SIGNS OF CHANGE

CONTEMPORARY ATTITUDES TO AUSTRALIAN SIGN LANGUAGE

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This study explores contemporary attitudes to Australian Sign Language (Auslan). Since at least the 1960s, sign languages have been accepted by linguists as natural languages with all of the key ingredients common to spoken languages. However, these visual-spatial languages have historically been subject to ignorance and myth in Australia and internationally. Absorbing these views, deaf Australians have felt confused and ambivalent about Auslan. Whilst recognising the prestige of spoken and signed versions of the majority language and the low status of their own, they have been nevertheless powerfully drawn to sign language. In the past two decades, a growing awareness and acceptance of Auslan has emerged among deaf and hearing Australians alike, spurred by linguistic research, lobbying by deaf advocacy groups and other developments. These issues are explored using semi-structured interviews with deaf and hearing individuals, participant observation in the deaf community, and analysis of government and educational language policies.

Linguist Carol Padden and educator Tom Humphries (1988) have described a growing consciousness and appreciation of American Sign Language among deaf Americans, occurring since the 1960s. An impetus for the research reported in this paper was an interest in whether a similar trend may have been taking place in Australia, albeit a decade or so later: How do deaf Australians perceive Auslan, and how does this compare with their attitudes in the past, and those of mainstream society?[1]

Sign languages were first recognised as natural languages in the 1950s and 1960s by Dutch linguist Bernard Tervoort and American linguist William Stokoe, although the public impression that these visual-spatial languages are akin to pantomime or pictorial gestures has remained powerful. Sign languages exist everywhere in the world where there are communities of deaf people, with numerous different sign languages used in different regions of the globe. However, each of these sign languages is independent of the spoken language of the surrounding hearing communities. For example, American Sign Language (ASL) and British Sign Language (BSL) are very different and mutually unintelligible, even though both deaf communities inhabit countries with English as their official spoken language (Sutton-Spence and Woll 1999). Auslan (Australian Sign Language) is the sign language used by most deaf people in Australia.

Auslan evolved from the sign languages brought to Australia during the nineteenth century from Britain and Ireland through the migration of deaf people, teachers of the deaf, and members of religious orders concerned with the welfare of deaf people (Johnston 1998; Johnston 1989).[2] Two schools for deaf children were established in Australia in 1860 by deaf British men: a school in Melbourne was set up by Frederick J. Rose, and a school in Sydney was established by Thomas Pattison (Johnston 1998). Since that time, Auslan has evolved to be slightly different from British Sign Language, especially in vocabulary and if people drop into vernacular or colloquial turns of phrase. However the two sign languages are generally mutually understandable (Power 1996). The linguistic structure of Auslan is discussed in detail in dictionaries of Auslan by linguist and native signer Trevor Johnston (Johnston 1998; Johnston 1989) and in a more recent monograph exploring various linguistic aspects of Auslan (Johnston and Schembri 2007).

Auslan received linguistic recognition in 1989 with the publication of the first dictionary of Australian Sign Language, by Johnston (1989). At the same time, he coined the term 'Auslan' (**Au**stralian **S**ign **Lan**guage) to describe Australia's sign language. Following lobbying by peak deaf community group Australian Association of the Deaf (now called Deaf Australia) and a number of linguists, Auslan was recognised as a community language in an Australian Federal government white paper on language policy (Commonwealth of Australia 1991). However, Auslan has not yet been recognised in government legislation. In 1983, Sweden became the first nation to implement legislation recognising its native sign language, and a few other countries have since followed their lead: British Sign Language in 2003, Austrian Sign Language in 2005, and New Zealand Sign Language in 2006.

ATTITUDES TO SIGN LANGUAGES BEFORE THE 1970s

Sign languages have historically been suppressed in many parts of the Western world.[3] Throughout most European countries from the 1700s onwards, schools for deaf children favoured an 'oralist' educational approach where use of sign language was forbidden or discouraged lest it interfere with the learning of speech. Children were taught to speak and lip read the dominant spoken language (Lane 1984; Lane 1999). Oralist education was particularly robust in the German-speaking states during the nineteenth century where it benefited from the high esteem of the general German educational system and well-organised teacher training courses (Monaghan 2003). Turning to the southern hemisphere, New Zealand's deaf education system had governmentally mandated oral policies from 1880 until the mid 1970s (Monaghan 1996).

Notable exceptions to oralism occurred during the late 1700s and early 1800s in France and America. Teachers of deaf children such as Abbé de l'Epée in Paris championed education through sign language, and their educational method and tradition was taken to the United States by teachers Laurent Clerc and Thomas Gallaudet. Signing schools existed in Dublin until the mid twentieth century (Le Master 2003), and the first British schools for deaf children, established in the mid-1700s, used British Sign Language or the 'combined method' (i.e. the use of signs with simultaneous speech) as the means of instruction. However, oralism had become widespread there too by the early twentieth century (Sutton-Spence and Woll 1999; Johnston and Schembri 2007).

A significant historical event in replacing sign language use in classrooms of the Western world occurred with the 1880 International Congress on Education of the Deaf in Milan, Italy, conducted by hearing opponents of sign languages (Lane 1999). This congress of educators of deaf children brought in a motion in favour of 'pure oral' methods for teaching deaf children, banning the use of sign language in the classroom.

Australia's first two schools for deaf children, established in 1860, used signs and finger-spelling with simultaneous speech, a method thought to be modelled on the combined method used in parts of Britain at the time (Sheen 1982). The more exclusively oralist schools in Australia were established in the early twentieth century by the Catholic church, and in the 1950s following a visit by prominent British arch-oralists, the Ewings (Branson and Miller 1993).

WHY THESE ATTITUDES?

Some linguists and historians suggest that the historical suppression of sign languages reflects a trend where minority languages have been perceived negatively and oppressed by the majority wherever and whenever two or more languages are in contact. In fact, Lane suggests that linguistic intolerance is the 'natural state' of humans (Lane 1999, p. 108). Drawing on the work of Suzanne Romaine (1989), the majority-minority language argument is also used by Burns, Matthews and Nolan-Conroy (2001) in their consideration of attitudes toward sign languages through history.

Yet reasons other than mere linguistic prejudice help explain why sign languages have been singled out for particular suppression among minority languages (Lane 1999). For instance, the manual-visual mode of sign languages, when compared to spoken languages, means that they have been seen as too alien to be accorded equal status as spoken languages; moreover, the users of sign language have been seen as 'too like us' to be given their own language:

> Only two kinds of people, after all, fail to use your language properly: foreigners and the mentally retarded. The deaf clearly were not the former: They did not come from some other land or visibly constitute a distinct community in our own, like, for example, the Navajo Indians … And their failure to use our [language] properly, like that of a person with mental retardation, could only be the result of faulty intellect (Lane 1999, pp. 108–109).

Sign languages have long been seen as some kind of improvised pantomime or gesturing. American authors Padden and Humphries (2005) lament that the erroneous belief that American Sign Language (ASL) is a set of gestures with no grammatical structure has led to the tragic assumption that the relationship of deaf people to their language is casual and can be easily replaced. 'This misconception more than any other has driven educational policy', they state (Padden and Humphries 1988, p. 9).

Pioneering research into ASL by linguists Klima and Bellugi (1979) demonstrated that signed conversations in fact use a wide range of devices, from conventionalised signs through to free pantomime. The mimetic aspects of sign languages, Branson and Miller (1998) suggest, have nevertheless contributed to the public perception that sign languages are merely 'gesture', and lack the arbitrariness seen as essential to the concept of language.

A related impression of sign languages is that most if not all signs are 'iconic' (Van Uden 1986), that signs correspond closely to the objects or activities they represent, as the sign for 'tree' mimics the shape of a tree, and so on. In order to examine the degree of iconicity of signs, Klima and Bellugi (1979) conducted a number of studies. In one experiment, hearing non signers with no prior knowledge of ASL were presented with ninety signs commonly known among deaf ASL signers and fairly directly translatable into English nouns (e.g. APPLE, BOY, IDEA, WEEK),[4] and asked to write down a meaning for each sign following its presentation. None of the research participants was able to guess the meaning of 81 of the 90 signs presented. In another (much less-demanding) experiment, hearing non-signers were presented with ASL signs and their English meanings, and asked to describe what they considered the basis for the relation between the form of each sign and its English translation-equivalent. For over half of the 90 signs presented, the responses of the subjects showed overall agreement on the basis for the connection between the shape of the sign and its meaning. The results of this second study support the idea that many ASL signs have a representational aspect. They conclude:

> Although an ASL sign is not usually so unambiguously representational that a non-signer can guess its correct meaning … characteristics of the form of an ASL sign often are related (or relatable) to characteristics of its referent (Klima and Bellugi 1979, p. 26).

Historical change reduces the iconic properties of signs, with some ASL signs becoming more opaque over time, and some completely arbitrary (Klima and Bellugi 1979). Johnston and Schembri (2007) have confirmed a number of these points in relation to Auslan, concluding that the occurrence of iconicity in sign languages should not be overemphasised. Moreover, recognition that all spoken languages have onomatopoeia and hence some iconic forms suggests the presence of iconicity in sign languages does not disqualify them from being seen as true languages (Valli and Lucas 2000).

An associated myth about sign languages is that they are very 'concrete' – tied to present objects and events, and hence unable to express abstract thoughts, humour, or subtleties such as figures of speech. However, sign languages have been found to enable the full range of figurative and abstract mechanisms of language: metaphor, irony, puns, humour, poetry and so forth (Klima and Bellugi 1979; Johnston and Schembri 2007; Valli and Lucas 2000).

Opponents of sign languages have long believed that their use, especially in the classroom, discourages the learning of oral communication skills. In this way, proscription of sign languages has appealed to hearing parents eager to believe their deaf children can learn to function like hearing people, and on those terms participate more fully in society (Baynton, 1996). However educational research has shown that deaf children struggle to make sense of spoken language when it is the medium of instruction rather than a sign language (Johnson, Liddell and Erting 1989; Komesaroff 1996). Language acquisition and deafness is discussed later in this article.

Another important factor underpinning negative perceptions of sign languages involves the social status of the deaf people who use them. This reflects a more general pattern where language attitudes are shaped by the status of their users, with language use a symbol of a more generally stigmatised social identity (Romaine 1989). Deafness has historically been and continues to be seen as a 'disability', and as Branson and Miller point out, this is compounded by the subliminal equation of muteness with dumbness, and dumbness with stupidity (Branson and Miller 1993; Branson and Miller 1998). This is coupled, especially in Western cultures, with:

> A definition of politeness … where gesticulating is minimal, pointing is rude, and mouth movements and facial expressions are minimal and subtle, the tongue well out of sight … The mouth movements and gestures integral to signing, positively disable the Deaf culturally within the hearing community (Branson and Miller 1993, pp. 26–27).

The study's methods are discussed in the next section, followed by an examination of past attitudes to Auslan amongst deaf people and (wider) hearing society. The subsequent sections report on contemporary attitudes to Auslan amongst deaf and hearing people respectively. The paper concludes with a discussion of catalysts for changing perceptions of sign languages.

METHODOLOGY

This study of attitudes toward Auslan originated as one part of a wider socio-cultural study of a deaf community. The research involved a mix of direct and indirect methods, that is, direct questions about attitudes toward Auslan, complemented by a search for implicit or un-stated beliefs evident in educational policies and other materials. The following forms of data collection were used:

- In-depth semi-structured interviews with 31 people, comprising: 23 deaf people, 4 (hearing) Auslan interpreters and 4 (hearing) colleagues of deaf people
- Participant observation at two deaf community organisations and numerous deaf community social events
- Collection of materials revealing attitudes about sign languages, including government and educational language policies and media materials.

As one of Australia's most populous cities, with a large, active deaf community, Melbourne was chosen as the site of this study. In the absence of demographic information about Australia's deaf-born and early-deafened population, a sample comprising a broad cross-section of deaf people was sought, with roughly equal numbers of each gender and age group. Nineteen of the 23 deaf people interviewed described Auslan as their primary language, reflecting the aim of the broader study to explore identity of deaf people who use Auslan. A snowball technique for interviewee recruitment was used, starting with professional and personal networks of the researcher and deaf people invited from two deaf community organisations and an Auslan teaching institution. This mix of initial access points helped ensure a diversity of deaf people was interviewed.

The interview sample also included four Auslan interpreters. Sign language interpreters have insight into the world of deaf people through their sign language fluency and frequent interaction with this group. At the same time, their hearing status and identification with wider society means they also bring a comparative perspective. Four hearing colleagues of deaf people were also interviewed to further contribute to this comparative perspective. Interviews were conducted in the language nominated by the person being interviewed. All interviews were audio recorded to aid transcription and analysis of interviewee comments. Interviews conducted in Auslan were recorded with the assistance of an Auslan interpreter. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

The researcher conducted participant observation through volunteer clerical work at two deaf community organisations for a period of 22 months, where communication between staff was often exclusively in Auslan. Participant observation was also carried out at deaf social events including sporting events, 'culture nights' of deaf story telling and anecdotes, and socialising at hotels and parties.

The qualitative data was analysed using a combination of grounded theory and thematic analysis. As part of the management and analysis of the qualitative data, software package Nvivo2.0 was used.

PAST ATTITUDES TO AUSLAN

For many deaf people, the views of their (hearing) parents about sign languages appear to have reflected the historically negative ideas of broader society. Leon, a deaf man aged in his sixties interviewed for this study, recalled his parents' reluctance to allow their son to mix or sign with a deaf family who lived near their house in the 1940s and 1950s. Leon's parents were 'embarrassed about seeing sign language', and 'tried to push [him] away from them'. However, Leon recollected being drawn to the family and keen to communicate with them through signing. Leon recalled, 'Signing wasn't considered a language in those days. People would just say, "Talking with their hands". That's how they would refer to it'. Leon recalled that after six months attendance at the local deaf school in 1944, he had spontaneously started signing at home and school. His parents discouraged him from signing in front of other people, and quickly moved him to a mainstream school.

Similarly, Ursula (aged in her mid forties when interviewed) remembered that her parents were adamant that she learn only speech and lip reading, and she was sent in the early 1960s to a pre-school that used oralist methods. Recalling childhood memories of going into the city centre with her mother, Ursula said

> [One day] we pulled up behind a car and it had deaf people in the back signing … and I'm like, 'Oh, Mum they're deaf!' Mum said, 'Yes, aren't you *lucky* you're not like that … You can talk, you don't need the sign language, you've got beautiful speech. Very, very lucky girl.' So she had this funny thing about signing; she couldn't see it as a beautiful language.

Ursula remembered her mother reprimanding her for gesturing and pointing to ask for food; Ursula would be requested to repeat her mother's words after her, enunciating carefully, 'I want a jam sandwich'. Even parents of younger deaf people now aged in their twenties or early thirties continued to discourage their children from learning Auslan. Gemma, now in her early thirties, recalled, 'Mum and Dad didn't want me to sign. They believed that I should speak and lip read and be oral.'

Deaf people of deaf families whose parents and grandparents grew up signing at home recall that these older generations felt uncomfortable signing under the gaze of the hearing public. Evan, aged in his late forties, was born into a large deaf family and remarked:

> [So] when you meet people in their seventies and eighties now, you'll see that their signing space is quite small and it's low down [in front of their abdomen] because they were embarrassed to be seen in public … to be seen to be signing. Whereas *now*, signing space is much bigger and it's higher up because people don't care!

Educational experiences of this study's participants are particularly illustrative of dominant attitudes toward Auslan in the past. The pervasive ideology was an exclusive emphasis on speech, with the associated assumption that any use of sign language would interfere with speech development. Jen, a former teacher of deaf children who is deaf herself, recalled that before Auslan began to be recognised as a genuine language in the late 1980s, deaf students who showed potential to speak and lip read were seen as educational 'successes'; their deaf counterparts unable to master speech and lip reading were seen as 'failures', and retained at the deaf school where less was expected of them. This attitude prevailed in both deaf schools and mainstream schools with deaf children. Ascertainment committees, comprising doctors, school principals and psychologists routinely visited each of the schools and decided if the children were to be moved. Jen lamented, 'Nothing about the language learning needs of each of those kids [was considered]. It

was all based on how well they could speak … because most people at that time confused speech and language.'

A stark indicator of educationalists' misconceptions about sign languages has been the invention of artificial sign systems – in north America, Britain, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere – to represent spoken language in a visual-manual modality (Reagan, 2001). These systems have been, and in some locations still are, used in educational settings to teach deaf children spoken language. In Australia, the most well known of these systems is often referred to simply as 'Signed English', and was the medium of instruction in schools for signing deaf children from the 1970s until the late 1990s (Johnston and Schembri 2007). The inventors of Australia's Signed English reorganised the word order of signs in Auslan in an attempt to mirror the order of words in spoken English sentences, and invented signs or finger spelled English words were added to supply the supposedly missing English elements. For example, rather than signing in Auslan I SHOP GO which translates approximately as 'I go to the shop', the inventors of Signed English attempted to mirror the English sentence with I GO T-O T-H-E SHOP.

As Padden and Humphries (1988) argue, the invention of these artificial communication systems are underpinned by 'the pervasive belief that sign languages are essentially "incomplete" systems and amenable to modification for educational purposes. They ignore the fact that individual signs, like words, are inseparable parts of a larger grammatical system' (Padden and Humphries 1988, p. 64).

These invented systems are highly dubious from a linguistic point of view, claims linguist Timothy Reagan (2001). Discussing the various sign systems used in America, he suggests that in seeking to represent the lexical items of English, an oral-aural language, in a visual-manual context, the results are signing systems that are essentially 'neither fish nor fowl', involve violations of the structural and morphological rules of American Sign Language, and are clumsy and confusing to use.

More significantly, Reagan argues, the use of such systems may cause educational problems for pre-lingually deaf students (that is, those whose deafness was present at birth or at least before the development of language) who as a result must depend on such a system as the linguistic base from which they operate. The experience of Yvonne, an interpreter interviewed for this study, appears to support this claim. One of Yvonne's first jobs as an interpreter was working at a school with a policy of using Signed English. Yvonne recalled, 'Slowly I realised that the kids were not getting it. They were just not getting it. And it was just so stiff and horrible'. For further discussion of language acquisition and deafness see Llewellyn-Jones 1987; Johnson, Liddell, and Erting 1989; Branson and Miller 1993; Komesaroff 1994; and Pearce 2002.

Deaf people interviewed for this study who were compelled to use Signed English at school were unanimous in their frustration with this communication system. Natalie, aged 24 when interviewed, remembered asking her parents to move her from a school that used Signed English because she found it slow and cumbersome to use, and far less expressive than Auslan: 'With Auslan you get the facial expression, the context, so you don't need all these unnecessary words, "is", "are", "am", "the" and it is a lot quicker'.

PAST ATTITUDES OF DEAF PEOPLE TO AUSLAN

When deaf people were asked about how they perceived sign languages during their childhoods, their responses could be summarised as ambivalence and a degree of ignorance: lack of awareness initially, that the signs they furtively used in the playground with their classmates, for example, were part of a genuine language; sometimes shame about needing to 'resort' to using sign language rather than speaking; and at times a powerful attraction to sign language. These conflicting attitudes were most pronounced among those from hearing families and where their parents had no experience with Auslan.

As mentioned earlier, Australian deaf people have been using sign language since at least the early 1800s, evolved from the sign languages brought from Britain and Ireland during the early days of settlement. What *is* relatively new is a name for the language, Australian Sign Language, or Auslan, and its linguistic recognition as a genuine language. Before coinage of the term Auslan, deaf people did not have an official name for their language. Melbourne deaf people would just sign the term SIGN, or MY OLD SIGN, or among older people, fingerspell the word 'sign'. In 1989, when the Auslan dictionary was published, deaf people in Sydney would still refer to their language as they always had, TRUE DEAF SIGN or FULL DEAF SIGN (as opposed to 'incomplete' or 'hearing-like' sign), writes Johnston (1989). Interviewee Leon described some of the confusion among deaf people:

> When I meet other older deaf people nowadays, they still don't understand what [the term] Auslan means. I'll say, 'I work as the Auslan Program Coordinator'. And they'll say, 'Oh, I don't use Auslan, I've never used Auslan.' But they do say, MY OLD SIGN, literally … But in fact it *is* Auslan. Auslan is such a new name for them. It was only really recognised in 1989. And it's the same signs.

Other interviewees highlighted what little was known about Auslan until recently. Jen, a deaf woman raised in a hearing family in remote northern Victoria, recalled a

course she took during the 1980s to become a teacher of the deaf: 'They didn't even know that the grammar [of Auslan] was different [from English].' British researchers describe similar stories about British Sign Language (BSL) before it was recognised and given a name (Edwards and Ladd 1983). A relatively more recent Irish study of attitudes toward Irish Sign Language (ISL) found that only 23 of the 30 deaf participants recognised ISL as a real language, and that confusion remains among some deaf Irish people in distinguishing between ISL, signed English and BSL (Burns 1998).

Many deaf interviewees described ambivalent feelings about Auslan, sometimes an early uncertainty or rejection of it followed by a later embracing of Auslan as they reached adulthood. Gemma, 31 when interviewed, recalled childhood embarrassment about signing: 'When [my friends] signed in public I would say, "Hey, don't do that, use your voice!" … Now I don't care.' Similarly, Ben commented that when he first started using Auslan as a young man he was very conscious of what hearing people thought. These deaf people appear to have initially absorbed the negative attitudes toward sign languages of their teachers, hearing parents, and medical professionals around them. This, Edwards and Ladd (1983) argue, has also occurred in regard to British Sign Language in Britain.

Deaf people may be eager to improve their spoken and/or signed English, seeing this as vital for social and economic success. Interviewee Dan commented disparagingly about deaf people trying to demonstrate their knowledge of English and/or signed English, rather than using Auslan, when giving public presentations: 'A lot of deaf people who grew up with signed English, they want to show that they're clever, so they'll often use signed English as a way of showing off their [knowledge of] English'.

When conducting participant observation at a deaf community organisation, the researcher found that two deaf colleagues there were initially hesitant to use Auslan with her even though they signed to each other. The following observations were recorded in field notes:

> I've found it hard to practise using Auslan because Rick often tends to talk to me rather than sign, whilst I try to sign … It could be that … he sees that it's easier to communicate by speech whilst I'm still learning Auslan. Maybe Rick is keen to show he can speak quite well, and/or given the fact I'm hearing, speech should be used with me.

American linguist Barbara Kannapell has described the hesitation of deaf people to use their sign language with hearing people: deaf people 'have learned that they are not supposed to sign to hearing people in ASL so they try to sign in English and speak also.

When they are with other deaf people, they feel comfortable using ASL …' (Kannapell 1980, p. 111). Kannapell argues that ASL has a unifying function, uniting deaf people by their common language; ASL use simultaneously separates deaf people from the hearing world. This separating function is felt to protect deaf people:

> We can talk about anything we want, right in the middle of a crowd of hearing people. They are not supposed to understand us … ASL is the only thing we have that belongs to deaf people completely. It is the only thing that has grown out of the deaf group. Maybe we are afraid to share our language with hearing people. Maybe our group identity will disappear once hearing people know ASL (Kannapell 1980, p. 112).

Other studies have also suggested mixed views about ASL by deaf people in the past. A 1982-83 survey of 205 deaf Gallaudet University students found that the overwhelming majority saw ASL as a beautiful and 'fully developed language' in its own right, but more than half believed that ASL had no rules of grammar or syntax (Kannapell 1993). Over 80 percent agreed with the statement that ASL is a 'short-cut language', although students subsequently clarified that this does not mean that ASL contains less information than English. Kannapell concluded that, all in all, the students had positive attitudes toward ASL but were somewhat conflicted about it. Similarly, British researchers writing in the early 1980s reported that BSL was considered by many deaf people as 'broken', 'ugly' and 'telegraphic' (Edwards and Ladd 1983).

CONTEMPORARY ATTITUDES TO AUSLAN

DEAF ATTITUDES—A NEW-FOUND ACCEPTANCE?

> Auslan is my language now; it's my – identity, my involvement with the deaf community. I have deaf friends, I work with deaf staff, it's my language. I can speak, but Auslan is where I identify (Sarah, aged 33, mainly oralist education).

A growing demand for qualified Auslan interpreters has occurred in recent years, for the many important encounters deaf people have with the wider hearing community, for example, doctor's appointments, university lectures, and some financial transactions. Until the past two decades, deaf people were often compelled to 'make do' with written

messages or by co-opting a hearing relative or welfare officer to interpret, but there is now more commonly an expectation that qualified Auslan interpreters should be provided (Ozolins and Bridge 1999). Interpreter Vivian observed that, 'the deaf community are very comfortable with the use of interpreters. It's a normal part of their world to have interpreters coming in and out of their life.' In 2004, after intense lobbying by peak deaf community group Australian Association of the Deaf, the Australian government granted $18 million for the provision of Auslan interpreters for doctor's appointments. Sign language interpreting practice is now recognised through the national accreditation system that awards qualifications to Auslan interpreters alongside spoken language interpreters.

It is a common practice among many deaf community organisations and service providers to disseminate important information via Auslan presentations on DVD, as well as face-to-face presentations. Participant observation and the researcher's own personal experience have revealed increased use of sign language in collaborative research projects and awareness-raising campaigns, and these processes are often written into budgets and timelines.

Pride in Auslan is evident in the way it is described in information distributed by deaf organisations to the general public. The following is part of a press release from the Australian Association of the Deaf for mainstream media inviting people to a Learn to Sign Day:

> Auslan – Australian Sign Language – is used by Australian Deaf people, and they are very proud of their unique language. They want others to know more about it and learn their beautifully expressive language too … [This is] the Deaf community's opportunity to showcase their community, its culture, and rich and expressive language (Australian Association of the Deaf 2005).

Certainly, a glance at the programs of National Week of Deaf People in Victoria for 2006 and 2007 show they were rich with events presented in Auslan, including Auslan-interpreted tours of the National Gallery of Victoria and the Melbourne Museum, storytelling for children at public libraries, public debates, and numerous social functions.

It is important to highlight that four of the 23 deaf interviewees in this study said they generally preferred to communicate in (spoken) English. These people tend to have some residual hearing and/or are post-lingually deaf. For example, 25 year-old Marie explained, 'Auslan's not my first language. Auslan's not the easiest way for me to communicate'. With a post lingual, moderate hearing loss, Marie had worked for an organ-

isation that provides services to deaf and hearing-impaired people, studied Auslan as an adult and described herself as quite fluent. However, most of her friends were hearing people with whom she spoke. The complex relationship between audiological status – level, nature, and age of onset of hearing loss – and identity, is discussed further in Slegers (2007).

HEARING ATTITUDES: A GROWING AWARENESS

In tandem with increasing acceptance by deaf people of their sign languages, more hearing people are becoming aware of these visual-gestural languages, and some are even learning to use them. Alan, who has worked in a range of community organisations, described 'an awe' about sign language. 'People are fascinated. Especially kids', though Alan conceded that public perceptions still have 'a long way to go'. Similarly Ursula, who has worked in a range of educational organisations, commented that Auslan had become much more acceptable over the past twenty years.

Auslan is now taught as an accredited course as a language other than English (LOTE) at secondary schools and is in the Year 12 (VCE) curriculum. Ben, who had taught classes to hearing people at colleges, witnessed 'a big change' in public perceptions of Auslan, adding that recently students had been motivated to learn Auslan 'more out of a sense of curiosity to learn about deaf people than a sense of "helping" [them].'

With the increasing profile of qualified Auslan interpreters, sign language is becoming more visible to hearing people at public events such as arts festivals, lectures, political rallies and other public gatherings. Examples in Melbourne include the series of marches and rallies against the war in Iraq in 2003 and 2004, a protest rally against climate change policies in November 2006, and dozens of arts performances each year. Terri, who interprets in the arts sector, felt that knowledge of Auslan is viewed as 'hip' and 'edgy', particularly among artistic circles. She added, 'I think it has come directly out of deaf performers, like Mr Kewl, playing mainstream venues'.

However, we should be careful not to form an overly optimistic assessment of the current status of Auslan and other sign languages. The only course in Victoria that qualifies teachers to instruct deaf children retains a pro-oralist approach, as several of this study's participants reminded the researcher. Paul, who has a moderate to severe hearing loss and uses English as his primary language, lamented that ignorance persisted about Auslan and is a manifestation of broader ignorance and prejudice about deafness itself:

> A lot of hearing people associate deaf[ness] with being a bit less intelligent. They just have the assumption that 'Oh deaf people … they don't go very well at school, and the language they've got, oh, it's not really a language … They get by with making a few gestures'.

Similarly, interpreter Yvonne commented that 'there's still not enough exposure. Because it's different, people just see it as less'. Yvonne continued, her frustration evident: 'Even parents of deaf kids don't get it. So I mean if they don't get it, how are you going to expect the wider community to get it?'

CATALYSTS FOR CHANGING ATTITUDES

Since the earliest linguistic studies by Tervoort and Stokoe, a mounting tide of international data has emerged to reveal sign languages are legitimate languages, and not mere 'pantomime' as some had claimed. This knowledge has raised awareness and understanding amongst both hearing and deaf communities (Burns, Matthews and Nolan-Conroy 2001). As British researcher Paddy Ladd (1988, p. 41) commented, 'By simply declaring that British Sign Language was a language, people's conceptions changed. Deaf people officially had something positive and attractive which made them equal to hearing people'.

Linguistic recognition of sign languages has also been a mechanism for new conceptions of deaf communities as distinct cultural and linguistic groups within societies, challenging the earlier pathological views of deafness (Brien 1991). The new perspectives forged a deaf identity movement in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, before spreading internationally, at a time when issues of race and identity were receiving prominent public attention (Padden and Humphries 2005). As part of this social movement, national and international deaf advocacy groups have been instrumental in increasing the exposure to and acceptance of sign languages.

Educational research has also contributed to changing attitudes. A growing body of international research over the past three decades supports the notion that deaf children achieve better academically in a bilingual classroom setting. An environment with sign language as the language of instruction has been shown to better teach subject matter and to impart background knowledge and skills that facilitate learning to read and write English (or another spoken language) as a second language (Johnson, Liddell, and Erting 1989; Komesaroff 1996; Branson and Miller 1993; Branson and Miller 2002). A handful of Australian schools, including the Victorian College of the Deaf, have introduced bilingual policies in recent years.

Deaf people have long known of the power of television and film for raising the profile and status of sign languages. Proposals to establish a television program for deaf Australians on a major public broadcasting network, as achieved by a number of European deaf communities, have been unsuccessful so far, but in 2006 community broadcaster TVS began broadcasting 'SignPost', a half-hourly magazine program in Auslan. Now in its second series, 'SignPost' is broadcast to five Australian cities (Australian Association of the Deaf 2008). At the same time, greater exposure of sign language through provision of interpreting at public community gatherings and university lectures, as discussed earlier, has also raised public awareness.

For much of the twentieth century, negative beliefs about sign languages drove educational policies and programs in Western societies, causing confusion and ambivalence amongst deaf people about their languages. In Australia, there has been a slowly growing awareness and acceptance of Auslan amongst deaf and hearing people in the past few decades, reflecting similar patterns internationally. Further research on attitudes to Auslan across Australia, among deaf and hearing people, would be beneficial: a large-scale quantitative-qualitative study, for example, could shed more light on the precise extent and prevalence of positive attitudes. Further international comparison of attitudes to sign languages would also be useful, for example between New Zealand with its particularly strong oralist tradition (Monaghan, 1996), and Australia, where a number of educational approaches were employed simultaneously in various historical periods.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Deaf studies scholars, dealing with those for whom deafness came early enough in life to necessitate some kind of special education measures, often use the term 'Deaf' with a capital D to refer to those deaf people who share a historically created language and culture that is distinct from that of hearing society, using the form 'deaf' to refer to the audiological condition of deafness (Parasnis 1998; Baynton 1996). These distinctions highlight cultural identity as distinct from physiological deafness. Whilst I recognise the significance of this distinction, I have chosen not to utilise it in this paper because of practical difficulties in applying it: for example, as Baynton (1996) points out, 'At what precise point do deaf people become Deaf?' As this paper is drawn from a larger study exploring deaf identity, itself a dynamic and nebulous phenomena, I have used the lowercase form. Non-deaf people are generally referred to as 'hearing people' in deaf studies literature and in deaf discourse, so I have adopted this convention.

[2] Sign languages were used by Aboriginals before the British occupation and settlement, and some continue to be used today, however these have been found to be alternate signed languages used instead of or together with speech, as when observing periods of speech taboo during mourning (Johnston and Schembri 2007, citing Kendon 1988). No evidence to date suggests that any existing or extinct Aboriginal sign languages were adopted or adapted by deaf communities in Australia (Johnston and Schembri 2007).

[3] This discussion is confined in scope to attitudes toward sign languages in the *Western* world.

[4] This paper follows the conventions of sign language glossing used by Padden and Humphries (1988) and Klima and Bellugi (1979) whereby signs are represented by English glosses in capital letters. Capital letter joined by hyphens represent finger spelled words or abbreviations. Glossing generally includes notations for recording facial expression and other simultaneous non-manual features. These notations are not included here, so the translations do not express the full meaning of the signed utterance.

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