

# A History of Misunderstandings

## The History of the Deaf

*Aude de Saint-Loup*

### A "Strange" Disability

Sarah is a young deaf woman in revolt, refusing to speak. She marries James, an orthophonist who works in a special school for the deaf. However, what gradually emerges in the course of their relationship is the latent suffering caused by what each of the partners isn't getting. James, tired of acting as Sarah's interpreter, frustrated by the limits of what they can share, shouts out:

You want to be independent of me, you want to be a person in your own right, you want people not to pity you ... then you [must] learn to read my lips and you [must] learn to use that little mouth of yours for something besides eating and showing me you're better than hearing girls in bed! Come on! Read my lips? What am I saying? Say what I'm saying ... You always have to be dependent on someone, and you always will for the rest of your life until you learn to speak. Now come on! I want you to speak to me. Let me hear it. Speak! Speak! Speak! ...

The tetanic moment has arrived. Sarah, who throughout the play has not uttered a single sound, communicating exclusively by signs,<sup>1</sup> begins to yell, at first incomprehensibly, and then at last lets forth with the following:

Speech! Speech! Is that it? No! You want me to be your child! You want me to be like you. How do you like my voice? Am I beautiful? Am I what you want me to be? What about me? What I want? What I want!<sup>2</sup>

It's powerful theater. When this play, *Children of a Lesser God*, written by the American playwright Mark Medoff, was produced for the French stage in 1992, the French public was ready to take this slap in the face.<sup>3</sup> Curiously, though, the play addresses only the question of a deaf person's ability or inability to speak, since sign language, embodied in Sarah's dexterous hands, only used

within the deaf community itself, is reduced in the play to an institutional setting. This attitude corresponds almost exactly to the way in which the question was posed in the nineteenth century, leading to the conclusion that speech should be the deaf person's highest priority. However, the inherent problems associated with deafness are at no point addressed either in the play or in more popular and recent works devoted to the subject. In truth, the greatest challenge that a person who is born deaf must face – and this is a point that must be insisted upon from the outset – is learning how to read and write, quite apart from questions of methodology (i.e. whether sign language or speech is used or not). Speech, in this sense, is but a luxury.

*A Poorly Understood Disability*

In spite of the mediatization of deafness in the United States and Western Europe, where its "spectacular" aspect – that of deaf people who sign – is the one most frequently depicted, the spontaneous reaction of uninformed people to deafness reveals a total lack of knowledge on the subject. Many continue to be surprised by the fact that much remains to be said about deafness. Along with repeated confusions of the type, "Is Braille used in working with the deaf?," there is both the banalization of deafness in our languages (from the time of the Middle Ages, the question "Are you deaf or drunk?"<sup>4</sup> has been asked of someone who doesn't understand) and its association with another universal phenomenon linked to the aging process, that is to say *presbycusis*. In this sense, deafness has most often been portrayed as a "natural" disability, resulting from the process of biological decline, among people more or less aged, and incorporating a sympathetic and comic depiction of the hard of hearing, such as Professor Calculus in the Tintin comic strips. In this form, deafness is accepted fatalistically, as old age is accepted.

The situation is different when the subject turns to people who are either born deaf or who become deaf before an age considered more "normal." Because the spoken language can not be acquired naturally, the linguistic skills retained by someone who has become deaf later in life do not exist in a person whose deafness is prelingual; and it's here that the abnormality arises.

*An Invisible Disability*

However, it is an ambiguous abnormality since it affects neither physical autonomy nor development. On the surface everything appears normal. Yet as soon as a desire for exchange is expressed, discomfort begins, and especially on the part of the person who can hear. The hearer is surprised by what he or she could not detect: initiating a dialogue, the hearer gets in return either silence, or an incomprehensible response emitted by a strange voice, or a clearly enunciated statement that does not always accord with what has been asked. Before thinking of deafness as the cause one usually presumes that the other is either simply refusing to answer (the hearer perceives an obstinate silence: the eye/look is there but the mouth refuses to move, which is more offensive than an abuse), or that the other didn't understand because the response is inappropriate (he's stupid), or there's a mental problem (a feeble voice, crazed gestures). As deafness is unseen, and the expected voice and gestures are not there, we "imagine" as best we can, and usually wrongly. This relentless desire to make the other responsible for the communication failure is above all an expression of what is most painful: the fact of not having been understood, of having failed to make oneself understood.

The most common way of putting an end to this discomfort is to interrupt the exchange, leaving the deaf person standing there, and to go seek other interlocutors. The coherence of their responses is reassuring for someone who may have just been momentarily prey to doubt about him or herself as well as the other. The deaf are thus often doomed to isolation, even when the surrounding group is aware of their condition, since it is tedious constantly to have to repeat oneself.

*A Contagious Disability*

One peculiarity of deafness is that it is a shared handicap.<sup>5</sup> However, as the deaf are a minority, the sharing is not equal: the solution to their difficulties is referred back to them. It's up to them to find ways to adapt to societies that function on the basis of oral exchange and the mastery of the written language which itself is derived from speech. While those who become deaf later in life usually succeed in verbal communication, those who are born pro-

foundly deaf have a harder time of it, in spite of the fact that official attempts at instruction, using various methodologies, have been tried continuously since the sixteenth century. Indeed it was during this period, with the increase of written materials, that the birth of the printing press brought, that an additional ordeal was imposed on the deaf; this occurred because the ability to learn to write is closely tied to a prior knowledge of the spoken language, or at the very least, as some have argued, to practice with sign language.<sup>6</sup>

*The Deaf Person as Irrational Animal ...*

Able to imitate the gestures associated with agricultural, artisanal, and industrial activity, the deaf remained outside the world of intellectual commerce. Knowledge acquired by hearing and reading was thought of as closed to them by nature. It was this attitude that contributed to their being identified with “imbeciles,” and out of which arose the frequent shame of parents of deaf children and even of the deaf themselves. In our day, in response to this, we can observe the pride of some deaf people, signers for the most part, who demand a culture and identity based on their own language and in the name of which they now call hearers the “understanding impaired.” This movement only became possible with the formation of deaf communities, in which a language, arts and way of life thought specific to the deaf are developed. The rise of city and the development of “specialized” schools and organizations also fostered this process.

The demanding tone of the debate, however, grew out of a conjunction of other factors, within a socio-political context in which both deaf and hearers played leading roles. The deaf movement, which was aborted in France at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, took root in America and was later re-exported to Europe. This movement expressed a desire for independence that many deaf people felt but which their hearing allies did not sense in their regard. It reached a point at which some activists even called for territorial secession. In 1850, John James Flourney proposed the creation of a state for the deaf in Georgia. In the lively discussion that followed, enacted in the pages of *The American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* (1856-1858), some deaf people denounced this utopian project, asking – for

example – what would be done with hearing children produced by deaf couples?<sup>7</sup> The French doctor Itard, who first became known for his work with Victor, the wild child of Aveyron, practiced at the Institute for Deaf-Mutes in Paris in the first half of the nineteenth century. After his failed attempts to cure deafness, Itard took it into his head to dream up this very same project, although without an illusion about the possibility of its realization ... A dream, but one that continues to appeal to some deaf adolescents, and which is symptomatic of the painful difficulties associated with living amidst hearers.

In any case, most societies have ignored the deaf, an attitude embodied in vague legal statutes and in the way that care is dealt with. After all, these societies can get along quite well without the deaf. At the same time, the majority of the deaf, especially if isolated, seek – and know how – to blend into the crowd, thanks to their gifts of imitation and natural desire for integration. For instance, Chinese deaf, whether educated or not, do not flaunt their identity as deaf persons, which they could do by signing (gesturing) their name, but instead remain attached to the purely Chinese tradition of the written name.<sup>8</sup>

#### *The Price of Shame*

Still, the suffering of the deaf, both in social and interpersonal relations, has long been recognized and has elicited a variety of responses. The first of these is to seek a means of getting rid of the deficit: the appeal for miracle cures, which has been expressed from time immemorial (and has still not completely disappeared in the religious world, nor in the more nebulous regions of the para-medical and para-religious, in which charlatanism plays a part), medical intervention, various hearing aids and lip-reading techniques. In cases where these approaches are judged to be – at least in part – a failure, the next step is to try to overcome the deficit by adapting the approaches to the deaf condition; i.e. by the development of various forms of gestural and written communication (for example, the sub-titling of films, although this presumes a prior mastery of reading skills ...).<sup>9</sup>

Although real progress has been made, obstacles do remain, and in some areas, such as the line separating those fighting the

deficiency itself (deafness reduction) from those fighting against the idea of handicap (the ability of society to create a context in which deafness is accepted), conflicts have in fact grown more acute. Hearing aids, it is true, have been improved and, thanks to medical progress and a rise in living standards, there has been an overall decrease in the number of deaf people in the industrialized world. However, we are still far from seeing either deafness's actual eradication or the adoption of measures perfectly suited to this handicap. Sign languages and phonetic codes are used only in narrow circles. Yet the will to extend these modes of communication exists, as is evidenced by the emergence of a new set of players, the interpreters.

Then what are the obstacles? And why does deafness continue to provoke shame and the desire to hide it, paradoxically leading to the refusal to use hearing aids when the wearing of eyeglasses is accepted by all? Is the problem of a strictly sociological nature, based on a society's excessive will to normalization and its inability to accept this "deviance"? Or are there other dimensions to deafness, perhaps psychological or even anthropological, as some of the facts and factors mentioned above might suggest? One way of getting a clearer picture of the situation is to take a look at the history of deafness.

### **From Myths to a History of Human Beings**

Just as there was no golden age for the deaf, neither has there been a period when the deaf were rejected by all. Still, myths persist, acting as a springboard for the despair of those who dream of a better future, either by referring to an idealized time or by denouncing centuries of oppression. However, none of this is based on a credible foundation. To begin with, the world of deafness has always been heterogeneous; both the forms and degrees of deafness are variable, as are their effects. There can therefore be no single clear-cut perspective on the question. Secondly, the way in which each individual adapts to his or her deafness introduces another variable, as does the environment in which the deaf person lives. Against a totally negative interpretation of this

past, common sense must assume the emotional involvement of parents, which certainly was not totally absent at certain historical periods. As for a too rosy picture of this past, we have the experience of the Abbot Epée, who worked with deaf children between 1760 and 1789. About this experiment we must remain skeptical given its short duration, its change of course and the violent reactions it provoked. Which brings us back to an overriding truth: while many initiatives have been undertaken in the course of history, no single one has proven so effective as to mark a final turning point.

Indeed, one is struck rather by the repetition, especially beginning in the eighteenth century, of the same kinds of inquiries, the creation of the same phantasms and even the same oppositions, which lead to the same feelings of helplessness. Yet, in spite of everything, some societies have been able to show some originality, and it is the nature of this originality that we will seek to identify. By so doing, we hope that this micro-study of deafness, although inherently incomplete by the fact that the deaf have left us no direct written records of themselves prior to the second half of the eighteenth century, will nevertheless resonate with our understanding of general history and make it possible to identify the characteristics that determine exclusion or integration. But what makes this inquiry especially interesting is that deafness has never been treated within any of those categories where marginality is associated with a handicap (such as Jewishness, prostitution, homosexuality, heresy, etc.).

An exception to this rule, however, was observed in France between 1791 and 1794, when the inability to distinguish between the deaf and blind led to their being treated in the same institutions. It is of course true that these two disabilities affect senses considered fundamental for the acquisition of knowledge. And it's also possible that Usher's syndrome (*retinitis pigmentosa*), in which blindness and deafness are linked, reinforced this confusion, although economic considerations were probably the decisive factor. Needless to say, in the education a clear distinction had to be made between the blind and deaf, even if this fact was little known to the outside world. The deaf went unnoticed, continuing to be confused with the blind.

On the whole, deafness is elusive. This in part explains both the lack of understanding and the weakness of the social net surrounding deafness. What remains to investigate is the extent to which the individual meshes of this net have been able to contain this variegated and elusive prey. It is not enough simply to confine ourselves to a logic of classification, which serves merely to confirm a structuralist approach to history. Here it is the fully human dimension, fraught as much with accidents as with seeming necessities, that takes center stage.

*An Ancient Classification*

The Assyriologist Jean Bottéro has determined that the ancient cuneiform character "*sukkuku*" is translatable by our word "deaf" and "*ashikku*" by dumb. He comments that these two terms, although frequently associated, are nevertheless distinguished from one another, without linking deafness and dumbness, while by the time we reach the Greek term *cophon* and the Latin *mutus*, a single word is used to designate the deaf-mute. The medical procedures of the period offer no treatments for the condition, which allows us to conclude that deafness was judged to be irreversible. Generally speaking, this is a realistic understanding of deafness. At the same time, deafness and dumbness were used as a threat: people who violated agreements or laws were said to be subject to them.

Naturally, such an attitude could lead to the belief that people suffering these disabilities were themselves responsible for their condition. This notion of guilt has continued, with varying degrees of intensity, to be a part of popular and religious traditions. A victim is intolerable unless he or she can either be held at least partially responsible for the punishment or seen as being punished for the transgressions of his or her parents.<sup>10</sup> Bottéro then goes on to explain that the term "*sukkuku*" also designates someone who is "dense, dazed, uncultivated, and stupid."<sup>11</sup> This identification of someone who cannot hear with someone who cannot understand is a basic assumption in societies where mastery of the written language is required beyond the religious sphere: it becomes an indispensable condition not only for social advancement but a criterion for judging both reasoning ability and the very nature of the reasonable.



We find this attitude again in classical Greece. For example, Plato admits that without language or voice we would speak like the dumb, that is to say with our hands, head and body.<sup>12</sup> Although this statement assumes the possibility of the construction of a primitive form of linguistic communication, it assumes little more than that. As for Aristotle, although he admits that child differs from animals by his greater capacity to imitate and that "he learns at first by imitation,"<sup>13</sup> Aristotle nevertheless declares that deaf mutes are less intelligent than the blind.<sup>14</sup> Although this statement was to have great influence on later developments, there were other authors, such as the Arab doctor and philosopher Avicenna (his *De Anima* was translated in the West in the twelfth century), who emphasized that the problem lay not so much in the gestural system as in the fact that such a small number of people were familiar with it. The problem here is thus viewed primarily in social terms. "Deaf-mute" can be expressed in two ways in Greek: by the term *cophon*, which is used in the Greek version of the Gospels and is a synonym for the word "idiot," and *alogos*, which leaves no doubt as to its meaning of "deprived of reason."

Republican Rome did not only not modify this judgment but confirmed it legislatively under Ulpian (second century A.C.E.), where the deaf were legally identified with the insane and profligate (those who wasted a family fortune) and were stripped of their rights. There are, however, some brief, if more positive mentions of the deaf in the works of Lucretius, Cicero, and Pliny the Elder.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Medieval Alchemy: Where Anything is Possible*

The medieval period, although respecting the ancient knowledge that survived the invasions, nevertheless produced some innovations of its own. It was aided in this endeavor by the fact that Europe had become a mosaic of territories, across which various centers of authority co-existed and where diversity was an admitted fact.

There were authors who followed the Aristotelian model, which conceived of the *logos* as a fusion of the understanding and the spoken word. This lesson was to be faithfully transmitted through the centuries. For its part, Christianity only reinforced this idea by insisting on acts of hearing and speech in its central

themes, such as the creation of Man (Adam's body brought to life by the breath of God, the very God who created the universe in an alternation of "God said ... and it was so"), or the Annunciation (*conceptio per aurem*, conception through the ear). Both Alain de Lille and Albert the Great reworked this lapidary formula: those born deaf are less intelligent than those born blind and a gesture can never be the equivalent of the spoken word. This was at a time when the argument over the status of universals, which opposed nominalists and realists, raged. Guillaume Durand, Bishop of Mende in the thirteenth century, let his obvious irritation show through: "there are many deaf who refuse to hear the word of God, and many mutes who do not want to speak, although they are capable of it." Later he classed together foreigners, the deaf and dumb, calling them "flawed" (*imparfaits*) in their pretending not to understand "virtuous and capable preachers."<sup>16</sup> Beyond the fact that Durand could not accept the idea of shared responsibility in the failure to communicate (this at a time when preaching, with the use of *exempla*, was believed to be understandable to even the simplest listeners), it is interesting to note his conflation of the deaf and foreigners. He reproaches both for their lack of adaptability, as if it were a matter of a conscious refusal and not of objective difficulties.<sup>17</sup>

Other authors, however, asserted that nothing prevented the use of equivalent tools in the visual order (i.e., images, gestures, graphics). Both Saint Augustine, whose views on the Paulinian theme of *fides ex auditu* (faith comes through hearing) were broader than most commentators have realized, and Saint Jerome, were open to this point of view. Without doubt, the first missionaries, who often preached to the uneducated and in foreign lands, developed a more flexible attitude. Moreover, the monks of the Eastern church developed a gestural code in order to observe the rule of silence, which was adopted by the West. Theoretically reduced to the strictest minimum, this form of communication replaced speech. Whether or not the deaf themselves benefited from it, they certainly could not be forbidden to make use of a sign system to make themselves understood.

The Christian approach, which affected the entire Medieval period and beyond, was not limited simply to noting the various

difficulties engendered by deafness. The Church sought explanations, finding them alternately in feelings of guilt, since any infirmity could be taken as a sign of a moral failing, and in sublimation, since human suffering could be seen as an echo of Christ's own. In the latter case, deafness was seen as a trial of salvation, not only for the person suffering the disability but for all those who perceived the deaf person as a full-fledged human being. As such, this required the hearer to establish some form of communication with the deaf person, convinced – as was St. Paul – of the possibility of transmitting knowledge to them.<sup>18</sup> Such an attitude was tantamount to freeing oneself of the influence of Aristotle and his emulators. As a result, deaf children were welcomed by religious communities, most often as oblates or lay brothers.<sup>19</sup> Because of the rule of silence, gestural communication was perfectly acceptable; and as productive capacity was not affected, these communities were able to welcome the deaf without any need for special adaptive measures.

Nevertheless, these areas remained zones of “integrated marginality,” as Roger Chartier has shown.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, not all the deaf could find refuge in these communities. What happened to those who lived under ordinary circumstances in the midst of hearing populations?

The documents reveal a variety of situations, exhibiting varying degrees of tolerance and understanding. The important advantage that the deaf person had over most of the other disabled was that he retained his physical autonomy. He or she was not necessarily “lazy,” a reproach that was often leveled at those requiring assistance. In medieval Europe, the deaf could be seen working in the fields, as artisans and domestics.<sup>21</sup> Almost identical conditions can still be observed in any rural area where education is not the first priority and where the interdependence of village or community life holds sway. Moreover, because of the closer connection among the community's inhabitants, a better knowledge of the deaf is made possible because they retain their place in the family and community. A spontaneous form of communication arises (one that is criticized by purists of all stripes), marking the acknowledgment of these individuals and of the will to share with them. The deaf person is thus not fatally destined to play the role of “village

idiot." This has been confirmed by Yau's observations in China and among the Cree tribes of the Canadian far north,<sup>22</sup> and can also be seen in Africa and even in France, indeed in any industrialized country, outside the principal population centers where, as we know, natural ties of community and family break down. It is thus not a matter of a more passive, quasi-fatalistic attitude causing a better acceptance of the deaf in an "undeveloped" (*rudimentaire*) setting. On the contrary, daily contact reinforces a natural understanding of the disability and a reciprocal adaptation. In such a context, one does stop to wonder whether signing or speaking is the right approach. Indeed there are no ideological constraints, provided that the communicative act can take place. This is also why, in these settings, the deaf have been able to be educated when the opportunity arises. Those who have left a trace are most often remembered because of their having belonged to a noble family.

The Medieval period however, most notably in its hagiographies, points to a wider range of social origins. This is not really surprising, given that it was generally the religious orders that took responsibility for the education of deaf children and adults. Putting aside the strictly miraculous aspect of these narratives, we can speak of cases in which the deaf are taught to read, speak and write. Admittedly, this is not a common phenomenon, but why should it be in a society where the vast majority was illiterate? At the same time, it shows that there was no doubt about a deaf person's ability to be educated.

#### *The Birth of Gutenberg's Universe and Modern Times*

The real turning point in the European history of the deaf took place at the end of the Middle Ages. Although not directly affected by the more coercive measures that resulted in the social marginalization of certain groups (the poor, prostitutes, lepers, indigent cripples, etc. ), the deaf nevertheless suffered at the hands of a process of social normalization based on a new model of social advancement, in which bourgeois conceptions of education and know-how, necessarily urban, became indispensable.

The city produced a dual and paradoxical effect: while allowing the deaf to interact among themselves and develop a form sign language (as Montaigne noted), it also forced them into a new

way of living in which education took first place and grass roots solidarity no longer operated. At the same time, artists and men of letters more or less farsighted took a live and critical interest in the deaf. Montaigne, for instance, acknowledged the existence, already in the animal kingdom, of what we call gestural communication. He added:

... In the same way our own deaf-mutes argue, debate, and tell stories by signs ... I observed some who were so nimble and adept at it that in truth there was nothing in the art of making themselves understood that escaped them ... .

Then, taking obvious delight, he made a list of commonly-used human gestures, along with their corresponding meanings. He described hand and head movements, those of the eyebrows and shoulders. He concluded:

None of their movements fails to talk a meaningful language which does not have to be learned, a language common to us all. This suggests (given the variety and usage among spoken languages) that we must judge it inherent to human nature. I will leave aside what necessity can teach men in individual cases of particular need, as well as finger alphabets, gestural grammars, and those branches of learning conducted and expressed through them, and, finally, those people who, according to Pliny, have no other tongue.

He makes his meaning clearer below:

If it is objected that the naturally deaf (that is to say, those born deaf) never learn to talk at all, I have the following answer: it is not simply because they are unable to receive instruction in speech through the ear but rather because of the intimate relation which exists between the faculty of hearing (the power they are deprived of) and the faculty of speech, which are bound together by a natural thread: our way of speaking is such that it first sounds in our own ears, then we utter it into the ear of other people.<sup>23</sup>

Leonardo Da Vinci, who was equally receptive to the gestural expression of the deaf, suggested that painters develop their powers of observation in the same way as deaf-mutes:

One day in Florence I saw a man who had become deaf as a result of an accident. He could not understand you if you spoke to him loudly; but if you spoke softly without letting the voice utter any sound, he understood you merely from the movement of the lips. Perhaps you'll say: 'But does not the person who speaks loudly move his lips in the same way as one speaking softly? And since the one moves his lips like the other, will not the one be understood like the other?' As to this, I leave it to your own experiments to draw a conclusion ... .<sup>24</sup>

If in the above quote it is essentially a matter of lip reading, in the quote below the painter directly addresses the question of expression:

To be well educated one could do well by imitating the speech of a mute, expressing what lies in his soul by the use of his hands, eyes, eyebrows, and entire body. And do not mock me because I offer you a teacher without language to teach you an art he does not know: he will teach you with deeds while the others use only words.<sup>25</sup>

Rabelais, on the other hand, who is more of a pragmatist and very up to date on the subject as the sources he uses in Chapter 19 of the *Tiers livre* show, does not hide the comic ambiguities of this form of communication. In the following chapter (20) he displays the full measure of his talent in a description of a dialogue by signs between Nazdecabre and Panurge in which Pantagruel plays the role of learned guide. Using the system of symbolic signs developed by the religious order established by the Venerable Bede, the two carry on a conversation laced with buffoonery.<sup>26</sup> The comic aspect of their discourse derives from the way in which each gesture – whether it be a sneeze or something else – is interpreted.

It is not Montaigne and Rabelais but other authors who begin to project their own long-winded agendas onto the deaf and their forms of gestural communication. These speculations center around themes related to the origin of language (an ancient area of speculation but which gained new life after the sixteenth century), universal communication, etc. The deaf thus became objects of theoretical speculation in these first intellectual laboratories, their own history gradually effaced in favor of those of their instructors.

#### *The Infatuation with Methods of Teaching the Deaf*

The first official traces of the education of the deaf are to be found in sixteenth century Spain. It was here that the deaf children of noble families were turned over for their education to the Benedictine prelate Pedro Ponce de León (1520-1584), later to Ramirez de Carrión (1584-1660), and finally to Juan Pablo Bonet who wrote, in 1620, *The Reduction of Letters and the Art of Teaching Speech to the Mute*. A contemporary of Pedro Ponce, Ambrosio Moralès, reports in his *Spanish Antiquities* that the monk:

was able to teach deaf-mutes to speak with rare perfection. He is the inventor of this art. He has already taught in this way two brothers and a sister of

the Castillian constable and is currently busy teaching the governor of Aragon's son, who is, like the above-mentioned, a deaf-mute by birth ... His students, while remaining deaf-mutes, write and reason very well.<sup>27</sup>

In the archives of the convent of San Salvador of Ona, where Pedro Ponce lived, can be found the founding documents of a chapel which states that its students:

were able to read, write, calculate, pray aloud, participate in the mass, confess, speak Greek, Latin, and Italian, and could hold forth ably on questions of physics and astronomy. Some have even become competent historians. Their knowledge of science is so vast that even Aristotle would have judged them to be men of talent.<sup>28</sup>

We are thus speaking of a high level of instruction, reserved for members of the aristocracy. Kenelm Digby, nephew of the British Ambassador to Spain, was impressed by these results. He expressed this opinion in one of his own writings in which he makes mention of Juan Pablo Bonet's above-cited work. Himself a member of the British Academy of Sciences, Digby passed this information on to the noted grammarian and mathematician John Wallis. By this means, the question of deaf education became a subject of lively interest among British men of science in the sixteenth century. Doctor John Bulwer,<sup>29</sup> John Wallis,<sup>30</sup> and the Scotsman Delgarno<sup>31</sup> all studied "manual" communication and published their findings. Each offered "his own" method but without consultation or comparison's with the others' results.

France's turn came next. Religious communities continued to welcome the deaf. One of their number, who became an architect in the second half of the seventeenth century, decided to remain among the Prémontré monks of Amiens and to take up the education of young deaf children himself. Only at the end of nineteenth century did the learned functionary Théophile Denis, working in the archives of the province of the Somme, discover the name of this long forgotten "old deaf-mute of Amiens": Etienne de Fay. Thus there existed – and other sources equally attest to it – educational centers for the deaf well before the appearance of Charles Michel de l'Épée. The discrete silence about them only confirms the fact of their continuous existence. However, as their number and objectives were necessarily limited, many parallel initiatives, outside of these structures, were undoubtedly tried.

Home tutors were in particularly strong demand. This type of instruction had the advantage of being adapted to the individual, to the goal of his or her study, and to the kind of deafness involved. This was a long-standing approach, which flourished under the *Ancien Régime*, but not always to the advantage of the deaf: in all cases, it required considerable financial means.

On a more simple level, family members who knew the deaf person well could act as his or her interpreter. In the available documents, it is not always explicitly stated, at least before the sixteenth century, whether deaf persons who could read lips, write and read<sup>32</sup> owed this ability to the efforts of a tutor or to the social group in which he or she lived. Even today, with the development of specialized courses of instruction, it is no secret that recourse to a tutor, in the form of orthophonic lessons and other strategies, remains well ensconced. In addition, parental follow-up is used when practical.

*The Opening of Hostilities: Gesture Versus Speech*

The real debate over methods did not get started until the second half of the eighteenth century. It was centered in France, primarily around the person of the Abbot of l'Épée, although other Europeans also figured prominently.

Some years earlier, a young man who tutored the deaf became known. His name was Jacob Rodriguez Pereire (1715-1780), a Portuguese Jew who had emigrated to France with his family. At age nineteen he took on one of his sisters, who was deaf, as a student and made a study of the various methods of instruction then available, notably those of Juan Pablo Bonet, John Wallis, and of a Swiss national residing in Holland, by the name of Amman, who was the author of a work published in 1692 and entitled *Surdus loquens*. Amman was an ardent defender of speech and opposed to the use of gestures. In 1748, Pereire presented one of his students to the Paris Academy of Sciences, and the academy's report, notably signed by the naturalist Buffon, was full of praise. In 1751, a second report confirmed the success of his work and he was granted a royal pension for life. Although Pereire left no written treatise, his correspondence, along with the testimony of his students, particularly Saboureux de Fontenay, and members of the Academy of Sci-



ences (Buffon, La Condamine), as well as of some philosophers (Diderot, Rousseau), show that in his efforts to teach speech, Pereire made use of tactile sensations (touching the neck in particular) to give the student an understanding of vibration, and that he used both sign language (with phonetic and graphic equivalence) and dactylology (manual alphabet), the signs never being dissociated from their articulation in speech. The content of the education corresponded to that being received by the upper bourgeoisie.

As for Charles Michel de l'Épée (1712-1789), he was an abbot and passionate grammarian. However, his Jansenism put an end to his ecclesiastical ambitions. Having begun to work with deaf children around 1760, he created – thanks to gifts, subsidies and his personal fortune – an institute for the deaf in Paris and published a treatise on the subject in 1776, reworking it for publication in 1784 under the explicit title, *The True Way to Teach the Deaf and the Mute* (*La véritable manière d'instruire les sourds et muets*). L'Épée was opposed both to the methods of his predecessors and even more so to his contemporaries, calling instead for the use of “methodical signs” as the best way to teach the deaf, although with no other aim than to turn them into “good Christians and good workers.” These “methodical signs” corresponded to a kind of signed French which was quite difficult to use because it required the visualization of all grammatical categories (gender, number, tense, etc.); still, in so doing the abbot proved that the hand could play the same role as the voice.

Without going into great detail here, it can be said that this was the beginning of a period in which lines were drawn between the adherents of Épée's gestural method (even if only a form of signed French) and those insisting on the primacy of verbal articulation. Épée's successor, the abbot Sicard, complicated Épée's method, making it unusable, while at the same time some of the deaf themselves condemned its artificial form, which they saw as more like French than a true sign language. Sicard's Godson, Bébien, who could hear, had nevertheless from a young age been educated with the deaf and decided himself to take up the matter, calling for the creation of a true sign language, based on the actual practice of the deaf. As a result, in less than fifty years, the work Épée had started had been subverted from the inside.

The majority of deaf teachers supported the organization created in 1834 by their leader, Ferdinand Berthier, which called for social justice for the deaf. Although deaf teachers opposed the use of hearing teachers in deaf classrooms, deaf teachers were gradually eliminated from the profession during the course of the nineteenth century.

The repercussions of these debates were felt throughout France and beyond. National and international congresses multiplied, with doctors playing a larger and larger part. As early as 1828, the Academy of Medicine in Paris called for a mixed method. Behind the scenes, however, a round of resignations and rehiring was taking place within the Paris Deaf Institute, depending on which group – gesturalist or oralist – currently held sway. The indecision was deep and general, with the first integrated classes opening in French schools in 1847. Other institutions, having decided to follow the gesturalist line, called this approach into question. The voice of the moderates, calling for an ill-defined mixed method – with ideas such as “total communication,” which meant trying all approaches simultaneously, and “bilingualism,” which called for varying amounts of speech, reading and writing in French, and sign language – was drowned out by extremists on both sides. In the end, the oralists won out everywhere in Europe. The triumphal moment for this idea came at the Congress of Milan, held in 1880 under a warm Italian sun. Declaring that there could be no thought without speech, the congress ended with the cry of “*Prima la parola!*”, which had an almost mystico-lyrical effect on the debate over the education of the deaf. This congress had brought together mainly French and Italian instructors, the majority of whom had already chosen the oral method.

If we are to understand what really happened, we can not rely exclusively on what is known about the theoretical debates over methods and languages, and all the realized and unrealized projects that grew out of these debates. These lack the necessary historical contextualization and its accompanying documentation.

For example, in France political developments led to a standardization of instruction and a call for mastery of the national tongue. The groundwork for this was already laid by the abbot Gregory in a series of suggestions attached to a report made to the National

Assembly of the Convention on November 17, 1794. In his report, Gregory, a constitutionally-named Bishop and therefore a “jureur,” insisted “on the necessity of stamping out the dialects and standardizing French usage.” Emphasizing the small number of people who could actually speak and write French correctly, he stated that:

with thirty different dialects, we are, at least as far as language goes, a Tower of Babel ... . The language of a great nation can be standardized so that all its citizens can express their thoughts without hindrance. This enterprise, which has never been fully carried out by any people, is worthy of the French people ... who must, in a single and indivisible Republic, endeavor to establish, at the earliest possible moment, a single and invariable usage for its language and its liberty ... . Without adequate knowledge of the language, domestic tranquillity could be compromised or equality destroyed.

The laws introduced in the 1880s by Jules Ferry are but the culmination of this idea. In Germany too the tone was set by the rise of nationalism, which was seen as a way of increasing social cohesion.

We ought to collate the results of the various measures undertaken: what became of the deaf students attending the various institutes? How did the different methods affect them? For instance, how did the students of *Épée* do, instructed in what could be called a signed version of French? What of Sicard, theoretician of an abstruse form of French, who in practice delegated teaching authority to the deaf students of the institute’s first generation, who taught via sign language? And what happened afterwards, when the institute fell into the hands of an ever more rapidly changing group of directors? At the beginning, under the influence of *Épée*, these institutes tried to serve first and foremost the destitute. Thus the aim of this kind of education remained modest; when ambitions grew, other methods were called for, such as those first suggested by J.R. Pereire. A study of this process remains to be carried out. We can not hope to ascertain the general level of instruction by relying on the works of a small number of deaf persons who mastered the written language sufficiently to have their observations published.

As for the United States, diverse methods have coexisted from the beginning. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, whose wife and daughter were both deaf, set out for Europe to find a teacher to help him set up a school in the United States. After having visited several institutions and without any preconceived ideas concern-

ing method, Gallaudet made the acquaintance of Laurent Clerc, a deaf man who had been educated at the Institute for the Deaf in Paris during Sicard's era. Clerc joined up with Gallaudet. This was how the French system of signing, after a short period of adaptation, took root in the New World. At the same time, Alexander Graham Bell, who was the inventor of the telephone and whose wife was deaf, took the opposite tack, embracing a purely oral method. He went even further in a memoir that was published by the American Academy of Sciences in 1883, entitled *Upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race*. In it he argued that the deaf should avoid contact with each other and not practice intermarriage for fear of perpetuating their deafness and gestural form of communication ... Between these two extremes, many intermediate approaches were developed. Moreover, even when there were tensions between the disputants, this did not prevent them from pursuing their separate experiments in parallel.

#### *Oralist Hegemony*

This was not the case in Europe. In France, for example, until the 1970s the oral method was the official and only one sanctioned for use in special schools for the deaf. It was an idea so popular with a certain segment of the profession that some of their number made a conscious attempt to prevent young deaf people from signing. Their basic argument was developed as early as the nineteenth century: because gesture and speech are incompatible, gesturing can inhibit the development of speech (an idea that deaf signers now mirror, claiming that speech is harmful to the practice of sign language).

In a broader sense, however, indifference to the problem seems to have predominated. The discussion of deafness was limited to those directly concerned with it, and in all likelihood the actual practice in schools was based on a compromise, without any kind of *a priori* method or ambitious pedagogical aims.

After 1945, however, a change took place. The parents of deaf children, faced with this pedagogical void, took it upon themselves to create associations and to seek out teachers who were prepared to meet the challenge of creating true national standards for the education of the deaf. At the same time, orthophony was

being recognized as an independent discipline, a branch of which was specifically devoted to the education of the deaf. However, sign languages as such were still not accepted, their use being limited to communication among the deaf in special boarding schools and clubs and residence halls outside of school.

The turning point came during the sixth and seventh congresses of the World Federation of the Deaf, held in 1971 and 1975. The seventh congress, which took place at the renowned Gallaudet University in Washington D.C., where virtually all courses are held in sign language, brought together not only the deaf and their parents but researchers from the fields of sociology and linguistics. Minority liberation and the right to be different were very much in the political air of the time. After a series of initiatives, sign languages were finally accepted as legitimate throughout Europe. Nevertheless, in spite of these legislative openings, the actual practice of sign languages has remained more or less limited.

#### *What Are We Talking About?*

The real questions lie beyond this relative inertia. In 1960, with the publication of *Sign Language Structure, An Outline of the Visual Communication Systems of the American Deaf*, the American linguist W.C. Stokoe became the first to show, through an analysis of the American Sign Language (A.S.L.), that sign languages, both in their components and expression, were worthy of the name of a true language. This thus became the first of a series of similar studies, based on the sign systems used by the deaf in various countries, to argue for the recognition of sign as a language in its own right. Recently, the French university system has begun to accept dissertations studying the French sign language and the deaf themselves. Thus the status of S.L. as a separate language enjoys the support of some of France's most respected institutions. But does the matter stop here? It is of course true that the critics of S.L. have used the following argument over and over again: sign languages are not languages; at best they are an elaborate form of mimicry whose form (and content, by the nature of things) remains crude if not "animalistic." There is no point in rehashing the list of charges leveled against this form of communication that comes so naturally to the deaf. Most of them have in fact been answered, although some

professionals in the field have clearly continued to resist signing; nor should we underestimate the spontaneous reaction of people not part of the deaf world (in this sense, fascination and rejection are part of the same process).

On the other hand, a more important issue is how much time and attention to devote to the search for potential connections between national and sign languages. Bilingualism, which offers the strategic advantage of a bilateral mastery of communication, is generally encouraged, although in practice it has yet to be universally accepted. There are both theoretical and material reasons for this. To begin with, the creation and financing of special structures for the deaf is burdensome to the community at large, especially in times of fiscal constraint. At the same time, with the possible exception of the Scandinavian countries which seem to have struck a workable balance, the opposition between sign and speech, based on the idea of their mutual harmfulness, has not been eradicated and continues to thwart certain initiatives. Moreover, an atmosphere of mutual suspicion characterizes the relationship between hearing and deaf professionals in the field. The former fear a deterioration in their students' command of the national language, while the latter are apprehensive about the danger of S.L. being "polluted" by hearers who attempt to use sign language. The former recommend an early acquisition of the spoken language, justifying it on the grounds of the progressive loss of brain plasticity with age. The latter counter this argument by asserting that oral instruction is pointless because the mastery of S.L. alone will guarantee the deaf student direct access to the country's written language. However, there is no conclusive data to back up this point. Others refuse to enter into this either/or polemic,<sup>33</sup> believing instead that the European sign languages may evolve in the direction of their national languages or that they at least can eventually be studied in the schools, their lexical content enriched in becoming part of the regular curriculum. The United States, by analyzing the results of the various approaches tested over the years on its territory, can provide crucial data in resolving these disagreements. For the time being, however, the echo received in Europe continues to nourish some doubts ...

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What conclusions can be drawn from this admittedly introductory presentation of the relationship between deafness and society? All too often we find the actual data being obscured by analyses and conclusions that are overcharged with ideological agendas. In particular, the diversity and variety of the deaf must be constantly kept in mind by both the professional community and the general public. Keeping lines of communication open between the various participants (families, physicians, psychologists, orthophonists, etc.) is an indispensable condition for improving the overall situation of the deaf and for creating a change of atmosphere that will mitigate the potentially pernicious effects of both ideological passion and indifference. Since it is clear that there is no single solution to the problem, it is essential that there be as much free choice as possible among the various approaches.

This variety of needs and responses is present, in outline form, in the very history of the deaf. Both the deaf and hearing have shown the ability to live together, at times even manifesting the wisdom necessary to accept the existence of limits to what they can share. There have been people with faith in the intellectual capacities of the deaf, and the deaf have proven them right. However, these encounters have remained largely haphazard. The creation of schools for the deaf was a more revolutionary step, although not so much in the methods developed there (in essence, not much more innovative than those regularly practiced in the past), as in the intention to extend the right of education to all the deaf. Yet this idea also contained the seed from which later disputes would grow.

The situation of the deaf, although still full of conflict and ambiguity, has entered a promising phase. The willingness of professionals to focus on the many sides of the question, and to draw into the debate an ever larger number of those concerned, promises to produce reflection and future initiatives. The decisive factor, however, will be the response of the deaf themselves, acting not out of anger or frustration (as important as it was for it to be expressed), but possessing enough education and self-confidence to express themselves (by speech, sign, or in writing) no less ably than the various specialists who can hear, and to take control of their own destiny.

## Notes

1. In the sense of gestural signals as used by the deaf.
2. M. Medoff, *Children of a Lesser God. A play in Two Acts*, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1987, p. 84.
3. Mark Medoff's play was first produced on Broadway in 1980. The American film version of it earned the deaf actress Marlee Matlin (who has not been afraid to take speaking roles in other films) an Oscar, while its French stage version won a Molière award for the deaf actress Emmanuelle Laborit. The context of the play lent itself quite well to an exploration, along the lines of political correctness, of the themes of difference and minority experience.
4. See, for example, the medieval farce *Le Chaudronnier* (ed. by A. Tissier), Paris, 1984, p. 71.
5. This notion is well brought out by J. Dardenne, himself a deaf person, in his *L'Expérience d'intégration urbaine des sourds. Une approche du handicap incident*, thèse universitaire, University of Bordeaux II, 1992; it has been taken up by the sociologist Bernard Mottez in the term "handicap induit."
6. Some American and European linguists who have worked on sign language argue that, if deaf children acquire sign language correctly, they will then possess a linguistic structure adequate to master reading and writing, in spite of the differences of syntactic construction. On this point see D. Bouvet, *La Parole de l'enfant. Pour une éducation bilingue de l'enfant sourd*, Paris, 1989, pp. 289-333.
7. C. Padden and T. Humphries, *Deaf in America. Voices from a Culture*, Cambridge, Mass., 1988, pp. 111ff.
8. On this question, see the article by Yau Shun-chiu below.
9. Currently a distinction is made between actual sign languages (S.L.), which were spontaneously developed by the deaf themselves and possess a syntax of their own without regard to our spoken and written languages, and sign systems that have been adapted to the languages of the countries in which they are used (and which are called *pidgin* by the supporters of S.L.), as well as gestural codes such as Cued Speech, the French *Langue Parlée Complète*, or other versions to which orthophonists have recourse.
10. Among parental offenses, the most important are violations of sexual taboos, classic expressions of which are to be found in Jewish and Islamic writings. Thus, in the eyes of the community, a child afflicted with a disability is revealing the sins of his parents.
11. I wish to thank Jean Botteno who gave me this valuable information.
12. Plato, *Cratylus*, Cambridge, Mass., 1963, XXXIV, 423a and 423s.
13. Aristotle, *Poetics*, Ann Arbor, 1967, IV, 2.
14. Idem, *De sensu and de memoria*, New York, 1973, 437a.
15. Lucretius, *De natura rerum*, V, 1050-1055; Cicero, *Tusculanes*, V; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, XXXV, 21 (where the young deaf-mute Quintus Pedius is characterized as a talented painter).
16. G. Durand, *Le Rational ou Manuel des divins offices*, 6 vols., Paris 1848-54, pp. 352f.
17. In our day the very same kind of irritation is caused by those who demand the right to their difference, in this case deaf people who sign and who are voluntarily opposed (or at least in appearance, many of them having in fact experienced failure) to the use of hearing aids and other such devices. Instead



they loudly and forcefully “signal” their belonging to another culture, that of deaf people. Here the label “stranger” or “foreigner” which has been defended in works of ethnolinguistics (C. Cuxac) and neurology (O. Sacks), becomes a coat of arms. ... On this idea of “deaf culture” which was born in the United States, see the article by Patrick Seamans below, or the dissertation by Philippe Sero-Guillaume, *L'interprétation en Langue des Signes Française*, which was defended in 1994 at the Ecole supérieure d'interprètes et de traducteurs, Sorbonne, Paris III.

18. St. Paul, “Epistle to the Galatians,” in: *The Holy Bible* (King James Version), pp. 1157ff.
19. According to documents, the first communities to propose the acceptance of deaf children were in the French province of Lorraine (Bouxières-aux-Dames) and in Austria (Ossiach) in the tenth century.
20. R. Chartier, “La naissance de la marginalité,” in: *L'Histoire*, 43 (March 1982), pp. 106ff.
21. A. de Saint-Loup, “Les voies du sourd-muet dans l'Occident médiéval,” in: D. Jacquart (ed.), *Comprendre et maîtriser la nature au Moyen Age* (Essays in honor of G. Beaujouan), Paris, 1994, pp. 205ff.
22. Yau, S.-c., *Création gestuelle et débuts du langage*, Paris, 1992.
23. Montaigne, *Essais*, Book II, Paris, 1969, Vol. II, Ch. 12, pp. 120f., 125.
24. *Carnets de Léonard de Vinci*, excerpted from the *Codice Atlantico* and translated by L. Servicen, fol. 139 r.d., Vol. II, Paris, 1942, p. 275.
25. L. de Vinci, *Traité de la peinture*, Paris, 1910, Ch. 14, pp. 163-73.
26. Rabelais, *Le Tiers Livre*, Chs. 19 and 20.
27. Quoted in: Feijoo, *Teatro critico universal* (1726), Clásicos Castellanos, 1924, Vol. II, p. 292.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 150f.
29. See his *Chironomia* and his *Chirologia* of 1644, followed in 1648 by *Philosophe* (or Friend of the deaf-mutes).
30. See his *De loquela* of 1653.
31. See his *Ars signorum* of 1661 and his *Didascalocophus* (or Tutor of the deaf and mute) of 1680.
32. In the fourteenth century, the Italian jurist Bartole described, in his *Digesta Nova* (II, 45), a deaf man by the name of Nellus Gabrielis who was able to read lips. Also in the fourteenth century, Cardinal Nicolas of Cues described a deaf woman who practiced lip reading with her daughter (*Le tableau ou la vision de Dieu*, XXII, 1453), while the philosopher Rodolphe Agricola, a lecturer at Heidelberg University who died in 1485, mentions a deaf man who could read and write, but did not speak (*De inventione dialectica*, III, 16). It was this example that led the humanist Jerome Cardan (1501-1576) to affirm, perhaps a bit too hastily, that a deaf person could learn directly to read and write (*Paralipomenona*, III, 8, and *De utilitate ex adversis capienda*, II, 7).
33. P. Sero-Guillaume (note 17 above).