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Signs of Prison Life: Linguistic Adaptations of Deaf Inmates

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Abstract

Results of a preliminary analysis of the language use of 96 profoundly deaf prisoners incarcerated in a Texas state prison is reported. Results indicate that 90% of deaf offenders at the facility are using visual-manual communication, with approximately 20% using non-standard signing or minimal language skills (MLS). Four Deaf offenders participated in videotaped storytelling sessions, with the purpose of identifying adaptive use of ASL by the population. Two categories of adaptive communication are identified: ASL that is representative of prison life, and iconic signs used primarily between Deaf prisoners and hearing prisoners or correctional officers.

Background

In 1913, George Veditz made his famous statement, "As long as we have deaf people on the earth, we will have signs." Nowhere is this more evident than on the E-Wing of the Estelle Unit, located at Huntsville, Texas. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice has designated this 2,910-bed facility to house a sheltered unit, and groups almost all of its 96 signing deaf offenders on a single cellblock (J. Franklin, personal communication, May 8, 2001). This practice serves to benefit both prison administrators and offenders in a number of ways, particularly in terms of providing interpreting services in accordance with the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA).

Today, although many deaf offenders still find it necessary to use legal means to obtain access to communication in the criminal justice system (Access Ordered 1999; Deaf Inmates Gain, 2001; Miller & Vernon, 2001; Pollack, 1996), the practice of grouping deaf prisoners has the potential to greatly reduce their social isolation and to facilitate rehabilitation. Deaf pris-

oners who are housed together learn prison rules and basics of the legal system from each other, while others from socially isolated backgrounds begin to develop their American Sign Language (ASL) and English language skills in earnest (J. Lee, personal communication, May 8, 2001).

Throughout history, language has transformed to meet the demands of our changing culture. The development of computer technology provides one example of how language expands. Twenty-five years ago, most people would not have thought of a mouse as anything more than a rodent, yet today it is integral equipment for computer software users. Corrections professionals and offenders in Texas state prisons use a spoken vernacular that has been evolving since the system's inception in 1848 (Horton & Turner, 1999). An analogous linguistic process is now occurring among deaf offenders in Texas, which has its foundations in the practice of grouping deaf prisoners. Since 1987, the population has grown from 12 to 96 deaf offenders (J. Lee, personal communication, May 8, 2001). The purpose of this paper is to identify and document sign language adaptations of male deaf offenders in a Texas prison.

Method

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice provided access to 96 deaf prisoners, who were each screened individually for language use. The prison's former staff interpreter, Jerry Lee, an RID certified sign language interpreter who has Deaf parents and 20 years tenure at the Estelle Unit, served as a language consultant in the identification of language use by offenders. Four offenders were selected for videotaped interviews, in which they told stories and answered questions about their life experiences. To assist in the identification of adaptive signs, Deaf ASL users Terold Gallien and Marcus Meyers acted as consultants. The videotaped signs provided by informants during storytelling were documented through digital photography using a Deaf model, Terold Gallien. The signs were then provided to a focus group of 15 Deaf prisoners for review. At that time, production of the signs was confirmed, corrected, or discarded as determined by group consensus. Descriptive statistics and ethnographic analysis (described above) were used.

Results

Sign language was the primary mode used by deaf prisoners at Estelle. Among the signers, no distinction was made between the use of contact languages such as Pidgin Sign English (PSE), Mexican Sign Language (LSM), or ASL. One-fifth of the population was using non-standard sign language. For the purpose of this research, non-standard sign language is described as language variations typically used by undereducated, language delayed, or multiply-disabled deaf adults. This includes deaf offenders who were not able to effectively use any signed or spoken language, i.e., those with minimal language skills. Another 10% of the population were not signers, and relied on speaking and speechreading English or Spanish for communication (Figure 1).

Non-standard signers are particularly disadvantaged in the prison environment. Many have restricted sign language and English vocabularies and are functionally illiterate, reading below the third-grade level (Vernon & Miller, 2001). In many cases, they are not able to ascertain a correctional officer's spoken directives, discern directives through notewriting, or comprehend prison-generated print materials such as booklets that outline disciplinary regulations. They also may not recognize basic rules of social discourse, such as turn-taking cues provided by others during a conversation (Miller, 2000).

The experience of one Deaf jail inmate in Texas illustrates the perils that those with minimal language skills may face in

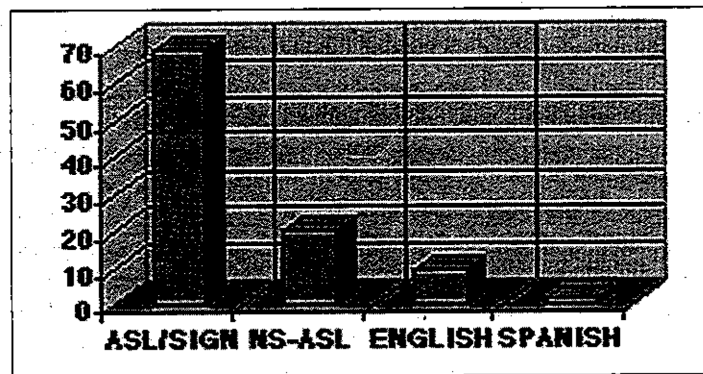


Figure 1
Primary Language Use of Deaf Prisoners in Texas
(n = 96)

the correctional environment. A Deaf man was reportedly incarcerated in a county jail for four weeks before he was apprised of the facility's laundering procedures in a language he could understand. As a result, he wore the same clothing for an entire month (A Texas Tragedy, 2001).

Offenders with minimal language skills usually require additional time and effort by interpreters for communication to be effective. However, even those without language disorders may experience difficulty comprehending complex legal concepts. This is in part attributable to delayed literacy skills and the lack of accessible communication, such as interpreters or real time captions as they move through the criminal justice process (Miller & Vernon, 2001).

Informants' Stories and Backgrounds

Informant #1

A 37-year-old Deaf African-American male shared his perspectives about interpreting services at the facility, using ASL. It was his view that the prison needs to provide more than the one staff interpreter currently assigned to the unit from 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. He believed that the staff interpreter had behaved unprofessionally by remaining in his parole board hearing after he had been dismissed from the room. He wondered if she had said something about him that caused him to be denied parole. He expressed three signs relevant to the prison environment (Table 1).

Informant #2

A 28-year-old Deaf Hispanic male who uses PSE discussed a classification error that occurred following his arrival at the prison diagnostic unit. Because he has intelligible speech, he stated that prison personnel did not believe he qualified for placement on the sheltered unit with deaf offenders. Isolated in a facility with no communication services, he recounts being coerced into a prison gang for protection. He remained at this facility for four months before his parents were able to intervene, at which point he was transferred to the sheltered unit. This informant expressed five signs relevant to prison living (Table 1).

Informant #3

A 39-year-old Deaf Caucasian male and ASL user recounted various jobs he had performed during his past 10 years at the facility. His work history included sorting meal cards for inmates on special diets, dishwasher, cook in the inmate kitchen, and baker for the officer's dining room. He is not working at this time due to numerous medical problems. He expressed 11 signs relevant to prison living (Table 1).

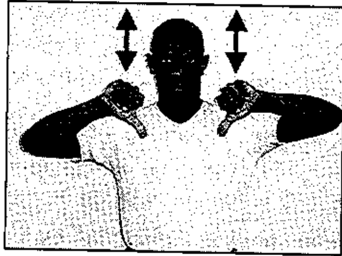
Informant #4

A 44-year-old Deaf Hispanic male, who communicated using a combination of ASL and spoken English, shared his educational history. As a child, he was sent to an oral school and was later placed in a special education class based solely on his limited ability to correctly pronounce English words. He described his view of Deaf culture from behind bars, and explained how he communicates with hearing officers and other inmates in the prison environment. He expressed 10 signs relevant to prison living (Table 1).

Table 1.
Environmentally Adapted ASL Vocabulary of Four Deaf State Prisoners.

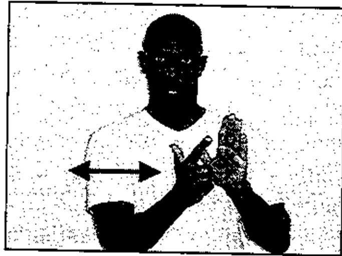
Informant	Adaptive ASL Vocabulary
1	AD-SEG, CAPTAIN, DISCIPLINARY (OFFICE)
2	CELLIE, FARM, PUNCH (DRINK), SENTENCE, TRANSIENT (WING)
3	CASE, COMMISSARY, LIEUTENANT, LOCK-DOWN, MAJOR, PRISON, SHAKEDOWN, SNITCH, PUNK, TEXTILE MILL, WARDEN
4	CONTRABAND, FREE WORLD, GIVE-ME-HALF, SHOWOFF, HAWG, HAWGED, HOME-BOY, HOUSE, PAROLE, RACK UP

Figure 2.
Adaptive ASL descriptive of the prison environment.



SHAKEDOWN

Figure 3.
Commonly used ASL as adapted to a prison-related concept.



CONTRABAND

Gallaudet alumni Terold Gallien demonstrates prison ASL. Terold has an M.S. in Deaf Education from Lamar University and currently teaches Deaf students at T.H. Rogers School, in Houston, Texas.

Discussion

At the conclusion of the video analyses, two categories of adaptive manual-visual communication were compiled. These categories are adapted ASL that is representative of prison life, and iconic signs used for communication between Deaf prisoners and hearing prisoners or correctional officers. The primary category of this study is made up of commonly known ASL signs as adapted to the prison setting. Adaptive ASL may appear as a sign that is descriptive of something in the prison environment but not typically seen in free-world or non-prison settings, as in SHAKEDOWN (a search of an offender's property or living space; Figure 2), or it may be prison vernacular that has been translated into ASL, often appearing as a logical sign choice that is simply being used in a different context, as in CONTRABAND (Figure 3).

Five iconic signs used between hearing officers or inmates and Deaf inmates were identified: CHOW, GIVE-ME-HALF, RACK UP (locking prisoners into their cells), PUNCH (DRINK), and TRANSIENT (WING). These signs were applied to basic everyday living situations in the prison environment (Table 2; Appendix). Compound signs and ASL signs that are commonly known in the Deaf community, such as CAPTAIN or LIEUTENANT, are not pictured or described.

A total of 29 ASL signs adapted to prison life were identified during the prisoner's storytelling. Some of the signs may not be considered conceptually accurate by ASL scholars, as in the case of SENTENCE. This concept was produced by several offenders in a manner that indicated a grammatical unit rather than a legally mandated punishment. This usage may be due to variations in the languages and modes used to educate deaf children, a lack of familiarity with the American justice system, or non-standard language use, as stated was found in one-fifth of study participants.

Limitations of the Study

The use of videotape, the presence of correctional officers, and the hearing/signing status of the interviewer all have the potential to alter the communication dynamic. Informants appeared to be uncomfortable with sharing certain aspects of prison living on videotape. It is difficult to create the atmosphere needed to conduct an in-depth interview in the prison environment due to the lack of privacy. There were frequent interruptions throughout the process. Obtaining permission to bring video equipment into the facility required an application to an internal review board, which took several months for approval to finalize. Previous research indicates that Deaf individuals are more likely to codeswitch from ASL to PSE or Signed English in the presence of a hearing interviewer (Lucas, Bayley, & Rose, 2000). All of these phenomena may preclude the attainment of natural ASL use by informants.

Summary

The deaf inmate population in Texas has increased to eight times the size it was in 1987. In the past 14 years since the grouping of deaf prisoners was implemented by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, adaptive ASL and iconic signs that are reflective of the state prison environment have emerged. Although the ASL adaptations described by this research are largely specific to a single male Deaf offender population in Texas, there is a potential benefit to interpreters working with Deaf offenders in correctional settings. For example, Deaf offenders who are isolated in the system or recently grouped together by prison administrators in other states may not have vocabulary in place that relates to incarceration or related legal constructs. The ASL concepts that have already

been established through natural processes by this Texas population can be implemented in many cases.

Acknowledgments

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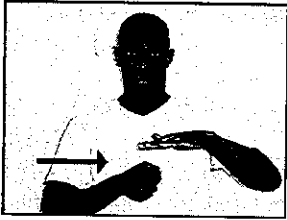
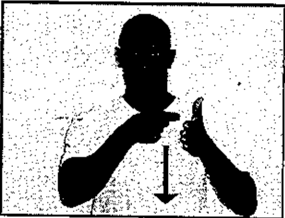
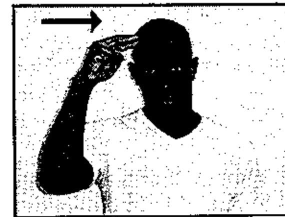
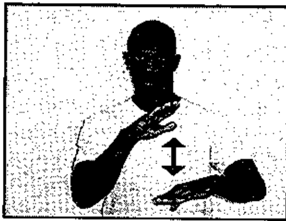
Table 2.
Adaptive ASL Use By Deaf Prisoners.

ASL Sign	Description
 AD-SEG	Administrative segregation can be used to separate active gang members, offenders in disciplinary status, or offenders in need of protection from the general prison population.
 CASE	Offenders who do not follow prison regulations may receive a disciplinary case. Disciplinary hearings are held daily, with offenders penalized progressively, from loss of commissary privileges to placement in Ad-Seg.
CHOW	This iconic sign is often used by hearing officers and offenders to communicate mealtimes to Deaf offenders. To produce this sign, a circular motion is applied at the wrist.
COMMISSARY	The prison store, or commissary, is where offenders in eligible status can purchase snacks and hygiene items, once per month. This sign is very similar to a sign for COLORADO. Directionality, from shoulder down or wrist up, is unimportant.
LAY IN	In Texas prisons, a "lay in" is an appointment. This is signed the same as CHECK (as in CHECK-BOOK).
PAROLE VIOLATION	Offenders may return to prison on a parole violation.
 PRISON	Derived from an older Texas School for the Deaf sign indicating PUNISHMENT.



PROBATION

Many offenders are on probation prior to their incarceration in the Texas state prison system. A variation on this sign is to use the same motion, with the dominant hand forming a P handshape.

SNITCH

A snitch is an offender who trades information for personal gain. A slight forward movement of the wrist is used to produce this sign, as in SNAKE. A variant production is the placement of this handshape to the neck, as in VAMPIRE.

Appendix

Some Prison Terms for Use in Preparing English-to-ASL Translations

Boss - A corrections officer. An ASL sign for BOSS is used.

Cellie - An inmate's cell mate is referred to as his cellie. An ASL sign for ROOMMATE is used.

Diagnostic Unit - Inmates are placed in the Diagnostic Unit upon arrival, where they undergo fingerprinting and ID, psychological testing, and a medical exam. This concept is fingerspelled: D-U.

Farm - A prison, so named because historically, Texas state prisons have operated agricultural industries. An ASL sign for FARM is used.

Flat Time - Inmates who are required to serve their full sentence with restricted opportunity for parole are serving flat time. An ASL sign for FLAT TIRE is used, without the accompanying deflation of the cheeks.

Free World - Society outside of the prison. "In the free world, I was a plumber." This may appear as a compound sign in ASL, using FREE+WORLD, or in some cases, simply as WORLD.

House - An offender's cell may be referred to as his house. An ASL sign for HOUSE is used.

High Security - One of the types of administrative segregation, often used for gang members. This concept is fingerspelled: H-S.

Pre-Hearing Detention - Another type of administrative segregation, used for offenders charged with a major disciplinary case who are awaiting a hearing. This concept is fingerspelled: P-H-D.

Rack Up - Lock inmates into their cells. The index finger of the dominant hand makes a circular motion, held at about eye level, succeeded by a "thumbs up" gesture, which is raised above the head.

Roll the Doors - Cellblock doors are opened to allow inmates in and out once an hour, usually on the hour. An ASL sign for OPEN DOOR is used, usually indicating a sliding door.

SSI - Offenders may work as Support Services Inmates in the officer's dining room or medical facility kitchen, if their behavior is exemplary. This acronym is fingerspelled: S-S-I.