

**9.00 – 9.30**

**Josef Fulka:** *Construction of Sign Language as a Historical Object: Some Questions and Fallacies*

When Stokoe proved, in early sixties, that sign language is a linguistic system in its own right, not only did he inaugurate sign language linguistics, but, as a consequence, certain issues concerning the history of Deaf communities and their language were raised. Deaf communities came to be considered as linguistic minorities with their own cultural heritage and several attempts followed to trace back their history (Lane, Rée, and others). We propose to tackle the difficult methodological issue of how to interpret, in the light of those modern findings – which seem to represent, in themselves, an inevitable starting point for such research – historical materials and texts where the phenomenon of sign language may well be mentioned but where it is treated in a different way and in relation to different issues. In the first part, some general methodological questions will be posed. In the second part, two separate case studies will be presented, demonstrating how historical material may be distorted by taking an unduly modern perspective: 1) one of the most frequently stated reasons of the oppression of sign language is the Cartesian spirit of modern intellectual tradition. Authors like Brenda Farnell and William Stokoe himself argue that the Cartesian body/mind dualism, identifying language with the mind as opposed to the body, opens the way for excluding sign language from the realm of linguistic phenomena. We will attempt to show that Descartes' position is exactly the contrary and that sign language, for him, does have linguistic nature; 2) Edward Tylor's *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* (1865) have given rise, in the context of Deaf studies, given rise to extremely diversified interpretations, ranging from very positive to overtly negative. We will attempt to show that this seemingly incomprehensible diversity is due to the fact that sign language, as treated by Tylor, is a hybrid object comprising – according to modern standards – irreconcilable qualities (linguistic and non-linguistic nature, universality and particularity etc.) and resisting any univocal interpretation.

**Bibliography**

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Lane, H., *When the Mind Hears*, Random House, New York 1984

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Stokoe, W., *Language in Hand*, Gallaudet University Press, Washington

Tylor, E., *Researches into the Early History of Mankind*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1964

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