# Language Learning and Deafness

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# Language Learning and Deafness

Edited by

*Michael Strong*

Center on Deafness
University of California, San Francisco

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# *Contributors*

John A. Albertini, National Technical Institute for the Deaf, Rochester Institute of Technology
Thomas Allen, The Gallaudet Research Institute, Center for Assessment and Demographic Studies
Gerald P. Berent, National Technical Institute for the Deaf, Rochester Institute of Technology
Joseph H. Bochner, National Technical Institute for the Deaf, Rochester Institute of Technology
Carol J. Erting, Gallaudet University
Martha Gonter Gaustad, Department of Special Education, Bowling Green State University
James Paul Gee, Applied Psycholinguistics Program, Boston University
Wendy Goodhart, Pennsylvania School for the Deaf
Diane Lillo-Martin, University of Connecticut, Department of Linguistics
Mimi WheiPing Lou, Department of Psychiatry, Center on Deafness, University of California, San Francisco
Steven Fritsch Rudser, Department of Psychiatry, Center on Deafness, University of California, San Francisco
Arthur Schildroth, The Gallaudet Research Institute, Center for Assessment and Demographic Studies
Hilde Schlesinger, Department of Psychiatry, Center on Deafness, University of California, San Francisco
Michael Strong, Department of Psychiatry, Center on Deafness, University of California, San Francisco
James Woodward, The Gallaudet Research Institute, Center for Assessment and Demographic Studies

# *Series editors' preface*

We are proud to include *Language Learning and Deafness*, edited by Michael Strong, in the Cambridge Applied Linguistics series. This series provides a forum for the best new work in applied linguistics by those in the field who are able to relate theory, research, and practice.

Strong has assembled a coherent collection of original research reports and position papers written especially for this volume by some of today's leading scholars in language and deafness. Researchers and practitioners will find up-to-date, accessible information on current problems and progress in language education for the hearing-impaired. The research presented herein links studies of language learning by the deaf and the insights these give into language learning in general.

In the introductions to individual chapters, Strong highlights issues of mutual concern to teachers and researchers involved with education in first or second languages, whether oral or manual. In so doing, he cuts across the traditional boundaries separating language acquisition in deaf and hearing populations.

We hope that in identifying areas of mutual concern this book will stimulate further cooperation and exchange of ideas among language professionals involved in the education of hearing, hearing-impaired, and other special needs populations.

Michael H. Long
Jack C. Richards

# *Preface*

There is good reason why a book on deafness should be included in a series devoted primarily to second languages in applied linguistics. The fact is that the prelingually deaf and speakers of other languages share many of the same problems in learning English; insights from work with either deaf or hearing populations, therefore, are often of interest to applied linguists working with the other group.

About 10% of the deaf population in the United States has at least one deaf parent (Rawlings and Jensema, 1977), and in a large majority of these families American Sign Language (ASL) is used in the home and is the children's first language. For this group English is learned either as a second language at school, just as it is for hearing speakers of other languages, or sometimes as another first language from bilingual parents.

About one third of all deaf children in the United States are enrolled in residential schools (see *American Annals of the Deaf*, 1985, p. 132). This figure includes most of the children of deaf parents and many other deaf children. In this environment, where Deaf culture predominates, ASL is usually the medium of social communication among peers.[1] Thus, the children of hearing parents not already fluent in that language learn it quickly as they are socialized into the deaf community. ASL then becomes their primary language, and English is reserved for academic purposes and for conversing with hearing teachers. In this way, the group for whom English is a second language expands to include many children whose parents do not use ASL at home.

The remaining deaf children who are educated in special programs in regular schools or who are mainstreamed learn English as their primary language. However, most, if not all, of these children have difficulty achieving native-like fluency in English, a fact reflected in the oft-quoted

1 Throughout this book, "deaf" (with a lowercase "d") is used to refer to the physical condition of hearing loss, whereas "Deaf" (with an uppercase "D") is used to refer to special collectivities and attitudes arising out of interaction among people with hearing losses. This distinction was first made by Woodward (1972) and has become standard in much of the literature on sociocultural aspects of deafness.

statistic that the average deaf student leaves high school with the ability to read at the fourth or fifth grade level (Trybus and Karchmer, 1977). Many deaf individuals, therefore, require remedial English in the same way that speakers of other languages require ESL instruction. Indeed, deaf learners make many of the same kinds of errors observed among hearing speakers of other languages (Quigley and Paul, 1984). Thus, even this third group, for whom ASL does not play a significant role, can be likened to ESL learners. A book on language learning and the Deaf, then, is indeed appropriately included in a series devoted primarily to second language issues.

Although the field of language learning and deafness is still relatively in its infancy, the last 15 years have seen a sharp increase in the attention scholars from a variety of disciplines have paid to the issues connected with deafness. Linguists are studying the grammar of ASL and are attempting to describe and categorize the varieties of sign language that are used by both deaf and hearing people when they communicate with one another. Neuropsychologists are studying the effects of deafness on the human brain. Educators are interested in the degree to which hearing-impaired children might be taught in classes with hearing children, and how their needs compare with those of children with other kinds of handicap. Physicians are experimenting with cochlear implants, which reverse some of the effects of hearing loss, and psychologists are considering, among other things, the ramifications of this procedure for the mental health of the recipients.

Of particular relevance to applied linguists are the ways in which language acquisition among deaf people compares with that among hearing people, and how the learning of English among the deaf relates to the acquisition of English by speakers of other languages. This book focuses on theoretical issues and research that form this bridge between the disciplines of deafness and applied linguistics. It will be of interest to anyone wishing to understand the complex issues involved in language learning among deaf children and adults, particularly to those who will be working with the deaf as teachers, interpreters, educational administrators, clinicians, or researchers. It will also provide an introduction to issues of language and deafness for other students of applied linguistics, and several chapters present familiar concepts (such as nativization and interlanguage) from a different perspective. The book is aimed at graduate-level readers, and the chapters are about evenly divided between those that summarize existing research, express theoretical positions, or define critical problems and those that report on new, original research. American Sign Language receives somewhat more attention than other kinds of communication, partly as a reflection of the interests of the editor and partly because ASL is increasingly at the center of

educational, social, and linguistic polemics concerning deaf people in the United States and elsewhere.

Michael Strong

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