



TIMOTHY REAGAN

Ideological Barriers to American Sign Language: Unpacking Linguistic Resistance

ASL, as linguistically defined, has nowhere near the power of English for receptive OR expressive purposes. ASL has its own merits, some of them outshining spoken language, but anywhere near as powerful as English for education, commerce, and all-around communication purposes it most certainly is not.

—Stewart, “Debunking the Bilingual/Bicultural Snow Job
in the American Deaf Community”

THE NATURE AND STATUS of American Sign Language (ASL), although long settled as linguistic matters (see Hoffmeister 2008; Liddell 1980, 2003; Lillo-Martin 1991; Lucas 1990; Neidle et al. 2000; Sandler and Lillo-Martin 2006; Valli, Lucas, and Mulrooney 2005), remain popular topics subject to serious misunderstandings and misrepresentations among nonlinguists, as the opening epigraph demonstrates. As Ronald Wardhaugh has noted about language in general:

Language plays an important role in the lives of all of us and is our most distinctive human possession. We might expect, therefore, to be well-informed about it. The truth is we are not. Many statements we

Timothy Reagan is CSU Professor of Education at Central Connecticut State University.





believe to be true about language are likely as not false. Many of the questions we concern ourselves with are either unanswerable and therefore not really worth asking or betray a serious misunderstanding of the nature of language. Most of us have learned many things about language from others, but generally the wrong things. (1999, viii)

Unfortunately, although perhaps not surprisingly, such ignorance is even more true of ASL. Although there have been significant advances with respect to the status and use of ASL in general in the United States, there also have often been backlashes to such developments, typically manifested in controversy related to beliefs about the nature of ASL as a “real” language or as an “appropriate” language for study. This has been the case, for instance, in four particular areas: efforts to achieve official recognition of ASL, early identification of hearing impairment, the rise of ASL-English bilingual/bicultural education programs, and the teaching of ASL as a foreign language in educational institutions. In this article, the debate about the status of ASL is addressed as an example of ideological beliefs that impact linguistic judgments and policies. Also discussed are the major challenges to the status of ASL with respect to formal legislative recognition, its utility as a medium of instruction, and its status as a legitimate “foreign” language. I argue that these challenges are both empirically and conceptually problematic. Further, I suggest that resistance to ASL is grounded in large part in a misunderstanding of the nature of human language and of the nature, structure, and history of natural sign languages in general and ASL in particular.

The Nature of Linguistic Ideology

The term *ideology* is a complex one that has many different and sometimes contradictory meanings (see Pratte 1977). At its core, however, it refers to the beliefs and attitudes of an individual as a member of a group. Thus, ideology is concerned with ideals, concepts, and the like held, either implicitly or explicitly, by a group or a community. This does not, of course, mean that all members of the group share the belief or attitude, merely that it is commonly held in the group. “Linguistic ideology” or “language ideology,” in turn, refer to beliefs and





attitudes that are specifically concerned with language and linguistic issues (see Reagan 1985). Ideological beliefs and attitudes are important in maintaining the status quo. As Norman Fairclough notes:

Institutional practices which people draw upon without thinking often embody assumptions which directly or indirectly legitimize existing power relations. Practices which appear to be universal and commonsensical can often be shown to originate in the dominant class or dominant bloc, and to have become *naturalized*. Where types of practice, and in many cases types of discourse, function in this way to sustain unequal power relations . . . they are functioning *ideologically*. (2001, 27)

Language ideologies play a key role in society, in social relations, and in educational settings. They also exist at both the personal and social levels, as Mary McGroarty explains:

Language ideologies have both personal and societal valence. For any user of language, it would be impossible *not* to have some ideology of language, however inchoate . . . all users of language and all speech communities possess ideological frameworks that determine choice, evaluation, and use of language forms and functions. Some political influences on language ideology can be observed directly, as when one language or language variety is promoted or proscribed; more must be inferred, and [they] are not always susceptible to direct investigation of discrete communicative events. (2010, 98; emphasis in original)

An especially potent way in which language beliefs and attitudes and thus language ideology can be discussed has been provided by Richard Ruiz. Ruiz suggests that there are, broadly speaking, three orientations that one might take with respect to how one views language, especially in bilingual and multilingual settings: language as a problem, language as a right, and language as a resource (Ruiz 1984, 1990, 2010) (see figure 1). Basically, the issue raised by Ruiz is whether language diversity is seen in negative or positive terms—that is, whether linguistic diversity in a society is a problem to be overcome or involves the recognition of the fundamental human rights of individuals, as well as the very real benefits that linguistic diversity can offer a society. The language-as-a-problem orientation focuses on the complications and





Language-as-a-Problem	Language-as-a-Right	Language-as-a-Resource
Where language differences are seen as determinants of social, economic, and educational disadvantage. This orientation leads to a devaluation of minority languages and their communities and favors the dominant language group.	A reaction against the language-as-a-problem approach, this orientation construes the expression in one's community language as a natural, human, moral, and legal right. The conflict with the predominant (language-as-a-problem) orientation is often played out in court.	This orientation sees language differences, including languages, language varieties, and their corresponding communities, as a resource that is conceptualized both intrinsically and extrinsically.

FIGURE 1. Three Orientations toward Language Diversity.
(From Nover 1995. Used with permission)

challenges that are created by linguistic diversity, generally in the context of the issues of equity and access, education, economics, and so on. The idea that underlies the language as-a-problem orientation is that language diversity plays a key role in disempowering groups and individuals and in promoting ethnic divisiveness and even strife. The language-as-a-right orientation focuses on the principles of social justice and the acceptance of the principle that language rights are fundamental human rights. Finally, the language-as-a-resource orientation sees language and linguistic skills as cultural capital that can and should be developed by society. Although Ruiz does identify these as three distinct orientations, in fact the first stands in contrast to the second and third—a point not always properly or fully recognized (see Skutnabb-Kangas 2000, 653).

Here, we are concerned with the beliefs about and attitudes toward ASL by various constituencies, especially by hearing legislators, policymakers, and educators. To make sense of the attitudes and beliefs that I discuss, I employ Ruiz's three orientations toward language as a tool.

The Official Recognition of ASL

Efforts to have ASL recognized and be granted official status in the United States at the state level have been relatively successful in recent years. As of 2006, more than forty states and the District of Columbia had passed legislation relating to the status of ASL. This legislation

differs from state to state, of course, and falls into a number of different categories in terms of its concerns and implications. Among the different kinds of legislation currently in place, the most common are those that simply recognize ASL as a language or recognize it as a *foreign* language.¹ Florida's 2005 legislation is an example of this; it begins with a strong section detailing the nature of ASL and its status for the deaf² community and then goes on to address the issue of academic credit for ASL study:

(1) Legislative Findings: Purpose.

(a) The Legislature finds that:

1. American Sign Language (ASL) is a fully developed visual-gestural language with distinct grammar, syntax, and symbols and is one of hundreds of signed languages of the world.
2. ASL is recognized as the language of the American deaf community and is the fourth most commonly used language in the United States and Canada.
3. The American deaf community is a group of citizens who are members of a unique culture who share ASL as their common language.
4. Thirty-three state legislatures have adopted legislation recognizing ASL as a language that should be taught in schools.

(b) It is the intent of the Legislature to recognize ASL as the language of the American deaf community, to authorize public and independent schools to offer ASL as a course of study, and to accept secondary-school ASL credits as foreign-language credits.

(2) AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE; FOREIGN-LANGUAGE CREDIT.

- (a) American Sign Language is a visual-gestural system of communication used by many in the deaf community living in the United States and Canada. It is a complete and complex language that has its own syntax, rhetoric, and grammar and that is used to convey information and meaning through signs



made with the hands, arms, facial gestures, and other body movements.

- (b) Any public or independent school may offer American Sign Language for foreign-language credit. Students taking American Sign Language for foreign-language credit must be advised by the school board prior to enrollment in such course that postsecondary institutions outside of Florida may not accept such credits as satisfying foreign-language requirements. (007.2615 “American Sign Language” 2005)

Such legislation, however, is often merely advisory in nature (indicating, for instance, that schools and universities “may” accept ASL for foreign language credit rather than that they “shall” accept ASL for such credit), as the legislation from Missouri makes clear:

This act treats American Sign Language (ASL) as a foreign language for the granting of academic credit at public elementary and secondary schools and public higher education institutions. Students *may* receive academic credit for demonstrating proficiency or completing a course with a passing grade. The credit *may* be used to satisfy the foreign language or language arts requirements, including entrance requirements of public higher education institutions.

Nothing in the act prohibits a department within a higher education institution from establishing specific language requirements for its majors that cannot be met by ASL, nor does the act prohibit the offering of non-credit courses in ASL. (HB 530, 2005; my emphasis)

Finally, several states recognize ASL but in one way or another limit this recognition to educational purposes (such as Georgia,³ Hawai’i,⁴ Illinois,⁵ Kentucky,⁶ Louisiana,⁷ Michigan,⁸ South Carolina,⁹ Virginia,¹⁰ and Washington¹¹).

The problem with all of the different kinds of recognition discussed thus far—and it is, in my view, a very significant problem—is that it is fundamentally based on deficit views of ASL. Although such legislation may well be important in increasing the opportunities for hearing students to study ASL as a foreign language, it also sends a powerful message about the need to establish—and to do so by legislative fiat—the legitimacy of ASL as a language. It would simply never occur to anyone, I think, to suggest that we need official legis-





lation to count Spanish, French, German, or Russian—or even less commonly taught languages, like Japanese or Arabic—either as languages or as foreign languages (see Reagan 2009, 23–51).

An additional concern with current legislative recognition of ASL is the relationship between such recognition on the one hand and “official English” legislation on the other. For example, in Kansas, which was the thirtieth state to adopt an “official English” law, the law explicitly excludes ASL from its concerns (see HB 2140), and a number of others mention disability exemptions and the like. Similarly, although California has both an “official English” law and, as a result of Proposition 227, has effectively banned bilingual education in the state, the two schools for the deaf in the state continue to provide ASL/English bilingual/bicultural education programs without resistance.

However, a few states have passed more appropriate legislation. Perhaps the best example of this is Alabama, where the legislation indicates that the “Legislature of Alabama recognizes American Sign Language as the official and native language of Deaf people in Alabama.” Maine similarly recognizes ASL as the official state language of the deaf community.¹² In Colorado and Rhode Island, using basically the same legislative language, ASL is recognized “as a fully developed, autonomous, natural language with distinct grammar, syntax, and cultural heritage.”

The state legislation that has been passed and is in place, however, while perhaps still typically and most commonly based on a deficit model, has nevertheless had a huge impact on the ability and opportunity of hearing students to study ASL. As of the 2004–2005 school year, more than seven hundred secondary schools in the United States offered ASL, and more than four thousand individual classes were being offered at the secondary level around the country (Rosen 2008, 17, 21). Furthermore, ASL enrollments had increased nationally from a total of 56,783 in the 2002–2003 school year to 73,473 in the 2004–2005 school year (see Rosen 2008, 20). Finally, in 2004–2005, these programs employed nearly 725 full-time equivalency teachers (Rosen 2008, 22). Although more recent data on ASL programs are not yet available, anecdotal evidence suggests that these numbers all





continue to grow. I return to the issue of hearing students studying ASL as a foreign language later in the article.

At the federal level, the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) has identified the federal recognition of ASL as one of its top twenty priorities for the 2008–2010 period, and its Public Policy Committee has this priority under review. Specifically, what the NAD is seeking is as follows:

The NAD shall pursue, as part of its long-range plan, federal legislation recognizing American Sign Language as a natural and legitimate language of deaf Americans. Further, the NAD shall investigate legal precedents, as well as historical reviews of other nations that have enacted legislation with respect to their sign languages. (NAD website)

While not an unreasonable goal, such recognition, if it is to be really meaningful, must avoid the limitations that we have seen in almost all of the state legislation.

What is really at issue in the efforts to provide some sort of meaningful official recognition of ASL at either the federal or the state level is the underlying issue of language rights (see Branson and Miller 1998; Haualand and Allen 2009; Jokinen 2000; Komesaroff 2008, 105–14; Siegel 2008; Skutnabb-Kangas 2008). The paradox here is that most (indeed, virtually all) of the current legislation is not concerned with the language rights of deaf people but rather with the acceptance of the study of ASL to fulfill foreign language requirements in educational settings—a matter of language rights, perhaps, but one that by and large affects hearing rather than deaf people. The language rights of deaf people continue to be dealt with not as linguistic rights per se but rather through disability legislation (such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 [42 U.S.C. §§ 12101 *et seq.*]), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 [29 U.S.C. §§ 794 *et seq.*]), and the Individuals with Disabilities Act [IDEA] of 1975 [20 U.S.C. §§ 1400 *et seq.*]), and almost always in terms of the *right to an interpreter* rather than to specific and meaningful language rights with respect to ASL (see Lucas 2003). This approach to the recognition of language rights has profound implications for deaf people in general and for deaf children in particular. Although well intentioned, such an approach is fundamentally based on an unequal and arguably unconstitutional under-





standing of both language rights and the nature of the deaf community. As Lawrence Siegel argues:

It is my contention that the First and Fourteenth Amendments to our Constitution mandate that . . . deaf and hard of hearing children have that which virtually every other American child takes for granted—the right to exchange ideas and information in school—and that current federal law violates those constitutional rights . . . Ultimately, I am arguing that the rights recognized under both the First and Fourteenth Amendments must be enlarged to include a right broader than freedom of speech—a right to access and develop communication and language. (2008, xiii–xiv)

What appears to be taking place ideologically with respect to ASL and efforts to have ASL recognized and granted official status in the United States, especially at the state level, is that such efforts largely take place through what might be termed a “lens of audism”: That is, they are conceptualized according to and reflect predominantly hearing perspectives about the nature of ASL (see Bauman 2004); further, these efforts ultimately seem better able to serve the interests of hearing people than those of deaf people. Although the laws that have emerged in general are grounded in what Ruiz would call the “language-as-a-right” orientation, at the same time they are embedded in a disability paradigm.

Finally, there is a fundamental paradox with respect to the issue of ASL and language rights for deaf people. The dilemma, at its heart, is how language rights are conceived. That is, to what extent, and in what ways are language rights *individual* rights, and to what extent and in what ways are they *group* rights (that is, rights that apply to a community rather than solely to the members of that community by virtue of some shared feature of those individuals)? Although for the most part language rights are conceptualized as individual rights, this is actually a far more complex matter than it might at first seem since language rights are “preeminently *social*, in that they are only comprehensible in relation to a group of other human beings with whom the language is shared and from which personal and cultural identity is achieved” (MacMillan 1982, 420). In other words, debates about language rights are unique in that, as Kenneth McRae has argued, “societies charac-





terized by linguistic pluralism differ from those characterized by racial, religious, class, or ideological divisions in one essential respect, which stems from the pervasive nature of language as a general vehicle of communication” (1978, 331). This having been said, the concept of “group rights” is itself somewhat problematic and can potentially lead to individuals’ being coerced into group membership. The challenge here is often a very real one, and this is certainly the case with ASL and the deaf community.

Early Identification of Hearing Impairment and ASL

The evidence is overwhelming that the single most important factor in meeting the needs of the prelingually hearing impaired child¹³ is early diagnosis of hearing impairment and subsequent responses to the condition (see Cone-Wesson 2003; Smith 2000, 431). The significance of early identification is, of course, extremely closely tied to the issue of language; in fact, one could compellingly argue that this is really the whole point of being concerned with early identification. The prelingual child with a hearing impairment basically lacks access to language, and until the child’s condition is recognized and addressed, this not only remains true but also contributes to ongoing linguistic developmental delays (Paul 2001, 16). The recognition of the child’s hearing impairment makes possible decisions about how to address the condition for each individual child.

Needless to say, for parents whose child has a hearing impairment, a variety of options is available, including the use of a signed language (the most common are ASL or a contact sign language), the use of assistive technology such as hearing aids to maximize residual hearing, and cochlear implants. These options ultimately all have educational, sociocultural, and linguistic implications. The decision about the best approach to take for any individual child must be made by the parents, but the decision should also be made based on a relatively complete understanding of all of the options available. Thus, both the information provided to parents of children with a hearing impairment and the person who provides this information are extremely important.

The concern that many in the DEAF^WORLD have with respect to the information provided to parents of children who have a hearing





impairment is that the individuals who provide the information are most often hearing professionals in medical fields (e.g., pediatricians, audiologists). Such individuals tend, as a general rule, to be unsympathetic to the nature and goals of the DEAF^WORLD and are widely believed by deaf people to offer what are at best somewhat biased perspectives on the options available to parents. The tension that exists is nowhere clearer than in a bill currently before the California State Senate, which has already been approved by the House. With respect to its articulated purpose, AB 2072 seems to be unobjectionable; it simply “requires parents of all newborns and infants diagnosed with a hearing loss to be provided specified information on communication options for children with hearing loss.” Requiring that parents be informed of the different options available to them is not only perfectly reasonable but also admirable and even appropriate. However, AB 2072 does far more than this: It also specifies who is to provide the information and what department in the state government is responsible for doing so. Currently the state agency responsible for addressing early childhood intervention is shared by the Department of Healthcare Services and the Department of Education, which allows for a clear programmatic articulation between early childhood intervention and public schooling. Bill AB 2072 shifts that responsibility to the Department of Developmental Services and requires the information to be provided by an “audiologist or other related professional.” In other words, what AB 2072 would effectively accomplish is the medicalization and pathologization of deafness. Further, it would create a situation in which those responsible for helping parents of children with a hearing impairment make decisions about their children’s future are necessarily in positions that involve conflicts of interest both financially and in terms of their own professional training and biases.

The historical development of AB 2072 is also a classic example of what many deaf people take to be hearing hegemony. Bill AB 2072 was initially suggested to Representative Tony Mendoza, its legislative sponsor, by a group of registered sponsors, who included the following:

- California Coalition (a group of six private oral schools)
- American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees
- California Academy of Audiology





- California Association of Private Special Education Schools
- California Hospital Association
- California Speech-Language Hearing Association

What holds this group of sponsors together is a focus on hearing and speaking; these are all profoundly audist organizations that share an ideology that diametrically opposes most aspects of the DEAF^WORLD. This does not mean that these groups should not be allowed to offer suggestions for legislation; that is certainly their right. However, in the case of AB 2072, neither the development nor the writing of the legislation initially involved transparency, involvement of key stakeholders, or any serious attempt at balance. As AB 2072 has moved through the legislative process, some of these failings have been addressed, but it remains a fundamentally flawed piece of legislation.

Perhaps the most discouraging aspect of the entire AB 2072 debate took place outside of the legislative discussions on an Orange County blog run by Art Pedroza, who referred to deaf opponents of AB 2072 as “ASL cultists,” “ASL loons,” and as simply “crazy” (Barillas 2010). Another blog, this one in Arizona and controlled by Barry Sewell, attacked opponents of AB 2072 as “deafhoodized peacocks” (Barillas 2010). It is hardly surprising in such a context that many deaf people remain deeply suspicious of the hearing world and especially of hearing, audist professionals.

The place of ASL in the debates about the need for the early identification of hearing impairment is complex. One can legitimately take a number of possible approaches in helping a child with a hearing impairment to acquire language, and it is arguable that the most important factor is simply to identify the hearing impairment and to act as quickly as possible in whatever manner the parents choose. I believe that ASL is the most natural and the easiest language for the child with a severe or profoundly prelingual hearing impairment and that it is thus the best way to provide the essential linguistic input that the child needs, but I also recognize that this is not an uncontroversial position. The challenge, of course, is that few hearing parents of such children can themselves sign, and, further, many hearing parents are committed to helping their children to “overcome” their deafness. Further-



more, there remain many stereotypes and folk beliefs about ASL that, although demonstrably wrong, are nevertheless widespread, even among many professionals with whom parents of children with a hearing impairment will have contact.

ASL as a Medium of Instruction in Deaf Education

Throughout much of its history in the United States, the field of deaf education has been a deeply divided one. Indeed, it would not be inaccurate to talk about two fundamentally distinct paradigms in deaf education: one that recognizes the value of some sort of manual/gestural/visual communication in teaching deaf students, and one that focuses primarily or exclusively on the development of oral language and concomitant speechreading skills. These two paradigms have historically been labeled the “manual” approach and the “oral” approach (see Baynton 1996; Bornstein 1990; Crouch and Greenwald 2007; Nover 1995; Reagan 1990, 2005 [1985]; Winefield 1987). It is important to note, though, that this bifurcation is somewhat misleading in that even the “manualists” have tended to focus disproportionately on the teaching and learning of English and for much of the past 150 years were concerned with instruction using *signing* rather than ASL (see Reagan 1989, 1990, 2005 [1985]). In the last quarter of the twentieth century, however, this changed significantly as ASL-English bilingual/bicultural education programs for deaf children became more popular and common (see Allen 2008; DeLuca and Napoli 2008; Erting et al. 2006; Gibson 2006; Johnson, Liddell, and Erting 1989; Ramsey 2004; Reagan 1990, 1995, 2005 [1985]; Tomkins 2004; Wilbur 2008). Such programs emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as a follow-up to the popular “Total Communication” programs that had spread rather like wildfire in schools and programs for deaf students after their initial introduction by Roy Holcolmb in 1967.

“Total Communication,” or TC, as it was commonly known, was originally “defined by whatever works for a particular child, for example, speech, speechreading, audition, signs, print, and so on, as well as combinations of these items” (Paul 2001, 237; see also De Vriendt and Moierman 1987). In practice, however, TC often became syn-





onymous with Simultaneous Communication (SimCom), or the use of *some kind* of signing together with speech. Thus, what was initially intended to be a statement of educational philosophy became a label for a particular kind of educational practice (see Denton 1976). The rise of bilingual/bicultural education in the 1980s was an attempt to challenge this situation both philosophically and methodologically (see Allen 2008; DeLuca and Napoli 2008; Erting et al. 2006; Gibson 2006; Johnson, Liddell, and Erting 1989; Ramsey 2004; Reagan 1990, 1995, 2005 [1985]; Tomkins 2004; Wilbur 2008). In essence, such programs are concerned with producing individuals capable of functioning in both the hearing and the deaf worlds and are committed to the use of both ASL and English as instructional media and as educational outcomes (see Johnson, Liddell, and Erting 1989; Simms and Thumann 2007). The bilingual/bicultural approach to the education of deaf people has been an attempt to address the situation noted by Tom Humphries, who has quite accurately observed that “traditionally, the cultural practices of Deaf people and their children have had a covert, unappreciated, and unfulfilled impact on methods of educating Deaf children” (2004, 29).

One of the more interesting concepts to have emerged in the context of ASL–English bilingual/bicultural education is one suggested by Stephen Nover, the director of the Center for ASL/English Bilingual Education and Research at Gallaudet University. Nover has compellingly suggested that language policy in the educational sphere has been traditionally concerned with two matters: oracy, which refers to the ability to effectively use listening and speaking skills, and literacy, which refers to the ability to read and write (both concepts are, in fact, far more complex than this suggests). In the context of deafness and ASL (or, indeed, any natural sign language), however, Nover argues that we need to take into account a third sort of linguistic competence, which he calls “signacy” (Nover, personal communication). Basically, “signacy” is the ability to use a sign language effectively and may be expanded to refer to a kind of metalinguistic understanding of sign language in general and of the specific natural sign language at issue in particular. In addition, Nover argues that the order of significance and emphasis of these three kinds of language skill must, for the deaf child, be signacy, literacy, and oracy (SLO) rather than the more





	Visual Medium	Visual Medium	Visual/Aural Medium
Two Languages	ASL	English	English
Mode	Signacy	Literacy	Oracy
Receptive Skills	Watching	Reading	Listening (when appropriate)
	Viewing		Speechreading
Productive Skills	Signing	Writing	Speaking (when appropriate)
		Typing/Keyboarding	Mouthing

FIGURE 2. Nover's Conceptualization of Signacy, Literacy, and Oracy.
(Used with permission)

traditional focus on oracy, literacy, and then (if at all) something akin to signacy (OLS) (see figure 2).

Even as ASL-English bilingual/bicultural education programs for deaf children have been increasing in numbers and improving in quality in recent years, there has been a movement away from residential schooling for deaf children and toward the mainstreaming of them as a consequence of the increased public support for inclusive education. I do not doubt that inclusive education is well intended, nor would I dispute that for many children it is an extremely good idea both socially and pedagogically. However, for many deaf children, it almost inevitably results in placements in which the child is effectively denied meaningful access to ASL and interaction with other deaf people. Given the language challenges that most deaf children face under the best of circumstances,¹⁴ mainstreaming can create additional barriers. In fact, in a powerful article on this subject, Branson and Miller have discussed what they phrase “the epistemic violence of mainstreaming” (1993, 21).

In terms of the major issues related to linguistic ideology and ASL as the medium of instruction for deaf children, several themes emerge. First, it is clear that from a historical perspective the ideological norm in deaf education has been to view deaf individuals from a deficit rather than a difference perspective (see Hoffmeister 2008). Although



educators in general rejected such views as they applied to children from culturally and linguistically distinct populations in the 1970s, as multicultural education became increasingly popular and normative (see Banks and Banks 2004; Gollnick and Chinn 2009; Grant and Sleeter 2007), the case of deaf people remained largely ignored in terms of the use of the deficit perspective. This was because they were indeed viewed not simply as different but also as having a disability and thus as characterized by a deficit condition. Only with the rise of disability studies and deaf studies has this perspective been challenged (see Bauman 2008b; Charlton 1998; Corker 2000; Davis 1995, 1997), and it remains common in educational settings. Indeed, it is often seen as simply “common sense,” to return to the language used by Norman Fairclough at the start of this article. The normativeness of hearing and of what Steve Nover has labeled “hearization” as an educational goal in deaf education (see Nover 1995, 123–25) has also led to common views of ASL as a secondary—and second-class—language in deaf education. In essence, what this means is that for many policymakers, politicians, and members of the general public, the use of ASL is acceptable in deaf education insofar as it moves the student toward some level of competence in English but not really for its own sake.

This particular situation is especially intriguing in that most deaf children thus do not in fact actually have a mother tongue or native language in a meaningful, robust sense. The parents’ language (unless it is already a sign language) is not the child’s L1; indeed, to learn this language requires extensive, formal educational efforts. Nor, initially, is the natural sign language of the surrounding deaf community the child’s native language since the child is most likely to learn that language only after being placed in an educational setting and exposed to other deaf people, both children and adults (see, for instance, Deuchar and James 1985; Gibson 2006). As Peter Matthews has noted, echoing the view of mainstream linguists, a “native language” is “a language that people have acquired naturally as children, as opposed to one learned later, e.g. through formal education” (1997, 238). Since most deaf children actually learn to sign from other deaf children in residential schools for the deaf, this means that they literally do not have a native language or mother tongue: Prior to either the acquisition of a natural sign language, such as ASL, or extensive intervention



in terms of the deliberate teaching of speaking and speechreading skills in a spoken language, these children are arguably in some sense *alingual*. When the role of the critical language-acquisition period is taken into account, the vital importance of both early identification and early intervention for such children—and, it would seem, for the exposure of the child to ASL—is evident.

ASL as a Foreign Language

Another somewhat controversial matter with respect to ASL has been the rise of ASL programs as foreign-language programs in K–12 and university settings in the United States (see Hayes and Dilka 1995; Reagan 2000, 2002a, 2009; Wilcox 1988; Wilcox and Wilcox 1997). I have already mentioned the legislative side of these developments, but the matter is in fact far more complex than the legislation alone might suggest. The study of ASL by hearing individuals has been increasing quite dramatically around the country in the past few decades, and this is promising for a number of reasons. Wilcox and Wilcox (1997, 51) report an increase in enrollment in ASL courses at the postsecondary level of 181 percent over a five-year period in the 1980s, and enrollments have continued to rise since that time (see Miller 2008; Mitchell et al. 2006). In fact, Sherman Wilcox, a faculty member at the University of New Mexico, maintains a list of universities around the country that accept ASL in fulfillment of their foreign-language requirements, and the list currently includes more than 160 institutions (see <http://web.mac.com/swilcox/UNM/univlist.html>). Not only are more secondary schools and universities offering ASL, but one of the key, and especially problematic, differences between teaching ASL and other foreign languages—the lack of appropriate and articulated national standards of the sort developed for other languages by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages 1996, 2006)—has now been addressed as well. The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*, which were developed by ACTFL in the 1990s, provide the fundamental framework for how the teaching and learning of foreign languages is conceptualized and has important implications for



teaching methodologies, curriculum, and assessment. The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* exist in two forms: a generic, non-language-specific version (see American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages 1996), and language-specific frameworks for Arabic, Chinese, classical languages (Greek and Latin), French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish (see American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages 2006). Furthermore, the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* have been widely adopted in foreign language education and play a key role in both the education of future foreign-language teachers and in contemporary foreign-language textbooks (see, e.g., Lafayette 1996; Omagio Hadley 2001; Phillips 1999; Shrum and Glisan 2005). Between 2007 and 2009 the American Sign Language Teachers Association (ASLTA), in collaboration with the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers, produced a draft version of the *Standards for Learning American Sign Language*, which will ultimately appear in the fourth and final version of these standards. In the meantime, a number of states (including California, Virginia, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, and Texas) have already developed ASL standards based on the ACTFL *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (see, e.g., California State Board of Education 2009; New Jersey Department of Education 1999; New York State Education Department 1996; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction 2007; Texas State Board for Educator Certification 2004; Virginia Department of Education, Division of Instruction 1998).

At the same time, however, a powerful backlash to such developments has arisen, seen most clearly in the resistance among many educators (and especially many foreign-language educators) to the inclusion of ASL as an option for foreign-language credit in both secondary schools and universities. Broadly speaking, five objections commonly arise to granting academic credit for ASL courses:

- ASL is not a real, fully developed language (or ASL is simply a way of presenting English in a visual/gestural modality);
- Because it is found primarily in North America, ASL by definition cannot be considered to be a “foreign” language;



- ASL is simply too easy for students to learn and thus misses the point of a foreign language requirement;
- Since it is not a written language, there is no literature available in ASL, which is one of the key reasons for studying a foreign language; and
- ASL lacks a real cultural community (or the use of the term *culture* with respect to deaf people is really metaphorical rather than literal in nature).

I believe that all of these claims are fundamentally false and that the literature in the field strongly supports my position. Although it should not be necessary to do so, and while I do not want to waste space in refuting these claims, for the sake of argument I provide a very brief response to each:

- The claim that ASL is not a real language or that it is English in a different modality is simply wrong (see Reagan 1997). Since the 1960 publication of Bill Stokoe's *Sign Language Structure*, a huge body of linguistic literature has presented abundant evidence that the status of ASL (and of other natural sign languages) as a full-fledged language is beyond question (see Hoffmeister 2008; Liddell 1980, 2003; Lillo-Martin 1991; Lucas 1990; Neidle et al. 2000; Sandler and Lillo-Martin 2006; Valli, Lucas, and Mulrooney 2005). This claim may reflect confusion about the difference between ASL and either contact sign or one of the various manual sign codes.¹⁵
- The question about whether ASL should count as a foreign language in the U.S. context since it is indigenous to and spoken primarily in North America is an interesting one. It seems to me that we use the term *foreign* in the phrase "foreign language" to indicate that the language is *foreign to the student*. If the fact that a language is widely or even exclusively used in the United States, then this would mean that we would also not accept Native American languages or even, perhaps, Spanish as foreign languages.
- The idea that ASL is too easy to learn is one that can be maintained only by someone who has not tried to learn it. In fact, the research suggests that ASL is a relatively difficult language for students to acquire (see Jacobs 1996; McKee and McKee 1992). Of course, if one





is not talking about ASL but about a manual sign code for English, this is a very different situation.

- ASL does not have a written language to speak of, but of course neither do the vast majority of languages spoken around the world today. More to the point, though, there is an extensive body of ASL “oral” literature, including ASL poetry, theatrical work, and the like (see Bahan 1992; Bauman 2008a; Bragg 1996; Christie and Wilkins 1997; Conley 2001; Davidson 2008; Frishberg 1988; Jacobowitz 1992; Krentz 2000; Low 1992; Novak 2008; Perlmutter 2008; Peters 2000; Rutherford 1993; Sonnenstrahl 2003; Taub 2001; Valli 1990). This body of literature is very much worth studying and is only accessible through ASL.
- The deaf community constitutes a vibrant, living culture in every meaningful sense of the term, and writers about this culture—both deaf and hearing—use the term *culture* in a literal manner (see Bragg 2001; Branson and Miller 2002; Gregory 1992; Gregory and Hartley 1991; Harris 1995; Jones 2002; Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996; Padden and Humphries 1988, 2005; Reagan 1990, 1995, 2002b; Tomkins 2004). To be sure, deaf people are inevitably bicultural in that they must function in the hearing world in order to survive (see Kersting 1997; Leigh 2008; Skelton and Valentine 2003), but this in no way diminishes their own cultural identity.

In short, the objections and challenges to ASL as a foreign language are neither accurate nor compelling. They are based not on the available evidence but rather on beliefs and attitudes that, although undoubtedly deeply held, are nevertheless extremely problematic.

This brings us again to the question of the language ideology that seems to be at play in the discussions and debates about the academic acceptance of ASL as a foreign/second language. The core ideological issue here has to do with what has been called “linguistic legitimacy” (Reagan 1997), which is the idea that some languages or language varieties are more “real,” “legitimate,” or “proper” than others. Such views, although by no means uncommon, are simply indefensible on linguistic grounds. To be sure, some languages do have more social status and function as “higher” language varieties in their respective societies than do other languages and language varieties.





However, this is a result of social, political, historic, and economic factors—ultimately, issues of power—rather than of any linguistic factors. In short, such determinations are extralinguistic in nature and are incompatible with what we know about the nature of human languages. Consider, for instance, the following set of claims offered by Donald Vandenberg, a well-known philosopher of education:

I find it difficult to imagine any university students majoring in one of the liberal arts ever wanting to fulfill the foreign language requirement by studying . . . ASL . . . It is equally hard to imagine a university giving tertiary school credit for [its] study. . . . liberal arts programs require foreign languages so that their graduates have access to the culture, *i.e.*, scholarship, *i.e.*, “high” culture, that is available in that language. This is not just a matter of words, as it gets to be if one just uses the word “culture” in that sentence. The scholarly reading that I have done with German sources simply cannot be done in . . . ASL . . . [It does] not really have a “linguistic community” in the strong, robust sense of possessing a body of scholarly literature of [its] own, the kind to which learning the language can give access. (1998, 83–84)

Vandenberg’s argument is characteristic of many critiques of ASL as an appropriate topic for academic credit and for foreign-language credit in particular. It is also a clear example of the application of the ideas embedded in the language ideology of “linguistic legitimacy” and, as is generally true of such arguments, is based on a set of claims that are erroneous in nature, as I have shown.

Conclusion

In this article I have addressed some of the major ideological barriers that emerge in discussions and debates about the status of ASL in four specific contexts: the official recognition of ASL at the state (and potentially federal) level, early identification of hearing impairment, the use of ASL as a medium of instruction in deaf education, and, in the context of secondary schools and colleges and universities, the granting of academic (and foreign language) credit for the study of ASL. I have employed the model proposed by Richard Ruiz, which identifies three orientations toward language diversity (language as a prob-



lem, language as a right, and language as a resource) in analyzing these ideological barriers. I have also utilized the concept of “linguistic legitimacy” in responding to the often emotional reactions to ASL among educators, policymakers, politicians, and the general public.

This analysis demonstrates that the language-as-a-problem perspective of ASL remains the dominant one and that this perspective is further strengthened in many cases by the ongoing assumption by many hearing people that deaf people have a disability and that they (and their language and culture) are therefore products or outcomes of a condition of deficiency (i.e., audiological deafness). This situation is further exacerbated by ignorance of the nature of language in general and of ASL in particular, which leads many to assume that ASL is in some meaningful sense not a complete or legitimate language, which is where the notion of linguistic legitimacy comes into play. Thus, even when there are well-intentioned efforts to support and recognize ASL, as in state legislation, such efforts often fall short of the mark, continuing to be embedded in and to reflect what are ultimately deficit assumptions. Finally, in many (although certainly not all) of the cases that I have examined here, it is hearing people rather than deaf people who tend to receive the greatest benefits. In short, it appears that deaf people remain, in essence, a colonized community in the midst of a much larger and more powerful hearing community.¹⁶

Notes

1. The terminology for second language classes for speakers of English in the United States is a somewhat complex matter. Traditionally, the label “foreign languages” has been used, but at the present time the label “world languages” is more popular, especially in the K–12 context. Other labels that are also used are “second/additional languages” and “languages other than English” (LOTEs).

2. A common distinction made in writing about deafness is between “deaf” and “Deaf”: The former refers to deafness solely as an audiological condition, the latter to deafness as a cultural condition. The basic idea underlying this distinction is that when writing about cultural groups in general, uppercase letters are employed (e.g., “Native American”). Thus, a person can be “deaf” without being “Deaf” (as in the case of older individuals who gradually lose their hearing). Although I believe that this is a valuable distinction conceptually and heuristically, I also think that it oversimplifies and di-



chotomizes the complexity of membership in the deaf community. I have therefore chosen simply to use the lowercase “deaf” here, with the understanding that deafness is not only socially and individually constructed but also that its construction is complex and multilayered (see Branson and Miller 2002; Ladd 2003; Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996; Padden and Humphries 1988, 2005; Reagan 1990).

3. In Georgia, ASL is accepted as a foreign language *in limited circumstances* and carries different credit for deaf and hearing students. All of the information in notes 2 through 10 comes from the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center’s “States That Recognize American Sign Language as a Foreign Language,” which is on its website at <http://www.ncssfl.org/links/ASL.pdf>.

4. In Hawai’i, ASL is recognized for educational purposes only at the post-K–12 level.

5. In Illinois, ASL is recognized as a foreign language for up to four years of secondary-school credit.

6. If taken in high school, ASL can meet the foreign language entrance requirement for a state institution of higher education. At the university and community-college level, ASL is accepted as a foreign-language credit.

7. In Louisiana, public schools may offer ASL as an elective course provided that there are sufficient numbers of students requesting it.

8. School districts in Michigan may grant high school foreign-language credit for ASL as a result of either formal study of ASL or a proficiency test in ASL.

9. In South Carolina, school districts may grant elective high-school credit for ASL courses.

10. In Virginia, House Joint Resolution no. 228, passed by the Virginia General Assembly in 1996, “requests public schools and public and private institutions of higher education in Virginia to recognize American Sign Language course work for foreign language credit.”

11. In Washington, ASL satisfies both secondary education foreign-language requirements and foreign-language requirements at the tertiary level, including any foreign-language admissions requirement.

12. The “deaf community,” also called the DEAF^WORLD in ASL, refers to the social and cultural grouping of individuals who self-identify as “culturally deaf” (see Branson and Miller 1993, 2002; Cokely 2008; Dolnick 1993; Harris 1995; Hoffmeister 2008; Jones 2002; Ladd 2003, 2005; Leigh 2008; Lindgren, DeLuca, and Napoli 2008; Tomkins 2004).

13. I am deliberately using the term *hearing impaired* here because the future sociocultural and linguistic status of the child has not yet, in most cases, been determined. Excluded here are children of parents who are members of the DEAF^WORLD, whose native language is ASL, and whose language development will parallel that of hearing children in all significant ways.





14. I am excluding here deaf children born to deaf, signing parents, for whom ASL is truly their first language. Such children do not face any challenge with respect to language development since they acquire ASL as a native language in the same manner that hearing children acquire a spoken language.

15. Since the 1960s and well into the 1980s, a number of efforts were undertaken in the United States to construct artificial sign languages or, more accurately, manual sign codes (MSCs) for use in the education of deaf children, and many of these MSCs continue to be used in programs for deaf children. Such MSCs are intended to facilitate the learning of a spoken language by children who have limited or no auditory input from the spoken language. Thus, these MSCs attempt to provide linguistic and communicative input in a modality different from that normally employed (i.e., visually rather than orally). Although the MSCs that have been developed typically (though not universally) utilize signs drawn from natural sign languages, they nevertheless differ dramatically from natural sign languages. Phonologically, morphologically, lexically, and syntactically, the basis for the MSCs are the norms of the target spoken language rather than those of the natural sign language. In other words, artificial MSCs designed to represent English may best be understood as varieties of English that utilize a visual/manual modality rather than as varieties of ASL. The best-known MSCs include Seeing Essential English (SEE 1), Signing Exact English (SEE 2), Linguistics of Visual English (LOVE), Signed English, and, most recently, Conceptually Accurate Signed English (CASE).

16. An earlier version of this article was delivered at the 2010 annual conference of the American Association of Applied Linguistics held in Atlanta, Georgia, March 6–9.

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