

Ann DeWitt
Canadian Organizing Committee for 1981
International Year of Disabled Persons

It was the country of Libya back in 1975, which first proposed to the United Nations that there should be a special year for a forgotten segment of the world's population - disabled people. Canada endorsed that resolution; and here we are in 1981, the International Year of Disabled Persons.

The theme for this special year is full participation and equality.

As part of her commitment to the United Nations, Canada has set up a non-governmental committee, composed of 35 people from across the land. This Committee's responsibility is to co-ordinate and direct the focus of the year, full participation and equality, at a national level. They are doing this via three main programmes; a communications programme, a liaison programme, and a special projects funding programme.

Access and equality - access to jobs, to recreation, to the community, to goods and services and to information. Because this conference is focusing on information science, I should like to single out one single area in order to explain lack of access. The nation's libraries. A very great number of these institutions, both public and private are singularly inaccessible to a great proportion of the estimated 15% of Canada's population who are disabled. These institutions can frequently not be entered by anybody in a wheelchair, or with any other serious mobility problem. Many are not equipped with page turning devices for those persons with no hand or arm control. As well, there is an enormous lack of taped information on cassettes available to blind persons, particularly French-speaking blind persons.

I should like to focus today on one area of that disabled population - the profoundly deaf. Nobody can say for certain, how many profoundly deaf persons there are in our country - but in the United States sign language is the third most used language, after English and Spanish.

"I suppose it is because you can't see deafness", says Frederick Schreiber, Executive Director of the National Association for the Deaf. "It's only when you talk to us and we can't understand you, or when you hear the funny sounds most of us make when we try to speak, that you realize we're different, and your first reaction is that we are either putting you on or that we must be morons". It is no coincidence that the adjective "dumb" has become synonymous with stupid.

Those funny sounds referred to by Schreiber are the attempt made by profoundly deaf people to express themselves in a second language. This is communication. The years, the struggles and the determination devoted to acquiring this skill

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is something most of us present here cannot possibly understand. Perhaps if I say to you that you must learn Russian or Chinese without any sound, but only with pictures, it may give you some idea of the enormous effort involved. How will you learn the pronunciation, the grammar or the syntax when you have neither sound nor pictures to guide you. A picture will show you an orange and if beside the orange you print the word, presumably you will learn what it is, and how it is spelled, but not necessarily how to pronounce the word orange. If I show you a Russian and Chinese word equivalent to 'HOW', what method would you use to demonstrate when and where such a word is used? How do you convey the inflection which changes the whole emphasis of a phrase by a different tone of voice? For example - You are a lazy so and so. (3 times)

Yet deaf persons express themselves as well as hearing persons to those who understand sign language. This beautiful language bears little structural resemblance to English, French, or for that matter to any other language that I know of. It contains no articles, prefixes, suffixes, or even verb endings. Have you ever been to Montreal? If I were a deaf person and signed to you Montreal - touch-finish - would you recognize that as the same question? If you think about it, you will see that those completely different structures can convey the exact same information.

From birth, we the hearing population have absorbed, I guess unconsciously, the results of one of mankind's greatest achievements - language. By the time we reach school age most of us and already learned close to 80% of the words we would use for the rest of our lives, as well as sentence structure and some rules of grammar. We had learned to communicate. We learned this almost by osmosis, from our parents, and from the hearing, speaking world around us. Thus we learned to think in words; and, when we got to school, we learned that there were letters for the sounds that made up those words, and we graduated to writing, reading and acquiring knowledge via those same words. Communications for us is a verbal language and we think with words. In contrast the deaf child enters school with an average vocabulary of ten words. He has no grammar and is, of course, unable to associate letters with those sounds he cannot hear. He then spends years learning to read and write while the rest of his education suffers. Despite all these difficulties, the vast majority of profoundly deaf people have learned written language. A much smaller number have speech. This is not because they are mute or dumb - their vocal chords and brains are as good as yours - but rather because it is such an effort to modulate tones that they cannot hear.

Because of the effort to learn a written language as well as absorb some of the wonders the language tells us about, profoundly deaf persons, leaving school at grade eleven

frequently have a reading skill level no greater than grade four. It doesn't seem to matter what method is used to teach the deaf child - and there is strong and passionate disagreement about which method is best - the reading skill level remains about the same. We don't do much to help this situation. Our misuse of words - for instance if you say, jeans are still a "hot number", what does that phrase mean to a deaf person? A number is a symbol and hot describes a degree of temperature. If you use hot number referring to a person as "Wow, he's a hot number", more confusion; if someone else in the group referring to this same person then goes on to speak of a "cool cat", you will see that the words hot and cold have become synonymous while neither have been used with their original meaning.

Another example would be the word square. The dictionary defines square as a parallelogram having four equal sides and four right angles. What does that definition have to do with being 'all squared away' (being a generally good state of affairs) or 'he's so square' (generally a rather pejorative statement).

Jargon further compounds the problem: "On line data processing; pencil line? clothes line?" This constant struggle to understand us partly explains why most of you here have never met a deaf person. The profoundly deaf form almost a sub-culture in our society. They make friends with other deaf persons, they frequently marry deaf persons, and often work in job ghettos of deaf persons - underpaid and underutilized.

Their language is AMESLAN. American Sign Language. This is the name for the system of signs used by deaf people in all of North America. Signs or gestures are probably one of the oldest, if not the oldest, means of communications between human beings. We have all used signs or gestures when trying to communicate with someone who used another language in order to better express ourselves.

It wasn't until the 17th century that anyone succeeded in teaching deaf children. This happened in Spain. Apparently, Spanish law at that time stated that people had to be literate - able to read and write - in order to inherit property, and a Spanish monk succeeded in educating the deaf children of titled families in order that they could inherit the family estates. The father of modern sign language is generally considered to be Abbe Charles de L'Epee. He founded the first public school for deaf children in France in the late 18th century.

This French method of signing was learned by an American, Thomas Gallaudet, who introduced the system to the United States, and it is now used all over the North American continent and known as AMESLAN.

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Yesterday I visited all the exhibits at the conference. All of which were good for hearing people and absolutely meaningless to profoundly deaf persons with low language comprehension. I guess I would like to see 2 parallel systems, one, as here, using all technical jargon, and the other set up using only dictionary definitions. With access to information in these two parallel forms, the deaf person can identify the true meaning of technical phrases in a way that was not even conceivable before the advent of computers.

AMESLAN is like FORTRAN. Think of your friends who don't work with computers, don't understand their language, and therefore are quite inarticulate on the subject. FORTRAN, too, is a silent communication you must learn. But never forget that when learning FORTRAN, you already had a total language to modify.

Therefore, you are light years ahead of a prelingually deaf person. I'm not sure which computer languages are compatible or even if FORTRAN and ASKI are both computer languages. But if FORTRAN and ASKI are not compatible, offering Shakespeare to someone with only AMESLAN is equivalent to inserting information coded in ASKI into a computer geared only to accept FORTRAN.