Deaf Studies: A Critique of the Predominant U.S. Theoretical Direction

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The focus and concerns establishing Deaf Studies in the 1970s have rigidified into a reactive stance toward changing historical conditions and the variety of deaf lives today. This critique analyzes the theoretical foundation of this stance: a tendency to downplay established research in the field of Deaf Studies and linguistics, the employment of outdated examples of discrimination, an uncritical acceptance of Derrida’s phonocentrism, flawed uses of Saussure’s linguistic theory, and reliance on the limiting metaphor of colonialism. The purpose of the critique ultimately is to point Deaf Studies in a new direction. Issues with conceptualizing an expanded Deaf Studies are the focus of a companion article (this issue), “Inclusive Deaf Studies: Barriers and Pathways.”

Deaf Studies in the United States was born out of a movement in the 1960s and 1970s when linguistic scholars were struggling to prove that American Sign Language (ASL) is a language and that Deaf people have a culture, history, and educational practices that are important to learn about. Building on this linguistic research, scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds and artists contributed to what has become Deaf Studies. These first-generation scholars accomplished much, particularly in gathering and analyzing the history and arts of those who use ASL and live according to Deaf norms and values (Bahan & Marbury, 1992; Baker & Padden, 1978; Batson & Bergman, 1976; Baynton, 1996; Bragg & Bergman, 1981, 1989; Fischer & Lane, 1993; Lane, 1976, 1984a, 1984b, 1992; Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996; Lucas & Valli, 1992; Padden & Humphries, 1988; Valli & Lucas, 1996; Van Cleve & Baker-Shenk, 1987; Van Cleve & Crouch, 1992; Wilcox, 1989). And the advocacy and vigilance that attended the birth of ASL and Deaf Studies are still needed. However, because of changing historical conditions and new awareness about the variety of deaf lives, Deaf Studies as an academic field needs to evolve and expand. Close scrutiny of the foundations of Deaf Studies is warranted to assure that changes are made to allow scholars in this field to reflect both a strong academic approach as well as an awareness of the complexity of deaf communities and their languages. As a first step in addressing the possibility of a new theoretical foundation for the field of Deaf Studies, this article critiques the currently predominant, reactive theoretical stance of the field built around audism and related concepts of phonocentrism and colonialism: Phonocentrism explains the origin of audism, and audism explains the rationale for the sociopolitical manifestation or institutionalization of audism in hearing colonization of deaf people.

Most fully expressing this reactive stance is Bauman’s “Audism: Exploring the metaphysics of oppression,” published in 2004 in the Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education. Bauman uses Derrida (1998) as a particularly compelling philosopher because Derrida critiques Western metaphysical understanding of the nature of reality in a way that puts phonocentrism, the privileging of speech, at the very center of Western culture. Adopting this critique elevates the importance of Deaf Studies insofar as people in the field focus on native ASL. Deaf signers as the authentic core of deaf life. Phonocentrism, at first glance, seems appropriate as a concept to explain...
audism and thereby build a theoretical foundation for Deaf Studies because it can be used to signify reasons why signed languages were not recognized as languages or have been marginalized throughout the course of history.

Another idea Bauman explores may best be described as the metaphor of colonialism. Other scholars have also analyzed deaf history in these terms: Lane (1992), Mirzoeff (1995), Wrigley (1996), Ladd (2003), and Ladd (2008). Topics of discussion revolve around the medicalization or pathologizing of deafness that result in medical, educational, and social practices or institutions that oppress deaf people. Within this emerging foundation for Deaf Studies, a metaphorical use of colonialism purportedly describes how phonocentrism becomes the ideological grounding of a political and institutional relationship between hearing oppressor and deaf oppressed.

Bauman’s work, just one brief treatise, deserves scrutiny because it comes out of the Deaf Studies Department at Gallaudet University. Gallaudet University is the flagship educational institution for U.S. Deaf people and, indeed, many deaf people throughout the world. It is also where a critical mass of deaf people enables the concentrated development of ideas about how deaf people ought to live versus how they do live. As an institution, Gallaudet serves to establish boundaries between deaf and hearing people enabling deaf people to imagine and advocate for a world uniquely designed to fit their visual, gestural, and tactile strengths. Gallaudet’s Deaf Studies Department, with a majority of Deaf faculty, is one of a very few institutions offering a Deaf Studies Masters degree as an academic specialization in its own right. Thus, the theoretical orientation of this department is immensely important for the evolution of Deaf Studies as an academic discipline.

Although Bauman has articulated a theory of audism in written English, Deaf faculty and Deaf master’s students have translated his articulation into ASL, using the same foundation and philosophers—Derrida (1998), Saussure (1959), and Foucault (1984): As stated in an Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) based blog about Deaf Culture called Orange Brown Coalition (2008), Bienvenu’s (2008) presentation at National Technical Institute for the Deaf/RIT included discussion of phonocentrism; at a faculty development presentation on bilingualism, Bahan (2009) illustrated academic ASL with a clip of a graduate student focusing on the same problem Bauman does with Saussure’s identification of speech with language; and Commerson’s (2008) master’s film in ASL mentions Saussure and Foucault in the same terms Bauman does. In print, at least two scholars (Mitchell, 2006; Nelson, 2006) discuss or borrow Derridean ideas about phonocentrism. Other uses of phonocentrism include those by Lapiak (2001–2005) and Mprah (2008). Insofar as much of the scholarship coming out of the ASL and Deaf Studies Department is based on the same premises outlined in Bauman’s article, we argue for discernment of the misapplications of Derrida, Foucault, and Saussure.

The Phenomenon of Audism

Discussing the phenomenon of audism both at Gallaudet University and in the greater society beyond Gallaudet’s gates, Bauman outlines personal, institutional, and metaphysical constructs of audism. He cites Humphries’ (1975) definition of audism at the personal level as “the notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or to behave in the manner of one who hears” (Bauman, 2004, p. 240). Humphries also points to institutional manifestations of audism. Building on Humphries’ work, Lane (1992) expounds on the institutional manifestations of audism, defining it as “the hearing way of dominating, restructuring, and exercising authority over the deaf community” (p. 43)” (as cited in Bauman, p. 241). Bauman’s essay credits Lane’s contribution and then turns to the Western philosophical sources of audism, defined as metaphysical principles of reality.

Metaphysical audism means “the orientation that links human identity and being with language defined as speech” (Bauman, 2004, p. 242). This linkage is identified as the root cause of audism and the denigration of Deaf people who sign and do not use speech. The critique of the link between human identity and speech draws support from Derrida’s (1998) Of grammatology. Following Derrida, the essay seeks to provide the underpinnings of a Deaf Studies that will expose the ancient origins of this linkage, a linkage that has persisted in the exclusion of sign and, thus, results in continually frustrating and damaging the lives of deaf people.
In this Derridean context, Bauman (2004) provides examples of discrimination and denigration as surface phenomena with deep roots in phonocentrism or metaphysical audism. After a nod to founding scholars on ASL, Bauman proposes that spoken language had (or has) status over signed language because of phonocentrism. Given this focus on signed versus spoken language, it is not surprising that a particularly helpful part of Derrida’s writing is his critique of Saussure, widely regarded as the progenitor of modern linguistics. Derrida identifies phonocentrism in Saussure’s conception of structuralist linguistics, a privileging of sound that thereby explains the failure to recognize the linguistic status of signed languages. Bauman further uses Saussure’s conception of the linearity of language to explain why visual–manual–kinesthetic-based languages were not recognized as languages. The last major point is that phonocentrism has not only infected Saussure’s perception about language; hearing people generally have imposed in colonialist fashion their phonocentric practices on institutions for deaf people. Although not explicitly referenced, a discussion of ethnocentrism implicitly rationalizing colonialist oppression also appears in Derrida’s critique of ethnocentrism in the work of Structural Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. (Instead of referencing that example of colonialism to support the assertion of hearing control of language in deaf-based institutions, Bauman provides a different historical example of colonialist control of language in Mesoamerica.) Listing “oralism, Total Communication, and mainstreaming” (p. 245) as examples of phonocentric impositions on deaf people, Bauman suggests that hearing people have perpetuated institutional or systemic hearing privilege associated with privileging speech. To tackle such privilege, Bauman mentions the Derridean deconstruction of the privileging of speech over writing. Derrida redefines writing in such a way, Bauman maintains, that sign can be aligned with writing in opposition to speech. Furthermore, this understanding of audism may help us transform institutions serving deaf people. For example, with educational institutions, Bauman asks us to imagine schools that are “ocularcentric” rather than phonocentric.

Overview of Problems With Bauman’s Argument

Five problems make Bauman’s overall argument ineffective: (a) a tendency to downplay established research in the field of Deaf Studies and linguistics in order to highlight the novelty of Derrida’s ideas, (b) an inclination to minimize the historical nature of certain examples of discrimination, (c) an uncritical acceptance of Derrida’s overall characterization of the history of Western metaphysics as phonocentric—speech being dominant over writing, (d) introduction of a “deaf lens” that leads to flawed uses of Saussure and an ill-considered substitution of signing for an expanded idea of writing formulated by Derrida, and (e) the polarizing suggestion of a fixed “colonialist” relation between hearing and deaf people (also between speech and sign). Continuing this colonialist metaphor and seeking to build a philosophical foundation for it through metaphysical audism only takes Deaf Studies further afield by turning its origins into a quasi-mythology. Ironically, this route circles back to the conditions of Deaf Studies’ origin and ends there, resulting in an ahistorical view of deaf people which measures everyone against a single standard. Instead, the ahistorical view needs to be brought current in order to generate fuller, multiple understandings of the reality of deaf people and their complex lives.

Downplaying Established Deaf Studies and Linguistics Research

The way Bauman’s case for metaphysical audism handles research about signing demonstrates a tendency to underplay the significance of work in the field of Deaf Studies and linguistics. For example, it is acknowledged that “[s]ince the 1970s, we have discovered that all humans (whether hearing or deaf) are born with the equal capacity to receive and produce manual as well as spoken language.” (That is, deaf and hearing people have the same cognitive capacities although not the same sensory capacities.) And, as Bauman (2004, p. 243) notes, this research had already recognized that speech was not to be regarded as the only proper vehicle of human language but merely one of several modalities (Bellugi,
1972; Bellugi & Fischer, 1972; Fischer, 1973, 1974, 1975; Klima & Bellugi, 1972, 1979; Stokoe, 1960, 1965; Woodward, 1973a, 1973b, 1973c, 1974, 1975a, 1975b; Bellugi & Klima, 1975). Derrida’s work began appearing in English in the 1970s (1974 for Of grammatology) when Deaf Studies already had its foundation started. Yet the essay proceeds at once to celebrate Derrida for bringing this admittedly superseded notion of the privileging of speech to “the forefront of postmodern contemporary thought” (Bauman, 2004, p. 243). It is certainly true that Derrida gave this old idea a catchy new name, “phonocentrism,” but it is also obvious that he, along with his “postmodern contemporary” colleagues, lacked knowledge of the work in Deaf Studies which had anticipated one of his major philosophical conclusions. Bauman seems to privilege Derrida’s ideas over this research that helped found the field of Deaf Studies.

Training the spotlight on Derrida has the side effect of crowding into the shadows work that had struck a blow at audism before the word had even been coined. No one would disagree, for instance, that prior to Stokoe’s (1960, 1965) seminal work in the 1960s showing that ASL exists as a language on a par with the world’s other languages, many false assumptions and much erroneous information prevailed regarding deaf people and their communities. Although some eighteenth and nineteenth century writers romanticized signing deaf people as closer to innocent nature and, therefore, to God (Baynton, 1996, p. 9; Lewis, 2007, pp. 75–76), others such as Johann Conrad Amman and the Abbe Roch-Ambrose Sicard (as cited in Bauman [2004], p. 243) believed that humans without speech were, thus, brought closer to base nature and made akin to beasts. Early twentieth century linguists believed that speech was necessary to language as well, and therefore, deaf people without speech were without language. As such, deaf people were looked upon as defective and subhuman, a situation Stokoe, psycholinguists, neurolinguists, and others—through labors that were more than mere “insight” (p. 243)—corrected permanently. Moreover, the work establishing ASL as a language clarified that deaf people are neither more nor less human than any other person—not brutish and not angelic, but human.

In the light of almost 50 years of research expanding on Stokoe’s founding scholarship of a manual modality of language, Bauman’s relying on an example of linguistic research published as far back as 1949 (Mario Pei’s The story of language) apparently in order to bolster the feeling that linguists still think of manual languages as “nonlinguistic” simply underscores a general tendency to treat the past as contemporary when it is convenient. In the authoritative Cambridge encyclopedia of language, Crystal (1987) exemplifies the general acceptance of signing already by the 1980s, by classifying it as “... a third means of linguistic communication” (p. 219). Thus, the linguistic research and this general acceptance of it in English-speaking countries indicate that both before and during the years of Derrida’s work, the “Herculean task” (Bauman, 2004, p. 243) of distinguishing speech from language was already getting accomplished. Except as the idea lingers in some corners of popular (and uninformed) consciousness, speech no longer is taken to be identical with language.

Certainly, a need to educate others about this knowledge continues. Humphries (2008) makes this point when he acknowledges that deaf people are still (“probably forever” he speculates) bound up with the “other” of uneducated or biased hearing people (p. 40). But, he contends, “that should not prevent us from seeking to be more than just reactionary,” that is, by relying solely on making the case to the public ‘in “liberation’ art”—literature and art about having a culture or about experiencing pain from oppression. Instead, Humphries declares, “We are at a point where exhibiting ourselves does not have to be all-consuming; we can afford to let culture talk about something other than ourselves and transcend our relationship with the other” (p. 40). Part of this talk might concern portraying the complexities and varieties of deaf people, individually and wholly, especially in dynamic interaction. Undoubtedly, the expansive contemporary view we recommend takes in this full variety of deaf people. Building on the work of artists as well as on Stokoe and a good number of researchers, our expansive view, it seems to us, provides the most life- and knowledge-enhancing focus for Deaf Studies.
Using Outdated Discrimination Examples

The presentation of outmoded examples as current threats has the effect of seeming to justify the wheeling in of heavy Derridean artillery. However, we need only remember that these examples—denial of rights to own property, have children, or drive a car—typically belong to the past. Although some senior citizens may remember the time when deaf people suffered these or similar wrongs, the status quo for deaf people today reflects a reality where they are known as safe drivers who get insurance from companies other than their own National Fraternal Society of the Deaf—now dissolved because of this progress. Deaf people also own property and have children. And they have moved up into all types of professions including the law, dentistry, and medicine. Deaf people’s rights to live with full citizenship are widely acknowledged and guaranteed by law. ASL courses are taught in many school systems and universities. In a recent report from the Modern Language Association (Furman, Goldberg, and Lusin, 2006), enrollments in ASL courses rose nearly 30% from 2002, making it the fourth most studied language on college campuses, slightly ahead of Italian. Moreover, many ASL courses are taught by Deaf individuals so that these courses are a valuable way to bring Deaf people into desirable and rewarding employment. Frequently, ASL courses satisfy foreign language requirements, a hard-won acknowledgment from traditional liberal arts faculty that, indeed, ASL is a language and deaf people are fully human. Evidence of such growing acceptance joins established knowledge to make the task of eradicating the last vestiges of ignorance or skepticism easier.

What intellectual benefit can be gained by Deaf Studies’ continuing to perpetuate the notion that its mission is to counter this almost vanished view of deaf people as “sub-human”? For the historical perspective that speech is tied to language and, therefore, deaf people who are without speech are sub-human, Groce (1985) provides a thorough review of the history that confirms we have centuries of misunderstandings and derogatory beliefs about deaf people that tie lack of speech to lack of intelligence. Because research establishing sign language as a language is relatively recent, it is understandable that deaf people still feel a need to fight these old battles. It is equally disconcerting that today we sometimes see the flip side of derogation, that is, hearing people who romanticize deaf people and sign language as exotic or noble. Instead of reacting to such mischaracterizations, however, we are more concerned with seizing the present historical moment that interrupts the long chronicle of hearing people’s defining deaf people and replaces it with deaf people’s defining all of themselves in all their rich complexity. As part of an academic endeavor, Deaf Studies scholars should focus on creating knowledge. In this regard, Deaf Studies is uniquely positioned to document and study deaf communities as well as deaf individuals and their relationships with hearing people in all the ways they actually exist in the world today.

These criticisms are not meant to imply that audism does not exist. It most certainly does. They are only to say that an ahistorical approach to perceptions, research, and discrimination does not show us where scholars of ASL and Deaf Studies need to inquire in order to reflect the contemporary complexity of deaf communities and their languages as well as the myriad of issues they face today at the intersection of technology, science, language, and culture. For different reasons, neither does the argument based on Derrida. We will now discuss this argument and its difficulties in order to clarify further the direction we believe Deaf Studies must take in the future.

Uncritical Acceptance of Derrida’s Phono-centrism and Related Assertions

Derrida is intentionally not easy to summarize. A fair number of important contemporary philosophers and other intellectuals have criticized Derrida for willful obfuscation (Chomsky, 1995; Rorty, 1991, pp. 104–106; Searle, 1986; Smith et al., 1992). Using Derrida’s notion of phono-centrism to understand audism is tricky because Derrida’s phono-centrism is itself a dubious and difficult theory in that he bases it on the questionable assertion of the primacy of the ear and speech over the eye and writing. Furthermore, the theory involves an idiosyncratic idea about writing that does not oppose speech as Bauman thinks it does and, thus, is not interchangeable with signing. Even so, Bauman’s paper...
argues that Derrida’s ideas are useful in uncovering the metaphysics of audism, the source of denigrating images of deaf people and of deleterious institutional practices. It identifies these images and practices as the product of the metaphysical privileging of speech over writing—Derrida’s “phonocentrism.” Conceding that Derrida “does not directly discuss sign and the repression of deaf individuals,” Bauman (2004, p. 244) proposes nevertheless that “one can read Derrida through a deaf lens: This lens would often substitute Derrida’s use of writing with signed languages or, more succinctly, sign.” The leap from the relationship between speech and writing, as explained by Derrida, to that between speech and sign, as put forward above, simply substitutes sign for writing with no apparent basis.12 This substitution partly perpetuates some of Derrida’s more questionable assertions and partly misconstrues his analysis of the differences between speech and writing.

Derrida aimed part of his argument about the phonocentrism of Western metaphysics at correcting structuralism—a theory that had earned particular prestige in France after World War II and still held center stage among Parisian intellectuals when Derrida began to write. (The linguist Saussure and the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, two of the four main writers Derrida analyzes, were among the founders of this school of thought.) Structuralists posit “binary opposition” as the fundamental structure of meaning. That is, anything gains meaning only by its contrast with something else. Derrida points out that such binary oppositions cannot be neutral because their terms are never equal. One term of any opposition is always privileged. To privilege something in binary relationships means to disadvantage something else, which, thus, becomes the repressed, marginal, or ignored Other. Male/female, spirit/matter, mind/body, rational/irrational, White/of color, hearing/deaf, and speech/writing exemplify a few of many binary oppositions wherein the first term is privileged. According to Derrida, to deconstruct these binary structures is to unmask and decenter privilege, hierarchy, or repression. His deconstruction of the binary opposition speech/writing is his prime example of how structuralism operates as a privileging agent that simultaneously denies its own metaphysical investment in hierarchy. But structuralism is only one strand of what Derrida claims is a whole metaphysical tradition in the West that privileges speech over writing.13

Derrida’s discussion of Saussure exposes what Derrida seems to view as a fundamental contradiction in Saussure’s structural linguistics. Saussure states that the relationship between a signifier (whatever represents a meaning or concept, like a spoken word or a manual sign) and a signified (meaning or concept) is arbitrary, that is, a conventional relationship that has no “intrinsic” (e.g., iconic) value (Saussure, 1959, p. 68).14 But Derrida (1998, pp. 52–53) thinks Saussure undercuts his own principle of arbitrariness when he also insists on a natural (intrinsic) bond between sound or vocative (Mitchell, 2006) signifiers (speech) and signifieds; spoken words are natural, for example, in comparison to the more removed and abstract written word. This bias toward speech leads to his privileging sound signifiers at the expense of written ones.

Although critical of this bias toward speech, Derrida (1998, pp. 7–8) is not surprised by it. He declares that the “privilege of the phonè”—by which he means spoken sounds or phonemes, not signed phonemes—was an unavoidable choice given that the “system of ‘hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak’ through the phonic substance” carries with it a sense of immediacy or “interiority” that intimates a natural or intrinsic bond. It is this bias toward the ear and speech that results in phonocentrism. Bauman (2004, p. 243) asserts that this privilege entailed “the historical assumption that speech is the most fully human form of language.” If we follow this train of thought through to its conclusion, speech is what makes us human, and writing, like signing, is one step removed from the immediacy of speech. Both the assumption of the primacy of the ear/speech and the comparison of sign with writing are flawed.

Not everyone agrees that the Western tradition has privileged speech. Even Saussure (1959, pp. 23–25) himself thought that it was writing that had been privileged. Basing his analysis on only four writers, Derrida may have unduly limited his view. Wood (1977) acknowledges his own and others’ sensation of the immediacy of speech as more natural than writing, but he also emphasizes that this experience has not
translated into a privileging of speech. Quite the con-
trary, Wood argues incisively that

... it seems possible that Derrida has got the whole argument upside down. Writing is not repressed in the West, but on the contrary incessantly cele-
brated, not least in the work of Derrida himself, and the examples of logocentrism [of which pho-
nocentrism is a manifestation] he uses—Plato, Rousseau, Saussure, Lévi-Strauss—make clear, by their sparseness and dispersion, that they don’t repre-
sent the main stream of metaphysics, but are rather sporadic protests against a clearly felt su-
premacy of writing. Where Derrida sees repres-
sion, Saussure saw an alarming prestige, and there is no reason for us to think Saussure simply wrong. (p. 27)

In fact, Chandler (1994) persuasively summarizes a counter argument to phonocentrism and its bias to-
ward the ear in favor of writing and its bias toward the eye:

The bias in which writing is privileged over speech has been called graphocentrism or scriptism. In many literate cultures, text has a higher status than speech: written language is often seen as the standard. Until the early twentieth century, linguists tended to accord priority to written language over speech: grammatical rules were based on written language and everyday speech was largely ignored; the prescriptive tradition was based on the written word. Marshall McLuhan, using James Joyce’s coinage, referred to ‘ABCEDmindedness’—an un-
conscious bias which he regarded as ‘the psycho-
logical effect of literacy’ (in McNamara[,] 1970, p. 8) .... It reflects a scriptist bias to refer, as many scholars do, to ‘oral literature’, or to any semiotic systems, written or not, as a ‘text’.

Biases in favour of the written or printed word are closely associated with the ranking of sight above sound, the eye above the ear, which Anthony Synnott has called ‘ocularcentrism’ (Synnott[,] 1993, p. 208). Walter Ong comments that ‘Because we have by today so deeply interiorized writing, made it so much a part of ourselves ... we find it difficult to consider writing to be a technology’ (Ong 1982, p. 82) ....

Contrary to Derrida and Bauman, Chandler, thus, points out that both Plato and Aristotle “accorded primacy to sight” among the senses. We see from these examples that many scholars support an alternative to Derrida’s characterization of the history of Western metaphysics as phonocentric, and the complexity and richness of contrasting views should be brought to the conceptualization of audism and the relationships of speech, signing, and writing in deaf communities. Far from being in a binary opposition, speech and sign, along with writing, intersect and interrelate in com-
plex ways that are or should be a primary focus of Def Studies. Brueggemann (2008) discusses a similar point in calling for study of interactions and fusions among seemingly oppositional terms like deaf and Deaf; deaf/Deaf and disability; deaf and hearing; mainstreamed, implanted deaf/hard-of-hearing stu-
dents and hearing ASL students; and English and ASL (pp. 177–187). She speaks of “think-between” where the hyphen illustrates the idea of a space be-
tween opposing terms that can open up new ways of being. Her personal example is a space between “think-deaf” and “think-hearing” which she calls “think-eye” (p. 187). Our only concern with looking at hyphenated lives as a way to get beyond oppositions is that both terms can remain in opposition even if joined. In Lend me your ear, Brueggemann (1999) notes Paul Preston’s study of hearing children of deaf adults in which he himself comments that “Hyphens connect, but they also keep apart” (p. 169). Indeed, this connected-but-separate mode may only be the first step in deconstructing and dismantling the binary oppositions, a step possibly leading to fluid, new constructions reflecting complex realities of deaf people today.

The “Deaf Lens”: Three Blurry Views

In this section, we examine flawed uses of Saussure and Derrida’s critique of Saussure that lead to three flawed positions: (a) phonocentrism has caused lin-
guists like Saussure to overlook the linguistic nature of manual and other visual signifiers, (b) Saussure’s
principle about the linear nature of language denies nonlinear sign its rightful status as a language, and (c) sign can substitute for Derrida’s “use of writing” (Bauman, 2004, p. 244) to aid in “dethroning speech.” In order to critique this part of the case for a metaphysics of audism, we will work within Derrida’s characterization of 2,500 years of Western metaphysics as phonocentric.

Blurry View 1: Saussure Overlooks the Linguistic Nature of Visual Signifiers

Adapting Derrida’s critique of Saussure, Bauman’s paper comments: “Because Saussure and others were unable to see that manual signifiers could be just as arbitrary as spoken signifiers, it became assumed that only sound could be fully arbitrary and that any visual sign would be a ‘natural’ or ‘iconic’ sign, relegated to the study of semiology rather than linguistics” (p. 243). Without knowing who the “others” are, we can only discuss Saussure’s thinking. And, in regard to that, we find the mistaken assumption in the essay that arbitrariness is a principle of the linguistic sign only. In turn, because Saussure’s linguistic sign was auditory, Bauman mistakenly asserts that “Saussure and others … assumed only sound could be fully arbitrary.” It is true that Saussure did not recognize any visual sign as linguistic. But Saussure did see that other systems of nonlinguistic signs, including visual signs, could be just as arbitrary as sound images. For Saussure, these other systems of signs, as well as vocative linguistic signs, all belong to a larger field of semiology.15

Saussure does not mention the manual signs of signed language specifically, so we do not know for sure if he would have characterized them as one of the few “‘iconic’ or ‘natural’” (p. 243) semiotic signs or one of the majority of systems of arbitrary signs. It is possible that he would have acknowledged some iconicity but focused on arbitrariness as he did with his example of bowing nine times to a Chinese emperor.16 In the end, however, we must note that, what Saussure might or might not have said about manual signs is insignificant—interesting as an historical rather than as a contemporary issue—in light of the subsequent establishment of sign as linguistic. A forward-looking direction would include the work of contemporary ASL linguistic research that challenges arbitrariness and the resulting stigmatizing of iconicity as nonlinguistic.

Although the earliest efforts of ASL linguists focused on the similarities between signed languages and spoken ones, particularly downplaying iconicity and emphasizing the arbitrary or conventional nature of signs, today the focus is as much on the differences and how such differences may alter our understanding of the nature of language (Taub, 2001, p. 2). A consensus view seems to be building among a small but growing number of scholars concerning iconicity as an essential feature of language, both spoken and signed. ASL cognitivist linguists Liddell (1995, 1998, 2000, 2003) and Taub (2001) have analyzed iconicity in signed languages—with Taub focusing on the relationship of iconicity to conceptual metaphor or abstract thought. Liddell’s and Taub’s work shows that signed languages include gestural or iconic elements.17 Although omnipresent in signed languages, a substantial amount of iconicity, as Taub (2001, p. 7) explains, is also exhibited in spoken languages—though less than in signed languages because of the speech modality’s more limited resources.18 The difference in degree aside, Taub asserts that iconicity exists in language because of “universal properties of human cognition” used in making meaning (p. 227). Both signers and speakers gesture in meaningful ways, but iconicity also can combine with arbitrary elements in the same sign. These findings indicate, one, that our understanding of what constitutes language must be broadened to include iconic and indexic elements, and, two, that “recognizing these can help us to see how meaning develops in language in general” (Armstrong, 1999, p. 139–140).19

Blurry View 2: Linearity Excludes Sign as Linguistic

Bauman (2004, pp. 243–244) explains that when Saussure “substitutes the term sound-image for linguistic signifier [emphasis in the original] …, other forms of language are cast aside, and speech governs the internal workings of linguistics.” He also maintains that this substitution causes Saussure (1959) to misperceive language as linear—“unfolded solely in time”
and, thus, to exclude "other forms of language" like what is characterized as the "visual–kinetic–spatial modality" of nonlinear sign (Bauman, 2004, p. 244). He concludes: "As a result, sign becomes the 'other' of language, helping to determine what language is not ... . Linguists could not see this because their vision was occluded by the intrinsic and 'natural bond' of sound to thought. Our ears got in the way of our eyes, disturbing and distorting our vision" (Bauman, 2004, p. 244).

Because most Deaf Studies students are almost certainly already aware of this fundamental linguistics research that dispels such ignorance about sign, it can hardly serve as the main focus of the field's scholarship. However, two other problems undercut this argument contrasting sign with speech that could be avoided by relying on contemporary linguists. One is that Saussure (1959) relies on a restricted sense of speech that highlights the linear, one-dimensional sense of spoken language and excludes other aspects of spoken communication. The other is that, compared in equivalent terms to Saussure's idea of spoken language, sign would also seem to be linear. Unfortunately, the idea of sign as nonlinear has attained near-mythic status. In fact, study of up-to-date, comprehensive linguistics reveals that both have visual–kinetic–spatial aspects, and both speech and sign have linearity (Liddell, 2003; Sandler, 1989).

Saussure (1959) carefully restricts the "object of linguistics" to langue, an abstract system of rules governing signs that are delimited to mental sound-images bonded with concepts (pp. 9–15, 17–20) that gain meaning by their differences from other sound concepts in the system. He, thus, eliminates from langue speech as vocal activity or the speaking of utterances (parole), especially in face-to-face communication. To be compared on equivalent terms to Saussure's langue, signed language would need to be studied only in terms of manual signifiers and their concepts. And such a circumscribed focus would yield a linear (time dependent, sequential) sense of signing as well—the unfolding of signs in time that Bauman's (2004, p. 244) essay itself acknowledges might include study of contrasts of successive hand shapes or the ordering of signs.

It is the performative aspects of sign that also give the greatest credence to the essay's characterization of signing as a visual–kinetic–spatial modality (Bauman, 2004, p. 244). Simultaneously with manual signs, signing also uses lips, tongue, face, and hands.20

However, including the whole range of performance elements means that speaking (in the sense of including parole) also contains visual–kinetic–spatial elements, albeit in different ways and to different degrees.21 In contrast, the view of audism as originating in phonocentrism (Bauman 2004) implies that visual–kinetic–spatial elements belong exclusively to sign and so distinguish sign from speech in absolute terms (p. 244).22

Rather than a difference of polar opposites, then, conceivably the only real difference between speaking and signing is the specialization of sound versus sight for the "words/concepts" and for most of the other dimensions of live, three-dimensional communication. Indeed, what we might say, although Derrida did not, is that his descriptions and statements about speech apply equally to the only other live form of communication besides speech: sign. If Derrida had been deaf or had thought deeply about signing, he might have written about "the system of 'seeing (understanding)-oneself-sign'" instead of "The system of 'hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak'."23

In this way, sign aligns with speech, not writing. We emphasize that study of modern linguists is warranted in order to avoid mistaken claims about speech as linear, about sign as nonlinear, and about a stark contrast between speech and sign in terms of temporal linearity and visual–kinetic–spatial elements.

Blurry View 3: Pairing Sign With Writing Helps Sign Challenge the Hegemony of Speech

Bauman (2004, p. 243) supposes that "... although speech [with sound-based phonemes] has clearly produced the idea of what it means to be fully human, there is nothing intrinsically 'more human' [less human] about nonphonic [sic] forms of communication such as sign [with manual/visual phonemes] or writing." The pairing of sign with writing misapprehends the Derridean sense of writing and seems to be based on little more than an impression that both have been
marginalized. Derrida’s idea of writing does go beyond linear, phonetic writing certainly. However, sign cannot substitute for this kind of writing because sign is only one member of what is an increased scope of writing that also incorporates linear, phonetic (meaning alphabetic representation of vocative language) writing, and speech itself.

Derrida’s first step in deconstructing the privileging of speech versus phonetic writing is to expand the idea of writing. Bauman’s paper explains that this “writing refers to the wider notion of recording ideas and impulses symbolically” (p. 244). It goes on to quote some of Derrida’s explanation and part of the list of examples from Derrida (1998, p. 9) which are given here in full: “And thus we say ‘writing’ for all that gives rise to inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural ‘writing.’ One might also speak of athletic writing, and with even greater certainty of military and political writing in view of the techniques that govern those domains today. All this is to describe not only the system of notation secondarily connected to these activities but the essence and content of these activities themselves.” The difficulties with celebrating sign as something “alien to the [linear] order of the voice” have been discussed. The additional point here is that Bauman’s (2004, p. 244) paper embraces a “wider notion” of writing because it conjectures that the goal of “recognition of sign as equal to speech” needs sign to join forces with writing and thereby increase “the destabilizing of phonocentrism.” At times, this alliance seems to mean a deaf lens substitutes sign only for nonphonetic writing, but nonphonetic writing is not solely what Derrida means by his expanded formulation. This wider notion of writing, called arche-writing, does not merely equal speech; it subsumes it. Moreover, it not only subsumes speech but also all systems of signifiers. For these reasons, the substitution of sign for a Derridean understanding of writing in general does not hold.

Derrida’s (1998, p. 44) arche-writing produces a “vast field” of all kinds of systems of signification to be known as grammatology, his science of “writing in general” which seems akin to Saussure’s semiology.24 The main difference is that, although Derrida’s (1998, p. 55) posits that “oral language already belongs to this writing,” his reformulated writing does not privilege spoken language as the most important system. He also avers that arche-writing is not a science, as grammatology, semiology, or linguistics can be. It is not even a concept. Instead, it is the possibility of differences. Arche-writing does not exist, yet somehow—is the analogy the moment before the Big Bang?—it is supposed to make possible the existence of both speech and writing (and all other signifying) as forms of the play of difference (or différence).25

It is most important to understand that, for Derrida, all signifying processes—phonetic and nonphonetic writing, speech, and many more—are irreducibly and equally derivative in that all signifiers are always and only signifying other signifiers. Thus, there is no privileging or casting out—which is why he says ordinary phonetic writing is not derivative of speech, not merely “a sign of a sign, except if one says it of all signs, which would be more profoundly true” (Derrida, 1998, p. 43). Furthermore, because of the endless chain of signification, always “deferring” and differing, there can be no present. As Wood (1977) says, speech is a form of “unrecorded writing” (p. 28), and the same could be said of sign. That is what Derrida means in the line quoted in Bauman’s (2004, p. 244) essay about a wider notion of writing: The idea of “inscription” that is not literal describes both speaking and signing.

The inescapable conclusion from Derrida’s arche-writing is that sign is comparable not only to nonphonetic writing but also to speech and phonetic writing and all other systems of signs. No hierarchy relates these systems. Without any justification for the association of sign with writing as arche-writing, or even more narrowly as nonphonetic writing, all that remains in the metaphysics of audism argument based on Derrida is the desire to upend the hierarchy that privileges speech. Ironically—because the terms of the argument do not seem to fit those of an agon of signed versus spoken language—it is through arche-writing that the dominance of speech is at least theoretically reduced, and sign is made equal to speech. But arche-writing and other problematic “Derridean perspectives” (Bauman, 2004, p. 245) do not seem all that helpful
in understanding either the sources of audism or the ways to tackle institutional and individual audism.

Audism as Ethnocentrism: A Path to Colonialism

Derrida’s assertion of the ethnocentrism of phonocentrism is an idea that appears in his criticism of structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss for failing to recognize nonalphabetic kinds of writing. Derrida attributes this oversight to the ethnocentrism of those (like Lévi-Strauss) accustomed to linear, phonetic writing as the sum total of what constitutes writing. Bauman’s paper depicts this mistake as analogous to hearing people’s failure to recognize sign as a proper language.

The case for metaphysical audism implies how a deaf lens would transform this part of Derrida’s commentary on Lévi-Strauss—the writing issue—into a critique of possibly well meaning but equally ethnocentric, audist hearing people. And, indeed, Derrida (1998, p. 123) points out that, despite Lévi-Strauss’s ignorance of nonphonetic writing, the Nambikwara’s “diagrams” of genealogies are similar to those which were the beginning of writing worldwide and that the Brazilian tribal people even had a word for writing, “at least a word that may serve that end,” a word meaning “drawing lines.” Rather than giving this example of the Nambikwara, Bauman gives another, similar example: “the imposition of linear, phonetic writing on the Mesoamerican cultures that had already developed sophisticated economic, scientific, and literary texts without recourse to phonetic script” (p. 244). The argument for metaphysical audism would correctly translate both examples of a failure to recognize other systems of writing into a failure of the phonocentric hearing world to recognize the language of sign.

But there is more to the picture of the Nambikwara and that of the Mesoamericans than appears in Bauman’s essay. That is, Derrida also criticizes Lévi-Strauss for romanticizing both speech and the Brazilian Nambikwara whom Lévi-Strauss has studied. Mitchell (2006), also recognizing this duality of denigration and idealization, warns against sentimentalizing or idealizing sign language. Moreover, he also situates this dual distortion as a legacy of privileging (spoken) orality, hence, of audism: “This double movement of over- and underestimation is, in fact, precisely what constitutes the mythologizing and fetishizing of gesture by oral cultures” (p. xix). Although romanticizing clearly figures in the idea that deaf people are only and naturally people of sign, Bauman makes no mention of the analogous romanticizing of deaf people.

According to Derrida (1998, p. 116), ethnocentrically limiting writing to phonocentric, linear writing also led Lévi-Strauss to romanticize the Nambikwara of Brazil as a sweet-natured, authentically tender people who should be praised for resisting Western alphabetic writing because such resistance preserved their honesty, freedom, and innocence just a little longer before their inevitable corruption by Western writing (Derrida, 1998, pp. 134–135)—in other words, Lévi-Strauss is afflicted by the same romanticization of nature and speech as Rousseau. In this melodrama, speech is authentic because characterized by “neighborliness” in the small communities where ‘everyone knows everyone else’,” (p. 137) whereas (alphabetic) writing is filled with deception and is, thus, “the condition of social inauthenticity” (Derrida, 1998, p. 136). Observing that the chief of the Nambikwara wanted to learn the shapes of alphabetic letters, even without understanding them, to impress his people and maintain authority, Lévi-Strauss leaps to the conclusion that “the primary function of writing, as a means of communication, is the enslavement of human beings” (Derrida, 1998, p. 130).

To point up the romanticizing, Derrida’s (1998, p. 116) notes that not everyone saw the Nambikwara as sweetly innocent; equally distorting but contradicting Lévi-Strauss’ idealized view is the American anthropologists’ “deploring of the hatred, surliness, and lack of civility” of the Nambikwara. To include this part, Bauman’s argument would need to address not only denigration of deaf people but also romanticization. To illustrate, it would have to make explicit reference to how some people, deaf and hearing alike, wish to preserve the closeness of a small, core signing Deaf community that values face-to-face communication. And it would then have to acknowledge that this view is the romanticizing converse side of the denigration it deprecates and Lane (1992) shows is an old
psychology of deafness (pp. 35–37). Contemporary realities make more important what the wish to preserve this closeness too often obscures, namely elitism among mostly White deaf people and their exclusion of the other. A much larger, more varied deaf population would alter this small village-like life. This alteration understandably feels threatening to those within it. Instead, as Lévi-Strauss naively praised the Nambikwara for resisting phonetic writing, today some would praise the Deaf community core for resisting the corrupting influence of ways the other deaf people have chosen to live their lives.

Also deflating the romanticizing, Derrida (1998, p. 137) observes with common sense based on history that both speech and writing can be used to oppress—the neighborly gathering can also be “the crowd subjected to a demagogic harangue.” Certainly, the same could be said of sign as well as speech and writing. But Derrida (1998, p. 130) brings out more subtle aspects of the role of writing that also apply to the role of sign among deaf people. Historically, writing has not led inevitably to exploitation as Lévi-Strauss would have it but often to prestige and legitimate authority. The Nambikwara chief knew it, and Mesoamericans did, too. In fact, Bauman’s example of Mesoamerica, according to Mazzotti (2000), involves elite native scribes who, long before colonial rule, gained prestige and power because of their special ability to decipher native writing; they only increased their clout when they gained exclusive access to the Spanish language of the colonial power. Could these scribes have exploited their position and their own people? Possibly. And what about the place of sign? Is there a certain way that ASL, having gained authority, could be used to exploit institutions and other deaf people? Such a question does not figure in the romanticized view of signing deaf people and the absolutist colonial relations of hearing oppressor and deaf oppressed. Yet we must recognize that this idealization does not liberate us from audism; instead, it joins denigration in perpetuating the distorting effects of audist thinking.

Moving from Derrida’s philosophical critique of phonocentrism to Foucault’s (1984) critique of power relations in social institutions and “biopower” (Bauman, 2004, p. 246)—control over the body (in particular, deafness)—Bauman uses audism as a form of ethnocentrism that leads to institutional control of deaf people’s lives. Indeed, his recourse to a Mesoamerican example appears to be part of a desire to emphasize that the failure of ethnocentric-like hearing people to see that deaf people already had a language was a major factor leading to their imposition of speech and phonetic writing on deaf people. The paper argues that privileging “speech and phonetic writing as the norm” rationalizes the “institutionalization” of “[e]ducational practices such as oralism, Total Communication, and mainstreaming” which then “beget individual audist attitudes through daily practices, rituals, and disciplining of Deaf bodies into becoming closer to normal hearing bodies” (p. 245).

The “Colonialist” Relation Between Hearing/ Speech and Deaf/Sign

The metaphor evoked for institutional audism, although not directly named in Bauman’s article, is the political institution of colonialism. This move to institutional oppression gets to the heart of the reactive stance. On the one hand, this metaphor of colonial power of hearing people over deaf people has some explanatory power concerning certain dynamics—education, social policy, and medicine—in the history of deaf people. However, this metaphor also carries with it meanings that are distorting and even harmful both academically and politically. These meanings form the reactive stance.

How does a story of colonialism leave room for mutual respect between ASL users and English users, or even among different deaf people, deaf people of color, and White deaf, for instance? Ostensibly, the intent of using both phonocentrism and colonialism is recognizing sign as equal to speech; however, does denigration of English as the oppressor language encourage such equality? A post-speech-only world does not need to be an ASL-only world. Even if those using the colonialist metaphor deny this denigration of English, unfortunately the “colonialist” story, intended or not, creates a space for an elite group of White-dominated ASL users—not unlike the scribes of the Mesoamericans—who can exploit their skill for political and financial gain.
Evoking the metaphor of colonization in present historical conditions to describe the institutional relationship of deaf and hearing people actually may impede progress toward the more comprehensive theoretical understanding that we need to guide both Deaf Studies’ understanding of deaf/Deaf lives and political activism on behalf of deaf people’s rights in all walks of life.

Although the current politicized, American version of postcolonialism perpetuates the binary opposition problem of the colonialism metaphor, one value of the postcolonial metaphor involves the process of decolonization leading to a postcolonial freedom from a binary opposition between colonizer and colonized. In this way, it somewhat resembles the deconstructive process of allowing free play among seemingly fixed, separate (opposing) and hierarchically organized/valued terms. For example, the process could involve examining what made deaf people a people and determining which values and ideas of the colonizers were beneficial to them and which ones were not. Unpacking the polarity between deaf and hearing might allow recognition of the value in being Deaf or deaf, White or of color, with or without devices (cochlear implant, hearing aid), from deaf parents or hearing, from a deaf residential school or a mainstream one. Validating everyone’s experience can teach us how to respect, value, and include each other. However, the politicized version of postcolonialism perpetuates the colonialist opposition between what behavior constitutes authentic, healthy Deaf life, and what behavior constitutes the ways of oppressive hearing people. The continual gaze backward diminishes both groups. Whatever the politics among deaf and Deaf people, the way forward in Deaf Studies involves study of a more inclusive, nonhierarchical view of diverse deaf life.

Deaf Studies: The Case Against Metaphysical Audism

In the case for metaphysical audism, the picture of where we are theoretically and politically suggests, to use the Derridean frame, an aborted deconstructive process. Rather than allowing free play and change, the analysis meant to remove repression also fixes us into binary oppositions between sign and speech and between Deaf and hearing that ultimately imprison deaf people. For example, although no one would support the privileging of speech at institutions of deaf education, it is less clear why efforts to unleash “the full force of human potential for signed languages” entail a place “where the human voice was rendered irrelevant” (p. 245).

Such a view, as our postmodern consciousness recognizes is true of all theories, is not neutral ideologically. As Edward Said’s insight makes clear, how knowledge, theories, or ideas are constructed is itself a form of power (Kohn, 2006) that also influences political actions. In this instance, the implied action of rendering the human voice irrelevant is simply turning the old hierarchy on its head and producing a new hierarchy that privileges sign. By embracing or even tolerating such a picture, Deaf Studies Departments themselves go a long way toward relegating Deaf people to the status of a colonized minority and hearing people to a colonizing one. This status reflects an impoverished definition of what Deaf people can be—so defined, they can only fulfill their human potential by living in or striving to exist in redoubts of signing people.

Audism is quite a force without any quasi-metaphysical basis. Audism is quite a force without casting it in the dynamic of colonialism. The core Deaf group historically has suffered harsh oppression; at the same time, merely flipping the old opposing terms and privileging this orthodoxy at deaf institutions will lead only to flailing at broken windmills of might-have-beens and what-ifs. Moreover, this kind of theorizing rationalizes divisions and exclusions that we analyze in our companion article (this issue), “Inclusive Deaf Studies: Barriers and Pathways.”

Notes

1. In distinguishing between Deaf and deaf, we refer readers to Brueggemann’s identification of the originator of this distinction, ASL linguist James Woodward, and of the most common way to understand it, namely distinguishing between a culture and a physical (audiological) characteristic (p. 179). Brueggemann also shows that, despite this generally accepted distinction, there are divergences and, each time, scholars must explain their usage of Deaf versus deaf. Although she suggests the practice might stop, we follow the practice of explaining our usage which diverges from the common understanding in
several ways. We do use Deaf to refer to a cultural sense although, perhaps, with different connotations and emphases: D with a capital refers to those who grow up with ASL in their homes and schools and use ASL as the primary language and live in accordance with the norms and values of the language and culture. It also refers to deaf people who come to learn ASL and its culture at some point in their lives and make a conscious decision to live as native Deaf people do. These people strive to create a separate ASL community and, although they can and do interact in English through writing, reading, speech reading, and speech, they would prefer not to because generally they regard English as their second language and/or as the language of their oppressor. The lower case d refers to a broader and more diverse group of people who exemplify various ways of living as deaf people that are other than the ways of Deaf culture but that are nonetheless cultivated and, thereby, worth studying. Hence, lower case d does not refer simply to an audiological characteristic. For example, deaf may refer to non-Deaf people who live with more than one language (ASL, English, Spanish, French, etc.), and communicate in several modalities (speech, sign, writing, and possibly more). [See Brueggemann, B. J. (1999). *Lend me your ear: Rhetorical constructions of deafness*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.]

2. Although there has long been cross-fertilization between European and American sign and culture study, the current article directly expresses only the authors’ U.S. frame of reference. We also wish to disclose that we are both women, both White, both with a PhD, both able-bodied, both straight, and both middle to upper-middle class. In addition, Myers was raised Christian and converted to Judaism, and Fernandes is Christian. Myers is a hearing daughter of ASL-using deaf parents, and Fernandes is a deaf daughter of a deaf mother and hearing father, who was raised to speak English and learned ASL in Iowa at age 23. In April 2006, the Gallaudet University Board of Trustees appointed Fernandes as the university’s ninth president. Her appointment evoked a protest that lasted over 9 months until the Board rescinded her appointment before she had taken office. Myers strongly supported Fernandes’ selection as the ninth president and spoke out in opposition to the protest.

3. Bauman, Nelson, and Rose (2006) provide an extensive list of “ASL Video References” (pp. 253–254), and a “Time Line of ASL Literature Development” (pp. 241–252). One mistake appears in the Time Line, however: The person who organized (and also moderated) the first special session on ASL literature at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in 1984 was not Joseph Grigely, but Shirley Shultz Myers (then Shirley Shultz), one of the authors. It was called, “Image, Language, Culture: Deaf Studies at Gallaudet University.” The author recalls that Joseph Grigely spoke to her directly about this fact he discovered when he was organizing the second session a few years later. [See Bauman, H.-D. L., Nelson, J.L., & Rose, H.M. (Eds.). (2006). *Signing the body poetic: Essays in American Sign Language literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press.]

4. Upon completion of our article, we came across Bauman’s “Listening to phonocentrism with Deaf eyes: Derrida’s mute philosophy of (Sign) language,” published in 2008 in the online journal *Essays in Philosophy: A Biannual Journal*, 9(1). Retrieved June 29, 2008, from http://www.humboldt.edu/~essays/bauman.html. The newer article revisits many of the arguments in the 2004 article, and, where our argument addresses similar points in both articles, we will make reference to the more recent article in our notes.

5. In Bauman’s (2008) essay, covering much the same ground, a similar history is recounted with more emphasis on the credit linguists and others deserve for establishing the linguistic nature of signing (see para. 4). Yet this research does nothing to explain what is called in this same essay a “nearly maniacal obsession with the voice” (para. 10). We do not have the space to address the difficulties with anecdotal evidence offered to substantiate this “ Obsession,” but we can briefly discuss the problem with the rationale given for using Derrida: In Bauman’s view, Deaf Studies scholars are a tiny band in a David and Goliath situation in “naturally” wishing to “critique the primacy of the voice in the Western tradition.” Thus, they should be glad to get the help of a renowned “French philosopher by the name of Jacques Derrida and legions of followers.” Our essay shows why we believe we would do better to stick with the proof of linguists as well as neurolinguists and psycholinguists and spread their widely accepted view of the linguistic nature of sign.

6. Brueggeman (1999) works through the historical, rhetorical, and philosophical conflation of speech with language in the second chapter (Deafness, Literacy, Rhetoric: Legacies of Language and Communication) of her book, *Lend me your ear: Rhetorical constructions of Deafness*. 7. Bauman seems to think otherwise. After providing a 1957 example from Helmer Mykdebust denigrating signed language, Bauman acknowledges in his 2008 essay: “While we now see how skewed this outdated perspective is, it lingers perniciously in deaf education and hearing-centered ‘folk wisdom’ regarding the nature of language” (para. 14). We would like to see evidence of the denial of the linguistic status of sign in deaf education. As for “folk wisdom,” while Bauman thinks we need metaphysical audism to chase away this vestige of ignorance, we reiterate that we only need to educate and popularly promulgate an arsenal of established knowledge within Deaf Studies. Confidence about this established knowledge will allow Deaf Studies scholars to focus on what is sorely needed: new knowledge about the complexities of the lives of deaf people today.

8. They are also all of a kind, even when there is some historical evidence that there were periods of romanticizing as well as of tolerance. For example, Rosenfeld (2001) shows how Enlightenment ideas in the latter half of the 1700s about the nature of language and signs—particularly the origin of language in gesture and a sense that manual languages might be more precise—led to the Romantic adoption of signed languages in Revolutionary France. [See Rosenfeld. (2001). *A revolution in language: The problem of signs in late eighteenth-century France*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.] The enlightenment interest in signs created a tolerance that also allowed the Abbé de l’Epee to establish a school for deaf students in 1755 (Armstrong, 1999, p. 66). However, this acceptance in the early 1800s in France (and the United States) gave way in the Victorian era, second half of the 19th century, to a denigration of sign as primitive and isolating from society (Armstrong, 1999, p. 67).
To pick out only the examples of denigration skews the historical record.

9. See the 2006 document on U.S. state recognition of ASL as a foreign language, [retrieved May 19, 2008, from http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu/InfoToGo/051ASL.pdf]. According to this report, as of 2004, 40 states have legislation recognizing ASL as a foreign language. Laws vary in terms of what level (elementary to postsecondary) ASL may be offered at or who has authority to approve such courses. But the salient point is that, along with research, this kind of recognition behooves us to stop acting as if we still have a fight on our hands when the occasional person or institution challenges recognizing ASL as satisfying a foreign language requirement. By acting defensively, we feed those stragglers who still are misinformed. We ought to make the few who hold onto misinformation uncomfortable for doing so, not the other way around. Furthermore, how does the 2008 article’s claim that “vicious battles are still being fought against sign languages” have any basis when there is also the claim at Gallaudet University’s Web site [retrieved July 2, 2008, from http://www.gallaudet.edu/x557.xml] that “[t]here has been an explosion of interest in ASL among college and university students in the United States during the past 20 years, ... Currently, ASL is the second most taught language in community colleges and the fourth most taught language in universities.” Also this same Web site has the assertion that “[r]esearch on ASL and, subsequently, numerous other signed languages has since proliferated, and there are now signed language research and instructional programs in a large number of highly respected colleges, universities, and laboratories around the world. It is quite likely that the published scholarly research on ASL exceeds that of most of the world’s spoken languages.”

10. As Baynton (1996) explains, the denial of access to the corrupting influence of the artificial conventions of speech and hearing society was seen as a blessing in that deaf people could remain closer to innocent, unfallen nature, from which sign derived (as a more direct imitation of nature than spoken language) and, therefore, also closer to the Creator. [See The natural language of signs: Nature (Baynton, 1996, pp. 108–131).] These contrasting views of nature, and, by association, deaf people and “natural” sign language, are two of various configurations of the nature versus culture dichotomy. But in one way, the contrast does not matter: Both idealized elevation and denigration marginalize deaf people. Davis (1995) expresses a similar idea when he writes that denigration of disability includes “the process by which people with disabilities are portrayed as ‘noble,’ ‘heroic,’ and ‘special.’ Privileging the inherent powers of the blind or the deaf is a form of patronizing.” Women’s Studies and Feminist Studies have had much to say about the similar double-edged sword of idealized elevation and denigration of women. And Davis also makes this link: “In the same way that women were seen as the moral center of European culture, their moral space carved out on the body of their oppression, ... so too does the attempt to redress disability by attributing higher powers to it actually attempt to erase the difference by dressing it in moral raiment” (p. 106). [See Davis, L. (1995). Enforcing normalcy: Disability, deafness, and the body. New York: Verso.]

11. Finding Derrida more amasing than serious, Rorty (1991), an American Pragmatist, sees common ground only in that both he and Derrida critique metaphysics. But his differences from Derrida are crucial. Rorty posits metaphysics as a “genre of literature which attempted [note the past tense] to create unique, total, closed vocabularies.” As such, it had an “important historical function but ... now survives largely in the form of self-parody” (p. 105). And because it is solely “an intriguing historical artifact,” Rorty explains, Derrida attempts to break out of it by raising problems which, like privileged binary oppositions, are only really “pseudoproblems” that he makes look “real and urgent” (p. 104). The other critics mentioned (Searle, Chomsky, and W. V. Quine) find far less than Rorty to appreciate about the difficulty of Derrida’s writing. For example, W. V. Quine signed a 1992 letter with 17 other philosophers protesting the University of Cambridge’s conferring of an honorary degree on Derrida; the letter made observations such as the following: “In the eyes of philosophers, and certainly among those working in leading departments of philosophy throughout the world, M. Derrida’s work does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigour” (Smith et al., 1992, para. 3). And: “Above all—as every reader can very easily establish for himself (and for this purpose any page will do)—his works employ a written style that defies comprehension” (Smith, 1992, para. 8). At this point, there may be a growing consensus that Derrida’s work deserves modest appreciation for his points about the limits of the Western metaphysical tradition related to problems of language, his spurring on of others to resist “critical complacency,” and the injection of ethical concerns into issues of “freedom and justice” (Adams and Searle, 1986, pp. 82–83). [See Adams, H. and Searle, L. (1986). Introduction to excerpts from Derrida. In H. Adams and L. Searle (Eds.). Criticism since 1965 (pp. 79–83). Tallahassee: Florida State UP.]

12. This idea that reading and writing do not involve speaking or hearing may have come from an argument in Davis’ (1995) Enforcing normalcy. Davis writes that “print narratives are actually surrounded by silence.” Because Davis says sign language is also silent—not oral, even anti-oral, it can be placed with writing (see p. 101, 104, and 112) in the sense that both are the Other of speech. We make our own case that this Otherness is overwhelmed by important similarities with as well as differences from speech; thus, we also agree with Brueggemann’s critique of Derrida’s aligning of sign language with writing. On the other hand, some of Davis’ comments—for instance, signing as the “locus where the body meets language” (p. 117)—glance at our assertion that signing is like speaking in terms of the presence of face-to-face communication. Our critique of Bauman’s argument may apply to some parts of Davis’ argument as well, but it also may find some agreement. Whatever the case, Davis’ discussion goes in a different direction from the present concerns so that we will have to deal with it more fully at another time. [See Davis, L. (1995). Enforcing normalcy: Disability, deafness, and the body. New York: Verso. See also Brueggemann (1999).]

13. Besides the structuralists Saussure and Levi-Strauss, Derrida’s two other main exemplars of phonocentrism are Plato and Rousseau. But we discuss only the two structuralists in this
article because they figure in the argument about the metaphysical source of auditism.

14. To elaborate, by “arbitrary,” Saussure (1959) means that no systematic explanation can be given for the association of signifiers with their signifieds although Saussure allowed that semiology may include some iconicity in some signifier/signified associations (p. 68). In full arbitrariness, neither logic nor resemblance will do the job of explaining systematic associations, and there is no connection in nature to appeal to. To oversimplify a bit, we could say that a word (e.g., the sound-image “duck”) and its meaning (our idea of the creature) have no necessary systematic relation. This principle explains why different languages have very different words for the same creature. To complicate the point a bit, even signifiers that seem to correspond to the same signified/concept may not wholly do so—Saussure’s (1959, pp. 115–116) example concerns the French mouton and the English sheep: both may signify an animal, but mouton also can mean the prepared meat of this animal whereas mutton, rather than sheep, means only the meat prepared for human consumption—a difference he called the “value” of a sign.

15. Semiology as a science was not yet developed at the time of his lectures on general linguistics. In fact, it still has not developed into a science. Instead, Chandler explains that the “study of signs” is a “mode of analysis.” [See Chandler’s Semiotics for beginners. Retrieved July 15, 2008, at http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem11.html]. Although Saussure (1959, p. 68) allowed that the field might include “natural signs” as in pantomime, he was nevertheless sure the field would be comprised mainly of systems of arbitrary signs (with language, the most highly developed system of arbitrary signs, as its best example): “Supposing that the new science [of semiology] welcomes them [“natural signs”], its main concern will still be the whole group of systems grounded on the arbitrariness of the sign .... Signs that are wholly arbitrary realize better than the others the ideal of the semological process; that is why language, the most complex and universal of all systems of expression, is also most characteristic.”

16. Some arbitrary and visual semiotic signs are phonic writing, the manual alphabet, and polite formulas. Phonetic writing for Saussure is a semiological, nonlinguistic, visual representation of speech using arbitrary signs—Saussure’s (1959, p. 119) example is that the shape “t” has an arbitrary relation to the sound “t.” In the same way, Saussure (1959, p. 68) regards “the alphabet of deaf-mutes” (p. 16) as an analog of phonetic writing, a semiological system of arbitrary, visual signifiers of spoken words. (It is interesting that, although Saussure does not mention manual signs as used by deaf people, he explicitly mentions the manual alphabet.) A polite formula is, for example, “a Chinese who greets his emperor by bowing down to the ground nine times.” Although he allows that the bowing has a natural or “iconic” feature, the rule about bowing nine times makes the bowing formula arbitrary. All these examples are fixed by abstract rules and characterized by arbitrariness and conventionality (needing to be learned).


18. In his 2008 article, Bauman briefly discusses some of the recent research (paras. 15–16) on iconicity. In addition to the summary we provide in the text, we note here that the difference in degree of iconicity between the modalities of speech and sign explains what has long been observed informally: According to Taub, signed languages with separate origins, unlike spoken languages, possess mutual intelligibility. Key grammatical features of all signed languages “are strongly motivated by universal properties of human cognition .... This is the reason why signed languages share so much structure, why signed languages with separate origins are mutually intelligible” (Taub, 2001, p. 227). The key grammatical structures Taub identifies are “classifiers: systems of iconically motivated forms for representing shapes, locations, and movements. All signed languages establish referential loci in space—special locations in signing space that represent people, places, and so on—and have pronouns and verbs that change their movement patterns to ‘agree’ with those loci. Finally, all signed languages inflect their verbs for temporal aspect” (p. 225).

19. Some scholars have related this linguistic work on iconicity to theories of a gestural origin of language. According to this theory, although hearing people moved from gesture to sounds accompanying gestures to language and the modality of speech, Deaf people went on to develop a fully formed language with the modality of sign. As early as 1974, Stokoe, in his book, Language origins, raised the idea of the origin of language in visible gesture rather than in speech. He continued with this work, joining with Armstrong and Wilcox to publish Gesture and the nature of language (1995), and then ending with his posthumously published Language in hand: Why sign came before speech (2001). Armstrong (1999) also published his own work on this topic in Original signs: Gesture, sign, and the sources of language.

20. This delimited linguistics explains how Saussure is more easily able to call the spoken language linear and compare spoken language to phonetic writing. In this scheme, phonetic writing represents or records only words (those signs made up of auditory impressions and concepts) unfolding in chronological succession. Because the linguistic signifier is thought of as existing only in time, it can have only one dimension. In geometry, an element of one dimension is a line. But geometry is a science of space. The graphic basis of Saussure’s description is, thus, clear: “the linearity” of the oral signifier is the product of an analogy with a spatial pattern. Spatially, phonetic writing inadvertently reinforces (and may have been the original suggestion for) this spatial analogy of linearity because it literally is a spatial line rather than a span of time. Beyond Saussure’s circumscribed focus, speaking or the performance aspects of communication featured in discourse analysis and pragmatics, for example, also unfold in time, but the simple succession of words is complicated by interrelated dimensions simultaneous with speech. Saussure thought that the simultaneous articulation of an accent on a spoken syllable occurred as one “phonational act” and, therefore, meant that such simultaneity did not contradict his principle of temporal linearity (Saussure, 1959, p. 70)—and Derrida (1998, p. 85) repeats this idea about simultaneity as “linearist” which he contrasts with pleiridimensionality. Derrida (1998, p. 85) writes, “Simultaneity coordinates
two absolute presents, two points or instants of presence, and it remains a linearist concept." Mythograms are his example of pleuridimensionality; in mythograms, he postulates, “the meaning is not subjected to successivity, to the order of a logical time, or to the irreversible temporality of sound.” Adapting the work of Andre Leroi-Gourhan on mythograms, Derrida discusses the function of mythogram as a collective memory (say of socioeconomic or other matters of import to human society). The symbol “exteriorizes” or objectifies a complex of meanings that already exists for a group. Again, signing, unfolding in time, compares readily to speech more than to an atemporal symbolic structure like a mythogram. Hence, the concept of pleuridimensionality in sign does not accord with Derrida’s concept. The idea of linearity versus simultaneity becomes more complicated and loses efficacy as a linguistic principle when other features of communication are included. Certainly other sound-based features like tone of voice, pitch modulation, accent/stress, duration, and volume also fall within this idea of simultaneity and temporal linearity. The act of speaking also includes elements like facial expressions and nonverbal gestures involving various parts of the body. They unfold simultaneously with the rest of spoken communication and can be part of a single act of communication. However, with these modifications, temporal succession does not have the weight Saussure wanted it to have.

21. Armstrong (1999) suggests that the auditory and visual channels are the two primary channels of multiple channels that exist in language generally—here language means “communicative behavior” (p. 5), a broader sense of language than Saussure’s. (Armstrong also notes that these channels are used to different degrees and in different ways in signed vs. spoken languages.) In this broader sense of language, we could say that the visual-kinetic-spatial aspects we have been discussing are examples of multichannels for meaning making in language generally. And study of signed languages in particular could focus on ways and degree of usage of each channel.

22. Sign uses certain linguistic features of directionality, intensity, and the like, what Bauman refers to as “three-dimensional grammar” (p. 244), the dimensions of which are all systematically inter-related in the act of signing. The greater degree of simultaneity in signed language indicates a particular structure like a mythogram. Hence, the concept of pleuridimensionality in sign does not accord with Derrida’s concept. The idea of linearity versus simultaneity becomes more complicated and loses efficacy as a linguistic principle when other features of communication are included. Certainly other sound-based features like tone of voice, pitch modulation, accent/stress, duration, and volume also fall within this idea of simultaneity and temporal linearity. The act of speaking also includes elements like facial expressions and nonverbal gestures involving various parts of the body. They unfold simultaneously with the rest of spoken communication and can be part of a single act of communication. However, with these modifications, temporal succession does not have the weight Saussure wanted it to have.


24. In Bauman’s (2008) essay, there is a claim that “significantly, sign language, unlike speech, is not fully present to itself, not fully interior. When signing, it is impossible to fully ‘see oneself sign’” (para. 25). The value of that claim is not clear from the discussion; more important, similarities are at least as significant as any difference. When people speak, they hear themselves differently from the way others hear their speech because the sound is not just travelling through the air to their ears but also through their bones. They also feel themselves articulating speech. When they sign, they feel themselves articulating signs, and they also see their signs differently from how others see their signs. When people hear their recorded voice for the first time, they are shocked at how utterly strange it sounds compared to how it sounds to them while they are speaking. When they see their videotaped signing, they are probably surprised at how their signing looks compared to how it feels and looks to them while signing. Certainly, compared to speech, signing occurs significantly less in the mouth (inside) and significantly more in movements of the arms, hands, and fingers as well as the face (and in that sense, outside). Bauman suggests this sense of exteriority shares a similarity with the kinesthetic experience of handwriting or even typing. Signing, writing, and typing are all gestural, but the gestures of writing and typing are accidental and, unlike those of sign, have no meaning; meaning is experienced inside, usually inside the head, for both speaking and signing. And, as we just noted, signing also shares a similar interiority that speech has while in live production—a similarity in terms of a greater immediacy and “naturalness” than writing or recording of any kind. When considered in terms of a theory of a gestural origin of language by scholars of sign language (as noted elsewhere, Armstrong, Stokoe, Wilcox), the idea of speech as more immediate than sign seems even less plausible.

25. Would making the human voice “irrelevant” also exclude writing and reading in English, a voice-based language? Would such irrelevancy be the best response to a history in which phonetic, alphabetic writing was imposed on deaf people? For one thing, phonetic script is of immense and palpable advantage: There is a tiny number of alphanumerical symbols to learn (20–28 or so) compared to several thousands for any rival system. It is the compact phonetic alphabet that made Gutenberg-style printing thinkable—lacking this alphabet, the Chinese never bothered to develop movable type beyond its use for drawings. Second, printing led to the stocking of the world’s libraries so that more and more people could become educated. To know phonetic writing, this valuable part of our inheritance (“our” includes deaf people), is to possess efficient access to the thousands of years of human experience stored in the libraries of the world. In a more personal way, it is acceptable to deny deaf children access to their parents’ native language if it is not ASL but English or a language other than English—particularly Spanish, the language and ethnicity of the largest minority deaf children today? For documentation of the changing demographics of deaf people as evidenced by deaf children, see http://gri.gallaudet.edu/Demographics/2006_National_Summary.pdf: White children, a gradually falling percentage, now at 47.4%; Black children holding steady at 15.1%; Latino children growing and now at 28.3%; American Indian .7%; Asian/Pacific Island 4.2%; Other 1.9%; and Multicultural 2.4%. Deaf people who live in the United States with more than English and ASL should be encouraged to live with as much linguistic
competence as they can muster—not discouraged. As the numbers indicate, Deaf people who use ASL, English, another sign language (such as Mexican), and other spoken/written language (such as Spanish) are becoming more prominent in the U.S. population. The list of languages used in the homes of U.S. deaf children can be found at the survey link above.

References


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