

Sign Language Peoples and the Significance of Recognition of Deaf Cultures

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Structure of Paper

1. Relating BSL to Deaf Culture – the Language Recognition campaigns.
2. Brief history of Deaf Culture concept.
3. Its significance for SLPs.
4. Brief history of cultural rights.
5. Recent UNESCO cultural legislation.

TITLE

- Ideally we would spend this time watching examples of Deaf cultures :
 - Sign language poetry and ‘sign-songs’
 - Deaf film, TV
 - Deaf visual arts, theatre, cabaret, humour

But we need to cover a lot of important ground today, so I will just give you a brief taster.

WWWINSERT WWWS FOR POETRY AND BSLBT

Sign Language Recognition Campaigns (1)

- Bencie has established the BSL background, so here I briefly mention a significant 21st century development - the global campaigns for official recognition of sign languages.
- X countries worldwide have focused on official recognition, and Y have achieved a degree of recognition.
- In the UK it is claimed that recognition was achieved 10 years ago this month.
- INSERT LINKS etc

Sign Language Recognition Campaigns (2)

- However, many countries are still unclear about what recognition should mean.
- Others continue to meet with resistance to recognition.
- This comes not only from governmental bodies, but those who oppose the use of sign language in Deaf education, or who promote technological ‘solutions to deafness’ including eugenics. (Emery 2012)
- Other routes must therefore also be sought. These include cultural recognition, which I now focus on.

History and significance of the Deaf Culture concept.

- Language Rights are beginning to be acknowledged.
- But very limited understanding of Deaf Culture concept, in both SLP and majority societies.
- Huge imbalance of academic funding and resources — the vast majority is devoted to medical, biological and technical ‘solutions’ to the ‘problem’ of being Deaf.
- Within Deaf Studies, resources focused on language rather than the study of Deaf communities themselves, their sociologies, cultures, histories, arts, philosophies, politics etc.

Why is Formal Recognition of Deaf Cultures Important ?

- As with other minorities, SLPs have much to offer the world – to expand and challenge received ideas about what it means to be human.
- Emergence of ‘Baby Signs’ suggests that hearing parents with hearing babies find sign language beneficial to their development.
- But are SLP collective views really being heard ? No.
- Most SLP discourses are in Sign Languages, and not collected and recorded in print - thus they remain unknown to majority societies.
- Thus much research – and funding – is needed.

Deaf Culture concept important for SLPs themselves because :

- It offers a chance to reflect on Deaf lives and realise what we have created together as communities for 250+ years.
- It offers all Deaf people a chance to develop pride and ‘make a difference’.
- Appreciation of our Deafhood helps us to decide how to tackle immense issues such as genetic engineering and eugenics (Why we should be ‘allowed to live’.)

Concept important for majority societies because (1)

- They have a problem believing that Deaf communities have their own norms, values, beliefs, and traditions.
- Western societies think in individualist, not collective terms ; they can't believe that peoples such as SLPs do have collectively held beliefs etc.
- They also see us primarily as impaired *individuals*.
- They are unaware of the global dimensions of Deafhood – the power and beauty of International Sign and SLP global society.

They base their educational, social and political policies towards SLPs on these misunderstandings.

Concept important for majority societies because (2)

- Once concept is accepted, this validates the existence of Deaf collective values and beliefs.
- Therefore validates SLP rights to ‘speak for’ and represent themselves.
- This can then be applied to important domains such as Deaf education, medicine, social and welfare services, film, TV, arts – and governmental negotiations for all these.

The 'need to prove' that Deaf Cultures exist.

- Linguistic 'proof' that Sign Languages are bona fide languages made an immense difference to our lives.
- The existence of languages is easier to prove.
- But much harder to 'prove' that cultures exist – because little research into that subject generally.
- This is partly because of ethnocentrism. Human discourse about cultures is very minimal compared to other academic disciplines.
- Minority and colonised cultures have only recently been recognised.

So what evidence do we have ?

- Deaf cultural/sociology texts include :
 - Padden and Humphries (1988 and 2005)
 - Lane, Hoffmeister and Bahan (1996)
 - Mindess et al (2000)
 - Ladd (2003)

Enough to confirm the concept, but reflects the minimal resources available.

A simple definition.

- If a group of people have their own language, then they have their own cultures.
- This is because how people :
 - perceive and
 - interpret the world around them,
 - and act on those interpretations,is shaped and mediated by the language they develop for this purpose.

Deaf Cultures and the ‘Minority Culture’ concept (simplified)

- Ladd (2003) identifies crucial differences between ‘majority cultures’ and ‘minority cultures’ :
- Humans growing up in a majority culture have only one culture to absorb.
- Those who belong to minorities inside majority cultures, or are colonised peoples, have to absorb **BOTH** cultures.
- When these cultures are unequal, this experience is very problematic, leading to identity confusion, loss of confidence in the minority culture.

Minority Cultures :

- Are almost all *oppressed cultures*.
- Many of them are also *colonised cultures*.
- Ladd (2003) expands on Lane (1993) and Wrigley (1996) - states that Deaf cultures are also *colonised cultures*.
- ie. Their languages and cultures are suppressed, colonised, in order to be 'replaced' by the majority languages and cultures.
- Colonisation is found mostly in Deaf education systems but also elsewhere in SLP lives.

So therefore...

- SLPs need to align themselves with other minority cultures.
- Seek the same protections as those campaigned for by minority cultures.
- Sign language recognition discourses are limited by omitting the cultural (and political) dimensions.
- Both routes and dimensions must be utilised.

Some Examples (1)

1. SL recognition means nothing unless Deaf Heritage resources, museums, archives are created and **permanently** funded.
2. SL recognition means nothing if all Deaf children are mainstreamed or cochlear implanted - and Deaf schools then closed.
 - Deaf schools are the *castles*, the cornerstones of our cultures, repositories of cultural heritage, major community resource of Deaf skills for our collective lives.
 - Without what is learned from people immersed in the ‘heart’ of Deaf cultures, mainstreamed Deaf children have no easy means of developing their Deafhood.

Some Examples (2)

3. Deaf children and their families' rights to access to Deaf cultures traditionally denied/obstructed. Now much worse with mainstreaming and cochlear implantation.
4. Deaf people being banned or obstructed from being teachers of Deaf children.
5. Deaf education not taught from Deaf-culturally centred pedagogies.
6. Deaf Studies programmes in universities threatened with closure.

So what we can do to hasten SLPs' cultural recognition ?

- The Rise of Cultural Rights.

“In the late 1980s, ownership of knowledge and artistic creations traceable to the world's indigenous societies, emerged, seemingly out of nowhere, as a major social issue.”

'Who Owns Native Culture ?' Brown (2003) p.ix

Ownership of What ?

Other Minority Peoples are asserting their rights over elements of culture that they consider part of their **patrimony**.

Just a *few* examples :

- Language (many countries)
- Arts (Australia)
- Folklore (New Zealand)
- 'Cultural Knowledge' (many countries)
- Spiritual Beliefs (Native Americans)
- Land / Landscapes (includes plants/wildlife) (Peru)
- Buildings / Other sites (many countries)
- Medical practices (India)

Successful Battles for Collective Ownership.

- The traditional problem for minority cultures – Human Rights are mostly framed as *individual* rights, not *collective* rights (Emery 2010).
- HOWEVER, some of the campaigns just mentioned include examples where collective cultural rights have been won (eg. copyrights owned by a tribe/people, not an individual.)

The Development of Cultural Policies

- Organisations like the UN have *implicitly* recognised cultural diversity since 1946.
- But *explicit* recognition has come much later (triggered by concerns about globalisation).
- 2001 - UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity.
- 2005 – Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005)

- Signed by 117 member states plus EU as of 2011.
- *Recommending*, not binding by law.
- *Celebrates* cultural diversity, *recognises* its value to all of humanity, *recognises* the need to protect cultures.
- *Recalls* that linguistic diversity is fundamental to cultural diversity,
- That EDUCATION systems play a key role, so that minorities can have access to their own cultures.

Additional Implications of Cultural Recognition.

- Minority Languages being the core of minority cultures – thus minority cultures aim to control the means of –
- Teaching, training, assessing, certificating, disseminating those languages and cultures.
- Funding and administering domains such as education, TV / film, and interpreting, etc.

Relevant UNESCO Articles (1)

- 1 (b) “to create the conditions for cultures to flourish....”
- 2.4 “to **create** and strengthen their **means** of cultural expression...”
- 2.7 “access to the means of expression and dissemination...”
- 2.8 “States should promote....openness to other cultures of the world.”

More Articles

- 4.7 “Protection means...preservation, safeguarding and enhancement” of cultures.
- 6.2 (f) “Establishing and supporting public institutions as appropriate.”
- 8.1 to “Determine the existence of special situations where cultural expressions are at risk of extinction, under special threat...”
- 13 “The creation of conditions conducive to sustainable development..”
- 18 - Establishing “An International Fund for Cultural Diversity.”

Routes to Action.

- The ‘UNESCO’ Intergovernmental Committee (established by Article 22)
- Governments to provide information on their reports to UNESCO “on measures taken to protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions...”

(I recommend you look at the UNESCO website on culture. Full of fascinating information !)

But what about other UN routes ?

■ **UN Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2007.**

Fails to protect –

Deaf schools – inclusion is still the keyword.

Deaf cultures – no mention of the Right To Be Born.

Deaf children – no rights with regard to enforced Cochlear Implantation.

■ **UN Rights of Indigenous Peoples** (delayed by colonisers for 20+ years)

“ have the right to practice **and revitalise** their cultural traditions and customs.”

- **BUT** it would be a huge battle to gain recognition via this definition.

And so...

- We have to enlist your own support in the struggle to obtain **collective recognition** via linguistic and now minority cultural rights.
- One place to start – offering you Deafhood Awareness training courses.
- Thank you for watching 😊