

Introduction

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There were periods when the problem of deafness became a favorite theme in the Western world, attracting the philosophers, scientists and intellectuals from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries such as Diderot, Musset, and Dickens among others. But most of these authors did not know deaf persons directly; rather this marginal group of humanity made it possible for them to rethink fundamental questions of communication and of difference from fresh research materials.

From an intellectual point of view, the problem is indeed a stimulating one. From a practical and human point of view, it remains a difficult question, with the result that basic work on it remains the preserve of specialists who may be physicians, educators, speech therapists, or others whose expertise combines these disciplines. Few and far between are those who succeed in writing for a wider public while having both experience of the field and a clear notion of the realities with which the deaf are faced. Few and far between are also those who can step back from a fascination that propels them to identify with the deaf, thereby mixing their personal concerns with questions specific to deaf people. Even rarer are those deaf persons who write more than just testimonies. In so doing, they cannot avoid being typed by research that constructs "The Deaf Person," even at the price of leaving aside, without sensitivity, all of those who do not conform. In fact many of them

Are an attraction to this theme and its basic analysis incompatible? On the one hand, there are writings that are too complex and technical, and on the other, popular ones which are seductive but deficient.

The articles appearing in this volume do not claim to cover all aspects of the problem; all they aim to do is to open up fresh

reflection and to stimulate future publications within a broader intellectual framework.

The panorama of the Western historical development that is quickly traced in the first article is not merely designed to convince the reader that there is a topic here to be exploited, but also that a welcome revision of past analyses is needed in order to understand the major stakes that involve deafness and whose consequences vary only with reference to the choices a society makes.

There were times and places when and where the desire to share went beyond conventional forms of communication. Acutely conscious of the social pressures that exist in the countries of Europe, Danielle Bouvet nevertheless recalls with warmth that desire of “being able to speak” that exists in all human beings, the deaf included. Speech therapist, psychologist, and linguist, she has promoted since the 1970s the sign language that she herself uses, demonstrating how essential it was for the deaf child, before she created the first bilingual courses in France. Here she discusses the ways in which we can express, through gesturing, abstract concepts with the help of bodily metaphors.

Sign language, once a cause of segregation, actually becomes the motive for a voluntary separatism among a minority of deaf persons. This is now the debate that revolves around the notion of “culture of the deaf” whose main developmental stages – half-French, half-American – are traced by Patrick Seamans, himself deaf and thus well placed to criticize the ambiguities of this tendency to ghettoize the deaf in the name of a culture of difference. Good multilingualist that he is (he speaks, reads and signs as well in French as in English), Seamans also points to the avenues that open up genuine life choices.

The new militancy of the deaf “*signeurs*” and the media interest in their means of communication in Western countries neglects a majority of deaf persons who have adapted themselves, more or less, to the conditions of their countries.

Much still remains to be learned, especially about the situation of deaf persons outside the West. Yau Shun-Chiu, a linguist at the *Centre de Recherches Linguistiques sur l’Asie Orientale* in Paris, has been a pioneer in every sense of the term. After publishing work on the sign language of the deaf in China and while other authors

still stressed the autonomy of sign language, he became convinced that visual perception had influenced all languages from the start – those of the deaf as well as those who have hearing. To prove his point, he decided to study the sign languages of the deaf who were isolated in communities where no school structure was available to them. After 1977, he traveled to the Northwest Territories to meet, on his snow-shoes, the Cree of Canada and then to South China. He observed, reconstructed, and analyzed the signs of the deaf in those regions and concluded, in a work rich in information and reflection, that sign languages were original and independent, but that there also existed common features with other language systems (oral and written) in the visual realm. He reaffirms this in his article in this volume where he demonstrates the possible marriage between the written graphics and gestures. The natural disposition of the deaf in China to use signs does not lead them to reject the national culture, with the result that their social conscience appears “to be dozing by the fire-place.”

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