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Language Policy, Culture, and Disability: ASL and English

The Department of Public Safety (DPS) at Gallaudet University has two emergency phone numbers: Extension 5555 is designated for voice calls, and 5444 is designated for TTY calls. The voice number, one repeated digit, is clearly easier to remember and to dial. The TTY emergency number, on the other hand, is easy to confuse with the non-emergency line, which is extension 5445. There is no clear reason why there are separate voice and TTY numbers for emergencies; most main phone lines at Gallaudet are designated to handle both voice and TTY calls. However, since there are separate emergency lines, it seems odd that a university whose mission "is to serve as a comprehensive, multipurpose institution of higher education for deaf and hard of hearing citizens of the United States and of the world" uses the unambiguous, easiest-to-remember number for voice calls (Gallaudet 2). This is especially true because, unlike with

voice phones, it can be difficult to tell when using a TTY when the call is answered on the other end, if the call gets disconnected, if one has reached a wrong number, and so forth.

This is an example of good intentions missing the point. Having a dedicated TTY emergency line is a good idea, so precious moments are not wasted. (On a line handling both voice and TTY calls, the usual approach is for the person answering the phone to first listen, and then if hearing TTY sounds—or nothing—to place the phone handset on the TTY and then answer via the TTY.) However, precious moments would also be wasted if a deaf caller with an emergency mistakenly calls the voice line, dials a wrong number, or dials the non-emergency line. I have come to see the emergency phone numbers as a metaphor for how ingrained institutional language and communication practices continue to disable the deaf community at Gallaudet by privileging the culture and interests of the hearing community.

How could this be at Gallaudet, a place so important to the history and development of Deaf culture? When I came to Gallaudet University in the fall of 1996 as an assistant professor and newly minted PhD, I was excited to be here. This was a place made for deaf people! I was looking forward to, for the first time since I became deaf at age 10 (about a month before starting 6th grade), being in a deaf-friendly environment. I had made my first pilgrimage here, to the “deaf Mecca,” when I came to DC for a conference while I was in graduate school. I took the campus tour and remember being particularly impressed by a display outside of the president’s office of an old dorm room doorbell system that consisted of a weight attached to a chain to be pulled and then dropped so the person inside the room could feel the vibrations. That might not seem like a big deal, but when I was an undergraduate at a hearing college, I didn’t like closing the door when I was alone in my room, afraid of missing a friend stopping by. What freedom there could be, being in a place designed for deaf needs!

Gallaudet would also be the first place where other people would not see my deafness as something that I had to overcome. I was tired of constantly having to prove myself to hearing people. At Gallaudet would I not only have deaf students and work with other deaf faculty, but also our dean, vice president for academic affairs, and president were all deaf. Gallaudet had made a huge shift to showing it believed in deaf ability through the Deaf President Now (DPN) protests in 1988 and the resulting selection of Dr. I. King Jordan as the first deaf president of Gallaudet.

Prior to that, Gallaudet had been run by hearing people—a paternalistic pattern that has dominated education and other services for the deaf. The accepted term for this is *audism*—coined by deaf educator and author Tom Humphries, and defined by Harlan Lane in *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf*

Community as “the paternalistic, hearing-centered endeavor that professes to serve deaf people” (43). Audism parallels what Edward Said calls Orientalism, the imperialism of the West toward the East. Said explains that “the essence of Orientalism is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority” and that the practice of Orientalism creates situations to further justify itself (881). Imperialism institutionalizes itself and attempts to perpetuate its values on the oppressed culture. When the means of oppression become institutionalized, it is difficult to excise the dominating culture.

In the years following DPN, the faculty and administration at Gallaudet have made conscious changes to reduce the presence of audism on campus. One change was a years-long process to revise the general studies curriculum, which took effect in the fall of 1997. One of the changes is the removal of Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology 120, “Communication Science and Deafness,” (which with the same course description had been “Communication Processes and the Hearing Impaired 120” prior to the 1991–92 school year). One of the requirements for this course was that students had to get an audiogram (a hearing test) or fail the class, even though all Gallaudet students have to submit an audiogram as part of their application. While working on this paper, I spoke to two of my friends who entered Gallaudet in 1987 and 1990. Both had complained about this requirement then, and both recounted the experience with anger. The first told me that following her hearing test, the hearing audiologist looked at her with pity and told her, “I am sorry, you have a profound hearing loss.” Of course! That’s why she was a student at Gallaudet. Never mind that she did not see her hearing loss as something to be sorry about. My other friend, annoyed at having to get yet another audiogram, asked the hearing audiologist how long it had been since he had gotten an audiogram, pointing out that as a hearing person, the audiologist actually had hearing to lose. The audiologist, annoyed, wrote on the report that my friend had a bad attitude.

Such blatantly audist requirements have been revised out of Gallaudet policy and curricula. Since American Sign Language (ASL) is at the heart of Deaf culture and identity, official recognition of American Sign Language is an important part of this process. (ASL was not recognized as a language until Dr. William Stokoe began doing linguistic research at Gallaudet in the 1960s to prove that ASL has all of the components of a language.) One step toward this is Gallaudet’s adoption in February 1995 of a policy on sign communication. This policy states that “Gallaudet University is a bilingual community in which both American Sign Language and English thrive. We recognize that in our campus community ASL and English coexist in complex ways” (Gallaudet 3). Similarly, the “Faculty Communication Guidelines,” adopted in April 1990, says that “the University Faculty encourages the learning and clear use of American Sign Lan-

guage and English, in all aspects of University life, to meet the needs of the individuals we serve" (Gallaudet 3). This provides important recognition that both languages are valued. Without equal status, those who are primary users of the unprivileged language are disabled within the community.

However, it is one thing to say that Gallaudet is a bilingual community and quite another for it to function as bilingual. Official language practices at Gallaudet show an official favoring of English over ASL. One way it does so is by providing faculty who are not skilled in ASL an official excuse for not learning ASL. The same "Faculty Communication Guidelines" that encourage faculty to learn and use ASL also redefine ASL. According to the guidelines, "The term American Sign Language (ASL) is to be used in an all-inclusive sense, even including signs expressed in English word order, with or without voice" (Gallaudet 3). This policy makes a mockery of ASL. When signs are expressed in English word order, the signing is no longer ASL. For comparison, imagine an ESL program defining English as "including English words expressed in Chinese word order"; the students would have an easy time achieving the goal, but they would not really be learning English. A large body of linguistic research now shows that ASL is distinct from English and has its own quite different grammar. ASL does exhibit influence from English, which should not be surprising because ASL users are also exposed to English; however, if the presence of influences such as loan words meant that the borrowing language was the loaning language, English would be French.

This faculty language policy privileges community members whose first language is English. It hurts members whose primary language is ASL both because it does not include a similarly flexible definition of English and because ASL-primary language users are the ones who must adapt to understanding the non-ASL signing. This is difficult to do even with a strong foundation in English because signs frequently used to correspond with English words do not match the concept. For example, consider the word *will*. Those who sign English frequently generalize the sign used to indicate future (that is, the "will" in "I will go home") for other uses such as "free will" and "willing." Signing like that often confuses me, and I am both a native speaker of English and a skilled enough lip reader to generally follow the speech that usually accompanies such English-based signing.

The undergraduate curriculum today also reflects dominance of English over ASL and thus of hearing-world values over that of the Deaf world. Many Gallaudet students enter college with typical ESL problems. Many of them would probably be thrilled for us to redefine "English" as "English words expressed in ASL sign order." We do not, though. We expect students to learn standardized academic English. All undergraduates must complete between 6, 9, or

12 credit hours, or two to four semesters, of English courses as part of their General Studies requirement, depending which track students place into. This means that even students who demonstrate superior skill in English and place into our Honors program must take two semesters of general studies English. Students who do not meet minimal qualifications for credit English must also take noncredit courses. In addition to those English courses, all undergraduates except those studying for a BS degree in the sciences must also take a literature course of either literature written in English or of foreign literature in English translation. Finally, all undergraduates must take a minimum of four courses designated as writing enhanced in order to graduate. The curriculum thus demonstrates very strong commitment to English.

This same curriculum has no requirements at all for ASL. Students may elect to take, as one of three options, "Sign Language and Sign Systems" to satisfy a general studies requirement in "Heritage and Self Awareness." This is a course offered by the department of Linguistics and Interpretation. This course covers several topics, including "A survey of the major features of the linguistic structure of ASL" (Gallaudet 97). However, it also covers "Language variation and language contact in the deaf community, including discussions of contact varieties of signing and systems for representing English" (Gallaudet 97). Contact signing is what native users of ASL do to accommodate nonnative signers. Thus, the closest thing to an ASL course offered that satisfies general studies requirements also teaches about the systems used for accommodating English speakers.

There is no ASL proficiency requirement for undergraduates at all. This is unfortunate both for the native and nonnative signers in the student body. The native signers are deprived of the opportunity to strengthen their understanding of their primary language. They should be able to do so while satisfying general studies requirements, just as native speakers of English take English class to further understand its structure and to improve their facility in using it. The nonnative signers can, if they choose, graduate from Gallaudet without ever taking an ASL course or demonstrating any knowledge of ASL. This can and does happen, and such students seek out teachers who do not use ASL (as a linguist would define it) in the classroom. Of course, many nonnative signers who come to Gallaudet do use the opportunity to acquire ASL, both by voluntarily taking ASL courses and by interacting with the native signers on campus. The message from the curriculum, though, is that the only language important enough to require is English.

ASL is not only not accorded the status given to English, it is also not accepted as an option to satisfy the second language requirement, which is 8 credit hours (two semesters) in the same language for all students except those studying for a BS degree in a science. Languages offered include French, German,

Italian, Latin, and Spanish. Full or partial waivers of the requirement are granted if students can demonstrate "basic knowledge of the written form of any foreign language" (Gallaudet 36). Sign languages other than ASL (such as British Sign Language or French Sign Language) are also not accepted for this requirement.

By contrast, ASL is accepted as one means of satisfying foreign/second language requirements at over one hundred other colleges and universities (Wilcox). These schools recognize that ASL is another language and that learning ASL for a native English speaker serves the same category of educational objectives as learning French or Russian.

So why doesn't Gallaudet? One reason is probably that ASL was not even offered as a major prior to fall 1996. Before that, there was a major in Sign Communication. But another reason is certainly the audist view that written languages (which of course are also spoken) are more intellectually rigorous than signed languages; not everyone in the Gallaudet community even accepts that ASL is a language. Also, there is the reasonable belief that if students could use ASL for their second language requirement, few students would take any of the foreign languages that currently meet the requirement. Because many deaf students do not take foreign language in high school, some argue that Gallaudet is responsible to make up for secondary education allowing deaf students to be waived from foreign language. The requirement thus carries additional audism because it is in place specifically to make up for gaps in the deaf education system.

For change to happen, Gallaudet will need to look away from current practices that have carried over from the past to make it not only "the only liberal arts university in the world designed exclusively for deaf and hard of hearing students" but also one where the values incorporated in the design reflect those of the Deaf community (Gallaudet 2). Because university policy and curriculum changes involve politics and turf, it helps that there is now an ASL major and that during the 2001–02 academic year, the ASL department merged with Deaf Studies (founded in 1995). Because this department has a vested interest in promoting ASL and Deaf culture, it stands to reason they will advocate for change in that direction. The very existence of the Department of American Sign Language and Deaf Studies is evidence of altering attitudes and support for ASL and Deaf culture. That is quite a change from the viewing of deafness as a disability, a lack emphasized in the course requiring an audiogram.

So change is slow, and Rome wasn't built in a day. But if Rome burns, I want to be able to call x5555.

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Beyond Vision: Authors with Visual Impairment in American Literature

Historical American literature is dominated by writing that emerged from an upper-class literate minority and reflected the lives and beliefs of this same group. Many potential authors never contributed to recorded literature because they belonged to groups that were uneducated and politically undervalued. African-Americans, Native Americans, women, and people with disabilities are among these groups.

In comparison to other members of these disenfranchised groups, people who were visually impaired were often better prepared to contribute to the fabric of recorded literature. Beginning in the early 1800s, many people with visual impairments were educated at specialized schools, and their oral/verbal capabilities were similar to others in an emerging literate society. Although tactile reading media varied regionally, blind people were often taught to read from the early 1800s using raised print forms or variations of dot systems such as the New York Point system and Braille. Yet reports of authors with visual impairment are almost nonexistent before the nineteenth century, and their writings are socially compartmentalized throughout that century. Until the mid-twentieth century, individual perspectives of people with visual impairments are rarely heard in general market literature. Their transition to literary participation can be traced through three eras of writing in the United States: pre-Revolutionary