

## Commentary on Language, ASL, and Cued Speech

by Hilary Franklin on Monday, November 12, 2012 at 11:10pm

I am writing this public post as a response to the myriad comments that people make about Cued Speech. Often, people are either uninformed or misinformed as to what Cued Speech is, as in the case of one person who recently commented that “A Cued-speech only environment is not humane, in my opinion.” (Source: [https://www.facebook.com/ella.m.lentz/posts/468139516562274?comment\\_id=5300013&notif\\_t=comment\\_mention](https://www.facebook.com/ella.m.lentz/posts/468139516562274?comment_id=5300013&notif_t=comment_mention))

This post is not meant to provide an explanation of Cued Speech. If you’re looking for that information, please read this article before moving on: Cued Speech: Your Unasked Questions Answered (<http://trivisualcommunications.com/WordPress/wp-content/uploads/Cued-Speech-Your-Unasked-Questions-Answered-DeafDC.pdf>).

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I was raised and educated in a rich, person-first environment. Ever since I can remember, I have always viewed my peers as fellow human beings, and had to learn how to “describe” people based on society’s understanding of identities. I generally don’t think of people first as male or female; white/Caucasian, black/African-American, Latin/Hispanic, Asian, or American Indian; as gay, straight, bisexual, transgender, or queer; as hearing or deaf; as democrat, independent, green, or republican. To me, people are people, and I have constantly struggled, and continue to struggle, with understanding why we can’t just get along. Naturally, with this world view, I consider myself to be “Hilary first.” And what does that mean? It means that I recognize that all the applicable categories from the identities listed above all make up a part of who I am. No one identity makes me a whole person. I am greater than the sum of my parts, and so are we all.

I believe it is important to understand what my world view is before you can begin to understand what I’m about to say. The following is edited from an off-the-cuff commentary I provided in response to the comment that triggered my outrage.

I am dual-lingual. English is my first language, and the language of the home in which I was raised. ASL is my second language. My parents are both native English speakers, and my father is relatively proficient in German and can apparently hold his own in French. My mother doesn’t communicate in any language other than English.

I acquired English naturally via Cued Speech because my parents cued consistently and regularly; thus, I had age-appropriate language skills by the time I entered primary school. When we moved to Maryland, I was enrolled in a pre-Kindergarten class that had a teacher and teacher’s aide who both cued fluently. The other kids in the class were also deaf and cued. That means I not only had acquired the language of the home, but I was also able to expand on that with language experiences gained during school hours. I developed English in a completely

visual medium that did not require auditory ability. I had a natural language learning environment where people communicated easily in a visual-manual mode other than in a signed language. Post pre-K, I was mainstreamed with a cued language transliterator (CLT), and had deaf classmates throughout primary and secondary education. I consider myself extremely lucky to not only have been educated in one of the best school systems in the country, but also in schools with dedicated mainstreaming/inclusion programs for students who were deaf and hard of hearing and who signed, cued or spoke—sometimes all three!

**I absolutely do not consider that to be inhumane.** I had no struggle to learn and acquire the English language and apply it to reading and writing development skills.

In short, I had appropriate language development. I internalized English naturally, and through a visual medium. Because I had a solid first language foundation, I was able to build on that and gain academic English fluency. I am aware of my own thoughts (which are in English) and enjoy discussing, and sometimes debating, with others about various topics. I am my own person and developed social norms appropriately, etc. (That's not to say I don't have my quirks, but we all do, right?! :) )

Because I had a solid first language foundation, I was able to learn ASL as a second language and consider myself proficient/fluent (you may disagree, and you're entitled to your opinion). I don't think I need to remind y'all—there's my Texan upbringing creeping in!—that many children who are deaf and typically struggle with language are those who are born to hearing parents who can barely sign ASL functionally. (Note: I said many, not most or all.) Consequently, by the time these children enter primary school, they may have the equivalent of a year or two of their “first language,” rather than four or five years. That's a pretty significant delay; and on top of that, they're expected to learn a second language (English) with a not-yet-developed first-language foundation?!

Rather than harping on ASL being the “native language of the deaf,” let us all focus on providing these parents with the means to visually express their home language to their children \*immediately\*, in a visual mode (e.g., cued English, cued Spanish, etc.) while ALSO learning ASL. That way, their children can learn ASL from someone who is actually a native signer rather than trying to learn the same language their parents are also learning. Done well, these children could be appropriately bilingual by the time they enter primary school (Kindergarten/1st grade). Children in Spanish-speaking homes could even become trilingual!

As many linguists recognize, culture and language go hand in hand. Part of understanding culture is knowing the associated language. However, learning language does not necessitate becoming part of a culture. For example, I could learn Arabic and learn about Arabic culture, but that does not mean I'll ever be part of a country's culture – a country where the national language is predominantly Arabic. The same holds true for English – yes, English. There are many people from other countries who speak English but hold no American, British, or Australian national customs.

America has no official language. That's right, English is not our official language. However, proficiency in English is not only expected by the time we graduate from high school, English literacy is required to succeed in our ever-intertwined globalized world. Students in other countries who want to become software developers, business managers, traders, entrepreneurs, etc., learn English in order to become successful. Many European countries are multilingual not only by choice, but by design, and they teach English as one of multiple languages in their nations' schools.

Those people who emphasize instruction in ASL and Deaf Culture with no mention of English are unfortunately typical of Americans who have a monolingual mindset; that is, many of us. Many of them state that "ASL is the language of the deaf." I have to wonder how people outside of America feel about that.

Remember the old NBC slogan? "The more you know.... N-B-C!" In other words, the more we know, the better off we are. There is absolutely no reason to limit language exposure or restrict communication modes.

I'm a person who believes that we should have no limits. And these people are implying that they would limit access to English to deaf children, by providing "only" instruction in ASL. While providing children a solid home language in ASL would result in them having a strong first language foundation on which to learn a second language (English), that is not so easily done unless every child who is deaf or hard of hearing has hours of ASL exposure on a daily basis, just as any hearing child has hours of exposure to English/Spanish/Arabic.

What we need to do—as Americans—is to focus on educating ALL children—deaf, hearing, hard of hearing—in English, ASL, Spanish, Arabic, Mandarin Chinese, Hindi, and even Pig Latin. For children who are deaf or hard of hearing, let's ensure they receive the appropriate exposure to their home language AND in an appropriate mode. (Reminder: All children's native language(s) should be the language(s) of the home.)

I am Hilary. I am an American. I am a woman. I am deaf. I am bisexual. I am white. I am short: no comments from the peanut gallery! I am not perfect, but I am able to communicate with a wide variety of people in myriad communication modes. Being able to communicate easily with people who talk, sign, cue, and/or write has allowed me to learn from those people and them to learn from me. I think that's pretty cool.

\*\* Note: I recognize and accept the viewpoint that children who are deaf (severely to profoundly deaf) often require visual access to language in order to ensure that linguistic information is not left out, as can occur when an oral or auditory-verbal approach is used. What many proponents of ASL-only education do not seem to recognize or accept is that cued English IS entirely visual. It does not require auditory ability or articulation skills to convey or receive English at its phonemic (consonant-vowel) structural level.

Please note that not once have I used the terms spoken language or spoken English. The medium in which we communicate language can be by speaking, writing, signing, or cueing. The mode is as important as the language; communicating proficiently in a linguistic mode requires not only knowing the language, but also the mechanics of speaking, cueing, signing, and writing (or typing).

**\*\*\*IMPORTANT\*\*\***

I have chosen to make this note/post public so that it can be shared with others. Any comments in direct response to this post **MUST** be made with respect. Responses to other commenters must also be respectful. Any comments published that are offensive **WILL BE REMOVED AT MY DISCRETION**. I do not employ a three-strike policy; you get one chance. Please keep the following adage in mind: "If you cannot say something nice, don't say it at all." Thank you.