

## **SEEING ESSENTIAL ENGLISH: A SIGN SYSTEM OF ENGLISH**

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Don Juan Pablo Bonet . . . Charles Michel, Abbe de l'Epee . . . Laurent Clerc . . . Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet . . . Zenas F. Westervelt . . . David A. Anthony. You will recognize the names of these gentlemen in the field of the education of the deaf. John Bolling . . . Alice Cogswell . . . Randy Vrzal . . . Todd Hicks. The names of these deaf children may not be familiar to you, but they become the warp and woof of our design as we look at the development of SEEING ESSENTIAL ENGLISH.

To begin with, let's meet, briefly, John Bolling. Master Bolling was the son of Major Thomas Bolling, citizen of Cobbs, Chesterfield County, Virginia. He was, as far as can be determined, the first American deaf child to receive a formal education. This boy was sent by his father across the Atlantic to the Braidwood School in Edinburgh, Scotland. This was in 1771. Unhappily, there is very little to say about his success, for he died soon after his return to his home in Virginia in 1773.

It was about ten years before John Bolling went to Edinburgh — in the early 1760's — that schools for the deaf were opened, almost simultaneously, by the Abbe de l'Epee in France, Samuel Heinicke in Germany, and Thomas Braidwood in Great Britain. The Abbe de l'Epee came across two deaf girls in Paris and after unsuccessful attempts to converse with them he decided it was Heaven's will that he should come to the rescue of the deaf. He started a school in Paris and set to work inventing a system of manual signs by which the deaf could converse. His inspiration came from a book on educating the deaf which had been written by a Spaniard, Don Juan Pablo Bonet. The Abbe could not read Spanish, but he found a one-hand manual alphabet diagrammed in the book. He learned this alphabet and proceeded to devise a system of signs. The sign language the Abbe invented is essentially the same sign language used by the deaf in the United States today; we shall refer to it as American Sign Language (ASL).

Next, let's meet Alice Cogswell; this young lady we all know quite well. She was the daughter of Dr. Mason Fitch Cogswell, neighbor of the Gallaudet family. Dr. Cogswell and a group of his friends raised some money to send young Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet to Europe to study the methods used in the education of the deaf, so that he might return and help in the education of Alice Cogswell. It is a familiar story about how Gallaudet was frustrated in his attempts to gain information from the schools in London and Edinburgh, how he met the

Abbe de l'Epee's successor, the Abbe Sicard, and how, after three months, he returned to America to establish the school in Hartford, Connecticut.

Gallaudet brought with him a deaf teacher from the Paris school, a brilliant young man by the name of Laurent Clerc. If you should ever browse through early issues of the *American Annals of the Deaf*, you will discover the witty, erudite writings of this extraordinary deaf teacher. Today, French vestiges are found in the American Sign Language, as in the following examples:

<i>English Word:</i>	<i>French Word:</i>	<i>Hand-shape used:</i>
Good	Bon	B
Hundred	Cent	C
Thousand	Mille	M
Other	Autre	A
Seek/Search	Chercher	C

It was Samuel Heinicke of Germany who made the first real effort to teach orally, although it is interesting to note that he corresponded with the Abbe de l'Epee while planning his oral system. The work of the Abbe de l'Epee and Heinicke is of special importance to us because their methods of educating the deaf were—and in most cases still are—the methods used in America. Since the mid-1800's the only major offshoot from these two schools of educational methodology is the "Rochester Method" developed by Zenas Westervelt.

Almost 100 years after the establishment of Gallaudet College a young deaf man by the name of David A. Anthony had recently graduated from that college. It is the Summer of '62, and he is leafing through a copy of *LIFE* magazine.

He pauses to read an article entitled "The English Language" by Lincoln Barnett. Among other things, the article talked about Basic English:

While collaborating on a book, *The Meaning of Meaning*, two Cambridge Scholars, C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, discovered that a few hundred key words could do all the real work in their analyses of other words and idioms. After ten years of lexicological labor, Ogden evolved what is known as Basic English—an elixir, distilled from the ancient wine of our language, of 850 volatile, versatile words that can say just about anything that needs to be said in ordinary talk.

That September David A. Anthony joined the Deaf Research Project at Lapeer State Home in Lapeer, Michigan. The Project staff began the program with Basic English, and they were using the sign language (ASL). The first thing that hit these deaf teachers of the deaf was that more than half of the 850 words of Basic English had no signs. There were no signs for such commonplace nouns as BAG, FRUIT, etc., and no signs for such ordinary words as SUCH, SORT,

QUITE, THE, etc. On the other hand, they had more signs than they had words. There were three different signs for the word GLASS, and three more for the one word HAVE.

Let me now quote Mr. Anthony, as he writes about this period:

If we as teachers were disturbed, we tried to gloss over it. Not so the children. Two anecdotes come to mind: One morning we came across GLASS as a new word, and the students were given the three different and common meanings of GLASS: 1. drinking glass, 2. window glass, and 3. eye glasses. That was pretty straightforward, with appropriate drawings on the blackboard. However, each of these items had a different and unrelated sign. One boy said that this should not be so: a glass is a glass is a glass. At times like this, the classroom situation becomes teacher-centered; authority prevailed.

A few days later this same boy, apropos of nothing, came up to the teacher and said, "Better (sign)." (Here, he demonstrated an entirely new and unfamiliar sign: the G hand sweeping from the eye to the palm of the other hand.) This conversation followed:

Teacher: "Better what?"

Boy: "Better (sign)."

Teacher: "What is (sign)?"

Boy: "You know, G . . . ss. Can't spell. Window."

Teacher: Wrote on blackboard: GLASS

Boy: "Yes, yes, yes. (sign)."

Teacher: (Fingerspelling) G-L-A-S-S. Why (sign)?"

This boy then explained:

G hand at eye, "For eye (glasses)"

G hand sweeping down, "For window through see"

G hand on other palm, "For water drink"

So, we accepted that sign for glass.

The second anecdote concerns the verb *to Be*. The kids were introduced to AM, IS, and ARE, and told that this was the sign: (the one sign for this verb and all its inflections is made by putting an index finger to the lips and then taking it out and down. Incidentally, this is also the sign for these words: REAL, REALLY, TRUE, TRULY, TRUTHFUL, TRUTHFULLY, SURE, SURELY, EXIST, EXISTENCE, and a few others!). The kids demanded changes, and so we devised the manual alphabet A hand for AM, the I hand for IS, the R hand for ARE, and the B hand for BE, all with the same movement from the lips out and down.

The more advanced students soon insisted on having definite signs for such verb endings such as: -LY, -AL, -TION, and so on because of the frequency with which they appeared.

Logic was on the side of these kids. COMING is not the same as COME; HE is not HIM; SHE is neither HER or HERS; SEE is

not SEES; nor is DOG, DOGS. And so S. E. E. began.

I mentioned earlier the erudition of Laurent Clerc; Mr. Anthony has this style in the use of English, and his writing is marked with wit and charm. His subject is language, his concern is the deaf child, and his abiding interest is in ways that this deaf child can learn the English language. He notes that "...deaf children *will* sign" and goes on to say: "Since deaf children will sign, they might as well be taught to sign right!" He says, regarding methodological points of view, "...our profession, that of teaching the deaf, can be compared to a Texas long-horn: there are two widely separated points – and a heck of a lot of bull in between."

Mr. Anthony knows the research, and points out: "Early manual communication will not, does not, and cannot impede or impair acquisition of language and expression of speech (language does precede speech!). And the converse is true: manual communication will, does, and can enhance educational achievement, social maturity, and personality development as well as language and speech." He cites the studies by Quigley and Frisina, Stevenson, Montgomery, Birch and Stuckless, Vernon and Meadow. Further, he states that the basic premise – and the promise – of S. E. E. is the presentation of English as a visual, visible medium to complement speech, and not the communication of concepts per se as in the traditional sign language.

It seems to me that a major point made in *They Grow in Silence* is that if early manual communication – meaning the use of American Sign Language – can enhance the deaf child's academic and emotional growth, how much greater would be that growth if the deaf child could be surrounded by English from the earliest possible moment. Let there be no mistake about it, ASL is *not* English. It is a language unto itself, expressive, often beautiful, but nevertheless a language that has its own morphology, syntax and semantics.

Let's take a look at two of the idioms of ASL, two out of a multitude of idioms that are commonly found in the language of the deaf in America.

1. Touch finish Denver?
2. Mind, stun, me.

Translated into English, "Touch finish Denver" can mean "Have you been to Denver" or it can mean "I have been to Denver." "Mind, stun, me" is a bit more difficult to translate, but essentially it means "I was so surprised that I couldn't do anything for a while."

I think that it is clear that the average deaf child is deprived of the opportunity to learn his native language. In the July issue of *Psychology Today* I was struck by this passage from the article by Dan Slobin "They learn the same way all around the world." "It is frightening to think what an enormous number of grammatical forms are poured over the poor head of the young child. And he, as if it were nothing at all, adjusts to all this chaos, constantly sorting out into rubrics the disorderly elements of the words he *hears*, without noticing as

he does this, his gigantic effort. If an adult had to master so many grammatical rules within so short a time, his head would surely burst. In truth, the young child is the hardest mental toiler on our planet. Fortunately, he does not even suspect this." The studies by Lowell and others advise us that lipreading is at best an ambiguous art, and greatly dependent upon inner language to be even half-way efficient. The studies by Stokoe and Bellugi advise us that American Sign Language is not English. Thus, it is no wonder that the average deaf child in the United States does not know English, and is not given the means whereby he may learn and understand the English language. This child comes into adulthood with a handicap in language development that has been insurmountable.

At the start I mentioned two other deaf students, Randy and Todd. In 1968 I had a special class funded through Title VI at Miller School in Jefferson County, just west of Denver. There were eight deaf children in the class, and Randy, age 12, was one of them. Up until that time, all of these youngsters had been without any sign language... and, really, without any skill in expression or reception. Randy had a record of five suspensions during the previous year, and of being a constant "trouble-maker". No teacher wanted him in her class. In the one year of being in a classroom in which sign language — albeit ASL — was used for all instruction, Randy changed from the "trouble-maker" to a likeable, hard-working, even helpful lead student in the class. His use of the English language was still deplorable, but his whole inner outlook on life was transformed. This experience in an elementary public school classroom prepared me for my introduction to S. E. E. Experience at Community College of Denver (CCD), young adults at the post-secondary level, also primed my interest. For one thing, during the past year, we had 80 students from a variety of school backgrounds, representing numerous states. We have found that students at this post-secondary level—regardless of educational background (oral, combined, etc.)—exhibit a reading level of about 4th or 5th grade. Their knowledge of the English language is too meager for coping with society's demands.

In October of 1970 I was asked to be Mr. Anthony's interpreter at a workshop directed by him in Denver at the invitation of Mrs. Marion Downs. After 14 years of using the American Sign Language, I was very hesitant about accepting this new idea. A system of signs that permits us to have one sign for each word? A system that allows us to use the language of signs in the correct patterns of English syntax? A system in which there are designations for verb endings, prefixes, suffixes, infixes? At the finish of the two and one-half day workshop I was "hooked"! I returned to my several classes in manual communications — at Community College, Denver University, University of Northern Colorado, and Colorado State University, and we all started learning and using SEEING ESSENTIAL ENGLISH. Teacher/students in those sign classes went back to their public school classrooms and

convinced parents, administrators, and other teachers that S. E. E. should be tried.

Finally, let me tell you about Todd. He is a nine-year old, profoundly deaf boy in the one classroom for the deaf in Adams County, just to the north of Denver. His teacher, who had been studying S. E. E. with me, invited me to observe Todd, son of an Air Force Sergeant, who had recently come into the district. Todd had—in October of last year—no usable speech, the barest of vocabulary skill in writing or picture identification. Together, the teacher and I talked with the parents, and they agreed to allow Todd to learn S. E. E. (and they would try to learn it themselves). I observed Todd again just a month ago; Mr. Anthony was with me as we talked with Todd about his classroom activities, his recent birthday party at home, his sorrow that his father had been sent to Viet Nam. We all talked through the use of the S. E. E. system of English. Not only was Todd asking questions and answering ours in complete English sentences, he was speaking the words as he signed them. Todd is not an isolated student; we have observed students who have been using S. E. E. for one year in the laboratory school in Greeley, in the public school system of Fort Collins, and at Miller School in Jefferson County, as well as very young deaf children at the D. U. Clinic. Our observations have confirmed our belief that S. E. E. provides a major new approach to the education of deaf children — an approach that will dissolve the language barriers that have beset the deaf citizen for too long.

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