DR JIM'S LITTLE RED BOOK

You’ve got to hand it to them

Why hearing people should use British Sign Language

Author's notes

1. I'm going to say "they" a lot here. That means Deaf people. Why? Because I'm hearing, and I'm talking to hearing people. That's "us". "We" are hearing. Yah boo.
2. I'm going to use a big D for Deaf too. That means culturally Deaf and/or BSL users. I might say Hearing for Hearing culture too, but who knows...? Thing is, deaf people don't divide neatly into *deaf* and *Deaf* people. It's fuzzy. But, as you'll hopefully see, it's not about deafness anyway. It's about *eyes*. Read on.

Disability, Impairment, and Handicap. An Englishman Abroad.

Deaf people are disabled. There, I said it. But don't get all huffy – this is a bold statement that requires definition. Hearing people don't usually find this contentious, but try it out in the staff room when it's busy and see what happens... The World Health Organisation distinguishes *impairment*, *disability*, and *handicap*, which are all pretty dodgy words to use these days, but don't panic. Be bold. It's useful to be clear what we are talking about and to know the difference between these things, whatever you want to call them. The definitions are:

- **Impairment** – Something is wrong with your body that stops part of it working normally.
- **Disability** – The consequences of the impairment in terms of what you cannot do.
- **Handicap** – The disadvantages you experience as a result of the disability.

For example:

- a person may have damaged cochlear hairs (**impairment**).
- That makes it very difficult to hear high-pitched noises, learn speech, or understand speech-sounds (**disability**).
- So communicating with someone who only uses speech sounds, is very hard indeed (**handicap**).

In terms of *language*, deafness like this results in a *social handicap*, which is a difficulty that exists *between people* rather than existing in one person. If you think of impairment to disability to handicap, it is like zooming out. You zoom out from cochleas, to one person's ability, to a difficulty experienced by two people. This difficulty, this handicap, belongs to two people finding it difficult to communicate – just like how a French speaker and an English speaker share a common handicap. Theirs doesn't come from an impairment, but each is *disabled* because they are unable to speak the other's language, and they are *handicapped* by having different languages. In this situation, each person is equally able to learn the other's language, but in the case of a deaf and a hearing person that is not the case. While it is certainly not easy for a hearing person to learn BSL, it is *harder* for a deaf person to deal with English speech, and requires expensive technology and these days cranial surgery with outcomes that are not guaranteed. In Martha's Vineyard[1] - where everybody knew sign language – having a hearing impairment and related disabilities did not lead to a handicap. *Everybody spoke sign language*[2].

If I had a bullet for every time I heard someone say "it is a hearing world out there", I would have no bullets – *because they would all have been used!* It is frequently said and clearly untrue. The world "out there" belongs to everybody in it, deaf and hearing, blind and sighted, walking and wheelchair-user, black and white, Welsh and English speaking; and everybody in it has equal rights. Yes, in this country most people speak, and speak English. But no, that does not mean that users of other languages have to learn and speak English, particularly deaf people for whom learning to speak and listen to

[1] http://bit.ly/marthasign
[2] http://amzn.to/17IAc2F

English speech sounds is physically either very challenging or impossible. Yes, speaking and listening skills are clearly useful skills to have in the world, and developing those skills is important, but it is prejudiced and oppressive to assume that the Deaf person should be more hearing in order to overcome the *social* handicap. And it is damaging to allow the teaching of speaking and listening to English to make learning *other* subjects harder due to not teaching them in BSL.

A good way to understand this is the Civil Rights movement in the USA in the middle of the twentieth century. This is because Deaf Equality is a civil right. In 1950's America it was enormously disadvantageous to be black. **But it would be horrific and absurd for black schools to not support the rights of their students or to empower them to assert both their equality and their diversity because "it is a white world"**. However many black citizens did not rock the boat. When Rosa Parkes[3] refused to move her seat on the bus, other black people had already moved, and when Deaf people let us off from the responsibility of allowing them to be Deaf and to adapt *our* communication, it is similar (and just as understandable) to black people humbly moving along the bus. Deaf people can oppress Deaf people too! Likewise Deaf schools *must* advocate for their students' futures by educating them in their natural language[4], clearly and strongly respecting them as visual communicators, and ensuring they grow to be Deaf adults with the strength and optimism to stand up for their rights to be communicated with on their own terms.

The world is a *Deaf and hearing* world, but Deaf schools are exactly that – *Deaf* schools. They are places where the density of Deaf people compared to hearing is at its highest, and we can usefully think of them as the sovereign soil of 'Deaf Land'. So, hearing teachers (and other staff) in a Deaf school are like English teachers working in France, with similar obligations – to teach in French, to not speak to each other in English especially when French speakers are there, and to make sure that their everyday French good enough.

[3] http://bit.ly/rosaparkes
[4] What's that?! More on *this* later...

So hearing people should leave their Hearingness and Englishness at the door when entering the Deaf school, and should be using the natural language of Deaf people. Places like this often come up with policies that say BSL must be used whenever a Deaf person is in the room. This is brilliant and of course *much* better than not doing it, but it does not go far enough for three important reasons:

1. BSL courses do not make you fluent any more than driving lessons make you a sophisticated and responsive driver. The only way to become fluent is to sign *a lot*. Many members of staff work in completely hearing departments, but even *they* have occasion, perhaps not often, to communicate with Deaf people - and on those occasions being fluent is clearly more effective than not. But they have very few opportunities to practise their BSL with Deaf people, and the best-trained and best-intentioned person will simply lose their skill and confidence. So, as bizarre as it might seem, signing *whether or not a Deaf person is there* is a very good idea. It also quickly raises confidence, and lack of confidence is the biggest barrier to signing in front of a Deaf person.
2. With a policy of signing when Deaf people are there, hearing people feel a real and heavy sense of their heart sinking when Deaf people enter the room, because they have to immediately switch from an English train of thought to a BSL one – and that is *really hard*. It shows on our faces too. Even if we somehow *do* hide this on our faces, Deaf people nevertheless still feel responsible for this sudden additional burden and often let the hearing people off the hook. Noooo! This maintains the problems of lack of practice, decreased confidence, and the implicit oppression of the Deaf people – just like people on Rosa's bus. The additional burden of working in a Deaf school is not the fault of the Deaf person, *it is a choice made when applying for a job in a Deaf environment*. Signing regardless of the presence of a Deaf person demonstrates respect for Deaf people and an interest and delight in BSL for its own sake - not just as a means to communicate with Deaf people.

3. Choosing to speak because no Deaf people are present is a decision based on the fact that speaking is easier for you than signing. Life in a Deaf school becomes muuuch less problematic the easier your signing becomes and that happens quite naturally through *time spent signing*. The more you feel a sense of relief when you stop signing and use speech – *the more that shows you need to take the opportunity to practise BSL.* The more you sign, the easier it gets, the better you get at it, and the easier your job is, you understand Deaf people better[5], and Deaf people love and respect you more. Including students[6].

Despite being officially disabled to varying extents and in various audiological ways, prelingually profoundly Deaf people are a *linguistic minority*, and a *cultural group* defined by a shared language as well as shared experiences. To Deaf people it is the linguistic minority status and cultural membership that matters most, and the extent to which disability is an issue is almost entirely a result of the social handicap arising from linguistic differences – differences that are perpetuated and multiplied by hearing people not communicating visually.

Yeah yeah yeah, very groovy, but BSL is, well, kind of rubbish isn't it?! It's got fewer words in it. And there's so much in English that you can't say in BSL. Right?

Wrong. Shut up and listen.

BSL evolved naturally amongst Deaf people in this country. It varies regionally with dialects just like spoken English, although BSL also differs regionally with vocabulary - but English not so much. For example signs for numbers and colours vary quite a lot. This is because the media blurred the regional differences in English but not in BSL. Only since the internet has BSL (and signed languages in other countries) started to blur in the same way. Look at bslqed.com for lots of really good information about BSL.

[5] See below about interpreters and meetings of minds.
[6] Yup.

So BSL *grammar* of course is naturally evolved, and represents grammatically important things *visually* - like if we are talking about the present or the past and who-did-what-to-whom. English grammar of course shows these things as well, but *not visually*. So BSL vocabulary with an English grammatical structure ("Sim-Com" or "SSE" for example) removes the visual grammatical structure and loses important information like tense, who-did-what-to-whom and so on.

BSL[7] is therefore the *natural* language of Deaf people because it is purely visual and has evolved from Deaf people communicating. Interestingly therefore, this is the case *regardless* of whether or not an individual Deaf person has ever even been introduced to it. Deaf people's eyes are just as good as hearing people's[8] and for a visual person a language with a visual grammar is easier to use even if they may not have yet had an opportunity to experience that due to their home environment or educational history.

Many many Deaf people *start* to learn BSL for the first time after leaving home, after 18 or 20 years of only knowing English. Why? Because it comes more naturally. A prelingually profoundly deaf child[9] with no experience of BSL must be given opportunities to learn it because it is the easiest language for them to pick up, and to think and reason with. Considering that child to be "oral" because they do not (yet) sign and not offering a rich signing environment is wrong in the same way as discovering a hearing child raised by wolves with only grunts and whimpers and not offering a rich English environment as a matter of urgency. Not providing the opportunity to use the visual language of BSL perpetuates an abuse[10].

BSL is as linguistically complex as any other language[11] (including English), but the complexity shows itself in different ways. BSL has fewer signs than English has words, but it expands on them by changing the way each sign is produced. English is different because it uses other words or adds adjectives

[7] Or American Sign Language, or Polish Sign Language etc. Although the vocabularies are hugely different, the grammars of all signed languages are very similar because they all evolved in the hands of similarly Deaf people.

[8] Better, actually, in interesting ways. But that's an even longer story.

[9] Basically, born very deaf.

[10] Humphries et al (2012) "Language acquisition for deaf children: Reducing the harms of zero tolerance to the use of alternative approaches". *Harm Reduction Journal*, **9**:16.

[11] Rachel Sutton-Spence and Bencie Woll (1999). The Linguistics of British Sign Language: An Introduction.

and adverbs. Such differences do not make a language better or worse. English complexity differs from German complexity in similarly different[12] ways. For example German uses lots of 'compound words', words made by joining together smaller words, meaning the vocabulary is either bigger or smaller *depending on your point of view*. You might think adapting one sign in different ways (BSL) is second-rate. *Or* having to use lots of words where one will do (English). Or having to shove words together to make new words (German). It is our *point of view* that affects our opinion of the language, for both German and BSL, and others.

Foreign or second-languages *always* seem to be relatively simple or pidgin, because we see them through the lens of our own first language – because that is the language we think in[13]. Similarly, we do not notice the ways our own language does pathetically simplistic things because we are too used to it. It's like why you can't describe "Hearing Culture" and why fish don't know what "wet" means[14]. For example, the German for "nipples" is "brustwarzen", which is a compound word from the German for "breast" and "warts". Hilarious, right? But the English word "business" is a compound word from another English word meaning "occupied/active" ("busy") and a suffix meaning "I mean this as a noun" ("ness"). English speakers do not even notice this, just as we do not notice that "become", "also", "forty" or "inside" as also clumsy bolted-together compound words. It's hard even to notice it now I've pointed it out, isn't it?! We notice "breast-warts" but Germans just see, 'nipples'[15]. It does not take much for us to consider the BSL sign *BELIEVE* as a pidgin compound of signs meaning *THINK* and *TRUE.* But this is an illusion caused by our own unfamiliarity. It does not mean that BSL is somehow *simpler*.

[12] Similarly different.
[13] Unless your BSL is amazingly fluent. That would be good wouldn't it?! More on this later...
[14] ☺
[15] I just wrote "Germans just see nipples". Can there really be a context where that is appropriate?

Oh whatever... But I've seen people signing and speaking at the same time. That's good isn't it? TWO languages at once is better than one!

Gah! Nope.

Speaking while signing gives us the *impression* of communicating well because it matches exactly the thoughts that we are trying to express. *But*, the visual bit (the signing) contains none of the vital information carried by BSL grammar. This is because there is no word-for-sign equivalence, and vital bits of information carried by things like word order and word endings in English are carried by placement and additional BSL signs. So for example the simple sentence "I was paid by Bob" would likely only be communicated with signs meaning "me", "the act of paying" and "the name Bob". Who paid who and when are missing because in BSL they are expressed in the grammar by placement, by a directional verb, and by an additional signed tense-marker about the past sometimes with a subtle shift of head and eye-gaze also showing tense. It sounds good, because in sound it *is* good. But *visually* it's full of holes.

It's difficult, isn't it?

Yup. Sorry about that! But don't give up hope...

Communicating in a second language always feels unsatisfactory – like you can't exactly say what you mean and have to make compromises - unless you are as fluent in the second language as you are in the first, and you are able to think in both languages equally well. However, thinking in a second language is not an all-or-nothing state of affairs and is in fact like a sliding scale. For example English-speaking BSL students find it hard to give English translations or explain the English meanings of signs known in class as "Multi-channel signs" because these are not taught with an English word translation. But they know what they *mean*. When you use a multi-channel sign you are thinking, momentarily, in BSL. Now, BSL tutors lie to you! You get taught that

‘this is the sign for “apple” and this is the sign for “happy” and this is the sign for “drive”’ - but this is actually just a simplistic way to teach you stuff quickly. *Really* they should teach you that ‘this is the sign that deaf people use when talking about *the thing that hearing people are usually talking about when they say* “apple”, or “happy”, or “drive”’ For something like “apple” or “France” the word and the sign pretty much mean the same thing. France is, after all, one thing. But for things like *driving* – where “drive” is a catch-all word for all sorts of driving, while the various signs for ‘driving’ imply lots of other information too – or for things like “guilt” or “attitude”, the English words and the BSL signs mean subtly different things. Their meanings overlap, but parts of what the BSL means are not what is meant with the English words, and vice versa.

“What is the sign for ‘because’?”

If you ask a question that starts “What is the sign for...” Deaf people will usually give you an answer. But the answer is misleading because the question is the wrong one to ask as there is no word-for-sign relationship. There *is* a sign that interpreters usually interpret as “because”, but there are signs often interpreted as “why” and as “through” which are also both used to explain something happened *because*.

In BSL *why* and *because* often mean the same thing. But for English speakers this feels very weird.

Why? Because different languages chop up the world in different ways. We chop the world up into categories, then label them with words. But people from different cultures with different languages chop them up in different ways. For example English divides siblings into “brothers” and “sisters” – naturally and obviously (to us) dividing siblings into “male sibling” and “female sibling”. Interestingly Indonesian divides siblings naturally and

obviously (to them) into “kakak” and “adik”, which means “older sibling” and “younger sibling”. Both languages have ways to describe age and gender, so both languages are equally able to describe older female siblings and younger male siblings, for example, *but these different cultures see the world of siblings in entirely different ways.* It is only by learning a second language that we become able to distinguish the world from the words that we use – and to communicate effectively with people who use that language by inhabiting the same world that they do.

> When you stop thinking in a word-for-sign way, and sign what you *mean* rather than what you want to *say* you are signing like a Deaf person, you are making more sense, and you avoid the frustrating sense of *not quite meaning <u>that</u>.*

AUGH! It’s all too much! Surely I should just leave it to the interpreters?

Aah. There’s a thing. Let’s be mean about interpreters...

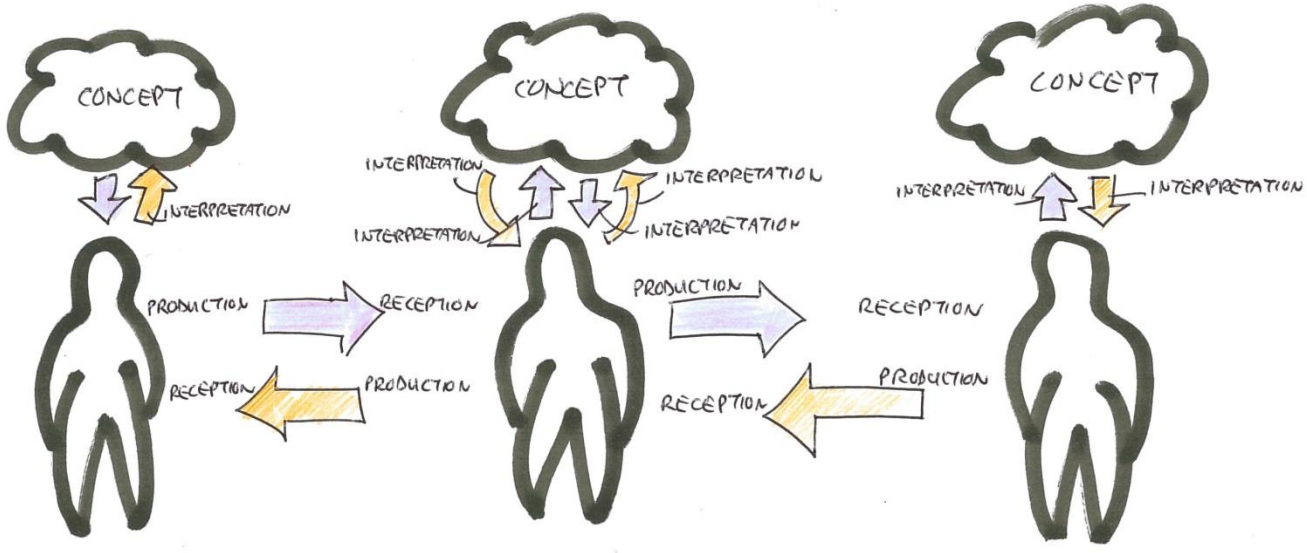
When communicating through an interpreter, we communicate in our first language and when we do that, we process the conversation in our own language and so in terms of our own Hearing-English labels. We are not able to inhabit the world of the Deaf person, who divides it up in different ways. As much as interpreters enable communication and try their best to give culturally appropriate interpretations, the effect of an interpreter standing essentially between the minds of two people is to prevent a meeting of those minds. Imagine an interpreted conversation between an Indonesian and an English person about families.... A *one-to-one* (uninterpreted, direct) but non-fluent conversation will be a partially successful meeting of minds, while an *interpreted* conversation will be, at best, a more successful meeting of *words* but not in any sense a meeting of *minds* – of true understanding.

To be fair, interpretation is not an entirely linguistic exercise (it can’t be, remember, because signs don’t mean *words*, they mean *things*). Interpreters

strive not to interpret the words or signs presented to them, but to interpret the *meaning* that they consider was intended by the person presenting those words or signs. Sadly, that is a process of educated guesswork and while it is the aim of a good interpreter, they can only work with the words or signs given to them and *guess* the intention. Interpreting is a process of encoding one language as another in the context of educated guesswork about the intended meaning and the intended intention (which may be different) of the speaker.

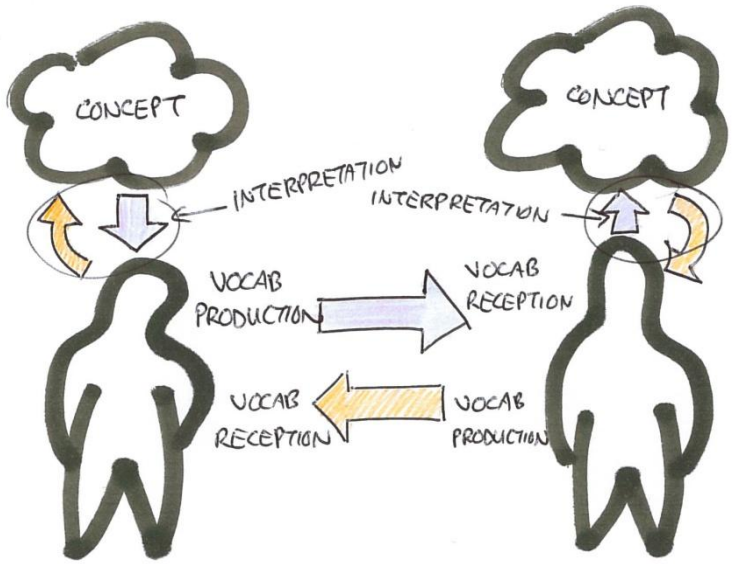
In an interpreted interaction there are EIGHT interpretations between person A having something to say to person B, and then forming an impression of B's response. **Not** the two that you might expect:

1. 'A' forms a concept that he wants to express and encodes it in his preferred language. He says it and the interpreter hears it, let's assume, perfectly.
2. The interpreter forms a conceptual understanding of her own from A's words.
3. The interpreter encodes that understanding in the language of B. He signs it and B perceives it, let's assume, perfectly.
4. B forms a conceptual understanding of the interpreter's signs.
5. B conceptualises a response and encodes that in BSL. He signs it to the interpreter...
6. The interpreter forms a conceptual understanding of her own from B's signs.
7. The interpreter encodes that understanding in the language of a. He speaks it and A perceives it, let us assume, perfectly.
8. A forms a conceptual understanding from A's words.



Each of these steps is an interpretation that never quite captures what was intended, and A (you!) can only know about the misinformation and dropped detail that you yourself originally encoded. That is about 1/8 of the interaction (since we generally assume – incorrectly - that we understand perfectly the 'meaning' of the words we hear.) The interpreter themselves, however, is not much better, being only aware of 1/4 of the misinformation.

Communicating directly gives you a greater and more accurate awareness of where the communication is breaking down, what is being missed, so you can keep trying different things to make yourself clearer. *And it* makes it more likely that you will be able to inhabit each other's world. That's a meeting of minds. Interpreted interactions are not necessarily more accurate. They are less troublesome and shorter, **but "easier" does not mean "more effective".**



If asked, Deaf people nearly *always* prefer you to sign directly, even non-fluently, than to use an interpreter. When they do not, it is usually for one of the following reasons, all of which raise important questions that would need to be addressed:

- Your signing is so poor as to be incomprehensible. (You need to improve, urgently).

- They do not want to make your job difficult. (But by not doing so, they sacrifice *their* understanding to make *you*, the hearing person, happier. In a *Deaf* organisation...?!)
- They do not want to stick their head above the parapet. (If Deaf people do not want to speak out, then the context or organisation is implicitly oppressing them.)

The arguments on pages six and seven imply that you should never speak (unless teaching speech, to be fair). This would be amazing, but we have to be realistic. A realistic commitment, because of the things I've described above, would be this:

Try to sign, without speech
- with BSL grammar –
as often as possible.

and

Whenever you don't, question why and act to fix that for the future.

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