

COLLECTIVE REMEMBERING

EDITED BY

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Folk Explanation in Language Survival

Carol A. Padden

In very fundamental ways, languages are collective memories. We need only look at cases of language death, when languages are replaced by a more dominant language, to remind us that living languages are those in which the speakers agree to remember them. Dyribal, a collection of dialects spoken in the north-eastern corner of Australia, is a particularly instructive example of language loss through organized forgetting. Citing a disinterest in Dyribal and its irrelevance to their increasingly modern life-styles, younger members of the Dyribal community not only avoid using Dyribal with whites and among each other, but they avoid using it with Dyribal elders. They complain that older speakers further contribute to their disinterest in Dyribal by correcting or ridiculing the little Dyribal they do use. For these speakers, English has become the language of choice, representing the generation's shift away from the traditional life of their elders. After a single generation, only older speakers remain committed to the use of Dyribal and the 'collective memory' for that language may be lost to future generations (Schmidt, 1985).

Other languages have been dying less dramatically, although in much the same pattern. The replacement of Scottish Gaelic by English has been taking place for hundreds of years. Various disruptions through the history of the Scottish Highlands, from land clearances carried out in the 1800s to introduce sheep farming to the deterioration of the indigenous fishing industry, have all slowly but inexorably diminished Gaelic in favour of English (Dorian, 1981; 1985). As familiar contexts for Gaelic embedded in traditional fishing communities were replaced by contexts in which English was required, each new generation of children failed to learn more of the language: they failed to contribute to the collective memory of the language for future generations. Today there are very few complete speakers of Scottish Gaelic; most of those who now speak it are 'semi-speakers' and can only use it interspersed with English (Dorian, 1977; 1981).

Dramatic change and disruption are not necessarily fatal to

languages, as illustrated by the large influx of Latin vocabulary into Old English in the sixth century. The infiltration of Latin brought new possibilities, including concepts ideal for the rise of Christianity throughout Europe (McCrum, Cran and MacNeil, 1986). But what seems to characterize dying languages is loss without replacement or expansion. Instead of the two-term tense system used by older speakers of Dyribal, in which there is a marked form for future and an unmarked for all other references to time, younger speakers of Dyribal have lost the future tense marking, leaving only an unmarked form for all tenses (Schmidt, 1985). Modern speakers of Gaelic have lost the masculine gender marking in the language, further reducing the class of gender distinctions.

Crucially, in the case of language death, almost as dramatic as the disappearance of structures is the disappearance of an explanation for why speakers of a language should continue to use and remember the language. As the following report of an English-Gaelic bilingual shows, speakers of dying languages find that the contexts in which they can use the language are shrinking, leaving what Dennison (1977) finds to be the demise of dying languages: the realization that 'there is nothing left for them appropriately to be used about'.

See, when you go to the shops, here, or when you meet people on the road, and they don't understand, well, you've got to speak the language they understand and that's the English. There's more English in the parish now than there is of Gaelic, and before we were born it was more Gaelic than English. See, times have changed. People's changed with it. (Dorian, 1981: 104)

Speakers need a tradition of explanation about the language that helps them organize social forces for remembering it. The Gaelic speaker offers an entirely reasonable explanation, perhaps overly reasonable, of pressures that justify non-use of Gaelic. In the case of Dyribal, not only have younger speakers replaced their parents' language with English, but they seem to have replaced their parents' mythology about the place of Dyribal in their lives. Today, when younger speakers of Dyribal and Gaelic talk about their use of their ancestors' language, they do not repeat their parents' references to tribal and language identity; instead they use themes of resignation and dismissal, of futility in face of the dominant language, as in this comment by a Dyribal speaker about his language: 'Talking Duwal [everyday Dyribal] to a waybala [white man] - it's like singing and you're ashamed of your voice . . .' (Schmidt, 1985: 18). Use of Dyribal is associated with 'backwardness' and a traditional life that is increasingly at odds with their modern practices. In Nahuatl, an Aztec language being replaced by Spanish, younger speakers do

not show shame, but their association of Nahuatl with the ways of the past achieves much of the same ends: in their explanations about Nahuatl, they position the language remotely from the circumstances of their everyday lives (Hill and Hill, 1977).

American Sign Language (ASL), a natural sign language used by communities of Deaf people in the United States and Canada, has many of the social features of languages under threat like Dyribal, but unlike Dyribal, it seems to be thriving.¹ A primary feature in the memory of ASL, one that is perhaps absent in younger-generation Dyribal and Gaelic, is the community's collective explanation about the central place of the language in their everyday lives. In stories and anecdotes that the group tell about their language, themes of regeneration, preservation and transmission are common currency. Such collectively held explanations can be seen as ways of collectively reminding each new generation of the special circumstances of becoming a native speaker of the language.

As in Dyribal, there are dislocations across generations of ASL users. Young deaf children, more often than not, do not learn ASL at birth. Only about 10 per cent of all deaf children are born to parents who are also deaf. Of this number, most, but not all, have deaf parents who use ASL. This leaves the large majority of other deaf children without access to ASL until later in life, if at all. The ages at which deaf children learn ASL vary widely, from the small number of deaf children who learn at birth to the larger numbers who learn by age six, when they attend school with other ASL users, and there are sizeable numbers of teenage and adult learners of ASL. Like Dyribal, ASL must also co-exist with a powerful dominant language, English. ASL is very rarely the official language of social institutions that govern the early lives of deaf children, notably the school.

But from all indications, ASL has managed to sustain its vitality over nearly two centuries of tenuous transmission, with each new generation learning mostly from non-relatives rather than the family. There are no reliable official counts of primary users of ASL in North America, but based on the number of users known to social-service agencies, a conservative estimate is about 200,000 (Padden and Humphries, 1988).

There may be a good explanation as to why ASL remains tenacious in face of strong pressures from the more dominant English-speaking community. English is a spoken language, communicated primarily by speech. For Deaf people who do not hear, the inability to access speech would appear to make English a difficult, if not impossible, alternative to ASL. However, there have been, over the years, alternatives to ASL for Deaf people. A powerful alternative has been the signed English systems in which ASL is reconfigured in

forms which are putatively more reminiscent of English structure (see Ramsey, 1988). Additionally, there are orally based forms of communication among deaf people where sign language is used in a sharply reduced form. While these form of communication exist, they have not replaced, nor have they displayed a dominance equal to that of, ASL in the North American Deaf community.

Very little has changed over the years in terms of how ASL is learned by new generations of signers; it is still unusually hard to learn. Yet ASL has remained surprisingly durable despite the lack of a strong institutional base for maintenance of the language throughout its history. ASL continues to have currency among Deaf communities in the United States and Canada and is slowly gaining ground in official institutions outside of the Deaf community. One measure of its growing recognition is the number of colleges and universities which now allow ASL to be used to meet hearing students' language requirements (*San Diego Tribune*, 27 January 1989).

Certainly one of the most interesting stories about the survival of ASL has been the community's flexibly changing explanation over time about why the language needs to be remembered. To understand the history of explanations about ASL, a brief history of the mythological roots of such explanations is necessary. Many 'stories' about ASL are framed as stories about the uniqueness of the language and how Deaf people came to use it in place of speech. Stories about the earliest use of ASL can ultimately be traced back to a folk tale told in deaf clubs in France about the founder of a public school for deaf children in Paris: the Abbé de l'Épée. Épée, a priest in search of a calling in the late years of his life, was introduced to the deaf daughters of a widow, and decided to organize a small school for deaf children. His initial success with the children attracted funds from the city and a distinguished benefactor, Louis XVI; his school grew to serve seventy-two deaf children by 1785. At the time of his death in 1789, Épée was a minor celebrity and left behind a legacy of several students and disciples who went on to establish additional schools, including a deaf man, Laurent Clerc. With Clerc, the American story of origins begins. In 1816, Clerc travelled to America with an Episcopalian priest, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, to help establish the first public school for deaf children in America. Clerc introduced his native French Sign Language as the first language of the school. Nearly two centuries later, ASL and FSL are no longer mutually intelligible, although they share a common base (Lane, 1984).

The popular version of how Épée came to his calling is still told in dramatic form in deaf clubs throughout France. Described in an

account of a trip taken throughout France by myself and my husband (Padden and Humphries, 1988), 'the story of the Abbé de l'Épée' is almost always a preface to an official deaf-club event, to remind visitors such as ourselves of the significance of Épée to Deaf people in France. When these stories are told, it is clear that they are not merely anecdotes, but variations on a stylized folk-tale, to be rendered in heightened, lyrical form. One version, recorded by us at one such event, appears below:

The Abbé de l'Épée had been walking for a long time through a dark night. He wanted to stop and rest overnight, but he could not find a place to stay, until at a distance he saw a house with a light. He stopped at the house, knocked at the door, but no one answered. He saw that the door was open, so he entered the house and found two young women seated by the fire sewing. He spoke to them, but they still did not respond. He walked closer and spoke to them again, but they failed again to respond. The Abbé was perplexed, but seated himself beside them. They looked up at him and did not speak. At that point, their mother entered the room. Did the Abbé not know that her daughters were deaf? He did not, but now he understood why they had not responded. As he contemplated the young women, the Abbé realized his vocation.

The theme of the tale is essentially religious as it draws on motifs of a light at the end of a dark road and a warm fire. At the light, Épée is introduced to two deaf women and undergoes a transformation. His transformation was perhaps the most powerful motif of all, one which would acknowledge his role in the formation of a national community of deaf people in France. Officially, Épée founded a school for deaf children but he had also created a community of deaf children who were housed together for most of their formative years, children who would later form a secondary community of adults around the core of the school. In some versions of this tale, Épée is proclaimed the father of sign language, the inventor of the language of deaf people. Although the credit is misplaced – no individual can create a language, only generations of speakers can – Épée is symbolically the catalyst for the formation of a community of deaf people that continues to this day (Lane, 1984; Padden and Humphries, 1988).

The Épée tale is 'reincarnated' in various forms in the United States in the person of his student, Laurent Clerc. Each year, deaf children at the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut perform celebrations of the day Clerc and Gallaudet founded their school, the first school for deaf children in the United States. In much the same style of Founding Fathers' mythology, deaf children at the American School for the Deaf in Hartford,

Connecticut re-enact how Clerc met Gallaudet and agreed to leave his homeland to sail with him across the Atlantic.

Increasingly, however, this kind of story-telling is being supplanted by a modern variation, one that is much less religious, much less centred around persons such as Épée or Clerc and Gallaudet. The new explanation for the place of ASL in the everyday lives of Deaf people is essentially 'scientific', not because it exhibits features of academic or scientific discourse, but because it is self-reflective and driven by references to features of 'language' and 'culture', and vocabulary which until very recently did not belong to the group.

This transition from the religious or the mythical in stories about ASL to the 'scientific' mirrors a profound change in the community itself, best summarized in terms of the emergence of a deaf middle-class, a professional class of deaf people who now dominate myth-making in the community, including explanations about their language. The new folk explanation about ASL, if we examine it closely, has not lost its mythical roots, but it has taken on new vocabulary and new kinds of representations that cast it in a decidedly modern light. These new representations form the basis for ways of talking about the place of the language in Deaf people's lives, ways that reflect replacements to earlier explanations without loss.

The crucial role of the middle class in myth-making about ASL underscores the relationship between control of social resources and opportunities for remembering. Survival of minority languages is, as Dorian (1981) notes, dependent not on the numbers of speakers but on *who* is using the language. Catalan is a classic example of a stable minority language thriving in what would otherwise be a hostile situation. Used by the political élite in the Catalanian region of Spain (Woolard, 1983), Catalan has maintained its integrity in the face of pressures from the larger nation-state in which Castilian is spoken. Each new generation of Catalan speakers, including the children of merchants and power brokers of the state, are expected to learn the language. By dominating myth-making about their language, the economically established class maintains resources for remembering the language.

The thematic shift in the folk explanation about ASL can best be illustrated by comparing selections taken from two popular Deaf news magazines, one in 1950 and the second in 1989. In 1950, a few issues after the inauguration of a new magazine for Deaf people, the *Silent Worker*, the editor's page featured a stern editorial on the subject of 'The Sign Language'. The theme was a familiar one to Deaf people: the sign language was in serious danger of deterioration owing to pressures surrounding it. There were 'oralists' who

demanding elimination of the sign language from schools for deaf children in favour of teaching speech. Readers were exhorted to join forces and work to preserve the language. The vocabulary features the popular explanation for the language of the Deaf community in America: it is known simply as 'the sign language', it is characterized by the fact that it is not speech. The editor could not use the word 'grammar' in reference to sign language; he instead uses the word 'standard' which he argues derives from 'custom'. And in recognition of good signing, the editor refers to it as 'art' because it is carefully constructed and pleasing to see.

Anyone who has been observant can detect a vast difference between the sign language in use today and that of a quarter of a century or so ago. . . . What has happened will be considered by some as changes due to the passing of time, while others will call it plain and simple deterioration. At any rate, the sign language is in danger of becoming a lost art unless something is done by the deaf to keep it at a standard where it can be considered the medium of conversation of a cultured people.

There is no grammar in the sign language. There is no standard authority by which it is determined that one sign is correct and another is incorrect, but custom has given us a fairly good standard, and we recognize a correct and incorrect form of usage. . . . (*Silent Worker*, February 1950, p. 2)

The themes in this editorial are solidly rooted in older worries about sign language. In a filmed lecture made by the National Association of the Deaf in 1913, the president of the organization gives an emotional and rousing speech on 'The preservation of the Sign Language', resounding much of the same themes that appear in this editorial. Users of the sign language must always 'protect and guard their language' against larger forces that conspire to eliminate the language. These malevolent forces seek to 'trap and imprison' Deaf people against their will by forcing them to abandon sign language for speech. In his powerful closing, the president invokes the deity as he acknowledges the sign language as 'the noblest gift God has given to Deaf people'.

In a recent issue of the *Silent News*, a popular Deaf newspaper published monthly, 'the sign language' has taken on a new name: it is now called 'American Sign Language', popularly referred to in its abbreviated form, ASL. The following article, reporting on a development in a Deaf community in Canada, is filled with quasi-scientific references:

On the evening of December 6, 1988, a private member's resolution was passed unanimously which recognizes the cultural uniqueness of the deaf community and ASL as a distinctive language with its own grammar

and rules of usage. It is now recognized as the true and complete first language of Deaf Manitobans.

The resolution received the unanimous support of all the parties. . . . Gary Doer, leader of the New Democratic Party, concluded the debate by congratulating the Deaf Community for bringing forward this resolution and spoke of his party's pride in being able to 'support their resolution to have their distinct society and distinct culture with their language, the [sic] American Sign Language [recognized]'.¹

Lawrence Zimmer, president of the Winnipeg Community Center of the Deaf, said 'This resolution marks the first time a government in Canada has officially recognized ASL and Manitoba leads the other provinces as a model in recognizing ASL. . . . Several American states have also recognized ASL as the language of deaf people, including California, Michigan and Texas. (*Silent News*, February 1989)

As these two selections illustrate, the popular explanation about ASL has changed dramatically, over time as short as a single generation. In 1950, the *Silent Worker* used 'the sign language'; in 1965, a book on the structure of the language (Stokoe, Croneberg and Casterline, 1965) added a qualifier and called it 'the American sign language' to distinguish it from other distinct, unrelated sign languages of the world, thus broadening the world pertinent to Deaf people to include other nations and other languages. In 1980, at the centennial celebration of the founding of the National Association of the Deaf, their national convention featured public workshops in 'the structure of American Sign Language'. Not only was the article dropped, but the language achieved final autonomy as all three words were capitalized. The transition from the lower-case to the capitalized, from the generic to the specialized, is but a single example of a profound shift in how Deaf people in the United States refer to their primary language.

What precipitated such a profound change in vocabulary and ways of talking about ASL? Numerous factors have been cited: the popularization of the civil-rights language extending to not only ethnic groups but disabled groups as well and new paradigms for research in deaf children and signed language which draw from disciplines of linguistics and anthropology. But these are frames of explanation which come from outside of the community; what changes took place within the community to cause such a wide scale appropriation of this vocabulary? What is often overlooked in this critical transformation beginning in the early 1970s is the emergence of new patterns of work life in Deaf communities in the United States and Canada, one that would demand a new vocabulary for their language, one to match the new social contexts in their everyday lives.

Until about the middle 1960s, the primary occupations for deaf

people in the United States were either the 'solitary' trades (shoe repair, upholstery, printing or factory assembly) or as school teachers or dormitory supervisors (Braly and Hall, 1935; Crammate, 1987; Cronenberg and Blake, 1966). Teaching at that time had little of the trappings of 'professional' life: there were few requirements on type of training other than a college degree, and sometimes not even this was required. Deaf people were insulated from the ranks of management; nearly none were elevated to principals or supervisors in their schools. The working-class standard within the community was so predominant that it was entirely appropriate and common for deaf teachers to moonlight as printers or upholsterers to supplement their small teaching incomes.

Perhaps an important signal of changes in the economic lives of Deaf people was the formation of a National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) in 1967. Funded initially by a grant from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, the NTD was awarded enough money to form a permanent theatre. They assembled a repertory of deaf actors and accepted national and international bookings for performances featuring deaf actors in revues they had never before performed - in college theatres, city halls and mainstream auditoriums. These actors had long been community performers; they were well known to the community for the folk entertainment they provided at deaf clubs, picnics and conventions, but the novelty of the NTD was the promise of full-time employment as actors. Many left their jobs as school teachers or printers to be thrust in the public light as actors. The popular entertainment they had provided for the small community of Deaf people was now transformed into an expensive spectacle for the hearing public (Miles, 1974). As they travelled to Deaf communities throughout the United States and Canada, the NTD presented an image of the specialized Deaf professional, one who could earn a living at something other than the traditional trades.

The 1970s were remarkable for another change: the professionalization of teachers of deaf children. The expansion of the access mandate for the handicapped (section 504 of the Civil Rights Act, passed in 1974) and the rapid increase in public funding made it economically lucrative for public schools and universities to offer 'mainstreamed' programmes for deaf children. Colleges and universities began to provide disabled students with support services, including Deaf students with sign-language interpreting. The general trend towards professionalization in teaching extended to teachers working with deaf children. Certificates and master's degrees were required for new positions. New specializations were offered: 'counsellors for the deaf', 'elementary education', 'post-

secondary education, etc.' highlighting the burgeoning industry of special education in the 1970s and 1980s.

The 1970s also marked the appearance of another profession: the ASL teacher. As public interest in ethnic diversity increased, the demand for adult classes in ASL exploded, to an estimated 50,000 new students each year in the language (*San Diego Tribune*, 27 January 1989), with classes in colleges and universities and in increasing numbers, in high schools. The professionalization of ASL teaching has probably more than any other field contributed to the introduction of the disciplines of linguistics and anthropology into mainstream Deaf life. Teachers of sign language became, within a few short years, newly recast as teachers of a language, ASL.

There were several consequences of the emergence of professionalization within the deaf community, the most significant of which was new social tensions between the middle class and the working class within the community. Teachers now no longer moonlighted as printers; they lost interest in the traditional social organizations of the community, especially the segregated deaf clubs, and sought out new affiliations outside of the community. Deaf clubs in the United States today have nowhere near the popularity they once enjoyed in the 1940s and 1950s when the clubs were packed every weekend night. After the Second World War, the Los Angeles Club of the Deaf was at the height of its strength; it owned a building in the centre of town and was the political and social centre of the deaf community. It is now defunct, its social and political functions distributed elsewhere in the community (DeBee, 1985).

The flight of Deaf people from the traditional club has variously been blamed on television, the video-cassette recorder and the telephone. As the argument goes, Deaf people turn to more private pursuits and they lose interest in the traditional group activities. But again, the new interest in this technology was not uniform within the community, but promoted most heavily by the new middle class. Along with their new economic lives came a desire for the trappings of middle-class life: to conduct one's business by telephone instead of the traditional face-to-face encounter and to participate in the consumption of televised goods.

Their new economic status brought about new types of political agendas, ones that promoted technological expansion in the community. In 1964, Robert Weithrecht adapted surplus Western Union tele-typewriter machines for use across telephone lines, and a small group of Deaf people purchased for the first time a telephone in their homes which allowed them to use these machines for typed communication with each other. By 1988, Deaf organiza-

tions in the States of California, New York and Minnesota had successfully lobbied for free distribution of these machines to any Deaf person subscribing to the telephone service (Telecommunications for the Deaf, Inc., 1988). Bowing to intense political pressure from Deaf social-service agencies, in 1987 the public-utilities commission in California began providing free 'relay' services using operators to link calls between a user of a tele-typewriter device with those who did not have one. After six months, the volume of calls rose to approximately 40,000 calls per week made to the relay service in the State of California alone (California Public Utilities Commission, 1987). There are now continuing efforts to persuade the federal government to expand this service nation-wide. In 1981, a federally funded private organization began providing 'closed captions' on network television which appear only on televisions equipped with a specially purchased decoder. These English subtitles appeared on regularly scheduled network- and cable-television programming. In 1989 an estimated 375 hours of closed captioning per week were featured on network, cable and pay channels provided by at least four independent captioning companies (National Captioning Institute, 1988).

These social and political changes are accompanied by new ways of talking about their language. Deaf people began using a vocabulary that reflected the specialization of their work lives, a vocabulary that included special names for not only ASL but other varieties of signing. What was formerly referred to as 'the sign language' was now divided into several different categories, each with distinct labels, reflecting new cultural sensibilities about appropriate and inappropriate language behaviour. Forms of signing which depart from ASL and mimic some structural features of English are called 'Sign English'; individuals who use this form of signing run the risk of being judged as overly compliant to the dominant language. Another form of signing, called 'see', an acronym for a pedagogically developed system, Signing Exact English, has much more drastic departures from ASL where many forms are judged as 'odd' and ungrammatical. Signing in SEE is highly stigmatized in the community, drawing suspicion and ridicule. With each new label are new types of tensions, new ways of collectively evaluating the language behaviour of the group. These tensions are played out in a number of rich ways, reflecting rapid cross-generational change (see Padden and Humphries, 1988 for further discussion).

Deaf people's contexts for learning and living, formerly called 'custom', are renamed, as the *Silent News* segment illustrates, as instances of 'cultural uniqueness' and 'distinctiveness'. While the community has always promoted a theme of uniqueness organized

around their unusual language, these new ways of referring to the group as a 'culture' and a 'society' are new ways of acknowledging the group's minority status in the face of pressures to assimilate. Instead of the deity, the traditions of science and pluralist humanism have become the new standards for themes about self-justification.

These thematic shifts are not specific to the Deaf community; other minority languages, notably Navajo (National Education Association, 1987) and Athabaskan (Paul, 1980; Scollon and Scollon, 1979) have also turned to self-conscious enterprises such as linguistic analyses of their languages in an attempt to maintain survival, with varying results. Perhaps this self-conscious appropriation of scientific vocabulary has been successful in the case of ASL because of how it is thematically intertwined with the changing economic and social lives of Deaf people. As the *Silent News* article illustrates, unlike in Dyrhval, younger Deaf people see ASL as a key emblem of their own future, one which lays claim to cultural uniqueness and to co-existence with English.

The survival and maintenance of a language is typically thought of in terms of maintaining access to that language. The argument presented here is that 'living' languages also depend on sharing folk explanations that remind speakers of the language's central position in everyday life. Folk explanations are fundamentally ways of collectively remembering the significance of what a language is to a particular culture, of privileging certain explanations above others. The collective memory for a language is embodied in the collective memory that is formed in justifications, explanations, the rhetorical organization of accounting for the necessity of the survival of a language such as ASL. In this way, the 'folklore' of a language contributes to the organization of social resources for maintaining the language in the face of pressures from the outside.

Notes

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1. Lower-case 'deaf' is used when referring to the audiological condition of not hearing, and upper-case 'Deaf' when referring to a particular group of deaf people who share a sign language such as American Sign Language (ASL) - and a culture.

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