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**SEMINAL WORK ON “SIGN LANGUAGE
ARCHAEOLOGY”**

In this book we investigate the infancy of American Sign Language (ASL), which, at one time, was called simply “the sign language,” or the “natural language of signs.” We highlight the major events of the history of ASL, revealing information that until now has not been clearly understood. In this chapter we look first at traditional accounts of the inception of sign language and then move on to look in-depth at the documents that are the focus of this book, a set of films produced by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) between 1910 and 1920. These films, which represent samples of “sign masters,” the model signers of the time, provide a window through which we can view previously unknown characteristics of early ASL and better understand the relationship between the earliest and modern forms of the language.

We begin with the traditional timeline of the development of ASL (see figure 1.1), with its roots in eighteenth-century French Sign Language (Old LSF).

According to most historical accounts, the roots of ASL begin around 1760 with the establishment of the first public school for deaf people in France by the Abbé Charles Michel de l’Epée.¹ By the time Thomas

1. As related by John Burnet in his *Tales of the Deaf and Dumb* (1835), the popular anecdote shared at that time was that de l’Epée happened upon two deaf

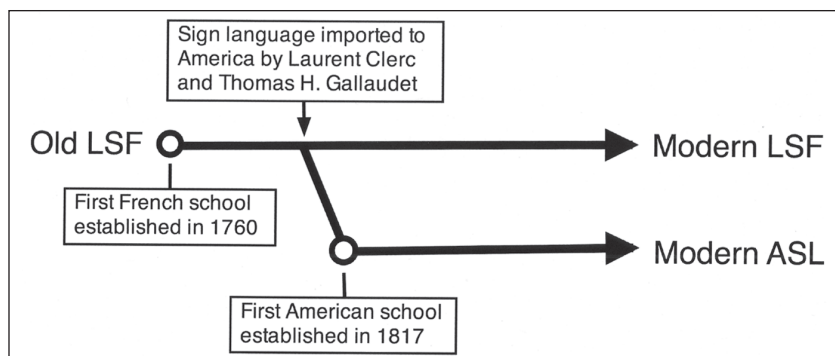


FIGURE 1.1. Traditional timeline for ASL.

Hopkins Gallaudet brought Laurent Clerc, a deaf teacher from the French school, to North America to open such a school, the French educators had established a system of approximately sixteen schools for deaf people in Europe. Under this French system, teachers from the mother school in Paris were sent out to establish satellite schools throughout France and Europe. The American Asylum for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb (now the American School for the Deaf, [ASD]) was established in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817 (Czech 1830; Eriksson 1993).²

French and later American educators engaged in pedagogical discussions, often publishing tools and materials that included descriptions of signs for their colleagues to use.³ They believed that the natural language of signs was universal and therefore useful to all educators regardless of the spoken language used. Such discussions involve the *metalanguage* of that era—the way scholars and educators wrote and talked about the language

sisters one day in 1760 when calling upon their family home. They had been under the tutelage of a Father Vanin who had since passed away and were at that time “inconsolable,” according to their mother. Observing their gestural communication with one another was the event that sparked his interest in restoring them and all deaf people to themselves and to society (69).

2. The count of schools is arrived at as a result of reviewing the charts contained in these two texts.

3. At the American School for the Deaf (ASD), for instance, books were collected in French, German, and English for faculty to read and use in their own teaching (personal communication, Gary Waite, archivist).

of signs. Writings from that era also reflect a shared belief in the “natural” grammar of the sign language, with a few brief descriptions of this grammar. In this environment, ASL was born.

Where can we find evidence of the transitions from the early introduction of French Sign Language to the emergence of early ASL to modern ASL? To provide insight into the metalanguage of the signing community we have used early sign language dictionaries and the collection of films created by the NAD at the turn of the twentieth century to identify the differences in signs and grammar from early to contemporary ASL. Prior to these films, the only records were written text descriptions or drawings, as there was no capability to record signs on film.⁴ Written records of individual signs and even some sentences have provided some insight into what “the sign language” might have been like at the beginning, but the static nature of these records has put researchers in the position of guessing what the original forms actually were, often obscuring possible linguistic explanations for the differences identified.

LITERARY AND HISTORICAL TREASURES IN A FILMED MEDIUM

The technology for creating motion pictures emerged just before the beginning of the twentieth century. Soon after, amateur filmmakers in the grassroots of Deaf America,⁵ including Charles Krauel and Ernest Marshall, ventured into producing literary materials worthy of aesthetic appreciation by their target audiences, their deaf peers. To demonstrate and preserve “the sign language,” the NAD undertook its first organized filming effort in the early part of the twentieth century with a set of films—the Gallaudet Lecture Film Series—featuring the most respected signers, or “sign masters,” of the time. The NAD produced twenty-two films between 1910

4. De l’Épée and Sicard kept scrupulous records of their method of teaching and included extensive descriptions of methodical signs. However, since the prevailing belief was that natural signs were universal, detailed descriptions of the natural signs were rare.

5. The term *grassroots* refers here to members of the Deaf community at a local level who were not involved in the political centers located at the Hartford school and at Gallaudet College.

and 1920, fifteen of which have survived.⁶ This collection of oratorical literature, including speeches, poetry, and stories performed by fifteen sign masters, gives us a window into early ASL.

The Gallaudet Lecture Film Series project began as an attempt to preserve the language variety of the early sign masters. Although the project failed to maintain its initial momentum and broad support and the films were eventually shelved, they are significant today in providing us with invaluable information about the birth and evolution of the classical variety of “the sign language.” The sign masters on film are of different ages and therefore provide a sample of three generations of ASL users. Each generation of ASL users from 1817 to today represents a different sociopolitical agenda; each has its own set of literary traditions and values that in turn reflect different language attitudes.

To determine the criteria that the NAD may have used in selecting the signers filmed for their preservation project, we carefully examined the biographical background of each signer and reviewed the NAD documents of committee work devoted to this preservation project. We also dissected the multigenerational odyssey of metalinguistic thought and captured the progression of scientific methodology over time. Studying the NAD’s treasure trove of historical documents and the *American Annals of the Deaf*, we succeeded in bridging the gulf of a period of neglect of sign language metalinguistic discussion from the early 1930s to 1970, the “Dark Period,”⁷ when proponents of oralism were undertaking efforts to “relegate sign language to the past” (referring to “the sign language”), as sign master J. Schuyler Long stated (1918, 10). We aimed instead to recapture the true nature of our past.

In order to reconstruct the literary history of ASL and the evolution of its grammar, we developed new research tools and methods, analyzing and interpreting the films’ sign language content from the perspective of the people of the time. In previous approaches to such investigation, researchers located archaic forms in these film records and compared them to modern forms used today. Instead, we transcribed all of the films in their entirety

6. The original copies of the NAD films are stored in the archives of Gallaudet University and the Library of Congress. In 1997, Sign Media, Inc. produced a videotape copy of almost all of these films.

7. Other references to a “dark age” in terms of literary works in sign language support our use of the term “Dark Period.” See Bauman, Nelson, and Rose (2006) and Brueggemann (2009).

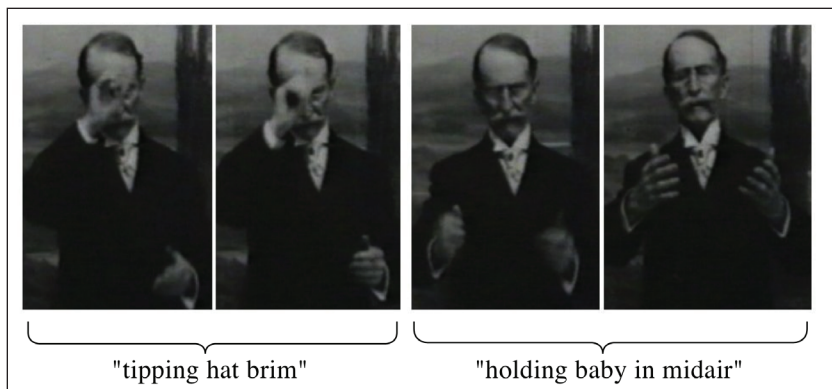


FIGURE 1.2. Lexical phrase variant expressing the concept of “father” in early ASL. Source: *The Preservation of American Sign Language: The Complete Historical Collection DVD*. Used by permission from Sign Media, Inc.

and examined the full corpora, and discovered that the younger signers in the films used alternate forms that resemble modern signs—the contrast in forms was not just *diachronic* (across periods) but *synchronic* (within the same period) as well.

A brief sample from the historical film materials illustrates both the quality of data available and the differences that can be observed when comparing signers of different ages. In this example, three signers, representing three-generation cohorts, form the signs for the kinship concept of “father.” While all three use kinship signs, the forms are articulated in different ways by members of the first compared with the second and third generations, who show a pattern of reduction. The archaic form is shown in figure 1.2, as E. M. Gallaudet collocates two separate signs in a lexical phrase to express the kinship concept of “father.”

Signers in the subsequent generation produced kinship signs with prosodic reduction in the second sign (an attributor for signifying the kin relation), which we analyze as contraction with the preceding gender marker. Figure 1.3 shows how Robert MacGregor compresses the lexical phrase into a single flow of movement for the same word FATHER.

We observed that the younger signers produce kinship terms with even further reduction in both the first and second parts. Figure 1.4 shows FATHER as signed by Winfield Marshall, in his “Yankee Doodle” recitation.

This form for FATHER is similar to that used in modern ASL. The archaic form has nearly disappeared from the modern lexicon, remaining only in certain ritualized literary routines such as the Lord’s Prayer.

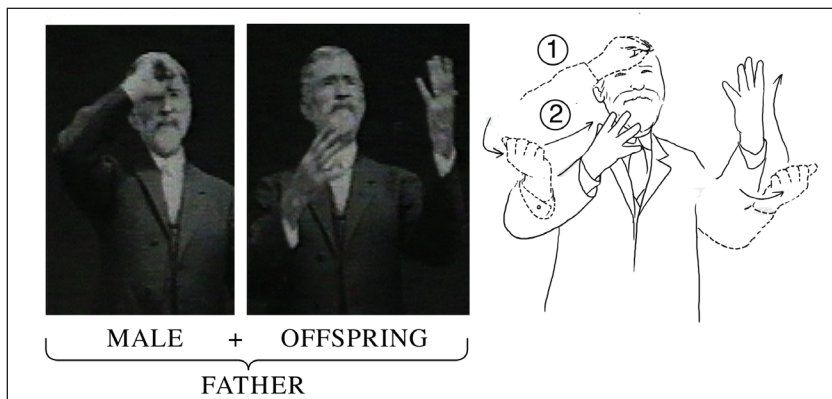


FIGURE 1.3. Variant showing compression of lexical phrase for “father.” Source: *The Preservation of American Sign Language: The Complete Historical Collection DVD*. Used by permission from Sign Media, Inc. Illustration by Val Nelson-Metlay.

To relate the signs in the films to even earlier forms, we studied dictionaries from nineteenth-century France. In 1856, Pierre Pélissier published his dictionary of French Sign Language (LSF), which includes the description of male and female kinship terms shown in figure 1.5. Of all our materials, this dictionary presented the earliest information on the system for constructing kinship terms. Pélissier explained that the two signs in the first element pictured in figure 1.5 are those representing male and female genders, which must precede a second element, one of several signs indi-



FIGURE 1.4. Reduction of kinship term expressing the concept of “father.” Source: *The Preservation of American Sign Language: The Complete Historical Collection DVD*. Used by permission from Sign Media, Inc. Illustration by Val Nelson-Metlay

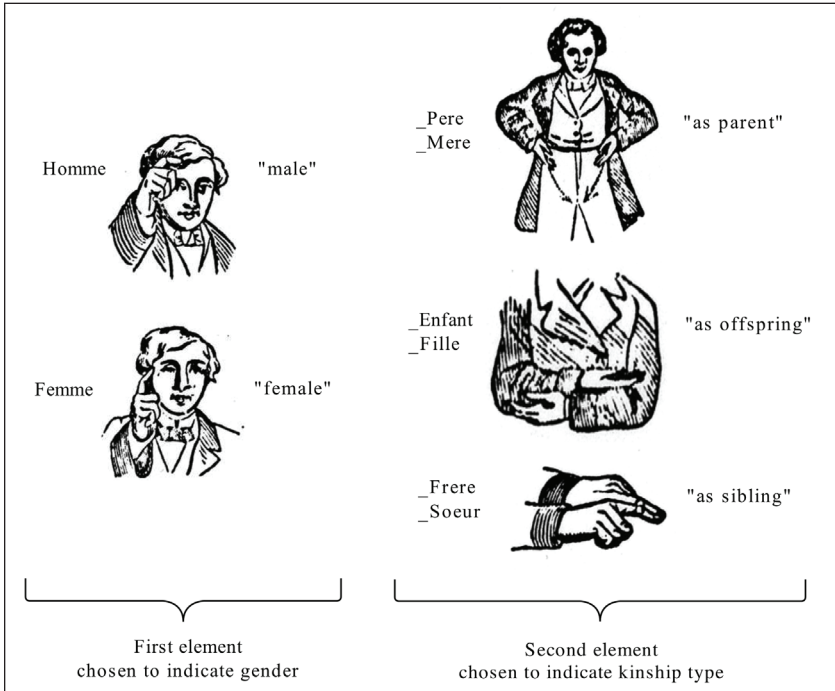


FIGURE 1.5. Male and female kinship terminology in LSF during the nineteenth century. Source: Pélissier (1856).

cating an attribute of the male or female. These attribute signs metonymically represent “giving birth,” “rocking a baby,” “symmetry or relatedness,” and “formal dress.” The combinations result in constructions that translate as kinship terms in the case of the first three attributes, namely, “father/mother,” “son/daughter,” and “brother/sister.” Not shown in figure 1.5 is a construction containing a fourth attribute, “formal dress,” which results in a marking of the social relationship via class status, and is often translated “gentleman/lady” or “man/woman” in ASL.

The LSF signs imported to America in 1817 by Clerc and Gallaudet were very similar to the forms in the Pélissier dictionary. Comparing Pélissier’s forms with both historical and modern ASL forms reveals great similarity across the LSF and ASL data, as well as at least two steps of diachronic change in the lexical structure of ASL kinship terms across a span of 150 years. These first two steps can be seen in the NAD films of 1910–1920, which feature signers from three generations, each using slightly different forms.

Analyzing these films enabled us to observe differences among the sign masters filmed, and with these data, along with other historical documents, we reconstructed the characteristics of ASL during the intermediate period between the emergence of early ASL and modern ASL, and we traced the progression of change from the early forms to their modern equivalents. To begin our examination, it was important to first identify generations of signers. At any point in time, a community will have members of at least three generations living together and interacting, equivalent to the “parents,” the “children,” and the “grandparents.”

The chart in figure 1.6 depicts an approximation of the generations of sign language users in America. ASL is typically not passed down from birth parents to children, but from older to younger peers at residential schools and day programs. In our calculations, approximately thirty years constitutes a generation of signers. Using this framework, the lines across the time chart reflect the number of generations using ASL since its inception in 1817.

First-generation signers were the first groups of students, both children and adults, who attended the American Asylum in Hartford and learned directly from Clerc. The second generation were students who attended the school later and learned their sign language from the first generation. The second generation of signers became the language models for the third generation, with this pattern continuing to the present day. Internal and

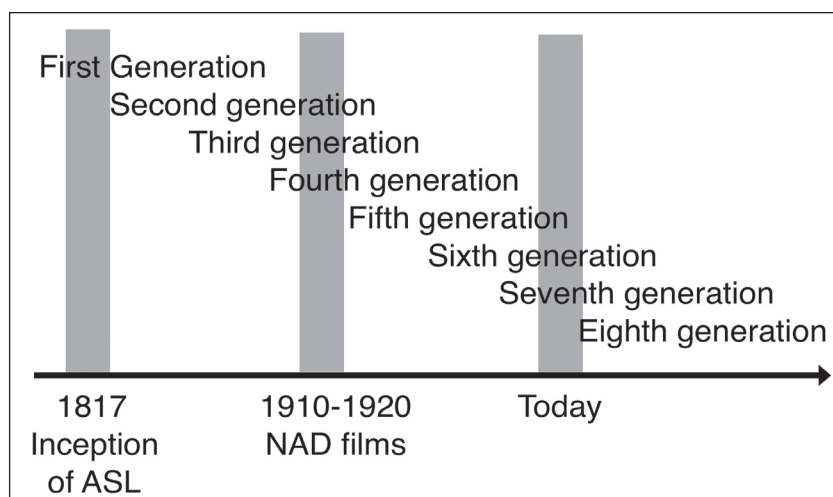


FIGURE 1.6. Generations of American signers.

external linguistic and sociolinguistic factors (such as the spread of oralism in deaf education) affected the language change patterns seen across the generations; we address these factors in chapters 6, 7, and 8.

From records dating from the turn of the twentieth century, we can identify people representative of each of the different generations that were captured in the films. Based on this measure, the sign masters on film represent the second, third, and fourth generations of ASL users, and thus provide a historical cross-section of linguistic and literary ASL use as it existed in the middle of the period between 1910 and 1920. That period is indicated by the middle vertical bar in figure 1.6, which crosses three generations (the second, third, and fourth).

The youngest generation of signers in the films (the fourth generation) lived until the middle of the twentieth century. The current generation of signers in their eighties constitutes the fifth generation, and adults in middle age today constitute the sixth generation. Young adults and college students form the seventh generation, which began during the 1970s.

Our research with historical documents has led us to interpret the actions of the Deaf community in commissioning the NAD films in a different way than others have in the past. We believe that the films were produced in response to divisions within the community concerning the formal and colloquial uses of sign language. Polarization of the community was driven by changes in educational practices (Woodward 1976; Lane 1987). We found indications that as this situation evolved, the NAD films were eventually pulled out of circulation and archived.

In the 1946 committee report to the NAD, Roy Stewart, the chair of the Motion Picture Committee, wrote about the legacy of the films for future generations:

It is the hope of the National Association of the Deaf that educators of the deaf and others interested in the educational progress of the deaf will be enabled by the use of copies made from these prints to study the progress of the sign language and note whether it is improving. If copies can be made, fifty or a hundred years hence they will be of great value and interest. (NAD 1946)

This was a reiteration of the goals of the committee as stated in the 1910 *NAD Proceedings*. Such written historical artifacts give powerful insight into the thoughts of the period when the films were made (Supalla 2004). Stewart's prophecy indicates a metalinguistic awareness of language change

and at the same time reveals a hitch in the plan to preserve the sign language, as it was originally outlined by NAD President Veditz in his 1913 lecture. The forces in education that contributed to the removal of sign language from most classrooms also shaped its future. The classical register, as we will refer to the register used by educators and sign masters in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, gradually lost ground and finally disappeared during the Dark Period. The mandate to pass on the principles of the classical register also disappeared as classical signers—second- and third-generation sign masters and proponents—lost prestige after the 1920s. This loss of prestige and the diminishing number of proponents in schools for the deaf and within the NAD left a vacuum without a sign language register that was formal and widely used.

At Gallaudet College, however, incoming generations of Deaf college students were pressed to continue to emulate the classical signers' value system and sign language usage. Instead of such classical master signers as Laurent Clerc, Melville Ballard and John Hotchkiss, they had Elizabeth Peet monitoring and policing their sign language usage. For almost a century, the Peets were among the leading American families devoted to the tradition of teaching deaf children and enriching their intellectual and spiritual lives through the use of sign language (Veditz 1913). Initially trained at the American school in Hartford, Harvey Prindle Peet became the principal of the New York School for the Deaf in 1831. The school, also known as Fanwood, produced its own pool of successful professionals who went on to establish satellite schools. When the philanthropist Amos Kendall contacted Isaac Lewis Peet, Harvey's son and successor, to assist in his project of establishing a school for deaf children in Washington, DC, Peet suggested Edward Miner Gallaudet, who eventually established not only a school for the youngsters but a college program as well.

The Peet family tradition continued for another half-century when Gallaudet hired Isaac's daughter Elizabeth to be a teacher at Kendall School and Gallaudet College. Her mother was Mary Toles, a poet deafened at age eleven who attended the New York school as a young girl. Elizabeth served as the dean of women from 1910 until she retired in 1951. For her sign language authoritarian role, Elizabeth Peet was named by many the "last of the classical signers" (Gannon 1974, 242).

To this day, many elderly alumni recall their irritation at being admonished by Dean Peet for not using the proper formal register. Although Peet's nagging may have alienated many, she found a protégé in Martin Sternberg,

who began learning sign language when hired as an English instructor by the college. Peet took Sternberg, a member of the fifth generation, under her wing and mentored him in the instruction of proper forms (Sternberg 1981). He joined her in work on her pet project of collecting signs and published it as *American Sign Language: A Comprehensive Dictionary* in 1981. Dr. Sternberg's modern ASL dictionary includes some archaic forms along with modern signs, such as FATHER and MOTHER as shown in figure 1.7. These signs contrast with more modern variants, which have the rough meaning of "mom" and "dad." The reduced forms have become standardized as basic lexemes in modern ASL for MOTHER and FATHER. In the hands of young children today, the signs may be further reduced to a mere index finger tapping the chin and forehead.⁸ The prescriptive exhortation for purity on the part of Elizabeth Peet and her colleagues was and continues to be a common response to natural linguistic processes of change.

The purpose of this book is to unravel the mystery of our collective memory regarding details about the genesis and evolution of American Sign Language and its French predecessor. Thus far we have presented a brief overview of the varieties of "the sign language" as known to be in existence in the early days. Comparing these to the varieties as used today can help us begin to address this challenge. In chapter 2 we look at some of the twentieth-century metalinguistic assumptions that obscured modern researchers' ability to develop appropriate tools for conducting historical linguistic research, particularly in regard to the NAD films, called the Gallaudet Lecture Films produced by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) Moving Pictures Committee.

With this understanding, we open chapter 3 with a description of the language plan conceived by NAD leaders to preserve the original form of signing that reflected the sign language of the founders. The factors precipitating the language plan reach well into the nineteenth century, so we look at the major metalinguistic ideas that shaped the NAD's plan. Selection criteria and a brief biographical sketch of each sign master are provided in chapter 4 to pave the way for understanding their contributions to the

8. It is interesting to note that this reduction occurred at an early phase of ASL development. It may have been triggered by limited developing articulation among the children of deaf adults, as a form of "childrenese," and the alternate glossing with informal words above reflects this register (Boyes Braem 1990; Chen Pichler 2012).

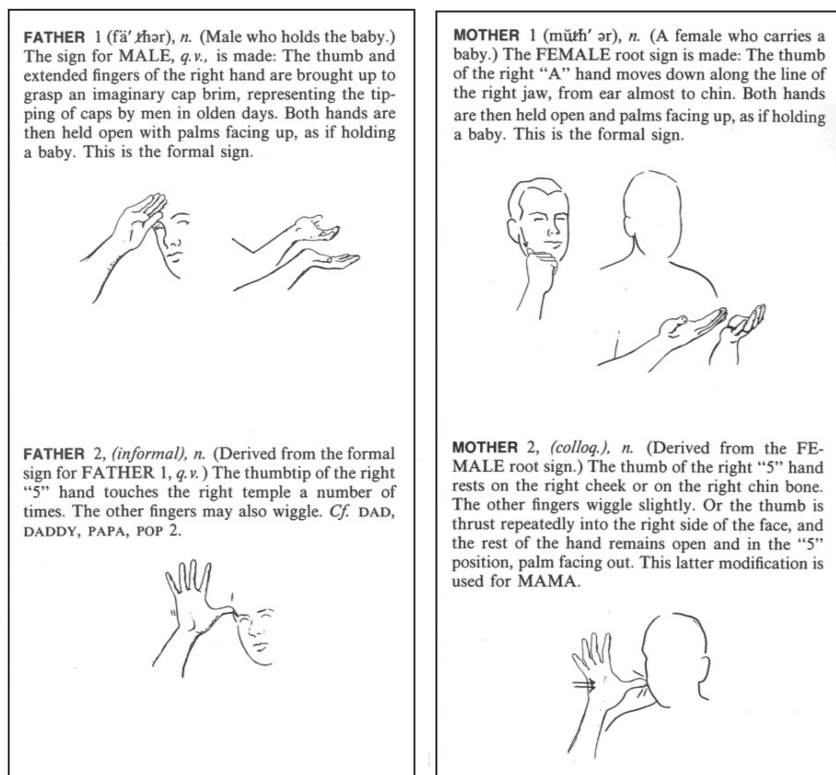


FIGURE I.7. Dictionary descriptions of archaic and modern variants for FATHER and MOTHER. Source: Images and text of definitions from 139, 252 from AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE DICTIONARY by Martin L. A. STERNBERG. Copyright © 1981, 1987 by Martin L. A. Sternberg. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

rich aesthetic and literary value of the films. These two chapters provide additional insights into the NAD language plan as well as our understanding of language change.

After uncovering the socio-historical context for early ASL, we move into exploring the structure of sign language as used in the films. For readers interested in the lexicon and morphology of early ASL, chapter 5 describes how we developed a linguistic corpus and provides evidence about the word formation process of early ASL, based on the data collected from the films and from several dictionaries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Chapter 6 traces the history of dactylology (fingerspelling) first imported from the French school and adapted to the needs of the American Deaf community. We explore its role and influence in the ASL morphological system as well as the loan-sign and name-sign systems. Chapter 7 reconstructs the historical context for the grammar of early ASL, beginning with a description of the metalanguage of each century and how it changed through each period, by tracing the writings of selected individuals from those periods. With the historical context for the grammar of early ASL established, chapter 8 focuses on the literary legacy of the Deaf American voice rediscovered. We analyze and discuss the literary skills of Deaf sign masters as seen in public oratory and at banquets, especially in terms of how they are preserved in the NAD films. In describing tools for analyzing historical linguistic data, in chapter 9 the views and practices surrounding the use of sign language at the beginning of the Dark Period is discussed, which sets the stage for understanding the fate of the classical register, the films that preserved it, and the shift in metalinguistic discussion up to our modern period. In chapter 10 we draw a contrast between folk etymology and scientific etymology and thus see the history of ASL in the terms of historical linguistics. With the backdrop of historical linguistic discussion in chapter 10, we move into chapter 11 to review the evolution of morphological processes in ASL and wrap up in chapter 12 with a discussion of what varieties of ASL disappeared and what variety survived the onset of the Dark Period and the impact of these changes on ASL today.