Exploring British Experiences of Language and Deafhood in Hypermodernity

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This chapter explores some of the ideological underpinnings of younger Deaf people's language practices and examines their implications in terms of social theory. It also discusses current British Sign Language (BSL) issues through a theoretical lens developed by Monica Heller (1999), which focuses on how we as language users respond to the challenges and constraints of "hypermodernity." What do BSL users in contemporary Britain think about the language and communicative choices they make? A series of research interviews with British signers between 20 and 29 years of age provides some revealing perspectives with, I maintain, an apparent ideological commonality centering on the willingness to make pragmatic accommodations to external linguistic circumstances. Language choice, in this context, becomes one of many decisions about self-presentation taken on a case-by-case, pragmatic basis as these young Deaf people move through their daily lives.

BSL AND BRITISH DEAFHOOD IN CONTEXT

BSL is the first or preferred language of 50,000–100,000 people in Britain and of still more as a second, or "hobby," language. It is now firmly identified as a natural language that has evolved through processes of communicative interaction within communities wherever Deaf people were present and that is capable of fulfilling all of the functions of any natural human language (Sutton-Spence and Woll 1999). Nevertheless, this status is insecure, not least because it seeks to overturn a long period of oralist dominance. In 1760 Thomas Braidwood started teaching hard of hearing and deaf pupils in Britain to speak. By 1780, what had started as the tutoring of one boy had grown into a school for twenty students in Edinburgh. Despite the insistence on speech, however, pupils in Braid-

wood's first school and others modeled on it learned sign from each other and sometimes from the teachers.[1]

The underground—rather than open—nature of signing, however, meant that the Milan Congress of 1880 had an impact in England that was very different from its effect in the United States (Lane 1984; Baynton 1996). The *London Times* editorial of September 28, 1880, for instance, declares, "No more representative body could be collected than that which at Milan has declared for oral teaching of the deaf—and nothing but oral teaching. . . . The resolution was the act of representatives of countries which hereto have countenanced the language of signs. There is virtual unanimity of preference for oral teaching which might seem to overbear the possibility of opposition." The national organization of Deaf people in Britain, however, supported sign language. At the First National Conference in Great Britain of Adult Deaf and Dumb Missions and Associations, held in London in 1890, Francis Maginn—missioner for Northern Ireland and one of the prime activists in founding the British Deaf and Dumb Association (BDDA)—made an early contribution to the debate: "I wish to correct a wrong impression that has gained some credence amongst the ignorant and unreasoning public, that sign language—the agency through which we interexchange thought and opinion—is calculated to do injury to the intelligence of the deaf and dumb. This language is to the deaf-mute what the German language is to the German, or the French to the French. I contend that the best evidence of the efficacy of the combined system are [*sic*] the attainments of the deaf-mutes who have profited by it, and that the deaf-mutes of America are far better educated than those of any other country" (Grant 1990, 12).

A close interdependence has always existed in Britain between language and educational issues in relation to Deaf people. This is no surprise in the context of a community where more than 90 percent of community members' parents are hearing and share neither the preferred language nor their children's developmental experiences. The Elementary Education Act of 1893 made it a legal requirement that deaf children between the ages of 7 and 16 be educated, but clear and careful attention was not given to the manner of that education until after World War II.

The oral education tradition continued throughout the twentieth century. In 1946 the influential Mary Hare Grammar School (MHGS) was established. Firmly oralist in its policies, it nevertheless provided a standard of education that, when allied with the signing skills that children learned for themselves, has furnished the Deaf community with a great

many of its more prominent members. While the MHGS was being founded, early experiments began with the creation of "partially hearing units"—small specialist units for deaf children within mainstream educational institutions. Again oralist in orientation, the units provided positive environments for neither Deaf cultural nor sign linguistic interaction and development.

The BDDA, the association of Deaf adults, however, continued to pass resolutions at its congresses throughout the century, arguing for wider acceptance and recognition in policy terms of BSL. At the same time, however, although the thrust has been strongly in favor of signing, acknowledgement of the value of speech was not entirely jettisoned. In a resolution passed in 1950, members recorded that

> while appreciating the genuine desire and efforts of the teaching profession to furnish deaf children with a satisfactory education by means of the Pure Oral Method, [BDDA members] are nevertheless gravely perturbed at the general low standard of achievement under a system which ignores completely the value of manual means of communication. It being their considered opinion, based on personal experience, that no one method is sufficient to meet their needs in adult life, they desire, therefore, that the Minister of Education shall with the utmost speed institute a special inquiry into the results of the present system and if necessary in the light of conclusions thus established, take such steps as he may think desirable to include the use of fingerspelling and signing, in conjunction with the oral teaching in the curriculum of all Special Schools for the Deaf. (Grant 1990, 87)

The next wave of change in Britain began to break in the 1970s.[2] The BDDA dropped the words "and Dumb" from its title in 1971—though there was considerable opposition from within (ibid.)—and became the British Deaf Association. The National Union of the Deaf was established as a radical, Deaf-led campaigning force, thanks to the energy of Raymond Lee, Paddy Ladd, and others. Following a commission of inquiry, the Lewis report (1968) had tentatively paved the way for exploration of the value of manual communication in the education of deaf children, and this bore fruit in policy design and practical implementation from the early 1970s onward in the form of the Total Communication approach (i.e., seeking to use a range of communicative means as appropriate to meet the needs of particular children; see Evans 1982).

In the late 1970s the BDA secured support from the Department of

Health and Social Security for a project that led, over time, to the establishment of both a national register of sign language interpreters (1982) and the first training course for Deaf tutors of BSL (1985). Hearing people began to learn BSL in greater numbers, many inspired by a short BBC television series introducing learners to the language (Miles 1988). Early linguistic research into BSL culminated in the first major research workshop in 1979, featuring contributions from authors of major works in BSL studies such as Margaret Deuchar (1984), Mary Brennan (1990, 1992; Brennan and Colville 1980), Jim Kyle and Bencie Woll (1985). As these books were published, so the shift toward the use of BSL in education gained momentum. It had been boosted at the end of the previous decade by the publication of Rueben Conrad's dry-eyed and highly critical analysis of deaf children's educational attainments in England (1979), and by the second half of the 1980s, ripples of official or unofficial bilingualism were spreading through educational waters. Progress since that date has been uneven, at best, though inroads toward developing more rounded bilingual services have been made (see Powers, Gregory, and Thoutenhoofd 1998; Brennan 1999, 2003).

In recent years, social and linguistic achievements have been consolidated. Notable landmarks have been the publication of the first bilingual BSL/English Dictionary (Brien 1992) and the appearance in the mid-1990s—for the first time—of Deaf chief executives at both the BDA and the Royal National Institute for Deaf People. Further political shifts followed (Turner 2002). The country now has a Disability Discrimination Act designed to bring about a fundamental shift in attitudes to service provision in all social and commercial spheres. Nevertheless, to date there has been no parliamentary recognition of BSL as an official language and thus no far-reaching phase of sign-language policy implementation in conjunction with the Deaf community. All that has been offered—via an announcement made on March 18, 2003, indicating that the government now acknowledges that BSL is indeed a language—is a toothless form of recognition that is not backed by any change in BSL's *legal* status.[3]

Yet, the opening up of BSL research has precipitated an ideological shift within the Deaf community in England because the focus of this unprecedented and supportive scientific attention was fixed quite dramatically upon BSL, as opposed to other ways in which Deaf people communicate. Thus, in an article portentously titled "The Renaissance of British Sign Language," Mary Brennan and Alan Hayhurst—shortly after

the first research workshop in England—wrote that "Recognising the real worth of Sign Language is bringing about renewal at various levels within and around the deaf community. We hope that this renewal will develop into a true linguistic and cultural renaissance which will benefit both deaf children and the deaf community as a whole" (1980, 2).

In outline, the shift has been away from the identification of BSL as a language "not fit for public usage," with the English language occupying a position of prestige within the community and its public discourse.[4] These attitudes have been superseded in light of the "legitimization" offered by late-twentieth-century descriptions by scholars, scientists, and community leaders of BSL as a full and rich language in its own right.

LANGUAGE AND HYPERMODERNITY

Let me now turn to a key idea in current sociolinguistics in order to explore current BSL issues through a theoretical lens developed by Monica Heller in her studies of French speakers in Canada. Heller is interested in how we as language users respond to hypermodernity, the shift into new sociopolitical structures for the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The notion of hypermodernity is aligned with the idea that we are no longer confined by the boundaries of the nation-state. This allows people to seek economic advantage in a transformed marketplace, redefined by the flow of information and services, by changing their positions (figuratively or physically in terms of relocation): "This is particularly important for linguistic minorities, whose linguistic repertoires have value that is radically different from the value they had when a centralizing nation-state and a primary-resource, extraction-based economy defined it. Linguistic minorities used the logic of ethnic state nationalism to resist that older form of power in order to enter the modern world. That modern world uses a different logic, and so linguistic minorities now have to define themselves in order to retain their economic and political gains, but without losing their legitimacy" (Heller 1999, 4).

What does this mean when applied to Deaf people in Britain?[5] When BSL first began to be identified in scholarly terms as a language in the 1970s, the language abilities that were seen as having value (in economic terms) for Deaf people were English, spoken and written, and English-influenced signed varieties. The 1980s and 1990s have seen a broad, strong shift here. BSL has now been named and taught and has a rela-

tively high public profile with an infrastructure of qualifications and regulation.[6] In other words, it has been industrialized and now carries an economic status of its own. Deaf people have a range of "socially accepted" linguistic potentialities, therefore, which they may (or may not) operationalize within daily life.

TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY SIGNERS

How do young adult BSL users feel about the language and the communication choices they make? The ontological position taken here led to qualitative interviewing as an appropriate way to explore the views and understandings that are meaningful properties of the social reality in focus. The interviews reported here indeed provide some revealing perspectives with an apparent ideological commonality, centering on the interviewees' evident matter-of-fact readiness to make pragmatic accommodations to external linguistic circumstances. The data reported are drawn from fieldwork conducted in Britain under my supervision by Deaf researchers Jen Dodds and Helen Phillips.[7] The interviewees are all between 20 and 29 years of age. They come, in terms of language influences, from a full range of school and family backgrounds and describe themselves variously—using terminology of their own choosing, which is not a part of the material analyzed here—in terms of linguistic identities.[8]

Interviewees were recruited by the two Deaf researchers, both U.K.-educated and in their twenties. Information was disseminated using the researchers' own extensive social networks as community members to identify interviewees on a friend-of-a-friend basis. To widen the "catchment" population, interviewees were also identified following recruitment via the *British Deaf News* (national magazine); BBC *Read Hear* teletext pages; local Deaf organizations' magazines; Deaf clubs; local mainstream newspapers, libraries, and Citizens Advice Bureaus; websites of voluntary organizations and independent Deaf groups; website bulletin boards for young deaf people; and the widely accessed, independent Deaf-U.K. e-group. Thus the sample encapsulates a relevant range of people, with a functional balance between generating a degree of intersubjective understanding among participants and maintaining a degree of social distance. Qualitative interviewing is acknowledged as involving the construction or reconstruction of knowledge more than the "excavation" of it (Mason 2002; Kvale 1996). The sampling can be seen throughout as

purposive (in the sense of Robson 1993), and the conclusions should be read with due caution in this respect.

Forty-three face-to-face, semistructured, videotaped interviews took place, allowing people to answer more on their own terms than the standardized interview permits but still providing a greater structure for comparability than that of the focused interview (see May 2001). The interviews took place in contexts of the interviewees' choosing in order to maximize their comfort. In conducting the interviews, both researchers (who self-identify as BSL users) signed directly to the interviewees and sought to adjust their mode of communication as necessary to ensure the interviewees had full access and were using the language they felt most comfortable with. Interviews were transcribed into English in full by the researchers, supported where needed by qualified British Sign Language/English interpreters. Final decisions on the transcripts were made by the Deaf researchers. Interviewees were assured that their identities would not be revealed to anyone outside of the research workers.

FINDINGS

All of the interviewees could sign and had not the slightest qualms about signing. When asked, for instance, whether they had ever been embarrassed to use sign language or felt prevented from signing, interviewees commented as follows:

> Never! I am open, and I don't care what others think about it. If they make fun of us I will tell them off! (male, twenty-four, language with hearing oral, with Deaf signing)

> I ignore what other people think of us. I just carry on signing away. . . . It is okay with me. (female, twenty-one, BSL)

> Never! I am proud of it. (female, twenty, with Deaf BSL, hearing SSE and oral, but likes all)[9]

> Never! Never! (male, twenty-four, BSL)

> I have never been stopped using sign language. It is my language. I am Deaf and it is my language. . . . Put my hands down and I can't do this! I will continue using sign language. It is my language. (female, twenty-two, speak)[10]

Despite some views apparently staunchly in favor of signing and no evidence that some situations were considered in principle "off limits" for signed interaction, interviewees nevertheless expressed considerable openness to making communicative adjustments in interaction. Some of this flexibility is overtly recorded, too, in their descriptions of their linguistic identities.

Some interviewees explicitly marked signing and speaking situations, with the Deaf or hearing nature of the interlocutors seen as the deciding factor:

> If my Deaf friend is with me, then I sign to help her follow the conversation, but if it's with a hearing person then I talk. (female, twenty-seven, sign language user)

> INTERVIEWER: Did you have an interview for entry to your work experience?
> INTERVIEWEE: Yes.
> INTERVIEWER: How did you communicate with the panel at the interview?
> INTERVIEWEE: Signing.
> INTERVIEWER: Were you happy with this?
> INTERVIEWEE: Yes.
> INTERVIEWER: Why?
> INTERVIEWEE: Probably because there was a deaf person there. (female, twenty-seven, mainly nonsigning)

The interviewees' often identified the linguistic identity or capability of their interlocutor as the main factor in deciding their approach to communication (see Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985; Edwards 1985). One interviewee describes this as an "automatic," rather than deliberate, process:

> It depends on the people. If the person is a strong BSL user, I would use BSL with them! (female, twenty-one, BSL)

> It depends. . . . With hearing people who can sign, I will use signing—for example, interpreters or people learning to sign, because if they can sign, why not use it?! (male, twenty-four, BSL)

> Depends on each person. . . . If the person knows sign language, I would use it. . . . I feel it depends on the person and which to use comes automatically. (female, twenty-one, BSL)

For some interviewees, the familiarity of the interlocutor plays a major part in defining lines of communication:

> I have got hearing friends who know me well, and I don't need to use sign language as they know me very well and I can talk to them. (female, twenty-two, speak)

Some said that they at least initially use speech when they meet hearing people, explicitly reporting this as an accommodation to hearing people's needs:

> I choose oral language because hearing people can understand it, and it is easier when you speak it. (male, twenty-three, oral most of the time)

> I would use speech to hearing because if I used sign and speech they will say "what are you doing?" And they don't like it. . . . Some hearing people are like that. . . . They don't want to embarrass themselves. It's their way. I don't know why they do it. (male, twenty-four, with hearing oral, with Deaf signing)

On the other hand, there is also evidence that making such adjustments in the presence of hearing people is not felt to be in any sense a matter of *obligation* despite the fact that, from other evidence, it is clearly accepted as an available *option*:

> Why should I use speech?! For hearing people? If I want to use BSL, and other Deaf people want to use BSL, why should I do it for them? It is my right. . . . If they don't feel comfortable, well, it is tough, it's their problem. This is public, and I can do what I want! (female, twenty-one, BSL)

Many interviewees drew distinctions between situations in which they would consider BSL to be appropriate and those where they would opt for more distinctly English-influenced "contact" signing (see Lucas and Valli 1992; Turner 1995):

> With hearing people, it would depend. . . . Some hearing people are not good at signing, and I would use SSE and at the same time use my voice. (female, twenty-nine, BSL)

> Really, I have two languages, BSL and SSE. When I meet hearing people who know a little sign, I have to use SSE. When I meet Deaf people, I use BSL. (male, twenty-two, BSL)

> Well, my sign language is based on SSE but sometimes BSL. Sometimes I feel that SSE is more important because of the real world out there. (female, twenty-two, speak)

Interviewees also showed a relatively uncomplicated willingness to engage in written communication if they feel it is necessary:

> When I meet a hearing person I will try and use my voice and talk to them. . . . If they don't understand, you can always write on paper and give it to them. (female, twenty-two, speak)

> If the information is important and I need to know it, I would ask them to write it down—better than not having a conversation at all! . . . I have BSL, and the other person has spoken English, so pen and paper means we meet in the middle. (male, twenty-four, BSL)

> It depends on the person; if they can sign, I will use it. But if the person can't sign, I will use oral language. If they still don't understand, I will use writing. . . . I want to understand the conversation. (female, twenty, with Deaf BSL, hearing SSE and oral but likes all)

Some interviewees declared that they had no particular communication preference:

> Well I prefer them both (speech or sign). . . . I am not critical of either because it depends [on] who I am communicating with. If they sign to me, I sign back. If they talk to me, I'll talk back—it's equal. If they want to sign, I'll sign, so it depends. (male, twenty-one, sign language user)

> INTERVIEWER: What would be your preferred communication method?
> INTERVIEWEE: No preference. (female, twenty-seven, mainly non-signing)

Finally, when asked which language groups they would prefer to be in, some interviewees demonstrated a notable degree of flexibility and a very unconcerned, matter-of-fact approach to making communicative adjustments:

> It doesn't bother me: I just go along and learn from them. (male, twenty-four, with hearing oral, with Deaf signing)

> I like all the groups because some of my friends are oral, SSE, and BSL, and I can fit into all the groups. (female, 20, with Deaf BSL, hearing SSE and oral, but likes all)

> I feel fine to be part of those two groups (sign and speech users). I can communicate with both of them and can introduce them to each other. (male, twenty-three, oral most of the time)

IMPLICATIONS

What we see here may suggest a transition among younger Deaf people that is arguably very much in keeping with notions of hypermodernity. I propose that these data may be indicative of "a linguistic minority prepared to abandon the old politics of identity, and hence the problematics of authenticity, in favor of a new pragmatic position which allows them to take advantage of their access to multiple linguistic and cultural resources in order to participate in a globalized economy" (Heller 1999, 5).

We might identify four very broad, twentieth-century phases of Deaf language attitudes (Baker 1992) and ideologies (Woolard 1992; Turner 1999) in Britain, each approximately associated with a different "generation" of Deaf people. The first generation resolutely identifies command of the English language as the "best" or "most respectable" goal. Such an ideological perspective is most commonly associated with older signers. In the formative years of slightly younger signers, manual communication (often in the form of fingerspelling) gained a foothold in education and public consciousness (and policy). For respectability, Deaf people began to look to—or at least use—signed forms that displayed their knowledge of English. As time went by and researchers began to recognize BSL, Deaf people identified it as "best," in the sense of being emblematic of the authenticating characteristic of politicized Deafhood.

Most recently, as the earlier data suggest, the territory has started to shift away from this focus on language and identity. Younger people reach maturity via a policy climate that is fraught with conflicting and contested discourses about Deafhood, disability, community membership, and language choices—*but one that increasingly enables them to do well using whatever linguistic resources they have at their disposal*. Thus their language choices become contingent—a means to an end, rather

than a profoundly symbolic act, where the end is a matter of economic and lifestyle "success." Language choice, in this context, becomes one of many decisions about self-presentation taken on a case-by-case, pragmatic basis as people live their daily lives.

Certainly the politics of identity has made young Deaf people sensitive to exclusionary practices, which they by no means condone. However, it seems they are willing to go beyond taking a narrow, rights-based line on communication practices; they do not insist upon using BSL or nothing at all. They appear to be fighting their battles not on the grounds of collective language rights, but on other grounds altogether. They have grander ambitions for themselves, commensurate with their view of Deafhood in the twenty-first century. Their ideologies of language and their language practices are designed to enable them to do well, in terms of both economics and lifestyle, in the hypermodern world.

Insisting upon BSL at all times, it therefore appears, feels to them like asserting a principle to their own detriment. The young Deaf people quoted in this chapter seem to consider themselves at liberty to deploy their linguistic capital in a situated, contextualized, and contingent manner. On their behalf, other (older) Deaf people have generated sociopolitical circumstances in which twenty-first-century Deafhood can be seen as an era ripe with many possibilities, the right to choose is established, and the social and economic promise anticipated in the previous century is materializing. Like the participants in Heller's Canadian studies, young British Deaf people "have mobilized to enter the modern world in order to enjoy its fruits, not to maintain the marginalized and difficult life which was the basis of their solidarity, but which was not much fun" (1999, 16).

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NOTES

1. American Lewis Weld's 1845 report on British schools reported signing among students and pantomime and signing by teachers (in Lane 1984).

2. Paddy Ladd (2003) offers a highly informed and detailed discussion of this period of change.

3. British governments had previously taken the view that there was no need to recognize BSL because no other languages are officially recognized in the United Kingdom. However, *protected language* status was given to other indigenous languages including Welsh, Cornish, Scots, Ulster Scots, Scottish, and Irish Gaelic.

4. This cast of mind is exemplified repeatedly in historical accounts by Deaf people; Paddy Ladd, for instance, cites the example of a Deaf person who behaved in adult life as if her communication were still being policed by an antisign school principal and thus was "afraid" to sign to her own hearing children (2003, 145), with the English language occupying high prestige within the community and its public discourse. See also McLoughlin (1987), Jackson (1990), and Taylor and Bishop (1991).

5. See Padden (1996) and Padden and Rayman (2002) for a discussion of related issues in the U.S. Deaf community and papers in Monaghan et al. (2003) for a related discussion of Deaf communities worldwide.

6. See www.cacdp.org.uk for details.

7. The researchers' work was broader in focus than the sociolinguistic issues that are reported here. Phillips was interested in comparative analysis and also gathered data in Finland. All of Dodds's data were gathered in England and range across issues of education and employment.

8. Interviewees were asked to state their preferred or native language or communication method.

9. SSE originally stood for "Sign Supported English" but has come to be used by signers in the United Kingdom to refer to any form of British signing that is relatively heavily influenced by English. Despite the anomalous terminology, the difference between the historical sense of SSE (which would require full, spoken English "supported" by key signs produced in parallel with English content

words) and the signing community's common usage is well understood by British signers.

10. The claim that "sign language . . . is my language" by a young person whose self-description in terms of linguistic identity is "speak" might be read in a number of ways. One possibility is that the interviewee has a view of signing and speech that, in practice, plays out as "having no overriding preference."

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