

Construction of Sign Language as a Historical Object

Some questions and fallacies

Harlan Lane, *When the Mind Hears. A History of the Deaf* (1985)

Jonathan Rée, *I See a Voice. A Philosophical History of Language, Deafness and the Senses* (1999)

A history is bound to be an interpretation because, for one thing, it makes selection at every turn among an infinity of facts. It defines its domain, excluding some periods, nations, individuals, including others. (...) Since a history, then, must have a point of view and should have a point of view, the reader might like to have mine clearly posted, as follows. With the recent evidence from linguistics that American Sign Language is a natural language, the signing community is revealed to be a linguistic minority, and this history interprets the record of their struggle in that light.

H. Lane, *When the Mind Hears*

Answer me this: if we hadn't a voice or a tongue, and wanted to express things to one another, wouldn't we try to make signs by moving our hands, head, and the rest of our body, just as dumb people do at present? (...) So, if we wanted to express something light in weight or above us, I think we'd raise our hand towards the sky in imitation of the very nature of the thing. And if we wanted to express something heavy or below us, we'd move our hand towards the earth. And if we wanted to express a horse (or any other animal) galloping, you know that we'd make our bodies and our gestures as much like theirs as possible. (...) Because the only way to express anything by means of our body is to have our body imitate whatever we want to express.

Plato, *Cratylus*, 422e-423a

Linguistics is still hampered by an ancient belief, stated by Plato and reaffirmed in the seventeenth century by René Descartes, that mind and language are unrelated to the lowly material universe, and that our souls are likewise independent on our bodies.

W. Stokoe, *Language in Hand*

For it's a remarkable fact that no men (including even madmen) are so dull-witted or stupid that they can't arrange different words together so as to form an utterance that makes their thoughts understood; whereas no other animal, however perfect and well-endowed it may be, can do anything like that. It's not because they lack organs of speech; for we see that magpies and parrots can utter words as we do yet can't speak as we do—i.e. utter words while showing that they are thinking what they are saying. Whereas men who are born deaf and dumb, and thus at least as lacking in speech-organs as the beasts are, usually invent their own signs to make themselves understood by those whom they live with, who have the opportunity to learn their language. This doesn't show merely that the beasts have less reason than men; it shows that they don't have reason at all.

René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*.