

The Invention of Nicaraguan Sign Language

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Introduction

“[Normal speech] development is achieved,” said Vygotsky, “under particular conditions of interaction with the environment, where the final or ideal form [of speech] ... is not only already there in the environment and from the very start in contact with the child, but actually interacts and exerts a real influence on the primary form, on the first steps of the child’s development.” It follows from this that a deaf child will not develop either spoken language or sign language if it is denied the possibility of interacting with others using such a language. Denied the possibility of acquiring the knowledge and wisdom of their community, their entire psychological development will be stunted. In a minority of cases, deaf children *can* master speech without the aid of sign language, through lip reading and intensive professional training, and with the aid of the written word (where that is the norm) go on to achieve a normal cognitive development. But for the vast majority, in the absence of sign language, development of language is entirely blocked and consequently, the psychological development associated with language-use is also blocked.

In the 1980s, Nicaragua was a poor country, lacking in specialist resources and with low levels of literacy even amongst the hearing population, and was a country in which the deaf had no sign language. If a brand new sign language were to be created from scratch, it is hardly likely that children with no language capacity to begin with were going to be the ones to do it.

So linguists and psychologists were shocked when it was reported* that in the 1980s, in Nicaragua, without even the awareness let alone assistance of adults, deaf children themselves had *invented* a brand new sign-language, Nicaraguan Sign Language (NSL), linguistically distinct both from spoken Spanish and other sign languages – a fully-fledged language with syntax and the capacity to reference abstract concepts and hypothetical or distant events. Since the children had no access to *any* language – spoken Spanish or sign language, and mostly not even written Spanish – it seemed impossible that they should have been able to acquire a language, let alone collectively invent one, unaided, from scratch – the only recorded case of the creation of an entirely new language, as opposed to a dialect or a creole of existing languages.

Vygotsky’s claim that ontogenetic development was unique and distinct from any other kind of development (historical, cultural or biological evolution) because the final point of development must be present throughout to act as the *model* and *source* of development, must be wrong. It appeared that language could develop autonomously among a limited group of hitherto noncommunicating children, without interaction with the final form functioning as the source of development.

The solution to the puzzle is simply that this *did not in fact happen*. Nonetheless, it is true that in 1980 there was no sign-language in Nicaragua and only a handful of the thousands of deaf Nicaraguans could speak intelligibly and lip read and the majority were illiterate. But by 1990, there was a self-conscious Deaf community with its own sign-language distinct from that of other countries, whilst the education system, far from having taught children to sign, continued to actively suppress the use of gesture and signing by their deaf pupils.

So somehow, during the 1980s, a new sign language developed in Nicaragua simultaneously with young deaf people acquiring it and beginning to use it. So the puzzle remains as intriguing as ever and the answer should tell us what are the minimal conditions for the development of a new language and the minimal conditions of interaction with an ideal for the normal cognitive and linguistic development of individuals.

The problem of language development posed by NSL is particularly sharp because we depend on speech for our socialisation which is in turn the source of the development of *all* of our personality. But Vygotsky's point cited above was not made exclusively in relation to language; he made the point about child development in general and made the same point explicitly in connection with arithmetic. A language is in a strong sense a concrete concept or 'science' of the world, and every one of our higher psychological functions also is a kind of 'science', expressing the world in its own unique way, so in a strong sense this problem of the ontogenesis of language is an archetype for the development of all forms of human activity, that is, of all our institutions and activities and of all our psychological functions. Children *cannot* learn a new concept or subject matter by talking amongst themselves, unless amongst their number at least one has already acquired a facility in the relevant subject matter and can teach the others.

Vygotsky on the Ideal Form

Before turning to the case of Nicaraguan Sign Language, I would like to briefly review what Vygotsky said in "The Problem of the Environment" (1934a) which makes the claims in relation to NSL challenging for Vygotsky's theory.

Vygotsky wrote:

"... environment is a factor in the realm of personality development and its specific human traits, and its role is to act as the *source* of this development, i.e. environment is the source of development and not its setting.

"What does this mean? First of all it indicates a very simple thing, namely that if no appropriate **ideal** form can be found in the environment, and the development of the child, for whatever reasons, has to take place outside these specific conditions (described earlier), i.e. without any interaction with the final form, then this proper form will fail to develop properly in the child."

"Try to imagine a [hearing] child who is growing up among deaf people and is surrounded by deaf and dumb parents and children his own age. Will he be able to develop speech? No ..."

The ideal form is that which sets the expectations for "a member of a certain social group, ... a certain historical unit living at a certain historical period and in certain historical circumstances." (Vygotsky 1934a) In the overwhelming majority of communities, this includes a particular spoken, grammatical language, capable of referencing hypothetical or remote events and situations, and abstract ideas. "Ideal" means the *norm* for the given community, not any individual instance. The norm finds its expression, however, only through ontogenesis – many individuals, each of them being different *realisations* of the ideal. The ideal is implicit in each and every individual, even if not even a single individual in the community perfectly matches that ideal. The ideal differs from any individual formation in that while individuals live and die, cultural history continues, consisting in the evolution of this norm, this ideal, and it is this sense that the norm of a given society is said to be "ideal." The ideal is an expression and product of *cultural history*, which in turn provides the model for each individual at the same time as generating the social interactions which promote the development of each individual. Normal development does not mean "matching" the norm, for implicit within a norm is also an understanding of which differences constitute the normal range of diversity, and which differences represent some kind of pathology or deviance.

Vygotsky goes on:

"Secondly, try to imagine that this ideal form is not to be found in the child's environment, ... the child develops among other children, i.e. that his environment is made up of children of his own age who are all at the lower, rudimentary form stage. In such a situation, will the proper activity and traits develop in this child? Research shows that it will, but in an extremely peculiar way. They will always develop very

slowly and in an unusual manner, and will never attain the level which they reach when the suitable ideal form is present in the environment.”

So children working amongst themselves might find a solution to some arithmetical problem, a solution which differs from that which the teacher expected of them but neglected to teach them. The children have solved the given problem, but what they have missed out on, and which was the teacher’s responsibility to provide for them, is that method of solution which contains the germ of further development leading to the acquisition of higher mathematics or other more advanced forms, solutions to problems only implicit in the problem before them, something which the children will *never* acquire by themselves, without the aid of text books and instruction. A true concept, the ideal, does not inhere in the *problem* as such, but in the culturally evolved *solution* to a socially evolved problem.

“Ideal” does *not* mean “perfect.” “Ideal” has these three interconnected meanings: it is what is *expected of* the child in the given community, that is, the norm; it is the ideological formation which exerts pressure on the child to *draw them* towards itself, and which alone gives meaning to the child’s actions; and it is a cultural and historical formation which evolves over many generations in and through the birth, life and death of every individual in the community.

According to Vygotsky, not only the presence, but adequate *interaction* with the ideal, is a precondition for the attainment of the norm, or ideal, by a child of the given community.

Deaf Children in Nicaragua

I rely for the history of NSL on Laura Polich (2005), an audiologist who conducted exhaustive historical research into the deaf community in Nicaragua, interviewing every deaf person she could find in the country in a 10-year-long research project, as well as all those who had been involved in deaf education over the decades.

Up until after the Second World War, in 1946, deaf children in Nicaragua were considered a punishment visited upon a family for past wrongs, a point of shame, to be kept out of sight and isolated from the rest of the world. Deafness was taken as a variety of mental retardation (and this remained largely the case into the 1990s); mental retardation would be hardly surprising given the conditions under which they were kept – isolated from any interaction with other human beings. Deaf children were either cared for with kindness or chained up like animals, but in no case did they have a chance to develop beyond childhood. Even today, despite the developments of the past 25 years, an unknown number of deaf people in Nicaragua are kept by their families in this condition, and though there are 10 qualified NSL-Spanish translators in Nicaragua, there is hardly a single deaf child who can communicate by Sign Language with their hearing parents.

Under these conditions it is obvious that there was no possibility for the development of a sign language in Nicaragua. But in 1946 the government made a decision that deaf children had a right to education, albeit in special schools together with mentally retarded children, and with no real prospect of becoming useful members of the community. So something went on prior to 1946 which led to the government to begin treating deaf children as human beings with rights like other human beings. But we have no knowledge of exactly what prompted this change in the expectations which the country had for its deaf citizens, but whatever it was, it was one of the necessary precursors to the formation of NSL.

From 1946 until the Revolution in 1979, a minority of deaf children in the capital, Managua, were given an elementary education up to the age of fifteen. This meant that 10 or 20 or on occasion up to 30 deaf children would be brought together at school. However, the children would be taken to and from school in a school bus, ensuring that outside school they had no interaction with each other or ever had the need to make their own way through the city by public transport interacting with the general public. The Nicaraguan education system right up until 1992 remained dedicated solely to the integration of deaf children into the general

community by means of speech and lip reading – the ‘oral method’. However, although sign language was unknown, teachers did use gesture, writing, mime, pointing or whatever means worked in the process of trying to teach deaf children to speak and lip read.

Very, very few of these deaf children ever learnt to speak, and those few who did, and are alive today, generally prefer to sign. Although the children did have a chance to meet each other in the playground during breaks and used their ‘home signs’ to talk to each other, a process which led to a pooling of home signs and a consequent expansion of the vocabulary of home signs, it did *not* lead to a development of a sign language.

‘Home sign’ is a limited form of communication which uses the stock of natural gestures of the general community, together with pointing at objects, parts of the body, etc., and the iconic representation of actions (See Goldin-Meadow 1977). Home sign can only reference real entities and feelings and is extremely limited in the range of ideas it can represent outside of the home environment. A genuine language on the other hand, can represent an open-ended and infinite variety of ideas. Illiteracy and limitation to home signing bars the way to the formation of true concepts and entry into adult life in the wider community, leaving the deaf person in a condition of dependency akin to childhood, able to execute commands and express feelings, but unable to discuss ideas and remote or hypothetical events.

So although deaf children were able to meet each other in groups of 20 or 30 over a period of decades, this was not in itself enough for a sign language to emerge from a collection of home signs.

The Effect of the 1979 Revolution

The Sandinista Revolution of 1979 had an impact on the formation of the Deaf community in Nicaragua and its language, NSL, but somewhat despite itself as it happens. The Sandinista government appointed a Russian expert, Natalia Popova, in charge of education of the deaf, and whereas the teaching of spoken Spanish to deaf children had hitherto proceeded somewhat eclectically under the Somoza dictatorship, under Popova’s regime the ‘oral method’ was enforced as an absolute dogma; teachers were barred from using gestures or mime or anything other than the spoken word to get their meaning across, even outside the classroom, and pupils likewise were forbidden to use gestures insofar as it was in the power of the teachers to prevent it. Manual communication was *denigrated*, not only blocking the way to the education of deaf children in school, but also undermining the children’s *own* efforts to communicate with their hands. This dogmatic enforcement of the oral method and active suppression of manual communication continued up until 1992 despite its manifest failure to give any but a tiny minority of deaf children the gift of intelligible speech.

But changes instituted on the eve of the Revolution to set up a vocational training school for deaf and mentally retarded children restarted once the chaos of the Revolution passed and the new political regime also provided an opening which I will come to shortly.

Teachers at the Centro Ocupacional para los Discapacitados (COD), however, being charged exclusively with making the children employable, were freed of the ban on gesture and could again use whatever means of communicating with their students which worked, and as a consequence, the youngsters did learn. But more important than the meagre job skills they acquired in the workshops, was that they were treated as adults. Instead of attending for the limited hours of elementary school, they were expected to arrive on time at 8am, work till 5pm, five days a week, and rather than being picked up and dropped home by the school bus, they were expected to make their own way to and from the school on the public bus system, paying their fares and navigating the city. On completion, the COD actively sought job placements for them.

In other words, they *were treated as adults* and were expected to behave accordingly and many of them did in fact go on to find jobs, albeit unskilled work at exploitatively low wages. Also, their education together was continued into their mid-20s, and having been drawn out of

the family home into the public transport system, they had freedom of movement and were now no longer confined indoors. So now we had a situation where young adults, rather than children, were gathering together in their own spaces, and freely communicating as aspiring citizens of the nation. As a result of this, the young people began to socialise and build friendship networks outside of working hours and visit each others' homes. This led to young deaf people in Nicaragua developing *a sense of shared community* of their own, in their common situation in life. They sought each other out, and insofar as they could, talked to each other about their shared situation. Before 1986 there was only one instance of a deaf couple marrying, but now they were increasingly finding jobs, and making friends in the Deaf community, and would go on to marry, set up households and raise children. In other words, despite still being without a true language, by the fact that they were being *treated as adults*, more and more they *became* adults and entered into the range of tasks and problems of the wider community, albeit invariably in extreme poverty.

Those who are familiar with Vygotsky's (1934) writing on concept formation will recognise that this is one of the preconditions to the formation of true concepts. The extension of deaf education into young adulthood and the expectation that the deaf adolescents would behave as adults and enter to some degree into the life of the community was the next essential step towards the formation of NSL. Nothing they had experienced during their elementary oral education had contributed significantly however.

Nicaragua was a country of 6 million people. By 1984, enrolment of deaf children at school had reached 200 and remained at that level until 1997. Laura Polich shows by an analysis of the numbers of deaf children gathered together at various stages in the growth of deaf education that the hypothesis that a 'critical mass' of deaf children in communication with one another can explain the emergence of Nicaraguan Sign Language does not stand up. No number of children interacting in the playground or on the school bus would ever develop a new sign language. When NSL did emerge, only a *small number* of deaf people were involved, whereas when much larger numbers were gathered together at school, sign language did not emerge.

However, the opening of the world of work to a cohort of deaf *young adults* under conditions where they were treated as adults and gained sufficient independence to get about and seek out their own friends among other young deaf people did create the conditions for the emergence of sign language.

There are some individuals whose role in this story is such that they deserve to be known by name. In 1983, Gloria Minero was appointed to supervise the vocational workshops at COD. Her daughter, Morena, had been born deaf and Gloria had been training her to lip read and speak since she was a baby, and Morena attended a mainstream school. Through her job it was Gloria who first made contact with the Royal Swedish Association of the Deaf (SDR) which immediately took an interest in the position of deaf people in Nicaragua. SDR advocated a *cultural* approach to deafness, that is, that deaf people should cherish their sign language and the Deaf culture which may be built upon it (See Padden 2005). A touching incident between mother and daughter is not only a key turning point in the history of the deaf community in Nicaragua, but encapsulates the necessity for deaf people to build their own culture based on sign language. Gloria heard Morena talking in her room, and went in to find Morena talking to herself in the mirror; asked what she was doing, Morena replied that since no-one else would talk to her, she would speak to herself. It appeared that although Morena's speech was intelligible, the other children ridiculed her deaf accent and would not talk to her. Gloria determined that since Morena could not make friends among the hearing community, then she would see that Morena could make friends among young deaf people. In 1983, Gloria invited a number of her vocational students from COD to meet at her home to socialise. Morena was considerably younger than the students from COD, all products of the 1962 rubella epidemic, but was included. It was from this group of young deaf adults who met regularly at Gloria Minero's house that Nicaraguan Sign Language emerged. It took a number

of years to form, but the linguist Judy Kegl first identified the existence of NSL in 1986. Laura Polich has determined with certainty that there was no sign language in use prior to the beginning of these meetings, and the evidence points to it being the members of this small group of friends who created NSL, achieving the level of a true language within 3 years.

Among the young people meeting at the Gloria Minero's house, there is another individual whose importance in this story warrants his being named; that is Javier López Gómez.

Javier López's interest in sign language began when he was given a sign language dictionary in 1978 or 1979, possibly during an athletics visit to Costa Rica by students at COD. He also met the American deaf educator Thomas Gibson in 1979. From this time onwards Javier practised signing and is reported to have taught other students at COD to sign in 1981, although it was abbreviated and apparently hard to understand. He actively sought out all the information he could find about signing. He also taught the other young people meeting at Gloria's to sign, though it has not been possible to reconstruct *how* he went about that.

Previous to what they learnt from Javier, they had used only home signs and finger spelling to communicate with each other. At the time of the meetings at Gloria's, Javier was regarded as having good oral skills.

APRIAS (Association to Help and Integrate the Deaf)

In 1984 or 1985, Gloria Minero suggested that if the young deaf adults wanted to do anything to improve their future, they would need to organise themselves formally into a self-help group to act on behalf of deaf people. The main benefit of the Sandinista Revolution is that it legitimated the formation of an organisation to represent the interests of such a disadvantaged section of the population. The group who had been meeting at Gloria's home took the initiative, worked their way through the considerable mountain of paperwork required to register an association in Nicaragua and made up the core of founding members. The name was suggested by Gloria – Association to Help and Integrate the Deaf – but was decided upon by a vote on April 22, 1986, the date which is recognised by what now calls itself the National Nicaraguan Association of the Deaf (ANSNIC) as its founding date. In 1989, Gloria secured a grant of \$50,000 from the SDR to purchase a permanent building to house ANSNIC in Managua, located at the junction of the main bus routes to ensure that deaf people could get to it.

APRIAS defined itself as a national association, that is, for *all* deaf people in Nicaragua, a qualitative leap in self-consciousness from the group of friends who had been meeting in Gloria's home. Polich points out that the purchase of a permanent building, now a landmark in Managua, meant that any deaf person who wanted to get in touch could always find their way to APRIAS without needing an introduction through the friendship network, making APRIAS a genuine national body, not just in name only. Gloria's contact with the Swedish Society, already at that time, advocates of a cultural conception of the Deaf, might suggest that this moment also represented an embrace of the cultural concept of deafness and an embrace of sign language. But this is not quite the case. The name implied the object of *integrating* the deaf into the wider society, that is, learning to speak and lip read. It's slogan was "breaking down the wall of silence" and its constitution made it clear that its aim was that deaf people should gain a voice, not just figuratively but literally. As a result, all the members elected to the founding National Committee were young Deaf people who were regarded as 'successful' in oral communication. Javier López drew the logo which illustrates a speaking voice and a hearing ear breaking down the "wall of silence." So even Javier, at this point the Nicaraguan most proficient in sign language, was an advocate of integration.

However, the critical point had been reached with the formation of APRIAS – what was formerly just a group of people sharing a common problem in Nicaraguan society, had transformed themselves into an *object-oriented project* with the aim of achieving the emancipation of the social layer they represented. At first they did not (as the Swedes had)

clearly conceptualise what that emancipation entailed, but they had formed a concept of a voice for the Deaf, and organised themselves to realise that object.

An election of officers for APRIAS held in October 1990, was the occasion for a small group to form a slate and overturn the former Committee. The new Committee, with Javier López as their President, set a new course. No longer was their ambition the *integration* of deaf people into society by means of each individual mastering speech, but the Deaf would form *their own* community in which the language of choice would be Nicaraguan Sign Language. There were enough Deaf able to speak and enough hearing people could be trained in NSL to communicate between the Deaf community and the wider community to ensure that integration of a Deaf individual into a Deaf community would mediate their socialisation and acceptance into the society as a whole.

In 1996, APRIAS changed its name to the National Nicaraguan Association for the Deaf and more recently changed that to the National Nicaraguan Association *of* the Deaf.

By the late 1980s, the great majority of deaf people involved with ANSNIC were married and raising a family. They were still extremely poor, many working at exploitative wages in the Free Trade Zone, mostly in unskilled jobs, but nonetheless, they were part of the community, and through their organisation, they are now able to influence the government, intervene in the country's education policies and overturn the oral method and work to bring their younger Deaf brothers and sisters out into the world. Alas, older deaf people, with very few exceptions, have not been touched by this project, and in the main remain on the margins of society and lack a voice of any kind.

NSL is still undergoing development, and it still has not reached the majority of deaf people in what remains one of the most underdeveloped countries in the Americas. But there is every reason to believe that ANSNIC will achieve its goal of emancipating the Deaf in Nicaragua.

The Deaf community, and its language, NSL, was created by a very small group of people, between 1984 and 1986, who continued to develop it and propagate it between 1984 and 1992. And this was not a spontaneous process. Javier López was recognised as the arbiter of disputes over signing standards and chaired Sign Standardisation Workshops during the '80s which voted on its decisions. Javier visited Sweden for 10 months, as a guest of Royal Swedish Deaf Society, returning in the summer of 1992, giving increased impetus to the development of NSL. His two hearing sisters have also been employed by ANSNIC as interpreter and secretary/receptionist, intensifying Javier's influence on the development of ANSNIC. ANSNIC members are noted for their vigilance in defending the standardisation of their sign language while many are also very skilled in interpreting and translating other varieties of sign language.

Was ANSNIC Acting Alone?

In the light of the claim that Nicaraguan children created NSL by themselves, it is worth reviewing the range of contacts which contributed to the formation of NSL during this period. Linguists say that NSL exhibits the influence of Costa Rican, Spanish, Swedish and American Sign Language, and this is not surprising.

By 1975, neighbouring Costa Rica had their own sign language, LESCO. Young deaf people had founded their own self-help and advocacy group, ANASCOR, on 8 June 1974 and had used sign language from the beginning. A number of them had been educated in Spain where they learnt Spanish Sign Language. Also, Deaf adolescents from Costa Rica had attended the Deaf university in the US, Gallaudet College, where they would have learnt ASL. A teaching approach known as "Total Communication" was established in 1976, probably thanks to a Costa Rican Deaf educator who had studied in New York and returned to Costa Rica in 1974. In this approach, teachers used sign language simultaneously with speech to communicate with students. Word about this method reached Managua and special education teachers from

Managua attended a workshop on Total Communication in the late 1970s shortly before the Revolution, and were impressed with what they saw.

Javier López was among Deaf students who participated in a sporting visit to Costa Rica by COD students in May 1978, where they contested against Deaf Costa Rican students and would have witnessed Costa Rican Sign Language in action.

A Deaf youngster, Adrián Pérez, left Nicaragua in 1974 to receive an oral education in Spain, and was an accomplished speaker and lip reader by the time he returned from Spain in 1982 and was also able to use Spanish Sign Language. He was one of the founding members of APRIAS, and a major contributor in the formulation of NSL. He was not as enthusiastic an activist for APRIAS as Javier however.

Thomas Gibson visited Nicaragua in April-May 1979 as a Peace Corps volunteer, assigned to teach sign language to special education teachers for 2 years, but his visit was cut short before it had hardly begun by the Revolution, and he was sent to Costa Rica instead. All the people he met were impressed with his sign language and during 3 weeks he spent at the special school, he gave an ASL sign language dictionary Douglas Vega, a friend of Javier López and later another founding member of APRIAS, and the two friends closely studied the dictionary, and were observed conversing using sign language. Vega later emigrated.

Between 1988 and 1993 a number of volunteer Deaf educators visited Nicaragua. An American couple worked as volunteers from 1988 to 1992 running a kindergarten using Total Communication approach in the provincial town of León. A Swedish volunteer made multiple visits to Nicaragua over a 10 year period around the late-80s and early '90s encouraging the use of sign language in the classroom and helped set up a regional branch of ANSNIC. In 1990, officials from the Swedish Association for the Deaf visited Managua and may have been a factor prompting the change of leadership in ANSNIC. A Deaf educator from Finland worked at the Head Office of the Education Department 1992-93, and advocated for the use of sign language and participated in activities with ANSNIC.

In addition to the early sporting trips to other Central American by students at COD, officers of ANSNIC went on fact-finding and fraternal journeys to other Central American countries where they met with Deaf organisations in their region.

So it is not the case that Javier and his friends invented and proliferated Nicaraguan Sign Language on their own and unaided by adults and other young people who had acquired a fluency and understanding of sign language from Costa Rica, the United States, Finland, Sweden and Spain. NSL was thus a link in the cultural history of the Deaf across the world, not a unique and isolated creation. Nonetheless, everything that has been said about the preconditions for the formation of a *self-conscious, autonomous Deaf community* within the larger community remains the case. No number of Peace Corps volunteers and individual deaf children could have accomplished what APRIAS achieved.

Minimal Conditions for Acquisition of the Ideal

The conditions under which deaf children can learn a spoken or manual language, should they have the opportunity to interact with it, are a matter for professionals in that discipline. The experience of Nicaragua has shown that young deaf people are drawn as if by a magnet to sign language in the event that they come across it. It can be taught with no more skill than every mother and father exercises in teaching their own children to talk. If, however, they are not *surrounded* by sign language, but on the contrary are growing up in a hearing community, then even the sight of other children communicating with signs seems to have been enough to stimulate the interest of a minimally socialised child. Just as the hearing children of Deaf parents have no difficulty in acquiring speech from friends and neighbours, given exposure of at least 5 to 10 hours per week, the Deaf children of hearing parents can acquire the beginnings of Sign Language if given the opportunity to learn from their Deaf peers.

However, the experience of ANSNIC has been that deaf people who grow to maturity without the gift of communicating with others, having been raised as ‘eternal children’ (Polich’s phrase) or kept in childlike dependence on their families, generally do *not* develop an interest in Sign Language when exposed to it in later life. And without an interest in learning a language it is impossible to do so.

Minimal Conditions for the Formation of a New Language

We now know that NSL did not develop out of nothing, but in fact drew on Spanish, Swedish, American and Finnish Sign Language which was introduced to the creators of NSL by professional Deaf educators. Several of the main creators of NSL were also proficient in spoken Spanish, and the group who met at Gloria’s in 1984 created the beginnings of a Sign Language in a couple of years, refining it over the several years following, so that it subsequently continued to develop into one of the world’s fully-fledged languages.

This was an impressive achievement but now that the facts are known, it is not something which will cause us to rewrite the textbooks. The real achievement lay in taking that precious creation from Gloria’s living room and turning it into a national language, in *institutionalising* NSL. What we have learnt from the Nicaraguan experience is that this is not a spontaneous process, a kind of ‘contagion’ or ‘emergent process’. The formation of the Deaf community in Nicaragua, and which is the same thing, the creation of their language, Nicaraguan Sign Language, an “ideal” prized by the Deaf community, acting as both the model and source for the development of Deaf children in Nicaragua, was the achievement of a *self-conscious project* on the part of the Deaf community, a project which constituted the Deaf community itself. It was carried through by *young Deaf adults*, not by children.

This one case is not sufficient basis on its own to formulate an idea of the minimum conditions for the formation of a new language. Deaf children in Nicaragua faced special difficulties in the prejudice that led to their isolation from one another and the particularly dogmatic enforcement of the ‘oral method’, which was fashionable for much of the post-World War Two period across the world. But what has been the experience elsewhere?

In What Sense may the Case of NSL be Generalised?

For a review of the case of NSL in relation to the history of sign languages generally, I will rely mainly on the paper by Meir, Sandler, Padden and Aronoff (2010).

According to Meir et al, Sign Languages are of two kinds, distinguished by their genesis: village sign languages and Deaf community sign languages.

Village Sign Languages

Most existing village sign languages (VSL) are quite ancient, having developed a long time ago in an isolated community in which genetics had raised the incidence of babies born deaf to a relatively high level, say 3%, and provided stable conditions for linguistic development free of the impact of migration and outside influences. In these cases, the number of hearing users of the sign language is commonly greater than the number of deaf members of the community – in one case 35 adults used a sign language to communicate with one Deaf child! This situation is the opposite in every way from the situation of Nicaraguan deaf children. Although the VSL is normally a distinct creation, not bearing the marks of the influence of Sign Languages from elsewhere, members of the hearing community, speaking a dialect of one of the world’s languages, are active participants in the formation and maintenance of the language, which is nonetheless, frequently quite distinct in its grammar and ontology from the spoken language, not a code for it. It is fair to say that to the extent that the members of the general hearing community treat their Deaf neighbours as adults and equals and make an effort to communicate with them, then a fully-fledged, albeit parochial sign language will result.

However, Padden et al mention that PSL – the sign language of Providence Island – did not develop into a “fully structured” language because of the “paternalistic attitudes” of the community towards deaf people. In the isolated conditions under which VSLs are created, Deaf people are generally speaking subjected to the attitudes of the majority community, and the development of their language will reflect the place of the Deaf in the wider community.

Deaf Community Sign Languages

Deaf Community Sign Languages (DCSLs) on the other hand have grown up in modern societies, where deaf people from differing backgrounds have been brought together, or brought themselves together, most often for specialist education, and form themselves into a Deaf community. They may have been taught sign language by the institution which brought them together, or having been gathered together, they may have taken the opportunity to form themselves into a project and formed an association even without any assistance from the majority community. In either case, to the extent that the Deaf community is successful in constructing and defending its own culture, their language will, in time, be fully structured and be subject to the influences of all the world’s languages with which it interacts, like any other language, and any other culture. Invariably, a mixture of home signs and VSLs provide the initial material by means of which a Deaf community first forms and creates a DCSL in the form of some kind of creole. But once having formed as a self-conscious project in a modern society, the way is open for the DCSL to become a fully-fledged, structured language.

The following examples of DCSLs exhibit the range of histories of these languages.

French Sign Language (LSF). Charles Michel de l’Épée accidentally stumbled upon an existing sign language (Old French Sign Language) used by a Deaf Community in Paris of about 200 deaf adults. de l’Épée learnt the language and established a free school for the Deaf in about 1771. de l’Épée codified and systematised LSF but his creation was too complex and impracticable. Nevertheless, by a large number of Deaf people having been brought together and it having been made known to the general community that Deaf people could be educated, the Deaf community in France was able to take charge of LSF and it entered into a natural process of standardisation and development. LSF was instrumental in the formation of the Sign Languages in Dutch, German, Flemish, Irish, American and Russian societies. LSF has 50–100,000 native signers.

American Sign Language (ASL) originated in the American School for the Deaf established in 1817 in Hartford Connecticut, by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, who travelled to Europe to learn about education for the deaf. The British refused to share their methods, and he chose LSF as the sign language of choice, and appointed Laurent Clerc as director for his knowledge of LSF. Clerc taught in LSF. 58% of signs in ASL are cognate with Old LSF, but ASL evidently draws from both the LSF taught by Clerc and incorporated the various VSLs and home sign languages which deaf people first brought with them and more expressions added in the 200 years since. Even as Clerc taught in LSF, he was obliged to acquire signs from his pupils and adapt to the Sign Language his pupils were constructing.

ASL was developed and propagated by Deaf associations such as the National Association of the Deaf, while the education system did not regard ASL as a genuine language and used the ‘oral method’ for deaf education, ASL being maintained only by the Deaf through their own organisations. The linguist William Stokoe challenged the claim that ASL was not a true language, and side-by-side with the Civil Rights Movement and the other social movements of the ’60s, the Deaf Community fought, as described by Carol Padden (2005), to promote their right to be educated in their own language and for various social rights, such as interpreter services, facilitating the maintenance of Deaf Culture.

ASL has between 250,000 and 500,000 users, hearing and Deaf, across Anglophone North America. British Sign Language and ASL are not mutually comprehensible.

British Sign Language (BSL) with its dialects such as AUSLAN and NZSL. Sign language was in use by the Deaf in the UK at least as far back as 1570. Thomas Braidwood set up an Academy for the Deaf and Dumb in 1760 for the Deaf sons of the middle and upper classes. Braidwood's codification of sign language was the first effort to standardise what was to become BSL, but until the 1940s, BSL was maintained and passed on solely thanks to the Deaf, whilst signing was actively discouraged in schools, and the 'oral method' enforced, backed up by punishment of offenders. Only from the 1970s has BSL begun to be used in some schools, thanks to organised agitation by Deaf organisations. There are about 150,000 users of BSL in the UK.

Israeli Sign Language (ISL). ISL dates from Germany in 1873 when Marcus Reich, a German Jew, opened a special school for deaf Jewish children. In 1932, several of his teachers set up a school in Jerusalem. The sign language used here was based on German Sign Language, but developed into a creole by absorbing the sign system brought in by Jewish immigrants from all over the world. ISL became well established during the 1940s and is used by the Deaf from all the religious communities in Israel today.

There are many other DCSLs which are also of long standing. Meir et al separate out sign languages of the DCSL type which are still developing, of which *Nicaraguan Sign Language* (NSL) and *Costa Rican Sign Language* (LESCO), we have already dealt with above.

The Development of Language Communities

Historically, in modern societies, the sign languages of the Deaf have been suppressed, though in all cases, the initiative of individuals from the hearing community has aided in the formation and ultimately acceptance of Sign Language. The story is somewhat parallel to the story of indigenous and ethnic minority languages, which were routinely suppressed until the changes in social attitudes which were wrought by social movements in the 1960s and '70s, among which the Deaf Communities themselves were active players.

Languages obviously do evolve, merge, absorb and borrow from one another and so on in *spontaneous* processes reflecting the movement of peoples and changes in social relations and activities in the communities affected. But other things being equal, the Deaf are only ever going to have a true language, appropriate to a community which is fully participating in the affairs of the world, insofar as they can organise and fight for it, together, as independent citizens. Conversely, a Deaf community exists only insofar as it has a Sign Language of its own.

A fully structured Sign Language – capable of discussing the reasons for the election of the latest President, the danger posed by Ebola, whether computers are an aid to learning and whether Andy Warhol's work is art – is always therefore the mark of a *self-conscious project* expressing the shared needs and aspirations of the Deaf, because for the overwhelming majority of the Deaf, it is only by means of such a Sign Language that they can *fully participate* as equals in the relevant activities.

There is one extremely well-argued body of work, supported by extensive observation, indicating that it is in fact possible for deaf children to develop their own language in isolation from Sign Language, as was claimed to have happened in Nicaragua, without the aid of hearing adults or practitioners of an established Sign Language, that is the work of Susan Goldin-Meadow and her colleagues.

Goldin-Meadow on the Structure of Personal Sign

Susan Goldin-Meadow has conducted a comprehensive study of the gestures of a number of deaf children raised in isolation from sign language by hearing parents, in order to establish that:

“Despite their lack of linguistic input, the children use gesture to communicate. ... these gestures assume the form of a rudimentary linguistic system, a system that displays structure at both word and sentence levels.” (2005, p. 50)

and that:

“A conventional language model is *not* necessary for children to use their communications for basic and not-so-basic functions of language.” (2005, 150)

The chief subjects of the study were 10 children aged from 16 months to 4 years and 10 months. The children were all born deaf to hearing, middle-class American parents who were raising them in isolation from sign language, with the aim of them learning lip reading and speech, but despite on-going efforts by the parents, these were children who had not made any progress in mastery of the spoken word. Their parents continued to converse with them, accompanying their speech with conventional gestures and interpreting the children’s gestures in the same spirit.

So in contrast to Nicaraguan children of the pre-1946 period, these deaf children were not treated as objects of shame and isolated from human contact, and in contrast to most Nicaraguan deaf children pre-1992, they were not treated as mentally retarded with no prospect of leading a useful life, but were, on the contrary, addressed by their parents as intelligent, free agents. This would be expected to open the opportunity for the children to become full participants in the life of their own family and to acquire its customs and values.

However, being among that majority of children raised under such conditions who fail to acquire speech, their life prospects would remain extremely limited as they would lack a language by means of which they could communicate with strangers, read, and access the ideas, customs and concerns of the wider world, and could expect to remain dependent on their families with limited opportunities for work and social life.

The unique and startling contribution of Goldin-Meadow is that by bringing a team of skilled linguists armed with video recorders into the homes of these children, she was able to discover within the children’s developing gesture systems a linguistic structure. Only one of the 10 subjects (David) exhibited all of the structures described, but the others exhibited significant steps towards such a structure. According to Goldin-Meadow’s somewhat generous analysis, this structure included segmentation of gestures into stable units (words) and the concatenation of these units into sentences, according to stable structural rules; a consistent morphology governing the composition of signs into words; the structural differentiation of noun-like, verb-like and adjective-like gestures; some basic syntactical rules governing word order, omission of subject and branching. Although no representation of tense was found in the children’s gesturing (they could however indicate the immediate future and immediate past), utilising the resources of their immediate environment, they were able to use their gesture system to make requests, comments and questions about the here-and-now, communicate about the non-present, future and hypothetical, and make generic statements, talk to themselves and talk about their own and others’ gestures. Although the children did appropriate their parents’ emblematic gestures, there is no evidence that the structure of spoken English was the source of any of their structure, and even the appropriated gestures are transformed by their inclusion in the child’s system. A truly remarkable achievement.

The pity of it is that *their parents were quite unaware* of this structure which was revealed by the linguistic investigation, simply interpreting their children’s iconic gestures and pointing in the context of the household activity as more or less conventional, if somewhat idiosyncratic gestures. So, this linguistic structure added nothing to the communicative power of the children’s gestures, of which the child alone was an aficionado. It took the video camera and the expertise of linguists to bring this linguistic structure to light.

The need to communicate with their families whilst lacking a vocabulary of conventional signs beyond the limited stock of gestures provided by the family, meant that the children made full use of the resources of their environment. “Chair” could be indicated by pointing to a particular chair, but pointing to the chair could also be used as a sign for the person who usually sits in that chair, but is not present, or even chairs in general – the difference in meaning emerging from context. Thus the geography of their own home enters into the

substance of their signing, and the child's vocabulary is expanded, but in a way which is tied to the home environment and is useless for communicating in the outside world. Also, a small minority of Deaf children (Javier López and Morena Minero for example), do master speech under the conditions Goldin-Meadow's subjects were being raised, and many hearing children do not actually speak until after the age of 16 months. So while Goldin-Meadow has established that nothing of the grammar of English entered into the grammar of the children's gestures, one must suppose a considerable cultural impact from this kind of parenting.

The extent to which the adult culture is penetrating the child's language is brought out in a comparative study with a group of deaf Chinese children. The relatively frequent use of evaluative gestures by Chinese parents in talking to their children shows up in a corresponding use of the same evaluative gestures in the children's signing. And quite apart from what is conveyed by what is taken to be explicit gesturing by family members, the totality of the movements and use of artefacts and physical interactions with the child must surely communicate a great deal. But not grammar. The grammar created by the child, which remains *unknown to all those around him or her* barring the trained linguists, is a spontaneous creation, free of the influence of the local culture. Chinese or American children will certainly grow up to be culturally Chinese or American, though they will not speak the Chinese or American languages. That children spontaneously create language-like structures, structures which will provide the foundation for any fully-fledged language which the child may go on to learn, is obviously of great interest, and forces us to ask where this comes from? It may help us to better understand how children learn language, but it does not help the child communicate even with their own family, let alone strangers and work associates. A certain minimum of mutual comprehensibility and expression is needed before interaction in the general community can bring about language development appropriate to a sovereign member of the broader community.

Vygotsky's claim was that successful ontogenesis presupposes the presence of and participation in the ideal or final form, that is, in order to grow up to be a competent English-speaking adult one must be exposed to English speaking (for at least 5-10 hours per week according to Goldin-Meadow). Goldin-Meadow seems to have taken the claim to be rather that to develop *language competence* in general one must be exposed to *a language* while growing up. This interpretation seems to be negated by Goldin-Meadow's work; children not exposed to any language develop a system of gestures which has all the properties of language except that no-one except the child themselves understands it, beyond the crude interpretation of pointing and iconic gestures commonly referred to as home sign. No-one previously would have guessed that the home sign of deaf children isolated from both a conventional sign language and a spoken language would have a grammatical structure, and Vygotsky would doubtless have been just as surprised as we all are. However, what is at question is a normative standard of behaviour, including a *particular* language required for taking up a recognised social position, not language *in general*.

The fact that the deaf children evidently comment on their own and others' use of their signs (though not their structure, so far as we know) means that they are consciously aware of their signs, though probably not their grammar. The fact that they can use their signs to talk to themselves and command their own behaviour means that their signing can contribute to the early development of their intellect.

However, not "having a community of speakers or signers or, at least, a willing communication partner" (2005, p. 222) bars the child's way to the achievement of mature adulthood. And this is the question to which we addressed ourselves. If the child's personal signing system has the capacity to reference distant and hypothetical events, tell stories and evaluate, and allows the child to talk to themselves and talk-about-talk, what elements of language are missing (other than the existence of a community of users) which is required for a person to achieve sovereign independence as an adult citizen of their community?

I would contend that it is not any linguistic *form* as such which is missing, but the *content*. The form must be adequate to the content, and the content interacts with and modifies the form, but the content can only be acquired with the aid of appropriately well-developed language skills through participation in the world community, mediated through a substantial, self-sufficient community of like-speakers, such as a Deaf community. Mastery of the true concepts which have marked every human culture since humans became humans is achieved only by means of participation in social life; though not the end itself, language is a means to that participation. A Deaf community opens this door for the Deaf.

Aside from this, Goldin-Meadow's work obliges us to reflect on where this propensity for creation or acquisition of language comes from, if it can be manifested even in the absence of a linguistic environment. The first steps – single-sign comments, questions and commands – comes easily enough thanks to pointing and the appropriation of emblematic gestures, expressing good and bad, yes, no and maybe, stop, come and so on. Goldin-Meadow speculates that lacking linguistic input from others, the child builds on *their own* gestures as input. It seems to me that an Hegelian rather than a Kantian schema for this process makes perfect sense. Having one's needs met by other people poses communicative problems which must find their solution within the figures *already developed* in the system. The child works through the *immanent logic* of language-creation implicit in each stage of their constructive work. The same process works out differently if linguistic input from communicative others outweighs their own productions, but without such input, it is the immanent logic of the stock of gestures available to any deaf child which is exhibited in language learning. All that is pre-supposed are some basic human propensities – such as looking to others to meet one's needs, and the propensity to perceive objects as symbols – but not a Kantian universal grammar.

What participation in the wider community gives a person however is the logic of problems which have arisen on a *much* wider horizon, the solutions to which are carried by language. But these problems simply do not arise within the home.

The information which Goldin-Meadow has received about Nicaragua has led her to believe that the same process which she observed in young deaf children, at home in a hearing family, can be extended if children are brought together to share their home sign, up to the point of creating a fully-fledged language, without any input from the spoken language or a developed Sign Language. However, historical rather than linguistic investigation of the case of Nicaragua has shown that this did not happen, and indeed could not happen.

Conclusion

Deaf children participating in home life can develop home sign, and given sympathetic parents can manage quite well within the confines of home life. Deaf children participating in village life, to whatever extent the expectations placed upon them by villagers permit, can learn a Village Sign Language shared with other villagers, hearing and deaf. To be members of a modern community requires a shared Sign Language. Home signs cannot form the basis of such a community; only an institution and/or a social movement can create the necessary basis for a shared true Sign Language and the capacity to participate in the wider society. Broadly speaking, the scope of a "true" language, is the same as what Vygotsky called "true concepts."

In order to grasp and express a true concept, a certain minimal level of language development is a pre-requisite, a level which young adolescents have normally already thoroughly acquired whether speaking or using an established Sign Language. Content and form interact.

Discourse concerning true concepts – through participation in work and social life generally, and through reading and writing – stimulates the development of language, expanding the vocabulary and complicating the structure of relations expressed. From the standpoint of the linguist there is no qualitative shift between the language of the adolescent and that of the mature adult, but the content of adult life is reflected in the content of adult language, rather than its syntax.

It is a credit to Meir et al (2010) that they classified VSLs and DCSLs according to their *genesis* and *not* according to their linguistic features. So for example, NSL is categorically the same as ASL, even if at a given moment it were barely capable of expressing more than home sign. I would contend that home sign can *never* make the transition to a true Sign Language, without an institution and/or social movement intervening in children's development into adult life, offering Deaf children recognition as equals through their own Sign Language. Susan Goldin-Meadow's (1977, 2005, 2007) very interesting studies tell us nothing about how the transition to adult life with a true *shared* language is achieved.

The key moment in the development of a new language is the institution of a project having as its object the interests of the relevant community.

Andy Blunden, December 2014

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* See the Wikipedia entry: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicaraguan_Sign_Language for the conventional wisdom on this event.