Reflections on Reframing Language Through Signed Signs and Deaf Gain

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Reflections on Reframing Language Through Signed Signs and Deaf Gain

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Jamie Rooney’s “‘You Can Make Words Mean So Many Different Things’: A Study of Homesign” strings together, among other things, research from Goldin-Meadows, a direct response to work on homesign by Endre Begby, and maxims from Anglo-American philosophy of language, all with an eye to radically heterogeneous forms of communication and a designation of gesture in “speech.” The complexity of his arguments and his attention to both the details of existing homesign research and larger questions on the nature of communication is both compelling and thought provoking. But his article raises a couple of questions for me: If Grice’s English-spoken philosophy of language provides the tools for a study of homesign, what do insights from signed languages contribute to theorizing beyond tacit assumptions about the nature of language? What of conceptions of communication that are distinctly non-voiced, that is, what of the theory of viva non-voce? There is no shortage of such thinking, and in what follows I take up a particular (and by no means exhaustive) set of it, namely, Deaf Studies’ attention to the question of language via reflections on American Sign Language (hereafter ASL). First, I consider responses from Deaf Studies to Derrida’s grammatological project and its efforts to take up what Derrida leaves out. Second, I consider the concept of “Deaf Gain” and the reframing of “deaf” beyond the parameters of individual bodies and signing communities. I will thereby emphasize the social and political implications of the privileging of speech in hearing-dominant societies, as well as highlight some of the alternative concepts and questions that signed signs bring to communication.

Audism and Embodied Signs

To begin, it is essential to explain the term “audism” and its relationship to Derrida’s critique of phonocentrism. In his article “Audism: Exploring the Metaphysics of Oppression,” H-Dirksen Bauman gives a brief history and explication of the “maturing concept” (240) of audism, a term gaining use in Deaf Studies classrooms and that will hopefully
become more recognized in other disciplines and inquiries into the nature of language. Generally, audism refers to discrimination against deaf people, but more specifically the concept names instances of oppression in the lives of deaf and hard of hearing people, as well as wider structural oppressions found throughout hearing-dominant society. Critiques of individual audism emphasize the way that deaf and hard of hearing people are subject to prejudices and micro-aggressions from hearing people who assume that hearingness is better than and preferred to deafness and deaf ways of life. Critiques of institutional audism link individual experiences of oppression with wider matrices of power—such as those connected to education or medicine—that encourage and reward hearingness and hearing ways of life. Metaphysical audism, a term coined by Bauman himself, traces the way that the above levels of oppression are underpinned by longstanding metaphysical assumptions about the nature of human subjectivity—particularly “the orientation that links human identity and being with language defined as speech” (242). Meditating on the connections between the philosophical privileging of speaking subjects and the realities of individual and institutional audism, Bauman points out that Derrida’s critique of phonocentrism is of invaluable import to Deaf-centered projects that aim to end phonocentric violence and to re-frame “language” as a matter of more than words and mouths. While, importantly, Derrida never explicitly takes up Deaf History, critiques of audism on all levels lock gears with Derrida’s critique in a way that makes clear the “historical, institutional site of his project” (Bauman, “Listening to Phonocentrism,” n.p). Each of these dimensions of audism provide insight into the way that the supposedly exclusive relationship between speech and language is enforced within hearing-dominant societies. The arbitrary authority of “speech” is, in these contexts, undone through the centering of non-voiced and strictly gestural languages.

Deaf perspectives open up to scrutiny several new dimensions of the relationship between language, subjectivity, and everyday life. An emphasis on the spatial aspect of gesture, for example, raises a set of practical questions about communication. DeafSpace is an approach to design and planning that aims to make spaces better suited for signing languages and deaf ways of being. DeafSpace considers factors of interpersonal visibility (such as the amount of lighting in an area and the number and height of walls in a room) as essential conditions for communication. For example, Gallaudet University outlines six components of DeafSpace on its Campus Design and Planning webpage: sensory reach, mobility, proximity, light, color, and acoustics (“What is DeafSpace?”). As these priorities imply, the question “what does another person need from me in order to communicate?” can be usefully re-situated and re-contextualized to account for physical space and location. Robert Sirvage’s work on Deaf Walkers expounds on this connection between space and lan-
guage, analyzing the norms and responsibilities between signers when they are engaged in both conversation and walking. As ASL requires direct eye contact with another, signers keep a peripheral eye out for obstacles in the way of their conversation partners, alerting them to possible obstacles and shifting positions as needed (Bauman and Murray xxv-xxvi).

In this context, Begby’s notion of “non-bidirectionality” and Rooney’s notion of “bidirectionality” (as well as the latter’s emphasis on communicative responsibility) take on alternative meanings: direction is immediately relevant in the sense of orientation and movement and responsibility involves both participating in social norms and active involvement in the safety of another person (Rooney 100). If these categories of linguistic analyses are stretched through such an analogy, then a stretch is part of the point, for signed perspectives open up the meaning of words to the breadth of their contexts. While Rooney emphasizes the normative relationship between guardian and child as well as the minimum conditions necessary for pragmatic communication, an analysis of communicative relationships need also consider street signs, passersby, and physical bumps on the path of communication. Even in the less motion-oriented example of DeafSpace, relationships like those of elbow room and light fixture position become essential points of consideration for the question of what we might make words mean.

The physicality of ASL, the renovation of language to include three-dimensional space, influences one’s orientation in communicative social life as well as one’s orientation in the more critical and imaginative realm of one’s reading life. Accordingly, theory and philosophy, too, are opened up by signed perspectives. In his essay “Listening to Phonocentrism with Deaf Eyes: Derrida’s Mute Philosophy of (Sign) Language,” Bauman recounts an interaction he had, in his role as a Gallaudet ASL and Deaf Studies professor, with a student struggling to read Foucault:

He [the student] first signed that it was difficult to read, with his left hand representing the book, open and facing him, and his right hand was in a V shape, the two finger tips representing his practice of reading, re-reading, and then finally, his fingers got closer to the book, and finally, made contact; at this point, the eyes of the V shape then became a digging apparatus, digging deeper into the text. He then reached in between the lines of the page, now signified by the open fingers of the left hand, and began to pull ideas and new meanings from underneath the text. The notion of reading between the lines gained flesh, as the hands literally grasped for buried meanings. The result of reading Foucault, he said, changed his thinking forever, inspiring him to invent a name-sign for Foucault. The sign he invented began with the signed letter “F” at the side of the forehead, and
then twisting outward, showing the brain undergoing a radical reorientation. In a concise image, the philosophy of Foucault is given an iconic shape that is not one of mere mime—for it would be unintelligible to a non-signing audience—but imbued with the metaphorical iconic performance of the ramifications of studying Foucault.

While some nuances of some of the signs described may be lost to a reader not familiar to ASL, two details here are worth hovering over. First is Bauman’s characterization of iconicity as the site of expressive possibility and depth. Second, and less obvious, are the implications of iconicity for embodied relationships to texts, intimating a proliferation of relations and concepts that all follow from the modality of signing as gestural and visual as opposed to spoken or written. The qualitative difference between words and signs (in this example, the difference in their respective iconic potentiality) suggests not only that Deaf perspectives in theory are essential—the core implication of this very response—but also that signing offers a dimension of experiment and expression that spoken or written modalities of language do not. Elsewhere, Bauman and Murray similarly wonder about the gain to be had from using ASL or other signed languages to explain concepts such as Foucault’s more spatial notion of the “microphysics of power” or the process of cellular mitosis. They conclude that the three-dimensionality of signed languages is of invaluable pedagogical import (“Deaf Studies” 9). Attention to the complexity of iconicity in signed languages renders patently false the too-familiar assumption that iconicity is indicative of lesser cognitive functioning. Further, to name a more concrete social gain, this complexity makes an argument for the importance of publications such as the *Deaf Studies Digital Journal* and the circulation of video articles in ASL.

**Deaf Gain**

In an effort to tie together some of the above thoughts, we might say that perhaps what the social and political dimensions of audism make most clear for theory about speech and gesture is the need to make unfamiliar those relations between words and meaning that seem most obvious. Indeed, the privilege of words, their obvious meaningfulness, strikes one as ‘obvious’ precisely in the context of speech-oriented theory in hearing-dominant societies. My gesture here is in part one of defamiliarization for the sake of decentering speech, but it is also one that takes seriously questions about communication raised in the context of signed languages. What follows are new concepts essential for inquiry not only into language’s social and political dimensions but also into its sensory dimensions. An appreciation for the particular sensory nature of signed languages leads us to a framework upon which this essay has depended and whose name I have stepped around until now: Deaf Gain.
As Bauman and Murray, the editors of the collection *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes of Human Diversity* (2014), phrase it: “Deaf Gain is defined as the reframing of ‘deaf’ as a form of sensory and cognitive diversity that has the potential to contribute to the greater good of humanity” (“Reframing” 3). Or, simply, it is the re-framing of “deafness” as a marker of gain and benefit as opposed to loss or lack. But, importantly, Bauman and Murray’s emphasis on “sensory and cognitive diversity” (“Reframing” 3) aligns Deaf Gain with movements such as those advocating for neurodiversity and biodiversity, distinguishing the term from notions of “deaf” as merely a cultural or linguistic marker. If “deaf” as marker begs questions such as “What is deaf?” then “Deaf Gain” emphasizes the value of difference across cultural, creative, and cognitive lines (Bauman and Murray, “Deaf Studies in the 21st Century” 6-12). English glosses for the signed concept of “Deaf Gain” provide further semantic nuance here: DEAF INCREASE, DEAF BENEFIT, and DEAF CONTRIBUTE. These signs emphasize the introduction or emergence of something new, something that was not there before, an alternative way of being in the world that is qualifiedly distinct from ways of being that are oriented toward hearing and speech. This alternative way of being is obviously significant on the level of deaf and signing communities, but it also has implications for other language users.

One of the more immediate themes in Deaf Gain scholarship is its appeal to “humanity,” and more specifically its assertion that deaf people might make “contributions to humanity” (Bauman and Murray, “Deaf Gain” xxxix). While such terminology might suggest that Deaf Gain is simply another liberal humanism of sorts, it is important to note that Deaf Gain is firmly rooted in critiques of normalcy. More clearly, its critical heritage marks its distinction from what might be more specifically identified as “nostalgic longings for the humanist past” (Braidotti 45). Indeed, Deaf Gain’s alignment with disabilities studies—particularly the latter’s emphasis on the body as a site of possibility rather than a site of essential limits—oppose it to familiar humanist assumptions. If Deaf Gain were reconcilable with liberal humanism, its “gain” might simply mean an individual’s “getting ahead” in a current system—that is, capitalizing on difference within audist hearing worlds. The radical re-framing that Deaf Gain attempts, however, challenges traditional audist connections between subjectivity and language and opens up new ways of theorizing subjectivity. In fact, I am inclined to read Deaf Gain along the lines of Walter Mignolo’s “epistemological disobedience:” Deaf Gain, that is, as a decolonial gesture that resists narratives of self-presence and coming-to-be through speech, a radical “changing [of] the terms” (Mignolo 4) of language and communication. While maxims from an Anglo-American philosophy of language indicate the rules of a speech-based game, Deaf Gain and concepts
drawn from signing contexts initiate in part a shift in the terms of theorizing communication.

**Conclusion**

Neuroscientist Laura-Ann Pettito’s work provides a specific example of the way that Deaf Gain is characterized by concretely social and political priorities. Pettito is part of a group of scientists who ask questions about the nature and benefits of sign languages to human neural development. In “Three Revolutions: Language, Culture, and Biology,” she outlines her efforts to scientifically disprove audist assumptions that underlie the privileging of speech. Pettito’s findings indicate “[i]n early life the human brain will not discriminate between speech and sign but processes them identically, with biological equivalence,” and so she concludes that “speech and language have now been biologically decoupled. Speech is not language” (73). This research highlights Deaf Gain’s priorities in two ways: first, as Pettito goes on to make clear, it has implications for deaf education, public policies affecting deaf people, and the importance of deaf children’s access to signed languages in early years. Second, it notes that signed languages contribute to the neural development and literary and reading skills in both deaf and hearing children; therefore, there is value in any child—whether deaf, hard of hearing, or hearing—learning sign (71-72). The above priorities reiterate the points about language and theory that the concepts of audism, DeafSpace, and Deaf Gain make abundantly clear: namely, that linguistic analyses need to engage discourses of power and oppression, that they need space for physical and historical contexts, and that they need to take sensory and other dimensions of difference into account.

While Rooney’s methodological choices do not highlight the social priorities of a Deaf Gain framework, I do not say that his work is disconnected from an essential effort to question assumptions about the nature of language and meaning-making. His reflections on the complexity of homesigning relationships and his convincing concept of homesign-as-arbitrary are not only highly original contributions to the little examined question of semantic meaning in homesign, they also challenge familiar habits of thought regarding the relationship between gesture and speech. In response, I have used his emphasis on the heterogeneity of communicative forms as a starting point to consider ways that Deaf Studies and ASL perspectives generate new concepts and terms in relation to language. My aim here has been to present histories and concepts that situate Rooney’s engaging work amongst other theoretical inquiries into “speech” by way of signs-as-signed. My iterations of words that have been said about how signs are important—they are a mouthful. My point is a singular one: thinking alongside language that is not of words or mouths is instrumental to the effort of thinking about communication and social relationships in alternative ways.
1 Bauman points out the way that the concept of “audism” takes as its model analyses of oppression via the concepts of individual racism and systemic racism (“Audism” 240-241).

2 Sirvage’s work is available on video the journal *Deaf Studies Digital Journal*, in the peer reviewed article “Navigational Proxemics of Walking Signers: A Paradigm Shift in Methodology.” His article is in ASL and does not have an English translation; my reflections here are based on Bauman and Murray’s summary of Sirvage’s work in their introduction to *Deaf Gain*.


4 Here I borrow Harlan Lane’s explanation: “English glosses for American Sign Language (ASL) are conventionally written in capital letters. Hyphens connect glosses that are one word in ASL. They are not translations” (5). Glosses, rather, are more often defined as transcriptions. Similar to the occurrences of an italicized non-English word in English texts or a collection of hyphenated words in a translated text, glosses here index a situation where the original language presents a concept for which there is no word in the second language context.
Works Cited


