

Reflection Paper #2

This week, the class focused on studying signed language communities. There were three communities which were emphasized: the Martha's Vineyard community, a traditional Yucatec Mayan village, and Desa Kolok. According to a paper written by Bahan and Poole Nash, a signing community is a society where deaf people and hearing people live together cohesively. Everyone in the community can and will sign, particularly in the presence of a deaf person. These societies view deaf people as a normality, rather than a minority or disabled person.

When the island of Martha's Vineyard off the coast of Massachusetts was colonized, there was no easy source of transportation to and from the mainland. As a result, when the Weald of Kent moved to the Vineyard in the 1600s carrying the gene for deafness, the population of deaf people on the island became significant. With a small, isolated population, inbreeding was a common occurrence, which also made deafness and the spread of this gene prevalent. The deaf population became concentrated around the town of Chilmark up-island.

What I think is interesting about the signing community on Martha's Vineyard, is that hearing people would have likely grown-up viewing deafness the way that deaf people do. What I mean by that is that people who are born deaf only know what it is like to be deaf, therefore deafness is not something to be fixed, it is simply the norm. On the other hand, in most societies, many hearing people grow up without knowing what deafness is. Therefore, when they meet someone who is deaf, it is often viewed as a horrible condition and a problem to be solved. On Martha's Vineyard, hearing people would have been raised around deaf people, and therefore not view it as anything out of the ordinary. Deafness wouldn't be a problem to be solved, they would just know that some people hear, and some people don't. Communication wouldn't be an issue,

and hearing people would be able to learn about some of the advantages of using sign language as opposed to spoken language.

On the Vineyard, children growing up in this signing community would not be aware of the view that mainland society had towards deaf people, due to the community's isolation. I think that the Yucatec Mayan village would have been similar. While this village is not on an island and still exists today, the village is fairly closed off to outsiders. The residents have not assimilated much with the societies outside of the village, as mentioned in a paper by Robert Johnson. Even in modern times, this Mayan village has maintained almost complete equality between deaf and hearing people within its walls. Deaf and hearing people will make conversation and have all the same access to economic benefits and the village community. However, while this is a norm inside the village, the deaf people have been noted as not being particularly sympathetic towards the deaf community in the rest of Mexico or in neighboring countries. I think it is interesting how a deaf population was able to grow in an area on the mainland. However, it was described in the Johnson paper that the village is surrounded by rocky, hilly, and dry forested terrain. Therefore, it is likely that there would be little travel or development in this area, leading to a very rural and isolated environment of people who would continue to marry within the village and lead to a growth in the deaf population.

The last signing community that was studied this week was the Desa Kolok community in Bali, Indonesia. This is a particularly interesting signing community because it is still thriving today, even though Bali has become a major tourist destination, and unlike the Mayan village, this community is open to visitors. However, even with so much movement in and out of the village, the signing community has remained. Part of this may be because the oral language used in Desa Kolok is nonliterate.

I think that the power given by society to English in American culture, is not only because it is the auditory language, but also because both deaf and hearing people need to have at least a basic understanding of the language to communicate. While speaking English is not necessary for deaf people, being able to write and read the language provides the basis for most daily communication between deaf and hearing people. Therefore, English is a required second language for most American deaf people. However, in Desa Kolok, neither the signed nor spoken languages are literate. Therefore, deaf people are not under the responsibility of learning two languages to effectively communicate. The hearing people can speak to each other, but when it comes to communicating with deaf people, signing is required.

Even though each of the three communities mentioned in this paper are considered signing communities, I think it is noteworthy that they all formed under different circumstances. While some may be historic, others are thriving; and while some are isolated, others welcome tourists. Signing communities do not have to meet a certain requirement of being historical or remote, they can form wherever people are willing foster them.