

9. 1950-1985 - Emergence of Studies on American Sign Language

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Introduction

Before the formation of a national signed language, many deaf people did not realize that they have their own signed language to communicate. As discussed in previous chapters, after its creation at the American Asylum, signed language was taught and used by many teachers and deaf individuals, causing the language to spread throughout the country. However, during that time, signed language was not considered a formal language, just a more effective form of communication. Dr. William C. Stokoe was the first to claim that the signed language is a formal language and called it, “American Sign Language” (ASL). ASL was just as much a language as all the other languages in the world. It took a while for people, both hearing and deaf, to believe Stokoe’s claim, but it became increasingly impactful on the deaf community and those who interact with them. As more people recognized ASL for the formal and complex language that it was, people began to understand that being deaf did not mean they were defective, and it did not mean that they interacted in an inferior way, just a different way. Most of the historical information on ASL as discussed came from different articles: Baker and Battison, Eastman, R. Stokoe, and Wilcox and Wilcox.

Background

The origin of ASL is complex as it involved a combination of different signed languages but its creation mostly came from the establishment of the American Asylum by Thomas Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc in 1817. Deaf students from all over New England brought their own forms of

signed communication, their home signs. ASL was created from a combination of various signed languages, specifically Martha's Vineyard Sign Language, French Sign Language, and signed languages from Indigenous people. Even though it grew into an effective form of communication, it was not perceived as a proper, legitimate language for over a century.

As more deaf schools opened, graduates from the American Asylum spread ASL throughout the country. However, as the oralist movement grew the use of signed language diminished. Signed language was frowned upon and seen as inferior by the oralists, which caused many deaf individuals to believe that as well. While signed language was still taught by manualists, it was not until Stokoe that the language was studied and broken down into linguistic principles.

William Stokoe, Who is He?



William Stokoe was born in New Hampshire but was raised in West Virginia and New York. Stokoe first studied at Cornell University and majored in English. He supported himself with a plethora of part-time jobs that gave him a wide array of skills. Stokoe graduated from Cornell and then proceeded to earn his doctorate, studying Old and Middle English. After this, Stokoe

became an assistant professor and later the chairman of the English Department at Wells College. He was then invited to become an English professor and the chairman of the English Department at Gallaudet College, what we now know as Gallaudet University. He took the offer, and from there, his interest and fascination with ASL and linguistics grew.

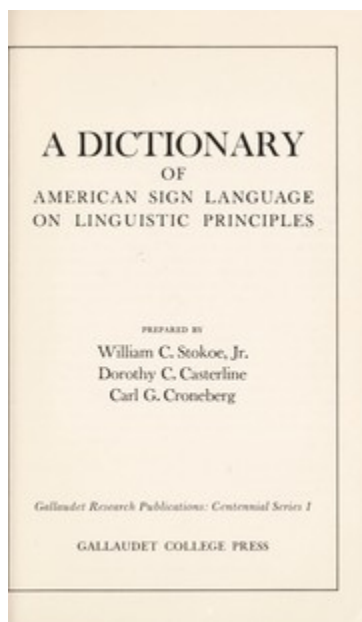
While at Gallaudet, Stokoe taught English but was given several grants for his research into the linguistics of ASL and other signed languages in the World. He traveled across the country, and even internationally, to compare the signed words used at Gallaudet to the signed words used elsewhere. Later, Stokoe retired from teaching English and became the Director of the Linguistics Research Laboratory. Stokoe became well known, especially in the deaf community, for his advocacy of signed language and linguistic research.

The Emergence of American Sign Language Linguistics

When Stokoe first arrived at Gallaudet, many were opposed to his presence. Many felt he had only been offered a job because he was friends with the Dean. Deaf students and faculty thought he shouldn't be at Gallaudet because he had only just started learning signed language, and his inability to sign fluently would be detrimental to them. He struggled with learning how to sign though that did not stop him from teaching and continuing to learn. As Stokoe taught at Gallaudet, his interest in linguistics grew further, particularly the linguistics of ASL. As he learned and understood more of the signed language they used, he began to analyze it, separating it into defined linguistic properties and structure.

Many deaf students and faculty were opposed to his research when they learned of it. They felt that if anyone was going to break their language apart to analyze it, it should at least be a deaf person who was fluent in it. This did not deter Stokoe, and in his analysis, he developed a form

of written signed language. His written language was called Stokoe Notation and required an original font made primarily from special symbols. Stokoe's research led him to believe that ASL had all the properties of a proper language and therefore was, in fact, a legitimate language. Despite the adversity his work faced, he continued to research and published "Sign Language Structure: An Outline of the Visual Communication Systems of the American Deaf." He also worked with two deaf signed language linguists, Casterline and Croneberg, and they "A Dictionary of American Sign Language." It was the first dictionary that outlined the linguistic principles of ASL and it helped people begin to see the importance of his work and understand the validity of his claim.



Deaf People's Reactions to American Sign Language

At first, the deaf community was opposed to having the idea of ASL as a language. It wasn't that deaf people were opposed to signed language; they just felt the terms and structure Stokoe associated their language with were an inaccurate representation. The term "American Sign Language" itself caused many to be concerned that people would get their beautiful language

mixed up with the type of signs the American Indigenous used. The structure Stokoe analyzed ASL to have also concerned many people because the sentences weren't structured like they were in English. Instead of signing "I think the red car is expensive" word for word like it is spoken in English, Stokoe noticed that many people actually signed "Me think car red expensive." Many deaf people were opposed to this realization. Deaf people had been conditioned to believe that English was superior. They felt that ASL was a low language because it was not grammatically correct according to the rules of English. This kind of thinking had shifted when deaf people realized that ASL is their language through a number of emerging studies on ASL in the 1970s.

Conclusion

It took time, but eventually, the deaf community accepted that ASL was indeed their language. For a long time, Stokoe had not changed it or made it lower but, in fact, embraced it - despite his own inability to sign fluently - and broke it down so others could do the same. Stokoe traveled all over the country and globally and inspired others to study signed language linguistics as well. More than that, though, Stokoe inspired people to always be true about their language. ASL was the true language of the deaf community, and Stokoe believed that deaf people, as well as hearing people, should embrace it. Others took after him and began teaching ASL in classrooms. Professors were inspired to create new courses that helped those who struggled with learning ASL, whether they were hearing or deaf. ASL became a defining feature in deaf people's cultural identity. Stokoe was internationally known as an advocate for ASL, and many deaf honor him as the Father of Sign Language Linguistics.[SSR3]

Required readings:

Baker, C., & Battison, R. (1980). Introduction. In *Sign language and the deaf community: Essays in honor of William Stokoe* (pp. vii-vx). The National Association of the Deaf.

Eastman, G. (1980). From student to professional: A personal chronicle of sign language. In *Sign language and the deaf community: Essays in Honor of William Stokoe* (pp.9-32). The National Association of the Deaf.

Stokoe, R. (1980). William Clarence Stokoe, Jr.: The person behind the story. In *Sign language and the deaf community: Essays in Honor of William Stokoe* (pp. 3-8). The National Association of the Deaf.

Wilcox, S., & Wilcox, P. P. (1997). *Learning to see: Teaching American Sign Language as a second language, 2nd edition*. Gallaudet University Press.

Media:

Image 1:

This image is from: <http://49640318.weebly.com/william-stokoe.html>

Attribution: "[William Stokoe](#)" by [Unknown](#) is in the [Public Domain](#)

This image is of William Stokoe, a former professor at Gallaudet University. He helped create the first American Sign Language Dictionary in 1965.

Image 2:

Image from: https://openlibrary.org/publishers/Gallaudet_Press

Attribution: "[Dictionary of American Sign Language](#)" by [William C. Stokoe Jr](#) is in the [Public Domain](#)

This image is of the first dictionary on American Sign Language that was published in the 1960s. The publication of this book led to the study of ASL as a language and not just a form of communication.

Okrent, A. (2016). *The story of ASL* [Webstreaming, 3 min]. Arika Okrent Production.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=betAZeKRpR8>