

Affirming Writing: Affirming Language for Discussing Deaf People and Signed Languages

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Deaf people have historically been treated as incapable of language, with signed languages viewed as impoverished unstructured gestures. Since the 1960s, linguists have challenged this view by demonstrating that signed languages are as robust and rule-governed as spoken languages. However, misconceptions persist, and because of common folk beliefs about the connection between linguistic ability and intelligence, deaf people are often described from a deficit perspective with respect to hearing people, as in the following title and abstract from a 2021 book chapter (particularly problematic wording is highlighted in red):

“Implementation of **Hand Gesture Recognition System to Aid Deaf-Dumb** People”

In recent years, the population of deaf-**dumb victims** has increased because of **birth defects and other issues**. [...] **Linguistic communication** provides the most effective conversation platform for the **mute** person to **speak** with an **ordinary** person.

https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-15-8391-9_14

In addition to antiquated and inappropriate vocabulary (“deaf-dumb”, “mute”), this chapter frames deaf people as needing “aid” because they “victims” of “birth defects” who do not have “linguistic communication” allowing them “speak” with “ordinary” people.

The entire basis of this research (hand gesture recognition as something of use to deaf people) is also problematic. It is part of a long trend of hearing people with little or no understanding of deaf people, deaf culture, or signed languages, trying to build some technology to “help” deaf people, without working with them to find out what kind of technology they actually want and need (see Hill 2020 for discussion of this issue).

Had the authors worked with deaf people from the beginning, they could have avoided both the pointless research and the hurtful language of this work. This is a key takeaway when writing about deaf people or any other marginalized group: engage with the group itself, either directly by working with the people or through literature and research published by members of the group. If you want to write about deaf people, consult deaf people and/or work by deaf scholars.

Another way in which writing can be problematic when it comes to deaf people and signed languages is when they are left out completely, as in the following course titles from UofT's Department of Linguistics:

LIN101: Introduction to Linguistics: **Sound** Structure

LIN229: **Sound** Patterns in Language

Spoken languages are not the only languages with phonology, and though linguistics has included signed languages since the 1960s, they are still often minimized or even ignored in general discussions, instead being treated as a special topic. We should instead be fully incorporating signed languages into our general linguistics courses. Having a dataset on handshape in American Sign Language should be no more remarkable than a dataset on vowel harmony in Turkish. Thus, both LIN101 and LIN229 should cover the phonology of signed languages, and more appropriate course titles would be:

LIN101: Introduction to Linguistics: **Phonological** Structure

LIN229: **Phonological** Patterns in Language

or: LIN229: **Introduction to Phonology**

Even the Linguistic Society of America ignores signed languages in general discussions, as in the following blurb from their “What is Linguistics?” page:

In a nutshell: Linguistics is the scientific study of language. Linguists apply the scientific method to conduct formal studies of **speech sounds**, grammatical structures, and meaning across the world’s 6,000+ **languages**.

<https://www.linguisticsociety.org/what-linguistics>

This blurb could be improved by giving explicit mention of signed languages, and expanding the notion of phonology beyond just speech sounds:

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. Linguists apply the scientific method to conduct formal studies of speech sounds, **signs**, grammatical structures, and meaning across the world’s 6,000+ languages, **both spoken and signed**

or: Linguistics is the scientific study of language. Linguists apply the scientific method to conduct formal studies of **the physical properties**, grammatical structures, and meaning across the world’s 6,000+ languages, **both spoken and signed**

When signed languages are mentioned, it's important to discuss them in appropriate ways. There is a common misconception that there is only one universal signed language, when in fact, there are 100–300 of them across the world. They are distinct and often not mutually

intelligible. Thus, avoid writing singular “**signed language**” and instead use the plural “**signed languages**” (or the name of a specific signed language, like American Sign Language; as with English in discussing spoken languages, ASL is often taken as in implicit default for signed languages, but it is good practice to always name a specific language if that is what is intended).

When contrasting signed languages with spoken languages, avoid “**verbal language**”, and use “**spoken language**” instead. *Verbal* has multiple meanings, one of which is just having words at all, so contrasting signed languages with “verbal” language can imply that signed languages don’t have words or word-like structures, which is false.

There are also evolving conventions with terminology related to signed languages, so it is important to proceed with caution and get up-to-date information when possible. For example, signed languages have been called both “sign languages” and “signed languages”. For a while, “signed languages” was avoided to prevent confusion with signed version of spoken languages (like Signed Exact English). However, just in the past few years, there has been a shift towards using “signed languages” instead of “sign languages”, though both are common.

There has also historically been a distinction made between lowercase “deaf” as a physiological condition and uppercase “Deaf” as a cultural identity. The distinction was largely centred on the use of a signed language, but this has been increasingly called into question as problematic gate-keeping that has excluded some deaf people for not being sufficiently proficient in a signed language (usually due to lack of signed language usage at home or in school). Deaf scholars and activists are increasingly using lowercase “deaf” only, though again, this is still in flux, and much current writing still uses the “deaf/Deaf” distinction.

Related to this is the concept of a “native signer”. More than 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents, so many of them do not get robust signed linguistic input in their early years. This means that many deaf people would not count under strict definitions of “native signer”. Part of rejecting the “deaf/Deaf” distinction has included rejecting the distinction between “native” and “non-native” signers. Linguists, however, are quite obsessed with the linguistic purity of their experimental participants, so many still insist upon collecting data only from “native” signers and speakers (unless explicitly studying second-language acquisition). Rejecting this distinction is part of a larger trend in linguistics to recognize the validity of any language user’s overall linguistic competence, integrated all languages and dialects they have access to. Again, proceed with caution in this area, and be certain you even need the notion of “native” signer in your work.

Hill, Joseph. 2020. Do deaf communities actually want sign language gloves? *Nature Electronics* 3. 512–513.