CONSTRUCTING LIVES:
THE DEAF EXPERIENCE

INAUGURAL PROFESSORIAL LECTURE

by

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To teach the deaf no art could ever reach,
No wit inspire them nor no wisdom teach. 1

These words of Lucretius signal a long Western European history of attitudes towards people born deaf or becoming deaf early in life. Pejoratively, “deaf and dumb” meant not only “deaf and mute”, but also “deaf and stupid” - incapable of speech and hence reason and a fortiori incapable of being educated. 2 In 1749 the French Academy of Sciences appointed a committee to determine whether deaf people were “capable of reasoning” (Dolnick, 1993). In the Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides (1773) Boswell reports on Dr Johnson visiting a school for the deaf and describing deafness as “one of the most desperate of human calamities”. The traditional myth dies hard - even at the end of the second millennium it can still occur. Attitudes die hard too: We still find frequent references in the media and medical literature to “The Horror of Deafness” (a Sydney Morning Herald

1 Lucretius, The Eclogues, c. 300AD; trans. Alexander Pope.
2 Or even saved. One motivation for early education of the deaf in Catholic countries was that one had to be able to recite the Creed in order to be a Christian (and incidentally, to be able to inherit titles and property). As so often religious and economic motives proved a potent mix.

**Models of Deafness**

Very broadly speaking, modern views of disability divide into two categories: a “medical-disability” model and a “social-cultural” model.

The medical model replaced the “vengeance of God” model in the 19th Century with the rise of modern medicine. Because of the prestige of “scientific medicine” it has dominated professional, lay and media views until quite recently, and to a large extent, still does, especially for lay people and the media. The medical and paramedical professions have clung to this model also: “What do nasal decongestants, flu treatments and bionic ears [the cochlear implant] have in common? Being remedies for unpleasant ailments” (Caruana, 1997, p. 36).

In brief, what the medical model says is that deafness is a “condition” (sometimes even a “disease”; an “unpleasant ailment”); at least a “disability” that is “in” the individual that “has” it. Close examination of the medical model reveals its inappropriateness with regard to congenital or early life deafness. At present, deafness cannot be “cured”, it remains with the person for life, and, in fact, becomes part of the life of that person. This is particularly true for deafness from early childhood; more so when this deafness is severe or profound and the child has great difficulty in developing the normal speech and language of their community.

Contrasted with medical models are ones which have become prominent only in the last ten years or so. I have above called them “social-cultural” models, but they are also sometimes called “constructionist” models. This last name is because protagonists of such models believe that people (all of us, not just those with disabilities) construct their lives through interaction with the individuals and institutions of the culture in which they live. Especially influential of course is the
family in which we grow up. It is here that we form a basic view of ourselves as functioning people and our basic attitudes towards ourselves and others are laid down. Other institutions in the culture also intervene to shape us: probably most importantly education (and especially our "educated" culturally bound use of language), but also religion, peer group, vocational affiliation, social class and so on. Each one of us is the outcome of a host of influences which have impinged upon and continue throughout our lives to shape the person that we are.

The influences mentioned above are "outside" us, they are the institutions of our culture and particular subculture/s within it that we inhabit. Thus "Anglo-Australians" and "Greek Australians" share some aspects of Australian culture but not others because of the different ethnic subcultures in which they grew up and to a greater or lesser extent continue to adhere to.

Some characteristics are not ones we can change. A "Greek Australian" could to all intents and purposes become an "Anglo-Australian" with the passage of time, but aboriginal Australians could never in this sense be Anglo-Australians because they will always be distinguished by their colour, no matter how "Anglo" they may otherwise become. A significant disability falls into this same category of non-changeable life-shaping forces. If one is born significantly deaf or blind or cerebrally palsied one is accompanied by this for life and because one's interactions with family, school, church, recreation and work are invariably shaped by the presence of one's disability, the person one constructs for oneself is also inevitably shaped by the outcome of those interactions between self and societal institutions and individuals.

For people with minor disabilities the impact upon their lives may be minimal and have almost no influence upon their interaction with society and hence their vision of themselves. For others, it will influence their lives to some extent. For some, it will be the major determining influence on their lives. They are deaf people or blind people or cerebrally palsied people, no matter how much they may have come
to terms with their disability, how well adjusted to life with it they are, and how normal their lives are in most respects.

Deaf people are a special example of the process and outcome of this construction of a life - in this case, a Deaf life. It has become commonplace to talk about “the social construction of deafness” or “defining deafness socially” (as distinct from medically or audiologically; Higgins & Nash, 1987; Gregory & Hartley, 1991) for a particular group of people with hearing loss. These deaf people are not those who have become deaf with advancing age or who have hearing losses of such extent that they have been able to be educated relatively normally and who have more or less normal speech and language. The former group (if asked) would consider themselves to be “hearing” people who happen to have acquired a hearing loss. The latter group would acknowledge that they have been influenced by the presence of their loss, but that their lives have not been shaped by it to a very large extent. Both groups may sometimes refer to themselves as being “deaf” or “hard of hearing”, but not “capital D: Deaf” in the sense I am about to define.

Deaf people seem to be unique among people with sensory or physical disabilities. Blind people or cerebrally palsied people do share a certain “fellow-feeling” because in being blind or cerebrally palsied they share experiences of life with other people similarly disabled that people not so disabled do not share. They sometimes do group together for self-help, lobbying for welfare and other benefits or for social activities, but they do not form a cohesive or self-identifying group in the way that Deaf signing people inevitably seem to do. In all societies that we have records of, deaf people seem to have come together for mutual support and social ease, symbolized and supported by their use of a sign language, to the extent that most recent commentators speak of them forming a “Deaf community” and even of the existence of a “Deaf culture” within the general speaking-hearing culture of which they are a constituent.
In recent times in Australia we have come to see ourselves as a multilingual/multicultural society both because of the influx of migrants from many other cultures and their impact upon the previously mostly Anglo-Hibernian culture and because of the belated recognition of (all too few) living Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and cultures, as well as a number of varieties of English, including our own Australian English.

These developments have in part been due to the increased size, visibility and vitality of our non-English-speaking communities, but they have also been influenced by a number of policy developments, especially at the Federal level, and several Australian government enquiries and the publicatons and funds for language services and research that flowed from them have also been very influential. These began with the Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts Enquiry into a National Language Policy in 1982 and its 1984 Report, followed by Lo Bianco’s *National Policy on Languages* (1987), and the latest, *Australia’s Language: The Australian Language and Literacy Policy* (ALLP; Dawkins, 1991).

All of these have made specific reference to Auslan (Australian Sign Language, the natural sign language of Australia’s Deaf people) and the Deaf Community. The *ALLP* specifically recognizes Auslan Language ... may be used in a specific sense to refer to individual languages. Each commonly understood language system represents a *language*, such as English or other languages .... For some people language ... may also be manifest through a coherent, developed and systematic set of visual/manual gestures, such as Australian Sign Language (Auslan), which is the signed language of the Australian deaf community (p.8).

So what is “the Australian Deaf community”? In what sense do Deaf people constitute a “community”? “Community” has a number of meanings, but its
essential core is the sense of people having a feeling of "things in common". Members of a community share attitudes and beliefs about the meaning of life and how it should be carried on and they share a history, traditions and experience of life. Above all, particularly with communities that are nationally and/or ethnically based, they share a language which both carries the essence of the community and binds the community together. Thus, we can speak of the Australian Community, encapsulating all those things which Australians hold in common (we could have considerable debate about just what "those things" consisted of!), but we can also speak of other communities in Australia, usually ethnically and/or nationally based and always symbolized and united by their common language. Thus we can speak of "Greek Australians" or "Chinese Australians", all of whom share in Australian culture and community to some extent, but who also maintain a shared sub-community by virtue of their being Australian Greeks or Chinese. We can find many such communities and cultures in a multicultural/multilingual Australia. ("Community" and "culture" are often used interchangeably, but it is perhaps helpful to think of "community" as consisting of its members collectively, while "culture" is the outward expression of the beliefs, values, literature, art, and so on, of and by the community.)

It is in this sense of community/culture that we have come to speak of the "Deaf Community" in Australia, and of "Deaf Australians" in a somewhat similar sense to "Greek Australians" and "Chinese Australians". As the Australian Association of the Deaf (AAD) has said,

Members of the Deaf Community should be seen as a linguistic and cultural minority in the context of a multicultural Australia. Deaf Australians regard themselves as members of a unique linguistic and cultural group in Australia, similar in many respects to linguistic and cultural groups such as Italian Australians or Chinese Australians (p. 45).
Deaf people, however, are not in all respects like a national or ethnic community. Most ethnic communities share history, religion, race and other cultural characteristics. Deaf people are not like this entirely. They can come from any ethnic community or race or from any religion and are heterogeneous as to many other characteristics, but as AAD has again said,

Deaf people share attitudes, beliefs and experiences in common that mark them off from other Australians, and, above all, they share a common identity as Deaf people, united by a shared language, Auslan.

Deaf people share the experience of being deaf in a hearing society which largely does not understand them. They share a common experience of being educated differently in special programs. They share a history of their community in Australia, with its heroes and villains (largely passed along from hand to hand and not much yet written down). They share a common experience of not being able to access many things which hearing Australians take for granted (radio, telephone, public address notices, sirens and other audio alarms); a common experience of having to make special arrangements about wakeup calls, door bells, babies crying, babysitting, etc. They share common social ties in sport, social life, and marriage (most Deaf people marry another Deaf person).

Above all, they share and find pride and identity in a common language, Auslan (p. 45).

The ALLP agrees.

It is now increasingly recognized that signing deaf people constitute a group like any other non-English-speaking language group in Australia, with a distinct sub-culture recognized by shared history, social life and sense of identity, united and symbolized by fluency in Auslan (p.20).
These statements are the essence of a “social-cultural” as opposed to a “medical” model of deafness. Because of their experiences with individuals and institutions in their lives, and especially because of the availability of Auslan for ease and fluency in communication and a sense of identity as a “Deaf” person engendered by its use and its marking of Deaf people off from the hearing/speaking community that cannot use it, Deaf people have come to regard themselves as a linguistic and cultural minority group.

Numerous consequences flow from the adoption of such a model by Deaf people. For one example, they reject the use of the term “hearing impaired” to describe them. They argue that they are not “impaired” and the use of the term for them is derogatory. Similarly they reject the notion of “person with a disability” in favour of “Deaf person” because, as noted above, they find identity and pride in being a Deaf person; a member of a unique subculture. They argue that their language needs research, services, development and support just as spoken community languages do (or even more than them because it has been suppressed for so long), and that it should be taught and used for educational purposes just as spoken community languages are.

In summary, a social/cultural model of the construction of a “Deaf life” allows for a very different and potentially much less “disabling” view of deafness than does the medical model and its implications should be carefully explored by educators of the deaf and the community at large.3

3 There will always be an ambivalence about and tension between the benefits provided for deaf people as “a disability group” and the very similar provisions that deaf people would like to be made under the “social-cultural” model. All of special education, hearing aids and audiological services, sign language interpreting, TTY relay and other services are traditionally supplied under “disability provisions” by governments and other agencies and any diminution of their level would seriously affect the worse the lives of deaf people.

In the end, it is all “in the mind”; the services provided under either a medical-disability model or a social-cultural model would be very much the same; it is the attitudes towards and beliefs about deafness and deaf people that make the difference. Medical models see deaf people as dependent, needing paternalistic care; social-cultural models see them as largely self-determining individuals who can lead perfectly viable lives if the conditions under which they learn and live are appropriate.
The Deaf Community in Australia

I have argued that some deaf people in Australia constitute a minority cultural and linguistic community much like Italian Australians or Chinese Australians. It is reasonable therefore to ask how membership of this Deaf Community may be determined. What makes one a Deaf Australian? It is clear enough what makes one a member of an Australian ethnic community. Members of each community are noticeable for sharing a language that is not English, which they may use at home and elsewhere for social purposes, even though they may be completely fluent in English for other purposes such as education and employment. They share birth or ancestry from a definable geographic region. They usually share aspects of a culture marked by history, literature, music, dance, food, dress, and other aspects different from other Australians. They often, but not always, share a common religion, even if they do not regularly practice it. They frequently marry another member of the same community. Most of all perhaps, membership of a particular ethnic community is realized by the fact that you regard yourself as being a member and other members of that community accept you as being a member too.

Membership of the Deaf Community is marked by many, but not all, of these kinds of characteristics. Deaf people in Australia can come from any one of Australia's ethnic communities, so they may partake of the religions, dress, food, national origin and other cultural characteristics of their ancestral community, even perhaps to some extent, its language. As Deaf people, they enter another community.

Members of Australia's Deaf Community, despite its members' origins in different ethnic communities, do share many things in common. Obviously, they have to a greater or lesser extent, a hearing loss, though, as we shall see, this is not central to defining their membership. They share a generally common experience of being specially educated because they had a hearing loss during childhood. Especially, as
children and as adults, Deaf people share a common, often frustrating, experience of having to interact with a hearing-speaking community which does not understand them, and where indeed, as we have seen, the old stereotypes of "deaf and dumb" are slow to die out.

They share a common experience of having to deal with the world as Deaf people. A good example up until very recently was how Deaf people were unable to use the telephone. Recently TTYs (Telephone Typewriters) have made this easier, but many Deaf people still do not have TTYs and must still rely on mail or travelling to obtain face-to-face communication. A. G. Bell's invention of the telephone, reputedly as a side-effect of wishing to invent a hearing aid, turned out to be a double-edged sword for Deaf people, both socially and vocationally. Even with the advent of TTYs Deaf people are denied access to many jobs where the ability to use the telephone is necessary. Hearing people can perhaps not understand the continued frustration of having to drive half-way across the city only to find that the other Deaf people you want to visit are out, perhaps even passed you on their way to visit you! Deaf people share many anecdotes and jokes about such happenings (although the national TTY relay service is beginning to eliminate many of these difficulties).

The physical world is full of sound that hearing people use unconsciously for all kinds of purposes. Deaf people find it impossible to access and/or have to make special arrangements about many aspects of sound in life that hearing people take for granted. Deaf people's homes are full of flashing lights in place of or to alert to sounds: door bells, telephone (TTY) bells, burglar alarms, alarm clocks (which may vibrate as well as flash), lights that flash when a baby cries or someone enters a swimming pool (activated by a noise-sensitive microphone) all may be found in Deaf people's homes.

Until very recently (and still to quite an extent) Deaf people were denied access to television and movies. (They still mostly are with movies until they come out on
subtitled videos. Deaf people often frequented “foreign” movie theatres because they had subtitled films.) “Close-captioned” television (where the caption appears on the screen only via a special decoder) and occasional sign language interpreting of television programs has also helped, but it is still a relatively small proportion of television programming that is captioned; even less is interpreted.

Travel can be difficult if only audio announcements are made of airline gate changes, flight or train arrival times, etc. and the difficulty of arranging an early morning “wakeup call” at a hotel is one that Deaf people have many stories about; my favourite is of an American Deaf friend who asked for an early call, thought it was understood and was rather cross, upon waking up too late to catch his flight, to find a “wakeup note” had been slipped under his door “because we knew you wouldn’t be able to hear us if we knocked”!!

Deaf people also share an understanding of their history and status as Deaf people. This is not yet well developed in Australia, although it is slowly being recorded (especially by my colleague, Breda Carty) both in print and on videotape. As with other histories of cultural and ethnic minority communities in Australia, Deaf History will give Deaf people a sense of their identity and status in the wider scope of Australian culture and history.

It seems likely that there was at least one deaf convict, probably more, though the evidence is equivocal. The first deaf convict may have arrived as early as the Second Fleet, in the *Lady Juliana*. Concrete evidence of the presence of Deaf people emerges at the time of the Gold Rushes in the 1850s. It appears that a number of Deaf men, in a few cases we know of accompanied by Deaf wives, migrated to Australia, like so many others, in search of gold. We know, for example, that a Deaf man, Frederick Rose, worked on the goldfields in Bendigo. Later he became the first Head Master of what was then called “The Victorian Deaf and Dumb Institution”, founded in Melbourne in 1861 and still going on a site nearby to the original one; now known as the Victorian College for the Deaf and
where I first started as a teacher of the deaf. Another Deaf man, Thomas Pattison, had become the Founder of the New South Wales Institution earlier in the same year. A few years later, the first Catholic School for the Deaf was started in Waratah, a suburb of Newcastle, by a Deaf Irish nun, Sr Mary Hogan. Other Deaf people, including Rose's wife, Elizabeth, were active as teachers and other staff in the schools throughout most of the Nineteenth Century. Unfortunately, changing attitudes towards signing and Deaf teachers meant that almost none were employed throughout the Twentieth Century until very recently when a number of Deaf graduates of Griffith University's program for training teachers of the deaf has been employed in several states.

In the Twentieth Century Deaf people have had an ambivalent relationship with their schools. They have often resented the domination of education of the deaf by hearing teachers, but at the same time, look back on their school days with considerable nostalgia, as being the first time when they could feel comfortable being Deaf and where older pupils and children from Deaf families could introduce them to Auslan and the Deaf Community.

The numbers of Deaf people in Australia increased by migration and deaf children being born or deafened by the febrile diseases so prevalent in the pre-antibiotic days ("Colonial fever" was commonly cited as a cause of deafness). Deaf adults soon began to meet regularly and the organisations in each state now known as the "Deaf Society" grew out of their informal meetings. Originally known as "Missions to the Deaf" they mostly had a religious orientation (broadly Protestant in flavour), but also fulfilled important social and welfare functions, as they still do today. All the "Missioners" and "Superintendents" of the Deaf Societies were hearing and until very recently Boards of Management of the Societies were dominated by hearing people. In recent years Deaf people have assumed more control over their own affairs, most Societies now have Deaf staff, and it seems only a matter of time before the first Deaf Chief Executive Officer of a Deaf Society is appointed. The Australian Association of the Deaf was established in 1986 to provide a unified
voice for Deaf people's views on matters that concern them. It now seems firmly established, but it had predecessors before the Second World War that had a sometimes stormy history of relationships with both the “Hearing Establishment” and other Deaf groups. “Deaf politics” can be just as heated as it is among similar voluntary and lobby groups of hearing people.

Sport has always been a strong cohesive element in the lives of Deaf people. Deaf clubs in numerous sports played regular fixtures against hearing clubs and interstate rivalries in football, cricket, tennis and other sports date back to “inter-Colonial” days when Deaf people would travel great distances to compete in Carnivals which were important social as well as sporting events. Many Deaf romances were initiated at these meetings. There is a World Federation of Deaf Sports which holds its own “Olympics” every four years and Australia has always been strongly represented at these Games, its Deaf athletes usually winning more medals than do its athletes at the regular Olympics! Individual Deaf people have become famous in some sports and have been selected in regular teams for national and international competitions. The Decathlete in Australia's 1992 Olympic Team, for example, was a deaf man, Dean Jones. The present President of the Comité Internationale des Sports Sourds is an Australian, John Lovett of Victoria.

Perhaps because of their relatively small numbers, their commonly shared experiences, their use of Auslan, and the difficulty that many of them have in communicating with hearing/speaking people and the lack of understanding that they often encounter there, Deaf people often congregate together in a very active social life. Family entertaining is frequent, events at Deaf societies' Clubrooms are well attended and the sporting events mentioned above are as much an excuse for a social outing as for sporting competition itself. Because their communication is very much face to face Deaf people need to meet to exchange news, gossip and events; the TTY is no substitute for getting together. Deaf people are notorious for “not being able to say ‘Goodbye’”. Long after an event is officially over, little groups of Deaf people will be lingering over “last-minute” arrangements and talk.
It therefore comes as no surprise that most Deaf people marry another Deaf person. For the intimate relationships of marriage fluent and easy communication in Auslan and an understanding of what it means to be Deaf usually means that one Deaf person will seek out another to marry. Occasionally a Deaf person may marry a hearing person who signs well, especially if they are a “native signer” child of a Deaf family. Marriage to a hearing person who does not sign well is often difficult and hearing partners report a feeling of being “left out” in otherwise all-Deaf occasions and vice versa.

Hearing children of Deaf marriages occupy a special place in the Deaf world (Davie & Carty, 1992). Most children of Deaf couples are hearing. They are coming to be known as “CODAs” (“Children of Deaf Adults”) and American, Australian and international associations of CODAs have been established. Such children mostly grow up bilingual in Auslan and English. They often report occasional difficulties in growing up in this “intermediary” world, especially if they are the first child in the family and have to take on an interpreting role for their parents; sometimes in quite stressful situations like accidents, medical emergencies or even funerals. A few quite reject the Deaf world, some remain occasionally part of it and their families, but others, because of their love for Deaf people, their understanding of the Deaf Community and their fluency in Auslan, take up roles of service in and to the Deaf Community as teachers, welfare workers or interpreters.

Only a little over 10% of deaf children have Deaf parents and grow up directly in the Deaf Community. In a few cases members of families have been Deaf through several generations. These families play a special role in the Deaf Community. They are often the repositories of folk lore and history of the Community and play an important role in passing it on to new generations of deaf children, especially those of hearing parents. This generation to generation transmission of Deaf culture has been particularly important because until recently in Australia Deaf history and folklore has only thus been able to be transmitted, not being written
down or videotaped, though such records are beginning to appear. Deaf children of Deaf families have an especially important role in transmitting Auslan to deaf children of hearing families whom they meet at school. We have noted that until recently no signing Deaf teachers have been available as role models and very few hearing teachers are fluent in Auslan, and anyway, Auslan was not used in school or around it by teachers. Deaf children of Deaf parents therefore inducted deaf children of hearing families into Auslan at school during recess, lunch time and on after school and weekend visits. It is perhaps the only situation in which any language is passed on to new learners by the same generation rather than the previous one - a quite unique happening. Because of their knowledge of the Deaf Community and its ways and also because Deaf people of Deaf families often have better English than Deaf people from hearing families, such Deaf people often play a leading role in the affairs of the Deaf Community.

I noted above that some hearing members of Deaf families who grow up in the Deaf Community assume roles of service to Deaf people, often as interpreters. Sign Language interpreters obviously play a central role in mediating between the Deaf Community and the hearing world. Many signing Deaf people either do not have the speaking/lipreading or listening abilities and/or the desire to be able to interact thus with the hearing community, and although the passing of notes will do in some situations, it is unwieldy and too time-consuming in face-to-face situations, and impossible in mass situations such as meetings, religious ceremonies, lectures, and so on. In some lectures “real-time captioning” is now available which throws up the words of speakers on a screen or a computer display, but most deaf people do not feel that these print displays have the dynamism, immediacy and “personality” of good interpreting. In most personal situations such as medical appointments or in legal matters where accuracy is crucial, Deaf people overwhelmingly prefer a personal Auslan interpreter. Even when they have good written and/or oral English skills, which many do, nearly all signing Deaf people prefer an Auslan interpreter in most situations.
As, in recent years, Australian Deaf people have become better educated and as travel has increased their knowledge of Deaf people in other countries, especially the United States, an increasing sense of identity as Deaf individuals and a sense of “Deaf Pride” in that identity has emerged. This is based largely on American models of Deaf Pride which, in turn, were based upon “Black Pride” and similar movements in the American civil rights movements which became prominent in the nineteen fifties. Quite conscious parallels have been drawn between the situations of Deaf people and Black people as marginalized communities whose rights, particularly to education, employment and justice, have been denied and whose language has been denigrated or even denied the status of being a “language” at all, as sign languages were for so long. The most spectacular result of this movement for Deaf people was the “Deaf President Now” movement at Gallaudet University which forced the resignation of a newly appointed hearing President of the University and the appointment of a Deaf man in her place. One manifestation of this sense of pride in feeling “Deaf” is the rejection of the label “hearing-impaired” or even “person with hearing impairment”. These labels, following models adopted as “politically correct” in other disability areas which were said to put the emphasis on the person rather than the disability, have been rejected by Deaf people who argue that their unique sense of community and identity makes them “Deaf people”. They do not consider themselves in any way “impaired” and resent what they often see as the implications of a slur in this label. They may well, as we have mentioned above, often be “handicapped” by the institutions of the hearing/speaking society in which they live and work, but they are not intrinsically “impaired”. Thus they reject one of the key aspects of modern disability theory and practice.

I mentioned earlier that ethnic communities have expressions of their culture that are unique to them. I shall later examine the most unique aspect of the Deaf Community, its language -- Auslan -- in detail, but there are a number of aspects of the expression of their culture that are also unique to Deaf people: some relatively trivial, others quite central to their lives.
One aspect that hearing people often find it difficult to come to terms with is Deaf people's attitude to hearing/deafness and speech. Hearing people are so used to hearing and it is so integral to their existence that their descriptions of it and metaphors for it inevitably paint a gloomy picture of life without it: "walls of silence", "lonely isolation" are so common that it comes as a surprise to hearing people that most Deaf people, especially those congenitally so and comfortable in the Deaf Community, feel quite at home with their deafness, and in almost all cases would reject the opportunity to have their hearing restored, or even enhanced. Most Deaf people stop using their hearing aids as soon as they leave school and the emotional reaction against cochlear implants expressed by Deaf people is probably fuelled by this attitude to their deafness. Most Deaf people don't know what their hearing loss is like or its expression as an audiogram; they regard it as irrelevant, whereas most hearing people are always curious about the shape and extent of a deaf person's hearing loss.

Most say, "I am a Deaf person. If I was to get my hearing back, then I wouldn't be me!"

Even odder for most hearing people is the attitude of most Deaf people to speech. Quite a few Deaf people have understandable speech which they can use if the occasion demands it, but some who can, refuse to do so as an expression of their identity as a Deaf person. Most who have no useful speech do not keenly feel its lack, except as an occasional frustration in needing to communicate with a hearing person. Like getting their hearing back, most Deaf people do not particularly wish to be able to speak, a position again that is incomprehensible to hearing people. Among themselves, signing Deaf people often regard the use of speech with sign as anathema, as being not part of Deaf culture. They reject speechlike lip movements as an accompaniment of signing, using only those lip movements that have significance in Auslan.
It will be clear from several of the aspects of Deaf life described above that the most significant aspect is their use of sign language (in Australia: Auslan). This is indeed so. I will examine Auslan (and sign languages generally) later. Here I need only to say that Auslan not only provides an easy and clear method of communication for Deaf people, with a fluency and ease of use that most find it difficult to achieve in English, but also, as their languages do for non-English-speaking communities, acts as the unique identifier and symbol of their membership of the Deaf community. Without fluent comprehension and production of Auslan, it is impossible to be accepted as a fully fledged member of the Deaf community. Auslan use, as it were, acts as a boundary, marking off those who are not members of the community from those who are. To a point “audiological status” (i.e., degree of hearing loss) is irrelevant to membership, as is whether the person can use speech for communication with hearing people or not. Thus deaf people can become Deaf. Even if educated completely orally, some deaf people turn to the Deaf community as adolescents or adults, learn Auslan and accept the norms and conventions of Deaf behaviour. They may always be recognized by born-Deaf people as coming late to Deafness, but if they accept those aspects of the Deaf community we have outlined, they can become accepted members of the community. A few hearing people even become members of the Deaf community! - again mostly by learning Auslan and immersing themselves in Deaf culture and norms of behaviour and attitudes. This is especially so for hearing children of Deaf families. Many feel at home in the Deaf community and spend a lot of their time in it socially even if not professionally involved in working with Deaf people.

How many people are in this sense members of the Deaf community? Recent research gives an answer to this question. Merv Hyde and I (1991) conducted a survey using the “snowball technique” where we asked a core group of Deaf people to provide the names of other people who they regarded as being “Deaf”. This group was asked for more names; those people asked for more, and so on, until much repetition of names began to recur, at which point we had collected 15,400 names. This is considered to be the number of Deaf members of the Deaf
community (child and adult) as we have described it above. It is estimated that about another 15,000 or so hearing people use Auslan regularly and a few of them, as we have noted, would be considered to be members of the Deaf community also.

Numbers are therefore not large, but Deaf people do represent a significant group of Australians whose aspirations to access and equity in all aspects of community life need to be understood and recognized as part of the mosaic of a multilingual/multicultural Australia: another expression of the human capacity to communicate and form a community under particularly difficult and hitherto marginalized conditions.

**Australian Sign Language**

I have argued above that sign languages are the cement that binds Deaf communities, both by identifying users as members and providing them with an easy and fluent method of communication that almost all of them find difficult or impossible to achieve in the spoken languages of the communities in which they live and work. Every stable Deaf community appears to have developed a sign language appropriate for the uses it wishes to make of it. Naturally, just as is true for spoken language, some sign languages are more sophisticated and have larger vocabularies than others because their Deaf users need to cope with a more complex and sophisticated society. Thus the sign languages in the so-called “developed” countries have larger and more technical vocabularies than do those in “developing” countries, especially those countries in which education of the deaf has not been long or well established or which still labour under diminishing oral regimes which are among the last relics of a colonial past; regimes which, ironically, may well have been abandoned or considerably weakened in their countries of origin. Like spoken languages too, there is no evidence that, despite differences in size and sophistication of vocabulary, any sign language has a more “primitive” grammar than that of any other, or that any sign language is incapable of meeting the
pragmatic demands that its users make upon it. All are equally adapted to the needs of their users.

Myths About Sign Language

A number of “myths” about sign languages were prevalent even in quite sophisticated circles until quite recently (and perhaps still are in the popular media). Most of them were widely accepted, even among Deaf people, and certainly by teachers of the deaf and psychologists who discussed deafness, and these myths were played upon by oral advocates of sign-free education. Among these myths were that there was just one sign language, deaf people from all over the world could easily communicate and understand one another; that sign languages were just a word-for-word coding of the local spoken language; that sign languages had no grammar, but were just emitted as strings of responses to the immediate situation, or that they had a grammar but it was a mangled or shorthand version of the grammar of the local spoken language; that signs were essentially “iconic”, mimicking one or more features of the objects they were said to represent; and that (sometimes because they were iconic) they were “concrete” and incapable of expressing abstract ideas and so tied to the here and now. We will examine each of these and demonstrate that they are all mistaken.

It comes as a surprise to many people that sign languages are as different from one another as spoken languages are. Some who would not be advocates of a universal spoken language even express some disappointment that there is not a “universal sign language”.

People are even more surprised to find out that the sign languages of the United States and Britain/Australasia are mutually incomprehensible even though we (more or less!) speak the same English language. Auslan (and New Zealand Sign Language) are related to British Sign Language (BSL) in the same way that Australasian spoken English is: mutually understandable, but somewhat different in
vocabulary and usage of the "same" word and occasionally obscure to one another if people drop into vernacular or idiomatic Australianisms or Britishisms. On the other hand, American Sign Language (ASL) is not understood by Australian Deaf people because ASL is descended not from BSL but from "LSF" ("Langue de Signes Francaise"). LSF was brought to America and grafted onto a (probably) existing "proto-ASL" in the nineteenth century by Laurent Clerc, a Deaf Frenchman who was brought to America to open the first school for the deaf. ASL is therefore heavily LSF influenced, though it has moved further from its LSF origins than Auslan has from BSL. Therefore Auslan and ASL signers no more readily understand one another than would an Auslan and a Swedish Sign Language user. Auslan has in recent years borrowed quite a few signs from ASL, but not enough to make the languages mutually understandable.

A set of related myths claim that sign languages are not independent of the local spoken language, but are just a word-for-word coding of that spoken language or that they have no grammar at all, or, if they do, their grammars are just a mangled "Pidgin English" or shorthand (pun intended!) version of the spoken language around them. None of these propositions is true. As we have seen, for example, Auslan and ASL are not mutually comprehensible, so they could not be any coding of the grammar of the essentially similar English spoken around them. In fact, the grammars of sign languages often bear little relationship to that of the language spoken in their native country. I shall look at the grammar of sign language in detail in a moment; suffice it for the present to say that the word order of a sign language is often different to that of the spoken language around it, that its ways of marking, say, plurality or tense may be quite different to the way the local spoken language does, and so forth. Most grammatical devices for such functions found in sign languages will be found in a spoken language somewhere in the world, but not necessarily the local spoken language.

Even at the vocabulary level, signs usually do not just code the local spoken language. In Auslan, for example, there are two different signs for the one English
word “attend”; one for the sense of “attend to me (look at me)” and one for the “attend”, “(be present at) an event”, meaning, e.g., attend a football match. On the other hand, there is only one sign in Auslan for the two English words “lend” and “borrow”; whether the meaning is “lend” or “borrow” is indicated by the direction of movement of the “pronouns” used with the sign; one direction is “lend”, the other “borrow”; the full semantic distinctions present in English are there in Auslan, but conveyed in a different way.

Sign languages do have grammars, but they are not versions of those of spoken language around them, somehow picked up by Deaf people and, in a mangled version, used in the sign language. Because they have a grammar, sign languages are therefore not just a “stimulus bound” immediate response to the situation of the signer either. If they were, word order would vary freely, but this is not the case. Word order is constrained in sign language just as it is in spoken languages. Some sign sentences are recognized as “wrong” by signers and some as “correct”, so word order is not free, and it is a grammar that imposes these constraints upon what is and is not acceptable in a given sign language.

A major myth that has been very persistent is that sign languages are very “iconic” - more so than spoken languages, i.e., that signs represent quite closely the objects they represent, the sign for “tree” mimics the shape of a tree, that for “chair” the shape of a chair, and so on. It probably is true that because of the very nature of sign languages, they are more iconic than spoken languages, but a number of things need to be said about sign language iconicity.

One is that while a sign may be iconic (for example, the Auslan sign for “house” mimics the shape of a simple gable roofed house and thus can be seen to be iconic), in use that sign may often become quite abstract in the sense that a signer will use that sign for “house” even when the house being referred to has a flat roof, or, as in the case of one little deaf girl, when her “house” (for which she used the standard gable-like sign) was on an upper floor of a high-rise block! Again, if sign
languages were entirely iconic, they would likely use the same sign, but the Thai Sign Language sign for “house” is like the Auslan sign for “eat”. Different aspects of the object can also be chosen to be the “icon”. The sign for tree in Japanese Sign Language uses the trunk, whereas ASL emphasizes the foliage, and Auslan both the foliage and the trunk!

Some signs may be iconic, but many are not, or natural processes of change have made their iconicity very obscure. This latter is well exemplified by the Victorian Auslan dialect sign for “water” which consists of drawing the crooked index finger rapidly up and down a couple of times near the corner of the mouth. It is said that its origin comes from the early days of the Victorian School when the children would drink from a tap at a pump. Water would often trickle out of their mouths as they stooped to drink and they would wipe it away with a finger! Users or observers of the sign today would be hard put to explain any “iconicity” in the sign.

This non-iconicity is made even more so when signs are used in sentences in discourse. When viewing sign discourse, non-signers can make about as much sense out of them as they could in listening to a spoken language they do not understand. A few signs may be iconic, but sign language in use is not.

Associated with the view that sign languages are iconic has been the notion that signs are “concrete” - tied to present objects and events and hence the here and now. Those who believed signs to be concrete in this sense went on to argue that such concreteness would be reflected in the thinking and behaviour of deaf people exposed to signing, and hence advocated an oral-only approach. As late as 1970, oral advocates could say that “it is generally agreed that sign language is bound to the concrete and is rather limited with respect to abstraction, humour and subtleties such as figures of speech”. Such a position could only be adopted by someone who did not know a sign language. In fact, sign languages have available to them the full range of figurative and abstract mechanisms of language: metaphor, irony, idiom, humour, poetry, puns and so on. Punning and “sign blending” are frequently used
in sign languages via making two signs simultaneously (one on each hand), “holding” one sign on one hand while making another with the other, and substituting one “prime element” of a sign for another; for example, making the sign for UNDERSTAND with the little finger instead of the normal index finger to form the novel meaning “understand a little”. Research has also shown that there are “art form” signs where some parameters of signs are elided or emphasized for special effects in drama and (especially) poetry. Poetry in sign is always not just “translation” from English into a given sign language. Poetry in sign language makes use of the unique characteristics of sign languages' utilization of space and movement to produce effects which are genuinely poetic and not dependent upon effects borrowed from spoken poetry. These effects are virtually impossible to reproduce in print and need to be seen live or on videotape to realize their effects.

Are Sign Languages “True Languages”?

The above myths about sign languages are easily enough disposed of, even though they may be still more widespread in the popular media and the community than one might wish. This disposition is a rather “negative defence” of sign languages, however, and we can make much more positive statements about their status than the above. This is due to the fact that a great deal of research has been done into the characteristics of sign languages by linguists and psychologists over the last thirty years or so, beginning with the pioneering work of William Stokoe at Gallaudet University in the early 1960s. Both hearing and Deaf people have made valuable contributions to this understanding.

One way to gain an understanding of this new knowledge is to ask the question, “what makes 'a language'? What criteria do a particular aspect of human behaviour need to meet in order to be called 'a language'?" And then, “Do sign languages meet these criteria?” A number of criteria of what constitutes a language have been proposed over the years, Charles Hockett's (1960) being one of the best known. “Languages” in this sense are contrasted with the more limited “communication
systems" of animals and some insects. Edward Klima and Ursula Bellugi (1976) provided another orientation to "what makes a language?". Combined, these criteria can be said to include "rapid fading", i.e., the signal is not permanent, but rapidly disappears once produced, "broadcast transmission and directional reception", anyone within range of the language signal can receive it and the source of the signal can be located by "direction finding". Sign languages easily meet these criteria; the sign, as does the spoken word, disappears virtually immediately upon its production and anyone who can see the signer can receive the signal and it can be located by visual direction finding as speech is by auditory means.

Another major criterion for Hockett is "arbitrariness"; there is no necessary connection between the sound of a word and its meaning. His examples are that the word "salt" is neither salty nor granular, as is its object, "dog" is not in any way "canine" and "whale" is a small word for a very large object and "microorganism" a long word for a very small object. We have seen that in isolation a few signs are not arbitrary; they are somewhat iconic of their objects. However, this iconicity is rare and disappears in communicative use, so the connection between almost all signs and their objects are indeed arbitrary, the Auslan signs for "boy" and "girl", for example, do not look at all like boys or girls.

One of the most important criteria for a set of behaviours being a language is its "productivity". In Hockett's words, this is "the capacity to say things that have never been said or heard before and yet be understood by other speakers of the language". This capacity distinguishes human languages from animal signalling systems. The flashing white tail of the rabbit looks the same every time, it conveys the same meaning every time and it cannot be combined with other signals to produce novel meanings. With human languages, on the other hand, "one can coin new utterances by putting together pieces familiar from old utterances [words or signs], assembling them by patterns of arrangement [grammars] also familiar in old utterances (Hockett, 1960)". Sign languages certainly are capable of this; signers can combine signs into novel utterances never produced before, but which will be
understood by other signers of that particular language, just as speakers can with words. Oddly perhaps, Hockett does not mention one criterion for a language that would now be widely accepted and which is mentioned by Klima and Bellugi, “well-formedness”. This means that for a user of a language, not any string of words will do. Some sentences, for us as users of English, are “correct”, i.e., they conform to the rules of English, whereas others are, in the common parlance, “bad grammar”, they break one or more rules of the grammar of English. I am not here speaking of “non-Standard” usages such as “ain’t” and “gunna” and so forth, or unacceptably vulgar or otherwise taboo utterances, but of our awareness that sentences like “I saw me in the mirror” break a rule of English that says that a reflexive pronoun (“myself”) must be used where “me” is in that kind of sentence in English. Signers are similarly aware of the breaking of the rules of grammar of their sign language. Equally for them, not any string of signs will do; to be a “good sentence” strings of signs must also conform to certain criteria, they must obey the grammar of that sign language.

Another of Hockett’s criteria is “traditional” or “extragenetic transmission”. By this he means that although humans appear to have a genetically programmed capacity to learn a language, which language they learn is not genetically programmed, but is handed on by parents to their offspring in each generation. This is in contradistinction to animal communicative behaviour which is identical across the species and does not appear to be “taught” to offspring, being identical in each generation and thus is instinctive behaviour which must be genetically programmed, even if it requires a particular set of environmental conditions to induce it. Sign language meets this criterion. Deaf children are not, despite some popular belief to the contrary, “automatically” able to use sign language. They have to be “taught” learn it, just as hearing children learn their spoken language. Sign languages may be easier for deaf children to learn than spoken ones, but nevertheless, they are not “natural” to them in any genetic sense. They have to learn them; in the case of deaf children of Deaf parents in the “natural” way from
their parents, but uniquely, in the case of deaf children from hearing families, as we noted above, from their peers and other children at school.

Hockett's final criterion is what he calls "duality of patterning". This is similar to Klima and Bellugi's notion of a "hierarchically organized syntax". Basically, languages are "layered". The meaning-bearing units (morphemes) are constructed from essentially meaningless elements (sounds; more correctly "phonemes"); "b" and "p" are meaningless in themselves, yet they provide meaning, in fact contrastive meaning, when they occur in the words "bin" and "pin". All words in any language are built up thus; meaning at the lexical level is constructed by combinations of meaningless elements. Just as there are rules for "goodness" of grammar at the sentence level, so also at the lexical level. We all, as speakers of English, recognize that "bin" is an acceptable ("correct") combination of sounds in English, but that "bfin" is not. There are thus several layers to the hierarchy, phonemes combine to form morphemes, morphemes can be a word on their own ("cat") or can combine with others ("cat-s") to form other words ("type-write-er") which in turn combine to form good or bad sentences according to syntactic rules, and sentences can combine to form "text" or "discourse". All these phenomena can be found in sign languages. Certain hand shapes and movements (sometimes called "cheremes") which are meaningless in themselves can be combined to form a sign, signs can be combined to form sentences and sign sentences can be used to construct discourse in sign. Signers can recognize good and ill-formed occurrences at all these levels. Some handshape/movement combinations are not acceptable, some sign sequences in sentences are not acceptable, and so on up to sign discourse. Like most speakers, most signers may not know why a given phenomenon is "wrong" or be able to explain why, but they do recognize "wrongness" when they see it.

All these facets of sign language use are powerful evidence for declaring them to be "true languages". In all ways (bar one) that hearing-speaking people use spoken languages Deaf people use sign languages. Sign languages display a hierarchical structure at the morpheme, word (sign), sentence and discourse levels as spoken
languages do, enabling the creative generation of communicative messages just as spoken languages do — messages which, though novel combinations of elements in ways which may never have been seen before by the viewer, can still be understood. Sign languages are abstract, using idioms, puns and artistry to give aesthetic pleasure to their users and to talk about the “not here and now”. Thus they are not merely communication systems such as are used by some animals, but are indeed “true languages”.

In only one way do sign languages not meet Hockett’s criteria, and they do not do that in a way that in fact has forced a change to that criterion. I refer to “vocal-auditory” channel use as being a criterion for a system to be designated a language. In 1960 when Hockett wrote his paper, the sign language research we have referred to was in its infancy and Hockett could not have been aware of its implications. Were he writing today he would certainly need to add “or manual-visual channel” to these criteria because the evidence we have surveyed above does show that the manual-visual sign languages are indeed languages and their different mode of transmission and reception does not disqualify them from being such.

The Characteristics of Sign Languages

Having surveyed the evidence for sign languages being languages, I now want to look at their characteristics. I will look at a number of aspects of sign languages that consolidate the arguments I have made above, while at the same time displaying what sign languages are like.

The linguistics of sign languages

How are signs formed? I noted above that one of the distinguishing characteristics of languages that sign languages share is “layeredness”, they consist of hierarchies of elements which are creatively combined according to sets of rules to produce elements that can then be combined into one/s at higher level: from phoneme to
morpheme to word to sentence to discourse. I will discuss these phenomena in sign languages in turn.

The “lowest” level of linguistic analysis consists of phonemes, elements of sound that are meaningless in themselves, but which, when combined according to certain rules, produce meaningful elements at the next level — morphemes. (I will adopt the usual practice of calling these elements “phonemes” instead of the more technically correct “chere me”, despite the former’s derivation from “sound” — a little odd in this context!) I will follow here what Ronnie Wilbur has called “a traditional” approach to our description of the phonology of sign language.

Handshapes in several sign languages have now been well described. Johnston (1989) has described 31 handshapes for Auslan with a number of similarly shaped “variants” for some, bringing the total to 63.

Shapes can be made with either hand dominating (there are left-handed and right-handed signers). Sometimes the shape is only on one hand (WHO); sometimes the shape is the same on both hands (BOOK) and sometimes there is a different shape on each hand (SICK).

There are two aspects of Location: the area where a sign is normally made (when it does not contact the body) or its point of contact with the body. It is common to speak of the “signing space”, the area from the top of the head to just below the waist and extending for a few inches on either side of the body. Johnston says there are seventeen major contact points on the body for Auslan.

Movement is another obvious “prime” of sign formation. Movement almost always occurs within the signing space, only occasionally moving out of it for rhetorical or artistic purposes. Movement can be vertical, horizontal, diagonal or circular in the signing space, occasionally it can combine two or more of those directions. Sometimes movement can be just of the lower arm/s or of the hand/s
below the wrist or it can be of one or more of the fingers. Sometimes whole or lower arm movement can be combined with wrist/hand movement and/or finger movements to form a sign. Movement is also one of the parameters of sign that express “suprasegmental” aspects of the message. The speed, tension, staccato, etc. nature of the sign movement tells much about the emphasis or force of the message and so of the state of mind and intent of the signer.

**Orientation** is sometimes the only prime which distinguishes one sign from another. Two aspects of orientation are distinguished: that of the whole hand/s, and of the palm/s. Hands can be vertical, or with palm down or up and the whole hand in any of those orientations can point outwards from the signer or inwards towards him or her, up or down, in towards the midline of the body or outwards from the midline (this last is rare).

Other aspects of sign formation and use have been summarized by Johnston (1989) under the heading **Expression.** These are mostly non-manual aspects of signing and include such things as facial expression, movement of some parts of the face (especially brow, eyebrows and mouth), speed and “tension” of hand/arm movement, certain aspects of body pose, and some others. As Johnston and other commentators point out, it is in this aspect of signing that phonology begins to merge with syntax. Several of these expressive aspects do not necessarily apply only to one sign, but may cover a whole sign phrase or sentence. Thus certain eyebrow movements over a whole phrase distinguish a “Yes-No Question” (“Did you go home yesterday?”) from a “Wh Question” (one that begins with a wh-word, “who, when, where ...” etc.). Sometimes facial expression is all that distinguishes one sign from another, especially when there are positive-negative pairs: all that distinguishes “like” from “dislike”, for example, is the different facial expression that accompanies each.

We must be careful not to decide that just because English does not “do it this way”, a given phenomenon is non-linguistic. As we have seen, and other examples will be
given later, almost every phenomenon that some critics of sign languages' status as "languages" have believed to be "non-linguistic" can be found in one or more of the world's spoken languages. Gregory and Miles, in "Issues in Deafness" (19) cite a good example from Harris of how "different" a language can be if we view it only from an English perspective.

Most Europeans would be puzzled to know how to reply if asked the question "What is the word in your language for what people say on Thursdays?" or "What do you call the words spoken at night?" or "What do you call talk that took place a year ago?" But these questions would make perfectly good sense to a Mayan Indian of Tenejapa, whose language, Txeltal, provides commonly used designations for all of these. It is not that the European lacks the linguistic resources to make up a translation such as "Thursday talk" or "night words"; but rather that he would be at a loss to understand the point of drawing such distinctions. It is not part of his concept of a language that a language should provide you with Thursday talk or night words, and if it does not do that then it need provide no corresponding metalinguistic expressions either.

Another favourite example of mine is the belief of English speakers that it is "natural" or even "right", if one is writing or making a telephone call to a friend and enquiring about the weather, to ask "How's the weather over there?" — one wishes to know how the weather is where the friend is. If, on the other hand, one was a writer or speaker of Malagasy, the language of Madagascar, one would ask, "How's the weather over here?" (i.e., where the recipient is). It makes as much sense to ask about the weather from the position of the recipient as the questioner! The English way is not the only — or even necessarily the "best" way and the fact that sign languages do not do something the same way as English does, does not make them any less "language-like".
Other examples of “doing it differently” can be found in sign language morphology. Regular nouns in English add “s” or “es” to form the plural. Auslan doesn’t use this technique. The Auslan rules for pluralisation are complex and depend upon the kind of sign the noun is, but one way is “reduplication”: the sign is repeated one or more times. Again, critics of sign language criticized “not adding ‘s’ to form the plural” as “bad grammar”, but this really is only saying that Auslan (or ASL or BSL, etc.) is not English, because other languages use reduplication to form the plural, Indonesian for example. In Indonesian, one child is “anak”, more than one is “anak anak”, one chicken is “ayam”, more than one “ayam ayam” and so on — reduplication is one regular and “correct” process in Indonesian for forming the plural of nouns and just as this is acceptable in “good Indonesian”, so it is in “good Auslan”.

Similar differences from English occur in the marking of time on verbs. Auslan and other sign languages do not inflect verbs for tense, even in the comparatively simple way English does for “past” for example, by adding “ed” to regular verbs. Again, critics decried this as “bad grammar”, but again they really were only saying “not English”. The marking of time and tense is in fact more complex in sign languages than in English, and, again, uses linguistic devices that occur in languages other than English. Like Indonesian again, for example, sign languages often do not inflect their verb but specify the time by an adverb at the beginning of a piece of discourse. “Yesterday, last week, once upon a time, a long time ago” and such adverbs or adverbial phrases set the time and the following verbs need not be marked for time. Even over several sentences, the influence of the time adverb sets time for the events described and that time is taken not to change until another adverb or adverbial phrase specifies change. Frequently the sign often glossed as “finish” is used as a past time marker in Auslan and again the actual verb is not itself marked. “Finish” in this sense has the citation form for the sign for “finish” (i.e., “end”), but here it really is functioning as a “past tense morpheme” and should perhaps be better expressed as “ED” when translated into English. Certainly good interpreting would translate “FINISH BOY PUSH GIRL” as “The boy pushed the
girl”. The whole matter of time and tense is very complex in most sign languages and as I mentioned above they in fact have a more complex way of marking time than English does.

It is in syntax that the non-manual elements of sign languages become most apparent. I noted above that facial expression, facial movements, head and shoulder movement (among others) are an integral part of sign languages. This is so because they are used to accompany signs to modify their meaning in systematic ways. Thus, for example, the actual signs and their order can be the same in positive ("John likes Mary") and negative sentences ("John doesn't like Mary"), but the negative sentence will differ from the positive under certain conditions only by a headshake to indicate the negative. Similarly, under some fairly frequent circumstances there is no particular order for some kinds of questions. English questions are distinguished from indicative sentences by their word order ("Is John sick?" vs "John is sick.") but in sign languages this difference is frequently carried only by facial movement; the sign order would be "John sick" in both cases, but for the indicative sentence the face would be relatively "open" and "unmarked", whereas for the question (in this case a "Yes-No Question") the eyebrows are raised, the eyes opened somewhat wider and the head tilted a little forward to indicate that the sentence is a question, not a statement. In "wh-Questions" (beginning with "where, who, what", etc.) the eyebrows would be lowered somewhat to convey the force of the question. The wh-word would be included in the question in that case also. Facial movement and head-shake can be combined to form a negative Yes-No Question, e.g., "Don't you believe that?" Other facial expressions are used in many ways with syntactic force, e.g., incredulity ("You don't really believe that!?"), conditionality (i.e., with sentences containing "if") and other forms of subordination of a clause within a sentence. In some cases, "subordination" of a clause can also be literally that, the subordinate clause is signed lower in the signing space than the main clause. With conditional sentences, different facial movements can be used to convey very subtle information, e.g.,
whether the signer believes the state of affairs in the conditional sentence to be true or not.

In these cases with facial expression and movement expressing question type, incredulity, negation and so forth, the facial expression or eyebrow movement may be "held" over most or all of the sign sentence. Thus these facial expressions and movements are very similar to the suprasegmentals of spoken languages. They are used, for example, to provide something similar to an "intonation contour" in speech.

It should now be evident from this brief survey of the linguistics of sign languages that they are quite capable of expressing all the communicative needs of their users, albeit often using grammatical devices that appear strange to anyone who knows only English. To express communicative functions sign language uses a wide variety of linguistic devices, a few of which are unique because of their expression in a visual-manual rather than an auditory-oral mode, but most of which are analogues in this latter mode of devices that are used by one or more spoken languages of the world. Sign languages therefore truly are "languages" — unique solutions to the communicative demands of people living out a particular realisation of "the human condition".

The Psycholinguistics of Sign Languages

So far I have been describing sign languages as abstract linguistic systems. I now will move on to describing sign languages in use: the psychology and sociology of signing. Among the phenomena I will examine will be sign language acquisition (how do children and adults learn sign language), how is "information" transmitted in sign language and at what rate, the "psychological structure" of sign languages (phrase and clause boundaries, etc.), how sign language is processed by senders and receivers, memory for signs, the neurolinguistics of sign use, "nativesness" in sign language use, dialects, accents and other "sociolinguistic" aspects of sign language.
A good deal of research has been done on the processing of sign language, both for production and reception. Again, many studies of sign language paralleled those that were being conducted into spoken languages at the same time. There was, in the 1970s, for example, considerable interest and research into the “psychological reality” of sentence, clause and phrase boundaries. Research on sign language (mostly ASL) showed that signers did insert brief pauses at these natural syntactic boundaries between and within sentences. The longest pauses (still only milliseconds) were between sentences, next longest between clauses, with very brief ones at the boundaries of intra-clause phrases. These results were taken to demonstrate a point I made before in describing the abstract syntax of sign, that sign languages are “hierarchically layered”, in this case at the syntactic level, just as spoken languages are. Just like spoken ones, sign sentences are not just strings of words; they are organized by internal constituent structures at the clause, phrase, and of course, word level.

A particularly interesting aspect of this area of research is that signed and spoken languages basically both have the same “information transmission rate” in terms of number of propositions transmitted per unit of time. American researchers found that when speakers and signers were asked to retell a story they used the same number of propositions, reproduced the same semantic content and even took about the same amount of time to retell their stories. There were differences between the speakers and the signers. Speakers used 50% more words than signers did signs to tell the stories (because English syntax uses more redundant markers than sign), but about the same amount of time was taken by each because words take less time to produce than signs — there would seem therefore to be a “trade-off” between word/sign length and efficiency of syntax for transmission, perhaps because there may be some optimum neuropsychological basis for the transmission of information.
Research with speakers, as well as our own experience in conversation, indicates that we rarely speak over one another. This is because information is very difficult to process from two or more competing sources, so we have developed a now well-documented set of procedures among speakers for “taking turns”. Naive speakers are often not aware of it, but we all use markers that tell a partner that we have ended a turn, that we relinquish the floor to another speaker, that we want another turn and so forth. In speech these are signalled by falling tones near the end of a sentence and by facial movements and posture, etc. In signs they are signalled by dropping or assuming eye contact or by the signing hands assuming particular positions that are known to the receiver to signal an anticipation of wanting a turn, of wanting to interrupt, of yielding the next turn to another, and so on. Again, sign languages in principle operate just like spoken language.

A quite fascinating aspect of this kind of research is the finding that certain aspects of behaviour operate differently in speech and sign. Breathing is one example. It is quite abnormal for a speaker to breathe in the middle of a word, or even in the middle of a phrase, but there is not this relationship between breathing and signing. Breathing is likely to occur at any point in the sign stream. On the other hand, speakers are free to blink at any point, blinks do not have syntactic or semantic force in most speaking situations. However, they do in signing. It would appear that blinks signal phrase boundaries in signing as they only occur at such points, again indicating the intactness of phrase structure in sign sentences and its psychological reality in sign use.

Other phenomena which have been demonstrated in hearing speakers' use of spoken language have also been found in signers' use of sign. When asked to recall lists of words, for example, hearing speakers tend to make errors based upon the phonological characteristics of words: “tea” might be recalled as “key” because they sound the same. Signers do the same, but the errors are based upon the formational characteristics of the signs — one of the ones we described above. In ASL, for example, TEA might be recalled as VOTE because these two signs share the same
handshape, differing only in movement; similarly, hearing subjects confuse "noon" and "noun" on the basis of phonological similarity, but deaf ones respond with TREE to NOON because of formational similarities in the two signs. As will not be surprising, researchers have found that sign confusions in recall can arise from mistakes in any of the formational characteristics previously described: handshape, place of formation, movement, etc.

Many other aspects of spoken language use have been observed in signers. There is a "tip of the finger phenomenon" parallel to the "tip of the tongue phenomenon" that we are all familiar with when we "know we know" a word and it's "just there", but we can't come up with it. The same thing happens to signers, and it's equally frustrating, and like speakers, signers eventually do "come up with" the word, especially if they can successfully divert their attention to another topic. "Spoonerisms" ("You will leave by the town drain"), also occur in signing, and like spoken Spoonerisms, are not haphazard in their formation. Just as Spoonerisms in speech are formed by misplacement of phonemes, so also sign Spoonerisms are made by misplacement of the formational elements of handshape, location and movement. Puns are also formed by signers in the same way as speakers, again by artful manipulation of these same parameters.

One of the most impressive demonstrations of the "languagelessness" of sign languages comes from research into the cerebral localization of sign. General neuropsychological research indicates that the brain hemispheres are specialized: in right-handed adults the left side of the brain is specialized for language processing and the right side for other tasks, especially visual-spatial processing. If the critics of sign were correct, and sign was not a language, one would hypothesize that because of its peculiarly visual-spatial nature, the processing of signs would occur in the right cerebral hemisphere. Most impressively, the opposite is the case: signing is processed in the left, the "language" hemisphere! Both through experimental research and through examination of signers who have aphasia because of brain damage which affects their signing in characteristic ways, it has
been shown that signing is indeed lateralized in the brain like spoken language and not like nonlinguistic spatial-visual material; striking confirmation of the "languageness" of sign language.

An integral part of sign language is fingerspelling, where there is a "sign" for every letter of the alphabet: two-handed in Britain and Australasia, one-handed in North America and most European countries (there do not seem to be any benefits of either system over the other). In sign languages fingerspelling is typically used for proper nouns and for words for which there is no sign, increasing in frequency as the sign language becomes more "English-like", as we noted in PSE above. In ASL particularly, but also in Signed English, one-handed fingerspelling is used to create lexical items by the process known as "initialization", where the first letter of a written English word is used with an acceptable sign movement and location to create a "sign". The ASL signs for "culture" and "semester" (which have been borrowed into Auslan) are also formed in this way. There are relatively fewer Auslan signs formed by initialization, probably because two-handed fingerspelling does not so readily lend itself to this process: ANSWER and GOLD are a couple of examples where the sign is formed from the first letter of the word with a movement added.

**Australian Sign Language and the Australian Deaf Community**

I have mentioned Australian Sign Language regularly above and frequently used its characteristics as examples of the way sign languages work. It is time to examine it more closely. In recent years it has come to be known as "Auslan". Trevor Johnston popularized this term's use in his *Auslan Dictionary* (1989), it has its own sign and its use is now widespread. (I had suggested "Strinesign", but it did not catch on!) Auslan is now frequently enough used that it appears in the latest edition of the *Macquarie Dictionary* as "The sign language of Australian deaf people".
Auslan may be considered a descendent dialect of BSL with admixtures of Scottish Sign Language, a little Irish Sign Language (from the Catholic schools; before they became purely oral, they used ISL) and in the last ten years or so, considerable influence from ASL, both by conscious borrowing (sometimes via Australasian Signed English) and by natural borrowing as Australian Deaf people who have visited America and/or studied there (especially at Gallaudet University) have introduced ASL signs into the Australian Deaf Community. BSL however, is still the major influence. One Deaf BSL user after an extended period in Australia estimated that the "lexical overlap" between BSL and Auslan is 80%, though no formal studies have yet been done.

It is possible that BSL was brought to Australia quite early, but the first real record we have of it is from the 1850s when British Deaf people appear to have migrated, like so many others, in search of gold. Their presence coincided with appeals to start education for deaf children of the colonies and schools for the deaf were opened within a month of one another in 1860, first in Sydney and then in Melbourne. Both were founded by Deaf men and it would appear that the schools used signing, though whether this was BSL or Signed English or PSE is not clear. The Sydney school was founded by a Deaf man, Thomas Pattison, who had been educated at Donaldson's School for the Deaf in Edinburgh and brought the Scots variant of BSL with him and used it in the school. F.J. Rose, the founder of the Victorian school, had been educated at the Royal School for the Deaf, Margate and brought "southern dialect" BSL there, the two establishing slight differences between the states that persist to this day (sometimes with embarrassing/amusing results; e.g., the older Victorian sign for PURPLE is in Queensland the sign for PROSTITUTE!) Some signs have changed because hearing people's gestures change. The former Victorian sign for LAZY, for example, has dropped out of use in favour of the New South Wales one, as the Victorian sign used the middle finger in a movement that is now considered quite vulgar! It is likely that natural processes caused Auslan to slowly diverge from BSL quite early on. We noted the emergence of a seemingly unique Melbourne sign for WATER because of the
physical act of drinking that occurred at the Victorian school and this sign was also used in Melbourne for TOILET. Research has not been done to determine which signs might be uniquely Australian, but an analysis would be of great interest.

As mentioned above, Irish Sign Language was brought to Australia and used in the Catholic schools, from the 1870s in the case of the girls' school at Rosary Convent in Waratah, a suburb of Newcastle, and the boys' school, St Gabriel's, run by the Christian Brothers at Castle Hill, an outer Sydney suburb. The founder of Rosary Convent was also Deaf, an Irish Dominican nun, Sr Mary Hogan, who had been educated at Cabra, the Dominican School for the Deaf in Dublin. It is not clear what influence Irish Sign Language might have had on the development of Auslan, but presumably there are some Irish signs in its lexicon. Few users of the Irish Sign Language in Australia in any full way are still alive as the Catholic schools abandoned the use of signing fifty years ago.

Not much linguistic or psycholinguistic research has been done on Auslan. A major event was the publication of Trevor Johnston's Dictionary in 1989. This provides for the first time a comprehensive listing of the signs of Auslan current at that time and provides for the first time an outline of the grammar of Auslan, various aspects of which we have used in examples above. Broadly speaking, it can be said that Auslan morphology uses the same principles for sign formation that other sign languages use, with the parameters of handshape, movement, location and orientation being also found in Auslan. Similarly, the general principles of facial movement, expression, body movement, etc. that we described above for syntactic structuring in sign languages also occur in Auslan, though their detailed realization does, of course, have some unique characteristics in Auslan.

Something is known of the Auslan-using Deaf Community. Like most Australians, Deaf people are urban dwellers. There are about 15,500 of them. About half live in Sydney and Melbourne. They are strongly organized around the Deaf Societies in each state where they are playing an increasingly important role in their own
administration and governance. A number of national organizations for sporting and social life exist, a vigorous theatre of the Deaf is active in some places and the Australian Association of the Deaf is becoming increasingly influential in lobbying and policy development on behalf of Deaf people.

Auslan is recognized in official government policy documents as a “Community Language Other Than English (CLOTE)”. We noted the statement of The Australian Language and Literacy Policy in this regard above. Language services are becoming increasingly available, though high quality interpreting services are still in very short supply in most places. Auslan classes are available in many centres and numbers of Deaf people are being trained as teachers of Auslan. A few Deaf teachers are being trained and are working in schools and classes for the deaf.

All signs (pun intended!) at the moment point to the existence of a flourishing Deaf Community, very aware of its members’ needs and aspirations; one which is moving forward to demonstrate to the Australian Community that in the words of one of their slogans, “Deaf People Can”.

Conclusion

It seems strange to many that the Deaf community is opposed to the use of cochlear implants (“Bionic ears”) with prelinguistically deaf children. Surely a technology that promises even partial restoration of hearing for children who cannot benefit from conventional hearing aids should be welcome?

Deaf spokespersons are also opposed to genetic manipulation to prevent hereditary deafness (Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan, 1996). Lane et al. quote the National Institute of Health’s National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders’ Strategic Plan, “The insertion of genetic material into cells to prevent or ameliorate hereditary hearing impairment may soon become a possible treatment option (p. 385)”. Lane et al. claim that a clearer example of the continuation of a
medical model could not be found: "this human variation is a disease and should be avoided; society’s interest in avoiding it outweighs any individual or groups desire to continue it; ... the competent authority in these matters is medical authority (p. 384"). Such attitudes, "reveal underlying and conflicting constructions of Deaf people (p. 386)".

However, in the light of the social definition of deafness outlined above it should come as no surprise that Deaf community spokespersons have opposed child implantation and genetic engineering on the grounds that they continue the medical model of deafness as a condition to be cured, denigrating the status of the Deaf community and its members and that they would, if successful, "wipe out" the Deaf community, an outcome that they do not consider necessary or desirable (Lane et al., 1996).

Some commentators do consider it desirable. Mezenick is an American researcher on cochlear implants: for him, "the answer is clear: Deafness is a medical problem that ought to be cured”. "The simple fact is that if the culture could be wiped out, it would be a good thing to wipe out (in Clay, 1997, p. 29)".

I do not believe that present cochlear implants threaten the existence of the Deaf community: at best they provide profoundly deaf children with some access to speech, but the big majority of such children are still likely to be traditionally educated and to enter the Deaf community. However, sometime in the perhaps not too distant future, a device will be developed that will give deaf children sufficient restored hearing to effectively live as “hearing”.

Similarly, genetic manipulation sometime in the future will enable the avoidance of hereditary deafness. In the light of deafness not being life-threatening and the viability of a “Deaf life”, should we use such a device on such engineering? Most hearing people, especially hearing parents of deaf children, would undoubtedly say, “Yes”. Deaf parents and the Deaf community would say, “No”. 
How do we choose? What principles do we have to guide us? Is deafness a condition to be cured or a life to be lived? The inexorable march of technology will impose upon us a need to decide.

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**Audiovisual and Multimedia Materials**


About the Author

Professor Des Power was born in Cobden in Victoria in 1936. After education in Catholic schools in Melbourne, he trained as a primary teacher and a teacher of the deaf in Victorian Education Department teachers’ colleges. He began his teaching career at the Victorian School for Deaf Children in 1956, being both a class teacher and a resident teacher in the boarding house of the school. During this time he completed the first year of a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Melbourne. In 1961 he received a part-time studentship from the Education Department to continue his degree.

From 1961-1968 he lectured part-time at the Training Centre for Teachers of the Deaf (being the first in any Australian teacher of the deaf training program to teach signing), worked in the early intervention program for deaf and deaf-blind children at the Education Centre for Deaf Children and continued his role as a resident teacher, this time at the hostel of Glendonald School for Deaf Children under his first professional mentor, Dr Leo Murphy, a major figure in the establishment of modern education of the deaf in Australia. During this time he also completed his Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology and a graduate Bachelor of Education degree and a research Master of Education degree, all at the University of Melbourne.

In 1969 Professor Power gained a Harkness Fellowship of the Commonwealth Fund of New York and during his tenure of this award completed a Doctor of Philosophy degree at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, majoring in education of the deaf and developmental psycholinguistics under the supervision of the distinguished researcher in language and deafness, Professor Stephen Quigley. During this time he worked extensively on what became known as “The Illinois Language Project” that applied modern linguistic analyses to the language of deaf students, an area of research that has remained central to his interests ever since.

In 1972 he returned to the Training Centre for Teachers of the Deaf fulltime, having been promoted to Senior Lecturer. In the series of changes which occurred to teachers' colleges in the mid-1970s the Centre eventually became part of the Institute of Special Education of what was then the State College of Victoria at Burwood. In 1979 he took up a position as Principal Lecturer in Psychology and Special Education and Director of what became the Centre for Human Development Studies at Mt Gravatt College of Advanced Education, following its fortunes through the merger with the Brisbane College of Advanced Education. One positive outcome of this period was the establishment of the Deaf Student Support Program, the oldest and largest of such programs in Australian higher education, which continued through into the merger with Griffith University.

This work led to activity in the field of service to students with disabilities in higher education. It has included several consultancies for the Commonwealth Government including reports on access and service guidelines for the National Board of Employment Education and Training and membership of a current group developing a “Code of Practice” for students with disabilities in tertiary education.
for the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs. Upon
the merger of the Mt Gravatt campus with Griffith University he was appointed
Associate Professor, being promoted to Professor in 1994. He is now Director of
the Centre for Deafness Studies and Research, a University centre, and of the
Language Australia (National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia) Centre
for Deafness and Communication Studies, both in the Faculty of Education of
Griffith University.

Professor Power has been a Visiting Professor at the University of Illinois and
Visiting Distinguished International Scholar at Gallaudet University. He has also
visited at the University of London and the University of Nottingham. He has made
numerous presentations at major national and international conferences, including
keynote addresses at the Asia-Pacific Congress on Deafness and the International
Congress on Education of the Deaf. He is presently Chair of the International
Committee of the International Congress of Education of the Deaf. He is an
Honorary Life Member of the Association of Special Teachers of Victoria and the
Australian Association of Teachers of the Deaf. In 1994 he was made a Member of
the Order of Australia for his “services to deafness and research”.

He has authored or edited over 150 research, theoretical and professional papers in
national and international journals and is on the editorial boards of several of them.
He has also been involved in numerous curriculum, resources and assessment
materials development projects and has published papers, kits and videotapes in this
area. He has received major grants for research and development from government
and non-government sources, including the Australian Research Council and the
National Priority (Reserve) Fund. He has been a Member of the Board of
Australian Hearing Services and is presently a Member of the Council and Board of
Directors of Language Australia.

In 1968 Professor Power married Mary Rose O’Kane and they have four children,
three of whom are graduates of Griffith University, Lucy in Asian Studies, Linus in
Humanities and Education and Peter in Biomedical Science. The fourth, Ben,
would also have probably attended Griffith had the University established its
Faculty of Law a few years earlier. Dr Mary Power obtained her doctor of
Philosophy degree from Griffith University with a thesis on the Mackerras family
under the supervision of Professor James Walter. The Power family are well
connected to Griffith University!

Professor Power believes that deafness, especially congenital deafness, need not be a
“disability” or a “handicap” unless the community that the deaf person functions in
makes it so by placing structural and (especially) attitudinal barriers across the
educational, social and vocational lives of deaf individuals. He argues that in many
respects Deaf people should be seen as a minority linguistic and cultural
community, united by a shared experience of the world from a Deaf perspective, by
a shared social, community and family life and especially united by their bond in
the common use of Australian Sign Language (Auslan). In many ways “Deaf
Australian” lives resemble the lives of “Italian Australian” or “Vietnamese
Australian” lives.
Hence Professor Power strongly believes that deafness need not be a disability, but just an alternative (if sometimes difficult and frustrating) realisation of "the human condition". It is to the actualisation of this view that much of Professor Power's professional life has been devoted and he is particularly pleased that his written and oral presentations on behalf of the Australian Deafness Council to the 1982 Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts Enquiry into an Australian Language Policy was reflected in the "National Language Policy" of 1984 and its successors, the "National Policy on Languages" and the "Australian Language and Literacy Policy" and his writings and presentations since have played a significant part in bringing this view to public awareness.

It is to the elaboration of this view that Professor Power's Inaugural Professorial Address this evening is devoted: "Constructing Lives: The Deaf Experience".