

Communicating Deaf Theory: A Data Driven Approach

Deaf Studies Conference Transformations Proceedings

Benjamin Bahan

Gallaudet University, www.gallaudet.edu
benjamin.bahan@gallaudet.edu

Matthew Malzkuhn

Gallaudet University, www.gallaudet.edu
matthew.malzkuhn@gallaudet.edu

Abstract

*This presentation builds on our April 2010 talk on framing Deaf Theory (Deaf Studies Today, Utah Valley University, Orem Utah) as we continue to draw from patterns found in literary works, life histories and epistemologies. We propose that the human yearn and drive for communication are central to the development of Deaf Theory. Evidences and insights range from the role gestures play towards the foundation of human language to literary works, organization priorities/agendas, legislative actions, and technological extensions as data enables how we think and talk about communication as being central to Deaf epistemology and theory building. The root and recurrent theme/cultural value of: ‘Com’ will be scrutinized throughout our discussions. Lastly, we aim to extend our theoretical framework into a critical analysis of *The Great Gatsby* (as done by Lois Tyson (2006) in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* by Routledge) magnifying on communication issues that have long been undervalued or less emphasized by our society.*

Keywords

Deaf theory, critical theory, deaf epistemology, data driven approach, communication, literature

Presentation Transcript

(Slide 1)

The full title is “Communicating Deaf Theory: A Data-Driven Approach” as opposed to “A Data-Driven Approach.” My previous presentation discussed two different approaches: deductive and inductive, and the time is perfect to connect the two. My approach is inductive, which is taking a look at the data before we make a decision. Often, research is based on other, existing theories and then drawing from what theories say, adjusting the information to selectively fit the theories. My proposal with Matt instead aimed to conduct research and look at what the data said. Before we go on, just a quick note that the data is very American-centric.

To my out-of-country visitors, please bear that in mind, because we wanted to look at the data and see if they were similar to other research. If this indeed were the case, this would then be robust, if that makes sense. All right.

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Now, this is more of a call for you to figure out what and how to frame this, rather than me telling you theories. I can take a look at the data and say this is how it is; how do we explain it? We use theories to help explain different incidents throughout human lives, experiences, and so on. We can use theories to help explain and frame them. So that's the concept here on the presentation slide. Slobin, a linguist, came to present in 2006 and said, "The right way to develop theory is to collect data then make theory from data." I won't repeat myself, but that's the idea being presented here, supporting that point. What does our data say about us?

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[This remote control isn't designed for us signers. All right.] It's also important to know where to look for data. There is an abundance of information to choose from, so I selected some areas with the goal of examining them more closely.

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First, we have national and global activism and advocacy issues. Secondly, we have pedagogy and the history of medical instruction. Next, technologies and inventions deaf people use. Fifth, arts, literature, and life stories. Lastly, utopia and superheroes. These were the different areas we looked at.

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We looked at the National Association for the Deaf (NAD) and the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), and the issues they focus on.

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The NAD shared its Vision 2020 agenda it is pursuing. First, language. The NAD believes it is the right of every deaf and hard of hearing person to use sign. Secondly, attitude. We must change society's perception of us to a perception that understands us as much as we understand them. Thirdly, self-determination is when we decide for ourselves. Lastly, inner management and improvement. All four of these are part of NAD's vision for 2020. Every year — actually, every four years — the NAD hosts a conference and sets priorities to focus on during the following four years.

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As you can see on the slide, these are some of the priorities of what they fight for and advocate for, endeavoring to improve lives. For example, some issues are expanding captioning access at movie theaters, raising the bar for certified deaf interpreters (CDIs), protecting deaf schools, and federal recognition of ASL. There are many more, such as bilingualism, mental health, early intervention for children and parent education. And then there's the removal of additional requirements imposed upon deaf drivers by the Department of Transportation that the NAD

deemed unnecessary. And that's just for 2008-2010. Look at the 2012-2014 priorities, and then 2014-2016, and then 2016-2018. You can, by examining the topics, detect themes and topics that have similarities. They narrow the topics down from a larger list of topics, into categories. That's how we do it, by the process of categorizing topics that are similar. It's a specific process of themes and analyses.

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Let's move onto the WFD. As you can see, the WFD's vision states, "Human rights for deaf people including recognition of sign language in all aspects of life." The WFD partners with the United Nations and different countries, as shown here in the mission. They have a similar process of recommending position papers, statements, and so forth.

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As shown here, the role of the WFD is to "improve the status of sign languages, better education for Deaf people, improve access to information and services, and improve human rights for Deaf people in developing countries." And on the right, you can see different position papers and statements. When they speak of the unification of sign languages, that is related to the goal of recognizing the differences of sign languages. That's what the NAD, uh, WFD does. It's their position that different sign languages should be recognized. So, looking at the list here, they've written about Deaf women and human rights, sign language work — which is more in relation in ensuring that more deaf people are involved in research on sign language. Then there's the right of Deaf people to drive, and many others. So, as you can see, the NAD focuses on its own issues while the WFD focuses on its own issues. What is the common ground? What commonalities do you notice?

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Some commonalities are listed here. Commonalities are then narrowed down, and we'll discuss that in depth later. I'd like to first focus on advocacy and then other categories.

(Slide 11)

Yes, my ideology appears there. That's okay. I feel it is a form of colonialism, through teaching and medical practices.

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There is a long history of pedagogical and medical practices. You are familiar with that. I don't need to drive that point home or elaborate on it, but I will touch upon the topic. Pedagogy and medicine tend to revolve around making speech possible through education and training on learning how to speak. Or making it possible for deaf people to hear through technology or medicine. That has been the longstanding historical practice. The impact of this upon Deaf people's lives has varied, but by having that absorbed into our beings, that has become part of our life story and life history. That often becomes our story when we explain who we are; we tend to include our history in relation to those practices. With that said, look at how they viewed signing. They placed sign language in the category of a communication disorder. I emphasize: disorder. How did that framing appear?

Because it did not follow the norm and was different from others. So they had to determine how it was deaf — the difference was that we could not hear, hence the medical framework. Funding for research is often framed with that classification. The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders is one example of such a federally-funded agency. Many ASL departments and programs at universities in the United States — I don't know about other countries — are often placed under special education, communication disorders, or speech and language. They're not typically placed under foreign language or other language departments. There are some places that are working to move the placement of such programs, and that's an emerging trend. But generally, the majority places ASL in the first category. So that's one theme; let's move onto the next one.

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Communication technologies.

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Communication technologies developed by other people — meaning society, or hearing people — and what they're developing for us. Often what they give us has to do with hearing, “helping” us. How do we develop technology for ourselves? We take the technology they've developed for us, and hack it or modify it, or we invent our own technology to help ourselves. What are the differences between these? Let's look at the technological development. We use technology that connects to other senses, such as feeling vibrations and seeing lights, and so on. We use technology for communication access such as the TTY, videophone, or text messaging. Hilde Hauland conducted research here in the year — I hope I get the year right — 2007? [looks at audience] No, 2006? I'm one year off. 2006. He came here, and at that time, the hot new technology was the Sidekick. Back then, the Sidekick was in, before the iPhone. It was a nifty device, and popular with deaf people. We could see what was being said by typing on it, and so many people bought the device. Traffic connected to that device was transmitted via a tower network established by T-Mobile. Here at Gallaudet, we were a busy spot on the map; in fact, we generated more traffic than the Capitol and even Wall Street in New York City. Our traffic was extensive, and that happened because deaf people hacked into that technology for our communication purposes. I'm sure now data use is different and more prevalent, but back then, hearing people weren't too fond of texts. They preferred phone calls, but deaf people capitalized upon the use of text messages. The point is, we saw the ability to communicate and used it for our own purposes. Yet designers tend to develop different kinds of technology for us, like t-coils for telephone access. Don't take that as a criticism; many of you probably make use of that feature. The point is what designers think we need is vastly different from what we develop for ourselves. What possible technologies will arise in future generations? I see deaf people continuing to invent new things or even hacking and modifying technology for our purposes. If you go to Deaf Expo, you'll see that the exhibition booths are predominantly about video relay services, communication technology, and so forth. There are a lot of communication-related products and technology presented to deaf people, who then purchase and use them. Overall, such tools fall under the category of communication engineering. We've discussed life activities, education and medicine, communication, and now we'll talk about the arts, literature, and life histories.

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Durr in her studies proposed a common pattern in Deaf art. Recurrent themes tend to be under two categories: resistance or affirmation. Themes include audism, oralism, mainstreaming, cochlear implants, identity confusion, and eugenics. Under the affirmation category, themes include these. These are the basic themes. Okay, so we've discussed these, and now we'll discuss literature narratives.

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I've studied over 500 narratives, although there certainly are many more than 500 narratives, I'll tell you. Some stories used visual vernacular, classifiers, and 3D narrations. These were fascinating and beautiful, but I didn't want to use these. Rather, I used narratives and folklore that had deaf-related themes. For example, Nathie Marbury, who had many stories, had two I compared. The first story was about her going into a Japanese restaurant and trying sushi for the first time. Her friends persuaded her to go there and eat sushi. She went in but was unsure about eating it. She found out it was raw fish and didn't want it. She asked for something that was cooked, so the restaurant served her that. She was dismayed by the small amount of guacamole served with her meal, because she loved a good dollop of that. Given her love of guacamole, she went ahead and put the entire dollop, using her chopsticks, in her mouth. Yeah. We know what happened next. I've seen that story hundreds of times, and every time I see her make the facial expression of how she felt once she tasted the wasabi, I laugh uproariously. Wonderful story. That type of story isn't quite related to being Deaf. She was a Deaf person, so it could somehow be interpreted as that, but that's a stretch. So I didn't include her story in my research. Nathie had another story about her parents making her join the choir. But she was deaf! Instead of using her voice, she awkwardly stood there and copied the other singers' mouth movements. She was a short individual so she stood in the front row and used her peripheral vision to copy the other people's mouth movements. How she described that story was fantastic, so I did include it in my research, because it had a theme relating to the deaf experience and interactions. So, I selected stories and came up with 500 narratives. So as I mentioned, I placed each story in one of approximately 10 categories. Next, I put similar domains from these 10 categories and funneled them into three general themes: first, dealing with communication and language values. Second, ignorance and discrimination and how to deal with that, and third, the different worlds of sensory orientation and senses. These were the three recurrent themes. And then there were motifs that emerged, such as architectural barriers such as doors and windows. These appeared in numerous stories, interestingly. The difference seemed to be that doors were, so to speak, for hearing people, while windows were for deaf people. For instance, hearing people can communicate through closed doors — like knock-knock jokes commonly found among hearing people. Deaf people, of course, don't have that; if someone knocks on the door, we don't respond. What's ours — if we use knock-knock jokes, obviously we've gotten that from hearing people.

Rather, our version is closed windows; deaf people can easily converse through windows, while hearing people can't. So closed doors were architectural barriers for deaf people in many of these stories, and they'd look for windows for access. So these were the themes that emerged throughout the narratives.

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Poetry. With the three themes I identified, I also categorized poems into one of these three themes. Poems listed here by Dorothy Miles were placed into these categories, such as her poem, "Elephant Dance," in discrimination, where she talked about an elephant bound by chains. In "The Skunk," she wrote about how a skunk communicates, "I'm here!" by its smell. That's an example of using senses. Joseph Castronovo [his name sign is J-C on the back of the hand] signed a poem that fit the communication and language values theme. Ella Mae also had poems that fit in different themes. There were different poems that fit into different themes, but as you may notice here, the dominant theme was communication and language values.

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Other poets, such as Patrick Graybill, also wrote poems. Oh, I see an error. I copied/pasted without deleting that part. I was given less time than originally planned, so I recognize that mistake. The stories under the discrimination and sensory orientation categories are actually Dorothy Miles, but the top part is accurate. And then we have Clayton Valli, who had different stories in all three areas.

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Some time ago, Dirksen Bauman and I filmed, and collected data, on Deaf people's life stories. We conducted interviews as we filmed people with different experiences and backgrounds to ensure diversity. Of course, there were so many different themes, and we narrowed them down for this purpose. Some common patterns included feeling at home when communication was present. When communication wasn't present, they felt almost excommunicated and "unhomed." It boiled down to having sign language. Another theme was journeying to a site, being drawn to a site where there was sign language. Maybe they grew up not having that, and then when they became free, such as getting their license at 21 years of age, and then they'd have that initial contact that immediately drew them to that new site of signing. That appeared in many stories. Some were born in that place, while others grew up navigating that journey and eventually going to that site. If a deaf person growing up had a neighbor who could communicate clearly, maybe through fingerspelling, that deaf person would often visit the neighbor. If communication wasn't present, but they could easily play together, the deaf person would often visit. These stories were included as well. Or maybe there was an aunt or uncle who could sign that a deaf person would visit often. Another common story was having deaf neighbors you could see often. The commonality was going to a deaf space, and that created a path that drew deaf people to that site where communication accessibility existed. The more deprivation that took place, the more a deaf person's desire would increase. Deaf people wanted so much to be with one another to the point where, if you look at deaf school yearbooks, you'll often see their hobby listed as "talking with friends." As a hobby? That's peculiar, since talking with friends is generally a normal way of life. Why is that even considered a hobby? A hobby means something you love doing. "Yeah,

I love talking with friends!” They love it so much they’ll list it as a hobby? Well, that says a lot, if you look at it from an outside perspective.

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Let’s talk about utopia. We asked Deaf people to imagine a perfect world. What was their utopia? We have different activities. Some have tried to establish a deaf space or place.

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We know about J.J. Flournoy from a long time ago. The same happened with Jane Elizabeth Groom from Canada. She tried to set up a deaf space. Marvin Miller tried to set up a deaf space. But that’s not all; there are many more out there who I didn’t include. But overall, this shows that deaf people seek a formation of their space on a large scale. I’m looking forward to Cristina Gil’s dissertation on deaf utopias. And then we have literature on deaf utopia.

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Islay was written about a deaf state. And then we have Eyeth, another planet. We have Earth, but on Eyeth, upon arrival, everyone signs. Babies or children who speak are sent to a special school to force them to learn how to sign. That’s a reverse utopia, which provides good data to help us analyze what deaf people truly yearn for. We have superheroes. There’s a new movie called Sign Gene showing Deaf people having superpowers related to language, such as energy emitting from their hands when signing. Language itself is a superpower. In England, The Fingerspellers have superpowers that happen when they use their two-handed fingerspelling or signs. Those movies show a similar theme in the power of language or signing.

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Now, with all that data, how could we unify the data? With the three general themes, we identified sub-themes that fit under each category. Human rights, bilingualism, access to quality information, fighting oralism, and access. And then we have how to deal with ignorance and discrimination, in which we have audism, deficit views, being told we can’t drive much to our chagrin — how to deal with all of that was a common theme in the stories. With sensory orientation, in different worlds and experiences of looking at things. Each of these themes appeared in the stories.

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There were three general themes, as listed here. If you look at them — such as dealing with ignorance and discrimination, often people who are ignorant or value speaking will look at a deaf person and realize, “Wow, you can’t drive because you can’t hear. How can you be informed if an ambulance comes along?” Since they can’t communicate or inform that person, this leads to discrimination. The sensory world deals with the idea of how to communicate through speaking. Everything generally came down to one underlying theme.

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This poem is an ideal way to wrap this up. [shows video] A starving beggar sits in the family circle Who finishes his plate on the dinner table, And he is still the hungriest of his family: All hearing except for him. That as they talk back and forth - He is still begging in silence, for just a taste of their conversation! He is begging for just a teeny bit of communication, almost like biting into a sandwich, to fill him. That's beautiful. That's powerful, and that says everything.

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Tomasello wrote a book on the origin of human communication. The quote here... The common ground is what we build based on ideas, mutual understanding, and communication, the creating and seeking of a common ground -- all created through communication. I've read countless books about communication. There are so many books it's mind-blowing. The explosion of research on communication happened after World War 2. Technology and radio use became more widespread. What do our stories say? What do we say? After taking a look at the data, I know we can frame the data in a way that fits our stories.

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Now, this is a call to you. With our brain power, we can figure it out. It's obvious. I'm not the first person to bring it up. Numerous old articles have discussed and examined communication. Okay. Now we understand. But how do we frame it? How do we say it? If we create a good frame, we can use that lens to gauge society at large and examine literature like *The Great Gatsby* and identify themes. For example, higher-class people use less tactile communication, relying upon spoken communication. Poorer, lower-class citizens use more physical communication to interact. I saw that when I read that book. Other lenses such as the feminism movement generally don't see such things. By moving our lenses to different things, we can really do more with how we formulate a theoretical statement. The world can then benefit from that new perspective. That's our call.

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Thank you.

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PUBLICATION TEAM

Patrick Boudreault, Editor

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