious and economic reasons: they were Puritans and, hence, were seeking a place to remake the world in their own image, and the cloth-making industry, on which their livelihood depended, was in a major depression. Consequently, some number of them boarded the ship *Hercules* in 1634 and set sail. They settled in southern Massachusetts, moving settlements a number of times, and being joined by further arrivals from Kent, many of whom carried a recessive gene for deafness. The need for more land drove several families to move to Martha's Vineyard, and from the populated town of Edgartown to the more remote hills of Chilmark, by the late 1600s (Groce, 1985, pp. 26-33).

At the time of the English immigration, the Wampanoag tribe lived on Martha's Vineyard. Today, for the most part, members of the tribe live only at the western end of the island, Gay Head. At first, the English lived mostly in Edgartown, which became an important whaling port. Tisbury and Oak Bluffs were also towns of increasing population, with regular contact with off-island trade.

West Tisbury, Chilmark, and Gay Head remain rural to this day and were, at the time, very isolated villages. The pattern of marrying people within walking distance of one's own home continued, just as it had in Kent. Though there were deaf people who descended from Kent in the big towns, there was not as high an incidence of deafness as in West Tisbury and especially Chilmark. (Gay Head was populated by the Wampanoags, who did not share the gene.)

Jonathan Lambert

Jonathan Lambert was the first deaf person known to live on Martha's Vineyard. What little we know of his life comes from *The History of Martha's Vineyard*, regarded as the bible of Island history, which was written by Banks (1966), a physician with a rather unenlightened attitude regarding the deaf.

Lambert was born on Cape Cod in the town of Barnstable in 1657. In 1683 he married a hearing woman named Elizabeth Eddy, with whom he would have seven children, two of them deaf. He was a member of the militia who joined the famous expedition to Quebec under Sir William Phipps in 1690.

After Lambert returned to Barnstable, Banks notes, "not much of interest happened in his life." But what we know is interesting to us. For in 1692 he moved to Martha's Vineyard, where his wife's family had settled, with his wife and his oldest children, including his deaf son, Ebenezer, who was about 4 years old. In 1694 he bought land in the part of the town of Tisbury that has come to bear his name: Lambert's Cove. His deaf daughter, Beulah, was born in 1704. Lambert's occupation was listed as carpenter, although, like most people, he also had a small farm to provide for his family. He is mentioned in the diary of Samuel Sewall—a British official visiting the island in the year 1714—as offending him by not speaking to him, until Sewall learned that Lambert was deaf.

When Lambert died in 1738 he left in his will the use of his house to his "two Poore deaf children," Beulah, then 34, and Ebenezer, then 50, both unmarried, "who cannot speake for themselves," and a variety of other items to his married hearing children. His property list shows that he was rather prosperous for the times (Banks, 1966).

It would be interesting to know if he was literate, if he wrote his will himself and chose the wording "My Poore deaf children," or if his will was written from sign language and changed to fit the rhetoric of the time. But his knowable history ends here, except as a lead to trace back to Kent, for while not all of the deaf later born on the Vineyard were related to him, their ancestors did all come from the same area of Kent.

Though there were many other deaf people between the Lamberts and the 19th-century deaf of Chilmark, who will be considered here, there is little recorded information about them, in part because most records were destroyed in a fire.

Incidence of deafness

The Vineyard, in the years following the arrival of the people from Kent, had a much higher incidence of people born deaf than most of the rest of the world. Groce's genealogical study of the deaf population of Martha's Vineyard identified 72 deaf people born on the island over three centuries, who were mostly descendents of Lamberts, Tiltons, and Skiffes. Thirty-nine of these people lived in Chilmark.

In 19th-century America, the incidence of hereditary deafness was estimated to be one out of 5,728. On Martha's Vineyard the incidence was one out of 155; in Chilmark it was one out of 25, and in the Quitsa/Squibnocket area of Chilmark, one out of four people was born deaf during this time (Groce, 1985). It is these people, who lived in Chilmark from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, whom we know the most about, and whose story of total assimilation into the hearing community will be told here.

Informants and data collection

In 1977, as a member of the New England Sign Language Society (NESLS), Joan Poole Nash went to Martha's Vineyard to collect data on the sign languages used there and about the lives of deaf people that people on Martha's Vineyard remembered (see "about the presenter"). The people Poole Nash gathered information from had not had a deaf person to sign to for 25 years when she went down to videotape their signs and stories. They were very eager to share what they knew with her, though often they said that they were not the hearing people who had been most proficient in the sign language—they were just the only ones left.

Poole Nash's great-grandmother, Emily Howland Poole, was 94 years old at the time of the study. Emily's husband was a skillful signer because he had grown up signing with many people, including a deaf cousin. According to Poole Nash's grandfather, both her great-grandfather and his brother were able to carry on two completely different conversations at the same time, one in sign language and the other in spoken English. (This comment, in retrospect, is obviously naive, but it was a way of complimenting their skills.) Emily had only lived in the neighborhood close to deaf people from the time of her marriage, though there were some deaf people around her age. She did not consider herself a fluent signer, although she did understand quite a bit of sign language even as a child, as illustrated by this story:

OLD MAID[3]

There was a man named Luce, I can't remember his first name. He was younger than I. I must have been 12 or 14 years old, and he

[3]All stories and transcriptions in this paper are from the original NESLS videotapes and were transcribed and glossed by Joan Poole Nash. Signs are glossed in capital letters, e.g., OLD MAID refers to the sign for old maid.

was deaf and dumb. He used to come to Chilmark to visit the people up there. When I saw him he wanted to know if I was married. And I said no.

"No?"

"No."

"You're an old maid!"

Every time I saw that man after that he would say, "OLD MAID!" And I'd shake my fist at him. I suppose he's dead now. (NESLS Videotape)

From her stories, and the signs she showed, it was clear that while she was realistic about her sign language skills, she could communicate well with her deaf neighbors and had great respect for them.

Emily's son, Donald LeMar Poole, and his friend, Gale Huntington, were both very knowledgeable about Vineyard history. Donald was an expert on whaling and a consultant for the National Geographic Society. Gale, among his many other accomplishments, was head of the island historical society and wrote many articles for them. Both were wonderful storytellers, with a wealth of stories from before and during their own times. Donald remembered many signs connected with fishing because he was a fisherman. Gale remembered more signs connected with home life because his closest contacts were with the deaf woman who babysat and kept house for his family. Data were not collected from people younger than Donald because it was thought that the younger ones were too far removed from the deaf to have remembered much. Recently, however, Poole Nash found out that a "younger" Chilmarker had been exposed to and remembered some of the "old" signs. She managed to collect over 100 signs from Eric Cottle, an octogenarian, who had frequently eaten lunch at the home of a friend whose family had a deaf housekeeper.

The stories that they told were about Chilmark in the old days, not as it is now. There are some places in Chilmark where you can stand and imagine it is 100 or 200 years ago. But things are very different today. In the old days, from the 1800s to the 1940s, all roads leading to Chilmark were dirt. It was difficult to travel on the island on rutted roads when the major form of transportation was oxcart. If people needed to shop in one of the larger towns, they packed a picnic basket and went for the whole day. It was much easier to get to the mainland city of New Bedford by boat than to travel to the other end of the island. Indeed, many people have lived and died in one town without ever seeing the towns at the opposite end of the island.

Chilmark had a year-round population of about 400. It was not a prosperous community. Most of the people had subsistence farms and supplemented their income with fishing and hunting. They worked hard and did their trading by bartering. Their social life revolved around home, church, and the general store and post office.

Attitudes toward deaf people

In this small town, where travel was still difficult, people stayed very close to home. They often regarded people living just a few miles away as somewhat foreign. They perpetuated the marriage patterns of their ancestors. Though they did not marry first cousins, and rarely married second cousins, they were often unaware that they were related at all. In fact, most people in town shared common ancestors. Therefore the gene for deafness was expressed many times. It did not seem unusual to the people of the town. They assumed every community had a similar number of deaf people—though the reactions of outside visitors must have shown them otherwise. But Chilmarkers never held much stock in outsiders.

Their attitude about deafness was that it was just a normal variation, along the line of some people being right-handed or left-handed, some hearing, and some deaf. Though there were marriages where both husband and wife were deaf, most deaf people married hearing people. The only stories of people expressing any negative attitudes about deafness were found in newspaper articles by people from "away" who were looking for such attitudes. Deaf people themselves were generally not negative about their deafness. However, there was one story Poole Nash's great-grandmother told about a deaf woman who was not satisfied with her life:

SHAKE-FIST-AT-GOD

There was one old maid aunt. And she rebelled very much because she was deaf. And every once in a while she'd say,

"I HEAR NO SHAKE-FIST-AT-GOD!"

We all knew what she meant. (NESLS Videotape)

But all other stories portray relatively successful people who were satisfied with their lives. The deaf were respected citizens in town and remembered by the informants as being very bright and competent. Though the older people used the term "deaf and dumb" to describe them, they clearly meant "dumb" as in nonspeaking. In fact, our informants struggled to find a term to use to describe the hearing, generally settling on the phrase, "those who could talk." Later-born informants used the term "deaf mutes"

because they had come to use the word "dumb" as meaning "stupid" and they knew that deaf people were not stupid!

In succeeding sections we introduce you to the deaf people of Chilmark by telling you stories of the lives of its best-remembered characters, who were born around the 1850s and died around the 1940s. This was the last generation of the signing community on the island, but at the time of these stories, they didn't know that.

One-Armed Ben Mayhew

One of the best-remembered deaf men in Chilmark was One-Armed Ben Mayhew. His family descended from the original Mayhews who were the first English settlers of the island in the 1600s.

The most popular name in the Mayhew family history is Benjamin. It was a popular name all around, so it can be very confusing when one is trying to track down one specific man. At the time One-Armed Ben was living in Chilmark, there were at least four other Ben Mayhews in town—all known by different nicknames or called by their middle names.

One-Armed Ben was born in 1846. His deaf relatives included his father, whose name was also Ben, his mother, who was born in New Sharon, Maine, (another place where people "from Kent" had settled), his younger brother, and many of his aunts and uncles. He also had a hearing sister.

Ben attended the American School for the Deaf (ASD) in Hartford for five and one-half years starting at the age of 12. When he was 14 years old, he had the accident that led to his nickname and name sign. He lost his right hand in a threshing machine. From then on he was known as One-Armed Ben. His name sign was B hand "cutting" the other wrist, indicating where his hand had been cut off.

Name signs in Chilmark, the ones that people remembered years later, all were based on physical attributes of the people they named. It is interesting that none of the deaf people were called "Deaf ____" (as in Deaf Smith).

When Ben grew up he married a woman named Hattie, who was hearing, and they had three hearing children. They lived in a pleasant house overlooking Quitsa Pond. His other deaf relatives all lived nearby. There were around a dozen deaf people living in town then, some from previous generations, a few around his age, and just a couple who were younger. Everyone in Ben's environment, that is, all his hearing relatives, friends, and neighbors, could also sign.

Like most men in Chilmark, Ben didn't have just one occupation, he had many. Some were seasonal, and others occupied him year round. Deaf men in the 1800s had their occupations listed as carpenter, laborer, farmer, but in reality, most men followed multiple occupations depending on the season.

The records from the ASD list One-Armed Ben as a farmer. He had a small, one-horse, one-cow subsistence farm. Primarily he was a commercial fisherman. He caught fish to feed his family and also to barter or sell. He didn't let the fact that he'd lost part of an arm slow him down. He made a special harness that he could slide his stump into, and he could row the heavy surf dories as well as any man, not only on the pond but also in the heavy surf off Squibnocket where the codfishery was maintained.

Donald, Poole Nash's grandfather, commented that deaf men who fished off Squibnocket:

> *... caught just as much codfish as anybody else. They just couldn't hear the codfish complain, that was all.* (NESLS Videotape)

They would haul the fish in nets. They didn't use fishing rods in those days. When they fished with a hook they used handlines.

Hunting was another way in which men supplemented their incomes and fed their families. One-Armed Ben was remembered as being an incredibly good shot, the best in town. He had adapted his gun so he could shoot using just one hand, and these were not lightweight guns. It is said that he once shot 100 times and killed 100 ducks. Those ducks his family didn't use, he sold or traded. The informants remembered their families getting ducks from One-Armed Ben. It was a good source of income for him, to say nothing of the respect he earned from being such a good shot.

One-Armed Ben participated and excelled in just about all the occupations in town. Some deaf men from the island were employed in other ways. Jonathan Lambert, for example, had served in the militia for a time. Deaf men also served on ships, though according to Poole Nash's grandfather, who was an authority on the whaling industry, the deaf did not serve on whalers. He explained,

> *They could not hear orders. And the mate was not a patient man, and apt to reinforce it with the toe of his boot.* (NESLS Videotape)

Whale ships left from Edgartown, where few people had been born deaf because there were many more opportunities to marry people from thriving ports out-of-town than in the isolated village of Chilmark. Therefore, in Edgartown the use of sign language was not as widespread, and that may be why deaf men did not go to sea on those ships. Sign language, as we will see, certainly was used by both deaf and hearing fishermen in Chilmark.

One-Armed Ben died in 1924 and is buried in the Chilmark cemetery on Abel's Hill with his wife and many generations of Mayhews.

Jared Mayhew—A man of the church

One-Armed Ben had a younger brother who was even more successful. Jared Mayhew was born in 1852. His deaf father died the year he was born, but as you recall, he had many other deaf relatives including his mother, brother, five aunts, five uncles, and quite a few neighbors. Jared went to ASD at the age of 11 and stayed for five years. He came home to be a farmer and a commercial fisherman.

Jared lived with his hearing wife, Jerusha, nicknamed Lutie, in a large, beautiful Victorian house, which stands on the hill overlooking Quitsa Pond, right next to the house of his brother. The Chilmarkers had a beautiful place to come home to, so no wonder almost every one of them came back home after their schooling. Not only was there a receptive community, they also had million-dollar scenery to live and work in. Their letters printed in the local paper attest to their appreciation of the natural environment.

Jared's house was fairly close to the seasonal homes of our informants. Emily, Poole Nash's great-grandmother, told the story of giving him a message one day. She was 94 years old when this story was videotaped, and although she had not signed for at least 25 years, she recalled these signs and this story, which occured 75 years before.

MY HUSBAND TOLD-ME

My husband was codfishing off South Beach and he had come ashore, and I was going mayflowering. And he said to me if by any chance I saw Mr. Jared Mayhew—that was Leslie's grandfather—that I should tell him that he had left a codfish over in his boathouse for him.

Well, it was just a remarkable thing, that Mr. Mayhew came by while I was mayflowering. So I walked out and stopped him. And he stopped.

And we said, "How do you do?" Then I said,
"MY HUSBAND TOLD-ME TELL-YOU OVER BOAT HOUSE CODFISH FOR YOU."

And he said,
"I KNOW." (NESLS Videotape)

Nearly everyone in Chilmark signed in those days, except for those who just came temporarily, such as school teachers and ministers. Because Jared and Lutie were very devout Christians, many of the stories concerning them

are connected with the church. Jared and Lutie were regarded as pillars of the church and very active in church affairs. The ministers themselves did not sign in the pulpit. Hearing members of the deaf people's families would "interpret." Our informants all remembered Lutie interpreting for Jared. They sat right in front. Emily recalled being in awe of how fast Jerusha Mayhew could sign when she interpreted the sermon. She recalled,

She preached the whole sermon to him in deaf and dumb sign all through—right from beginning to end, including the hymns and responsive readings. (NESLS Videotape)

Emily's son Donald recalled as a boy,

If [Jared Mayhew] agreed with what the minister was saying, he would nod his head. And if he disagreed with what he was saying, he would shake his head like hell! (NESLS Videotape)

A feature of the way religion was practiced in the Methodist church was that people would offer testaments of faith. When the deaf testified their faith, they would stand at the front so that everyone could see their signs. There was no voice interpretation. It is not known if the minister learned to understand sign language or not, but all of the congregation, deaf and hearing, could understand what was signed. Emily recalls,

Of course, if someone missed something, the person next to him would whisper what had been said. (NESLS Videotape)

When Donald was away at Methodist boarding school, he had a friend who was studying for the ministry, and he asked if he could bring him home for the weekend. His mother approved, and word got around that Donald was bringing a minister home, so the friend was invited to preach the sermon. Now Jared and Lutie were sitting in the front pew while that friend preached. As usual, Lutie interpreted every word of the sermon. Afterwards, when Donald and his friend got home, Emily asked her guest how he had liked preaching the sermon, and did he feel it was well-received. He said,

"Everything went fine, but there was one lady in the front pew who was very nervous—kept her hands going all the time." (NESLS Videotape)

Jared Mayhew died in 1927; he and his wife are buried with other members of the Mayhew family on Abel's Hill.

Town politics and education

The town hall of Chilmark is right in the center of town. Chilmark was and is governed by three selectmen and served by a number of committees

and other elected positions. Town business was decided through town meeting. A family member would interpret at those meetings. When a deaf person wanted to comment on an article on the warrant, a family member or another member of the community would voice for him, though as Donald recalled, the person voicing tended to temper the message. He wouldn't sound as angry or use quite as strong a vocabulary in his interpretation. However, since almost everyone understood the signing perfectly well, the true force of the message got across.

All voting was done by counting hands in town meeting. The secret ballot could not be used in Chilmark until the 1950s, because up to that time so many people in town were illiterate. The deaf were full participants in town politics. Though none are known to have served as selectmen, they did serve on committees and hold other elected offices. Some of the offices they held included: fence viewer (that is, one who surveys and makes sure that boundaries are properly maintained, a very important job in a sheep-raising community), highway maintenance, and member of the school committee (regulating the education of their hearing children and grandchildren).

The deaf as a group were remembered as being very well educated for their time. Our informants believed that deaf children received their early education at home. Between the ages of 10 and 20, they attended ASD for a course of five to seven years. This was at a time when many hearing children in town attended school for only two or three years. Emily recalls,

> *They were very well informed. They read the newspaper and knew what was going on—very up-and-coming.* (NESLS Videotape)

The store and post office

The center of village life was the Squibnocket store. This store is still standing, though it is now used as a shed. People came here to buy things they could not grow, make, or gather, to get their mail, and to socialize. The informants remembered the deaf congregating in the store, mixing with the hearing, conversations going on in sign and speech simultaneously, overlapping. It was here that the men would play checkers, especially at night, in the flickering kerosene light.

There were very few visitors in Chilmark back then, not like now when the population swells every summer with thousands of people. So it was a rare thing when there was anyone around who didn't sign. In the store, the hearing people signed and spoke at the same time whenever a deaf person was around, which was almost all the time. When the men got to telling jokes, they would be signing with voice generally right up to the punchline. But since the jokes were generally not considered fit for women and children, they'd close ranks, turn their backs on them, and deliver the punchline in signs alone.

Shopping was a leisure activity for the customer, a time to socialize. You gave your order, one item at a time, to the storekeeper, and he'd fetch it for you and then ask for your next item. The store was one place where the few visitors to Chilmark were sure to go, and where many had their first encounter with the deaf. The impressions of some young girls from Vineyard Haven, about 14 miles from Chilmark, who vacationed at Menemsha, Chilmark's harbor village, in 1900 serves to illustrate:

THE CAPTAIN'S DAUGHTERS GO TO CHILMARK

[The Eldridge sisters of Vineyard Haven describe their weeklong vacation at Menemsha in 1900.]

> *I remember our first visit to the general store when we saw several people sitting around not making a sound, only smiling, just smiling away. It was a while before we realized they were deaf-and-dumb. At that time there were 17 deaf-and-dumb people at Menemsha. They were born there and mostly related. Interestingly, the deafness and dumbness has died out. The same families are there, but none of the members is deaf and dumb. Once we were walking to the center by the road, which was longer, and a man picked us up. Both his mother and father had been deaf and dumb. He made the strangest noises to his horse, the strangest noises you ever heard.* (Macy, 1978)

There is another story of an outsider first meeting the deaf at the Chilmark store. He was an artist by the name of Vasloff Vitlachill. One night he went to the store. Gale Huntington described the scene:

> *[The store] was the meeting place for everyone, the deaf and dumb as well as the, ah ... those who could talk. And of course everybody used the sign language, and they'd be making the signs in the sign language and there'd be complete silence in there, even those who could talk would be silent. Although those who could talk usually expressed the words with their mouths while they were making the signs. ... And Vasloff Vitlachill walked in there one night. It was this assemblage of great big men. They were big. And there was complete silence, and the place only lighted by kerosene lamps, you know, and he was scared 'most to death!* (NESLS Videotape)

How they learned to sign

Most people in Chilmark learned to sign naturally, hearing children learning signs the same way they learned to talk, by using them with the people around them, such as parents, relatives, and neighbors. For many years there were three generations of deaf people living at the same time, so a child not only grew up with deaf peers but also had two older generations of deaf people to converse with in sign language.

When hearing people moved into the community, such as Poole Nash's great-grandmother Emily, they picked up the signs through daily use, and occasionally direct instruction.

By Poole Nash's grandfather Donald's time, there were no deaf people his age. So Donald's generation did not learn signs from peers, the way his father's generation had, but they did learn from the older people. Emily remembered teaching Donald (her son) when he was very small, perhaps 3 or 4 years old, the signs for BOAT, HOUSE, CAT, DOG, and some others. When they went down to the store they met an old man, Mr. Tilton, who was deaf. Emily told Donald to go over and say "Good morning" to Mr. Tilton. So he did. Then she asked Donald to show Mr. Tilton the other signs she had taught him. The old gentleman was just as pleased as he could be. When they were ready to leave, Emily sent Donald over to say good-bye and shake hands, and Mr. Tilton said, "Glad you came in."

Donald didn't remember this story. He just remembered picking up signs by watching the deaf people and using signs with the other hearing boys and girls at school when they weren't supposed to be talking with each other. The teachers didn't know sign language. Donald said they didn't know what was going on, they just thought the children had a nervous habit of moving their hands around a lot. When Donald was asked if the teacher had a name sign, his cryptic response was, "Not that she ever knew." So, besides being a way for deaf people to communicate with others, the sign language was also used by the hearing to communicate among themselves when they wanted to be sneaky.

Signing hearing-to-hearing was not restricted to children being naughty in school. Hearing adults used sign language among themselves. Often they used signs when they were too far away to hear each other. Fishermen out on the ocean, for example, would sign between boats, or from ship to shore, which was of great benefit in the time before they had radios. People were described using spyglasses to see the signs of a neighbor across the way, taking turns signing and looking in the days before telephones. The deaf and the hearing could use this distance communication equally.

During boring town meetings, people would sign across the room to each other, "making good use of the time." They didn't mind that everyone could understand what they were saying, and because they weren't technically interrupting the meeting, which was being conducted in speech, they got away with it. Gale Huntington's last memory of Ben Carlton Mayhew, a few days before Carlton died, was seeing him sitting in a meeting and signing to Ernest Mayhew across the room that he didn't feel well.

The Sign Language[4]

The language to which we have been referring throughout this paper—the language whose use enabled the assimilating society to function—is Martha's Vineyard Sign Language (MVSL).

When we first started learning about the deaf people who used sign language on Martha's Vineyard, we wanted to know what the sign language was like. Unfortunately, we had come a generation too late to get a full picture, for the most fluent signers were already interred at Abel's Hill. However, from the signs that our informants could remember, and from the way they talked about the sign language, we could reconstruct a fairly accurate description of MVSL.

The sign language, as it was used in the late 1800s, was very similar to the sign language used on the mainland. By that time many of the deaf people had attended ASD and brought back signs and other elements of what was now American Sign Language, which were passed along to other community members. There was a consensus among informants that the Martha's Vineyard signs were in some ways different from the off-island signs but that skilled signers had no difficulty understanding each other, despite differences in vocabulary. Those hearing people who were less skilled in signing had a more difficult time but could still communicate. Though there were few deaf visitors to the island, people from the island occasionally met deaf people when they traveled off-island. As Emily recalled in this story:

TRIP TO TENNESSEE

When your great-grandfather and I were on a sightseeing trip in Tennessee, sitting behind us were two ladies, and they were deaf and dumb. And they were talking away.

And I said to my husband, "Turn around and say something to them." Oh, he didn't want to. He was kind of like your father, kind of retiring. And I said, "Oh, they'd be pleased." So he turned around and said, "HOW-DO-YOU-DO?"

[4]For further information on the phonological analysis of MVSL, we refer you to Poole (1979, 1983).

Well, they started a conversation and they talked all that trip. And then one of the ladies said to me, "YOU HEAR?"

And I said, "I HEAR."

And she said, "NOT I."

And when they got out, they got out before we did, they THANKED us and THANKED us. That was in Nashville. (NESLS Videotape)

From the way people talked about the sign language, and from the signed sentences that they produced, Martha's Vineyard signs appear to be very much like those of modern ASL both in syntax, in the way signs were put together in sentences, and in phonology, the rules by which signs could be formed.

The hearing informants knew that the sign language followed different rules from the spoken language. Without knowing formal linguistic terms, they described the use of classifiers, spatial grammar, and differences in word order. They used points in space as pronouns and directional agreement when they inflected sign language verbs. They explained how facial expression was used grammatically in forming questions, adverbially in modifying statements, and to distinguish one sign from another (for example, the signs THUNDER and COLD were distinguished by facial expression).

Informants also talked about "one sign meaning a whole sentence." They gave as an example the use of the sign for SWORDFISH—two X-handshapes representing two fins on the surface of the water, and the movement shows direction and location it swims. Donald signed a sequence showing the SWORDFISH struck by the harpoon, swimming away, going under, and reappearing on the surface. Since fishing was one of the major occupations for people on Martha's Vineyard, there were many unique signs for fish. Table 1 explains some of the fish signs, reflecting the fisfishermen'sown perceptions of fish, which were different from those of the people who merely cooked and ate the fish.

The importance of Martha's Vineyard Sign Language

Martha's Vineyard Sign Language provides evidence that sign language was being used among deaf people in America before Laurent Clerc brought French Sign Language to Hartford. James Woodward (1978b) suggested that because French Sign Language and American Sign Language are so different, FSL could not be the sole base for ASL. He used a linguistic

Table 1: Martha's Vineyard signs for fish

SWORDFISH1 [Classifier—two "X" handshapes representing two fins moving along the surface of the water] This sign was used by fishermen to describe complex action sequences and to distinquish the commercially valuable swordfish from the "trash fish" or SHARK1 (see below).

SWORDFISH2 [Classifier—one "B" hand moving along the surface of the water] Describes the action of the swordfish's tail. Compare with SHARK2.

SWORDFISH3 [Classifier—"C" handshape on nose moves outward closing with handshape "S"] Describes the sword. Used by nonfishermen.

SHARK1 [Classifier—one "X" handshape representing one fin moving along the surface].

SHARK2 [Classifier—one "B" handshape representing the shark's tail flopping along the surface] Distinguished from SWORDFISH2 by the manner of its movement.

CODFISH ["L" handshape on throat and closes to "20" handshape in space just off the throat area] Describes flap of skin at codfish's throat.

CODFISHING [Both hands alternate from open "C" to closed "S"] Describes the pulling in of the nets.

SCALLOP [Relaxed "5" handshape closes to flat "O" handshape and repeats while moving diagonally in front of the

separation calculation devised for spoken languages that showed conclusively that there must have been another source of signs already in use by deaf people in America when Clerc arrived. The existence of sign language on Martha's Vineyard in the 17th century supports this claim (Woodward, 1978b). MVSL also shows connections to Britain because both the one-handed and two-handed alphabet were used and a certain number of the signs are similar. When compared with ASL, 22% of the MVSL signs were the same. A Deaf British signer examined the data and identified 40% of the signs as being BSL cognates. He also noted that the British two-handed fingerspelling Emily knew used the "old forms" of the letters s and z.

The MVSL signs that were similar to ASL signs support the patterns of historical change described by Frishberg (1975).

Table 2: Historical changes in ASL and MVSL

1. In ASL one-handed signs below the neck tend to become two-handed, for example:
   - in ASL the sign for MAD used to be one-handed and became two-handed;
   - in MVSL the sign for MAD was one-handed.
2. In ASL two-handed signs in contact with the face tend to become one-handed, for example:
   - in ASL the signs for DEVIL and COW used to be two-handed and are now one-handed;
   - in MVSL DEVIL and COW were two-handed.
3. Sign production tends to become more fluid by dropping parts of a sign, for example:
   - in ASL the old sign for BIRD was BEAK+WINGS; now it is signed "BEAK";
   - in MVSL, ASL's old form BEAK+WINGS was maintained.
4. In the process of producing signs more fluidly, sometimes MVSL and ASL took divergent paths.

   In old ASL the sign for HOME was signed EAT+SLEEP. Modern ASL maintains only the handshape of EAT and the location of the sign SLEEP to form the modern sign for HOME. MVSL retains only the SLEEP portion to mean HOME.

The signs that people remembered tell us something about memory for languages that have not been used for many years. As the language died out, people remembered the signs they used most. For example, Donald remembered signs used to describe catching fish, while his friend recalled the signs used to describe fish ready to eat. Emily remembered the signs connected with stories she had told many times.

The End of the Community

Unfortunately, the signing community of Chilmark died out. These famous deaf people were among the last of the hereditary deaf to be born in Chilmark. Though the same families still live in town, there has been much more intermarriage with people from "away," not only people from "down-island" as transportation improved, but also people from off-island. Summer visitors and college classmates provided a widening circle of prospective marriage partners who did not have common ancestors.

As the Deaf population aged, and their peers died off, there were fewer and fewer people who were fluent in the sign language. Children who lived close to the deaf people and helped them with chores still learned basic signs, but they were not real conversational partners. They learned to be polite and to ask for things they needed. More complex communication was interpreted by older people. Younger informants did not describe the close relationships between deaf and hearing that existed when there were several generations of deaf people living in the community. Other people who became deaf, and deaf people who interacted with Chilmarkers after this time, were not assimilated. Those deaf people who communicated orally had very superficial relationships in the community at large. Lipreading and speech did not assimilate them into a society that had once embraced a large group of signing people.

By 1952, there were no deaf people living in Chilmark. The last of the Chilmark hereditary deaf, Eva West Look, died in 1950. Her deaf friend "from away," Katie West, died in 1952. The signing community of Chilmark had vanished.

Comparison Between Assimilating and Suppressing Communities

Patterns found in assimilating communities

From our glimpse into the narrative history of Martha's Vineyard, we can extract overall patterns that this community shares with other assimilating communities. Though each community is unique in its own right, with variables including religion and tribal customs, assimilating communities have some important characteristics in common. They all share geographical isolation. Hearing people generally view deaf people less in terms of pathology and have a positive attitude about sign language. In these communities deaf people have much more equal economic access and often choose to remain in or return to the community. These communities have a higher

overall percentage of deaf people in their population than those found in suppressing communities, and this spans more than three generations.

Geographical isolation is a characteristic of many of these communities both in the past and in the present. These communities include island communities such as Martha's Vineyard and Providence Island, forest communities such as Urubu, and those in mountainous regions such as the Yucatec Mayan village and farmlands like the village of Adamorobe (where deaf people were isolated because they were far removed from a major cross-road).

These communities shared the attitude that deafness is a normal human difference no more unusual than being left-handed versus right-handed. The range of acceptance in these communities varies, particularly with respect to the issue of marriage, but they have in common their use of sign language.

Sign language is used by members of these communities, both deaf and hearing, as a natural part of everyday life. If a deaf person arrives, the hearing people unconsciously shift to signing without missing a beat. Farb (1973) reported sitting with five hearing Urubu Indians, listening to one of them tell a story. As soon as a deaf person came in to join them, the hearing person who was telling the story automatically started signing without omitting a thought. Similar observations in Yucatec Mayan village are reported in Johnson (1994), who commented that the hearing villagers can sign well and do so whenever they are in the presence of deaf people. Sign language becomes a necessary part of the community and is used throughout the village with or without deaf people present.

Another important factor found in assimilating communities is economic access. In many of these communities the majority of the work is agricultural, and deaf and hearing people have equal occupational access. As we have seen, the deaf people on Martha's Vineyard were productive and successful members of the society and the workforce.

Johnson (1994) reported, and our study of Martha's Vineyard confirms, that deaf people in assimilated communities appear to value their village more than they value being around other deaf people. This "village-first value" reflects a significant difference between deaf people in assimilating communities and deaf people in industrial societies, who tend to value being around Deaf people more than being with people of their birth communities. In the assimilated communities, being deaf itself is irrelevant, as deaf people have access to everyone in the village. This explains why most of the deaf people on Martha's Vineyard returned to the island after completing their education at ASD. Johnson (1994) gives an example of this "village-first"

value with deaf Yucatec Mayan villagers. He reports that they tend to identify first with their family, then with their village, and third with the Mayan society. They had never thought of singling out deaf people as a group, until an American researcher invited them as a group to a party.

A very important feature of these communities is that they have three or more generations of deaf people, often going back for hundreds of years or more. The village of Chilmark on the island of Martha's Vineyard had many generations going back to 17th-century England. The generations of deaf people in the village of Adamarobe go back as far as the beginning of the village, which is roughly 200 years old (Frishberg, personal communication, March 14, 1995). For as long as anyone can remember, there has been a lot of genetic deafness in the Yucatec Mayan village (Johnson, 1994). The presence of deaf people of all ages in an assimilated community provides a continuity and range for the use of sign language.

The high deaf-to-hearing ratio is another significant factor in these communities. Overall, the incidence of deafness in the USA is 0.003% (Shein & Delk, 1974). In the assimilated communities the incidence of people being born deaf is much higher. In Martha's Vineyard in the 19th century, deaf people constituted about 25% of the population near the Squibnocket Post Office in Chilmark, 4% of the whole town of Chilmark, and 0.6% for the whole island of Martha's Vineyard (Groce, 1985). In Adamorobe they make up 10-15% of the population (Frishberg, 1987; personal communication, March 14, 1995), and 2.6% for Urubu (Farb, 1973).

The degree of signing consistency and competence tends to be similar for assimilating communities. Osugi and T. Supalla (personal communication, April 25, 1995)[5] devised a circular model that resembles a target with a bull's eye in the middle and outer rings around it, and used it to show the various groups of people in Anami Island, Japan, exhibiting differing degrees of signing competence. This kind of distribution reflects what has been found in the assimilating communities, as seen in Figure 1 (next page).

The highest degree of competence is found in an inner circle of deaf people and people who are born in an environment with deaf people who sign. They have a larger repertoire of signs and communicate exclusively in sign language. Outside of that circle is the next band, which exhibits a decrease in overall competence and breadth of signed repertoire. Included in

[5]This observation was derived from Osugi's study of a "quasi-assimilating" community in the village of Koniya on Amami Island, Japan. It is too preliminary to conclude that Koniya shares traits similar to assimilating communities, but they appear to share a lot of similar patterns (Osugi & T. Supalla, personal communication, April 25, 1995).

Figure 1

- Outsiders (non-signers)
- Service Providers (grocers, tradespeople, ministers, school teachers)
- Family members, neighbors, friends
- Deaf people and their children

(Osugi & Supalla, personal communication, April 25, 1995)

this band are people such as hearing family members, neighbors, and friends who use both the spoken language and the sign language fluently, and always sign in the presence of deaf people. At the next level is another band of people who interact with the assimilated villagers but who might not be completely fluent in sign; they are usually service providers, such as grocers, tradespeople, ministers, and schoolteachers, who might visit or reside with the community for shorter periods of time. Finally, the outer band represents outsiders who know nothing of sign language and deaf people.

This model appears to describe industrial/suppressing communities. The signing competence in the inner circle is high, and competence decreases as one moves into the outer bands. But this model lacks an important feature found in assimilating communities: that is, multiple generations of deaf people living in the community concurrently.

Patterns found in suppressing communities

We can make some generalizations about the patterns of suppressing communities, based on the situation in the USA. One characteristic is the tendency of Deaf people in suppressing communities to seek out other Deaf people and to yearn for a separate community of their own. Deaf people in this type of community continue to fight to preserve the sign language they highly value. Hearing people in this type of community tend to view Deaf people in terms of pathology.

In industrial societies, Deaf people tend to think "Deaf first" rather than "village first" (Johnson, 1994). That is, in these societies, Deaf people prefer

to be with one another and actively seek one another out. When traveling to new places, Deaf people often seek out other Deaf people in new towns. This is unlike the deaf Mayans, who did not seek out or visit with other deaf whom they knew to live in other villages close by (Johnson, 1994).

Deaf people in suppressing societies often yearn for a separate community for Deaf people only, as shown in the story of *Islay* (by Bullard, 1986) and *Eyeth* (a known ASL story), and in the defense of residential schools. This yearning may come from the fact that they know they cannot attain equality in societies such as theirs. So the quest to form an independent country or planet is appealing to the imagination.

Sign language is highly valued by the Deaf, who defend it ardently in the face of constant pressures not to sign from their society. Even when hearing people express interest in learning how to sign, some Deaf people may become suspicious of the intent of hearing people who wish to sign (see for example Kannapell, 1978). This suspicion alone is enough to indicate that there is a form of suppression.

A very common attitude on the part of hearing people in suppressing communities is captured by the term "audism" (Humphries, 1977; Lane, 1993). Audism involves the a priori presumption on the part of hearing people that they are much better off than the deaf because they hear. There are some deaf people who adhere to this notion and behave in the manners and ways similar to those who hear. An audist views deafness as a disability, which should be managed by the use of hearing aids and prosthetic devices. Suppressing societies in general promote the use of speech and lipreading and have a low tolerance for sign language.

Conclusion

Assimilating communities tend to be formed in areas that are isolated, for geographical or other reasons. Isolation restricts the gene pool, providing more opportunity for genetic deafness to be expressed. This allows a critical mass of deaf people to develop across generations.

Lack of technology contributes to making hearing status irrelevant as most communication is face-to-face with familiar people, and the educational prerequisites for employment are minimal. Under these conditions, sign languages, the crucial element in communities including deaf people, seem to generate spontaneously.

Suppressing societies, on the other hand, tend to be highly technical. There is greater mobility among citizens, and a larger population keeps the percentage of deaf people very low. A critical mass does not develop except in small communities such as residential schools.

Both social and occupational interactions involve a large number of unfamiliar people, which makes for the assumption that deaf people need to behave in the ways of the majority of the people. The educational prerequisites for employment vary widely.

In sum, the two different outlooks on deaf people show that societies do construct a set of expectations for deaf people. The expectations are either accommodating or disabling. This has direct impact on the opportunity for deaf people to become equal members of society.

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