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On a universal language

As a child, I saw a painting of two girls. They are sitting on a bench in a meadow with the dark storm clouds breaking and a rainbow appearing. One girl is obviously blind. The girl who is not blind turns to see the natural phenomenon with the unanswered question, how does one explain a rainbow to someone who has never seen.

Years later as an adult I was at a large music festival in Canada. I was fascinated by the sign language interpreters, but being a musician I was struck with the thought that there had to be a way to interpret more than just the words. That the rhythm and emotion of the music, perhaps even the full experience of how the music makes me feel, could be conveyed. This became my life's work.

I sign music...which is taking sound in its most wonderful expression and finding a way to bring it to deaf people, those who would normally not be able to experience it. Even those who are profoundly deaf and have no hearing will still feel the bottom end, the vibrations at the lower end of the musical scale. I fill in the rest, the poetry and intensity of the words, signed with the emotional intent of the singer of the song, done rhythmically to the beat of the music. The cadence of the poetry becomes one with the emotional impact of the song made manifest through hand shape, body movement, and facial expression. Even those who hear have a more intense emotional response to the songs, because sign, when it is done well, has the ability to communicate on a deeper level, heart to heart. It's much harder for the audience member to stay detached, removed, closed off--or asleep. Signed music performance can touch the soul.

I once observed a woman, without the use of her legs, dancing professionally from her wheelchair, as a member of a dance troupe--her determination had set her free. Physicist Stephen Hawkins can explain the universe because computer technology has set him free from a body that functions only minimally. Wheelchair and computer technology are their enabling tools. Sign language is the enabling tool for the deaf.

If sign language can cut across the sound barrier and bring music to a silent world, than perhaps it can also cut through other barriers and borders and bring us all closer together. People enrich their lives by learning a second language, especially if that language is sign. From learning to sign, I not only learned about another culture (the world of the deaf), I learned more about my own language as well. As Richard Paul said when writing about the logic of language, “words have definite uses and defined concepts...every language has a highly refined logic which must be learned to express oneself precisely”.[1] Learning sign language helped me to understand the importance of using a language precisely. Since the signs represent concepts, not words, it is all the more obvious that they must be used correctly. When I translate this to my primary language, English, it helps me to understand that the words I use may have a different meaning or implication than I thought.

Signing is a symbolic language. Sign language is done differently in every country around the world just as spoken language is different. For example the signs used in American Sign Language are used in Canada and the United States and are similar to French sign, but are different from signs used in Africa or England; in some countries the alphabet is signed with one hand, in some with two. In the United States the sign for America is interlocked fingers making a half circle in front of the body, symbolizing different peoples coming together. But in some countries, the sign for Americans looks like someone taking a bag of money from their side and plunking it down on the counter. Even though sign language is done differently all over the world, if I were to travel to a country whose sign I didn't know, in a few days we would be able to understand each other unlike spoken language where the comprehension time is significantly longer. Because of differences such as this, the international deaf community has created a truly global sign language that can be used as a second language by the deaf or hearing community.

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[1] Critical Thinking Handbook: High School. Paul, Richard. Unpublished class handout, 1990 p.373.

Additionally, this universal language taught internationally, could be a second language for every country with less resistance than Esperanto that was not accepted and is not in use today.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines Esperanto as, “An artificial international language invented in 1887, characterized by a vocabulary based on word roots common to many European languages, a single unvarying ending for each principal part of speech, and a regularized system of conjugation and inflection."[2] (2) Even though world peace and unity were the goal of the creator of Esperanto, no country wants to lose its identity by giving up its language.

We do need an international language that would be a second language, without each country losing its own unique culture. Universal sign language would be the obvious choice for an international language that would have a better chance of being accepted.

In 1975 the Unification of Signs Commission was created. Deaf leaders were brought together under the auspices of the World Federation of the Deaf to create a universal language. The commission members were from Denmark, Great Britain, Italy, the USSR, and the United States. As Jerome Schein states in Speaking the Language of Sign, “Perhaps because the committee’s work was divided between five persons only, it accomplished the astonishing task of overcoming national linguistic prejudices and agreeing on a basic set of 1,470 signs in less than two years. The lack of funds, from government or other sources, and the great distances that separated committee members may also have contributed to the speed with which they worked.”[3]

The language they came up with is **"**Gestuno”. It is much less an artificial language than is Esperanto. It was made of a beautiful melding of natural signs taken from each delegate’s country as well as additional signs from Sweden and Finland.

This could be a language with the potential to cross all cultural barriers. Each country would keep its unique language, but could also learn this new language. In this way each country could still feel that their particular language is “best”. United States anthropologist Margaret Mead first proposed this in July 1976 in an article in Mainliner called “Unispeak: The need for a universal second language.” In it Mead “urged that sign be considered as a way around the attachment people have for their native tongues. She reasoned that a competing manual language would be less threatening than a spoken one.”[4]

This would give all countries a way to communicate with people from all over the world. (Computer programs that translate e-mail from one language into another are fine technology, but for those living in rural or non-technologized countries, computer solutions don't solve the problem...in spite of computer technology face-to-face contact is full and rich--especially if the two parties meeting can understand each other).

Gestuno could be used and understood by everyone who learns it, including deaf, hearing, and blind people. Even blind or deaf-blind people are able to understand what is being communicated with sign language. They do this by putting their hands over the signer’s hands. In this way they are able to feel the sign shapes. Only those who cannot use their hands would not be able to communicate with it, though they would have the potential to understand it. Also infants can begin to express themselves with sign as early as 8 months. Because motor skills develop faster than vocal cords, infants are able to use their hands to communicate before they are able to speak.[5]

The deaf community continues to refine their international language. They have now added “classifiers’’ with which they hope to make their language even more accessible and easier to understand. “Classifiers” are new hand shapes with which the object or action being expressed is more visually obvious. Because of this, even if you didn’t know the language, you would probably still get the general idea of what the signer was trying to communicate.

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[2] American Heritage Dictionary Morris, William. “Esperanto" New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969 p.447.
[3] Speaking the Language of Sign. Schein, Jerome. New York: Doubleday & Co., 1984 p.157.
[4] Speaking the Language of Sign. Schein, Jerome. New York: Doubleday & Co., 1984 p.74.
[5] Sign with your Baby Garcia, Joseph. Washington: Stratton Kehl, 1999.

Because Gestuno is a harmonic combination of signs from many countries, it is free of the prejudices and inequalities that so many languages possess. It has the potential to be a language that would empower all who use it, man or woman, no matter what color or religion that person is. Sign language was created by deaf people for deaf people. While I am not deaf, knowing sign language has made my life richer. Victor Hugo said, “What matters deafness of the ear, when the mind hears. The one true deafness, the incurable deafness, is that of the mind.”[6]

[6] When the Mind Hears, a History of the Deaf. Lane, Harlan. New York: Vintage, 1989.