Hands Full of Words: Exploring the Riches Of Sign Language

By Bart Barnes
Washington Post Staff Writer

Two decades ago when William C. Stokoe, newly hired as chairman of the English department at Gallaudet College, first proposed a linguistic analysis of sign language, his professional colleagues thought he was crazy.

Although sign language had been the primary means of communication among the deaf for more than a century and a half, it was strictly barred in some schools for the deaf and discouraged or neglected in most others. While its use by students out of class was tolerated, sign language was almost universally ignored by educators of the deaf and there were few who took it seriously as a legitimate language.

"They told me my job was to teach them English," recalled Stokoe (pronounced Stoo-kee). "Even some of the deaf people on the faculty thought I was out of my skull. All the experts were saying, 'Sign language can be ignored. It is not a language.'"

Now, almost 20 years later, there has been a 180-degree turnaround.

Despite his colleagues' skepticism, Stokoe pressed ahead with his idea and in 1960 produced the first linguistic analysis of sign language as part of a series on studies in linguistics. See DEAF, Page 10, Col. 1

City Council To Rethink
Of A

By Joel Washington Post

After an emotive debate on the merits of the city council's decision to list the race of a board of councilor candidates, the D.C. council agreed this week to review the practice, which documents racial composition of the board of education.

Councilmember Moore has argued the practice, which documents racial composition of the board of education, is a better way of ensuring minority representation than the method used by the federal courts.

"Some of us have newspapers to people by race," Moore said. "We are reverting to the method that many of us are used to and so hard to change in our society."

Councilmember Wills submitted reports, suggesting going back to the method of fair representation as a kind of like it.

SE Neighborhood House to

By Vernon C. Thompson
Washington Post Staff Writer

Southeast Neighborhood House in Anacostia, which will celebrate 50 years of operation in April, nearly shut its doors for other funding problems. The D.C. Council has found the need for other funding for the city's social service agencies, said, "There is a funding crunch and this is causing problems for everybody."

The crisis situation at Southeast Neighborhood House is one of the many that are being reevaluated by the council to ensure the financial stability of the city's social service agencies.
Hands Full of Words: Exploring the Linguistics of Sign Language

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For most of the last 19 years, supported by grants from the National Science Foundation and the Center for Applied Linguistics, he has continued his research, on his own at first and later as director of Gallaudet’s Linguistics Research Lab.

“Not long ago, sign language was looked down on as something deaf people did because they couldn’t do it any better. Now it is a legitimate topic of academic investigation. All of that can be attributed to the work started by Bill Stokoe.”

A graduate of Cornell, Stokoe, 59, came to Gallaudet in 1955 after nine years at Wells College. When Stokoe started at Gallaudet, the college had just embarked on an ambitious campaign to upgrade its faculty and academic program.

Stokoe’s only previous contact with the deaf had been a deaf blacksmith in the town where he grew up.

“I didn’t know any sign language, but when I brought in a piece of farm machinery he was able to communicate to me whether or not he could fix it,” said Stokoe.

One of the first things Stokoe did after arriving at Gallaudet was to take a crash course in sign language. He had not been on the campus long before he became fascinated with sign language as a potential topic of serious academic scrutiny, but his was a lonely effort at first.

“I used to feel like somebody standing alone on the beach shouting, ‘Hey, I’ve got something interesting here!’ but nobody was listening. It felt like the things I was studying and researching were of no interest to anyone.”

Gradually, during the decade of the 1970s, it all began to change. Deaf pride and deaf awareness groups organized. Other scholars, at Gallaudet and elsewhere, began studying the linguistics of sign language.

Stokoe began publishing a quarterly journal called “Sign Language Studies,” and there is currently a backlog of articles submitted for publication. Increasingly, hearing people began to develop an interest in learning sign language, and each year scores of courses in sign language are offered throughout the Washington area.

“It is a very sophisticated language,” said Stokoe. “Sign language is not English any more than French is English. People used to think that there were certain features it didn’t have. Now researchers are discovering those features all the time.”

Unlike other handicapped people, Stokoe observed, the deaf constitute a special community not unlike a separate ethnic group, in large measure because they have their own language.

“Having a common language joins people with the strongest of bonds,” he wrote in a recent article. “One of the most important uses of language is the formation and preservation of social groups. . . . The deaf constitute a social group both by the difference of not hearing, but even more by the social working of language.”

To study the language, Stokoe would exam language corpora, or more personal.

“The signs occur in the same way as in an English sentence may occur in different contexts. A sign serves as a set of signs for the English sentence may or may not have a set of words. The signs are not made up of single words.”

“Sign language is a language. It has vocabulary, grammar and syntax. It is a language which defines a community and is worthy of respect just like any other language.”

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the sign language. Stokoe has spent thousands of hours examining in minute detail sign language conversations between two or more persons.

"The signs in a sign sentence may occur in the same order as the words in an English sentence or they may occur in different order," he writes.

"A sign sentence may seem to omit signs for words that are essential in the English sentence. Again, the sign sentence may have signs for which the English sentence has no equivalent word.

"Sign language grammar has its own rules as well as its own lexicon, or vocabulary of signs, and rules and lexicon of sign differ from the rules and lexicon of English. ... There is a unique set of rules for making sign language constructions just as there is for making standard English constructions, non-standard English constructions or the constructions of any language."

While current research tends to build a case for recognition of sign language as a language in its own right, it also has uncovered common similarities between sign language and all spoken languages.

"Stokoe, for example, has found that "persons of the same age group sign alike" and that persons of the same sex sign more alike. Other researchers studying the sign language patterns of black and white deaf people in the Deep South have found signing differences comparable to different dialects of a spoken language. They have also found that sign language is different in different countries of the world just as spoken language is different.

Moreover, says Stokoe, "it is more than an hand language—it is body, face and eyes."

The simple sentence, "I saw what he was doing," Stokoe noted, could mean, with the eyes focused differently, "I saw what I was doing."

And, as with any other language, sign language is always changing."

"There is evidence of rapid and widespread change in the 200 years since the sign language behavior of the deaf was recognized and partially recorded," Stokoe said last year in a revised and updated version of his first linguistic analysis of American Sign Language. "Even in the relatively small amount of sign data observed in this study, there is evidence of structural change."

The bulk of Stokoe's work has focused on American Sign Language and Ameslan, based in part on work done with deaf people in France in the 18th century. But there are two other forms of manual communication commonly used by deaf people in the United States. One is finger spelling; the other is interpretation of spoken English into manual signs. But unlike American Sign Language, neither form has an independent linguistic base.

A resident of Silver Spring, Stokoe is married and the father of two children. His son, James S. Stokoe, is an architect and his daughter, Helen Marie Stokoe Phillips, judges Scottish fiddling competitions. Stokoe himself plays the bagpipes for amusement and entertainment.

At Gallaudet, he no longer teaches English but has developed a course in "socio-linguistics," which he describes as the ethnography of speaking. "We try to look at what kinds of social factors, nonlinguistic factors influence the way we use language," he said.

"The study of sign language," he continued, "is basic to the study of all language. Babies communicate with their faces, and their eyes and their bodies long before they use words."