

The Marvelous Richness of Language
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Introduction

Language fascinates us. It is at the core of almost everything we do, and it is at the core of who we are.* Language allows us to think, it allows us to communicate with our fellow man, and without it there would be no way to think about anything except the most concrete and immediate.

Language is practical, but it is also an object of aesthetic appreciation. We say we *use* language, but we do not discard it like an old rag when we are done with it. We want to pass it on to our children, we want to know the languages of our ancestors. With language we can express our feelings, we can seduce, we can compliment, we can shock.

Language comes to us before we are aware of anything but the most concrete and immediate experiences. We learn "on our mother's knee," as the expression goes. All people spend their lives using this skill acquired early; some people spend their lives endlessly fascinated by the process of learning and acquiring a language, whether it is the first, second, fifth, or tenth language.

Many of you are people like that. You share a fascination with endless power of language and its endless beauty. I too have spent much of my life exploring the coastline of language, working in the domain known as linguistics. I have found enormous pleasure in working in many of the various domains in which language is studied.

Each of these stories which I will share with you today is of some way in which the fabric of language has touched me deeply, and I hope that some of these accounts will find a resonance within you as well.

Embattled languages: the French of Quebec

English speakers from the United States, such as myself, and Spanish speakers from Chile, such as you, share something in common. We both are members of a language community that stretches across the New and the Old Worlds. English grew and developed on the British Isles, and suffered the effects of all of the invaders who came to visit or came to stay, most notably the Scandinavian cousins and the Norman French. Later the British came to the New World, and established themselves in many parts of North America, and when the time came that the United States set out on its own politically, it was as a nation whose primary language was English. British English and American English have continued to evolve; the prestige dialect in England now drops its syllable-final r's (as in "car" or "Harvard"), while we Americans (at least most of us) pronounce those r's. But we share a common literary treasure, and most major linguistic changes have been shared by both British English and American English. One of the most striking changes in English in the past two hundred fifty years is the use of the progressive aspect; even one hundred and fifty years ago it was possible to say "the house is building," something we no longer can; we must say, of course, "the house is being built," or "they are building a house." My point is simply that the change that has taken place in the use of the progressive form is one that has been equally shared on the two sides of the Atlantic Ocean (at

least in the prestige dialects).

Speakers of Spanish in Latin America have a similar history to tell, of course. You too are members of a large community of New World speakers who share a fairly homogeneous language, all things considered, and you share it with the Old World country where it all started several centuries ago; and you, like us, can point with pride to a New World body of literature, while you at the same time recognize the importance of an earlier, Continental tradition of great literary works.

When talking about the linguistic situation in the New World, it is easy to place too much emphasis on these two languages, English and Spanish; and of course no one in South America will for long overlook the importance of Brazil's Portuguese which it too shares with its Continental homeland. But French, too, has a life of its own in the New World, principally in Canada, and in Canada, principally in the province of Quebec.

Quebec is a land largely unknown to citizens of the United States, and yet it has been very important to me, both personally and linguistically, over the past twenty years. One of my first experiences with a language other than my own native English was learning to speak French in Montreal, Quebec, and I would like to talk with you about the linguistic scene in Quebec.

Quebec has been just recently in the news, as you know. On October 30 of this past year, a referendum on the question of sovereignty of the province of Quebec was held, and while the final vote was against establishing Quebec as a separate country, the results were extremely close. This was the second referendum on the subject; the first was held in 1980, when the question of secession was overwhelmingly defeated at the polls by a vote of 60 to 40. Now, fifteen years later, the vote is much closer, and no one knows for sure what Quebec's future will look like.

The most fundamental division in Quebec is one of language. The most obvious division is between the French-speaking community (more than 80 percent of the province) and the English-speaking community, though there are important communities speaking other languages which must not be overlooked. There are European immigrant communities, including the Portuguese and Cape Verdeans; there are Italian and Greek communities; there are important Native American communities, both in cities and on reserved Native American lands; there are Haitian communities where the vernacular is Haitian creole, based originally on French; and there are other lesser known communities, such as the communities of the Deaf in Quebec -- who are themselves divided into two communities, the Deaf francophones and the Deaf anglophones. I will come back to the story of the Deaf communities later on.

I first spent some time -- over four months -- in Quebec in 1975. Much of my effort was spent on learning the language, by which I mean Quebecois French. I was both helped and hindered by a very slight background in French -- continental French -- from my high school days. The French that I heard spoken around me in Montreal, both by the people that I worked with and by the radios and televisions, was very different from the French that I had been exposed to before. Most of the differences were phonological -- that is, they involved the pronunciation more than the grammar or the vocabulary, but even there the differences could not be ignored.

The differences in pronunciation between the French in Quebec and the French spoken in France is perhaps comparable to the differences between Continental Spanish and the Spanish of Latin America: certainly real differences, but not enough to impair communication except under special circumstances. And yet there is a difference. A foreigner (say, a North American) who

came to Santiago, for example, would naturally be expected to learn to speak as a Chileno, and not as a resident of Madrid, just as a foreigner moving to Mexico would be expected in the course of things to come to speak like a Mexican.

Expectations were not so simple in Quebec. I was not simply a foreigner; I was also an Anglophone, and therefore I fit into a ready-made cultural category. A shopkeeper working in downtown Montreal could see (without having to think about it consciously) that I was no francophone, I was an anglophone, and I would be addressed in English whether I wanted to be or not. Sometimes I would decide to look puzzled when shopkeepers addressed me in English; I told myself that I would say to them, in French, that I was Bulgarian, or I was Turkish (languages that I would not expect the merchants to speak very well), and that I did not speak English. This strategy for learning French was harder than I expected it to be, and I was not able to carry it off very well. The reasons why were clear: there were a set of linguistic expectations that were established for me in the minds of the people that I encountered, and these expectations were for the most part quite valid and correct: I was indeed a member of the Anglophone community.

And yet I wanted to learn French. But what French to learn? As my familiarity with Quebecois grew, so did my awareness of the differences between Quebecois and Continental French, and my sense that I was not expected to speak quite like everyone who I met.

Let me be a bit more concrete. There are three striking differences between the pronunciation of French in Quebec and that in France, or three phonological differences, as I will say. The first difference is the presence of affrication in Quebec French. The process of affrication replaces a *t* or a *d* by an affricate, a *ts* or a *dz*, when the vowels *i* or *u* follow. Thus in Quebec, instead of "tu" for the 2nd person singular pronoun, we have *t^su*, and instead of *peti* for 'small,' we have *pt^si*.

The second striking phonological feature in Quebecois French is call "High Vowel laxing". This refers to the replacement of the vowels *i*, *ou* and *u* in a closed syllable (one which ends with a consonant) by lax vowels which do not otherwise exist in dialects of French. Thus the word *difficile* is rendered [dɪfɪsɪl], with the vowel *i* roughly the so-called short *i* of the English word *bill*, and the pronunciation of *petite* is [petɪt] instead of [petit].

Now, both of these processes are general and common across speakers of Quebec French, and it is generally expected that foreigners who come and learn to speak French in Quebec will express themselves with these phonological habits. The third process which defines a Quebecois pronunciation, however, has a more complex side to it. This involves the use of diphthongs in Quebec. European French has a small number of diphthongs -- that is, sequences of vowel-like sounds inside a single syllable. European French contains diphthongs in a word such as *grenouille* "frog", where the final vowel is [u], followed by the glide [y]: u-y. Quebec French, however, has quite a few more diphthongs, and some of these appear only in stressed syllables. For example, where a Frenchman would say *je nage* for "I swim", a Quebecois would say *je nauge*, with a diphthongue in the verb. The infinitive of the verb *nager*, however, has no diphthong, because the vowel *a* which has the potential for becoming a diphthong is not stressed in *nager* -- stress falls on the final syllable.

This process is much more socially stigmatized than the two other processes that I have just mentioned, though why this should be I don't know. As many of you are undoubtedly aware, the Romance languages have undergone many, many periods in which diphthongs have been created, and in which diphthongs have been destroyed. Spanish has preserved an important role for diphthongs, appearing in some cases only when stress falls on a particular syllable, just as in

the case of *nauge* and *nager* in Quebecois French: in Spanish, the verbs in *tu tienes* and *el tiene* show a diphthong where the related forms *nosotros tenemos* or even (why not!) *vos tenes* show no diphthong, because the stress falls on a different syllable.

So the language learner in Quebec finds, as I did, that some processes are appropriate to learn, like affrication and high vowel laxing, but others are not, such as diphthongization. As language teachers, this is an area that is undoubtedly of interest and of ongoing concern to you as it has been to me. What does it mean to learn French? Which of the dialects that comprise French are legitimate for a learner to learn? The answer, of course, depends on the ends and the goals which the learner has in mind. As a linguist, one with a scientific interest in all things involving language, there is no point at which the door slams shut and beyond which I would have no interest in continuing. But not all forms that speakers of a language say among themselves are appropriate for a learner to learn -- at least at first.

Let us move on, past the sounds.

Once we get past the differences in pronunciation -- or "phonology," as linguists say -- the aspect of Quebecois French that is most striking is probably the unusual way in which swearing is accomplished in Quebec. In France, most swearing involves the human body, and to be specific, the lower half of the human body, and the various functions to which that half of the body must be, or can be, put. In Quebec, swearing is done in a different way involving not the body but the soul: curiously, sacrilege is the most important part of swearing. This is no doubt the result of the centuries-old dominance of the Catholic church in the life of the people and institutions of Quebec, a dominance which has slipped away in the course of the secularization of Quebec society over the past thirty years.

But something as ingrained in the language as the ways a person swears when he's angry does not change so fast. An angry speaker of English may well say, *Damn!* just as an angry Spaniard may swear, *Maldito!* And so, in Quebec one can likewise swear, *Maudit!* ["maldito"] (where the 'd' will be affricated, as we have already seen) -- though this is something that a Frenchman would never say -- he would be more inclined to make some sideways allusion to bodily functions, not to religious functions.

And so, most of the sacraments of the Catholic church have been turned into linguistic items that a speaker of Quebecois can use to express surprise, concern, or anger. As you might expect, most of these uses which have *not* been authorized by the Vatican have undergone modifications of one sort or another. The word "hostie" (host) has been changed simply to "stie", and is pronounced of course with the affrication that I described above ("stʃi"), giving us a sequence of sounds that is not at all easy to say. And in Quebecois French, it is possible to create a whole string of words, each referring in one fashion or another to important sacraments of the Catholic church, and each expressing the degree of personal involvement of the speaker, such as "tabernac' de calice de 'stie de maudit char" -- which roughly translates into English as "tabernacle of chalice of host of a damned car".

It remains to be seen whether this mode of expression will change as Quebec becomes more secular (as it has been becoming over the past twenty five years). I imagine that there is a deep psychoanalysis of language that remains to be done which will answer the question as to how we take pieces of our language and charge them with powerful meaning; how we put restrictions on when and where certain words can be used, and used with particular meanings and functions.

And perhaps one day we can attempt to explain why some cultures choose to select their swear words from the regions that they do.

Let us move on to some other questions involving language in Quebec.

There remain serious linguistic questions in Quebec, as the results of the recent referendum make clear. These questions, which involve the strains felt by a linguistic and cultural region under the stress of outside pressures, remain largely misunderstood in the United States. There is a strong desire on the part of many Quebecois to live in a country where their language is recognized, and in which it has a future as well as a past. Up until only two decades ago, the English language was, in Quebec as well as in the rest of Canada, the language of business, management, and negotiation, as well as prestige. Much of this has changed, but the future is by no means certain. The two primary factors are these: First, Quebec is a province of 6 million people in a country of 20 million, most of whom speak English, the language spoken by the overwhelming majority of the 250 million citizens of the United States just across the border; and second, Quebec, like the rest of Canada, continues to be the home to a very large group of immigrants. The question facing the citizens of Quebec is what degree of individual choice do they wish to leave to immigrants to decide on the Canadian language (English or French) they wish their families to become integrated into? One view is that Canada's constitution specifies that English and French are the two official language of Canada, and a citizen of any province has complete freedom of choice regarding language throughout the country, and on this view, there is no political decision to be made other than leaving the language choice in the hands of the individuals who will make decisions for themselves. Another view -- probably the dominant view among francophone Quebecois -- is that the choice made by an immigrant as to which province he wishes to live in already contains within it a linguistic choice: immigrants desiring to come to Quebec have indicated a willingness to come and live in a francophone culture, and it should therefore come as no shock that the provincial government will expect children of these immigrants to become integrated into a francophone schooling system, and become French-speaking.

I personally have found it interesting that this second point of view (which, as I say, seems to me to be the majority view in Quebec) finds absolutely no resonance among my fellow Americans in the United States. In a sense this should not be surprising, for the only political value that has any serious validity in public political discourse in American society is that of individual rights. What this perspective cannot come to grips with is that culture is a supraindividual category, and that its existence is not the sum of any number of individual choices. This point of view is not taken at all seriously in what I perceive as mainstream discourse in the United States. It is true, certainly, that rights of linguistic communities and rights of individuals can come into conflict, as Quebec has been witness: laws in Quebec forbidding the use of English in public signs comes into conflict with the choice of individuals who wish to advertise their businesses in English (or any other language). A great deal of care must be given to weighing the relative balance of importance of these two kinds of rights. When we turn to the subject of the language of the Deaf community, whose members in the United States use American Sign Language as their primary language, we will see the issue re-emerge in a different context.

Intonation

All of you who are here are teachers of languages which some call "world languages" -- a term used to describe languages used in an important way around the globe today. The world languages include of course English, Spanish, French, German, Portuguese, Arabic, Russian, Chinese, and several more languages which are political, economically, socially, or historically important. With a good command of one or more world languages, a traveler can make his way around the world and find people who share a language with him.

I have spoken already about how even a single language such as French can vary considerably around the world, in the Old World and the New World. And we are all aware of how slang and colloquialisms can vary a good deal from one country to another. But perhaps the aspect of language that varies more than any other is the area of intonation, the way that the voice rises and falls in almost musical pitch with each and every word that we speak. And it is to the subject of intonation that I wish to turn now.

Every spoken language in the world has a pattern of intonation that it employs. There is no language in which sounds come out in a simple and flat monotone (like an untrained computer), and no language in which it makes no difference whether one's voice goes up or down at any given point. No: in all languages, it matters where the ups and downs of one's voice go. In some languages, it matters because the highs and lows are actually used to distinguish one word from another (these languages we call "tone languages"), while in other languages, these highs and lows are used to signal an important part of the message we wish to convey. But equally importantly, the patterns of highs and lows that we use identify as speakers coming from a particular group or location. Nothing varies in language quite as much and quite as easily as intonational patterns.

Consider a very simple example from English. In American English, the intonational patterns used for questions are quite different, depending on whether the question in question is a yes/no question or a content question formed from words such as who, when, what, how, or why. In the case of yes/no questions, such as *Have you ever been to America?*, which are formed by inverting the subject and an auxiliary verb, the intonation ends with a sharp rise -- to be more precise, the final two syllables (which are unaccented) are noticeably higher in pitch than the preceding syllable, the second syllable of *America*, which is the accented syllable of the word.

If we change our attention from American English to British English, we find a different pattern of intonation for yes/no questions of this sort. Instead of a rising intonation at the end, we will find a falling intonation, with the final and penultimate syllables of *America* on a lower pitch than the stressed (second) syllable. The lowered pitch of the final two syllables is not as low in pitch as would be found in a similar declarative sentence (say, as in *I have never been to America*), but they sit on a tone that is about a minor third lower than the stressed syllable.

I must admit that this British intonation for yes/no questions sounds very exotic to me. And so it came as a great shock one day when I asked for a straw. It was about ten years ago, and it was the first time I had ever been to England. I was perhaps suffering from some cultural shock, because as a visitor from the United States, I was very conscious that (as one wit has put it) England and the United States are two countries separated by a common language. I knew that the English had no trouble understanding my language, but I found I constantly had to be on my toes. On the fourth or fifth day there, I walked into a fast-food store to buy something to drink, and when I got it, I heard myself ask, *Do you have a straw?* with the most bizarre intonation: it was just this sentence-final falling intonation so characteristic of yes/no questions in British

English. As I have already said, the intonational pattern is one that we Americans normally use for content questions, like *Where did you put my straw?* or *Who stole my straw?* or *When are you going to buy some straws?*; but it came as a shock to hear myself use that same intonation on a yes/no question.

Intonation is one of those areas of language use which we all use, and to which we are all sensitive -- we all receive clear emotional signals from the "way" our friends and loved ones talk, even when they don't put those thoughts into words -- but which we are often at a loss if we try to say explicitly what is going on. Most people who have not had considerable training are unable to say for sure if a given syllable is pronounced on a high pitch, or a low pitch, a rising or a falling pitch. You may be interested to know that even speakers of true tone languages, whether they are from Africa or from China, have the same trouble. At an unconscious level they have perfect control over the high and low pitches of their syllables, but without mnemonic devices learned at school, they are no better than speakers of English or Spanish at recognizing which syllables have a high pitch or a low pitch. Let's look at some details now.

First of all, we should start by asking how many different levels of tones we need to talk about. Two levels of tones is surely the minimum that we need to talk about: some syllables are definitely high in tone, and others are definitely low. Do we need more than that? In a musical analysis, there are many levels of pitch that are introduced -- twelve of them to each octave. But for our purposes in the study of intonation, it's been argued that two levels is all we need -- just High and Low. We'll see that two probably does the job pretty well for us.

Consider a simple word in English, like *music*. This word has two syllables, and the primary accent falls on the first syllable. In its simplest and most basic style of pronunciation, the first syllable is pronounced with a High tone, and the second with a Low tone. Listen to what the word with sound like if I pronounced it with other tones on each syllable:

- a. High Low
- b. High High
- c. Low Low
- d. Low High

Other combinations of tones are possible. A High and a Low can be merged onto a single syllable, to form a Falling tone; this is what's done when we pronounce a word of one syllable, such as *cows*. Notice how the pitch descends when I say *cows*, and notice how odd it sounds if I attach another intonational pattern (as in b,c,d above) to that word.

These two examples -- the word *music* of two syllables and the word *cows* of one syllable -- suggest the following pattern. In the neutral intonational pattern in English, a High tone is realized on the syllable which bears the main stress, and a Low tone is assigned to the syllable or syllables that follow. If no syllable follows the main stress, then the Low tone is also realized on the syllable with main stress, and in that case, the combination of High plus Low can also be called a Falling tone.

This pattern is often summarized: H* L (with H for High, and L for Low), where the star * on the H indicates that the High tone must be realized on the syllable with the main stress. The Low tone will be realized on its own syllables to the right if that's possible. But if there are no syllables there, then the Low will also be realized on the syllable with the main stress, as in a word like *cows*, and also in any word where the main stress falls on the final syllable, such as *Brazil* or *balloon*.

Let's digress for a moment and ask how well this description carries over to Spanish. Let's take two words with stress patterns like those of *music* and *cows*: let's say, *dedo* and *ley*. In neutral pronunciations in Spanish, we will also find for *dedo* the High-Low pattern of *music*, and for *ley* the High plus Low, or Falling, pattern as in *cow*.

Or at least we will in most dialects of Spanish. What would it sound like if we were to pronounce the first syllable of *dedo* with a falling (High + Low) intonation, the very same pattern that we find when we pronounce a simple one-syllable word such as *Juan* or *ley*? If we put that falling pattern on the first syllable of *dedo*, it would sound like this (and at this point I pronounced the words with these intonations). What does this sound like? Does it sound like a Buenos Aires pronunciation? Surely it does -- or someone trying to imitate an Italian accent. Notice that there is no sound in this Porteno pronunciation of *dedo* or *chico* which is peculiar or particular to it; what is special to it is that there is a falling tone on a syllable that is *not* the final syllable of the word. That is what is striking about the pronunciation. The same falling tone, when it appears on a monosyllable like *ley* or *Juan*, is totally "normal" -- that is, it sounds dialectally neutral. So it's not the sound itself which we find striking, but rather finding it in an unexpected place, from a linguistic point of view. This analysis makes the prediction, which I believe is correct, that we can imitate a Porteño intonation if the word has more than one syllable, but not if the word has only one syllable -- because in that case, all dialects work the same way.

To summarize, then: the neutral intonational pattern -- in English, and in many dialects of Spanish as well -- takes the form H* L, with a High on the accented syllable, falling to a Low on following syllables. (Porteño goes a step beyond this by anticipating the fall already on the accented syllable -- the Low tone starts earlier in this dialect). As we will see, this High Low pattern is not the only pattern that English has available. But in looking at these various patterns, we have found it helpful to have some labels for the different tones. The tone which attaches to the accented syllables, we call the accented tone, here a High tone; the tone that spreads to the remaining syllables on the right is known as the phrasal tone.

I will end this discussion of intonation with a story about the relationship between intonation in European languages and the study of more complex tone languages spoken elsewhere in the world. Quite a few years ago, I was working on the tonal system of a language called Digo, a Bantu language spoken near Lake Victoria in Tanzania. In Digo, there is a process that shifts the tones toward the end of the word, in a fashion that would require us to go into considerable detail to In any event, I worked with David Massamba, a graduate student in linguistics at the time, who was also a native speaker of Digo. In most cases, we could easily agree on what tones, High or Low, appeared on each syllable of a word or a phrase. Of course, Massamba had to say the words out loud and listen to them just as I did; he could not simply introspect and know the answer. But when we came to one set of words, with a different tonal pattern, we found ourselves stuck, and uncertain about what the tonal pattern was. This was in words like "kutema", meaning "to cut" -- but there were many words with this tone pattern. What was it? Was there a High tone on the last syllable, or on the second to last? We struggled with this problem for several days, finally deciding that it was a Rising tone on the second to last syllable, followed by a Falling tone on the final syllable. It was then that I realized that the tonal pattern in these words in Digo was virtually identical to a characteristically Porteño intonation (that is, the Buenos Aires intonation) of certain yes/no questions: for example, in a question like, *Querés ir al cine?* Here we find again in Porteño intonation a dynamic tone (here, a Rising tone) on the accented syllable, which is the first syllable of *cine*, which in most dialects would likely bear a

simple Low tone. This is a good example, I think, of how work on complex true tone languages and work on more familiar intonational languages can well be pursued hand in hand, and how these two studies can help each other.

Language of the Deaf

All languages of the world use tone and pitch in some way or other -- with one group of exceptions: the sign languages of the Deaf. It is only in the last thirty years that we have begun to understand something about the nature and the complexity of the sign languages of the Deaf, and there remains a great deal of misunderstandings among hearing people about the nature of Sign language. I have had the pleasure of learning some American Sign Language over the past several years, and my experiences working with American Sign Language (or ASL) have changed many of my ideas about what language is and how it works.

Let me begin with some general remarks about sign language that some of you may not be aware of. There is no one, single sign language of the Deaf throughout the world; there are rather different sign languages, and they belong to various language families, much like the spoken languages of hearing people belong to different language families. But the language families are different among the sign languages, because the sign languages are not based on a spoken language. French Sign Language, for example, is not based on French; French Sign grew naturally among the Deaf signing people in Paris several centuries ago, and it was taught to the Abb'e de l'Epee, a hearing man who made an effort to learn the language of the French Deaf around the time of the French Revolution. American Sign Language grew out of French Sign Language, because French Sign was brought to the United States at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century by a Deaf teacher who began teaching at a school for the Deaf in Connecticut. The Sign Language of the Deaf in Quebec is also related to French Sign Language, for much the same reason: the priests of the Catholic church who came to Quebec to teach young Deaf men in Quebec generally came from France, where they had learned French Sign Language, which they then taught to their students. (Interestingly, many of the nuns who taught the young Deaf women in Quebec came from religious training in Buffalo, New York, and therefore the signing of the women in Quebec until recent years had a good deal more influence of American Sign Language.) And a similar situation is found in many countries today in which the Catholic Church plays, or has played, a major role in education. In other countries of the world, both in Europe and elsewhere, other (unrelated) sign languages have arisen among the Deaf communities -- such as in England, in China and Japan, in Africa, and in many other places around the globe.

Parenthetically, I would add that I have sometimes heard the comment made to the effect that "isn't it too bad that sign language *isn't* universal" -- the same around the world. I think this comment is based on at least one misunderstanding: either the mistaken belief that sign language was somehow designed or invented by particular people (which simply isn't true, just as English and Spanish were not designed by individuals), or else the misunderstanding that sign language is more natural in some fashion. I will return in a moment to the question as to whether sign language *is* more natural than spoken language, but I would like to underscore the idea that there is no more reason for sign languages to be international than for spoken languages to be. Sign languages uses the hands, and three dimensional space, for expression, while spoken languages use the mouth and lungs; in principle, either kind of language could be international in scope, but

there are good and valid reasons why most languages of the world are local and not international.

Working with Deaf signers has been the most interesting and surprising experience that I have had, from a personal and human point of view. Deaf culture exists all around us, but unless we know the language, we cannot approach it.

Deaf signers are great story tellers. I must say that I regret very much that there isn't much story telling that goes on in my own culture. If we didn't read so much, I'm sure we would tell more stories. I recognize that with the advent of reading and literacy in our society, it is only natural that there should be some costs involved -- and the most obvious cost is the decrease in the amount of simple story telling. (The other obvious loss is in the decrease of effort we put into memorizing facts: when we can write things down and look them up later, what's the point in learning things by heart? Just as the widespread acceptance of the radio and the record player has led to the virtual collapse and loss of playing musical instruments at home as a social event, so widespread literacy has had a major impact on story telling. But American Sign Language, like the other sign languages of the Deaf, is not a written language, and so its story telling tradition has remained vibrant. I couldn't give you an example of an extended Deaf story with my limited skills and limited time, but let me share with you a story that is almost a joke, and which illustrates the kind of cultural "kick" that Deaf stories often have.

This is a story about a Deaf couple who are driving on the highway on vacation. Now, the story takes place in the United States, and you must bear in mind that travelers who travel by car typically stay in motels rather than hotels. Motels have the same function as hotels, but they consist of rows of tiny one room apartments, all with doors giving on the outside; there are no internal hallways in a motel. Now, in this story, night has fallen and in fact it's getting quite late, and the Deaf man and Deaf woman decides to get off the highway and find a hotel to spend the night. They find one, and register at the office. Now, the man, who has been driving for several hours, feels that he would like to relax by taking a little walk around the neighborhood, so he goes for a walk while his wife, who is tired, decides to take the key from the manager and go to their room.

When the man comes back from his walk, he realizes that he forgot to find out which room he and his wife have been given. His wife didn't move the car. The manager's office is closed, because it's past midnight. How is he going to find out where his wife is? He thinks for a moment, then goes to his car and puts his hand down hard on the horn. Well, that horn is loud enough to wake up the whole neighborhood. One after another, the lights in the motel rooms come on -- all except one. And that one must be where his wife is -- because she's too deaf to hear the car horn!

So -- you can see how the story plays on the not so obvious advantages and disadvantages of being Deaf or being hearing in this world that we live in. As many hearing people have come to see, the primary problem for Deaf people is not in living in the world, but rather in having to cope with a hearing world that does not speak its language. In a very, very real sense, at the core of the Deaf experience lies the language of the Deaf, which in the United States is American Sign Language.

I'd like to describe three aspects of American Sign Language that are interesting and relatively easy to describe: grammar, vocabulary; and use of space for organizing the flow of information. The third has no parallels in spoken language, except perhaps occasionally in intonation.

American Sign Language has nouns and verbs, but relies very little on anything that we might want to call a preposition. Suppose I want to say that I flew from Seattle to Paris. We would need to know how to sign "I"; this is an index finger pointing at the signer's chest, and this sign functions equally for "I" and for "me", since American Sign Language makes no overt distinction between nominative and accusative case. The verb "fly" is signed with a single hand, the palm roughly parallel with the floor, the thumb extended on one side, and the third and fourth finger folded under, yielding a handshape vaguely reminiscent of an airplane. The sign for Seattle is made with one hand held up in a clenched fist, with the thumb squarely covering the other closed fingers, and with the thumb placed away from the signer (this handshape expresses the letter "s", the first letter of *Seattle*), while the sign for New York is made with two hands. The left hand is open and flat, facing the signer at navel-level, while the right hand adopts what is called a "Y position"-- that is, with the thumb and fifth finger sticking out, and the other three fingers bent under. With this Y position, the right hand rubs the left hand's palm back and forth two times. There *are* signs for "from" and "to". "From" is signed by putting the index finger of the left hand up in the air, roughly at mouth level, and then approaching the tip of the left index finger with the tip of the right hand's index finger (all the other fingers of the right hand being folded under). "To" is pretty much the opposite, with the index finger of the right hand moving back from the tip of the left hand's index finger. But if I were to sign the sentence using those six signs, signing them in this order (and where upper case words designate signs) "I FLY FROM SEATTLE TO NEW-YORK", the result would not be American Sign Language, it would be English -- or what is called Signed English. Signed English uses the vocabulary of American Sign Language and imposes on it the grammar of English. If we want to see a sentence of American Sign Language, we have to see how a Deaf person would sign the sentence -- which would be something like this:

NEW YORK (point to spot A, in the air just to the right and in front of signer which we'll call A); SEATTLE (point to a similar spot on the left side, B); FLY (from B to A), ME

The final word "ME" is optional, for American Sign Language, like Spanish but unlike English, permits subject pronouns to be dropped optionally.

I will come back to the syntax, the grammar of a sentence like this one, but let's talk about sign vocabulary. I have found that it is terribly natural for hearing people who don't sign to ask with each new sign, Oh, where did that sign come from? Some signs are just so obvious that the question need not be asked (or so it seems), like why the sign for "I" is made by pointing at one's chest. But what is obvious is not always the whole story. It might be helpful to set up a set of categories like this:

- a. signs whose origin and meaning is completely obvious
- b. signs whose origin and meaning is fairly obvious, but there is much more to the story that we learn only after working on sign language for quite some time
- c. signs whose origins seems obvious once you have been told, but which are not obvious at all before you've heard the account.
- d. And finally, signs whose meaning seems just arbitrary.

We've already seen that the sign "I" falls into the first category, the ones that are totally obvious. There aren't a lot more that do. Perhaps the sign for "EAT" might go there; EAT is formed by putting the thumb tip under the tips of the other four fingers, and putting that hand configuration to the mouth twice in quick succession;

Let's turn to the second category . signs whose origin seems obvious once you have learned the sign. The sign for Paris is like that: once you know the sign designates the Eiffel Tower, its origin seems straightforward: this sign is formed by making a V with the index and middle finger of each hand, beginning with the two hands in a plane parallel to the floor, with the palms down and the hands pointing at each other, then the two hands moving towards each other quickly and becoming vertical, so that the hands are pointing upwards with their tips meeting.

But consider another sign: say, the sign for "head". What do you suppose the sign is? This sign is formed in American Sign Language by putting the four fingers of the right hand in a flat configuration, and then rapidly touching the right side of the head above the ear and then just underneath the ear.

Certainly this sign seems to have a real and natural connection to the object that it designates; but it is only after we have gotten more deeply into the structure of the language do we begin to see that it is no accident that the sign consists of two touches of the head, not one. We find that same pattern we look at related words, like the sign for BODY (formed by touching the front of the chest with the flat palm of the right hand, first just below the throat and then again about four inches lower), or one of the signs for DOG (formed by tapping twice the right pants pocket [or where that pocket ought to be]), or the sign for CHAIR, formed by laying the left hand flat with the palm down, and the index and middle finger out, with the thumb, fourth and fifth fingers tucked in; meanwhile the right hand, with the same hand configuration, taps twice the left hand's two extended fingers with its two extended fingers.

Let's turn to less obvious signs. Consider this sign:: the left hand is made flat, with the hand near waist level and the palm facing up, and with the fingers pointing to the right. The right hand begins outstretched in a relaxed fashion with the fingertips touching the left hand palm. The left hand then moves up toward the right side of the signer's forehead, though with the orientation of the right hand not changing as it moves. What does it mean? It's not obvious! Once we have learned that many signs which use the forehead involve knowledge -- like the sign for KNOW (in which the right hand, flat-palmed, taps the right side of the forehead) -- then it will not be difficult to see that the sign I described means LEARN: something is passing from one hand (which might represent a printed page) into the head -- which means that learning is going on.

With that background, perhaps you can guess what the following sign means: the right hand is curled up, with the palm toward the rear, and the index finger flips sharply upward, like a spring held back and then released by the thumb. It means UNDERSTAND, and is normally pronounced with the hand near the forehead, illustrating its connection to signs involving knowledge -- although in a normal conversation, the hand does not really need to be in its "correct" position on the forehead, just as KNOW can be pronounced with the hand on the cheek rather than the forehead, in rapid signed speech.

Finally, some signs seem to be simply arbitrary in their origin. Undoubtedly this list illustrates my ignorance of the signs' origins, but I would include here signs such as these: EXAMINATION; ONLY; LIE [mentir]; and MORE. EXAMINATION is signed by extending only the index finger in each hand, curling all the other fingers back; the hands are held in front of the body, with the back of the hands toward the signer; and the hands move downward from face height down towards waist height as the index finger of each hand moves up and down three or four times. ONLY is signed by the right hand, formed by extending only the index finger, pointing upward, and rotating 360 degrees with the only movement at the wrist. LIE is made by the right hand, moving sharply from right to left, lightly brushing the bottom of the chin. MORE

is formed with the same handshape used for EAT (see above), with the joined fingertips of each hand touching the other twice quickly.

One more aspect of sign language I would like to share with you: the interesting way in which space is used. In many verbs (though certainly not in all signs) the location and the movement of the hands is used to express overtly the direction of the motion that is being described. We saw this already in the case of the sentence in which I said I was flying from Seattle to New York: the hand that signs FLY actually moves from one location, designating SEATTLE, to the other location, which designates New York. If I want to sign that I will give a book to Mary, then I establish MARY as a point in my signing space, and then the hand whose shape designates GIVE travels from my body to the point in space which designates MARY; and then either before all this or afterwards, I sign BOOK to indicate what it was that was transferred to Mary.

These examples will illustrate for you, I hope, the remarkably different ways that American Sign Language has at its disposal for encoding in overt linguistic signs the concepts that we express differently in spoken language.

But sign language is different from spoken language not only in its purely linguistic aspects. It also is different because of the role it plays at the center of Deaf culture, and I would like to turn now briefly to some questions of the politics of Sign Language.

There are a range of important and difficult questions concerning the politics of American Sign Language once we open our eyes to the linguistic situation of the Deaf in a society such as that of the United States. Here are some of the most difficult:

1. What kind of services should the government be required to offer to Deaf citizens in American Sign Language? What kind of services should private businesses be required to offer to Deaf citizens in American Sign Language? -- private businesses like telephone companies; and what about services that are somewhere in-between public and private, like the medical care system? Should all hospitals, both public and private, be required to provide American Sign Language interpreters for Deaf patients?

2. A second question that we should bear in mind while we ponder our answers to these questions is, should the answers to our questions regarding the obligations to provide American Sign Language take into account the special status of American Sign Language as a language that is biologically locked into the community of the Deaf, or should the use of American Sign Language be looked at as a private choice made by Deaf individuals as to the language that they prefer? If American Sign Language is viewed as a private choice, then we might be inclined to think that there is no more *need* to provide interpreting services for the Deaf than there is to provide interpreting services for (say) immigrants from Haiti who have not yet learned English. I'm not saying that Haitian immigrants should not be provided with interpreters -- I'm just saying that we must decide whether American Sign Language has some specially privileged status that other minority languages may not have.

3. A third extraordinarily difficult question involves conflict between ideals of a common educational system in a democracy and a special cultural and linguistic community among the Deaf. Every state and local government in the United States has to face the question as to whether Deaf adolescents should be primarily educated in the same classrooms as their hearing neighbors, using interpreters in the classroom in most cases, or whether the Deaf adolescents

should be primarily educated in residential schools for the Deaf. Residential schools for the Deaf has been the tradition in most states in this century, and has, in my experience, the support of a large and influential part of the Deaf community. In recent years, however, efforts to solve problems of racial discrimination in the United States has led to a belief that there is a strong presumption that establishing separate or "segregated" school systems for subsocieties leads inevitably to inadequate schools for the minority groups: in a short phrase, separate can never be equal. But is this correct in the case of the Deaf, where the state institutions have in many cases been important centers of Deaf culture, where students perfect their abilities in Sign Language and feel themselves to be at the center, not the periphery, of the educational system. Many Deaf people feel that separate education is necessary.

4. The fourth, and perhaps the very most difficult, question is this: who makes the judgments on these questions? Should we recognize certain people as being experts, and then give these experts the primary role in making decisions? What counts as being an expert: does one have to be Deaf to be an expert, or does one have to have experience in teaching in a multicultural school? And almost as difficult as that question is the next: once we have settled on some answers to these difficult questions for society as a whole, there will still be many options left open to individuals. Who makes the decisions for the individuals? In the case of adult Deaf people, the individuals will make decisions for themselves, but what about the case of deaf children whose parents are hearing? The presumption is strong that parents are the only ones to make decisions for children, and surely noone would disagree with that principle as the most important guiding principle. But there are always exceptions to this. Courts in the United States, for example, have ruled that when a child has unambiguously has a medical problem which the parents choose to ignore, even if the reason is the parents' religious beliefs, the decision can be removed from the hands of the parents. As we noted above in our discussion of the role of French in Quebec, the provincial government in Quebec has determined that it is no longer the choice of the parent as to whether a child may go to a francophone or an anglophone school: except under very specifically demarcated conditions, a child in Quebec can only go to a francophone school. In the case of Quebec, this decision is not justified on the grounds of the best interests of the individuals concerned, while in the case of Deaf education, the argument has been made that the interests of a deaf child may be best served by providing the child with the opportunity to become fluent in American Sign Language at an early age -- and this decision is tantamount to deciding that the child's education should be provided in American Sign Language. In the case of any individual child, should the decision as to whether the child is given those opportunities be left to the parents? Does our answer to that question depend on how the parents in fact treat the deaf child? What if the parents do not care about their deaf child, and do not find ways to take care of that child emotionally? -- should their favored status as decision makers be then diminished? And who is to make the judgment as to whether the parents are doing a good enough job?

I hope it is obvious just how terribly difficult all of these questions are, and I do not pretend to have answers to any of them. How I wish I had answers to them, and how I wish that the study of linguistics provided simple answers! But the linguistic study of these questions serves some purposes: in many cases it does help us see that the very simplest answers are often based on misconceptions and ignorance. But finding the best answer is often a job that requires far more than technical knowledge: it requires the ability to get people to cooperate.

Conclusion

In the past hour, we have looked at three examples of the marvelous richness of language: the vibrant character of the French of Quebec, the intricacies of the intonational patterns of English, and the subtleties of the signed language of the Deaf.

Language is endlessly fascinating. As these examples of linguistic diversity have shown, language functions not only to help us to understand the world, and to communicate with our equals in our own society, it can also play a role in defining who is inside and who is outside that linguistic society of equals in which we live. Just how well our linguistic abilities can serve as barriers and as secret passwords to another world we did not suspect can sometimes come across to us in unsuspected and unexpected ways. (To give a very simple example that happened to me just after I moved to Chicago, about ten years ago. I had lived in a small university town in the center of the country, where the University community included a large number of people from all over the world, and the rest of the town was fairly provincial. At the time I had a number of friends who were Arab, and being a linguist, I had learned some basic Arabic from them. So shortly after I moved to Chicago, just a few days after moving there, I answered our phone, and when the person said, *Salaamu aleikum* -- the standard formula of greeting in Arabic -- I responded automatically by saying, *Aleiku wa es salaam*, the standard reply. What I did not realize (and how could I have?) was that by saying *Aleiku wa es salaam*, I had confirmed to my caller that she was indeed speaking to a member of her religious group (she was obviously a member of a local Islamic-American group, a group which is quite numerous in the neighborhood in which I lived, though I did not know it at the time). And she went on to tell me all sorts of things that had just happened to her in a great linguistic rush; we were both embarrassed, I think, when I had to tell her finally that alas, she had a wrong number, and that I was not a member of her temple. I had the impression that she felt I had been deceitful and had tricked her when I had properly answered her *Salaamu aleikum*. We trust our linguistic tests, of course, and when they fail, we want to blame someone! That day it was me who got the blame.

What do these cases have in common? In all three cases, there is a hidden quality which linguistics helps to elucidate. In the case of both Quebecois and the sign language of the Deaf, we have cases of languages which are little known to the world outside. North Americans are for the most part unaware of the linguistic character of the French-speaking community in Canada, and they are even less aware of the linguistic world of the Deaf that lives around them with barely an overt sign. The Deaf, that is, live with us and all around us in the hearing world, and yet few hearing people are aware of either the language or the culture of the Deaf people of their city and of their country.

Finally, intonation is hidden in a different way. It is hidden like the letter in Edgar Allen Poe's story *The Purloined Letter*. It is hidden because it is so obvious. It is obvious, and yet it is far from easy to identify and to characterize. In this regard it is quite unlike choice of vocabulary, or matters of grammar. If I choose to use an unusual word (or a tasteless word), you are not only aware of the effect that I create, you can identify and repeat the word back to me. Intonation works in more subtle ways: we know (as naive speakers of our language) that intonation is there, but it is rare indeed that speakers can say quite what it is that they hear. Rare is the speaker who can even identify which syllables are high in pitch and which are low. Interestingly, this inability to bring to conscious awareness where the intonation goes up and goes down is not

restricted to languages like English and Spanish; even speakers of true tone languages like Chinese or Igbo find it extremely difficult to determine which syllables have a high pitch, or a low pitch, or a rising pitch. They can always produce the correct and appropriate pitches for their syllables, but they do this "automatically" so to speak, and not reflectively .

I hope that these examples have given you some food for thought, as they have me -- as they illustrate the marvelous richness of language.

Note

*I am grateful to Katica Obilinovic, whose efforts made my visit to Chile to present this paper possible. I have tried to maintain in this written form some of the flavor of the oral presentation of this paper at the SONAPLES meeting, adding material as necessary to make it intelligible to the reader.