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**FROM LANGUAGELESS INTERACTION TO ENLANGUAGED
INTERACTION: A PHILOSOPHICAL STUDY OF ILDEFONSO**

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ABSTRACT

This investigation centres on a man, Ildefonso, learning his *first* language (American Sign Language) at twenty-seven. The prime source of material is Susan Schaller's account of teaching Ildefonso, *A Man Without Words*. Certain claims about language and education from the Deaf community, and writings of the Deaf are a second important source of material. The deaf individual, not the theory of language as such, is the focus of the issue of languagelessness in these materials and in this dissertation.

Schaller's account throws doubt on some conventional notions of language, and an alternative view of language emerges. Her early lessons are based on conventional ideas: that language is *fundamentally* a symbol system; that language is a tool for transferring information; that vocabulary and grammar are of prime importance. Lessons based on these ideas fail with Ildefonso.

Progress occurs when Schaller stops trying to show Ildefonso ASL signs and begins trying to confer with him. Her description of his progress suggests languaging is *fundamentally* a particular kind of interaction. I characterise this as *reciprocal back and forth interaction*, and trace its development in three dialogues between Schaller and Ildefonso. One of the most surprising features of this development is the secondary nature of sign/words and grammar to becoming enlanguaged.

Some years later, Schaller asks Ildefonso about his thinking before he acquired ASL. He gives none of the conventional answers we might expect. After two failed attempts to answer he takes Schaller to meet some of his languageless friends so that she can see for herself. Clearly he wants her to see *interaction*. I have characterised this interaction as *performer-audience interaction*.

Humberto Maturana's theory of language, based on the interaction of living systems, provides a framework which accommodates both performer-audience interaction and reciprocal back and forth interaction. The transition to becoming enlanguaged has more to do with coming to interact in a particular way than with acquiring a vocabulary or learning grammar. Language is *fundamentally* a particular way of interacting.

This view of language helps us understand why bilingual education (incorporating a signed language) is important for profoundly deaf children. We see why sign systems devised and imposed by the hearing do not work, but home sign systems generated by deaf children do.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iv

CHAPTER 1 1

1.1 Bilingual Education for the Deaf 2

1.2 Deafness: Disability or Difference 4

1.2.1 The Status of the Signed Languages of the Deaf 6

1.2.2 Deafness as a Health Concern 11

1.2.3 The Hidden Agenda 13

1.3 Oralism 15

1.3.1 John and Diana: The Realities of Oralism 16

1.3.2 NZSL: A Professional’s Reply to Parents 21

1.3.3 Lyneen and Craig: The Anger of Success 24

1.3.4 Speechreading: “Approaching the Ridiculous” 25

1.4 A Concession: Spoken Language in a Signed Form 29

1.4.1 Visual English 29

1.4.2 Merely Visual or Visually Coherent 30

1.5 Mainstreaming 34

1.5.1 Integration or Exclusion 34

1.5.2 Community or Isolation 36

1.5.3 Postscript: Real Integration 40

1.6 Signed Languages and the Languages of Ethnic Minorities 42

1.6.1 Indigenous or Introduced 43

1.6.2 Indigenous Minorities 44

1.6.3 Immigrant Minorities 46

1.6.4 The Infant Minority of One 47

CHAPTER 2 52

2.1 Language Issues In The History Of The Deaf 52

2.2 Speech or Manual Signs 54

2.2.1	<i>Jacob Pereire: The Greatest Demutiser</i>	55
2.2.2	<i>Saboureux de Fontenay: The Star Pupil</i>	56
2.2.3	<i>Tricks of the Trade</i>	58
2.2.4	<i>The Skill of Speech</i>	59
2.3	Signed French or Deaf Signs	60
2.3.1	<i>Pierre Desloges: Defender of Sign Language</i>	61
2.3.2	<i>Epée and Sicard: Manual Signs</i>	64
2.3.3	<i>Roch-Ambroise Bebian: A Signing Teacher</i>	66
2.3.4	<i>Ferdinand Berthier</i>	68
2.3.5	<i>Bilingualism at Last</i>	69
CHAPTER 3		73
3.1	A Starting Point: Language	74
3.1.1	<i>Lost in the World</i>	75
3.1.2	<i>Language and a World View</i>	76
3.2	A Starting Point: The Languageless Person	79
3.2.1	<i>Languageless Persons: Possible Candidates</i>	80
3.2.2	<i>Ildefonso: A Probable Case</i>	82
3.2.3	<i>Possible Misunderstandings</i>	84
3.3	A Starting point: The Late Acquisition of Language	89
3.3.1	<i>Virgil</i>	89
3.3.2	<i>Ildefonso</i>	90
3.3.3	<i>Deaf Opinions on Languagelessness</i>	91
3.4	The Late Acquisition of Sight: A Possible Case	94
3.4.1	<i>An Important Distinction: Strictly Blind or Functionally Blind</i>	94
3.4.2	<i>A Hypothetical Case - Berkeley's Blind Man</i>	96
3.4.3	<i>Berkeley's Blind Man could be Functionally Blind</i>	100
3.4.4	<i>Assessing S.B's Sight</i>	102
3.5	The Late Acquisition of Language - A Possible Case	105
3.5.1	<i>The Distinction Explored for Languageless and Enlanguaged</i>	106
3.5.2	<i>Assessing Ildefonso's Languagelessness</i>	109

CHAPTER 4	113
4.1 The Acquisition of Sight	114
4.1.1 <i>A Naïve View of Seeing</i>	114
4.1.2 <i>Can Virgil See?</i>	115
4.1.3 <i>A Comment on a Naïve View of Language</i>	116
4.2 Learning to See	117
4.2.1 <i>Virgil Learns to See Objects</i>	119
4.2.2 <i>Seeing Objects</i>	124
4.2.3 <i>A Comment on Naming or Languageing Objects</i>	124
4.2.4 <i>Virgil Learns to See His Way Around</i>	125
4.2.5 <i>Seeing His Way Around</i>	128
4.2.6 <i>A Comment on Ildefonso Languageing his Way Around</i>	129
4.3 Firsthand Reports	129
4.3.1 <i>Does Virgil Himself Report on the Late Acquisition of Sight?</i>	130
4.3.2 <i>A Comment on the Value of Firsthand Reports</i>	135
CHAPTER 5	137
5.1 Two Pictures of Language	139
5.2 The First Picture of Language	141
5.2.1 <i>Information Transfer</i>	141
5.2.2 <i>Language as a Symbol System</i>	144
5.2.3 <i>Ildefonso's First Steps</i>	145
5.3 The Second Picture of Language	147
5.3.1 <i>Communicative Interaction?</i>	147
5.3.2 <i>No Intended Message is Received</i>	150
5.3.3 <i>Linguistic Exploration</i>	152
5.4 Ildefonso's First Lessons	153
5.4.1 <i>The Name-Thing Connection</i>	155
5.4.2 <i>The First TREE Lesson: An Object and a Sign</i>	156
5.4.3 <i>The Second TREE Lesson: Drawing an Object from A Sign</i>	159
5.4.4 <i>The First CAT Lesson: A Picture and a Sign</i>	160
5.4.5 <i>The Second CAT Lesson: A Written Word and an ASL Sign</i>	163
5.4.6 <i>The Third CAT Lesson: A Mime</i>	164

5.4.7	<i>The Fourth CAT Lesson: The Cat Drama</i>	166
5.5	The “Breakthrough” and its Aftermath	168
5.5.1	<i>The “Breakthrough”</i>	168
5.5.2	<i>After the “Breakthrough”</i>	170
5.6	The Importance of Participating in Interaction	179
5.6.1	<i>The First Interactive Lesson: MALE and FEMALE</i>	180
5.6.2	<i>The Second Interactive Lesson: Colours</i>	181
5.7	Receiving	183
5.7.1	<i>A Non-Receiver</i>	184
5.7.2	<i>Receiving Behaviour</i>	186
5.8	Exploring	189
CHAPTER 6		192
6.1	Shared Understanding Through Conferring	193
6.1.1	<i>Justice and Fairness</i>	196
6.1.2	<i>Colour Preferences</i>	200
6.1.3	<i>Understanding Symbols is a Shared Understanding</i>	203
6.1.4	<i>Symbols for the Planets</i>	204
6.2	Understanding Names is a Shared Understanding	207
6.2.1	<i>Understanding Personal Names is a Shared Understanding</i>	208
6.2.2	<i>Understanding Common Names is a Shared Understanding</i>	216
6.2.3	<i>The Clock: A Revelation</i>	222
6.3	Going Beyond the Examples	228
6.4	Ildefonso is Just Like Us but Different	231
CHAPTER 7		239
7.1	The First Dialogue: “Dumb me.”	243
7.1.1	<i>Dialogue or Monologue</i>	245
7.1.2	<i>Asking a Question?</i>	246
7.1.3	<i>A Contrast with the Lessons</i>	248
7.2	The Second Dialogue: The Geography Lesson	249
7.2.1	<i>The Interaction Looks Like Conferring</i>	255
7.2.2	<i>Explaining and Language</i>	259

7.2.3	<i>A Tension in Schaller's Account</i>	261
7.2.4	<i>A Shared Understanding</i>	262
7.2.5	<i>A Conventional Language Model</i>	264
7.3	The Third Dialogue: The Burrito	265
7.3.1	<i>Equality of Participation</i>	268
7.3.2	<i>Signs and Mime in Conferring</i>	268
7.4	Ildefonso Learns to Language his Way Around	269
7.5	Progress: A Difference	274
CHAPTER 8		277
8.1	Schaller's Curiosity	279
8.1.1	<i>Ildefonso's World View and Schaller's Ambivalence</i>	280
8.2	Schaller's Question	282
8.3	Massieu's Answers	283
8.4	Ildefonso's Answer	285
8.4.1	<i>The Question Ildefonso Answers</i>	286
8.4.2	<i>Ildefonso's First Attempt to Answer</i>	287
8.4.3	<i>Ildefonso's Second Attempt to Answer</i>	289
8.4.4	<i>Ildefonso's Third Attempt: An Answer</i>	291
8.5	Interpreting Ildefonso's Answer	294
8.6	Interacting Without Language	296
8.6.1	<i>Introduction</i>	297
8.6.2	<i>Standard and Non-standard Signs</i>	300
8.6.3	<i>A Non-standard Aspect: Inventions and Experiments</i>	302
8.6.4	<i>A Non-standard Aspect: Idiosyncratic Signs and Gestures</i>	306
8.6.5	<i>The Testing Procedure: "Achieving Total Consensus"</i>	310
8.6.6	<i>Four Cases of Unusual Interaction</i>	312
8.6.7	<i>A Different Kind of Interaction: Performer-Audience Interaction</i>	323
8.6.8	<i>Not All Interaction Looks Strange: Two Examples</i>	330
8.6.9	<i>The Testing Procedure: What is Really Happening</i>	332
8.6.10	<i>Seeing Ildefonso's Answer</i>	337
8.7	Communal Interaction in the Absence of Conferring	339

8.7.1	<i>Communal Interaction: “Remember when...”</i>	339
8.7.2	<i>Communal Interaction: A Question Answered</i>	341
8.8	“The Difference” of Ildefonso’s Answer	346
CHAPTER 9		350
9.1	Language: Symbol System or Interaction	351
9.1.1	<i>Language: A Symbol System</i>	351
9.1.2	<i>Language as Interaction</i>	352
9.2	A Theory of Living Systems	353
9.3	Structure-Determined Systems	355
9.3.1	<i>Organisation and Structure</i>	355
9.3.2	<i>Autopoiesis: The Organisation of Living Systems</i>	359
9.3.3	<i>Structural determinism: Perturbations Trigger Changes</i>	362
9.3.4	<i>Living Systems are Structure-Determined Systems</i>	364
9.3.5	<i>Nervous Systems are Structure-Determined Systems</i>	366
9.4	Organisational Closure	368
9.4.1	<i>Living Systems are Organisationally Closed</i>	369
9.4.2	<i>Nervous Systems are Organisationally Closed</i>	372
9.5	Interaction Between Closed Structure-Determined Systems	375
9.5.1	<i>Ontogenic Structural Coupling</i>	375
9.5.2	<i>A Digression: Recovery from Blindness</i>	378
9.5.3	<i>Living Systems with Nervous Systems: Reciprocal Structural Coupling</i>	381
9.5.4	<i>Consensual Domains</i>	384
9.6	The Generation of Language in the Interaction of Living Systems	387
9.6.1	<i>Recursive Perturbation</i>	387
9.6.2	<i>Recursive Reciprocal Structural Coupling</i>	389
9.6.3	<i>Linguistic Behaviour</i>	391
9.6.4	<i>Languaging</i>	392
9.6.5	<i>Recursion in Human Languaging</i>	394
9.6.6	<i>Third-Order and Fourth-Order Consensual Domains</i>	398
9.6.7	<i>Words, Sentences, Grammar</i>	400

CHAPTER 10	404
10.1 Ildefonso's Progress	405
10.1.1 <i>Denotation is not Primitive</i>	405
10.1.2 <i>The Copying</i>	406
10.1.3 <i>What was the "Breakthrough?"</i>	407
10.1.4 <i>Naming Happens</i>	407
10.2 The First Recursion	408
10.2.1 <i>The First Recursion Begins</i>	409
10.2.2 <i>Languageless Miming and Enlanguaged Miming</i>	413
10.3 Ildefonso's Dissatisfaction	415
10.3.1 <i>At the Restaurant</i>	416
10.3.2 <i>Questions</i>	418
10.3.3 <i>Conversation</i>	421
10.4 Deaf Issues	424
10.4.1 <i>Oralism</i>	424
10.4.2 <i>Mainstreaming</i>	425
10.4.3 <i>Home Signs</i>	427
10.5 Conclusions	432
APPENDIX	435
BIBLIOGRAPHY	440

CHAPTER 1

In this chapter I will establish what I take to be the circumstances in which an individual might develop without language.¹ The notion of languagelessness that I want to explore will, I hope, emerge from the material presented in this chapter. I will draw, on the writings of Deaf people, and hearing people who have written about the consequences of prelingual deafness.² Deaf education is discussed at some length but this should not be thought of as a chapter *about* deaf education. This is more a chapter about a language issue. That language issue is often best understood if discussed within the context of deaf education.

I will first outline the issue of *bilingual* education for deaf children. This is a short section which stresses that bilingual education is important. I do not explain, in this section, why bilingual education is important. Rather, I hope that the explanation will emerge in the subsequent discussion. It was due to the debate about bilingualism in deaf education that I first realised deafness was a language issue.

I will then discuss the notion of deafness as a *disability* or deficiency. While many hearing people see deafness as a disability, the Deaf do not. In particular, their natural signed languages are not inferior to spoken languages and they have a rich culture. In general, their lack of hearing is not a health problem.

In the next section I will look at the educational method known as *oralism*. Oralism aims to teach the deaf to speak, and this includes prelingually profoundly deaf children.

¹ These cases do not involve gross abuse as in the well known case of Genie. Curtiss, Susan, 1977, *Genie: A Psycholinguistic Study of a Modern-Day "Wild Child"*, Academic Press, New York.

² Following convention, I will use "deaf" when referring to the audiological condition of not hearing, and "Deaf" when referring to a particular group of deaf people who share a signed language and a culture. (Padden and Humphries, 1988, 2.) Deaf culture is bound up with many things and experiences—signed languages; social exclusion, intentional and unintentional; educational experiences; close communities centred on residential schools for the deaf; the experience of utter isolation in mainstreaming; and much more. Deaf culture is so distinct that a mixed marriage is one where one partner is hearing and the other is Deaf. Where the Deaf are concerned race, religion and ethnicity are trivial differences.

It discourages any use of signed language. Almost every Deaf person who writes or speaks about oralism does so with anger. It is described by one writer as a CRIME.³ Oralism is named as a cause of poor language development, and in extreme cases, languagelessness is a result of oralism.

Less extreme educational policies offered various *signed forms of the spoken language* of the community. I will discuss the ways in which hearing people tried to devise visual forms of English which could be used by deaf children. None of these artificial systems worked well. Deaf children found them difficult, even when they were used exclusively, that is without expecting the child to lipread. The Deaf say that these systems are *unnatural*, they are not like natural signed languages.

Another deaf education policy is *mainstreaming*, where deaf children are integrated into hearing classes, but they are allowed to use sign language, and they may have an interpreter present. I will show how this policy limits the social interaction of deaf children. Even though they have been allowed to use their natural language, they are not in a community of signers. They are linguistically deprived in another way.

Finally I will discuss the issue of the Deaf as a *minority language* group. Some writers justify the use of signed languages in schools in the same way that ethnic minorities justify the use of minority spoken languages. This comparison does not capture the true nature of sign language minorities and thus does not fully explain the call for bilingual deaf education.

1.1 Bilingual Education for the Deaf

The starting point of this project is the debate about using sign language in deaf education—is there some good justification for insisting that the minority language is used in schools, or should the children be taught in the majority (spoken) language so that they can be integrated into the wider society in which they live. This debate has several forms and a long history. The opposing sides in the past, have generally been

³ Lane, Harlan, 1988, *When the Mind Hears*, Penguin, London, 338.

hearing educators advocating use of the majority (spoken) language only, and the Deaf community calling for the inclusion of the relevant signed language.

Deaf people have often had no say in how the deaf should be educated. This is changing and the most persistent demand is for bilingual education. In 1993 this was the goal of Lynette Pivac, chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Kelston Deaf Education Centre in Auckland. The two languages she wished to see used side by side in the school were New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) and English. In the bilingual education that the deaf are asking for, NZSL is regarded as the first language and English is the second language. This goal is becoming a reality.

This sort of bilingualism is not needed to preserve a language by teaching it to the children. Nor is this bilingualism needed because there are two widely used languages in the community at large. Bilingualism is needed to provide a level of education equal to that available to most hearing children. Bilingualism is needed to allow deaf children to have equal access to education. This is not a political issue. This is a language issue.

My goal is to improve all the teachers' communication depending on their way of communication. I'll try to improve *all* of them. Also I hope to have two languages within the school so the standard of each level a child can be brought up to [will improve]. So that we can have equal access to education the same as hearing children have.⁴

We are most familiar with calls for bilingual education where the two languages in question are spoken languages. Harlan Lane, cites such examples as speakers of Spanish in the United States, speakers of Basque in Spain and speakers of French in Canada.

Foremost among the rights demanded by language minorities is typically the conduct of their children's education in their own language, at least in part.⁵

⁴ *Future Indicative*, presented by Dianne Stogre Power on the National Programme of Radio New Zealand, 26 December 1993. Lynette Pivac was the first deaf person to be elected to the Board of Trustees of the Kelston Deaf Education Centre and she is its first deaf chairperson. She has two deaf children. David England asked the questions and interpreter Tamina Norman gave voice to Lynette Pivac's signed answers. (Page numbers refer to transcript from tape.)

⁵ Lane, Harlan, 1984, *The Deaf Experience*, Cambridge, Mass, 1.

The issue of bilingual education for deaf children is not like these cases. The deaf child's "own language" is taken to be a natural signed language, but there are no written forms of signed languages. To access written material the signing deaf child must be comfortably familiar with the written language of the community at large. Thus, in a sense, the written language of the community must also be considered to be the deaf child's "own language."

Often there has been opposition to bilingualism, and opposition to any use of signed language. The deaf claim that when this is the case there is a chance that some deaf children will grow up without *any* language. The Deaf have never claimed that this is so for *all* deaf children.

1.2 Deafness: Disability or Difference

There are two models of deafness, the social model and the disability model. In the social model, deaf people's condition is seen as *different* rather than *deficient*, and what makes the difference is not their lack of hearing but their language—their natural language is a signed language.⁶ This is extremely important to them because some are so severely deaf that to deny them their natural language is, they claim, to deny them *any* language, as I will discuss below. In signing communities the deaf communicate as effortlessly and naturally as we do. Their greatest difficulty is with the attitude which sees their condition as a disability.

In the disability model, deaf people are seen as disabled in that they have a handicap that is a health issue. The management of their education often reflects the disability model, or the pathological model, as Lane calls it. Lane claims that in the United States at least there is a hidden agenda behind this thinking and gives a strong characterisation of the situation.

The United States has a long history of grappling with the ills of the body politic by construing them as illnesses of the individuals concerned. In the same manner, for over a century our nation has sought to address the social problems of deafness with a model that pathologizes all consequences of deafness, tidily placing the blame for

⁶ Lane, 1984, 2.

the ills of the deaf on a cruel nature and invoking the health establishment to deal with them while disturbing the rest of society as little as possible. For this model to be coherent, the manual language of the deaf had to be branded a pathetic pantomime - just what it seemed to the uninitiated - a fallback, even an atavism, in the absence of a real language. Thus the deaf could not be an indigenous language minority and their failure to make appropriate use of the national language had to be attributed to pathology as it is with retarded persons. An “enlightened” society would provide the deaf, therefore, not with bilingual teachers giving them at least some instruction using their primary language but rather with “special” educators, speech pathologists and the like, who directed their efforts almost exclusively to rehabilitation. The same government agencies that support research and training for the education of retarded people who have no primary language do likewise for the deaf who have, while those agencies that address the needs of minority language groups in the United States have nothing to do with the half-million or so Americans whose primary language is the American Sign Language of the Deaf (ASL).⁷

Some of Lane’s claims need to be tempered with clarification. Lane’s arguments draw a parallel between the deaf community and ethnic minorities and that itself needs clarification. I will discuss that issue at the end of the chapter because other issues need to be clear first.

Three important questions come out of Lane’s assertions here. The first, and perhaps most important, concerns the status of the signed languages of the deaf, like ASL, are they “real” language? Secondly, Lane seems to be suggesting that there is no legitimate reason for health authorities to be concerned with deafness, it is a social concern not an illness. Is this really the case? Thirdly, is there some kind of hidden agenda which pathologises deafness, in order to place the blame for the ills of the deaf on nature rather than on the system? This last question embodies a strong allegation which might overshadow what I think is most important. Namely, there are some deep misunderstandings of the language issue underlying deafness. What Lane sees as a hidden agenda may be misdirected benevolence. That is, it may be a case agencies doing their best to help, but misunderstanding the problem.

⁷ Lane, 1984, 2.

I will discuss these three issues in the following sections. Namely:

1. The status of signed languages.
2. Deafness as a health concern.
3. The hidden agenda which pathologises deafness.

1.2.1 The Status of the Signed Languages of the Deaf

Misconceptions about signed languages are widespread, there is not a general knowledge of signed languages and Deaf culture. Comparisons in textbooks show the difference between English and Hungarian, for instance, but rarely compare spoken with natural signed languages, such as ASL or NZSL. Nor do they remark on the similarities between ASL and French Sign Language, and note how they are both different from British Sign Language—in the way that we remark on the similarities between Spanish and Italian, and note how it is different from German.

During the first half of the twentieth century linguists made no attempts to analyse signed languages of the deaf. In fact they did not even know that there were different signed languages, if they referred to signing it was called “the signed language,” and many thought it was ideographic, and thus, universal. It was lumped together with other gesture languages, such as that of Trappist monks who took vows of silence, and with gesture languages used in conjunction with spoken languages, such as that of the Plains Indians of North America. It was also variously believed that signed languages of the deaf were derived from spoken languages, that they were inferior to spoken languages, and that they had no grammar.⁸ A well-known standard text tells us:

The manual sign language used by the deaf is an ideographic language. Essentially it is more pictorial, less symbolic, and as a system is one which falls mainly at the level of imagery. Ideographic language systems, in comparison with verbal symbol systems, lack precision, subtlety and flexibility. It is likely that Man cannot achieve his ultimate potential through an ideographic language, inasmuch as it is limited to the more concrete aspects of his experience.⁹

⁸ Padden, Carol and Tom Humphries, 1988, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture*, Cambridge, Mass., 57-60.

⁹ Myklebust, Helmer R., 1960, *The Psychology of Deafness*, New York, quoted in Oliver Sacks, *Seeing Voices*, London, 1990, 76.

The most widely used gestures in the hearing community are pantomimic, a sort of “non-linguistic” means of communicating, and that is how signed languages were viewed. So there was no serious study of signed languages because they weren’t recognised as “real” languages. This general view of signed languages was based on the authority of such prominent linguists as Edward Sapir and Leonard Bloomfield, who influenced both those responsible for the education of the deaf *and the deaf themselves*.¹⁰

Educated and professional deaf adults used signed language, and valued it, but they did not think of it as a proper language. In 1913 George Veditz, a former president of the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) argued strongly against the oral method of education and for the preservation of “our beautiful sign language,” but even he believed that signed languages were derived from spoken languages.¹¹

Veditz believed, as was customary in his time, that signed languages are derived from spoken languages and have been invented by individuals such as Epée. His repeated references to Epée and Gallaudet suggest that he thought signed language would gain prestige or respect by being associated with leading hearing figures.¹²

In 1950 an editorial in the *Silent Worker*, the official publication of the NAD, echoed Veditz’s call for the preservation of sign language.

The editorial goes on to give a curious description of “the sign language”: “There is no grammar in the sign language. There is no standard authority by which it is determined that one sign is correct and another incorrect, but custom has given us a fairly good standard, and we recognize a correct and incorrect form of usage.”

The editorial writer subscribes to a long tradition of describing his language as lacking any internal organization or structure. Indeed it has no special name but is called simply “the sign language.”¹³

¹⁰ Padden and Humphries, 1988, 58.

¹¹ Padden and Humphries, 1988, 33-36. The “oral method” is discussed later in this chapter. Briefly, deaf children are expected to learn to speak and lipread. Signing is not used by teachers, and is often forbidden in the school.

¹² Padden and Humphries, 1988, 57. The Abbé de l’ Epée opened a school for the deaf in Paris in 1755 and drew on the signing of the deaf community in his teaching. In Deaf mythology he is credited with inventing sign language.

¹³ Padden and Humphries, 1988, 60.

An apologetic tone was widespread. Charles Krauel, a deaf filmmaker interviewed in 1986, said his signs (ASL) were natural and efficient but not good for children who needed to learn language, they needed something like manual English.

Nowadays signs are different. Back then, signs were better, you know, natural, but now with all these IS kind of signs, and all that—well, it may be good for children who need to learn language. Those kinds of signs are good language. My signs are not, they're like “short-cuts,” more abbreviated. But it sure saves time though. This faster way of talking is much clearer. Nowadays, with IS and all those things, you get these long drawn-out sentences that take forever to sign. It's a waste of time I tell you.¹⁴

Krauel illustrates an interesting distinction. On the one hand, there is good language which is something to be taught, a sort of educational task for children. It is something which is difficult and takes time. On the other hand there are his signs—quick, easy, clear and *natural*. Krauel's description of his signs sounds just like talking—quick, easy, clear and natural—it sounds like normal linguistic behaviour, especially for children.

Padden and Humphries believe that such ideas, about the inferiority of signed language, can be traced to beliefs held by others, namely hearing people, particularly the influential linguists of the day.

...it was simply unthinkable at the time to refer to signed language in the kinds of terms used by modern linguists. No respectable hearing linguist in 1950 would have suggested, as linguists do today, that signed languages contain verb agreement, have rich combinatory qualities, and have dependent and independent clauses.¹⁵

Signed language did not even have any status in the deaf schools.¹⁶ Those who taught and cared for the deaf in residential schools—most usually hearing people—did not attempt use or even learn any signed language. Generally the staff did not understand it.

¹⁴ Padden and Humphries, 1988, 63. Translated by Carol Padden. The new signs that Krauel refers to, including the IS signs, are the various forms of manual English. These are discussed below.

¹⁵ Padden and Humphries, 1988, 61.

¹⁶ Evans, A. Donald and William W. Falk, 1986, *Learning to be Deaf*, Berlin, 69. Benderly, Beryl Lieff, 1980, *Dancing Without Music*, Gallaudet University Press, Washington, DC, 228.

Sacks remarks that this illustrates a paradox—despite the belief that the signed language of the deaf was a pantomime, it was not readily understood. How could people who worked with the deaf not understand it, if it was, indeed, a pantomime.

There is, indeed, a strange paradox here: at first Sign looks pantomimic; if one pays attention, one feels one will “get it” soon enough—all pantomimes are easy to get. But as one continues to look, no such “Aha!” feeling occurs, one is tantalised by finding it, despite its seeming transparency, unintelligible.¹⁷

This was the predicament of signed languages then, scholarly opinion passed them over. The scholarly opinion influenced the attitude of Deaf adults who used and valued signed languages. As a consequence signed languages were not used officially in deaf education. And they were not used unofficially by the staff in residential schools. Padden and Humphries point out that the prevailing beliefs about signed languages were not based on any careful study of them, “but rather on impressionistic evidence that was allowed to take on scientific weight”¹⁸

Ways of thinking about and analysing signed languages, began to change in 1960 when William C. Stokoe published *Sign Language Structure*. His description of the signed language used by the Deaf showed that signed and spoken languages were far more similar than previously thought and although “almost everyone, hearing and deaf alike, at first regarded [his] notions as absurd or heretical,” but it is now accepted that signed languages are, in every sense, “real” languages.¹⁹ For instance:

To give just one example, ASL can be divided into three major classes (Padden 1988b). Verbs in one class can inflect for person and number of both the subject and the object; these include GIVE, SEND, TAKE, CATCH. Those in another class do not inflect for person and number at all; they include LEARN, LIKE, VISIT, TELEPHONE. Verbs in the third class also cannot inflect for person and number, but can take an extremely rich range of affixes.²⁰

¹⁷ Sacks, 1990, 76.

¹⁸ Padden and Humphries, 1988, 59.

¹⁹ Sacks, 1990, 77-79. Padden and Humphries, 1988, 79-81.

²⁰ Padden and Humphries, 1988, 7-8. Signs are represented by English translations in small capital letters. If more than one word is needed to translate a sign, the words are joined by hyphens, for example HARD-OF-HEARING, THINK-HEARING.

Sacks gives some of the variations of the verb LOOK-AT which show how a basic sign can be modified by grammatical and syntactic devices.

Thus there are numerous forms of LOOK-AT (“look-at-me,” look-at-her,” “look-at-each-of-them,” etc.), all of which are formed in distinctive ways: for example, the sign LOOK-AT is made with one hand moving away from the signer; but when inflected to mean “look at each other” is made with both hands moving towards each other simultaneously. A remarkable number of inflections are available to denote durational aspects (fig. 1); thus LOOK-AT (a) may be inflected to mean “stare” (b), “look at incessantly” (c), “gaze” (d), “watch” (e), “look at for a long time” (f), or “look at again and again” (g)—and many other permutations, including combinations of the above. Then there are large numbers of derivational forms, the sign LOOK being varied in specific ways to mean “reminisce,” sightsee,” “look forward to,” “prophecy,” predict,” “anticipate,” “look around aimlessly,” “browse,” etc.²¹

The variations (a) to (g) illustrated in Sacks’ book show variation in the degree of movement, the direction of the movement, repetition of the movement, and the scope of the movement. Facial expressions may be involved too. For instance, in “watch” the head is tilted slightly and the eyes are narrowed. It is not particularly easy to describe nuances for, as with spoken languages, the context may be important.

Specific facial expressions, or “behaviours,” mark syntactic constructions such as topics, relative clauses and questions, or function as adverbs or quantifiers. This grammatical use of the face is different from the normal affective use of the face. Evidence for this difference has been observed in deaf signers with brain lesions, they may perceive the linguistic expressions correctly but be unable to recognise the affective expressions and vice versa.²² “Facial expression” not a particularly accurate term, “non-manual features” is more usual. These features involve using the eyes, eye-brows, tongue, teeth, lips, cheeks, nostrils, tilts of the head, and shoulder movements seamlessly with the manual features. For this reason the older term “manual language”

²¹ Sacks, 1990, 85.

²² Sacks, 1990, 85,100n.

is not appropriate for signed languages, they are most definitely not “languages of the hands.”²³

The work of Stokoe, Klima, Bellugi and others in the linguistics of signed languages has resulted in new attitudes, proper names (such as American Sign Language or ASL), and a recognition that such languages have the resources to be just as expressive as spoken languages. It is very important to be clear that a language like ASL is not an elaborate gesture system. In the absence of any exposure to signed languages deaf people may use gesture systems and miming to communicate. The gestures and mime do not always have the expressive and communicative resources of a language. Most hearing people, cannot see the difference, but Deaf people can.

1.2.2 Deafness as a Health Concern

The second question drawn from Lane’s argument asks whether there are legitimate reasons for health authorities to be concerned with deafness. There is not a quick answer to this. Where the Deaf community is concerned some distinctions are important in order to avoid common misconceptions.

Most importantly, perhaps, *congenital* and *prelingual* deafness prevent people from acquiring normal speech and a normal understanding of a spoken language in the usual way, while *hearing impairment* and *postlingual* deafness may not have the same consequences. Hearing aids can help many people with hearing impairment, and those with postlingual deafness have already acquired speech and an understanding of a spoken language, so the difficulties that this group faces are qualitatively different from the issues concerning people who are prelingually deaf.

Hearing impairment can sometimes prevent the acquisition of a spoken language because what a sufferer hears is something like radio static, hearing aids can amplify but not resolve this. People with this condition are often grouped with the prelingually deaf. Proper assessment by health authorities can be very useful in helping the individuals

²³ Fluent signers look at the *face* and pick up the hand movements in their peripheral vision. The BSL/English dictionary *begins* with illustrations of thirty facial expressions/head positions.

concerned, or their parents, to understand their situation. There is no suggestion that this type of involvement with health authorities is a bad thing.

In addition it is quite appropriate for health authorities to be involved in determining the cause of deafness. *Conductive* hearing loss is a result of ailments like middle ear infections which can usually be treated. *Sensorineural* hearing loss, which arises because of disorders of the inner ear or auditory nerve, and which prevents the perception of sound by the brain, cannot be treated, but it may not be complete deafness. Minimal residual hearing can sometimes be very valuable, and if the condition is properly assessed a child may learn quite easily to *speechread* and talk with the help of a hearing aid or plenty of one-to-one interaction or both.²⁴ However, it is important to qualify this.

Hearing people tend to see it as a godsend if minimal hearing can lead to speech but many deaf people in this situation strongly disagree. There is often a high cost, in time and stress, acquiring a spoken language in these circumstances. One Deaf adult remarked that his schooling consisted of eight years of speech therapy with no education. The resulting communication skills turn out to be almost useless outside the very artificial environment in which they were taught, the strain of trying to use them or rely on them is excessive. Furthermore, with time, it is not unusual for minimal hearing to deteriorate and the child who has learnt to rely on it can be left with few resources for communicating. Bearing this in mind, there is no suggestion that health intervention to determine the cause of deafness, and offer help where appropriate, is a bad thing.

Lane's criticism is that the health authorities continue to be involved with those who cannot benefit from the things they offer. When the "illness" of deafness cannot be cured "rehabilitation" is forced on people who do not need it—they are not ill, or disabled, they are just another linguistic minority. Those people, the deaf people with congenital or prelingual deafness which is not helped by hearing aids and which cannot

²⁴ "Speechreading" is a more appropriate term for what is usually called "lipreading."

be treated, are the subject of this discussion. Their language, the minority language, is a signed language while the majority language is a spoken language.

The claim is, that for this minority language group, a signed language is their *natural* language, using a signed language is a natural way for profoundly deaf people to communicate. No spoken language can ever come naturally to these people. It is from the natural foundation that they develop best *linguistically*. It is from the natural foundation that they learn best—and *that includes becoming proficient at reading and writing the spoken language of their community*. That is what those calling for bilingual education are arguing for. It is not appropriate for the health authorities to focus on “curing” these people because they do not have a “health problem.”

1.2.3 The Hidden Agenda

The third question must be addressed in the light of the answers to the first two questions. It doesn't seem so clear that the pathological model of deafness has ever been used as a political expedient, to shift the blame for the ills of the deaf from the authorities to “cruel nature.” I think the talk of politics clouds something deeper. The normality of the deaf was missed because of the way that people thought about hearing loss, the way they thought about language in general, and the way they thought about sign language in particular.

Padden and Humphries believe that the roots of such ideas can be traced to beliefs held by others, namely the hearing people who professed to know about languages. Deep-seated beliefs influence educational programs and other services and, if the beliefs are mistaken, then the services are likely to be flawed. The deaf do have problems with government agencies, and there may be political agendas but there are also misconceptions about language. I want to address this issue by focusing on notions of language rather than on any political agenda. I see three, not unconnected, reasons why this is not just a political matter.

Firstly, the linguistic analysis of signed languages was wrong, so there was no general recognition of the ability of deaf people. They were seen as people who only has a

“pathetic pantomime.” Those in control of deaf education, as has been mentioned above, relied upon the linguistics of the day for their view of language, and this view was not always contradicted by the literate deaf. Those beliefs led to the desire to “rehabilitate” deaf people. This was grounded in ignorance rather than in some political reason.

Secondly, it is not clear that the actions of the health authorities were political expedencies. The health authorities could provide assessment, and followed it up with the provision of hearing aids. This often worked well. The health authorities could successfully treat conductive deafness. Speech pathologists and “special” educators had some success with the hard of hearing. Where hearing aids made a significant difference this meant that people initially considered deaf could, in a sense, be “rehabilitated.” The ease with which a child fits into family life, social life and school life while wearing good hearing aids has to be carefully evaluated, and sometimes it may be the best option. That is not a political matter.

Thirdly, sometimes the “special” teaching methods worked. They worked when residual hearing was useful, and when hearing aids could bring residual hearing up to a useful level. They also work with some postlingual total deafness. Deaf children who have indeed benefited from “rehabilitative” teaching methods have always been held up as examples to support the teaching methods and to encourage the teachers to keep trying. Thus, many people assume that the teaching methods which are applied successfully when hearing loss is minimal, only need to be intensified to work well when there is a greater loss. This is not a political matter, rather it is bad science.

I am not saying that political motives are irrelevant or non-existent, but I do not think they are at the heart of the misdirected strategies of deaf education. It seems to me that the basis of the way the deaf were treated has much more to do with the way people thought about language, deafness and teaching than with any desire “to deal with them while disturbing the rest of society as little as possible,” as Lane claims. I want to explore some of these ways of thinking, particularly the way people generally think about language.

I will say nothing more about deafness as health concern or physiological condition. I do not see prelingual deafness as a disability. I believe it is enlightening to listen to what Deaf people have to say about their language and their education. We recoil in horror when we hear of an abused child like Genie, who has no language because no one ever interacted her. What the Deaf have to say about the educational programmes of *oralism* and *mainstreaming*, is not nearly so extreme but sometimes uncomfortably similar.²⁵ Understanding Deaf attitudes to oralism and mainstreaming can help us to understand the important and unique sense in which signed languages are minority languages.

1.3 Oralism

As stated above, the deaf people who are the subject of this discussion are those with congenital or prelingual deafness which is not helped by hearing aids, and which cannot be treated. These people do not speak because they cannot hear, and much of their education has been aimed at finding ways of getting them to speak and to follow the speech of others by “reading their lips”. This is the aim of the oral method or oralism.

The strict oralist’s credo includes:

1. Deaf children should be taught lipreading and speech from the beginning.
2. Deaf children must be in an exclusively oral environment.
3. Systematic signing must be eliminated during the critical period of speech and language development.

The oralist believes that the education of the deaf must be contained within the framework of a curriculum whose main vehicle is oral communication. The oralist is supported in his position by the research and by living examples that deaf children can not only be taught to speak but must learn to speak if they wish to function in a hearing world without pain and embarrassment. He does not believe that his method is the only method. He would not prevent the deaf learning signs and manual communication provided that speech and language communication have been thoroughly established. He knows the price that teaching speech to the deaf demands, not only from the

²⁵ It must always be clear this project is about a specific group deaf people—the prelingually deaf who cannot speak and speechread.

teacher, but also from the pupil. But, he believes it is one that can, and should be paid.²⁶

Oralists argued that falling back on the use of manual signs would retard speech acquisition so all signs were forbidden. Children had to sit on their hands in class and watch the teacher's face. It was thought that they would grasp how the facial movement was associated with objects, pictures, actions and themselves. They had to reproduce the facial movements of the teacher but with something added—something they could not see—they had to add the appropriate sounds. Once this goal was achieved they could begin to read and write and from there go on to study as hearing children did, learning all about the world.

The Deaf community's opposition to oralism is vehement, although they do not deny outright that it will not work. What angers the Deaf is that educators *persist* with oralism in cases where it does not work. Many would agree with this strong statement from Isaac Goldberg.

“Pure” (there is no such thing) oralism has not a leg to stand upon. It is a menace to the deaf mentally and morally, and robs them of the happiness and peace of mind God meant for them. ... If I can do anything to combat this foolishness and this CRIME, please call on me.

-Isaac Goldberg, deaf chemist.²⁷

1.3.1 John and Diana: The Realities of Oralism

The realities of oralism are very different from the credo, but the realities are not obvious because for so long there was no acknowledgement of the high numbers of failures. Those who suffered because they could not lipread and speak, had little hope of learning to read and write. They could not proclaim their misery. John and Diana, for instance, are both profoundly, prelingually deaf and for them oralism did not lead to

²⁶ Di Carlo, Louis M., 1964, *The Deaf*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 115.

²⁷ Lane, Harlan, 1988, *When the Mind Hears*, Penguin, London, 338.

“functioning in the hearing world without pain and embarrassment,” far from it, in fact oralism seems to have failed completely.²⁸

The course of John’s schooling is a sad story. Born in 1958 he had visiting advisers, attended Kelston School for the Deaf (SDF) in Auckland, attended a deaf unit in primary school for a year, and then returned to SDF. His story is told in his mid-twenties. It is not possible to say how much has been filled out by the writer but there are examples of John’s own language at the end of the piece. John clearly did not interact with his teachers and classmates in the usual way. He equates language with speech, and since he has little speech he thinks he has little language.

My name is John. I was born in 1958 and so far as we know I was born with a profound hearing loss. Of course I am not writing this on my own as I do not have sufficient language. We will include a sample of my writing at the end of this paper.

I have little memory of my early years in a central North Island village where an adviser called regularly. Our family moved to Auckland so that I could attend Kelston School for the Deaf as a day pupil.

As a 4-year-old at school I can only remember being very quiet, I can clearly remember going to a unit class at a nearby school with other children. The principal thought we were all clever enough but I was not clever at school. Our very good teacher tried hard to help me I was upset that this school was too hard for me. I could not write and could not talk well.

I was very upset when I had to go back to the School for the Deaf (SDF) after one year. All of my friends stayed at the primary school and I had to start to get some new friends at the SDF again. After a time I settled down enough to concentrate on learning again but asthma made me sick many days at school. The work at SDF was easier than at primary school.

²⁸ It is very common in the literature on deaf education to see educational methods defended and the blame for failure subtly placed elsewhere; on the poor standard of teaching, on the lack of parental commitment, on inadequate assessment and advice from support services, on behavioural problems in the child. There is also allusion to less specific reasons for speech failures among those who have been instructed orally. Di Carlo (1964), for instance, writes, “Research has aptly demonstrated that many deaf children have other disabilities besides hearing impairment. Often hearing loss presents only one of the concomitant disturbances that result from etiological factors. Severe receptive and learning deficiencies cannot be accounted for by hearing loss alone.”(p.112.) I do not want to flatly deny any of these, but nor do I want to discuss in detail here the possible causes of failure in the above cases. I recognise that my assumption that the oral method is to blame for these failures could be challenged but I feel this challenge can be answered.

In Forms I and II some of my friends from primary school came back to SDF and during these years I often found the work hard and did not understand much of it. I did not have the language to understand maths, English, social studies or reading. I did not have very much speech. Only my family could understand me and they had to tell other people what I was saying and they had to tell me what other people said to me. They always had to change the words many times because I could not understand all the words people used and I could not lip-read them very well.

In the fourth form my teacher helped me a lot with speech I cannot remember doing very much speech work earlier than this. I can remember the speech trainer ear phones hurting my head. We spent hours learning to say “s”, “g” and “h”. Some of us could learn like this but some could not, and many of us learned some sign language from each other at “play time” and lunch time. The older boys would teach us. I think they learned from adults.

My teacher was very good but I was not learning anything. The third and fourth form were the same and when I went to high school in the fifth form I could not follow the work because the language was too hard.

I went to the high school for woodwork and technical drawing and back to SDF for maths, English and other things.

Maths in Forms I, II, III, AND IV was very hard. In the fifth form maths improved except for division. It took a long time to understand dividing.

In the 2nd year fifth form my parents were very upset at my poor speech and language and took me to a speech therapist who, in one-and-a-half years of 2 hours per week, improved my speech and English very much.

I still cannot read very much. I cannot read the newspaper and cannot read my own mail. I have to get my family to tell me what it means. I cannot write a letter very well. I have to use only easy words. My speech has improved: it is not very good but mostly I can make people understand what I say.

My wife and I both talk to our cat and he knows what we say but he won't take notice of people with ordinary speech.

I think it was hopeless at school. I am very disappointed I cannot read. I went to the technical institute to learn my trade but I cannot get a Trade Certificate because I cannot understand the language. My

family have helped me but they didn't understand how bad it was at school until I had nearly left school.

At work the men are very good to me but because I have to rely on lip-reading I don't always know what they say or I don't know what the word means. Sometimes I ask them what the word means and the man will laugh and say "don't you know what that means, never mind" and just keeps on laughing, leaving me very ashamed and I never find out what he said.

I am lucky that now one man is learning to sign, some from me and I help him learn signs from the book and he helps me to learn the meaning of some of the words.

I have some friends. All of them are deaf and we communicate with signs and lip reading but we only use simple words.

We see my family often and I have a few hearing friends but it is very tiring for them and us but we enjoy being with them.

Examples of John's own language:

- * We can't hear the phone
- * We not know what the TV talking about
- * We can't hear the car something wrong. We have ask hearing people if the car is alright
- * Sometime we don't understand what the doctor says
- * Sometime don't understand the mail
- * Sometime we never heard about milk and petrol on strike
- * Sometime it very hard to hear knock on door²⁹

Little is said about John's sign language in this report, but he is "lucky" that a workmate is learning to sign, and he uses signs with his deaf friends. It seems to be an important way of communicating for him but it is not a way of accessing information. It is not clear whether it is purely NZSL or some system incorporating signs to convey English. He says, "because I have to rely on lipreading I don't always know what they say..." The hours of speech and lipreading lessons have been in vain. The examples of John's own language show poor language acquisition, and the content of the examples says even more about the awful consequences of oralism for the profoundly prelingually deaf.

²⁹ Hearing, Committee on, (New Zealand) 1984, *The Hearing Report: Findings and Recommendations of the Board of Health Committee on Hearing*, New Zealand Board of Health, Wellington, 6-7.

The second story is Diana's, she is also profoundly, prelingually deaf. She was born in 1962 and attended the School for the Deaf in Auckland. She too equates language with speech or words, and signing is an alternative. Communicating with family and workmates was, and is, difficult.

I was born in 1962. I am deaf. When I was a baby I was very sick and was in hospital for a long time.

As I grew older my mother worried because I did not learn to talk and I cried a lot and got very bad tempered. When I was about four-and-a-half I started at the School for the Deaf. We were not allowed to use our hands to sign, we had to try to talk. We were made to sit on our hands, but when we went out to play the older children used to teach us to sign. I was always very sad because it was very difficult for me to learn speech and language without signs. I cried a lot. I hated school.

I spent 12 years at school and left with very poor language and I cannot read or write. This is very embarrassing because people write things down for me because they think I can read. I cannot read the newspapers, recipe books or even my mail. I like to knit but have to get someone to read the pattern for me.

I was very lonely at home too. Nobody knew how to help me, nobody could understand me, so I used to get very upset and throw tantrums. I used to want to know what my family was talking about or what the TV was saying but was told "Never mind, never mind" or Shut up, we can't hear" or "I will tell you later" but they never told me.

When I started work it was terrible. I couldn't understand them and they couldn't understand me. They used to write things down but I was too embarrassed to say I could not read. Nobody was very nice to me and I felt very sad and lonely. I left that job. They were pleased that I left and the boss clapped his hands and said he was happy that I was leaving.

My second job was quite good and the people were very good to me but there was a big fire. No job.

The work I have now is very good and everyone is good to me but they find it hard to talk to me and I find it hard to talk to them, but they do try.

When I met my husband it was a lot better. We were happy together and we talk in sign and understand each other. My husband's family are very good to me and they help me a lot. They always talk to me and help me to understand. I used to get upset sometimes because the

children used to pull my leg and I didn't understand that they were joking, but I soon learnt that they would not hurt me and they would explain about what they were saying. I spent a lot of time at my husband's home with his family.

We did many things together. I never felt left out. They always explain about television and what people are saying. I learnt to cook meals and cakes and biscuits. I learnt to knit and many other things.

My husband and I have a lot of deaf friends. We sign to each other, we talk too, but more signs really. It is much easier to sign when you do not have enough words. We go out to dinner with our friends and we visit our friends in their homes. Most of them are married now and all of them are married to deaf people. It is much easier to marry a deaf person because hearing people do not understand us very well.

It is very hard to be deaf. It is very lonely. You cannot hear the radio. We often don't understand what is happening on television. We have to have special door bells because we cannot hear people knocking on the door and people think we are intellectually handicapped because we sound funny and don't understand. In a crowd it is easier just to be quiet and just smile nicely.

Schools seem much better now because the children learn to sign and they have a lot of language and can read and write a lot better. I wish we had learnt with signs. It is much easier.³⁰

Although both John and Diana equate good language skills with proficiency in a spoken language, Diana is more positive than John about signing. Diana sees signs in schools as a way to achieve language skills. She clearly thinks that it would have been possible for her to learn "speech and language" if signing had been used in the classroom. Maybe the speech might still have been difficult but written language would have been a possibility if she had been allowed to use signs. This is exactly what Pivac is asking for.

1.3.2 NZSL: A Professional's Reply to Parents

Some might hold the parents responsible, but parents relied on advice from authorities. At the time John and Diana were going to school, those in control of deaf education barely acknowledged the existence of NZSL. In 1973, thirteen years after Stokoe's first

³⁰ *The Hearing Report*, 1984, 8-9.

work on ASL was published, Michael Parsons, Senior Lecturer in the Education of the Deaf at Christchurch Teachers' College has little to say about sign language. The following is his published answer to the question, "Are some deaf children given a means of communication other than speech and lip-reading?" *in its entirety*.

In New Zealand, all deaf children are taught by the oral method, that is, by lip-reading and speech assisted by hearing aids. The oral method has been used in New Zealand since 1880 when the school for the deaf was opened at Sumner in Christchurch. This was probably the first oral school for the deaf in the world to be established with full State support. In some other parts of the world, other methods such as finger-spelling are used. Finger-spelling, which is a way of making the letters by moving the fingers, can be a one-handed or two-handed system. When used with lip-reading and speech, we have what is called the "combined method". Some schools overseas use signs as a means of teaching, and some use a method of "cued speech", which is designed to add information to the lip-reading pattern.

Throughout the world there is considerable controversy about the method of communication that should be used to teach deaf children. Experimental studies can be found that appear to support each of the methods mentioned above. As no absolutely clear-cut evidence supporting one method for all deaf children can be produced, we in New Zealand continue to use the oral method. *It is true that the deaf in New Zealand sometimes use signs, but these are taught to the deaf by the deaf themselves, and are essentially a way they can communicate without the strain of lip-reading, even though there is only a limited range of signs available. It is interesting to note that some of these signs develop from natural gestures.*

There is, however, an important aspect of the oral method of teaching that needs to be presented. When the oral method is used, it tends to encourage deaf people to move out and take part in their community and family activities. Ideally, the oral method is concerned with making contact with people. In a sense, every hearing member of the community uses the oral method. Our job is to ensure that our deaf children develop an attitude of moving out into the world and not to become people who wait for the world to come to them.

Until the controversy about method is resolved, it is unlikely that New Zealand will depart from the oral method of teaching deaf children.³¹
[my italics]

³¹ Parsons, Michael, 1973, *Helping Our Deaf Children*, New Zealand Council for Educational Research, Wellington, 31-32.

This is his entire answer to the question and the only mention of sign language in the whole book (58 pages). The two sentences about signs are dismissive of, or show ignorance of, a language and culture that would have nurtured John and Diana. None of the items in the further reading, listed at the end of his book, are about sign language, and of the three journals recommended for parents of deaf children, one is called *Talk* and another *Hearing*.

What did the teachers think about the progress, or lack of it, that was made by children like John and Diana? How did they reconcile the obvious failures with the positive rhetoric that supported oralism? How might Parsons, for instance, explain the failure of John and Diana “...to move out and take part in their community and family activities?” He talks of a full, active and happy childhood for children who, like John, spent *hours* learning to say “s”, “g” and “h,” and who suffered physical pain using a *speech trainer*.³² His final comment appears to put a burden of responsibility for success or failure on the parents of deaf children—the parents who have just been advised to suppress any signed attempts to communicate.

To sum up then: deaf children are able to become independent, fulfilled adults, but this can come about only if they are given opportunities to enjoy a full, active and happy childhood. I hope this book will help you in some small way to achieve this for your child.³³

It is true that some prelingually deaf children learnt to speak using speech trainers. While the oralists assume that what deaf children see in the facial antics of the hearing can be as meaningful to them as the spoken word is to us, the use of speech trainers shows that they acknowledge the importance of hearing as well as vision. Often there has been enough residual hearing to allow the child to experience speech sounds through a *speech trainer*. Success, however, is not guaranteed even when the sounds can be detected, but for those who do “succeed,” it is not clear that the expectations of the oralists have been met—functioning in the hearing world without pain or

³² This is an amplification device with headphones and a microphone. Using this, some deaf children can make out the speech of others and, by using the microphone themselves, they can monitor their own vocal sounds.

³³ Parsons, 1973, 56.

embarrassment. The oralists rarely attend to the opinions of Deaf people. That has led to anger in the Deaf community.

1.3.3 Lyneen and Craig: The Anger of Success

Lyneen Allen and Craig Davis are two prelingually deaf people in their twenties who can be described as “successful” because they speak and communicate with hearing people. This does not seem to be a cause for rejoicing. It made life easier for hearing people but not for Lyneen and Craig.

The pair wish they had never learnt to speak so well, because it has given hearing people a false sense of security.

Lyneen Allen and Craig Davis wish they could throw their hearing aids away. They say they are more for the benefit of hearing people than for the deaf.

Lyneen learnt to speak. Although she did not understand the meaning of the English words, it was easier for hearing people to communicate with her, so she was classified as bright.

[Craig] describes the English language as a fascinating but useless book. He could spend many hours trying to work out its intricacies, but it would not benefit him in the end.

[Craig] said learning to speak was a conscious decision. once he began to learn, people commented on his improved social behaviour.

But he was suppressing his frustrations and anger. He said the trauma deaf people suffer in a hearing world can only be understood by the deaf.

He says when the deaf are restricted from using their natural sign language, they are prevented from expressing themselves freely and socialising.³⁴

These statements have not been made by people who have been helped “to function in a hearing world without pain and embarrassment.” What is more, these sorts of comments are not unusual, they are all too familiar where oralism is enforced. The

³⁴ Watson, Joanne, 1992, “Deaf show defiant signs of discontent,” in *Evening Standard*, July 25, 4.

oralist works hard to give deaf children *speech*, but if they acquire it they don't necessarily feel any more a part of the linguistic majority than do people like John and Diana, who think they have very little *language*. Craig and Lyneen are fluent in NZSL, their natural language, and the newspaper interview was conducted through an interpreter. Why? What does Lyneen mean when she says she did not understand the meaning of the words she used? What does Craig mean when he says that they can only express themselves freely in NZSL? Oralists do not explore questions like that.

Speech and lipreading skills did not lead to better employment opportunities for Lyneen, and between bouts of unemployment she worked in unstimulating factory-line jobs.

I was never asked what I wanted to do. Most deaf children are just expected to go into factories. It is not even considered we could have a career.³⁵

Parsons suggests that in New Zealand, deaf people have a surprisingly wide range of jobs. He lists accountants, farmers, factory workers, laboratory technicians, florists and mail sorters. There is nothing wrong with these jobs but is this the choice that Lyneen is thinking of when she talks of having a career? What about teacher, civil engineer, psychologist, lawyer, nurse, or senior lecturer specialising in deaf education, as options? All the lip-service that oralists have paid to helping deaf children participate fully in the community does not recognise the doors that are blocked by the language barrier, it is not a speech barrier, because some deaf children have learnt to speak but they cannot have the same aspirations as hearing children. Sadly, they are much more like John who had spent hours learning to say "s", "g" and "h" and who could not get a Trade Certificate because he could not understand the language.

1.3.4 Speechreading: "Approaching the Ridiculous"

Lipreading or speechreading is the other part of the oralist's programme, this skill is said to be acquired better if there are no manual signs to distract the children.³⁶ Once

³⁵ Watson, 1992.

acquired, a skill in speechreading allows children to follow the speech of others. Or does it?

The oralist has a stronger case for advocating speech and speechreading in the case of postlingual deafness. In that case the deaf person knows what the language sounds like and may already speak well. Cheryl Heppner is such a person. She lost most of her hearing through illness at the age of six, and managed with residual hearing and speechreading to continue her schooling and college education without ever using sign language. It was not easy, but she managed by reading as much as she could to make up for lost spoken interaction. At the age of twenty-five she lost her residual hearing due to a stroke and had to rely on speechreading entirely. This is not as easy a task as many hearing people suppose.

“Speechreading is EXHAUSTING. I hate having to depend on it,” writes Cheryl Heppner, a deaf woman who is the executive director of the Northern Virginia Resource Center for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Persons. Despite her complaint, Heppner is a speechreading virtuoso. She made it through public school and Pennsylvania State University without the help of interpreters, and she has never met a person with better speech-reading skills. But “even with peak conditions,” she explains, “good lighting, high energy level, and a person who articulates well, I’m still guessing at half of what I see on the lips.” When we met in her office, our conversation ground to a halt every sentence or two, as if we were travellers without a common language who had been thrown together in a train compartment. I had great difficulty making out Heppner’s soft, high-pitched speech, and far more often than not my questions and comments met only with her mouthed “Sorry.” In frustration we resorted to typing on her computer.

For the average deaf person, lip-reading is even less rewarding. In tests using simple sentences, deaf people recognize perhaps three or four words in every ten. Ironically, the greatest aid to lip-reading is knowing how words sound.³⁷

³⁶“*Speechreading*—Takes into consideration the context of the conversation and the natural gestures, facial expressions, and other associational cues and lip movements used by the speaker.” Jacobs, Leo M., 1987, *A Deaf Adult Speaks Out*, Gallaudet University Press, Washington, DC, 19. The expression, “approaching the ridiculous,” is also from Jacobs, a Deaf professor at Gallaudet University.

³⁷ Dolnick, Edward, 1993, “Deafness as Culture,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, September, 39.

After Heppner lost her residual hearing she persevered with speechreading, and learned and taught Pidgin Signed English (PSE). She did not know how much ASL had to offer, even though she knew Deaf people who used it. Eventually she took a course in ASL at Gallaudet University, a university for the Deaf, where ASL is used by everyone.

My teacher signed, and so did all the other students in my class. For the *first time* I participated in classroom discussions.³⁸ [my italics]

It was amazing how much my short stay at Gallaudet has changed me. I had always thought that my education was a good one. I began to realise how much of my success had been *in spite of, not because of*, my experiences in the classroom. I hadn't known what I was missing because I'd never had anything to compare it with.

After I'd experienced my first class discussion at Gallaudet, I was bitter. I thought about the many times I'd been cheated in the past. Learning from people offered a richness that textbooks couldn't match.³⁹ [my italics]

Heppner says that it wasn't until she learned ASL that she began to understand how much she had been missing. How much more must a *prelingually* deaf child miss? More importantly, how much can the prelingually deaf child *pick up* in an oral education? Lipreading, or speechreading, is not really an option for the prelingually deaf despite what the oralists say. Leo Jacobs reiterates the point and backs it up with figures from a clinical study.

Mindel and Vernon have this to say about comprehension of lipreading in *They Grow in Silence*.

Edgar Lowell's 1957, 1958, and 1959 studies conducted by the Tracy Clinic illustrated the problems inherent in speechreading. Nondeaf college sophomores who had never studied speech reading were more successful at it than deaf persons to whom it had been taught throughout most of their school careers. The better performance by the nondeaf sophomores derived from their normal language base (phonetic, semantic, and syntactic), enabling them to determine by guessing the words they could not speech read. It is helpful to remember that 40 to 60 percent of English sounds are monophonous: their formation on the lips is identical to that of other sounds. A person without an adequate language base to fill in the gaps, understands very little. In fact, even the best speechreaders in a one-to-one

³⁸ Heppner, Cheryl M., 1992, *Seeds of Disquiet*, Gallaudet University Press, Washington, DC, 137.

³⁹ Heppner, 1992, 139.

situation were found to understand only 26 percent of what was said. Many bright deaf individuals grasp less than five percent. (1971, p.96)

Therefore, when you consider untrained and undisciplined deaf infants or small children, it seems to approach the ridiculous if their parents attempt to communicate by talking, talking and talking to them. For, to many of those without normal hearing, including myself, the lip movements of people talking convey very little meaning. Much of the time we see them only as flapping lips.⁴⁰

This is the sort of information that the oralist does not consider, or rejects. The three points in the oralist's credo do not suggest that the best that can be expected is understanding twenty-six percent of what is being said. It does not say that many bright deaf individuals will grasp less than five percent of what is being said.

1. Deaf children should be taught lipreading and speech from the beginning.
2. Deaf children must be in an exclusively oral environment.
3. Systematic signing must be eliminated during the critical period of speech and language development.

If Heppner, with her language base and residual hearing, is right about the difficulty of speechreading, this is an indictment of strict oralism for *postlingually* deaf children. If Jacobs, and all the other Deaf people who say the same thing, are right about the virtual impossibility of speechreading for *prelingually* deaf children, strict oralism does look like a crime, as Goldberg says. So far as the deaf child is concerned, language has been virtually eliminated from the classroom, and thus language development is effectively prevented in that environment. My aim in this project is to try to understand something about the nature of that "crime." In particular, is it possible that some deaf children grow up with *no* language, no spoken language and no signed language? If this is a possibility, what can we say, if anything, about being languageless?

⁴⁰ Jacobs, Leo M., 1987, *A Deaf Adult Speaks Out*, Gallaudet University Press, Washington, DC, 18-19.

1.4 A Concession: Spoken Language in a Signed Form

All oralists are not strict oralists and sometimes different sorts of signs are permitted. Sometimes almost all communication may be signed if speech is not clear enough. Nevertheless, the language of the hearing community is still the goal. So the concessions made to accommodate those who could not learn to speak and speechread, led to signed versions of spoken languages. This appeared, *to the hearing*, to be an obvious solution. The Deaf do not agree.

1.4.1 Visual English

Attempts to create manual or signed forms of spoken languages for the deaf use a variety of techniques. Sign language vocabulary is often used as a basis, then some signs modified with fingerspelling handshapes to make them “more precise,” for example, if the sign for a group of people is made using the “f” handshape, it means a family rather than just a group; new signs may be invented for words that do not have a single sign translation, for instance, the notorious IS sign; signs may be developed for bound morphemes, like “anti-” or “-tion;” the normal order of the signs may be changed to reflect the word order of the spoken language, which can then easily be “transliterated” into signs.⁴¹

Some sign systems are: *Seeing Essential English* (SEE I), *Signing Exact English* (SEE II), *Signed English* (SE), *Manually Coded English* (MCE). *Cued speech* uses a system of hand cues alongside lip movements to indicate which sound is being pronounced. As pointed out in the above quote from Jacobs, forty to sixty percent of sounds in English are monophonous. For instance, “it” and “in,” are virtually indistinguishable for a lipreader, so the difference in what is being said is indicated by hand positions. There are also several systems of *fingerspelling* where handshapes represent letters, the main difference is between two-handed and one-handed alphabets. Using fingerspelling alone is akin to writing or Morse code, in that it presents what is being said letter by letter.

⁴¹ Padden and Humphries, 1988, 64. Lynn S. Liben, “The Development of Deaf Children: an Overview of Issues,” in *Deaf Children: Developmental Perspectives*, edited by Lynn S. Liben, New York, 1978, 11-12. Donald F. Moores, “Current Research and Theory with the Deaf: Educational Implications,” in Liben, 1978, 186.

These attempts gives rise to another distinction stressed by the deaf community, that between a signed language such as NZSL or ASL, and a signed version of a spoken language. Systems like MCE are intended to make the native language of a country accessible to those who are born there but who are born deaf—those who, as children of native speakers, ought to regard it as their language. This just doesn't seem to work. The deaf claim that NZSL and ASL are natural languages for deaf people just as English or Samoan are for hearing people. The devised manual systems, on the other hand, are not natural languages for deaf people.

1.4.2 Merely Visual or Visually Coherent

The Deaf are not the only people who realise that the signed forms of spoken languages are far from ideal for deaf children. Some hearing parents who try to use these systems with their deaf children find, in the end, that they do not really work. Charlotte's parents found out that she was deaf when she was ten months old. This led to emotional turmoil, but they thought carefully about Charlotte's needs and resolved to learn and use a manual form of English. As they used it they found it rigid and tried a pidgin form, but they found that communication really blossomed as they began to approach ASL. Sacks quotes from an account written by Charlotte's mother.

We started a sign language class at our home studying Signed Exact English, SEE, an exact replication of spoken English in signs, which we felt would help us in passing on our English language, literature, and culture to our child. As hearing parents we were overwhelmed by the task of learning a new language ourselves and having to teach it to Charlotte simultaneously, so the familiarity of English syntax made sign language seem accessible to us. ... We desperately wanted to believe that Charlotte was similar to us.

After a year we decided to move away from the rigidity of SEE to pidgin Signed English, a mixture of American Sign Language vocabulary, which is more visually descriptive, and English syntax, which is familiar ... [but] the elaborate linear structures of spoken English don't translate into interesting sign language, so we had to reorientate the way we thought to produce visual sentences. We were introduced to the most lively and exciting aspects of signing: idioms, humor, mime, whole-concept signs, and facial expression. ... Now we are moving to American Sign Language, studying it with a deaf woman, a native signer who can communicate in signs without hesitation and can codify the language for us hearing people. We are excited and stimulated by the process of learning an ingenious and sensible language which has such beauty and imagination. It is a

delight to realize that Charlotte's signing reflects visual thought patterns. We are startled into thinking differently about physical objects, and their placement and motion, because of Charlotte's expressions.⁴²

Charlotte's mother describes ASL as a "sensible" language. They appear to be drawn towards it as they improve or refine their communication with Charlotte. They do not seem to have made an abrupt change, "Now we are moving to American Sign Language ..."

When Charlotte is six years old she is competent in ASL and English. Her mother describes ASL as a "visually coherent" language, and the implication is that the manual languages devised by the hearing are not coherent in this way.

Charlotte is now a six-year-old first grader. We of course, feel she is a remarkable person because, although profoundly deaf, she is interested, thoughtful, competent within her (mainly) hearing world. She seems comfortable in both ASL and English, communicates enthusiastically with deaf adults and children and reads and writes at a third-grade level. Her hearing brother, Nathaniel, is fluent and easy in Sign; our family conducts many conversations and much business in sign language. ... I feel our experience bears out the idea that early exposure to visually coherent language develops complex conceptual thought processes.⁴³

Charlotte's mother seems to be suggesting that the devised forms of a spoken language do not promote thought development. Sacks talks about the passage from a perceptual world to a conceptual world, a passage dependent on good linguistic interaction. Without necessarily accepting the validity of this "passage," and without trying to explicate it here, I think it signals something interesting. For the deaf child, a devised manual form of a spoken language is not an easy way to learn that language. This is just what Pivac claims and why there is a demand for bilingual education. The Deaf want deaf children to be proficient in reading and writing spoken language, and the best way to achieve this is to *begin* by acquiring a natural signed language. Compare this view with the Oralists' credo.

⁴² Sacks, 1990, 69-70.

⁴³ Sacks, 1990, 71.

[The oralist] would not prevent the deaf learning signs and manual communication provided that speech and language communication have been thoroughly established. He knows the price that teaching speech to the deaf demands, not only from the teacher, but also from the pupil. But, he believes it is one that can, and should be paid.⁴⁴

The manual languages that the hearing construct never seem to work for deaf-deaf communication. The Deaf say they are not natural languages, they only work if you already know the spoken language, in this respect they are like writing—we only learn to write *after* we know the language. They are not in any way intermediate between signed and spoken language. I do not intend to analyse the difference between signed languages and spoken languages, but it is important to realise that there is a very significant difference when it comes to deaf children becoming enlanguaged. Lane says devised systems violate “the principles of the manual-visual channel of communication.” Sacks discusses the naturalness of sign language in terms of its *spatial* grammar.

No deaf child has ever learned such a system as a native language and indeed could not, for it violates the principles of the manual-visual channel of communication.⁴⁵

Focusing in particular on the sort of devices used to mark grammatical relations (these are all spatial in ASL, but in signed English, as in spoken English, entirely sequential), [Sam Supalla, a deaf researcher] has found that deaf children exposed only to signed English *replace* its grammatical devices by purely spatial ones “similar to those found in ASL or other natural signed languages.” Supalla speaks of these as being “spontaneously created,” or evolved.

It has been known for many years that signed English is cumbersome and imposes a strain on those who use it: “Deaf people,” writes Bellugi, “have reported to us that while they can process each item as it appears, they find it difficult to process the message content as a whole when all the information is expressed in the sign stream as sequential elements.”⁴⁶

The difficulties that deaf children have with devised sign systems don’t diminish with use, so the children improvise to reduce the strain—they modify the devised systems,

⁴⁴ Di Carlo, 1964, 115.

⁴⁵ Lane, Harlan, “Is There a “Psychology of the Deaf?”” *Exceptional Children*, Vol. 55, No. 1, p.10.

⁴⁶ Sacks, 1990, p.112.

much as Charlotte's parents found themselves doing. They also improvise to establish signed communication within their hearing families. As hearing parents attempt to communicate with their deaf children homesign systems develop.⁴⁷ The modified systems, the homesign systems, and all sign languages appear have certain syntactic characteristics in common. These characteristics are not shared by the devised systems.

And there is strong circumstantial support for this in the fact that all indigenous signed languages - and there are many hundreds, all over the world, which have evolved separately and independently wherever there are groups of deaf people—all indigenous signed languages have much the same spatial structure. None of them resembles Signed English, or signed speech, in the least. All have, beneath their specific differences, some generic resemblance to ASL. There is no universal sign language, but there are, it seems, universals in all sign languages, universals not of meaning, but of grammatical form.⁴⁸

Oralism as an uncompromising method of deaf education stands condemned from various perspectives. It frequently does not work and it causes misery, as with John and Diana. When some deaf children do learn to speak and lipread, they do not find that it is beneficial and they may wish they had never learned to speak, as with Lyneen and Craig. It is not even ideal for the postlingually deaf. When Heppner, a postlingually deaf successful professional woman, learnt ASL the scope of communication opened up for her and she was angry about how she had been limited by oralism.

When the oralists make concessions and signed forms of the spoken language are devised, there is no significant improvement from the point of view of the Deaf. In fact, hearing parents intent on communicating with their deaf daughter, and intent on sharing English with her, find better communication developing as they drift towards using ASL. Furthermore this is absolutely no bar to their daughter's acquisition of English.

⁴⁷ Goldin-Meadow, Susan, 1993, "When does gesture become language? A study of gesture used as a primary communication system by deaf children of hearing parents." Chapter 2 in *Tools, Language and Cognition in Human Evolution*, edited by Kathleen R. Gibson and Tim Ingold, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

⁴⁸ Sacks, 1990, p.113.

What view of language was at the basis of oralist philosophy? The folly of lipreading was just sheer folly. The folly of devised sign systems, on the other hand, suggests that language was considered to be symbols or sequences of symbols that we learn to manipulate. Oralists thought that if deaf children could clearly distinguish the components of the system they could learn them, and then learn to manipulate them. So all they had to do was to put the symbols in an accessible form for deaf children. Instead of becoming proficient in the devised systems, deaf children modified them naturally in a way that hearing children do not modify spoken language.

After Stokoe published his work more research was done on signed languages. When it was realised that signed languages were languages of the same calibre as spoken languages, more enlightened education systems incorporated them into deaf education. Enlightenment, however, brought another hurdle for deaf children—mainstreaming.

1.5 Mainstreaming

Sign language could not be totally banished especially where there were groups of deaf children. It flourished outside the classroom in schools for the deaf and deaf units at other schools. The greatest difficulty was for the single deaf student in a hearing school because there was not even the opportunity to learn and use sign at play time and lunch time as John did.

Attitudes are changing and NZSL is no longer forbidden in deaf schools but there are other changes too. Nowadays, a part of educational policy is the attempt to integrate all children who were previously educated in special purpose schools, into normal classes in local schools with some support services—mainstreaming.

1.5.1 Integration or Exclusion

Mainstreaming is not a new idea but it is being considered more widely than before as an alternative to all sorts of separate special education. The general theory seems to be to accept people for what they are rather than setting them apart on the basis of a disability they just happen to have. As with oralism, the intentions are good but misconceptions about the nature of deafness confuse the issue.

Here deafness is construed as a disability or handicap analogous to being blind, or mentally handicapped—shades of the pathological model.

Vygotsky felt that children with either physical or mental handicaps should be mainstreamed rather than educated with children with the same handicap. He held that if blind, deaf, or mentally retarded children were educated separately from “normal” children their development would proceed in a totally different, and not beneficial, manner, which “would inevitably lead to the creation of a special breed of people”. For example, Vygotsky mentioned that when mentally retarded children are not exposed to abstract thought in their schooling (because they are supposedly capable only of concrete thinking) the result will be a “suppressing [of] the rudiments of any abstract thought that such children still have”. Similarly, deaf children who are educated only with other deaf children are highly likely to develop differently from their counterparts who are mainstreamed. “Everything in this environment accentuates [the deaf child’s] handicap, everything fixes his attention on his deafness and traumatises him precisely for this reason. Here not only is there no development, but those forces in the child which would subsequently have helped him enter life become systematically atrophied.”

It is clear that Vygotsky did not view the developmental process as unidirectional, with handicapped children merely being in some way less developed on a continuum of development, but believed that development could proceed along entirely separate lines. He felt that this would be particularly true when children were labeled, and treated differently because of that label. “Once branded a fool or handicapped, the child is placed in completely new social circumstances and his/her entire development proceeds in a completely new direction.”⁴⁹

This contrasts sharply with the view of many deaf people. For instance, Pivac’s personal response to the idea of mainstreaming reinforces the social model of deafness.

...as a deaf person I’m personally against mainstreaming because when a deaf child goes to a hearing school it’s very hard for that child. Other hearing-disabled children can actually communicate and mix with other children but for the deaf child communication is very hard. That child is lost within a hearing environment, [the authorities (?)] think it is a freedom environment but it isn’t. But if that child is with other deaf children there is more freedom. There’s freedom of communication, of expression. So it’s really opposed to what the government says is the least restrictive environment. [i.e. mainstreaming] I’m opposed to that [mainstreaming]. If deaf children

⁴⁹ Jonathan Tudge, 1990, “Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development, and peer collaboration: Implications for classroom practice”, in *Vygotsky and Education: Instructional Implications, and Applications of Sociohistorical Psychology*, edited by Luis C. Moll, Cambridge, 158.

mix with other deaf children they build more communication and build more language. They develop more language because they're learning from each other and they have more support from each other. And that is why I'd like to see the children together and educated together so they can build on that; because many times when I go to the Deaf Club or whatever, I see a lot of deaf who were mainstreamed, who are oral, who have very poor English - they can't communicate, they feel very lost in the hearing world and in the deaf world. When that person mixes with other deaf they start to develop things but it's too late, it should have been done in their youth. And you hear many sad stories and many people don't know, have never heard these sad stories.⁵⁰

What lies at the centre of this disagreement? I think it is a misunderstanding of the nature and consequences of deafness. People who are deaf frequently resist the term “disabled,” it is more applicable to those who are blind or wheelchair-bound.⁵¹ The blanket use of a term like “disabled” or “handicapped” hides a significant difference, between the person who is deaf and the person who is not. I do not want to discuss the merits or otherwise of mainstreaming in general it may be beneficial for people who are blind or confined to a wheelchair but Vygotsky's view, as quoted by Tudge—that deaf children educated in a deaf school will have their handicap accentuated, and that they will be traumatised by this—seems clearly mistaken.

1.5.2 Community or Isolation

Two sorts of evidence can be offered. Firstly, there is the sense of belonging and being “normal” that deaf people feel when they are with other deaf people. The first time many deaf children have really felt that they are part of a community is when they arrive at a deaf school. It is common for deaf children to be the only deaf member of a family. Often there is little realisation that the deaf child is left out of real family life by being excluded from conversation and idle chatter. When the child first goes to a deaf school, then, they get their first experience of real community.

Most adults who were deaf as children can describe the same experience—the frustration, anger, and loneliness of home; arrival at school; the sudden dawning of community and relationships. Of all

⁵⁰ Pivac, 1993, 4.

⁵¹ Padden and Humphries, 1988, 44.

adult cultures in the world, this is one of the very few handed down generation after generation from child to child.⁵²

Secondly, there is the sense of isolation that the Deaf report feeling in a predominantly hearing class or school. A deaf teacher in the USA recalled being mainstreamed at a public school when he was a boy.

He could remember feeling, at the public school, that his social world seemed small. He wanted to feel he could move freely within the school, and from the classroom to a social life outside of school, but he understood that the school belonged to others; he was merely a special student.⁵³

Vygotsky said of *deaf* schools, "Everything in this environment accentuates [the deaf child's] handicap, everything fixes attention on his deafness and traumatises him...." From a Deaf point of view this is quite wrong. In a deaf school the deaf child feels normal; in a normal school the deaf child's difference is accentuated.

Being part of a community, then, involves much more than just being physically present in that community. Pivac stresses the importance of communication, it gives a sense of belonging, allows children to express themselves freely, leads to better language acquisition and, in contrast to those who are "oral," facilitates personal growth.

Pivac was questioned on the point that many parents of children with other disabilities argue for mainstreaming saying that we should bring people together or bring children together with their differences and allow them to learn from each other. She tries to illustrate that for a deaf child, this is unrealistic. It is unrealistic because deafness is not understood. A child who is blind can talk to a child in a wheelchair, the deaf child does not fit in as another member of that group.

No. I don't agree with that at all. I have seen a group of about 160 children who went to America, to Disneyland, and the organiser told them to group into fours. In each group a deaf, a wheel-chair bound, a slightly retarded and a blind. Most of the deaf children screamed, they couldn't communicate with those other children. So some of the

⁵² Benderly, 1980, 228.

⁵³ Padden and Humphries, 1988, 114

teachers thought - OK then, we'll select all the deaf ones out of the group so they can communicate amongst each other. You know, about the trip, about the travels and what they had seen the children felt good, they could not mix with the other students. Every four years we have our own World Deaf Games. Most deaf people will attend to some destination in the world like the IPC, the International Paraplegic Centre. They wanted the deaf people to be involved with those groups, the other disabilities, but the deaf felt "No", we can't be involved in that, we want our own, we want to be separate. We can communicate amongst each other, amongst ourselves but with other special disabilities it is very rare to have a deaf person, deaf sports, in there. So that just shows that we cannot mix with other disabilities.⁵⁴

It is important to realise that the deaf do not want to opt out of the hearing world, they do not want to avoid interaction with hearing people, and they do not want to live on the fringes of society. To participate in society, however, people must be able to communicate effectively. Good communication needs a group to develop. For deaf people that group needs to be a group of signers. This is confirmed by the experiences of those who are themselves deaf, people who have first hand knowledge of the lack of community in mainstreaming.

As Pivac says, many people have never heard these sad stories, and many who have heard them reject them because they contradict commonly held beliefs about the benefits of integration. Watson reports that Lyneen and Craig believe mainstreaming for the deaf should be banned. Craig was mainstreamed and felt totally alienated. It would be easy to reply that the real fault lay with the behaviour and attitude of the hearing children and not with mainstreaming, but how can the hearing children be expected to understand deafness if the educators don't?

Craig started out in a deaf unit and was gradually mainstreamed. His memories of school are so painful he can barely refer to them without becoming emotional and angry.

He remembers being alienated. Like Lyneen he was considered bright because he could speak. He never really made close friends and found hearing people would talk down to him, as though he was retarded.

They were polite enough to say "hello, how are you?", but didn't care enough to let him into their lives, or find out what life was really like for him.

⁵⁴ Pivac, 1993, 5.

“Surviving in the mainstream class involved guesswork day after day. I had to teach myself ways of learning which were alien to me.”

His life as a whole suffered, particularly on a social level.

“There is a relationship of both missing out on what is taught in class, and missing out on what is carried within everyday conversation, every day.

“Consequently, I missed out, and it gave people the false impression that I was either retarded mentally or socially retarded.”⁵⁵

Lyneen's schooling was not entirely happy because of the oral teaching, but being in a deaf school made a world of difference, she was part of a community. She had friends she could talk to.

Sign language was picked up in the playground through other children.

And because the conversations were “secret”, and signing was not taught nationally, different dialects emerged.

“We were not taught anything really at deaf school, but I liked it there because I could fit in and make friends,” said Lyneen.

“They were my world. We could talk to one another through sign.”⁵⁶

What is lost in the mainstreaming environment is the linguistic community, the easy chatter about this and that, the wider access to information as others are communicating among themselves or with the teacher. This community, as Pivac points out, is not just the environment needed for socialising and learning about the world, it is also the environment needed to acquire and develop language in the first place. Benderly notes the importance of what she calls the “other” curriculum.

For children, and especially adolescents, ...the “other” curriculum of friendships, camaraderie, sports and activities is at least as important as school work. Is a child truly in his “least restrictive environment” unless he can take full part in everything his classmates are up to ...⁵⁷

Lyneen and Craig are explicit about what education for deaf children should be like. What they say emphasises the idea of a linguistic community where the language is used naturally at *all* levels and it should be stressed that they do not say deaf children

⁵⁵ Watson, 1992.

⁵⁶ Watson, 1992.

⁵⁷ Benderly, 1980, 252.

should not learn English, or that deaf children should not learn to read and write any spoken language.

For Craig and Lyneen, an ideal world would be a deaf school, where deaf teachers used New Zealand sign language to teach the curriculum used in hearing schools.

They believe teachers advisers and social workers of the deaf should be deaf.

They say it is time the deaf had a say in their education - and what communication system is best for them.⁵⁸

Vygotsky may well be right in saying that in special schools development proceeds in a completely new direction, but within the wider, existing conditions this might be the best thing that could happen for deaf children. Development of deaf children in a deaf community must be compared with the actual development of a deaf child in a hearing environment and not with some mythical ideal which is rarely if ever approximated.

Mainstreaming does not offer the isolated deaf child the sort of community in which language development flourishes. Despite the proscription of signing the children at deaf schools were members of a language community, they were part of a social group. Social interaction is just as important for language development as is being able to perceive the language that people use. What is the point of giving the children the go-ahead to use a signed language, and then removing them from the community of signers? Why not acknowledge the importance of the community of signers, and then extend it by encouraging others to join it—the families of deaf children at least?

1.5.3 Postscript: Real Integration

It is not impossible for Deaf people to fit effortlessly into a predominantly hearing community for this has actually happened. There have been, and still are, communities where there is easy mixing of deaf and hearing people because the community of signers includes hearing people. One such community was on Martha's Vineyard.

Such worlds do exist, and have existed in the past, and such a world is portrayed in Nora Ellen Groce's beautiful and fascinating *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard*. Through a mutation, a recessive gene brought out by inbreeding, a form of hereditary deafness existed for 250 years on

⁵⁸ Watson, 1992.

Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, following the arrival of the first deaf settlers in the 1690s. By the mid-nineteenth century, scarcely an up-Island family was unaffected, and in some villages (Chilmark, West Tisbury), the incidence of deafness had risen to one in four. In response to this, the entire community learned Sign, and there was free and complete intercourse between the hearing and the deaf. Indeed the deaf were scarcely seen as "deaf," and certainly not seen as being at all "handicapped."

In the astonishing interviews recorded by Groce, the island's older residents would talk at length, vividly and affectionately, about their former relatives, neighbors, and friends, usually without even mentioning that they were deaf. And it would only be if this question was specifically asked that there would be a pause and then, "Now you come to mention it, yes, Ebenezer *was* deaf and dumb." But Ebenezer's deaf-and-dumbness had never set him apart, had scarcely even been noticed as such: he had been seen, he was remembered, simply as "Ebenezer"—friend, neighbor, dory fisherman—not as some special, handicapped, set-apart, deaf-mute. The deaf on Martha's Vineyard loved, married, earned their livings, worked, thought, wrote, as everyone else did—they were not set apart in any way, unless it was that they were, on the whole, better educated than their neighbors, for virtually all of the deaf on Martha's Vineyard were sent to be educated at the Hartford Asylum—and were often looked at as the most sagacious in the community.

Intriguingly, even after the last deaf Islander had died in 1952, the hearing tended to preserve Sign among themselves, Not merely for special occasions (telling dirty jokes, talking in church, communicating between boats, etc.) but generally. They would slip into it involuntarily, sometimes in the middle of a sentence, because Sign is "natural" to all who learn it (as a primary language), and has an intrinsic beauty and elegance sometimes superior to speech.⁵⁹

It seem so obvious, it seems so logical. If there are two modes of interacting, a visual mode and an auditory mode, and some of the people can see and hear while others can only see it is visual communication which will unite the community. The group that can see and hear is the group that becomes bilingual so far as everyday interaction is concerned and this does not inhibit literacy in the deaf group. This is an ideal way for a signed language to take its place in a hearing community where Deaf people live.

⁵⁹ Sacks, 1990, 33-35. Sacks cites: Groce, Nora Ellen, 1985, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

This could happen at least in the families of deaf children—as in Charlotte’s family—and in schools where there are deaf units. The demand for deaf children to fit in with the majority language group can be countered by showing how sign language minority groups differ from other ethnic minority groups—that is, other minority language groups.

1.6 Signed Languages and the Languages of Ethnic Minorities

Now that ASL and other signed languages are fully recognised as languages on the same footing as spoken languages, the social model of deafness is more widely accepted than the pathological or disability model. Thus, those whose primary language is a signed language are often seen as a minority language group, and Deaf culture is seen to be as important as other cultures. This does not mean, however, that the justification for using NZSL in schools, it is similar to the justification for having any minority language used where there are members of that minority language group in the school.

It’s almost too easy, in these days of ethnic politics, to call the deaf community a minority group. Indeed, deaf people themselves often use the term when pressing for political goals, but in so doing they sacrifice their uniqueness to gain visibility. The cliché at once connotes too much and denotes too little, letting outsiders off easily by convincing them they understand when in fact they may not.⁶⁰

Benderly refers to the uniqueness of the deaf being sacrificed. This means that the cliché “minority group” hides a very important sense in which the deaf are not like other minority groups, particularly other minority language groups. To show this I will compare signed languages, like NZSL and ASL, with other ethnic minority languages.

Minority language groups exist in widely differing situations. Maori and Basque are minority languages in their own countries. Immigrant and refugee languages are minority languages in adopted countries. The small community of Chaldean speakers in Iraq has a written heritage, speakers of Warlpiri in Australia do not. The minority language community may be small and fairly diffuse, for example, Vietnamese families in New Zealand, or large and concentrated like the Greek community in Melbourne. In

⁶⁰ Benderly, 1980, 219-220.

the case of a displaced orphan, for instance, the minority language group in an area could be as small as one.

1.6.1 Indigenous or Introduced

Signed languages are indigenous minority languages in that they have not been introduced from some other country. Those who use NZSL reside in New Zealand, and there is no other country where it is the “mother tongue”, as it were. Signed languages do not necessarily differ with differences in the surrounding spoken languages and they may or may not differ across national borders, but whether they do or not, the areas in which they are used are generally the areas where they developed. So the minority groups who use signed languages are indigenous minority language groups. They are not like groups of immigrants or refugees who bring their minority language into their adopted country.

On the other hand, indigenous spoken languages have, at some time, been the predominant or only language of some country, province, or district—Maori or Welsh, for example. Many indigenous minority spoken languages have become minority languages because they have been replaced, or displaced, by another language group flooding into that country or region. Other indigenous languages have become minority languages because the areas where they are spoken have been incorporated into larger geo-political units; like Basque in Spain.

This is not the case with signed languages, they are, and always have been, dispersed minorities. But they are not like Hebrew which is a dispersed language, being spoken wherever there are Jewish families who feel that it is their language. Hebrew has a “home” area where it is not a minority language. Where there are significantly large numbers of deaf people in a locality, as on Martha’s Vineyard in the past, or in Fremont, California today, a signed language may have a high profile and status, but it is never the majority language.

Thus, although signed languages are indigenous languages, and the deaf are minority language groups, there is a significant difference between that sort of language minority

group and ethnic minorities using spoken languages. I will compare sign language minorities with various sorts of ethnic minorities, both indigenous and immigrant.

1.6.2 Indigenous Minorities

Indigenous minorities who have had their language largely replaced, or even almost obliterated, have sometimes had their own language excluded from the classroom in the way that oralism excluded sign language from the classroom. This was the case in New Zealand where English replaced Maori. English was the unfamiliar language in which Maori-speaking children were taught, and Maori was often proscribed in the school. Like the deaf, Maori children used their own language in the playground. Eventually, however, the Maori children picked up English, as did many of the adults.

With time, through immigration, the English-speaking population of the country outnumbered the Maori-speakers. Some children grew up bilingual, but there were also new generations of Maori children acquiring English as their first and only language. The ethnic minority came to use the majority language well. Today there are many articulate Maori arguing clearly and persuasively in English for the preservation of their language through use in schools. There are thousands of literate and eloquent Maori of all ages whose *only* language is English, showing an interest in learning the Maori language.

There is no parallel between the deaf minority and the Maori minority. Oralism never replace signed languages with any spoken language in the way that English replaced Maori. Deaf children did not as a rule arrive at school fluent in a signed language. The few children who were fluent in a signed language were the deaf children of deaf parents, but most deaf children have hearing parents. Deaf children, like John and Diana, did not just use their signing in the playground, they actually *learnt* it there.

Few suppressed bands of believers have invented, preserved, or handed on a heritage in the face of greater opposition or with more ingenuity and determination than the deaf children who taught one another sign language in secret.⁶¹

⁶¹ Benderly, 1980, 228.

It is unrealistic to think that deaf children, as a group, could lose that heritage over a couple of generations, in the way that many Maori children grew up knowing no Maori.

Oralists are quick to mention, not only deaf children who have succeeded, but also deaf adults who are “oral” and bring their deaf children up as “oral.” This claim has to be qualified, it does not show that the use of signed languages might diminish in the way that Maori did. I have already emphasised the importance of residual hearing. Kyle and Woll review a number of studies on speech development and spoken language development in deaf children. There are a number of factors which affect the development of either of these, for example teaching methods, or home language environment. In the end, however, speech quality and competence in a spoken language are both significantly correlated with the degree of deafness.⁶² I have also pointed out that many of these “successes” do not identify with the hearing, or even the hard-of-hearing—Lyneen and Craig, for instance. Cases of “success” do not negate what the Deaf say about oralism as a policy for all deaf children.

John said of oralism, “some of us could learn like this but some of us could not.” Those who could not are, as mentioned earlier, the subjects of this discussion. This group of deaf children *could not* learn a spoken language—they were not like the Maori who *could* learn English. There just isn’t the same sense of “could not” in moving from one spoken language to another. Similarly, many deaf children *could not* grow up bilingual in the way that many Maori children did. They did not come to use a signed language and a spoken language with equal ease in their everyday interaction with other people. Many, like John and Diana, could not even read and write the language that they could not hear or speak.

Signed languages are indigenous minority languages but they are not indigenous minority languages in the way that Maori is. Thus the call for the use of NZSL in schools is not like the call for the use of Maori in schools. The call for the use of signed languages in bilingual education for the deaf is a call for a natural language. This is

⁶² Kyle and Woll, 1985, 59-64.

what every hearing child has in *any* spoken language. That is why Benderly says that a cliché like minority language “denotes too little, letting outsiders off easily by convincing them they understand when in fact they may not.”⁶³

Thus the two situations are quite different. Both Maori and manual languages were suppressed and the majority language was offered in their place; the Maori were able to accept the offer. The deaf didn’t refuse it, however, hundreds of deaf children and their parents really did give it their best shot within the terms of the offer. However, misconceptions about language and language acquisition obscured the fact that, for many, the offer was not realistic in the first place.

1.6.3 Immigrant Minorities

Sign language minority groups sometimes feel like foreigners in their own country, but unlike foreigners they do not “settle in.” There is the same sort of difference between sign language minorities and immigrant minority language groups, as there is between sign language minorities and indigenous minority language groups. The immigrant minorities may want to preserve their languages but cannot expect the schools to provide teaching in those languages. The immigrant children use the minority language at home but they will come to use the majority language in the classroom *and* the playground, *even among themselves*. Deaf children who are native users of signed languages do not ever get to the stage where they find it easy or appropriate to use lipreading and speech among themselves if they know sign language.

If one family, immigrant or refugee perhaps, is isolated within the majority culture, young children may become so proficient in the new language that they are reluctant to use their first language and their parents find it easier or preferable to concentrate on using and improving their grasp of the new language. When the children have grown up they may find that they have forgotten the language they used when young. Deaf children who use sign language at home never have the same reluctance to continue

⁶³ Benderly, 1980, 220.

using it even if they become proficient in a spoken language. Lyneen and Craig learned to speak but they do not feel that they have a good command of English.

Among the hearing, children are sometimes encouraged to acquire the language of a surrounding majority by purely informal interaction, there is no pressure on the child to learn the language. If a family visits a foreign country for a year, even six months, a young child can pick up the language through playing with other children. Deaf children in all countries often have the opportunity to play with hearing children but, for the group under consideration, this never leads to proficiency in the spoken language. It is more likely that the hearing children will pick up some signs from the deaf child.

A deaf child playing with hearing children, or in an ordinary school, is not in the same situation as a hearing child among foreign children. The difference is that the deaf child *cannot* “settle in” in the way that the foreign child can.

1.6.4 The Infant Minority of One

Sometimes a deaf child lives in a community where there are no other deaf people—the child is a minority of one. Orphan children from Eastern Europe and South East Asia have been adopted by families in countries like New Zealand. The adopted child is, for a while, a minority of one, from a different language group and a different culture. Usually these children soon acquire the language of their adoptive parents.

Profoundly deaf children born to hearing parents are like children from a different culture, but they are children who *cannot* share the culture of their parents. Often in these situations something remarkable happens. A gesture system called “home signs” develops around the infant. Even when parents try not to use any gestures, because of professional advice, the urge to communicate is strong, and if all else fails, gestures are used. The remarks of these parents who were told not to resort to gestures illustrate this.

Well using gestures helps us. It helps to communicate with them a little bit more with the gestures. But he’s not got to the sort deaf and dumb language sort of thing, it’s just gestures to show you what he wants and what he doesn’t. They tell us at school “Try not to” - but sometimes you can’t help but do it. And I mean I’ve noticed at times that they have to use them.

Well I don't think you can avoid it, quite honestly. I know you shouldn't and I don't want Gary to gesture. But quite honestly I can't imagine a deaf person could communicate without some gestures. I mean, how do you show them?

We're told not to use signs at all, but in fact he uses signs, without even being taught them, so we've carried on with whatever he does.

You can't just sort of talk. If she does hear any kind of word, it's not a word anyway, it's only a babble. I think you've got to communicate that way. I don't care how much they say that you shouldn't. You can't just stand there and do nothing.

Oh I don't mind gesture, I think if they can understand anything it's better than not understanding at all. Anything's better than nothing.

I would use anything to communicate with her.⁶⁴

The third parental statement above illustrates the situation in which home signs develop. "We're told not to use signs at all, but in fact he uses signs, without even being taught them, so we've carried on with whatever he does." Susan Goldin-Meadow has studied the gestures of young deaf children whose hearing loss was so severe that they could not naturally acquire spoken language. The hearing parents of these children had not yet exposed them to a conventional sign language. During their pre-school years these children began to use gestures as their primary means of communication. Goldin-Meadow's analysis of the developing pattern of their gestures reveals language-like properties.

My colleagues and I have found that these gestures, which comprise the children's sole means of communication, take on many of the formal and functional properties found in the early communication systems of children learning conventional languages. Moreover, the deaf children's gestures are structured in ways that the spontaneous gestures of their hearing parents are not. These observations suggest that gesture will assume language-like properties when used as a primary communication system (but not when used as an adjunct to

⁶⁴ Gregory, Susan, 1976, *The Deaf Child and his Family*, Allen and Unwin, London, pp.125-127.

speech), and that language-like properties can develop in the absence of a conventional language model.⁶⁵

A detailed analysis of the morphological structure in the gestures is reported for only one child and it was found that “the corpus of characterizing gestures the child produced over a two year period (2 years 10 months to 4 years 10 months) could be regarded as a system of handshape and motion morphemes.”⁶⁶

Certain features of that system were comparable to linguistic features of ASL; handshape morphemes comparable to Handle classifiers in ASL, which combine with motions to convey transitive actions; object handshapes comparable to Semantic-Class and Size-and-Shape classifiers in ASL, which combine with motions to create intransitive verbs of motion; object handshapes with motions representing transitive predicates comparable to Size-and-Shape classifiers in ASL, which combine with motions typically to represent instruments of transitive actions.⁶⁷ Overall the child’s gestures “appeared to reflect a morphological system, albeit a simple one, akin to the system that characterizes the productive lexicon in ASL.”⁶⁸

The children are oblivious to English, and the patterns of their gestures are different from the pattern of their mothers’ gestures. The child’s use of gestures is always more developed than the mother’s. It is as if each child has his or her own rudimentary language, distinct from the language of those who observe and interact with each child. The structure of this rudimentary language is elaborate enough to be described in terms used to describe any language—for instance, “object,” “action,” “real-world objects,” “objects that are not present in the here-and-now,” “an arbitrary location in space set up as a place-holder for an absent, intended referent,” “action and attribute relations,”

⁶⁵ Goldin-Meadow, Susan, 1993, “When does gesture become language? A study of gesture used as a primary communication system by deaf children of hearing parents.” Chapter 2 in *Tools, Language and Cognition in Human Evolution*, edited by Kathleen R. Gibson and Tim Ingold, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 64.

⁶⁶ Goldin-Meadow, 1993, 72. Preliminary data from two others suggests their gesture systems are also characterised by morphological structure.

⁶⁷ Goldin-Meadow, 1993, 72-74.

⁶⁸ Goldin-Meadow, 1993, 74.

“predicate structure containing three arguments - the actor, patient, and recipient.”

The deaf child of hearing parents may be an infant minority of one. In this situation the child is often the source of a new “language”—home signs—entering the family. Technically this is not a minority of one, because home signs do not appear if the parents do not interact with the child. However ineptly the parents use the system, they must reciprocate. Home signs may flourish when other children are involved. Paula is deaf and her hearing brother and friends use gestures when playing with her.

John (the hearing brother) has to be reminded of it much more than I do (using language). I mean I’m better than John, John’s aspect, reaction to it is more realistic than mine. I mean it’s all very well to go on about language, but basically I mean he’s concerned about playing and talking to his sister - he wants to get on with it, he wants to play the game, so if he can give Paula a bash on the arm and say “That’s wrong” he does.

She’s got to “gesture” really, hasn’t she? It’s a case of having to if you want to be understood.

(Q: Do you worry it might cut her off from other people?)

No, because all the kids round here do it with her.⁶⁹

Paula’s mother says that using the gestures is “more realistic,” it means you can get on with things, playing games and “talking.” Using gestures—a form of minority language—does not cut the deaf child off, it allows that child to join in. Those who have documented and studied gestures like these point out that they cannot be arbitrary or nonsensical as it is vital that others understand them.⁷⁰ Nothing like the development of home signs happens in ethnic minorities of one where only spoken languages are involved.

Thus when Deaf communities are described as minority groups, or minority language groups, it is important to understand what sort of minority language groups they are. Their justification for having the minority signed languages used in education is not the same as the justification for incorporating other ethnic minority languages into education. For a particular group of deaf children there will be *no language at all*, if there is no signed language.

⁶⁹ Gregory, S, 1976, 127-128.

⁷⁰ Padden and Humphries, 1988, 117.

* * *

Deafness, more than anything else, shows the importance of a common language, in the formation of a social community, and the importance of a such a community in the development of language. In their education, many deaf children were faced with a lack of language in oralism and a lack of community in mainstreaming. If a child, through circumstances, suffers the worst aspects of both these policies, language will not develop. According to the Deaf, this can happen. Generally it happens because parents are discouraged from using sign with a deaf child in the family. If they take the advice seriously and if the child has no opportunity interact with others who will use signs, the child does not acquire a language.

This is more common than most hearing people think. Many Deaf adults report learning their first language between the ages of five and twelve, depending on when they started attending deaf school. These reports are mostly from the USA where ASL has been well established in deaf schools, at least unofficially, since last century, so the first language was ASL.⁷¹ These reports are treated with scepticism by the hearing. It is my intention to begin by taking the reports at face value and to try and understand something about languagelessness.

In this chapter I have tried to give a picture of the milieu from which I derive the notion of a languageless person. That is, the sort of person who, through circumstances connected with profound deafness, may not acquire any spoken or any signed language, and who may not develop a home sign system. There are, I believe, such extreme cases. Many such languageless persons are reported by the professionals, hearing and Deaf, who work in areas concerned with helping these people to become enlanguaged.

⁷¹ ASL did not have this official name until after Stokoe's work was accepted, but it has existed in the USA as a language since Laurent Clerc came from France in 1816, and , with Thomas Gallaudet, set up a school for the deaf.

CHAPTER 2

This chapter outlines some significant historical developments in deaf education. It illustrates that the issues debated in Chapter 1 have been debated before. Furthermore, there has been in the past, a different attitude to sign language, even though there was not an analytical understanding of it. This is not a philosophical chapter as such. I feel however that the material is important because the insights which emerged from 1750 to 1880 were initially overlooked, ignored or discounted, and then almost completely lost, in the rise of oralism.

An understanding of sign language as a real language, had to be discovered again by people like Stokoe in the latter half of this century. And with that understanding came a renewed awareness of language issues for the Deaf. This understanding and awareness had been lost, because at the Congress of Milan in 1880, teachers of the deaf voted overwhelmingly in favour of oral education for deaf children, and for sign language to be eliminated from deaf schools. The American delegation of five were the only votes against, and the only Deaf delegate at the congress was a member of this delegation. Deaf educators were excluded by political means, and after the congress, of course, they lost their jobs. I do not believe, however, that this was all about politics. I think that hearing teachers, and maybe other authorities, just could not believe some of the things the Deaf had to say about sign language.

2.1 Language Issues In The History Of The Deaf

Deaf folklore in many deaf communities, attributes the invention of sign language to the abbé Charles-Michel de l'Épée and there is no doubt that he was a significant figure in revolutionising the education of deaf children in France. Padden and Humphries point out, however, that "Épée did not "invent" their signed language - no individual, however gifted, can invent a human language."¹ There is obviously a great

¹ Padden and Humphries, 1988, 28.

gap between history and folklore but the fact that Epée is revered is enough to show that he had a profound influence on the course of deaf education. His status was earned because he really began to think about the plight of the deaf and this meant thinking about language and what it is to have a language.

This is not something the hearing think about in the same way as the deaf. We don't have a great folk hero said to be the inventor of spoken language. The Deaf, on the other hand, have long been forced to fight for their language, and in some ways this has amounted to a struggle *to have language*. Epée strongly advocated the use of a manual language to educate the deaf and he acknowledged the signs used by the deaf themselves. He founded a school for the deaf in Paris in 1755, and it became the centre of a network of schools which promoted the use of sign language. Epée didn't get everything right, but he started something that turned out to be as much a philosophical inquiry as an educational reform.

Harlan Lane has edited a collection of writings by both deaf and hearing educators spanning the years 1760 to 1840 and the contents of these writings show substantial precursors of present day debates.² There are insights that accord with many of the things that the Deaf are saying today but somehow these insights were engulfed by the tide of oralism. It seems important to see that the sudden dawning of awareness in 1960, when Stokoe published his work, was not the first such dawn. There was at least one period of history when a similar sort of awareness of the status of sign language led to a golden age of deaf education.

This period - which now seems a sort of golden period in deaf history - saw the rapid establishment of deaf schools, usually manned by deaf teachers, throughout the civilized world, the emergence of the deaf from neglect and obscurity, their emancipation and enfranchisement, and their rapid appearance in positions of eminence and responsibility - deaf writers, deaf

² Lane, Harlan, 1984, *The Deaf Experience: Classics in Language and Education*, translations by Franklin Philip, Cambridge, Massachusetts. There is quite a bit of rhetoric in some of these writings and it is not hard to find contradictions. It becomes clear, however, that there were fierce loyalties, especially to Epée, and sometimes he is unduly praised and his critics unfairly represented. I don't think this necessarily confuses the issues.

engineers, deaf philosophers, deaf intellectuals, previously inconceivable, were suddenly possible.³

Then, with the rise of oralism, things changed and the profoundly prelingually deaf were the victims of what Isaac Goldberg called “this foolishness and this CRIME.” Why did this happen, especially in the face of much misery and failure? There are several possible reasons. Certainly the hearing teachers were ambitious, there were probably political and economic reasons too but I do not think these would have been enough on their own. The Deaf then, as now, insisted that the hearing did not understand deafness. I think this was probably true but I wonder how much of this misunderstanding was due to deeper misconceptions about language itself. The hearing persisted on focusing on the *fact of deafness* and not the *linguistic consequences*. And they could not believe that a sign language could possibly be a real language like spoken languages.

I will outline two main issues covered by these writings. The first issue I will discuss is the futility of the attempt to teach *all* deaf and hard of hearing people to use a spoken language rather than a signed language. Secondly I will look at the transition from the use of sign systems devised by the hearing to the use of true sign language. Initially the prominent high-profile teachers trained deaf children to speak, and because of publicity, that was perceived to be possible. When people saw that it was not possible the same language, French, was presented in a visual form. Successive changes eventually led to the use of sign language.

2.2 Speech or Manual Signs

Before Épée there were many attempts to teach deaf children from wealthy families to speak, for only those who could speak were eligible to inherit. Tutors would be employed and by various means, most of them unpleasant, would induce their deaf charges to articulate speech sounds, words, phrases and some sentences. It was a bonus if the child learned to read and write, but what impressed the general public

³ Sacks, 1990, 21.

most was to hear those previously mute, speak. “Successes” were exhibited to the rich and influential who marvelled at the results and engaged the teacher to instruct their own deaf children. Further “successes” might be exhibited in the highest scholarly institutions or at court, and honours were heaped on the teachers. What was not recognised was the harshness and emptiness of this for many of the pupils.

A wealthy family has a deaf son (deaf daughters were commonly sequestered at home or in convents). The family hires a tutor, often a man of letters, who works to maintain, perhaps restore, the boy’s speech and to expand his knowledge of arts and sciences. The boy makes progress; a philosopher notes it; the tutor published letters announcing his achievement but withholding his method. The tutor goes on to other things; the boy, generally, does not.⁴

2.2.1 *Jacob Pereire: The Greatest Demutiser*

Jacob Pereire, a contemporary of the abbé de l’Epée, is described by Lane as the most famous “demutiser” in history. He is an imposing figure on the oralism side of the debate and he challenged Epée publicly. Pereire read the works of the most prominent men who had taught the deaf to speak and his first pupil was his deaf sister. He then, over the period of a year, taught a deaf boy “to articulate all the basic speech sounds plus several words and phrases, such as “hat,” “madame,” and “what do you want?”” This pupil was displayed at the Jesuit school in Bordeaux and as a result Pereire acquired his next pupil, the eighteen year old son of a wealthy family.⁵

The boy, Azy d’Etavigny, had been born deaf but “Pereire found his pupil to be an intelligent youth who could read and write, having received instruction in French through sign language from a deaf Monk.”⁶ After a year the boy could articulate a thousand words and a few sentences which, interestingly, reflected the grammar of his sign language. Lessons ceased and the boy’s speech deteriorated, so Pereire was

⁴ Lane, 1984, 5.

⁵ Lane, 1984, 5.

⁶ Lane, 1984, 5. Lane, Harlan, 1988b, *When the Mind Hears*, Penguin books, London, 75. The monk, Etienne Defaye, had been born deaf and his class consisted of several deaf children. This was an ideal environment for the boy to learn useful sign language and that is a good basis for learning to read and write a spoken language. His linguistic ability and education, therefore, were a credit to Defaye and Pereire merely taught him a useless technical skill.

engaged again. After a demonstration at the Academy of Sciences he was asked to teach Saboureux de Fontenay, the thirteen year old godson of a duke. Saboureux, born hard of hearing, could read and write a little. He studied with Pereire for five years and then continued his studies on his own, learning several other languages.

2.2.2 *Saboureux de Fontenay: The Star Pupil*

Saboureux was the first deaf person to have his writings published and he opposed the use of any signs that did not directly convey the spoken word for he equated “language” with “spoken language.” He gives a description of how a hearing child learns language in the course of growing up, it is not a conscious study but something that goes on in the background. He goes on to reason that since the sounds and letters of a spoken language are completely arbitrary, shown by the diversity of languages, all that needs to be done for the deaf is to replace the arbitrary sounds with something they can see, and then to use that visual system “in every conceivable manner, at every opportunity, and at every encounter.”⁷ That is, to have the visual components of the language as much a part of the environment as speech sounds are for hearing children.

Pereire had used a manual alphabet which included some handshapes for particular sounds of speech and Saboureux saw this as the way for the deaf to acquire language. It was also an alternative to writing thus avoiding “the inconvenience of holding a pen and to avoid the slowness of handwriting ...”⁸ He is very critical of the gestures used by the deaf, although he had used these with an earlier teacher, Father Vanin, and claims they are inadequate for conveying intellectual, abstract, and general ideas. Strangely, he seems to think that if signs are used instead of words no real understanding will be gained, because his early religious instruction using signs left him with concrete, physical, and mechanistic ideas - that God was a “venerable old

⁷ Saboureux de Fontenay, 1764, “Extract of a Letter from Saboureux de Fontenay, a Congenitally Deaf Person, to Mademoiselle ***,” translated by Franklin Philip, in Lane, 1984, 17-22.

⁸ Saboureux de Fontenay, 1764, 26.

man, residing in the sky,” that the Holy Ghost was “a dove surrounded by light,” and so on. He then goes on to write,

...after I left Father Vanin, M. Pereire found me fairly advanced in the understanding of everyday language, and so he refrained from using those sorts of signs, making it a fortunate necessity to pay precise attention to the meaning of nouns, verbs, participles, prepositions, sentences and the order of phrases. He had me express myself in French without my usual signs, and informed me that he had no trouble understanding what I was trying to say, even without these signs.⁹

Saboureux’s account seems to be a mixture of insight and oversight. He points out that when the sense of hearing is absent anything we have to say can be evoked in another person’s mind with the help of sight (or touch or, less conveniently, with taste or smell). But it is, he says, important to note how language is usually acquired, and to make sure the experience is essentially the same for a deaf child. When it comes to educating deaf children, he says:

...almost no one can imagine the extent of the difficulties encountered in the study of language. There is a considerable difference between the way a deaf person without language learns the speech of his society, and the way in which another person trained in spoken language studies a foreign language.¹⁰

It is not easy for either the deaf pupil or the teacher when there is a background of linguistic deprivation, but it is quite possible to educate the deaf, provided the teacher establishes communication through a sense that the child possesses. So the first thing to do is make the communication visual. Secondly, think about the language acquisition environment of hearing children, and make the visual language part of the deaf child’s environment in the same way. Finally, remember that this is the deaf child’s first language, so don’t fall into the trap of teaching it in the way that you would teach a second language.

⁹ Saboureux de Fontenay, 1764, 25.

¹⁰ Saboureux de Fontenay, 1764, 25.

2.2.3 *Tricks of the Trade*

While Saboureux laments the fact that everyone soon forgets the way a toddler learns to speak, he himself overlooks the fact that he started by using signs with Father Vanin. He thinks these were no good because he had concrete ideas about God and the devil, but hearing children start with ideas like this too, they do not immediately grasp “intellectual, abstract, and general ideas” just because they begin with words and not signs. Saboureux is vague about how his first teacher taught him French, according to Lane.

The writings of both pupil [Saboureux] and teacher [Pereire] indicate that they at first used what signing the boy already knew, but they minimize its importance.¹¹

We now know that signing is a crucial step on the way to competence in other languages, and there is evidence that Pereire was familiar with deaf signs. He had a deaf sister, and she was his first pupil, so it is likely that he knew and used some signs because of that experience. Furthermore, Lane claims that despite all the denial of deaf signs, a careful reading of the records shows that they were very important. A well known pupil of Pereire's, Marie Marois, was interviewed when she was eighty and pressed to reveal Pereire's method of teaching speech. Among other things she revealed that he used signs. Lane reports:

He [Pereire] was a fluent signer: he used sign to give instructions, to explain words, and to converse with his pupils until they could converse orally or in writing, which he preferred.¹²

So although Pereire and Saboureux do not say so explicitly, that signing was used in the lessons, other things suggest that signing might have played an important part in Pereire's teaching. It is possible that Saboureux came to Pereire already familiar with deaf signs. And what Marie Marois says might mean that French words were explained using deaf signs. Thus it is possible that Pereire did teach French in the way that we teach a second language.

¹¹ Lane, 1984, 15.

¹² Lane, 1988b, 73.

Saboureux does not just overlook his own early signing. Some of Pereire's other pupils could communicate with signs when they came to him. His earlier pupil, Azy d'Etavigny, had begun his instruction with signs and by the time he came to Pereire he could read and write French. It almost certainly played an important part in the initial education of those pupils, education which was well begun by others before Pereire was engaged. In fact, Pereire is accused by his opponents of selecting pupils who had already received a good educational grounding.

Finally, Pereire himself admitted that both Marie Marois and Saboureux de Fontenay were not profoundly deaf, but only hard of hearing.¹³ This can make a significant difference depending on the auditory range of the minimal hearing. Again, Lane claims that this would have been a significant factor for the great "demutisers" in the selection of their pupils. The most impressive results were achieved with the hard-of-hearing rather than the deaf. These were tricks of the trade for a successful teacher.

If the history of oral education of the deaf reveals nary a principle for making a successful pupil, it reveals many for making a successful teacher.¹⁴

2.2.4 *The Skill of Speech*

What of speech, then, did it do away with the need for manual signs? Saboureux seems to be typical of the deaf, or more probably hard-of-hearing, who were, after hours and hours of instruction, able to articulate some spoken language.

Saboureux de Fontenay apparently never spoke after he left Pereire; there is no mention of it in his autobiography. A linguist who met with him when he was thirty found "not a trace of his speech lessons," and when Saboureux undertook to become a teacher of the deaf himself he gave further evidence that speech was not crucial in his eyes.¹⁵

¹³ Lane, 1988b, 82.

¹⁴ Lane, 1988b, 69.

¹⁵ Lane, 1988b, 84.

So Saboureux, the most successful pupil of the most famous demutiser, did not attempt to communicate with speech after he left Pereire. Neither did Marie Marois speak after she left Pereire's care. She said she let the skill fall into disuse, which shows how different and unnatural speech is for the deaf.¹⁶ Speaking for the hearing is not a skill that they have to keep up. Thus, despite the famous demonstrations before kings and courtiers, when it comes to really communicating in the world, for the deaf a manual method is preferable to speech.

Saboureux was highly literate and reportedly communicated much with pen and paper but he could do all his teaching of deaf children in this way. If Pereire used a manual method of communication in his teaching, as it seems he did, it is likely that Saboureux did too. This leads to the next question - which manual method? Fingerspelling, manual French and the signs used by the deaf are possibilities.

Saboureux was scathing about deaf signs in his writing, but he had not mingled in the Paris Deaf community. With hindsight we know the influence that language "experts" can have on the perception of any gestured language. Spoken language is extolled as civilised and sign language is denigrated as crude and somehow less than human.¹⁷ It is hard to know if this influenced what Saboureux wrote. It certainly did not influence the second deaf person to have his writings published, Pierre Desloges.

2.3 Signed French or Deaf Signs

There were several manual option for teachers of the deaf because hearing teachers often devised their own signs. Almost all the sign systems were signed French. Even Epée, who began with deaf signs, modelled his system on French. The sign language of the deaf had no standing at all and was not considered. It was openly attacked in print by the abbé Deschamps and this provoked spirited defence from Pierre Desloges.

¹⁶ Lane, 1988b, 84.

¹⁷ Chapter 1, 1.2.1.

2.3.1 *Pierre Desloges: Defender of Sign Language*

The first published defence of the sign language of the deaf was by Pierre Desloges. He was deafened at the age of seven after he had begun to read and write, and he continued to study written French although he received no formal education. He moved to Paris where he worked as a bookbinder and paperhanger. At the age of twenty-seven he learned the sign language used in the Paris deaf community and five years later wrote his *Observations*.¹⁸ He encountered a lot of ignorance concerning deaf people and their language.

To add the last straw to the public's errors, a new teacher of the deaf, the abbé Deschamps, publishes a book in which, not content to condemn and reject sign language as an instructional medium, he advances the oddest paradoxes and most erroneous criticisms of it.¹⁹

Desloges' book is short and to the point because he had to fit writing in with his work. As a result it is not very detailed but gives a remarkable outline of what must have been truly the language of the deaf at that time in Paris. Desloges was never a pupil of Epée's but he knew of him and knew something of his methods.

Indeed, once Epée had conceived the noble project of devoting himself to the education of the deaf, he wisely observed that they possessed a natural language for communicating to each other. As this language was none other than sign language, he realized that if he managed to understand it, the triumph of his undertaking would be assured. This insight has been justified by success. So the abbé de l'Epée was not the inventor or creator of this language; quite the contrary, he learned it from the deaf; he merely repaired what he found defective in it; he extended it and gave it methodical rules.²⁰

I will return to the "repair" of sign language below, but for the moment, the remark seems out of line with other things Desloges says—particularly, "We express ourselves on all subjects with as much order, precision and rapidity as if we enjoyed

¹⁸ Desloges, Pierre 1779, *A Deaf Person's Observations about an Elementary Course of Education for the Deaf*, Translated by Franklin Philip, in Lane, 1984, 29-48.

¹⁹ Desloges, 1779, 30.

²⁰ Desloges, 1779, 34.

the faculty of speech and hearing.”²¹ Perhaps Desloges *thinks* that the sign language he has learnt in the Deaf community incorporates Epée’s improvements.

I think it is important to note the following points when considering what Desloges has to say about the sign language of the Deaf. Desloges was postlingually deaf; he was literate before he learnt sign language; he was relatively old when he learnt sign language, twenty-seven; he learnt sign language in the Deaf community, not under Epée or any other hearing teacher; although the Deaf were taught “improved” sign language in schools they did not retain these “improvements” in their community. Therefore I think it is safe to assume that Desloges is writing about the sign language developed and used within the Paris Deaf community without significant input from the hearing. Clearly, he is not uninfluenced by some common ideas about language. For instance that we need to understand rules of grammar in order to communicate well.

...my presentation of sign language is limited to a simple outline of it, with no claim to a full explanation of its mechanism. That would be an immense enterprise requiring several volumes. *Indeed, sometimes a particular sign made in the twinkling of an eye would require entire pages for a description of it to be complete.*²² [my italics]

[The abbé Deschamps] commits a major error in suggesting that, for the deaf, sign language is limited to physical things and bodily needs.

That is true for those who are deprived of the company of other deaf people or who are abandoned in asylums or isolated somewhere in the provinces. This also unquestionably proves that we do not usually learn sign language from hearing people. But matters are completely different for the deaf living in society in a great city like Paris, for example, which we can rightfully call the epitome of the marvels of the universe. On such a stage as this our ideas are elaborated and extended by our opportunities for constantly observing new and interesting objects.

Therefore, when a deaf person encounters other deaf people more highly educated than he, as I myself have experienced, he learns to combine and improve his signs, which had hitherto been

²¹ Desloges, 1779, 36.

²² Desloges, 1779, 30-31.

unordered and unconnected. In intercourse with his fellows he *promptly acquires the supposedly difficult art of depicting and expressing all his thoughts, even those most independent of the senses*, using natural signs with as much order and precision *as if he understood the rules of grammar*. Once again I must be believed, for I have been in this situation myself and speak only from my own experience.

There are congenitally deaf people, Parisian labourers, who are illiterate and who have never attended the abbé de l'Épée's lessons, who have been found so well instructed about their religion, simply by means of signs, that they have been judged worthy of admittance to the holy sacraments, even those of the eucharist and marriage. *No event - in Paris, in France, or in the four corners of the world - lies outside the scope of our discussion. We express ourselves on all subjects with as much order, precision and rapidity as if we enjoyed the faculty of speech and hearing.*²³ [my italics]

I am not going to discuss the sign language Desloges describes but it is clearly not anything like manual French. He discusses signs which make general distinctions, like gender, tradesman/manufacturer, shopkeeper/street vendor, social class. He says that all signs can be reduced to three classes, ordinary, reflected and analytic, and by combining and uniting them they can express every possible idea.²⁴ He does not discuss things which clearly relate only to French—for instance, the use of the apostrophe, or turning the adjective “great” into “greatness” by combining the sign for the adjective with the sign for a noun.

Furthermore, Desloges criticisms of Deschamps' book are clear, precise and well reasoned, and he answers some of Deschamps points with well explained examples from sign language. It is hard to believe he was somehow misled about sign language. It is reasonable, then, to attribute Saboureux's criticism of deaf sign language to an inadequate understanding of it, for as a wealthy man he would not have mingled with the Deaf community.

²³ Desloges, 1779, 36.

²⁴ Desloges, 1779, 44.

2.3.2 *Epée and Sicard: Manual Signs*

Hearing opinion was more sceptical, even when the hearing person had acquired some sign language and viewed it sympathetically. Various positions were taken standing somewhere between Saboureux and Desloges. The abbé de l'Epée writes

although M. Pereire's system for teaching - called dactylology or fingerspelling - could lead the deaf to speak, it was nevertheless utterly worthless for teaching them to think.²⁵

The differences between sign language and French, however, especially the *apparent* paucity of signs compared to words, led Epée to think it wasn't a true language. He recognised that the deaf could learn and memorise without understanding but if the basis of their language was the signs they already understood then these could be refined with a methodical system. His lessons, then, focused on teaching grammar not language, because he thought it was only the grammar that the deaf needed to grasp.

He thought, however, that he could convert it into a [true language] by inventing signs for the French words and word endings that had no direct counterparts and by using all these signs in the French word order.²⁶

Epée's successor, the abbé Roch-Ambroise Sicard, was critical of this method for he thought that it "made the deaf pupils into automatic copyists of signed French into written French without any understanding of what they were writing."²⁷ The signed French that Epée devised was, to the deaf, almost as unfamiliar as Pereire's fingerspelled French. "Why couldn't Epée see that no one ever learned a foreign language with a grammar written in that language?"²⁸ Epée dictated both questions and answers to his students and assumed that if they could translate them into the

²⁵ Epée, Charles-Michel, (abbé de l'), 1784, *The True Method of Educating the Deaf, Confirmed by much Experience*, Chapters 1 to 5, translated by Franklin Philip, in Lane, 1984, 52.

²⁶ Lane, 1988b, p.61.

²⁷ Lane, 1984, p.81.

²⁸ Sicard, Roche-Ambroise, 1803, *Course of Instruction for a Congenitally Deaf Person*, Paris, Chapters 1 to 4, translated by Franklin Philip, in Lane 1984, 93.

methodical signs then they could understand the content. Sicard recalls challenging this assumption.

“One can understand a foreign language without being able to speak it,” he replied when I raised this objection. “I understand Italian,” he added,” but I cannot write in Italian. The deaf understand French, for they translate it into sign and that is enough for me.”

“Yes,” I might have said, “but these signs that you believe are their language, it is you who have given them to your pupils. This language is no more theirs than the one they are translating.”²⁹

Sicard’s own methods, however, seem very contrived. Rather than treating the language of the deaf as a natural language like French or English, he talks of it as if it was a sort of mathematics or logic. Signs are not vague like words, nor are they ambiguous. Used correctly, signs give an accurate picture of things and ideas. So Sicard’s method of teaching the deaf was “a complete system, a theory whose principles are now fixed ...”³⁰ This sounds rather mathematical and unlike language. According to what Desloges says, signs *are* like words—“Indeed, sometimes a particular sign made in the twinkling of an eye would require entire pages for a description of it to be complete.”³¹ The Deaf did not need their language modified any more than the hearing French did.

It was common knowledge that Epée has “improved” the sign language but in the past, as in the present, pupils did not usually take classroom alterations of sign language into other areas of their life. Sicard recognised the problem and tried to solve it but he felt that there still had to be signs to illustrate the structure of French grammar if the deaf were to understand French. He didn’t think of sign language as a language like English, for the French could understand English without having to have English grammar modified.

²⁹ Sicard, 1803, 95.

³⁰ Sicard, 1803, 91.

³¹ Desloges, 1779, 30-31.

2.3.3 Roch-Ambroise Bebian: A Signing Teacher

The deaf did not use the modified signs among themselves, and Epée and Sicard never recognised this. Roch-Ambroise Bebian, a hearing teacher of the deaf, who had become fluent in sign language as a youth explains:

But, one senses, the more profoundly these signs decompose the sentence - thus revealing the structure of French - the further they get away from the language of the deaf, from their intellectual capacities and style of thinking. That is why they never make use of these signs among themselves; they use them in taking word-for-word dictation, but to explain the meaning of the text dictated, they go back to their familiar language.³²

I do not think that by the “intellectual capacities” of the deaf Bebian means anything less than the intellectual capacity of the hearing. Others, however, thought that the Deaf did not use the “improved” signs because their intellect was limited by their sign language. The anthropologist, E. B. Tylor, who was also fluent in sign, remarked on the grammatical signs added by hearing teachers to sign language in 1878.

These are mostly signs adapted, or perhaps invented, by teachers who had the use of speech, to express ideas which do not come within the scope of the very limited natural grammar and dictionary of the deaf-and-dumb. But it is to be observed that though the deaf-and-dumb have been taught to understand these signs and use them in school, they ignore them in their ordinary talk, and will have nothing to do with them if they can help it.³³

Here were two hearing men fluent in sign but with different opinions of the standing of sign language as a language. Bebian sees it as merely different in style from French, Tylor seems to see it as a more limited form of language. The difference may be due to the fact that Bebian learnt it as a child while living with Sicard, his godfather, at the National Institute for the Deaf.

³² Bebian, Roch-Ambroise, 1817, *Essay on the Deaf and Natural Language, or Introduction to a Natural Classification of Ideas with their Proper Signs*, translated by Franklin Philip, in Lane, 1984, 148.

³³ Edward B. Tylor, 1878, *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization*, London, 16-17.

Under Sicard, the sign language of the Deaf was still not used in teaching. Bebian worked to change this.

More than any other man, Bebian was responsible for ending the worldwide practice of teaching the deaf in a manual version of the national language rather than in their own language.³⁴

The urge to modify sign language persisted, however. Bebian recognised that sign language was a genuine language but he thought it was different from spoken languages in that it was man's natural language—in its pure form it would be universally understood. Bebian sees this as a distinction between a natural language and a conventional language.³⁵ He was a fluent signer and knew that there were idiomatic expressions and vague signs that were not immediately clear to everyone, but he thought that these were merely imperfections. Once perfected, signs, and therefore ideas, could be classified. The position of each idea in the classification would be determined by the very nature of the idea and “the appropriateness of the sign would guarantee the appropriateness of the idea.”³⁶

So even Bebian, who was very sympathetic to the use of sign, wanted to meddle with it—to perfect it. And he saw it as more fundamentally natural than spoken languages

...the sign system is already extremely rich and in every way worthy of philosophical attention, it is at present far from being a perfect and regular whole.

I hasten to add that I am referring only to the familiar language of the deaf which no one teaches them and which is the direct and artless expression of their thought ...³⁷

Bebian is at least different from those who would improve sign language by borrowing from French. On the one hand he claims it is a genuine language but on

³⁴ Lane, 1984, 127.

³⁵ Bebian, 1817, 156-157. Many people still think there is *a* sign language, and they are surprised to find that there are many, just as there are spoken languages. When they find this out they seem surprised and wonder why the Deaf don't standardise it. We could say the same of the Swiss.

³⁶ Bebian, 1817, 147. This sounds like Bishop John Wilkins attempt to devise an artificial language in which all ideas and things could be classified. Crystal, 1987, 352.

³⁷ Bebian, 1817, 147.

the other he claims that it doesn't work the way spoken languages do, so we cannot borrow from a spoken language to improve sign language. Sign language, he thinks, is "the natural, direct expression of thought," and "Because the source of this language is inherent in our nature, we find it easy to master." This latter, of course, is not true. In Chapter 1 I pointed out that even people who work in deaf residential schools do not pick up sign language.

2.3.4 *Ferdinand Berthier*

The urge to modify seems to have eventually stopped. Ferdinand Berthier as a congenitally deaf teacher, could see the folly of "improving" sign language. He said of Sicard's method:

The imagination, we must confess, becomes apprehensive on seeing only a wearisome amplification, to say the least, of the teacher's points, apart from a host of procedures that are no doubt ingenious, but that reveal the facility of a systematic mind maneuvering at the expense of cold reason.³⁸

Berthier, was a man of some standing in the Paris Deaf community and over the years, through the use of sign, the Deaf were generally better educated and had more professional people among their ranks. The hearing still did not generally see sign language as a real language and there was no means of analysing to show that it was. The only way to realise this was to use the language.

All I can say about the language of gestures is that, even today, few speaking people have a precise idea of what the language and its special genius consist of. Far simpler than is commonly supposed, it has a small number of constituents in an infinite number of combinations, and it is enlivened by the play of the physiognomy. It has everything required to represent all the ideas crowding into the mind and all the affections stirring in the heart.³⁹

³⁸ Berthier, Ferdinand, 1840, *The Deaf before and since the Abbé de l'Épée*, Paris, translated by Franklin Philip in Lane, 1984, 184.

³⁹ Berthier, 1840, 175.

I do not think this is a desire to reform sign language. There are some “false and inexact expressions” in use both in schools and outside them. Here, I think Berthier is calling for correct language use in a general way. Sloppy French, or playground French slang, might be condemned in the same way. It is easier to insist on “precise” French because there is an established literature to draw on. Sign language does not get standardised in print, and natural variation is seen as imprecision, vagueness, or “vestiges of barbarism.” Now that there is a Deaf professional class there is, it appears, a class difference in the language.

So we must condemn the casualness of certain teachers who tolerate these expressions, for it is now widely recognized that the rightness of signs creates the rightness of ideas, and that the rightness of ideas has the same influence on the rightness of signs. Nevertheless, it will take the authority of some enlightened teacher to efface the remaining vestiges of barbarism.⁴⁰

Berthier advocates teaching in sign language because only in that way can you provide the child with “material for his natural mental activity.” That is what the hearing child gets through speech. He says of the deaf child,

The deaf child differs from normal children only in his lack of a sensory modality. His inferiority in this respect is also more apparent than real. His infirmity is less to blame than his isolation. His intelligence is dormant for want of exercise and communication.⁴¹

2.3.5 *Bilingualism at Last*

Finally bilingualism in teaching was accepted. Berthier saw no problem in moving on from sign language to French. In fact he points out that the developments that take place when deaf children are allowed to use sign language are the very developments that enable them to learn French.

Does not the influence of sign language on the deaf person’s intellectual development - as great an influence as speech sounds have on the hearing child’s mind - reveal that he can be given a

⁴⁰ Berthier, 1840, 187.

⁴¹ Berthier, 1840, 187.

great deal of knowledge without the help of written language and that this knowledge can later serve to interpret spoken language?⁴²

Then as now the call for sign language to be used in schools did not mean that the national spoken language would be ignored but it took a relatively long time to argue for something that Desloges, a bookbinder and paperhanger, thought so obvious—sign language is the natural language of the deaf and you can discuss as much in sign language as you can in a spoken language. Berthier, a respected and influential teacher, wrote so clearly about this. He wrote about education and the law in relation to the Deaf, and he wrote about the importance of sign language to deaf children.

Provide then the deaf person with materials for his natural mental activity! You will soon see him in possession of that great intercourse of ideas brought about through the mediation of speech and its most beautiful product, the precious storehouse of knowledge. Analogy and reflection will do the rest for him. The more he develops his relations with other men, the more he will discover the hidden reasons for their actions and will also learn to appreciate and understand them.⁴³

* * *

The arguments were the same then as now. The argument for the use of the sign language of the deaf rather than signed French as a primary language, repeatedly echoes the point that the signs of signed French are not signs for ideas so far as the deaf are concerned.⁴⁴ They are signs for French words and French grammar. The same thing was done in English, so there were signs like “-ing” and “-ally” to use as endings for a signed English word. These signs were as unintelligible to the deaf as the strange written symbols they could not associate with ideas, written symbols that stood for sounds that they could not detect. So much of the teaching focused on getting them to convert the signs into written symbols and vice versa, without ever

⁴² Berthier, 1840. 188.

⁴³ Berthier, 1840, 188.

⁴⁴ Today we might express it differently. Deaf people say that signed English is not a natural language, or that it doesn't look like language.

getting them to compose or express their own ideas in those written symbols or in the signs.

Berthier wanted sign language used because of its great influence on the intellectual development of the deaf. But so often sign language was not used, or it was mutilated beyond recognition. What happened to the intellectual development of children in that sort of environment—especially those who had no access to a deaf community? Did they compose ideas that they could not express? Could they compose ideas?

All teachers of the deaf probably thought that they were promoting language development, to some extent at least, in their pupils, but both speech training and methodical signs frequently failed to integrate the deaf into society. Families were disappointed when children returned home from school unable to communicate. The promise had been that their children would be taught to talk, and the families imagined that this meant spoken conversations would be possible. Talking, however, was all too often a technical skill, it was not a matter of language acquisition. And since there was no real language acquisition, written conversations were not an option either.

Here we have, then a debate about deaf education which attempts to enlighten the hearing about the plight of the deaf. Beliefs about the importance of speech were challenged and shown to be misguided. The hearing concept of sign language was also challenged and shown to be wrong. People began to really pay attention to what the deaf have to say about their condition and their experiences. This led to thinking about the nature and role of language in the development of mind. On the practical side reforms in education took place as the deaf message got through to hearing scholars.

The inestimable advantage of bringing the deaf together in a group, one incompatible with their instruction in speech, is to enrich each student with the ideas of every other student, to rouse their awareness by stimulating their attention, and to force them to give a

sufficiently clear and precise form to all their ideas, making them communicable through gesture.⁴⁵

In 1880 The Congress of Milan put an end to all this. Reforms in deaf education just melted away. People like Ferdinand Berthier lost their jobs. In New Zealand, as in most other countries, oralism was embraced and children like John and Diana bore the brunt of this.

Why did it happen? What did people think language was? How did they think we communicate? Why are the Deaf having to go through all the same arguments again?

⁴⁵ Bebian, 1817, 137.

CHAPTER 3

This chapter is concerned with how to begin the investigation into languagelessness, and how to justify the chosen line of approach. Superficially the investigation may look like a language issue. Pivac's assertion that some deaf adults feel lost in the hearing world and lost in the deaf world, signals "language and the world" as a possible starting point. However, if the enquiry is taken to be a language issue it is all too easy to focus on language and to lose sight of the languageless person.

It is not clear how to keep the languageless person in the picture. I will consider some discussions of languageless beings in the literature. Mentioned among them is a languageless deaf adult, whose development is described by Susan Schaller in her book, *A Man Without Words*. The discussions of this case, and of other languageless beings are disappointing for two reasons. Firstly, there is confusion about what counts as a languageless being. Secondly, the discussions of the languageless deaf adult are disappointing. They seem to mischaracterise the case that is presented by Schaller.

Schaller's book makes a good starting point because it is a rich and insightful source of information. She wrote the book after teaching ASL to a twenty-seven year old deaf man, Ildefonso. She wrote it *because* at the time she was teaching him, she could find no information to guide her. She searched libraries and even consulted the linguist Ursula Bellugi, who studies ASL and its acquisition. Bellugi knew of no studies of first language acquisition in adults.¹ Several years later there was still virtually nothing published. To fill the gap, Schaller decided to write about her experience with Ildefonso.

¹ Schaller, 1995, 65-66.

In what way does this book help our understanding of languagelessness? I am going to answer this indirectly. I see Schaller's work as similar to Oliver Sacks' account of a blind man, Virgil, who gains sight at the age of fifty.² There is not the same controversy and scepticism surrounding the late acquisition of sight, and many cases have been described. If we want to gain an understanding of the late acquisition of sight then Sacks' account and others like it, are ideal. If we want to gain an understanding of the late acquisition of language—where this is understood as the late acquisition of a *first* language—then Schaller's book is ideal. I will look at this comparison in more detail.

The comparison suggests to me approaching this enquiry as the late acquisition of a first language in an adult. The investigation looks at the transition from being languageless to being enlanguaged by looking at the person. Language is by no means out of the picture, but when Schaller delves into areas of linguistic theory it is always sparked by her consideration of the actual person. It is always relevant to what is going on in her interaction with Ildefonso.

Having chosen a starting point, I will show how it can be justified as the acquisition of a *first* language. The claim that Ildefonso is an example of the late acquisition of language, can be justified in the same way as the claim that people like Virgil are examples of the late acquisition of sight.

3.1 A Starting Point: Language

It seems easy enough to start with questions about a languageless person, but the very notion of someone without language is so alien to most of us that the orientation easily slips towards discussing language. It seems we just do not know how to talk about languagelessness.

² Sacks, Oliver, 1995, *An Anthropologist on Mars*, Picador, London, 102-144.

3.1.1 *Lost in the World*

Some people closely concerned with deaf education point to the damage that can be done to deaf children where there is a policy of strict oralism. All gesturing and signing is actively discouraged and the children are expected to learn to speak and lipread a spoken language. Some profoundly deaf children are unable to learn to speak and lip-read because of the extent of their deafness. If isolation is an added factor, and if parents take the advised ban on gesture to heart, these children will not develop a signed language either. Under these circumstances it is almost impossible to teach anything and the child never understands what school is all about. One of the strongest claims made is that a deaf child may acquire no language whatsoever, and that this state of affairs may continue for many years where no attempt is made to interact using a natural signed language.

Pivac talks of people like this feeling lost in the hearing world and lost in the deaf world. These people are “oral,” which means their school used the oral method, and so they have no sign language. It says nothing about linguistic proficiency. Thus, those who are oral *and* have very poor English, have few language skills at all. These are the people who feel “very lost in the hearing world and in the deaf world” and, on the face of it, this seems to mean that they feel lost in *any* world of other people.

... many times when I go to the Deaf Club or whatever, I see a lot of deaf who were mainstreamed, who are oral, who have very poor English - they can't communicate, they feel very lost in the hearing world and in the deaf world. When that person mixes with other deaf they start to develop things but it's too late, it should have been done in their youth. And you hear many sad stories and many people don't know, have never heard these sad stories.³

What does it mean to be lost in any world? Do languageless people have a worldview at all? Some people are sceptical about such dire consequences of the failure to acquire a language. The sceptics point out that these people are not incapable of doing things that seem to require an understanding of the world. They

³ Pivac, 1993, p.4.

learn to care for themselves, to care for a home, to tend the garden. They can observe, they watch and work out what is going on and then do it themselves. Admittedly they can't talk, or read and write, granted they have virtually no language, but that doesn't mean they have no world view, it just means they feel left out when people around them are communicating.

I am interested in trying to say something about languagelessness and its consequences. What Pivac says, amounts to saying that some deaf people have virtually no language. As a consequence they feel lost in any world. Without communication they do not understand what is going on most of the time. Have they, or have they not, managed to make sense of the world on their own? How might we decide?

3.1.2 *Language and a World View*

The notion of the connection between language and a worldview is signalled by Pivac's remark about feeling lost in the world. Here is a path that might be taken. One way to say something about the way in which a languageless person is lost in the world, is to work from some theory of what language is, or what language enables us to do. We might, then, by a sort of subtraction, outline some possible deficiencies, disabilities or disadvantages that might arise. For instance, Benjamin Lee Whorf suggests that the ideas we have about the world are shaped or influenced by the grammar or pattern of our language. The grammars of different languages differ to the extent that some things can be discussed in one language but not another.

It was found that the background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing agent for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade. Formulation of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but is part of a particular grammar, and differs, from slightly to greatly, between different grammars.⁴

⁴ Whorf, Benjamin Lee, 1956, *Language, Thought, and Reality*, The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass, 212-213.

If the formulation of ideas is part of a particular grammar, what of the languageless person who has no grammar? If we agree with Whorf, then we have found something that the languageless person cannot do, namely, formulate ideas. This, in part, seems to mean getting things about the world clear in one's mind—making sense of what we see by organising it into categories, like objects or actions or events.

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds - and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significance as we do largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way - an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language.⁵

Whorf supports this view by comparing Hopi with western European languages. He looks at the concepts of “time,” “space,” “substance” and “matter,” in these languages and finds linguistic differences. He concludes, on the basis of the linguistic evidence, that Hopi and Europeans do not experience the concepts of “time” and “matter” in the same way—there is no absolute “given” in nature. Rather, the experience of these concepts is, in part, conditioned by the structure of particular languages.⁶ The forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by the patterns of his language.⁷ Where does this leave the languageless person? If we subtract what language enables us to do, according to Whorf, it seems that languageless people cannot organise the world in their minds.

One of the grammatical differences that Whorf describes is the way Hopi categorises activities by having different verb endings for different classes of verbs. For instance, there are different verb endings in Hopi for the uniform English expression

⁵ Whorf, 1956, 13.

⁶ Whorf, 1956, 158.

“begins *x*-ing,” where *x* is an activity. Whorf claims that the different endings divide the Hopi verbs into different categories, cryptotypes, which signal different kinds of activity. It looks as if Hopi categorises activities in a way that English does not. The Hopi see different kinds of activities where English speakers do not. He gives a detailed description of the cryptotypes and, in general, the distinction is clear in his English account. There does not seem to be a problem *describing* the Hopi categories in English and they are not difficult to understand. This seems strange if the categories are peculiar to Hopi.

Whorf, however, makes another distinction, a distinction between overt and covert grammatical categories. An overt category is one which has a formal mark, like a suffix—like adding “-s” to make a plural noun or adding “-ed” to make the past tense, in English. A covert category has no formal mark but can be found in the way that we speak—for example, the notion of a terminus verb is one which is never used in a continuous tense.⁸ We say, “I am looking at the picture,” but not, “I am seeing the picture.” I either see it or I don’t, “seeing” is not something that I can be doing for a length of time in the way that “looking at” is.

It turns out that some, at least, of the Hopi cryptotypes Whorf describes can be easily found in English as covert categories. English does not have different forms for “He begins to swim,” and “He begins to dive,” there is no overt difference in the grammar. However, it makes sense to tell someone to stop swimming, but it does not make sense to tell someone to stop diving. Once the dive is begun there is no stopping it. Thus, one of the overt categories in Hopi appears as a covert category in English.

Whether the categories differ between languages or not does not seem to matter to languageless people if we know, at least, that the categories are dependent on language, or on grammar. Either way the languageless people will not be able to

⁷ Whorf, 1956, 252.

⁸ Ryle, Gilbert, 1960, *Dilemmas*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 103.

organise their world, formulate ideas, or make sense of what is going on.

Another claim is Chomsky's claim that underlying all languages is a universal grammar, and, what is more, that grammar is in some way innate. An innate universal grammar might allow some organisation of the world prior to the acquisition of an individual language. It could be, in a subliminal way, a "shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade," in the way that Whorf says the grammar of our individual languages are.

I am not going to take this discussion any further. I went down this path some way and always felt drawn back to looking at the people—the languageless people. Some investigative paths, like the one I have indicated here, seem to develop into discussions of language itself, and the languageless person is no longer the focus of the investigation.

Where are the people that Pivac says feel lost in the Deaf world and lost in the hearing world—the people who, before they come to the Deaf Club, have virtually no language, and maybe no language at all? How could we tell if these people had (a) no worldview, (b) a worldview but no way of communicating their view of the world to anyone? If we see certain behaviour that suggests these people have a worldview, how do we then explain what Pivac says? Many who learn language later in life report that at school they did not understand what was going on. They could not make anything of what was happening. Do they need a language and its grammar to be able to do that? I do not feel confident that examining language itself, its words and sentence, or its grammar, is necessarily going to help understanding languagelessness.

3.2 A Starting Point: The Languageless Person

Another way of approaching the issue is to take a different sort of starting point. I really want to start with the languageless people themselves. This does not take language out of the investigation but it is important not to lose the connection with

the aim of this project—to try and understand something about the condition of languagelessness in people who do not acquire their first language until later in life.

3.2.1 *Languageless Persons: Possible Candidates*

Several different sorts of languageless individuals are often referred to in discussions of thinking without language. There are the “wild” children or abused children, who have had no experience of linguistic interaction because they have lived away from other human beings, or because they have been kept in isolation. Victor, Kaspar Hauser, and Genie, are the most cited cases. Susan Curtiss has documented Genie’s progress. Curtiss focuses on Genie’s language acquisition—her vocabulary, her mastery of grammar, her comprehension level—which began at the age of thirteen, when she was found. Because of the circumstances there was little opportunity to find out anything about Genie’s languageless state. Helping her was paramount.

Furthermore, Genie had been abused, and had not experienced much of a “world.” She had experienced only the room, where she was kept, the unusual behaviour of her parents who never spoke to her, and some extraneous noise from outside—a dog barking, and someone playing a piano in a nearby house. She apparently had no playthings apart from a raincoat which hung on the nearby door, and she was not free to move around.⁹ Thus, Genie could not give us insights into what languageless people make of the everyday things that we all experience.

Stephen Pinker, in *The Language Instinct*, discusses the case of Mr. Ford, a Coast Guard radio operator who suffered a stroke at the age of thirty-nine. Mr. Ford’s speech is severely impaired and he is only able to answer simple questions in a halting, fragmentary and ungrammatical way.¹⁰ He can only blunder around because he has lost his sense of grammar. His limited ability shows that words and meanings

⁹ Curtiss, Susan, 1977, *Genie: A Psycholinguistic Study of a Modern-Day “Wild Child”*, Academic Press, New York. Rymer, Russ, 1994, *Genie: A Scientific Tragedy*, Penguin Books, London.

¹⁰ Pinker, Steven, 1994, *The Language Instinct*, William Morrow and Company Inc., New York, pp.47-48.

are not beyond him, and in other respects he grasps what is going on around him, even showing an understanding of his handicap.

I cite this case because it illustrates a way that the notion of a languageless individual might be misconstrued. Pinker describes the condition of Mr. Ford as a kind of “neurological impairment that compromises language while sparing cognition.”¹¹ Later he refers to the case of Mr. Ford as an “example of thinking without language.”¹² He does qualify the latter remark but does not elaborate. “One could, however, argue that his thinking abilities had been constructed before his stroke on the scaffolding of the language he then possessed.”¹³

It is not clear what we have here in terms of an individual with or without language, because it is not immediately clear what is meant by “without language.” I do not think that Mr. Ford’s case, or the case of any stroke victim who has been enlanguaged, will be helpful in thinking about the languageless deaf. Stroke victims may lose their language, but that does not put them in the same position as an individual who has never acquired any language. The example of Mr. Ford, and Pinker’s remarks about him, illustrate how easy it is to end up talking at cross-purposes when discussing beings without language.

Pinker goes on to consider other possible cases of “thinking without language.” He mentions “deaf children who lack a language and soon invent one,” and “deaf adults ... who lack any form of language whatsoever.” And then he gives three examples of other languageless beings who have been studied experimentally.

There are other languageless beings who have been studied experimentally, and volumes have been written about how they reason about space, time, objects, number, rate, causality, and categories. Let me recount three ingenious examples. One involves babies, who cannot think in words because they have not yet learned any, one involves monkeys, who cannot think in words

¹¹ Pinker, 1994, p.46.

¹² Pinker, 1994, p.67.

¹³ Pinker, 1994, p.67.

because they are incapable of learning them. The third involves human adults, who, whether or not they think in words, claim their best thinking is done without them.¹⁴

I get the feeling that there is a confusing mixture here. “Human adults, who, whether or not they think in words, claim their best thinking is done without them,” are so blatantly enlanguaged individuals. At first glance it looks as if Pinker thinks that language is something we can just set aside, or leave off doing for the moment. I do not think that cases like this can further our understanding of languagelessness. Nor am I going to discuss babies or monkeys.

Pinker has, however considered the group that I am particularly interested in.

Even more pertinent are the deaf adults occasionally discovered who lack any form of language whatsoever—no sign language, no writing, no lip reading, no speech.¹⁵

Pinker goes on to discuss Ildefonso, the man that Schaller taught and then wrote about. Ildefonso is one of the few cases written about in detail.¹⁶

3.2.2 *Ildefonso: A Probable Case*

It will help to have some details about Ildefonso before we continue. Ildefonso was twenty-seven years old when Schaller met him. Schaller is a trained ASL interpreter and teacher, and she took a temporary part-time job as a teacher’s aide while looking for work after moving to California. Ildefonso was in a class of deaf adults of mixed ability at a community college. It was a reading skills class and so was inappropriate for Ildefonso and some of the other students too.

¹⁴ Pinker, 1994, 68.

¹⁵ Pinker, 1994, 67.

¹⁶ When Schaller was teaching Ildefonso she made extensive enquiries for information about other cases. When she began to write her book she made further enquiries and the only cases she found were three discussed by Virginia McKinney. One of these cases, Joe, is a more extreme case of languagelessness than Ildefonso. McKinney, Virginia, 1983, *First Language Learning in Deaf Persons Beyond the Critical Period*, Unpublished dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, California.

Ildefonso had been brought along by his uncle, and it appeared that the family were illegal immigrants from a rural area of Mexico. Ildefonso's family was poor and he had spent some of his childhood begging on a city street in Mexico. The family had managed to find work in various parts of the USA and Ildefonso is described as a farm labourer. He had been deported at least once but seemed to be sane and well-adjusted. He lived with family, but it seems that much energy was taken up with surviving, and there just wasn't enough interaction for a home sign system to develop. Nevertheless, Ildefonso used gestures and mime to communicate.

Despite the gestures and mime, Schaller quickly concluded that Ildefonso had no language and she felt unequal to the task of teaching him. In all her experience with deaf people she had never met anyone like Ildefonso before—sane and well adjusted, but with no language. As she worked with Ildefonso a bond developed between them and she became interested in trying to communicate with him. The teacher, Elena, was an experienced teacher of the deaf and a fluent signer, but due to overwork she had no time to help Schaller. Schaller, a skilled communicator, worked with Ildefonso for four months, and she describes it as a learning experience for both of them. She learnt about languagelessness while he learnt about language. Gradually, together, they made progress and, as well, a firm friendship developed.

After four months Ildefonso got a job and the lessons came to an end. Ildefonso was well on the way to learning sign language, and when Schaller saw him six months later he had clearly improved.

Then one day, on a street corner, I ran into him at a bus stop. Emotion tightened my throat when I saw him sign, his grammar and vocabulary were still simple, like a young child's, but his arms and hands and face worked together smoothly in new fluid patterns that looked like adult sign language. He signed with confidence and unhesitating rhythm. His whole stature, including the way he held his metal lunch pail and wore his hard hat, expressed his pride in his new life.¹⁷

¹⁷ Schaller, 1995, 131.

Schaller moved to North Carolina for seven years and lost contact with Ildefonso. When she then returned to California she looked for him, and found him through Elena. Ildefonso had become a fluent signer and he said that whenever he could he would get an interpreter to interpret the news. He was surprised that she wanted to write a book about him, but he recognised the importance of language, and hoped that others who had no language could be helped if people understood their condition. He introduced Schaller to some of his languageless friends and his languageless brother, Mario, who had just come to live near him. Ildefonso eventually taught Mario ASL.

Schaller wrote her book about Ildefonso because she had not been able to find out anything about languageless adults when she was teaching him. She presents us with an account of an otherwise normal languageless adult. She describes his acquisition of language. She also gives an account of the interaction between his languageless friends.

3.2.3 *Possible Misunderstandings*

Others have read and cited Schaller's work and I find some of these citations disappointing and misleading. Pinker, for instance, has this to say about Ildefonso's progress.

Ildefonso's animated eyes conveyed an unmistakable intelligence and curiosity, and Schaller became his volunteer teacher and companion. He soon showed her that he had a full grasp of number: he learned to do addition on paper in three minutes and had little trouble understanding the base-ten logic behind two-digit numbers. In an epiphany reminiscent of the story of Helen Keller, Ildefonso grasped the principle of naming when Schaller tried to teach him the sign for "cat." A dam burst and he demanded to be shown the signs for all objects he was familiar with. Soon he was able to convey to Schaller parts of his life story: how as a child he had begged his desperately poor parents to send him to school, the kinds of crops he had picked in different states, his evasion of immigration authorities. He led Schaller to other languageless adults in forgotten corners of society. Despite their isolation from the verbal world they displayed many abstract forms of thinking, like rebuilding broken locks, handling money, playing card games, and entertaining each other with long pantomimed narratives.

Our knowledge of the mental life of Ildefonso and other languageless adults must remain impressionistic for ethical reasons: when they surface, the first priority is to teach them language, not to study how they manage without it.¹⁸

I find this précis of Schaller's book very disturbing. First and foremost, it misses some very deep insights about language that come through Schaller's frank and open musings. She wrestles with conventional notions of language and theories about worldview, and challenges some commonly held assumptions—for example, that Ildefonso, through observation, has been able to make some sense of the world.

When she meets Ildefonso's languageless friends, *seven years after teaching Ildefonso*, she brings many more insights to the issue of languagelessness. She points out some very unusual features of this interaction, things which are very surprising but which are completely missed, and maybe even masked, by Pinker's quick assertion that "they displayed many abstract forms of thinking." Furthermore, her account of their storytelling is particularly thoughtful, and it is trivialised by saying only that the languageless friends were "entertaining each other with long pantomimed narratives."¹⁹

I find this précis disturbing for a second reason. This concerns the "epiphany reminiscent of the story of Helen Keller." Certainly Schaller describes an apparent breakthrough and compares it to Helen Keller's description of the incident at the well. She also thinks that Ildefonso has learnt that things have names. What the précis leaves out is Schaller's description of her disappointment and confusion when nothing comes of the epiphany. Subsequent to the apparent breakthrough there is no "great leap forward." Ildefonso does not name anything, he does not use the signs, he continues to sit, waiting and watching as he did before.

¹⁸ Pinker, 1994, 67-68.

¹⁹ Schaller uses the term "narrative" only once. Generally she talks of stories and storytelling and then points out ways in which this storytelling is not like our storytelling. The précis misses this.

Schaller gives the impression that, although something happened in the “epiphany,” and she is not sure what it was, they are no further ahead. She rethinks things, she searches for strategies, she tries all sorts of things to engage Ildefonso in any sort of signed, gestures, or mimed interaction. Some things fail and some show small glimpses of progress, and sometimes—and this is *after* the epiphany—she thinks that it just isn’t going to work at all.²⁰ Slowly, “sometimes with agonizing slowness,” they begin to communicate.²¹ The précis misses the dead ends, the disappointments, the frustrations, and in doing so misses the real excitements and insights of Schaller’s account.

A third reason why I find this précis disturbing concerns the condensation of incidents where clarification is important. For example, Ildefonso tells “how as a child he had begged his desperately poor parents to send him to school.” If Ildefonso was languageless how did he do this? Schaller, describes how he did this because Ildefonso shows her—he mimed and acted out for her the way that he had communicated with his parents—but we need to have more of a feel for the context. This is just not something that bursts from Ildefonso in his language lessons as Pinker’s “Soon he was able to ...” suggests.

Ildefonso tells Schaller about this when they meet again *seven years after she had taught him*. He is fluent in ASL, politically aware, and concerned about helping others like himself to acquire ASL. He knows that Schaller is writing a book about him and he knows that education is valued. He has an understanding of her questions about the connection between thought and language. Just how much he might have been able to communicate with his parents is not clear, but Schaller feels that there is more to his present performance.

He wanted to tell me and later the readers of my book that although he was ignorant, he had always had a desire to learn.²²

²⁰ Schaller, 1995, 61.

²¹ Schaller, 1995, 71.

²² Schaller, 1995, 171.

None of this context comes through in the précis.

Pinker does, however, accept the claim that Ildefonso is languageless, others do not. Peter Carruthers, for instance, doubts that Ildefonso was genuinely languageless and gives two reasons for this. Firstly, he points to the existence of home sign systems. Secondly, he assumes that the very richness of the gesture and mime that Ildefonso's languageless friends use, means that it must be a simple language.

When introduced to ASL (American Sign Language) he learned it extremely fast, sucking in each new word hungrily. Schaller herself describes Ildefonso's predicament as one in which the absence of language had deprived him of a great deal of information, thus committing herself to the communicative conception of language. But actually hardly any formal testing of Ildefonso's cognitive abilities was undertaken, either before or after language acquisition.

Moreover, it is doubtful whether Ildefonso was genuinely languageless. Evidence from elsewhere [home sign] suggests that he would have developed for himself a gesture system having all the properties of a simple language. (Indeed, this interpretation seems confirmed by Schaller's description of him engaging in animated 'conversations' with other non-signing deaf adults, using what she describes as a rich repertoire of gesture and mime.)²³

I think that this passage shows how easy it is to miss what is really significant in Schaller's description. Firstly, the assumption that when introduced to ASL Ildefonso "learned it extremely fast, sucking in each new word hungrily," is just not how Schaller describes the slow torturous process, the "many discouraging days." One of the things Schaller learned was that it could take days or weeks to add a new sign. "Replacing some gestures and mime with one or two signs sometimes took weeks, when it was possible at all."²⁴ She introduced Ildefonso to ASL over four months and when the lessons finished a lot of their communication was still mimed, only about a

²³ Carruthers, 1996, 43. Carruthers cites Goldin-Meadow's work on home sign systems. I assume the animated conversations that he refers to are part of the interaction with the languageless friends. Ildefonso was, of course, fluent in ASL at this stage, so I presume it is the interaction of the languageless men that Carruthers sees as language.

²⁴ Schaller, 1995, 69.

third was in ASL.²⁵ Carruthers' statement does not capture Schaller's description of the process.²⁶

Secondly, Carruthers has missed what Schaller said about home signs. The mere existence of home sign systems which are said to resemble language, is not enough to show that the interaction of Ildefonso's languageless friends is anything like home signs. In fact, Schaller herself says explicitly that the interaction of the languageless is *not* like home sign, and she is in a position to see this—I will look in detail at her description of this languageless interaction in a later chapter.

They had met at different ages and could not interact frequently or regularly due to their poverty and the constant need to work or find work. Even Ildefonso and his brother were separated, first by their age difference of about seven years and then by Ildefonso's various jobs. As a result they had never had a chance to develop their gestural communication to the degree that some deaf siblings and children have. But what they lacked in standard vocabulary and structure, they tried to make up for in a tremendous variety of facial expressions and acting skills. Their repertoire of mimed stories seemed endless.²⁷

What grounds are there, then, for claiming that the “rich repertoire of gesture and mime” is language-like?²⁸ Schaller does not say that the languageless friends *did* make up for what they lacked in standard vocabulary and structure in a tremendous variety of facial expressions and acting skills—she says they *tried* to make up. Carruthers does not discuss either the interaction itself or Schaller's comments.

I have found Schaller's book a rich source of material and insight relevant to my questions about languagelessness. It is central to this project and I accept fully Schaller's claim that Ildefonso's development was a transition from being

²⁵ Schaller, 1995, 130.

²⁶ Carruthers does note that temporal concepts and tenses took a long time to learn, but he says “It took months of intensive training ...”(44) “Intensive training” gives completely the wrong picture of the way Ildefonso and Schaller interacted, as I shall show in a later chapter.

²⁷ Schaller, 1995, 185.

²⁸ “Rich repertoire of gesture and mime” are not actually Schaller's words.

languageless to being enlanguaged, this is the topic of a later chapter. I also accept her claim that the friends she met were languageless, this is also the topic of a later chapter.

3.3 A Starting point: The Late Acquisition of Language

My decision to rely on Schaller's work in this investigation is, in part, influenced by accounts of the late acquisition of sight, in particular, Oliver Sacks' account of Virgil as told in his book *An Anthropologist on Mars*.²⁹ Virgil is a blind man who has an operation on his eyes at the age of fifty. What struck me about Sacks' account was that it described a *man* trying to find his way about in the world in a new way—a visual way. It is not a dissertation on *sight*. Nevertheless, by looking at Virgil, through Sacks' account, we can learn a lot about learning to see, and about vision.

Sacks also makes an interesting comparison with language. A previously blind man learning to see for the first time is not like someone learning another language, he is like someone learning language for the first time.³⁰ This suggests a way of investigating languagelessness, for, in many ways, Schaller has done the same kind of thing as Sacks in her account of Ildefonso's late acquisition of language. Schaller helps us to get an understanding of Ildefonso's development in the way that Sacks helps us to understand Virgil's development.

3.3.1 Virgil

One thing that we learn early in Sacks' account of Virgil's case, is that seeing is not the simple matter some might think.

Everyone, Virgil included expected something much simpler. A man opens his eyes light falls on the retina: he sees. It is as simple as that, we imagine.³¹

²⁹ Sacks, Oliver, 1995, *An Anthropologist on Mars*, Picador, London, 102-144.

³⁰ Sacks, 1995, 134.

³¹ Sacks, 1995, 108.

This was just not the case, with Virgil. When he had his operation and the bandages came off, there was no sudden revelation, as Sacks, description shows. It was a long slow process. Furthermore, other cases that have been described all show that the naïve view is far from what happens.³²

Sacks does not just describe Virgil's development, he comments on what is happening, he draws on a wide area of literature, and he digresses in a way that enriches the account. He includes comments from Virgil's wife, Amy. They both note how Virgil manages, the sort of things that work for him, or help him; the things that are particularly difficult; the things that surprise him; the things that surprise them, things they had not expected. Virgil is trying to make something of his surroundings, visually. Sacks describes Virgil as a man constructing his visual world as he moves around. This made me think of Ildefonso as trying to make something of his surroundings linguistically.

3.3.2 *Ildefonso*

There is a kind of naïve view for language too—introduce someone to words, just get them to make that connection, and they will know straight away what to do with them, linguistically everything falls into place. I am not attributing this view to Pinker, but let us just look at part of his précis of Schaller again. I think it suggests a naïve view.

In an epiphany reminiscent of the story of Helen Keller, Ildefonso grasped the principle of naming when Schaller tried to teach him the sign for “cat.” A dam burst and he demanded to be shown the signs for all objects he was familiar with. Soon he was able to convey to Schaller parts of his life story ...³³

This looks like the equivalent of the naïve view of learning to see. Schaller herself seems to have held some view like this as she began to work with Ildefonso. She

³² Gregory, R. L., and Jean G. Wallace, 1963, ‘Recovery from Early Blindness: A Case Study.’ Valvo, Alberto, 1971, *Sight Restoration after Long-Term Blindness: The Problems and Behavior Patterns of Visual Rehabilitation*, American Foundation for the Blind, New York.

³³ Pinker, 1994, 68.

thought everything would now fall into place. After the epiphany she excitedly told her husband.

“He did it!” I cried. “Ildefonso understood today, He realized language.”³⁴

However, we quickly learn from Schaller’s account of Ildefonso’s development that language is not the simple matter some might think. As the rest of the story unfolds it is clear that any naïve view of language is as mistaken as any naïve view of seeing. Schaller describes a slow erratic process, which contributes to our understanding of language in the way that the work of Sacks contributes to our understanding of seeing. Schaller’s account also describes the interaction of Ildefonso’s languageless friends and thus contributes to our understanding of languagelessness.

The main difference between Sacks’ account and Schaller’s, is that accounts like Sacks’ are readily accepted and do not meet with the same scepticism as Schaller’s—the sort of scepticism Carruthers showed, a scepticism common in the hearing community. Before I go on to justify Ildefonso’s development as a case of the late acquisition of language, I feel it is important to say something more about Deaf opinion. While the notion of a languageless person is often not readily accepted by the hearing, this is not so in the Deaf community.

3.3.3 *Deaf Opinions on Languagelessness*

Languageless people are, according to the Deaf, not as uncommon as we think, and many of them live in society. Schaller, however, could find no academic information about them when she was teaching Ildefonso. When she went back to California after a seven-year absence she began to search for information again. She began by asking in the universities and met scepticism and indifference. She did hear of two linguists who were documenting the progress of a deaf adult learning her first

³⁴ Schaller, 1995, 46.

language, and she managed to speak to one of their graduate students who described it as “the incredible “once in lifetime” discovery of a prelingual adult.”³⁵

Schaller abandoned the universities and asked questions in the Deaf community. The response was quite different. Schaller was told of Virginia McKinney, director of the Centre for Communicative Development. Many languageless adults had acquired their first language at this institution, but McKinney, herself a Deaf woman, remarked that most people remained sceptical. McKinney had written a case history of Joe, a young deaf man who had fewer communicative skills than Ildefonso. When Joe had been referred to the centre there was no information about his background or identity. His age was estimated at eighteen on the basis of an x-ray. He had “no speech, no sign language, and, almost no ability to gesture, ...”³⁶ When he eventually learnt ASL, and was able to tell his story, it appeared that he had spent a lot of his time drifting alone.

Schaller talked to some of the teachers at the centre and found that they readily distinguished between the students who had some signed language—sometimes a foreign signed language, that is, not ASL—and the students who had no language. Teachers of the deaf are also very quick to pick up on any system of home signs. Home signs can be used to get language lessons going.

In Erika’s four years of teaching she had met about fifteen languageless adults. Most of them worked about six months before the awareness of meaning occurred—before the bulb flashed on.³⁷

Other teachers, both at this centre and other deaf education centres catering for adults, reported teaching prelingually deaf adults. Schaller wonders about the gulf between the universities and the streets, about how a researcher could think finding a

³⁵ Schaller, 1995, 134.

³⁶ McKinney, 1983, 197.

³⁷ Schaller, 1995, 144.

prelingually deaf adult was “a once in a lifetime happening when four were sitting at the same table only a few miles away.”³⁸ She considers the contrast.

[The dearth of interest and information is] unbelievable in contrast to the great interest in Genie and other wild children, real or imagined. Discussions—in philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, and among the general public—are intense, full of excitement and speculation about language and the brain, language and culture, language and thought, language and everything, but especially the horror and fascination of a human life without language. Yet no one thinks of deaf babies who grow up in linguistic isolation and reach adulthood with no shared language.

“Why?” I kept asking myself.³⁹

Schaller felt that she found the answer when she conducted a survey of California rehabilitation counsellors for deaf adults. The survey responses indicated that there were hundreds of languageless deaf adults. But Schaller noticed something in particular about the responses to the survey, something that she felt answered her question.

Most of the rehabilitation counselors had met between two and ten languageless deaf adults in their work, sometimes more. Three counselors, however, said they had never met a languageless deaf adult, even after years of working with deaf clients. These three counselors are all hearing. Every deaf counselor had met at least one languageless deaf person but hadn't differentiated between spontaneous gestures and mime and the ASL of a non-English speaking Deaf client. (Many hearing people sign manually coded English and cannot understand ASL.)⁴⁰

The implications of this are, firstly, that Deaf people readily recognise a difference between gestures, which are language, and gestures which are not language. Hearing people, even those who work with the deaf in non-teaching areas, do not readily see this distinction. The second implication is that languageless people *do* something—they do something in the way of gesturing or miming which looks like signing to hearing people. A third implication is that most of these people are languageless

³⁸ Schaller, 1995, 146.

³⁹ Schaller, 1995, 190.

⁴⁰ Schaller, 1995, 190.

merely because of their deafness, and not because of abuse or intellectual impairment, they are not institutionalised. In other words Ildefonso and Joe are not unusual cases—they stand out because someone has written about them.

Thus, hearing people have a problem evaluating languagelessness in deaf adults. Firstly, languagelessness is not easy for them to see, even when they work in the area. Secondly, few cases are documented, so it is not widely discussed in the literature. As a result there are no obvious models for evaluating languagelessness. I accept Schaller's claim that Ildefonso is languageless, but not everyone does—Carruthers did not.

I believe it is possible to make a credible case for classing Ildefonso as languageless. To do this, I will look to the more widely discussed area of the late acquisition of sight for guidance. Evaluating blindness is not as straightforward as we might think. I will spend some time looking at the way researchers justify classing some people as blind. I will then adapt the model for cases of languagelessness.

3.4 The Late Acquisition of Sight: A Possible Case

In all cases of the late acquisition of sight, patients are tested to see if they can detect light. If absolutely no vision is present there is no point in operating, there must be some retinal sensitivity. There is obviously a continuum of this minimal vision and some cases may not be considered to be recovery from *blindness*. In their paper, "Recovery from Early Blindness: A Case Study," Richard L. Gregory and Jean G. Wallace describe a man, S.B., who has severe visual impairment, and they present a justification for classifying him as blind.

3.4.1 An Important Distinction - Strictly Blind or Functionally Blind

In their paper, Gregory and Wallace begin by explaining the important distinction between operable and inoperable cases of blindness, or defective vision. They have this to say of S.B., the man who is the subject of their case study.

S.B. was admitted to the blind school not technically as 'blind' but as 'partially sighted'. The word 'blind' signifies to the

ophthalmologist ‘insensitive to light’, though its lay use is rather an absence of *useful* vision. Cases of strict blindness are inoperable, the retina being non-functional, and so we should expect any case such as this to be technically ‘partially sighted’. The question – a difficult one – is whether S.B. had *useful* vision, or more vision than the earlier cases described by von Senden.

It is most important to be clear that where blindness is literally complete surgery is always out of the question. The retina must be functional, and since the tissues and media of the eyes are never opaque, some effective retinal stimulation must always be expected. This point cannot be over-stressed. The word ‘blindness’ may in normal usage cover cases with sensitivity to light, providing appreciation of form is too poor to be of significant use, but to the ophthalmic surgeon (as became clear to us during discussions) ‘blindness’ is used to denote *total insensitivity to light*. In this sense there are *no cases of recovery from blindness*. ...

The most that should be claimed for any of these human cases is that vision has been dramatically improved upon operation, but as anyone can verify by practising ‘seeing’ with the eyes closed, under some conditions – particularly bright sunlight – quite a lot of visual experience is possible under conditions similar to the worst lens cataract or corneal opacity. The direction of bright lights can be seen, as can movement across the eyes of shadows. It could well be that this minimal vision, which we must suppose even the ‘best’ cases to have had, makes them very different from the strictly blind – those whose retinas are dead – and we know nothing of what would happen if *they* could be made to see.⁴¹

The very title of the paper by Gregory and Wallace, “Recovery from early blindness: a case study,” seems to be at odds with the explanation that there can be no recovery from total blindness. Yet Gregory and Wallace are clearly considering an important transition to being sighted. That is the point of the explanation. They say it is important to be clear about this distinction so that we don’t misunderstand certain claims that are often made.

Others have speculated about what it would be like for a blind person whose eyes were suddenly healed later in life. Molyneux, Locke and Berkeley all wrote about what sort of distinctions might be made by sight alone in these circumstances but there were no actual instances to observe. Molyneux, for instance, wondered if a

⁴¹ Gregory and Wallace, 1963, 71-72.

blind man, suddenly cured of his blindness, would be able to distinguish a sphere from a cube by sight, before he touched them. They do not say anything about the difference between strict blindness and the sort of blindness caused by some sort of opacity.

People like S.B., described by Gregory and Wallace, are not examples of individuals progressing from being totally non-sighted to sighted. Are they or are they not, then, actual instances of the hypothetical cases speculated about by Molyneux, Locke and Berkeley? Could someone like S.B. help answer the Molyneux question.

3.4.2 *A Hypothetical Case - Berkeley's Blind Man*

Berkeley, in *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*, makes no explicit distinction between strict blindness and the absence of useful vision. In this work he argues that some of our judgments about the objects we see, their distance for example, are “entirely the effect of experience,” and he clearly means “visual experience,” because his hypothetical blind man who later gains sight could not have had that experience.⁴²

He also says of this blind man, “But then, whatever judgments he makes concerning the situation of objects are confined to those only that are perceivable by touch.”⁴³ It doesn't seem to matter in judgments of distance whether the blind man is strictly blind or whether he lacks useful vision, in either case he will not have had the experience which enables him to judge how far away an object is. S.B. could not even make out objects let alone judge their distance. In judgement of distance, then, S.B. is like the hypothetical blind man.

If we examine more of Berkeley's points, however, Gregory's distinction does turn out to be important. This is not readily apparent because, as explained in relation to distance, the distinction between strict blindness and the absence of useful vision

⁴² Berkeley, XLI, 300.

⁴³ Berkeley, XCIV, p322.

often *doesn't* seem to matter. Berkeley, however, considers other aspects of seeing, and the person who has no useful vision is not always in the same situation as the person who is strictly blind.

... the question now remaining is, whether the particular extensions, figures, and motions perceived by sight, be of the same kind with the particular extensions, figures, and motions perceived by touch? In answer to which I shall venture to lay down the following proposition:— *The extension, figures, and motions perceived by sight are specifically distinct from the ideas of touch, called by the same names; nor is there any such thing as one idea, or kind of idea, common to both senses.*⁴⁴

Berkeley suggests that the spatial extension and shape of an object are not ideas that are immediately apparent on sight. It is only our experiences of seeing size and shape in conjunction with other perceptions, such as feeling size and shape, that accustom us to routinely make accurate judgments about objects on the basis of what we see. If this is so, then the newly sighted blind man, because he lacks such complex experiences, will not be able to make these accurate judgments using his newly acquired sight. But neither will the effectively blind man whose minimal vision is corrected, because he also lacks the right kind of complex experience. S.B. could not make out objects at all so in judgments of shape and size, figure and extension, he is like the hypothetical blind man.

The point about motion, however, is more problematical. Gregory makes it clear that any actual cases of sight restoration will have been sensitive to light before their operation. As a consequence, when we come to the issue of perceiving motion, the strictly blind *will* be different from those who lack useful vision

... as anyone can verify by practising 'seeing' with the eyes closed, under some conditions – particularly bright sunlight – quite a lot of visual experience is possible under conditions similar to the worst lens cataract or corneal opacity. The direction of bright lights can be seen, as can movement across the eyes of shadows. It could well be that this minimal vision, which we must suppose even the

⁴⁴ Berkeley, CXXVII, 335.

'best' cases to have had, makes them very different from the strictly blind ...⁴⁵

A shadow moving across the eyes may appear as a mere change in the intensity of light, but if the direction of a light can be perceived, then, as the light is moved, the motion of the light will be perceived visually. If the subject indicates the direction of the light by pointing at it (as is usually the case) then there *is* some complex experience involving more than vision alone. If the subject can actually touch the light as it moves the complex experience will link vision and touch prior to the acquisition of full sight.

Berkeley has earlier ruled out this sort of linking. "But then, whatever judgments he makes concerning the situation of objects are confined to those only that are perceivable by touch."⁴⁶ It looks as if Berkeley's hypothetical blind man must be *unable* to perceive motion by sight, and thus must be strictly blind. In judgments of motion S.B. is *not* like the hypothetical blind man.

There is another reason for assuming the hypothetical case is strictly blind. Berkeley doesn't say that his blind man has no sensitivity to light but we might suppose so from what he says about light and colours. The perception of light and colours are perceptions of the sighted only and not perceptions of the hypothetical blind man.

Light and colours are allowed by all to constitute a sort or species entirely different from the ideas of touch; nor will any man, I presume, say they can make themselves perceived by that sense. But there is no other immediate object of sight besides light and colours. It is therefore a direct consequence, that there is no idea common to both senses.⁴⁷

The example of the hypothetical blind man has been used to show that various ideas, extension, figure and motion for instance, are distinct depending on how they are perceived—by touch or by sight. That is, there is no idea of extension common to

⁴⁵ Gregory and Wallace, 1963, 71-72.

⁴⁶ Berkeley, XCIV, 322.

⁴⁷ Berkeley, CXXIX, 336.

both sight and touch, no idea of figure common to both sight and touch, and so on. Light and colours are ideas which, unlike ideas of extension, figure and motion, are ideas of sight only. It is not possible for *anyone* to make judgments based on mixed perceptions of light and colours, that is, there are no complex experiences of light and colours involving both sight and touch. So there is no need to speculate here on judgments based on perceptions of touch only. What does seem to be important is that the hypothetical blind man should not have experienced light and colour *at all*.

This is important because Berkeley thinks that it is not possible to “conceive colour without visible extension.” Therefore, if anyone has ideas of colour other ideas like visible extension will be suggested to the mind.

And, as for figure and extension, I leave it to any one that shall calmly attend to his own clear and distinct ideas to decide whether he has any ideas intromitted immediately and properly by sight save only light and colours: or, whether it be possible for him to frame in his mind a distinct abstract idea of visible extension, or figure, exclusive of all colour; and, on the other hand, whether he can conceive colour without visible extension? For my own part, I must confess, I am not able to attain such a nicety of abstraction. ... It must be owned, indeed, that, by the mediation of light and colours, other far different ideas are suggested to my mind.⁴⁸

Berkeley seems to be claiming that anyone who perceives colour will inevitably have some idea of visible extension at least. If, someone who has no useful vision can perceive light, and if the lights are of different intense colours, say a red one and a green one, then that person may perceive colour too. The perception of colour may suggest some of the very ideas that the hypothetical blind man is supposed to lack, namely, visual ideas of extension. The judgments of the hypothetical blind man must be based on perceptions of touch only. This is not the case with someone who lacks useful vision, but who can perceive colour. If S.B. can perceive colour as well as light, then in judgments of extension he is *not* like the hypothetical blind man.

⁴⁸ Berkeley, CXXX, 336-337.

The hypothetical blind man in Berkeley's speculations is, it seems, strictly blind. If he merely lacks useful vision then the perception of light at least means he may have visual perceptions of motion. If he can distinguish a red light from a green light then he has perceptions of colour, and that means he may have an idea of visible extension. Minimal vision can lead to the very thing Berkeley wants to rule out in his blind man—conditions must be such that “whatever judgments he makes concerning the situation of objects are confined to those only that are perceivable by touch.” It appears that Berkeley's hypothetical blind man is strictly blind.

S.B. is not strictly blind. It seems then that it is not possible to use cases like S.B. to answer the question posed by Molyneux. S.B. cannot be considered to be a case of a blind man being made to see. Gregory and Wallace argue otherwise.

3.4.3 Berkeley's Blind Man could be Functionally Blind

Gregory and Wallace admit that we are not looking at cases progressing from non-sighted to sighted. Nevertheless, they maintain that these actual cases are relevant to Berkeley's theorising about whether a blind man made to see could distinguish things by sight before he touched them. Cases like S.B. are certainly the closest possible instances of recovery from blindness that we will find. Once the distinction between strict blindness and the absence of useful vision is clarified, Gregory and Wallace clearly view S.B. as pre-operatively blind even though various tests have assessed his very limited vision.

This move is justified if we can be fairly certain that the limited visual experience of people like S.B. is not the same as the visual experience we use to form the judgments Berkeley mentions—distance, figure, extension, motion. That is, if limited visual experiences are more akin to what we perceive through closed eyelids, bright light or darkness coming and going, as Gregory and Wallace suggest, then they are not sufficient to judge distance, shape and size visually. Furthermore, if we can be fairly certain that the subject makes such judgments solely on the basis of touch, and the limited visual experiences play no part in judging distance, shape and size, then we have some justification for viewing people like S.B. as blind.

This is not the case with motion, however, because the direction of a bright light may be perceived and if the direction changes motion is experienced visually. For people like S.B., this sort of experience usually only occurs under test conditions. The light is shown in a darkened room *so that* the patient can detect it. There is no evidence that there are any useful everyday experiences that give the blind person a visual sense of motion. So if S.B. has any visual experience of motion it is not the same as our visual experience of motion. If we bear this in mind it may not be an obstacle for inquiry into other issues. Motion is not involved in the question Molyneux asked. His question about the sphere and the cube concerns figure and extension.

Visual ideas of extension, however, are possible, according to Berkeley, if colour is perceived. Ideas of colour entail having ideas of visual extension as well. Let us suppose someone like S.B. *can* tell whether a light is green or red, in the way that we might be able to make this distinction through closed eyelids, and that the direction of the green or red light can be judged. If that is *all* someone like S.B. experiences, his experiences of colour are not like our experiences of colour. All colour will be experienced as a diffuse patch of light. This is not the same as perceiving a discrete green area or a discrete red area. If there are any visual ideas of extension they are not like our ideas of visual extension because there is not idea of a discrete extension. The question Molyneux asked about seeing a sphere and a cube involves calls for visual ideas of discrete and distinct extension.

There is, depending on the severity of the cataracts or the opacity of the corneas, a continuum from near-blindness to slightly blurred vision. It is reasonable to assume that successful operations on the most severe cases may equate, to some extent, with the cases imagined by Molyneux, Locke and Berkeley. This is what Gregory and Wallace assume in the case of S.B.

3.4.4 Assessing S.B.'s Sight

This assumption does not depend on the calibrated results of tests, "Vision: 2/60," or the less precise "Vision: fingers at 9 inches."⁴⁹ Gregory and Wallace base their assumption on more general reports about S.B.'s life. The way he interacts with his environment shows no sign of the slightest dependence on sight when we consider most of the issues that Berkeley raises. Furthermore, even though S.B. could perceive a moving light, and thus, in theory, partially base judgments about the motion of objects on vision, this was just not the case *in practice*. Most effectively blind people are so described because they do not depend on any residual vision and they function as well in the dark as in broad daylight.

When S.B. entered the school for the blind he evidently had no useful vision, "we find no reference to useful vision anywhere in the school reports."⁵⁰ S.B. himself stated that he had no visual memory of form and this was accepted as an honest report.⁵¹

He told us, *first*, that he believed he became blind at the age of ten months – the age given in the records of the blind school – and, *secondly*, that the only visual memories he had before the operation were of three colours – red, white and black. He claimed, then, and later, that he remembered no other visual phenomena.⁵²

S.B.'s elder sister gave an account which suggested he had no useful vision as a child and she also believed he became blind at ten months.

She remembered him clearly as a small child. She used to take him weekly to the clinic, to have his eyes washed. She emphasized that his eyes were in a shocking state, and there was a severe running discharge. She remembers his head covered by a large bandage, under which the discharge used to seep. *Apparently he wore a bandage more or less continuously as a small child.*

The family used in effect to test S.B.'s vision, when the bandages were removed, as a game. Her recollection is that as a small child he could 'point roughly to large white objects'. She

⁴⁹ Gregory and Wallace, 1963, 78.

⁵⁰ Gregory and Wallace, 1963, 73.

⁵¹ Gregory and Wallace, 1963, 75.

⁵² Gregory and Wallace, 1963, 74.

thinks that his vision was limited to appreciation of fairly bright large surfaces, apparently without any appreciation of colour. *She is confident that his vision was too rudimentary to be useful when the bandages were removed, and he was blind-folded throughout his young childhood, so that what vision he had was generally not available.* There seems no doubt, from her statements, but that he led the life of a blind child.⁵³ [my italics]

The only reading mentioned in his school reports is Braille reading, and, although he is clearly intelligent, his assessment for pay is less than one third the average rate sighted workers. He had always used a large watch with no glass so that he could tell the time by touch. He enjoyed cycling and he had a friend to guide him by putting a hand on his shoulder.

The pre-operative report from Mr Hirtenstein, the ophthalmologist, described the exceedingly opaque condition of the corneas and very limited vision. We need to understand what this “limited vision” is.

The vision in the right eye was reduced to hand movements in front of the eye. The left eye had accurate projection of light only.⁵⁴

The light projection before the operation was tested by a pencil-light, and the patient indicated with his hand from which direction the source of light came. This was quite accurate in his case, with both eyes.⁵⁵

In one sense S.B. can see with both eyes. In these tests, however, special conditions have to be set. The light that S.B. sees needs to be shown in a darkened room. Even then he will not see a distinct light as we do, but rather a diffuse area of light—as we might see through closed eyelids. This sort of vision is not blindness but neither is it sight, as we usually think of it.

⁵³ Gregory and Wallace, 1963, 75. This is borne out by medical reports to which S.B.’s sister had no access (76).

⁵⁴ Gregory and Wallace, 1963, 84.

⁵⁵ Gregory and Wallace, 1963, 123.

On the basis of the evidence that they have—school reports, accounts from S.B. himself, accounts from his sister, reports from the operating ophthalmologist, and a general knowledge of the sort of life S.B. has lived—the authors claim that S.B. is, and has been since childhood, *effectively blind*.

When the authors visited him six months after the operation they found signs of his previous blindness.

... he still to a great extent lived the life of a blind man, sometimes not bothering to put on the light at night, and he still made little of the normal visual occupations of the cinema or television.

... he was able to find his way about without the use of his eyes, and ... he could detect the presence of houses and doors by the echoes from his footsteps.⁵⁶

Thus, Gregory and Wallace believe that S.B. did not get any assistance from residual vision before his operation.

This we believe for two reasons: (1) The absence of any comment in the school report of any help from vision in reading, crafts or other skills, combined with the rather low assessment [for pay]; (2) The fact that throughout his life he lived the life of a blind man, and developed the special skills, such as orienting himself by echoes, which are necessary for those who lack effective sight if they are to live active lives. S.B.'s residual vision was apparently insufficient, even for a man of his intelligence and training, to serve him in any simple or complex task, and so we conclude that the case of S.B. may be considered with the classical cases.⁵⁷

If we accept the relevance of “sightless” cases as argued by Gregory and Wallace we can look to actual instances for answers to the questions we have about the late acquisition of sight. Certainly we have been alerted to some aspects, such as motion, which may be problematical but this does not seem to “spill over” into other areas, like distance or figure. Their argument does not, in general, diminish the conditions that Berkeley outlined nor does it modify the questions posed or the issues raised.

⁵⁶ Gregory and Wallace, 1963, 111.

⁵⁷ Gregory and Wallace, 1963, 86.

* * *

We begin with speculations about what a hypothetical blind man would perceive if given sight in later life. Suppose that there is an actual case, we could learn from this about the late acquisition of sight. Gregory and Wallace say that an actual case of recovery from blindness, in the strict sense of blindness, is impossible. All that can be done is to operate on people who show some receptivity, that is, on people who are not blind in the strict sense. So there is a catch. The hypothetical blind man of the theorising is strictly blind, and any actual case must show receptivity before the operation. Therefore there are no actual cases of the late acquisition of sight.

Gregory and Wallace argue that some receptive cases are effectively blind. That is, there are people, and S.B. is one, whose minimal vision is so poor that they can be thought of as strictly blind in many respects. Most importantly, their effective blindness is such that we can learn about the late acquisition of sight by considering these cases.

I think that we can look at the late acquisition of language in a similar way. We know that the languageless people the Deaf talk about *do* something—they sometimes gesture and mime, although Joe did not. We hearing people can take that *doing* for language. Some might take S.B.'s receptivity for sight but we are justified, say Gregory and Wallace, in accepting S.B. as a case of the late acquisition of sight. Are there similar cases for the late acquisition of language? Are there cases where the gestures of a supposedly languageless person are better seen as receptivity than as language? I will now consider that possibility.

3.5 The Late Acquisition of Language - A Possible Case

Suppose we want to make a distinction between languageless and enlanguaged people, similar to the distinction between the blind and the sighted, where would we start? I will use what Gregory and Wallace say as a guide. As a first step, I will suggest how we might sort promising cases from unpromising cases using examples that Schaller describes. These examples indicate a difference between those who are

hopeless cases and those who are effectively languageless but likely to be able to acquire language. The point of this first step is not so much to see the difference between the hopeless cases and the receptive cases, rather, it is to get a feel for the sort of response that might be seen as receptivity yet not be a linguistic response.

The second step is to see whether it is reasonable to accept that, although the receptive individuals may show signs of having language, the worst cases may be classed as *effectively languageless* on the basis of their behaviour. As we saw in the case of S.B. the test showed that he was technically not blind but he was assessed as effectively blind because of his behaviour. No testing process was needed to see that he lived the life of a blind man, and that his meagre vision was of no use to him. His behaviour in certain situations was evidence enough for judgments about whether or not he could see.⁵⁸

Schaller mentions several cases of languagelessness which contrast with Ildefonso in terms of receptivity. I see a parallel with the contrast between strictly blind and effectively blind. The parallel I wish to focus on is between Ildefonso's languagelessness and S.B.'s blindness, *not* between Ildefonso's deafness and S.B.'s blindness—Ildefonso must be thought of as a languageless man who acquires language later in life, his deafness is not in itself relevant to the argument here.

3.5.1 *The Distinction Explored for Languageless and Enlanguaged*

Schaller describes her interaction with various people who she takes to be languageless, they are all profoundly, prelingually deaf. In some cases there is an apparent cutting off right at the beginning, and no overtures meet with the sort of response that suggests receptivity. That is, there is a sense that further interaction won't lead to better communication.

⁵⁸ In using Gregory and Wallace as a guide I am not trying to make everything match up between the sight case and the language case. For instance they say S.B.'s limited vision, his minimal sight, is not "useful." I do not necessarily want to say that any gestures a languageless person makes are not "useful."

I remembered a dark hallway at Ohlone College in the San Francisco Bay area, where a tall, gaunt man with unruly hair falling over his forehead greeted me with a simple gesture and signed, "My name is B-o-b."

"Good morning," I responded. "My name ..."

"My name is B-o-b," he interrupted. "My name is B-o-b." He continued repeating this sentence until I walked away. Later, I learned that he had been born deaf, and the only attempt to teach him language had resulted in this meaningless repetition. One of my friends was helping a rehabilitation counselor look for a placement for him, but everyone said there was nothing to be done; he was a hopeless case.⁵⁹

A man, rocking endlessly in his chair, was staring at the tabletop.
...

Hesitantly, I approached the rocking man. His shoulders pointed so far forward that his long neck was almost parallel to the table. When I gently touched his shoulders to get his attention, he at once accelerated his rocking. Eye contact was impossible. ...

"That's Tom. They found him in an institution for the mentally retarded. He was misdiagnosed as a baby and lived for forty years with mentally retarded people, until someone discovered that he was deaf and had normal intelligence."⁶⁰

Bob responds, but there is no sense of interaction which might be developed. Furthermore, Bob is in a place where there are people trying to help him, and if language was a possibility we ought to see more than his repetition. This does not look like the sort of receptivity we need for language. Tom also responds, but it is clear that his behaviour in this situation is not normal. There is no indication of how his intelligence was assessed. He certainly does not show the sort of receptivity we need for language.

Receptivity is not to be equated with *any* response, it has to be a response relevant to interpersonal interaction. Receptivity in languageless people will suggest that

⁵⁹ Schaller, 1995, 28.

⁶⁰ Schaller, 1995, 21-22, 23, 30.

becoming enlanguaged is a possibility. It is difficult to say just what it might be, because languagelessness in adults who are otherwise normal is rarely acknowledged in the literature.⁶¹ For the moment, then, we begin with Schaller's judgment that Bob and Tom are hopeless cases.

Ildefonso's initial interaction with Schaller was different. Was it different because Ildefonso was, in some sense, enlanguaged? Or was it different because Ildefonso, although languageless, was receptive? Certainly he showed no understanding of what was going on around him, and his only initial response was to attempt to mimic any signs or gestures Schaller used. This imitation was not like the sort of interaction we expect between enlanguaged people—people who know about language. It was not like interaction between foreigners where there is no common language. In spite of that, there was a degree of interaction which showed promise, unlike her encounters with Bob and Tom.⁶²

He tensed as I approached. I greeted him with a gesture and my namesign. He imitated my movements and inaccurately copied my namesign. "Your name?" I signed. Again he copied my movements. *His eyes never left mine; his taut arms and face showed his readiness to respond.* I sat down opposite him and raised my hands to begin another communication. Immediately he, too, put his hands in the air. I lowered my hands and took a listening position. He lowered his hands *and watched me.* I began a mime routine that reminded me of "Me Jane, you Tarzan." He repeated each facial expression and movement while *his eyes asked for my approval.* I held his hands down on the table and repeated my Tarzan routine with one hand. I removed my restraining hand and immediately he continued to imitate my gestures.⁶³ [my italics]

Ildefonso is not interacting with Schaller in the comprehending way that we associate with two enlanguaged individuals. There is, however, some engagement between them, an engagement which is quite different from the interaction with Bob,

⁶¹ Schaller found this when she went searching. Later she asked McKinney why she hadn't published her material. McKinney replied "nobody listens," and then indicated how much work was involved running the centre—that came first, helping the people concerned. (Schaller, 1995, 138.)

⁶² All Schaller's interaction with Ildefonso is gestured or signed, this includes facial components.

⁶³ Schaller, 1995, 26.

described above. Bob's simple signed sentence looks an example of linguistic behaviour, but we get the sense that, in a very deep way, there is no engagement. Ildefonso, on the other hand, shows engagement to the extent that he imitates each new sign or gesture that Schaller makes. He notes the hand movements and the facial expressions, and although he appears to have no understanding of what they mean or even of what is going on, he has focused on them.

Ildefonso's behaviour shows another encouraging sign of response.

He had a workbook in front of him, so I pointed to it and raised my eyebrows in a questioning look. He tensed, copied my raised-eyebrows expression, and raised a corner of his book. I nodded my head and signed "book." Instead of copying, he opened the book as if I had ordered him to. He didn't see the sign as a symbol but rather as a mime/gesture command, "Open the book." The sign for *book* is one of the few that is a pictograph: two flat hands with palms together spread open from the thumbs while the little fingers stay together.⁶⁴

This non-imitative response shows more than the mere tuning in of imitation, it suggests progressive interaction. It might be argued that this shows enlanguaged behaviour, but I think we need more than something which looks like a response to a command, to be sure. In the circumstances, this could just as easily be taken as evidence of receptivity. Like S.B.'s positive responses to the direction of light and to a hand passing before his eyes, Ildefonso's attention to signs, his imitation of signs, and his limited interactive response, suggest that he will be able to acquire language.

3.5.2 *Assessing Ildefonso's Languagelessness*

Now we come to the second step. Are we justified in accepting that Ildefonso is *effectively languageless*? S.B. responded to light and hand movement before his eyes but he was readily accepted as effectively blind by his family, his school, his friends, his workmates and health professionals, because his general behaviour was

⁶⁴ Schaller, 1995, 32.

that of a blind man. Does Ildefonso's general behaviour suggest that he might be effectively languageless?

Schaller certainly thinks so. Her description suggests that he is generally uncomprehending about much more than the specifics of what is going on around him. She cannot draw him into anything like a conversation, he just copies what she does. It is not that he doesn't understand the content of the simple conversation she attempts, rather, *he doesn't appear to know what conversation is*. And it is not that he doesn't understand the ASL signs, he seems to have *no idea what the ASL signs might be*.

Outside, two sidewalks framed a rectangular lawn with a ten-foot maple tree in the centre. I walked up to the tree and patted it with my hand, turned to Ildefonso, and pointed back to the tree. He looked at the tree, then at me, then pointed to the tree. We were equal now. We didn't need symbols. We could simply share the tree in front of us. I tried to think of things one could do with a tree. I patted it again with a very satisfied expression, plucked off a leaf, felt it, smelled it, twirled it, and glanced briefly at Ildefonso. He was studying me, but in a relaxed way.

The maple leaf zig-zagged to the ground, and I signed "tree." I exaggerated the sign by moving my forearm and extended open hand as high and far from my torso as possible towards the maple. I nodded alternately at the sign and at the tree. I raised my eyebrows at Ildefonso, and he pointed to the tree. I signed "tree" again, and he copied me. He was wearing his Is-this-what-you-want-me-to-do face again.⁶⁵

Back in the bungalow we faced each other once more. I signed "tree." He signed it after me. With sudden inspiration, I jumped out of my chair. Found a piece of paper and laid it in front of him. I signed "tree," mimed drawing, and gave him an encouraging nod. He signed "tree," mimed drawing with his pencil on the paper, gave me an encouraging nod, and put his pencil down. I signed "tree," again. When he once more copied me, I lost patience and signed, "No, watch me." I signed/mimed a leaf falling from the tree, which I picked up and offered to him. He repeated my moves. Frustrated, I didn't risk a third try.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Schaller, 1995, 33.

⁶⁶ Schaller, 1995, 34.

When I returned to Ildefonso, I struck out with the third “tree” lesson. Pointing to and naming objects failed to communicate anything. I led, he followed. I pointed, he pointed. I signed, he signed. We had perfect rhythm, but no music.⁶⁷

Ildefonso’s failure to connect the sign TREE with the actual tree while remaining attentive and apparently curious, is the sort of behaviour that suggests a sort of functional language “blindness” without giving the impression that he can never make this connection.⁶⁸

We do not have to assume that all languages have nouns, or that they have names for objects, to be surprised at Ildefonso’s perplexity. If Ildefonso had any sort of symbol system of his own for communicating, we could expect him to take Schaller’s sign TREE, and explore it in some way. It is an iconic sign (although we should not assume that this is obvious to those unfamiliar with it), and she uses it repeatedly in circumstances where the connection could be explored by someone familiar with symbols. Certainly she does more than just indicate the tree, she plucks, smells and twirls the leaf. She confronts him with paper and pencil when he may be totally unfamiliar with drawing. But the sign TREE seems to have been frequently used in conjunction with the pointing gesture, it is used in the presence of the tree where she nods alternately at the symbol and the tree.

Ildefonso does not attempt to explore the sign TREE. In fact, *it doesn’t seem to stand out for him in any way*. Certainly he repeats, or imitates it, but he does this with *all* of Schaller’s performance—miming drawing, the encouraging nod, all her moves. There is none of the exploratory interaction that we would expect from an enlanguaged person, and that includes someone who has a home sign system. Ildefonso does not do anything to draw a clarifying response from Schaller—for example, gesture with a questioning expression on his face. He behaves as if he has

⁶⁷ Schaller, 1995, 39-40.

⁶⁸ A convention: Signs from languages like ASL or BSL (British Sign Language) are often represented in English translation using small capital letters—for example, BOOK, TREE. If more than one English word is needed to translate a single sign, the English words are joined by hyphens—for example, HARD-OF-HEARING, THINK-HEARING. (Padden and Humphries, 1988, 7.)

no idea what the activity is all about. Ildefonso behaves as if he is not familiar symbol systems and the interaction in which they are used. That is a sort of *effective languagelessness*.

If Ildefonso is effectively languageless, what are we to say about the mime and gesture that he reportedly uses to communicate? Mime and gesture are often used by deaf people who are fluent in at least one signed language. They mix it in with their sign language and they rely on it heavily in communication with the hearing. Clearly, if someone asks to see the bank manager right now, using mime, this is enlanguaged behaviour. If a deaf person uses mime and gesture to get directions, invite someone for coffee, explain that they are late because the car engine caught fire, this is enlanguaged behaviour. What is Ildefonso doing with mime and gesture, if it is not enlanguaged behaviour?

That is one of my questions which comes from the claims that Deaf people make. Although mime and gesture play a large role in Deaf linguistic communication, Deaf people can easily tell when it is being used, not *instead* of language, but *because the person has no language*. I hope that this investigation will lead to some further understanding of this.

* * *

This enquiry, then, is concerned with the late acquisition of a first language—the transition from being a languageless adult to being an enlanguaged adult. The main source of material and information is Schaller's book. We can begin to find out about the late acquisition of language, and languagelessness, from this book in the same way that we can find out about the late acquisition of sight from Oliver Sacks' account of the late acquisition of sight.

CHAPTER 4

In this chapter I will briefly look at Oliver Sacks' account of Virgil acquiring sight at the age of fifty. Sacks refers to this as a "narrative of nature," and an "exploration of a deeply altered self and world."¹ Sacks' description of Virgil's behaviour, and his commentary on the whole case offer insights into seeing and learning to see. I will concentrate on two themes. Firstly, there is the theme of Virgil seeing objects, or learning to see objects. Secondly, there is the theme of Virgil learning to see his way around

As I said earlier, Sacks' shows a way that we might look at Ildefonso's development. Schaller's account of Ildefonso is, I believe, in the same vein as Sacks' account of Virgil. Ildefonso is learning to do something which I think of as languaging. I will use "language" as a verb freely but not persistently. The verb form is one way of keeping the notion of language tied to the person or what the person is doing. Loosely, the two themes in Sacks suggest two themes in Schaller's account. Firstly, the theme of Ildefonso naming or languaging objects, or learning to name or to language objects. And, secondly, the theme of Ildefonso learning to language his way around. After I have discussed each theme in relation to Virgil, I will say something about how I see it relating to Ildefonso.

In this chapter I will also discuss the naïve view of seeing. I think there is a kind of naïve view of language which can be questioned in the same way that the naïve view of seeing is. Ildefonso leads us to re-think languaging in the way that Virgil leads us to re-think seeing. There are, of course, many ways in which the cases of Virgil and Ildefonso differ. In using the account of Virgil as a guide, I am not trying to draw numerous parallels between the cases, in particular, I am not saying that we should try to think of language as another sense.

¹¹ Sacks, 1995, xiv, xv.

There are also two methodological points. Firstly, Virgil is able to report on his experiences as he learns to see, but Ildefonso is not able to report on his experiences as he learns to language. Secondly, Sacks observes Virgil interacting with his surroundings and reports on that, but Schaller is herself the crucial part of Ildefonso's surroundings. She is not, in general, observing Ildefonso interacting with someone else. I will discuss the matter of Virgil's firsthand reports in this chapter. I am aware of the second point and am assuming that it is not a difficulty.

4.1 The Acquisition of Sight

The acquisition of sight seems self-explanatory. Virgil can't see, so he has an operation on his eye. The operation is a success. Can Virgil see now? There is a "yes and no" answer to this question. Both Amy, Virgil's wife, and Sacks observe and interact with Virgil after the operation. As a result both of them conclude that they are not really sure any more what seeing is.

4.1.1 *A Naïve View of Seeing*

Sacks refers to a naïve account of what we might expect when sight is restored after long-term blindness—which is not strictly the same as the late acquisition of sight.

What would vision be like in such a patient? Would it be 'normal' from the moment vision was restored? This is what one might think at first. This is the commonsensical notion – that the eyes will be opened, the scales will fall from them, and (in the words of the New Testament) the blind man will 'receive' sight.²

This is what Virgil's wife, Amy, thought initially. She kept a journal, and on the day after the operation, when Virgil's bandages were removed, she wrote, "Virgil can SEE!" Everyone there was excited about the "miracle of restored sight."³ The implication is that Virgil opens his eyes and looks around the room, taking in the people and the furniture in a long slow gaze. Virgil's operation restored the function of one of his eyes to a great extent, and we might think that now he can go out and view the world. We might think that the things he has been familiar with for so many years would quickly

² Sacks, 1995, 103.

³ Sacks, 1995, 103.

make sense to him visually—particularly his house and its contents. Sacks considers this naïve view and points out that there are reasons for thinking this way.

A man opens his eyes, light enters and falls on the retina: he sees. It is as simple as that, we imagine. And the surgeon's own experience, like that of most ophthalmologists, had been with the removal of cataracts from patients who had almost always lost their sight late in life – and such patients do indeed, if the surgery is successful, have a virtually immediate recovery of normal vision, for they have in no sense lost their ability to see.⁴

The naïve view is by no means a universal view. Reports of the late acquisition of sight date back to 1728 when the first operation to remove congenital cataracts was performed on a boy of fourteen.⁵ That case, and every reported case since, shows that it just doesn't happen the way the naïve view suggests. In fact, the naïve view doesn't hold for sight *restoration* if the period of blindness was long. Some of the patients described by Valvo had lost their sight later in life through accidents. When lens replacement techniques were devised, these people could be given sight. They faced many of the same problems as Virgil and S.B., who are taken to be cases of the late *acquisition* of sight.⁶ Nevertheless, the naïve view persists.

Everyone, Virgil included, expected something much simpler.⁷

4.1.2 *Can Virgil See?*

Amy realises almost immediately that Virgil's sight is not what she thought. In the journal entry following the "miracle of sight restored," she portrays the situation differently and says that they are now "unsure what seeing means."⁸

⁴ Sacks, 1995, p.108.

⁵ Gregory, 1987, 94-95.

⁶ Valvo, 1971, 12-14. ME lost his sight at the age of ten and was blind for twenty years. After the operation he reported, "The first five months after the operation I found very disillusioning from the visual point of view. I would look from the balcony of the hospital and see things moving, without understanding what they were—only realizing that they had to do with cars. The outside world seemed to be comprised of blurred marks without any meaning." (14) With time, his sight improves and ME is able to read even the fine print in the newspaper, watch television, see the movies from the sixth row, and see his wife and children. Surprisingly, he does not get facial expressions. "Physiognomy for me has no meaning: I see the eyes, the mouth, and the nose, but I have never managed to understand anything of expression." (14) This is someone who could see normally until an explosion blinded him at the age of ten.

⁷ Sacks, 1995, 108.

⁸ Sacks, 1995, 103.

The following day the bandage was removed and Virgil's eye was finally exposed, without cover, to the world. The moment of truth had finally come.

Or had it? The truth of the matter (as I pieced it together later), if less 'miraculous' than Amy's journal suggested, was infinitely stranger. The dramatic moment stayed vacant, grew longer, sagged. No cry ('I can see!') burst from Virgil's lips. He seemed to be staring blankly, bewildered, without focusing, at the surgeon, who stood before him, still holding the bandages. Only when the surgeon spoke – saying 'Well?' – did a look of recognition cross Virgil's face.

Virgil told me later that in this first moment he had no idea what he was seeing. There was light, there was movement, there was colour, all mixed up, all meaningless, a blur. Then out of the blur came a voice that said, 'Well?' Then, and only then, he said, did he finally realize that this chaos of light and shadow was a face – and, indeed, the face of his surgeon.⁹

The naïve of seeing is very tenacious, perhaps because we judge what seeing is from our own experience. We may think that we can cover our eyes and get some sense of what it is to be blind. As Sacks' points out, temporary blindness due to cataracts is what most ophthalmologists deal with. Virgil, however, shows us that seeing is not just a matter of opening eyes and looking at things.

4.1.3 *A Comment on a Naïve View of Language*

If the naïve view of becoming sighted is tenacious in the light of the evidence, then any corresponding naïve view of becoming enlanguaged is going to be more tenacious—there are virtually no reports of corresponding cases of the late acquisition of language in adults. How can we think of being enlanguaged, or becoming enlanguaged, in any way other than the way that we experience it—as enlanguaged beings? How can we begin to explore other ways of thinking about it?

As Sacks watches Virgil exploring his house he says that it reminds him of an infant involved in the "primal construction" of a visual world. Then he says that most of us have no sense of the enormity of this construction. We just don't see it that way—not in ourselves, and probably not generally when we watch infants.

⁹ Sacks, 1995, 107.

As Virgil explored the rooms of his house, investigating, so to speak, the visual construction of the world, I was reminded of an infant moving his hand to and fro before his eyes, wagging his head, turning it this way and that, in his primal construction of the world. Most of us have no sense of the immensity of this construction, for we perform it seamlessly, unconsciously, thousands of times every day, at a glance.¹⁰

How do we come to think of seeing as the primal construction of the world? We come to think like that when a case, such as Virgil, brings us up with a jolt. I think that is what Schaller's account does if we read it closely. It brings us up with a jolt. It calls into question some commonsense ideas that could be taken as part of a naïve view of language. Roger Shattuck is quoted on the dust jacket of Schaller's book.

... Behind this moving story lies a quiet challenge to much current thinking (including my own) about language and language learning.
—Roger Shattuck, author of *The Forbidden Experiment*

4.2 Learning to See

We just cannot imagine how anyone with sight could not see the object in front of their eyes. We just open our eyes and see what is there, a chair, a cup, an apple. If we set an apple before Virgil soon after his operation, he just doesn't see it. Virgil is not confused by a jumble of objects, nor is he in doubt about what object is meant, for we set the object down in front of him. He doesn't have to work out whether we mean the table or the apple which is sitting on the table. Yet Virgil can't see the apple when he looks at it. We, on the other hand, *can't not see the object*, the apple when we look at it. We cannot even *imagine* not seeing it under these conditions.

The rest of us, born sighted, can scarcely imagine such confusion. For we, born with a full complement of senses, and correlating these, one with the other, create a sight world from the start, a world of visual objects and concepts and meanings. When we open our eyes each morning, it is upon a world we have spent a lifetime *learning* to see. We are not given the world: we make our world through incessant experience, categorization, memory, reconnection. But when Virgil opened his eye, after being blind for forty-five years - having had little more than an infant's visual experience, and this long forgotten - there were no visual memories to support a perception; there was no world

¹⁰ Sacks, 1995, 120-121.

of experience and meaning awaiting him. He saw, but what he saw had no coherence. His retina and optic nerve were active, transmitting impulses, but his brain could make no sense of them; he was, as neurologists say, agnostic.¹¹

Sacks says that we *create* a world of visual objects and concepts and meanings through *incessant experience*. It is there for us every morning when we wake up; it is there for us all the time. Virgil, however, after his operation, had no world of visual objects awaiting him. He saw, but what he saw had no coherence, his brain could make no sense of what he saw. If this is so then Virgil needs to incessantly experience his surroundings, his house and the objects in it.

This is precisely what happens. Virgil begins experiencing, exploring. He doesn't just cast his eye around the room—that won't do it. He has no sense of distance; he needs to *experience* distance, so he must traverse the room. Here his wife Amy helps.

On the day he returned home after the bandages were removed, his house and its contents were unintelligible to him, and he had to be led up the garden path, led through the house, led into each room, and introduced to each chair. Within a week, with Amy's help, he had established a canonical line – a particular line up the path, through the sitting room to the kitchen, with further lines, as necessary, to the bathroom and the bedroom. It was only from this line, at first, that he could recognize anything – though this took a great deal of interpretation and inference; thus he learned, for example, that 'a whiteness to the right', to be seen as he came obliquely through the front door, was in fact the dining table in the next room, although at this point neither 'table' nor 'dining-room' was a clear visual concept. If he deviated from the line, he would be totally disorientated. Then, carefully, with Amy's help, he started to use the line as a home base, making short sallies and excursions to either side of it, so that he could see the room, feel its walls and contents from different angles, and build up a sense of space, of solidity, of perspective.¹²

Virgil's first incessant experience of his house is from his canonical line. He must see the room from the same perspective repeatedly. He must walk the same line repeatedly. If he strays from the line he is lost, it is only from this line that he can recognise

¹¹ Sacks, 1995, p.108.

¹² Sacks, 1995, 120.

anything, and, from the way Sacks talks, this seems to be a rather loose sense of “recognise.” When he can manage this he is ready to make short sallies or excursions to either side. When he does that for the first time, everything changes for him. We could not say at this stage, that he sees the furniture in the room, he has to build up its solidity. He has to see a chair from different angles and realise that, despite its changing appearance, it is indeed the same chair.

4.2.1 *Virgil Learns to See Objects*

We who see objects easily are unaware of the changing appearance of things as we move around. We have put all the aspects of the object together into a coherent whole. And we have no sense of having done this. Virgil brings it to our attention.

Solid objects, it was evident, presented much more difficulty, because their appearance was so variable; and much of the past five weeks had been devoted to the exploration of objects, their unexpected vicissitudes of appearance as they were seen from near or far, or half concealed, or from different places and angles.¹³

Even simple shapes had been difficult for Virgil at first. Sacks says that initially, after the operation, he could not visually tell a square from a circle, although he could distinguish them instantly by touch.¹⁴ Interestingly, he had recognised capital letters on the eye chart, and he told Sacks that he had learnt to read the alphabet by touch at school. Why letters but not a square and a circle? Sacks does not explain this. It seems we must be prepared for the unexpected. Although Virgil could recognise the capital letters visually with no trouble, could not see words. He was, however, able to read inscriptions on tombstones by touch.¹⁵

When Virgil had trouble with shapes, Amy bought him a child’s formboard with large simple blocks. He had to practise for what seems a long time to master this.

...Amy had bought, among other things, a child’s wooden formboard, with large, simple blocks – square, triangle, and rectangle – to be

¹³ Sacks, 1995, 120.

¹⁴ Sacks, 1995, 119.

¹⁵ Sacks, 1995, 109, 118. S.B., the man described by Gregory and Wallace was also able to see capital letters. He had had the same experience as Virgil at school.

fitted into corresponding holes, and had got Virgil to practise with it every day. Virgil found the task impossible at first, but quite easy now, after practising for a month. He still tended to feel the holes and shapes before matching them, but when we forbade this he fitted them together quite fluently by sight alone.¹⁶

Sacks says that solid objects were much more difficult for Virgil to see. Even the simple blocks were hard. What a task it is then with more complex objects. Virgil needed to experience these incessantly too. It took “hours of conscious and systematic exploration each day.”

This first month, then, saw a systematic exploration, by sight and touch, of all the smaller things in the house: fruit, vegetables, bottles, cans, cutlery, flowers, the knick-knacks on the mantelpiece – turning them round and round, holding them close to him, then at arm’s length, trying to synthesise their varying appearances into a sense of unitary objecthood.¹⁷

This exploration of objects worked. By the time Sacks came to visit Virgil, about five weeks after the operation, Virgil was visually familiar with the things he had been handling. He could recognise them all by sight. This does not seem to have helped in the recognition of unfamiliar objects, however.

Unfamiliar objects were much more difficult. When I took a blood-pressure cuff from my medical bag, he was completely flummoxed and could make nothing of it, but he recognized it immediately when I allowed him to touch it.¹⁸

What is it to be able to see objects? Virgil can walk around his house visually recognising a multitude of objects, but when he is confronted with an object *he knows but hasn’t seen*, he has no visual recognition at all. Being able to see fruit, vegetables, bottles, cans, cutlery, flowers, and the knick-knacks on the mantelpiece, is of no help when it comes to seeing something else for the first time. We might think that objects are there to be seen and all we have to do is look at them. Virgil, however, only sees the ones that he has been able to synthesise into unitary objecthood. Although Virgil knows

¹⁶ Sacks, 1995, 120.

¹⁷ Sacks, 1995, 121.

¹⁸ Sacks, 1995, 122.

what a blood pressure cuff is, and although he knows it immediately by touch, the blood pressure cuff is not “there” for him to see. He has to create it as a visual object.

Even familiar objects can be difficult and if they move it is harder for Virgil to make them out visually. Both his dog and his cat are black and white and he constantly confuses them. This is not for want of trying to recognise them.

Sometimes, Amy said, she would see him examining the cat carefully, looking at its head, its ears, its paws, its tail, and touching each part gently as he did so. I observed this myself the next day - Virgil feeling and looking at Tibbles with extraordinary intentness, correlating the cat. He would keep doing this, Amy remarked (‘You’d think once was enough’), but the new ideas, the visual recognitions, kept slipping from his mind.¹⁹

Why should anyone think once was enough? Because that is what seeing is like for us—once *is* enough. We find that it is different when we come across someone like Virgil. Seeing is a long hard slog, even when the objects are familiar in other ways. Sacks believes that synthesising details is one of the problems for Virgil. We have no trouble seeing objects all of a piece with a lifetime of incessant experience, but Virgil does have trouble. Virgil sees what we see but he doesn’t see it *as* we see it.

Further problems became apparent as we spent the day with Virgil. He would pick up details incessantly - an angle, an edge, a colour, a movement - but would not be able to synthesize them, to form a complex perception at a glance. This was one reason the cat, visually, was so puzzling: he would see a paw, the nose, the tail, an ear, but could not see all of them together, see the cat as a whole.²⁰

It is as if learning to see objects, even objects that are familiar to the touch, means constructing a whole object piece by piece. But the pieces themselves aren’t there to start with. They have to be brought into being through experience. Is that what Virgil is doing with the cat? We have to see how they lie in relation to each other. Then they seem to shift, or even disappear. Finally they have to be synthesised, not into a simple object, but into a “complex perception.”

¹⁹ Sacks, 1995, 115.

²⁰ Sacks, 1995, 116-117.

How, then, is Virgil ever going to be able to see things that he *can't* touch? For instance, when they visit the zoo, where Virgil can't touch the animals, Sacks wonders what Virgil can see, and even what "seeing" means.

Very striking, as soon as we got to the zoo, was Virgil's sensitivity to motion. He was startled at first, by an odd strutting movement; it made him smile – he had never seen anything like it. [This is only five weeks after the operation] 'What is it?' he asked.

'An emu.'

He was not quite sure what an emu was, so we asked him to describe it to us. He had difficulty and could say only that it was about the same size as Amy – she and the emu were standing side by side at that point – but its movements were quite different from hers. He wanted to touch it, to feel it all over. If he did that, he thought, he would then see it better. But touching, sadly, was not allowed.

His eye was caught next by a leaping motion near by, and he immediately realized – or, rather, surmised – that it must be a kangaroo. His eye followed its motions closely, but he could not describe it, he said, unless he could feel it. We were wondering by now exactly what he could see – and what, indeed, he meant by 'seeing'.²¹

There is an added complication at the zoo because Virgil is as unfamiliar with the backgrounds as he is with the animals. A lot of what he does seems like guessing. These are not wild guesses, however, they are reasoned guesses, and given the circumstances that is a good way for Virgil to make something of what he sees.

In general, it seemed to us, if Virgil could identify an animal, it would be either by its motion or by virtue of a single feature – thus, he might identify a kangaroo because it leapt, a giraffe by its height, or a zebra by its stripes – but he could not form any overall impression of the animal. It was also necessary that the animal be sharply defined against a background; he could not identify the elephants, despite their trunks, because they were at a considerable distance and stood against a slate coloured background.²²

Virgil's difficulty in seeing the animals is not a result of imperfect vision due to retinal damage or something like that. Virgil's difficulty in seeing the animals is due to a lack

²¹ Sacks, 1995, 124-125.

²² Sacks, 1995, 125.

of experience, the ongoing incessant experience, that Sacks mentioned earlier. We see the difference that experience makes when they go to see the gorilla.

Finally we went to the great-ape enclosure; Virgil was curious to see the gorilla. He could not see it at all when it was half-hidden among some trees, and when finally it came into the open he thought that, though it moved differently, it looked just like a large man. Fortunately, there was a life-size bronze statue of a gorilla in the enclosure, and we told Virgil, who had been longing to touch all the animals, that he could, if nothing else, at least examine the statue. Exploring it swiftly and minutely with his hands, he had an air of assurance that he had never shown when examining anything by sight.

...

His face seemed to light up with comprehension as he felt the statue. 'It's not like a man at all,' he murmured. The statue examined, he opened his eyes, and turned around to the real gorilla standing before him in the enclosure. And now, in a way that would have been impossible before, he described the ape's posture, the way the knuckles touched the ground, the little bandy legs, the great canines, the huge ridge on the head, pointing to each feature as he did so.²³

Virgil does not have to touch the gorilla, the statue will do. Sacks describes this as a spectacular example of how touching can make seeing possible. We should not think of seeing, then, as something that we just do with our eyes. We should not think of seeing as something that is unconnected with the incessant experience which gives rise to our ability to see. So what can Virgil do about seeing the things he can't touch, and where there is no replica like the statue? Virgil solves this problem for himself.

Since the operation, Virgil had begun to buy toy soldiers, toy cars, toy animals, miniatures of famous buildings – an entire Lilliputian world – and to spend hours with them. It was not mere childishness or playfulness that had driven him to such pastimes. Through touching these at the same time he looked at them, he could forge a crucial correlation; he could prepare himself to see the real world by learning first to see this toy world. The disparity of scale did not matter, any more than it mattered to S.B. who was able to tell the time on a large wall clock because he could correlate with what he knew by touch from his pocket watch.²⁴

²³ Sacks, 1995, 125, 126.

²⁴ Sacks, 1995, 127. Before his operation, S.B. told the time by feeling the hands of his large hunter watch, which had no glass. After the operation he was instantly able to tell the time on the clock by sight alone. Gregory and Wallace refer to this as an example of cross-modal transfer. (89, 117) Cross-modal transfer appears to refute Berkeley's claim—"... the question now remaining is, whether the particular extensions,

Thus there are different ways of getting the incessant experience necessary for creating the visual world. Virgil can interact directly, as he did with the fruit and his cat. He can interact with a replica, as he did with the statue of the gorilla. Or he can interact with models of typical objects, as he does with his toys. Virgil may never see the famous buildings that he touches in miniature form, and he may never have models of the buildings that actually surround him. Nevertheless his experience with the toys and miniatures may be just the sort of experience he needs to see things in his surroundings.

4.2.2 *Seeing Objects*

Does it make sense to say that Virgil learns to see objects? It seems there is no such step, or stage, in his development that could be classed as “being able to see objects.” Each object has to be individually synthesised into a coherent unity. Being able to see objects x , and y , does not mean that it will be possible to see object z . Each visual object has to be synthesised through incessant experience. There is no visual object there for Virgil until he has done this through incessant experience. Incessant experience for Virgil is interacting with his surroundings, such that objects come out of the surroundings. He must touch the object, model or miniature, twist it and turn it, approach it and move away from it. The constantly changing appearance of the object eventually stops confusing him.

4.2.3 *A Comment on Naming or Language Objects*

Does it make sense to say that Ildefonso names objects? This is how the so-called epiphany is characterised. There are various ways of expressing this—Ildefonso learns that things have names; or Ildefonso learns to name things; or Ildefonso learns about naming; or Ildefonso realises the notion of names or nouns. It is taken for granted that the objects to be named are there in front of Ildefonso, just waiting for him to name them.

figures, and motions perceived by sight, be of the same kind with the particular extensions, figures, and motions perceived by touch? In answer to which I shall venture to lay down the following proposition:—*The extension, figures, and motions perceived by sight are specifically distinct from the ideas of touch, called by the same names; nor is there any such thing as one idea, or kind of idea, common to both senses.*” Berkeley, CXXVII, 335. The only examples of cross-modal transfer for Virgil and S.B. are the capital letters and S.B.’s ability to tell the time. This is interesting in the light of reported difficulties with

Naming is a linguistic activity so we might think in terms of Ildefonso languaging objects, all the time remembering Virgil seeing objects. Does it make sense to say that Ildefonso has to learn to language objects? Does Ildefonso's progress bear this out? Here are some questions that arise for me.

- Does being able to language/name one thing, or a few things, mean that Ildefonso can then immediately language/name others?
- Is a languaged/named object something that Ildefonso has to synthesise?
- If a languaged/named object has to be synthesised, does this involve incessant experience?
- If incessant experience is required what sort of experience is it?

Languaging is something that we do with others. The relevant incessant experience, then, would be some sort of interpersonal interaction. This suggests a way of thinking which makes names much less clear-cut than they seem to us. It also makes objects less clear-cut too. If a languaged/named object has to be synthesised, what is *there* for Ildefonso before he can name the object, before he has synthesised it into a coherent linguistic object?

4.2.4 *Virgil Learns to See His Way Around*

Virgil's first journeys of visual exploration were along his canonical line. He could not learn to get around visually by going from *a* to *b*, and then from *b* to *c*, and so on. He had to go from *a* to *b*, over and over and over again. Then he embarked on the sallies away from the line. Sacks describes this as if Virgil is *constructing* his living room visually. After Virgil has done that he gradually constructs the rest of his house visually.

As Virgil explored the rooms of his house, investigating, so to speak, the visual construction of the world, I was reminded of an infant moving his hand to and fro before his eyes, wagging his head, turning it this way and that, in his primal construction of the world. Most of us have no sense of the immensity of this construction, for we perform

shapes. It is possible the examples of cross-modal transfer are completely free of the confusion caused by solidity and depth, that is, extension on its own may transfer from touch to sight.

it seamlessly, unconsciously, thousands of times every day, at a glance.²⁵

For Virgil, it is not a matter of sizing up the room in the way we might check out a venue for a function. It is not the sort of visual exploration we do when buying a house—seeing how the rooms are arranged, where the dining room is in relation to the kitchen. Virgil, when he comes home after the operation, does not see his house—the rooms, the walls, the doorways, the windows, the ceilings, the floors. Virgil is not blind anymore but he has a long way to go before he sees his way around in his house.

By setting up the canonical line, Amy gets him started. Then he just has to set off in whatever uncertain way that he can, feeling out for things, bumping into chairs and tripping on rugs. Just looking won't work, just as it didn't work with recognising objects, like the blood pressure cuff, or the gorilla. Furthermore, Virgil will find that when he moves, everything moves, there is a constant optical flow—maybe that is why he says he finds walking scary. Gradually, however, by walking around in his house, he learns to see his way around it.

When Virgil first walks his canonical line, what is the result? He doesn't see the room as such. When he walks it a second time, what is the result? He still doesn't see the room, he still can't see his way around the room, it seems he is no further ahead. We do not see anything in the way of results for some time, so it is hard to understand the point of what Virgil is doing. Yet if Virgil walks the canonical line many times, he makes progress, he can eventually see his way around the room—*and there is no other way to do it*.

Virgil eventually becomes visually familiar with his wider surroundings, he does learn to see his way around. But this takes a long time, because, as with objects, seeing his way round his house is one thing and seeing his way round other places, unfamiliar places, is another. When Virgil has learnt to see his way round his house he moves

²⁵ Sacks, 1995, 120-121.

around easily in his house. But there are many things he has not experienced—vistas, different surfaces, shadows, steps, for instance. Distance is particularly difficult.

...he said that in general he found walking 'scary' and 'confusing' without touch, without his cane, with his uncertain, unstable judgement of space and distance. Sometimes surfaces or objects would seem to loom, to be on top of him, when they were quite a distance away; sometimes he would get confused by his own shadow (the whole concept of shadows, of objects blocking light, was puzzling to him) and would come to a stop, or trip, or try to step over it. Steps, in particular, posed a special hazard, because all he could see was a confusion, a flat surface, of parallel and crisscrossing lines; he could not see them (although he knew them) as solid objects going up or coming down in three-dimensional space.²⁶

We, who can see, do not see steps as a confusion of lines on a flat surface. We can look, and look, and look, but, under normal circumstances, there is always depth. It is for us, easy to see depth in a sketch, we always see depth in the Necker cube even though the perspective isn't correct—that's why it reverses. Gregory and Wallace found, however, that S.B. could see no depth in the Necker cube. What we see so easily, and what is suggested to us so easily in a sketch, namely depth, is just not perceived by Virgil at first. It takes a long time for that to develop. While it is developing we see Virgil spending hours doing something with no apparent result at the end because it takes a long time.

Virgil continues to make progress, however, and, it seems, begins to do better in unfamiliar places—unfamiliar visually, that is. He and Amy visit his family's farm for Christmas and his family notice a difference in his behaviour.

He continued to improve, visually, over the ensuing weeks, especially when he was free to set his own pace.²⁷

No less important was the change in the family's attitude toward him. 'He seemed more alert,' his sister said. 'He would walk, move around the house, without touching the walls – he would just get up and go.' She felt that there had been 'a big difference' since he was first operated on, and his mother and the rest of the family felt the same.²⁸

²⁶ Sacks, 1995, 114.

²⁷ Sacks, 1995, 135.

²⁸ Sacks, 1995, 136.

Of course, the family home is not unfamiliar to Virgil, and there is some question about whether he has any visual memories from his childhood when his minimal vision was slightly better.²⁹ His sister's evaluation, however, suggests that Virgil did not move about before the operation as he does now, so it seems unlikely he is seeing his way around because of childhood visual memories. Her evaluation of Virgil's sight is interesting in that it gives us an good idea that Virgil is seeing his way around without saying anything about what Virgil can or cannot see. The expressions "without touching the walls," and "he would just get up and go," give a clear idea of competence without saying whether Virgil can see how far away something is, or whether he can tell a circle from an ellipse. She describes how Virgil is interacting with his environment.

4.2.5 *Seeing His Way Around*

What is it to be able to see one's way around? When Virgil can move around his house comfortably using his sight, we cannot say that now Virgil can see his way around. Just as there is no such stage of development, "seeing objects" that follows from Virgil's visual recognition of the things in his house, so there is no stage of development "seeing his way around," that follows from his ability to see his way around his house. We might think that if he can see his way around his own house, then he can see his way around any house, or anywhere. This is not so, if there are no stairs in his house then he will not see his way around places where there are stairs.

Thus, there will not be just one lot of incessant behaviour. Virgil may have to go through the canonical line process in other situations, crossing the road, or through the supermarket, for instance. There will be repetition of the initial route and then sallies off the route. Virgil isn't sizing up the world so that he can move around, he is creating the world that he moves around in. In the process he bumps into things and trips over things. He has to cope with variability here, just as he did with the ever-changing objects. Surfaces loom, there is a constant optical flow as he moves, and shadows get in his way.

²⁹ Sacks does not think Virgil has visual memories of his home. I will discuss this below.

Virgil had to learn to see objects, to synthesise each into a coherent unity despite its “unexpected vicissitudes of appearance.” Virgil has to do this with the visual backdrop too. There are unexpected vicissitudes of appearance in Virgil’s whole environment, the environment changes as he walks. Sunlight coming through a window from different directions throws variable shadows in a room. It is hard to take that kind of variability into account until we read a description like the one Sacks gives us.

4.2.6 *A Comment on Ildefonso Languageing his Way Around*

Ildefonso has to language his way around. Are there unexpected vicissitudes for him too? Virgil familiarising himself visually with his house is not like me visually sizing up a house I might like to buy. Ildefonso familiarising himself with something linguistically is not like me understanding what has been said. Ildefonso first has to understand *that* something has been said. In the appropriate sort of interaction, through incessant experience, Ildefonso creates linguistic surroundings. Again there are some questions that arise for me.

- Is there repeated behaviour which appears to have no results, but which might be the incessant behaviour required, so that Ildefonso can eventually language his way around a conversation, or an argument?
- What is a canonical line for Ildefonso, something that he seems to *have* to do?
- Is there a linguistic flow that confuses him, a flow that has to be tamed?
- Does Ildefonso learn to language his way around in a limited way and then have to repeat the process to extend his linguistic surroundings?
- Is there a “depth” of languageing that Ildefonso cannot apprehend, and which we, who are enlanguageed, cannot *not* apprehend?
- Can we see Ildefonso “just get up and go” without trying to say, or measure, what he uses in the way of words or sentences?

4.3 **Firsthand Reports**

There is, at first sight, a major difference between the description of Virgil and the description of Ildefonso. Virgil can give a firsthand account of his experiences. We can talk to Virgil about his experiences as he learns to see. We can ask him to describe what he sees in different circumstances. He may remark on specific differences that we

had not thought of, thus leading to a better understanding of what seeing is. Does that make Sacks' account a more useful account than Schaller's?

Ildefonso is, necessarily, unable to report on his experiences as his language develops. Any report he makes must wait until he has acquired language and it will be different from Virgil's in at least two ways. Firstly, it will be made with hindsight and languageless experiences will therefore be described, and thus interpreted, in the light of later understanding. Secondly, if Ildefonso can describe his languageless state in language will that distort it? Are there some distinctive, languageless experiences which, by their very nature, dissolve in the presence of language? We cannot expect to find out about becoming enlanguaged later in life in the way that we can find out about becoming sighted later in life, if we think that a firsthand report plays a crucial role in our understanding.

How important, then, are Virgil's own reports? How much of Sacks' account hangs on Virgil's descriptions and explanations? As it turns out, firsthand reports do not play a crucial role in Sacks' account of Virgil's development. Sacks makes his own observations of Virgil, in test situations and in everyday activities. He relies on what others say, the surgeon and Amy. Amy keeps a journal and makes her own remarks about Virgil's activities, difficulties and progress. Sacks talks to Virgil a lot but what Virgil says cannot be taken as a firsthand report of the late acquisition of sight.

4.3.1 *Does Virgil Himself Report on the Late Acquisition of Sight?*

After the operation there is no doubt that Virgil's eyes function in a way that they previously did not. What did Virgil himself make of this? What was the experience like? Virgil did not have a lot to say about those first moments after the bandages were removed and it was some weeks afterwards when Sacks asked him about it.

The truth of the matter (as I pieced it together later), if less 'miraculous' than Amy's journal suggested, was infinitely stranger. The dramatic moment stayed vacant, grew longer, sagged. No cry ('I can see!') burst from Virgil's lips. He seemed to be staring blankly, bewildered, without focusing, at the surgeon, who stood before him, still holding the bandages. Only when the surgeon spoke – saying 'Well?' – did a look of recognition cross Virgil's face.

Virgil told me later that in this first moment he had no idea what he was seeing. There was light, there was movement, there was colour, all mixed up, all meaningless, a blur. Then out of the blur came a voice that said, ‘Well?’ Then, and only then, he said, did he finally realize that this chaos of light and shadow was a face – and, indeed, the face of his surgeon.³⁰

Sacks obviously weighs things up. What Virgil says overrides Amy’s journal entry, but what Virgil says is not particularly explanatory. Virgil does not say what things looked like. What he is saying is that things didn’t look particularly like anything to him.

Sacks does not report everything that Virgil says but some of what he reports clearly comes directly from Virgil either in conversation or in answer to questions. For instance, Virgil can read capital letters but not words. This information is often linked, or mixed, with information gathered by observing Virgil’s behaviour as well.

Virgil’s first formal recognitions when the bandages were taken off had been of letters on the ophthalmologist’s eye chart, and we decided to test him, first, on letter recognition. ... he readily perceived letters that were more than a third of an inch high. Here he did rather well, for the most part, and recognized all the commoner letters (at least, capital letters) easily ... How was it that he had so much difficulty recognizing faces, or the cat, and so much difficulty with shapes generally, and with size and distance, and yet so little difficulty, relatively, recognizing letters? When I asked Virgil about this, he told me that he had learned the alphabet by touch at school, where they had used letter blocks, or cut-out letters, for teaching the blind.³¹

But while Virgil could recognize individual letters easily, he could not string them together – could not read or even see words. I found this puzzling, for he said that they used not only Braille but English in raised or inscribed letters at school – and that he had learned to read fairly fluently. Indeed, he could still easily read the inscriptions on war memorials and tombstones by touch.³²

Virgil does not seem to be giving a firsthand report. It is as if he is supplying Sacks with more data. What Virgil says, is useful and Sacks clearly accepts it. We also learn

³⁰ Sacks, 1995, 107.

³¹ Sacks, 1995, 115-116.

³² Sacks, 1995, 116.

directly from Virgil that he has clear impressions of colour and can distinguish and match them.

His first impressions when the bandages were removed were especially of colour, and it seemed to be colour, which has no analogue in the world of touch, that excited and delighted him – this was very clear from the way he spoke ... It was colours to which Virgil continually alluded, the chromatic unexpectedness of new sights. He had Greek salad and spaghetti the night before, he told us, and the spaghetti startled him: ‘White round strings, like fishing line,’ he said. ‘I thought it’d be brown.’³³

When Virgil is asked to identify things, shapes objects, facial expressions, his answers cannot really be thought of as a firsthand report just because the nature of the test is question and answer. The results of the test are *necessarily* spoken. Virgil does not report that he cannot tell one shape from another unless he touches them. Sacks asks him what the shapes are and Virgil says he does not know. When he is allowed to touch the shapes he is able to identify them. Similar data can be collected just by quietly observing Virgil’s behaviour. Amy watches him examining the cat, Sacks notes just by watching, that Virgil has difficulty telling his cat from his dog. Some of Virgil’s comments do contribute to our understanding. He alerts us to the way that objects appear different when viewed from different angles, or when they move.

Even his dog, he told me, looked so different at different times that he wondered if it was the same dog.³⁴

So far, then, it does not look as if Virgil’s firsthand report is crucial. Some of the things that Amy notices are more revealing—she sees him recoil from birds because he thinks they are closer than they are; she remarks on how frequently he examines the cat, she says he has trouble with distance. Virgil cannot tell us that sort of thing because he may not be sure what the difficulty actually is. Amy knows he has trouble with shadows when she sees Virgil try to step over them. That report is as good as, or better than, any report Virgil could give, because he does not understand shadows.³⁵

³³ Sacks, 1995, 118-119.

³⁴ Sacks, 1995, 122.

³⁵ Gregory and Wallace asked S.B. if he could see depth in the sketch of the Necker cube. S.B. asked, “What is depth?” They carefully explained, using the sketch and a block. After that, S.B. said that he did

Virgil does give us some idea of the impact of his sight. Sacks could not have given this description.

Three days after surgery, they had gone to an IGA, and Virgil had seen shelves, fruit, cans, people, aisles, carts – so much that he got scared. ‘Everything ran together,’ he said. He needed to get out of the store and close his eyes for a bit.

He enjoyed uncluttered views, he said, of green hills and grass – especially after the over-full, over-rich visual spectacles of shops ...³⁶

Some of what Virgil seems to have reported is rather vague. For example, “he said that in general he found walking ‘scary’ and ‘confusing’ without touch, without his cane...” Some of his reports are unusual, for example, he says that sometimes “surfaces or objects would seem to loom, to be on top of him, when they were still quite a distance away...” And for us, some of what he says is unimaginable—“Steps, in particular, posed a special hazard, because all he could see was a confusion, a flat surface, of parallel and crisscrossing lines; he could not see them (although he knew them) as solid objects going up or coming down in three dimensional space.”³⁷ We could however find out that he had trouble with depth in the same way that Amy found out that he had trouble with distance, that is, by observation of his behaviour. Virgil is not giving a firsthand account of learning to see as such, but Sacks weaves what Virgil says into *his* account of Virgil learning to see.

During the visit to the zoo, five weeks after his operation, Virgil was asked to describe what he saw beginning with the emu. He was startled by the motion of the emu, Sacks saw that, but Virgil could say little about it because he wasn’t sure what an emu was. Sacks could see that Virgil’s eye was clearly caught by the distinctive motion of the kangaroo, and so could reason that movement, rather than what we might call appearance, was how Virgil identified it. We get no sense from what Virgil says that he

not see depth in the sketch. (94) We could not say that S.B. gave a firsthand report that he saw no depth in sketches.

³⁶ Sacks, 1995, 113.

³⁷ Sacks, 1995, 114.

is “seeing” these animals, even though he is seeing something. Virgil just can’t tell us what he sees.

It is a different matter with the gorilla where Virgil is able to touch a statue of gorilla and then describe what he sees. At first he could describe the gorilla no better than any of the other animals. Then he touched the statue and “his face seemed to light up with comprehension.” This expression cannot have vanished as he looked at the gorilla again. Anyone who could not hear Virgil’s words would have seen a man comprehending what he was observing. Sacks’ description of the difference is enriched by what Virgil says but Sacks can tell a lot from Virgil’s non-verbal behaviour. At the zoo it is not so much what Virgil says that contributes to our understanding, as the contrast between what he has to say about animals merely seen and the gorilla which, because of the statue, is felt and then seen again.

So Virgil does not really give a firsthand report of learning to see. Sacks uses Virgil’s statements in his account but does not treat them as privileged insight. In fact, when Virgil does make an interesting assertion about his visual memories there is room for doubt, and Sacks suggests an alternative possibility.

Although Virgil believed that he had visual memories, including colour memories, from the remote past – on our drive from the airport he had spoken of growing up on the farm in Kentucky (‘I see the creek running down the middle’, ‘birds on the fences’, ‘the big old white house’) – I could not decide whether these were genuine memories, visual images in his mind, or mere verbal descriptions without images (like Helen Keller’s).³⁸

When Virgil’s sight has improved and he has had some time to adjust his reports still do not seem to give us an idea of how his world has changed. Some things look good to him and some don’t – he finds his mother pretty but is disgusted by the sight of skin blemishes he could not feel previously, in his job as a masseur. Finally, what are we to make of the apparent claim that he can see the old farmhouse, the fences and the creek in the pasture, just as he remembered them from his childhood? Certainly he said that

³⁸ Sacks, 1995, 119.

he had cherished memories of his old home, but this is one part of Virgil's report that Sacks explicitly doubts.

When it comes to building up an understanding of what 'seeing' is, Sacks does *not* rely on Virgil's firsthand report for explanations. He takes what Virgil says in the same way that he takes data collected from his observations, from Amy's remarks, from the doctor's notes, and from other cases. Similarly, we would be able to tell by the way that Virgil moved about that he found walking scary and confusing. We could tell that his colour discrimination was good if he chose his socks correctly. Much of Virgil's firsthand contribution, therefore, is not significantly different from other contributions, like Amy's record and Sacks' observations.

4.3.2 *A Comment on the Value of Firsthand Reports*

It seems to me that Virgil does not, and cannot, give us a privileged firsthand report of learning to see, or of what it is like to acquire sight late in life. We understand this issue because of the way Sacks describes it. Even after Virgil can see things he does not give a firsthand report—he does not say that things used to look so, just after the operation, and that now they look different in this particular way. Sacks takes what Virgil says, and then Sacks writes his own report, and that is the report of most value to us.

Thus, the lack of a firsthand report in Ildefonso's case does not, in itself, mean that Schaller's account cannot be as useful as Sacks' account of Virgil. We can look to Schaller's account as a valuable report of the late acquisition of language. Even when Ildefonso becomes enlanguaged he, like Virgil, does not give a firsthand report as such. Schaller, however, takes what Ildefonso does say, and takes his observations of his behaviour, and gives her own report. We can rely on Schaller's perceptions, and on her account, in the way that we can rely on Sacks' perceptions, and on his account.

* * *

I will now begin to look closely at Schaller's account of Ildefonso's development, with the account of Virgil's development in mind. Sacks has influenced my thinking

particularly as follows. I think of Ildefonso learning to name, or to language, things in the way that Virgil learns to see things. And I think of Ildefonso as learning to language his way about. The incessant experience that is essential for Ildefonso is normal social interaction.

Even when social interaction is accepted as essential for language, linguistic development is still often evaluated in terms of vocabulary size, and the complexity of the grammar used in those social interactions. And becoming enlanguaged is still thought of as mastering the symbol system. I want to take something Sacks says about perception, and make it central to the way I look at Ildefonso's language development.

One does not see, or sense, or perceive, in isolation – perception is always linked to behaviour and movement, to reaching out and exploring the world.³⁹

If this had been seen as central to becoming enlanguaged, instead of symbols or structure, schooling would have been very different for the deaf people described in Chapter 1. Finally, Sacks himself likens someone like Virgil to someone like Ildefonso.

But in the case of a man previously blind, learning to see is not like learning another language; it is, as Diderot puts it, like learning language for the first time.⁴⁰

³⁹ Sacks, 1995, 111 fn.

⁴⁰ Sacks, 1995, 134.

CHAPTER 5

In Sacks' account of the late acquisition of sight we get the opportunity to look at seeing from a different perspective. Sacks mentions the naïve view which we might hold if we thought about sight in relation to our own personal experience. It certainly does seem that we can just open our eyes and we see. Virgil shows that seeing is just not like that, we get a different perspective on seeing.

Schaller's account of the late acquisition of language gives us the opportunity to look at language from a different perspective. There is a kind of a naïve view of language too, and much of it comes from our own personal experience of language. For instance, it is fundamentally symbolic, and we use language to transfer ideas from one person to another. The naïve everyday ideas about language, like the naïve ideas about seeing, need to be reconsidered in the light of Schaller's account.

There are also, of course developed views of language but I am not going to discuss these. I am interested in finding out something by starting from the different perspective that Schaller presents. I want to see what sort of picture of language emerges from an investigation of that perspective. *Then* I am interested in finding out what developed theory of language is suggested by the results of the investigation.

Schaller's account is not supported by other similar accounts. It is not always accepted, for example, Carruthers, and it is sometimes misdescribed, for example, Pinker. To my knowledge it has not been closely studied. I think it deserves careful scrutiny. In particular, the contrast between the early lessons and Ildefonso's later progress yields two different pictures of language. In this chapter I will begin by describing the two pictures of language that I find emerging from Schaller's description. Then I will discuss Ildefonso's early lessons in detail. This is where I see the first picture of language emerging. I will discuss what Pinker refers to as the epiphany, and the aftermath of the epiphany. It is particularly important to see that the epiphany was no

revelation for Ildefonso—or of it was a revelation for him, we have no idea what sort of revelation it was. It is here that the second picture of language begins to emerge.

Most studies of language acquisition concern children acquiring language in the usual way. There are studies of the acquisition of language in exceptional cases, Genie for instance, and the late acquisition of language by deaf children. Schaller is aware of many linguistic studies but openly admits that nothing really helps her to understand Ildefonso's situation, there are no teaching guidelines for languageless adults. Ildefonso's case is different for a number of reasons. Firstly, he is an adult. Secondly, he communicates with mime and gesture. Thirdly, he manages by himself to a great extent in his daily life.

It is difficult for us to imagine a sane independent adult who communicates with mime and gesture, but who is also languageless. What happens if you try to show someone like Ildefonso words, or their signed equivalents? What happens when you try to show someone like Ildefonso that you can use words for transferring information or ideas from one person to another? This is what Schaller tries to show Ildefonso—a sane independent adult who communicates with mime and gesture. What happens is that Ildefonso is completely baffled—and so is Schaller. Schaller realised the magnitude of the task right from her first session with Ildefonso.

I tried once more to explain without language that language existed, to explain without names that everything had a name. I failed, and his face showed that he knew he had let me down. We were only inches apart, but we might as well have been from different planets; it seemed impossible to meet.¹

Schaller has to decide where to start. It is not yet possible to say what Ildefonso's mime and gesture amounts to but it is not a signed language. Nor is it a home sign system. Home sign systems allow the sort of interaction that we have with language. Teachers at deaf schools where signing is used, often find that children arrive at the school with only a home sign system. Such a system is an ideal starting point for introducing the

¹ Schaller, 1995, 26.

child to a language like ASL. Someone with Schaller's experience would recognise home signs and start there. She does not appear to have that option.

What Schaller does in the early lessons is based on a sort of naïve view of language. Before I describe those lessons, the epiphany and its aftermath, I will outline the two different pictures that I see in her account.

5.1 Two Pictures of Language

I find that two rough pictures of language emerge from Schaller's account. One is a sort of naïve view of language that we find in Schaller's conventional ideas about language, and what is important in language acquisition. In particular, she thinks in terms of information transfer, and a symbol system. I find another picture emerging, however, in her natural interaction with Ildefonso. His development appears to be independent of the acquisition of symbols, and the notion of information transfer does not really capture what happens in the interaction. So, on the one hand, there is Schaller's description of what she thinks she ought to be doing, or what she is trying to do, in teaching Ildefonso. On the other hand there is her description of what actually happens in her successful interaction with Ildefonso.

There is a rough contrast between formal lessons and the less directed interaction which takes place in the breaks, or when the lesson grinds to a halt. Overlaid on that is a contrast between frustration and exhilaration, although not all lessons are frustrating and not all other interaction is exhilarating, quite the reverse sometimes. There are also varying degrees of a sense of interpersonal disengagement and engagement between Schaller and Ildefonso. The lessons in general, despite dedicated teacher and attentive student, lack some mutual or reciprocal aspect which is often apparent in the breaks, or when the lesson collapses.

Schaller's formal lessons cover things like names of objects, adjectives, and noun verb combinations, but not grammar as such. It appears that she is trying to give something to Ildefonso, some useful tools. She tries to show him how these tools can effect information transfer from one person to another. She aims to instruct or inform

Ildefonso. Ildefonso himself is not engaged in any languaging activity at this stage. He does try to imitate what she does but she tries to stop him doing that, she just wants him to watch.

In natural interaction, on the other hand, Schaller behaves in a different way, she doesn't try to show or instruct. Natural interaction occurs when the lesson breaks down, or is abandoned. She mimes and gestures in an effort to extend every point of contact, every small engagement, into some more extensive mutual interaction. This looks like a joint effort to get communication going. It is in the joint engagement that real communication begins. It is in this mutual interaction that Ildefonso's development is apparent—and ASL signs are often *nowhere* in the picture.

Schaller does not express two contrasting pictures of language as such. Nevertheless, she is not unaware of the contrast and sometime remarks indirectly on it. It is in remarks like the following one that I find, firstly, the notion of two different pictures emerging, and, secondly, the incentive to look deeper into the whole account.

In a dialogue the teacher is indistinguishable from the student. My lectures to Ildefonso never fostered understanding or created new paths; our dialogues, in contrast, were never wasted experiments, even if they failed to convey the intended message. We always improved, at least a little, with each round.²

I feel it is important to say something about Schaller herself to avoid misconceptions about her role in the class. Schaller is an ASL interpreter and teacher, not a teacher of the deaf. She has been hired, inappropriately it appears, as an interpreter. The class, all deaf, is large and disparate. What few materials there are have been supplied by the teacher, Elena, who admits that there really are no suitable materials. There are no lesson outlines and Schaller has no previous experience relating to, or working with, someone like Ildefonso, someone who apparently has *no* language. The student demands on Elena's time are such that it is not possible for Schaller to discuss things with her.

² Schaller, 1995, 73-74.

Schaller is also qualified in the area of public-health education, she is widely read, and she is passionate about ASL. However, when she meets Ildefonso, nothing in her background experience has confronted her directly with the notion of an adult who has no language but who, apart from that, is intelligent and sane. While she is teaching Ildefonso, she tries to remedy her lack of knowledge in this area and finds that no-one appears to have studied and written about it.³ What she does is just what Elena said she would have to do—she “plays it by ear.” Schaller brings to this task many conventional theoretical notions about language and language learning, strong communication skills, and a deep, sympathetic curiosity about Ildefonso’s situation.

5.2 The First Picture of Language

The view of language that underlies Schaller’s early and more formal lessons is not one that she expresses precisely. Rather she expresses some traditional notions to do with the nature of language and with the way that language works. Many of these notions are commonly held, and they are part of what I earlier called a naïve view of language. Language is seen as fundamentally a symbol system and words are symbols. Language is seen as something to be acquired, a tool to be used, or a code to be cracked.

Language users are characterised as transmitters and receivers, and language involves getting ideas out of one head and into another. Information transfer involving inputs and outputs is a central theme. A lot of these ideas seem like commonsense. This naïve picture comes through most strongly in the early stages where Schaller is wondering how to introduce Ildefonso to language.

5.2.1 Information Transfer

When Ildefonso does not respond to the signs that Schaller shows him, or responds only by copying, she laments, “He didn’t know how to receive.”⁴ She often depicts language users as transmitters and receivers of information. Language itself is explicitly

³ Schaller consults Ursula Bellugi, a linguist who studies ASL, and language acquisition. Bellugi works with signers and children of signers and is familiar with the literature on late acquisition of language in children. She tries to help Schaller but admits she knows of no one who has written on the late acquisition of language in adults. Schaller, 1995, 59-60, 65-66.

⁴ Schaller, 1995, 42.

portrayed as a means of communication that provides a way of getting ideas or thoughts out of one head and into another. We see this in what I call the “cat drama,” where Schaller act out the parts of a teacher and a student in an effort to get Ildefonso to see how language works.

I turned back to the teacher position and explained via mime that *cat* [written word] is not a real cat but puts the idea of cat in my head. After pointing to *cat*, I mimed taking something out of my head and putting it in the invisible Ildefonso’s head. Becoming Ildefonso again, I looked thoughtful while I pointed to the word, pointed to my head, held and stroked an imaginary cat, then pointed to my head again.⁵

Without a common language she cannot transmit any information to Ildefonso and the cat drama is her attempt to show him how language works. He does not understand and she at a loss as to how to get the transfer going with him. She talks of “the fatigue of our eye-to-eye search for an entrance into each other’s head.”⁶ She is curious to peer into Ildefonso’s “name-free brain” as if that would give her an insight his world.⁷

There is no mistaking the input-output picture here. Despite Ildefonso’s obvious curiosity and intelligence Schaller described his mind as “empty of all information that needed language as its conduit.”⁸ She talks of how much better, and faster thoughts can travel with language.⁹ The whole picture of information transfer is reinforced by some of her more figurative expressions.

Ildefonso’s intellectual meals often took weeks of preparation, but our exertion only increased our mutual sense of accomplishment when he finally received a message from my world.¹⁰

It is not clear whether receiving is just a matter of seeing that there is a message. Sometimes the focus is on knowing how to make something of the message. Ildefonso’s exertion and the mutual sense of accomplishment suggest that Ildefonso

⁵ Schaller, 1995, 43.

⁶ Schaller, 1995, 37.

⁷ Schaller, 1995, 31.

⁸ Schaller, 1995, 74.

⁹ Schaller, 1995, 82.

¹⁰ Schaller, 1995, 74.

himself has some work to do in receiving the message. What is it he has to do? As he stares at the written words, or intently watches other signers without ever joining in, Schaller pictures him as trying to work something out, like trying to decipher a code.

He had probably realized before that words had meaning, but he could never break the code.¹¹

He stared at the name attempting to smoke out the secret formula for deciphering the code.¹²

He would always wonder how to break the code and find meaning and rules.¹³

This looks like a processing activity that Ildefonso must do *in his head on his own*. Presumably, we who have already broken the code also process the symbols to grasp the meaning, it is just that we know the code. Encoding or decoding is what happens when each transmitter and receiver processes the inputs and outputs. The transmitter processes the information into a form suitable for transmission, language presumably, and that is the output. This piece of language is the input for the receiver who must process it such that it can be understood. When the receiver understands the message sent then information, thoughts, or ideas, have been transmitted from one head to another.

Schaller depicts typical ideas of information transmission where language is the means or carrier, and where inputs and outputs are processed by sender and receiver. This explanation of how language works leads her to devise lessons that present Ildefonso with what, in her opinion, are the basic essentials of language that he needs to get started, she shows him some names of things. Then she tries to show him how names work as carriers of information from one person to another, from one head to another. It seems that the first messages that Ildefonso has to receive are messages about language—that things have names, and that language is about sending and receiving

¹¹ Schaller, 1995, 53.

¹² Schaller, 1995, 54.

¹³ Schaller, 1995, 61.

messages. When he realises that much, he can then join with other people in conversations. Names first, then conversations.

5.2.2 Language as a Symbol System

Schaller describes language as a symbol system. This notion crops up frequently in what she says—at first Ildefonso doesn't see signs as symbols;¹⁴ the transition to being enlanguaged is a move into the universe of symbols;¹⁵ she wants to show Ildefonso the miracles that can be accomplished with symbols;¹⁶ when he can sign his first signs that proves that he understands the idea of symbols;¹⁷ in the early stages of his development he doesn't have enough symbols to convey a complete thought.¹⁸ The first step, then, is to show him some simple, easily grasped symbols, they must clearly be symbols and not mime and they must be easy to understand.

Schaller begins with what appear to be straightforward symbols. She attempts to show Ildefonso the names for some everyday objects, a book, a cat and a tree. She uses ASL signs. She begins by pointing to his workbook and then signing BOOK.¹⁹ The sign BOOK looks like a mime of opening a book, and when Ildefonso responds to it by opening his book Schaller comments that he didn't see the sign as a symbol but as a mimed command.²⁰ Her efforts then focus on presenting more unambiguous symbols in isolation to avoid confusion. Later she introduces verbs and comments, "he could not grasp them as symbols for action."²¹ Again he treats them as commands.

¹⁴ Schaller, 1995, 32,63.

¹⁵ Schaller, 1995, 40.

¹⁶ Schaller, 1995, 45.

¹⁷ Schaller, 1995, 68.

¹⁸ Schaller, 1995, 70.

¹⁹ Signs from languages like ASL and BSL are represented by English translations in small capital letters—for example, BOOK, TREE. If more than one English word is needed to translate a sign, the words are joined by hyphens—for example, HARD-OF-HEARING, THINK-HEARING. (Padden and Humphries, 1988, 7.)

²⁰ Schaller, 1995, 32.

²¹ Schaller, 1995, 63.

Schaller assumes that Ildefonso needs the symbols *first*. Only then can he begin to manipulate them and combine them to form explanations, to carry information, to agree and disagree, to describe, to ask and answer questions, to make analogies and comparisons.²² As such symbols are permanent tools, tools of argument.²³ Schaller seems to be thinking that Ildefonso, or anyone for that matter, has the ability to grasp the notion of a name, a symbol or a code, prior to using language. These notions, then, cannot be the ideas that we need language to carry. If language were like that then grasping these ideas prior to being enlanguage would commit a person to knowing about language before understanding any language.

5.2.3 *Ildefonso's First Steps*

In this picture of language it looks as if Ildefonso, who doesn't know how to receive, has to receive a message. He has to get the message that using language is about sending and receiving messages. It also looks as if he has to understand what the elements of language are before he can begin to acquire language. He has to realise that those gestures name things even though, because he is languageless he does not know about naming things. How might he do this? Clearly, he is not stupid, so maybe he can work it out on his own.

Schaller imagines that as a sane intelligent adult, Ildefonso has his own individual thoughts. She says that language is what "integrates the collective human mind with our individual thoughts."²⁴ It is not clear what Ildefonso's individual thoughts might be. Schaller sometimes seems to think that people like Ildefonso, and even Joe, who did not communicate with gestures, have been able to think some things out alone. They have, within themselves, some explanations of the world, and information just waiting for a means of transmission.

No one had ever agreed or disagreed with him, mirrored, confirmed or argued with his impressions. He had only his own mind to connect experiences, find patterns, imagine meanings, and fit together semantic puzzles. Even with shared meaning, feedback, and help in

²² Schaller, 1995, 36, 58, 70, 105.

²³ Schaller, 1995, 39, 75.

²⁴ Schaller, 1995, 112.

interpreting the world, many people have trouble with reality. How does one stay sane when all interpretation is generated by one's self alone?²⁵

Like Ildefonso, Joe seemed to studiously note events and interactions around him, but did not know how to join or interpret them.²⁶

Ildefonso and Joe wanted and needed to communicate who they were. Both of them understood that people were asking for information about themselves, even though they didn't understand the questions. Without any way of referring to the past, they held their pasts inside of themselves. When finally given some basic tools, they anxiously began expressing their personal histories.²⁷

It is easy to think that Ildefonso, a sane adult, is learning to express himself, by putting his thoughts into words—ASL signs in this case. Add to this the view that symbolising or naming is *fundamental* to language. It follows then that Ildefonso can somehow realise that signs are symbols, or that signs are names of things. That must be the first step for everybody who becomes enlanguaged. This, then, is how Schaller seems to be thinking as she begins working with Ildefonso.

What can we learn from Schaller's description of what *actually* happens in the lessons and in her interaction with Ildefonso? How then does the picture of languaging based on Ildefonso's behaviour cohere with the conventional ideas about language expressed by Schaller? Does Ildefonso behave as if he has his own individual thoughts? Does he get the tools and tell his story? Is it easy for him to see that signs are symbols? We learnt from Sacks' description of Virgil that the naïve or commonsense notion of seeing was mistaken, Virgil's behaviour just did not bear it out. Virgil's behaviour suggested a different picture of seeing. This is precisely what happens in Schaller's account of Ildefonso's actual development.

²⁵ Schaller, 1995, 36.

²⁶ Schaller, 1995, 140.

²⁷ Schaller, 1995, 142.

5.3 The Second Picture of Language

Schaller was frustrated by Ildefonso's persistent copying. She also dismissed his response to the sign BOOK—he responded as if to a command and did not see the sign as a symbol. These responses, copying or obeying, suggests to her that he is not receiving.

He still insisted on copying everything I did. He didn't know how to receive. He could act and react, but he couldn't get the idea of conversing without doing. I wanted to scream at him: "I don't want you to *do* anything!"²⁸

Ildefonso's responses are not what Schaller expects. Her own reactions to Ildefonso's responses are to suppress his "doing." The other picture of language or languaging begins to emerge when Schaller stops doing this. She begins to *accept* his natural impulse rather than *suppressing* it, and they begin to *interact* in a different way

Schaller does not describe Ildefonso communicating with his own gesture and mime on its own. By the time there is some interactive communicating flowing between them Ildefonso's transition to being enlanguaged has begun. He still uses gesture and mime but we cannot be sure from that, what his gesturing and miming was like before he met Schaller. In a later chapter I discuss in detail Schaller's description of the interaction between Ildefonso's languageless friends. I assume that what Ildefonso did before he met Schaller is similar to this communication of his languageless friends.

5.3.1 Communicative Interaction?

Schaller notices the difference between the lectures and the dialogues. There is a contrast between the instruction which is driven by her ideas about language, and the more spontaneous, communicative interaction that appears when there is no focus on instruction at all. When Schaller's natural ability as a communicator comes to the fore, communicative interaction begins to develop. It is not possible to say what, if anything, is the "content" of that communication, but the term "dialogue" implies two-way

²⁸ Schaller, 1995, 42

communication. I infer from what Schaller says that the development may be thought of as “fostering understanding” or “creating new paths.”²⁹

In a dialogue the teacher is indistinguishable from the student. My lectures to Ildefonso never fostered understanding or created new paths; our dialogues, in contrast, were never wasted experiments, even if they failed to convey the intended message. We always improved, at least a little, with each round.³⁰

Schaller makes several interesting points here. Firstly, she suggests that there is an equality in the interaction—“the teacher is indistinguishable from the student.” It is as if they are meeting on level ground, and both participate. Schaller cannot rely on her ASL because Ildefonso doesn’t understand it. She starts instead with Ildefonso’s acting and reacting—she begins with what he is doing. This is unlike her earlier thought:

I wanted to scream at him: “I don’t want you to *do* anything!”³¹

Secondly, Schaller suggests that the dialogues foster understanding and create new paths. The idea of creating new paths is very reminiscent of Virgil extending his canonical line. Virgil is exploring, and becoming familiar with, his surroundings in a visual way. This says nothing about what he actually sees—whether he sees more clearly or whether he can see more things. Similarly Ildefonso is exploring. By interacting in a dialogue he is exploring in a linguistic way—becoming more familiar with interpersonal surroundings. This says nothing about whether he knows any ASL signs, nor whether the dialogue is *about* anything. Schaller just says that they improve.

Thirdly, I think it is important to note that Schaller does not say Ildefonso improves. Rather, she says that *they* improve. Why does Schaller have to improve, she is already enlanguaged? *They* improve because it is their interaction that improves, this is a joint effort, it is not the sort of thing that can be done by one person. Later Schaller remarks,

Without a human exchange, Ildefonso could never have learned language. Language is so entwined with human behaviour, it is like a living organism.³²

²⁹ I will look at Ildefonso’s development in more detail in a later chapter.

³⁰ Schaller, 1995, 73-74.

³¹ Schaller, 1995, 42

When we think of language as a symbol system which can be considered independently of human exchanges, we completely lose the sense in which it is entwined, perhaps *inextricably* entwined, with human behaviour—interactive behaviour. If, on the other hand, we talk of people languaging rather than using language, we cannot easily separate language from human behaviour. Furthermore, we are less likely to think of it as the behaviour of an individual, languaging is not the sort of thing that one person does.³³ This is quite different from the first picture of language, where language is seen as a system, a separate entity, which can be shown to someone.

Fourthly, Schaller makes a surprising point. The dialogues, even when they failed to convey the intended message, were never wasted. Initially, in the first picture, it was so important to convey the message, success was receiving a message. In this picture the interaction can improve without the message getting across. Virgil's visual interaction with his surroundings gradually improved, became easier, his behaviour showed that. But after any one traverse of his canonical line, it was not clear whether he was seeing anything, the way that we think of seeing. Ildefonso's behaviour gives Schaller the feeling that their interaction is improving even though some of the dialogues are apparent failures. Ildefonso may not be languaging in the way that we usually think of languaging, but no "failed" dialogue is a wasted experiment.

Schaller does not always feel so positive about the dialogues. Sometimes Ildefonso seems perfectly satisfied but Schaller is not because the communication process has been so slow. But things were slow for Virgil. Sacks says we have no idea of the incessant experience that has gone into constructing our visual world, and Virgil helps us to realise that. Similarly, we have no conception of the incessant experience that has gone into constructing our linguistic world and Ildefonso helps us to realise that.

He expressed much more satisfaction than I over understanding a simple conversation that had sometimes taken hours to work out. He thought that was excellent. He thought that was language. I knew

³² Schaller, 1995, 79.

³³ Soliloquies and talking to oneself look like one person languaging in isolation, but the basis of that sort of individual languaging is the social interaction in which the individual became enlanguaged.

better, but I could not tell him how much better and faster thoughts could travel.³⁴

Thus, when the lectures are abandoned something exciting begins to happen. In the dialogues—two-way interaction—Ildefonso and Schaller are *both* exploring. This is a joint adventure. The notion of conveying an intended message loses importance, it becomes secondary to the developing interaction. Acquiring the requisite symbols loses importance, it is no longer a goal or a measure of success. Schaller's account reveals an alternative to the naïve view of language as essentially a symbol system that we use to convey information. What seems to be basic in Schaller's account of Ildefonso progressing is the development of interaction—and often ASL signs are nowhere in the picture. This is different from the sort of development that is assessed by measuring vocabulary or mean length of utterance, or which looks at grammatical constructions.³⁵ Often there is no vocabulary, so there is no mean length of utterance as such.

5.3.2 *No Intended Message is Received*

In the first picture of language, language users are depicted as transmitters and receivers. The notion of transmitters and receivers implies that what is received by the receiver is *intended* by the one who transmits. Schaller clearly thinks this way in the formal lessons. What goes into one head in the cat drama is precisely what comes out of the other head—the receiver gets what the transmitter intends. When Ildefonso saw the sign BOOK as a command instead of a symbol or name, Schaller was frustrated. The receiver, Ildefonso, did not receive what the transmitter, Schaller, intended. The notion of the transfer of information is clear in the first picture of language.

The second picture of language does not involve the idea of a transmitter intending a response in another. Schaller accepts Ildefonso's reactions and works from there. She often takes time to see how he is responding to what she mimes or signs to him. She cannot tell what he will make of it. This is as much an exploratory exercise for Schaller as it is for Ildefonso.

³⁴ Schaller, 1995, 82.

³⁵ Crystal, 1987, 233, 242-243.

During many discouraging days, I wondered what kept us working. In the first few weeks of our work together, Ildefonso's progress was not great enough to encourage the student in him or the teacher in me. What pushed us every morning to face each other? It's obvious now in retrospect. When I look back, I don't recall the student Ildefonso, but Ildefonso, my friend. As friends, we pushed each other to explore. Without understanding any specific objectives or direction, we knew we were involved in an adventure together. Our work included discovery of the self, the other, and possibilities—the stuff of all friendships. Life was re-examined and reviewed and found new. Inner thoughts and feelings, which surface in an atmosphere of trust, create new combinations and alter perceptions. A new friendship can sometimes cause one to feel that life is happening for the first time. Ildefonso and I experienced this newness and the challenge of rethinking Everything.³⁶

The notion of transferring an *intended* message is out of this picture. Schaller is not trying to get something out of her head and into Ildefonso's. Progress is made despite the lack of clear specific objectives. It is as if, at each move, at each response, they are both looking to see what happens next. It is not a case of the intended message from one failing to get through to the other; or getting through to the other but being misinterpreted; or being received correctly by the other. *In an exploratory exercise these evaluations are inappropriate. There is no intended message and there are no expectations.*

Schaller's account shows us that as this sort of interaction develops Ildefonso becomes enlanguaged. As this happens, there is no point in the development where their interaction becomes a different sort of interaction, where they become transmitters and receivers. Why should it? If development happens and understanding is fostered in the exploratory interaction, why do we need to introduce the notions of transmitters and receivers, and information transfer? Maybe what looks like receiving the intended message is more a matter of the participants in the interaction, both being familiar with the explored territory. There is no receiving, there is just reacting, and we can build on that.

³⁶ Schaller, 1995, 76.

5.3.3 Linguistic Exploration

Schaller begins with the idea that she can show Ildefonso language. She tries to show him the names of things. She wants him to pay attention to what she is showing him, she is frustrated because he insists on mimicking her.

He didn't know how to receive. He could act and react, but he couldn't get the idea of conversing without doing. I wanted to scream at him: "I don't want you to *do* anything!"³⁷

There is a marked contrast between that demand to watch the teacher, and the subsequent interaction which takes place when the formal lessons are dropped. When both become involved in the exploration, Schaller portrays it as a joint enterprise, with no intended messages and no expectations.

As friends, we pushed each other to explore. Without understanding any specific objectives or direction, we knew we were involved in an adventure together.³⁸

For hours, days, weeks and finally months, Ildefonso and I played mountain climbers. We plaited, tossed, tugged, and tested strands of meaning. Lines had to be thrown repeatedly until they were finally caught and attached. Gradually, sometimes with agonizing slowness, we tied knots, wove a pattern, and added breadth, height, and thickness to our rickety bridge. Slowly, as imperceptibly as a tree grows, we communicated.³⁹

This sounds like Sacks' description of Virgil constructing his visual world. It is as if Ildefonso is constructing a linguistic world. What is different for Ildefonso is that someone else is *necessarily* involved in his enterprise of construction. If Amy had been frustrated with Virgil's repetitious behaviour—"you'd think once was enough"—it would not have stopped Virgil's exploration. Schaller's participation, however, is a vital part of Ildefonso's exploration. It is only when she gets past her initial frustration that Ildefonso's exploration is able to proceed.

³⁷ Schaller, 1995, 42

³⁸ Schaller, 1995, 76.

³⁹ Schaller, 1995, 71.

All Ildefonso ever does is react, and how he reacts seems to be up to him and not to anyone else. This unpredictable reaction frustrates Schaller, but in the end she adjusts to it and stops trying to give, or transmit, messages to Ildefonso. She accepts, struggles to follow, works with and builds on whatever reactions that she can. Communication seems to get going without Ildefonso becoming a receiver of *intended* messages. What is more, in the exploratory model, Schaller is an explorer too. Schaller is already enlanguaged, yet she suggests that she is as much an explorer in the process of Ildefonso becoming enlanguaged as he is.

These are the two pictures of language I find reflected in Schaller's account. The first picture, about words and information transfer, leads to some formal lessons in which Schaller begins by trying to teach Ildefonso the names of things. This persists, unsuccessfully, until the epiphany, or breakthrough. I will now look at those early lessons which focus on naming things.

5.4 Ildefonso's First Lessons

Schaller sees language as a symbol system and she sees words, or signs, as symbols. She does not really know how to begin to show Ildefonso this but she is open about the ideas she wants to convey. Things have names, names stand for things, there is meaning behind names—the connection between names and things is a crucial connection to grasp. The name-thing relation is a symbol-thing relation so she begins by pointing out things and the symbols, ASL signs, which name those things. In her first attempt she points to the book on the desk and then names it.

BOOK was not a good sign to begin with because it looks like someone miming opening a book, and Ildefonso thinks she is asking him to do just that.

I nodded my head and signed "book." Instead of copying, he opened the book as if I had ordered him to. He didn't see the sign as a symbol but rather as a mime/gesture command, "Open the book." The sign for *book* is one of the few that is a pictograph: two flat hands with palms together spread open from the thumbs while the little fingers stay together.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Schaller, 1995, 32.

Ildefonso did not see BOOK as anything but a command. The apparent ambiguity of this sign alerts Schaller to something she must be clear about. If she is going to introduce Ildefonso to names, the sign must not look like a mime or Ildefonso might misunderstand it, or, rather, misinterpret it.

As it turns out, this is not a straightforward lesson like teaching the ASL sign BOOK to someone who only knows English. Ildefonso, she realises, doesn't understand *that* things have names, or that words and signs are symbols. To see a sign as a symbol is presumably to see that here we have something, the sign, that has a *relation* or *connection* to something else, the thing. It cannot be seen as a symbol if some sort of relation to something else is not assumed—the relation or connection between that sign and what it symbolises. The notion of a symbol that stands on its own, that does not symbolise anything, is absurd. The same goes for the naming relation as it occurs in Schaller's discussion. Names are the names of things.

That connection can be obscured or missed if another possible interpretation catches Ildefonso's attention first. When Schaller says that Ildefonso didn't see the sign as a symbol she means that he didn't see it as related to the book. It is as if he just took it at face value. It looked, by itself, like a mimed command, "Open the book." So Schaller tries a number of ways to reduce confusion, and to draw Ildefonso's attention to the connection she wants him to see, the connection between a symbol and a thing. She starts by trying to teach him the names of some everyday things.

Briefly, there are six ways she tries to do this. (1) She begins by attempting to isolate an object, a tree, which has an unambiguous sign—she points at it and names it. (2) In the classroom she tries to encourage Ildefonso to draw a tree by giving him paper and pencil and then signing TREE and miming drawing. (3) The sign CAT is also unambiguous—Ildefonso has a workbook where a pencil line has been drawn from the picture of a cat to the printed C-A-T—Schaller points to the picture and signs CAT. (4) She also wonders if a mechanical association between the written word and the ASL sign, which are both names for a cat, will help spark the connection between a name and a thing. (5) She mimes interacting with an imaginary cat and signs CAT. (6) Finally, she performs the cat

drama where she plays the parts of a teacher and a student. I will now look at some of these attempts in detail, but first I want to point out that this is not a mere list, I see a definite progression from the BOOK lesson to the cat drama.

The BOOK episode alerted Schaller to the ambiguity of a sign that looks like a mime, the mime will predominate for Ildefonso and he will miss the name-thing connection that she wants to convey. So she starts over again with a lesson stripped down to nothing but a thing and its name, its ASL name, number (1) above. Ildefonso does not appear to get the message and each new lesson introduces something extra or tries something new. Eventually mime re-enters the lessons at (5) and (6) above. With it comes the possibility of misinterpretation, as in the BOOK lesson, but with it comes, as well, the possibility that Ildefonso will understand something. What is most significant, however, is that mime is probably the one thing that will bring Ildefonso into the lesson as a participant. Dropping Ildefonso's usual means of communication, mime, removed the very signals he could make something of, and effectively excluded him from the interaction.

5.4.1 The Name-Thing Connection

Schaller's behaves as if there are three steps in showing Ildefonso the name-thing connection. Firstly, she herself distinguishes an object and attempts to draw Ildefonso's attention to that object—object there. Secondly, she makes the ASL sign for that object and attempts to draw Ildefonso's attention to this sign—name here. Thirdly, she juxtaposes the sign and the object and indicates that they are associated by nodding at them alternately—these two things, to which you are now attending are associated.

Step 1. Object there.

Step 2. Name here.

Step 3. Name-object connection.

It never seems to occur to Schaller, in any of the actual lessons, that Ildefonso fails to attend to the object that she points out. She thinks Ildefonso may misinterpret the sign, but she seems to assume that he does, at least, distinguish it. Thus, the lessons focus on

teaching the name-thing connection. *If* Ildefonso attends to the tree it is one entity, and *if* he attends to the sign it is another entity. Can he learn from Schaller's nodding at them, that these two entities are associated? At this stage he has no notion of names. He is being asked to make an association without any stipulation about what that association is.

5.4.2 *The First TREE Lesson: An Object and a Sign*

The first TREE lesson, which immediately follows the misunderstanding over BOOK, illustrates the three steps—object there, sign here, these two things go together. Schaller and Ildefonso go outside to a tree on the lawn. At first they just stand by it as she looks at it, points to it, and pats it, hoping to focus Ildefonso's attention on it. Then she makes the sign TREE, exaggerating it. She nods alternately at the sign TREE and at the tree itself, as if to draw his attention to a connection between them. Ildefonso remains mystified.

I walked up to the tree and patted it with my hand, turned to Ildefonso, and pointed back to the tree. He looked at the tree, then at me, then pointed to the tree. We were equal now. We didn't need symbols. We could simply share the tree in front of us. I tried to think of things one could do with a tree. I patted it again with a very satisfied expression, plucked of a leaf, felt it, smelled it, twirled it, and glanced briefly at Ildefonso. He was studying me in a relaxed way. The maple leaf zig-zagged to the ground, and I signed "tree." I exaggerated the sign by moving my forearm and extended open hand as far from my torso as possible toward the maple. I nodded alternately at the sign and at the tree. I raised my eyebrows at Ildefonso, and he pointed to the tree. I signed "tree" again, and he copied me. He was wearing his Is-this-what-you-want-me-to-do face again.⁴¹

It is hard to believe that Schaller has not drawn Ildefonso's attention to the tree. She pointed at the tree—there it is. She patted the tree—this thing here. She looks at him and points to the tree—see that? He looks at the tree, looks at her, and then points to the tree. Why should we doubt that she has drawn his attention to the tree? Schaller does not seem to doubt that she has drawn Ildefonso's attention to the tree. When she says that they are both equal and that they simply share the tree I think that she means they

⁴¹ Schaller, 1995, 33.

are now both paying attention to the tree. I will come back to this point in more detail, but for the moment, the assumption is that the object has been distinguished successfully.

The sign TREE does look a bit like a tree, with the forearm held vertically as the trunk, and the elbow resting on the palm of the other hand. The fingers spread to indicate the branches and move to simulate the movement of the branches. Schaller makes the sign, she exaggerates the sign by pushing it as far out from the signspace as possible. This is as close as she can get to detaching it so that she can nod towards it in the way that she nods towards the tree. The sign is not so easy to point out but she seems to assume that Ildefonso distinguishes it even though he may not understand it.

Firstly, the sign does not look like a command, or at least Ildefonso does not behave as if he is obeying a command. Secondly, she is at pains to avoid miming anything—it is as if the sign is there on its own, isolated. Thirdly, she does something to highlight it, she exaggerates it.⁴² Fourthly, she does something to call attention to it—she nods at it. Fifthly, it appears that Ildefonso copies the sign, albeit in an uncomprehending way—at least his actions look like TREE. So in the first TREE lesson she assumes that Ildefonso attends to the sign, even if he does not understand it.

With mime removed from the situation, and the object and sign apparently isolated, Schaller indicates the connection by nodding alternately at the object and the sign. It looks as if she hopes Ildefonso will come to associate that thing there, she nods towards the tree, with this thing here, she nods towards the sign TREE. This is the sort of common sense pattern that the lessons follow at first—object there, sign here, these two things are connected. With mime removed from the situation, however, it seems Ildefonso has lost

⁴² If Ildefonso has not distinguished the sign as a particular entity, the exaggeration will not help. Exaggeration may make something stand out better but it is not what makes it stand out in the first place. If Ildefonso does not see the sign as something that stands out, but rather as something which blends in with all the other activity, then the exaggeration will blend in with all the other activity too. (It is a bit like expecting people who don't understand English to have a better chance of understanding if it is shouted at them.) Furthermore, facial expressions and head movements, like the nod towards the sign, are only seen as separate from the sign if we know what the sign is. Many signs in any signed language involve non-manual features, especially involving the head and face.

the signals he just might understand. He does not misinterpret this lesson; rather, he is baffled by it.

Schaller is assuming that Ildefonso will see that these two entities are associated without any idea of what that association amounts to. If Ildefonso has distinguished the tree as distinct from everything else, and as distinct from the actions of pointing and patting, and if he has distinguished the sign as distinct from all other activity, why would he think they are associated? Well, Schaller nods alternately at them. That, however, does not tell Ildefonso anything. If you nod alternately at Mary and John and look at me with a “see that?” expression, but give me no other clues, what am I to make of that activity? Later I see Mary and remember the incident and I wonder what it was all about.

I have the resources to hypothesise, so maybe I wonder if John and Mary are brother and sister. Maybe they can’t stand each other and it was surprising to see them in the same room together. I am at a loss. With all my resources I do not say, “I understand that there is an association between these two people, I just do not know what it is.” I wonder what all that nodding was about. Ildefonso, presumably, does not have the resources to hypothesise in the way that I have. How could he know that the nodding was not part of the pointing and the sign activity? That is, how could he begin to wonder what all the nodding was about? If I have difficulty with an undefined association, even with possible explanations, it seems unlikely that Ildefonso, at this stage, sees something in Schaller’s behaviour.

The difficulty is much greater if steps one and two are in doubt. What are the entities, “that there” and “this here?” Suppose that unbeknown to me you are a fabric expert. You noted that John’s brown shirt and Mary’s blue dress were made of the same exotic silk fabric. I know nothing about fabric and their clothes look quite different to me, as different as blue and brown. It never occurs to me in the first place to consider that you might be nodding at, that is, picking out, something other than John and Mary.

In the normal course of things Ildefonso attends to mime and gestures. He uses mime and gesture himself. But he does not have any sign language and he does not have any

home signs. If his mime and gesture was the sort of activity in which things were picked out we would assume that he had some home signs at least. If he does not do that sort of thing, picking out, in his mime and gesture, why should we think that he sees it in the mime and gesture of others? That would be to credit him with some comprehension even though there is no behavioural evidence of any such comprehension. Ildefonso does not pick things out, and he does not behave as if he understands, or perceives that sort of activity in the behaviour of others.

If Ildefonso is languageless, he can have no idea that enlanguaged people associate movements, sounds in the case of the hearing, with their surroundings. That sort of association only makes sense to us because we are enlanguaged. The behavioural evidence suggests that he sees a performance that he does not understand. Thus, all three steps in showing the name-thing relation are uncertain.

5.4.3 The Second TREE Lesson: Drawing an Object from A Sign

Nevertheless, Schaller's next lesson shows that she thinks he just might have made the required association even if he did not understand it. Back in the classroom she tries to encourage him to draw a tree by handing him a pencil and paper, signing TREE and miming drawing. This lesson only makes sense if she believes that the sign TREE, which she now makes in the absence of the tree, has, for Ildefonso, some association with the tree outside. All of the following assumptions are needed for this lesson. He paid attention to the tree in isolation from other things. He paid attention to the sign in isolation from other activity. He realised that there was an association between the tree and the sign. But Ildefonso just watches uncomprehendingly and echoes her actions. Again he is baffled.

Back in the bungalow we faced each other once more. I signed "tree." He signed it after me. With sudden inspiration, I jumped out of my chair. Found a piece of paper and laid it in front of him. I signed "tree," mimed drawing, and gave him an encouraging nod. He signed "tree," mimed drawing with his pencil on the paper, gave me an encouraging nod, and put his pencil down. I signed "tree," again. When he once more copied me, I lost patience and signed, "No, watch me." I signed/mimed a leaf falling from the tree, which I picked up

and offered to him. He repeated my moves. Frustrated, I didn't risk a third try.⁴³

The most telling piece of Ildefonso's copying is the encouraging nod. I think it shows that nothing in the performance stands out for him particularly. Yes, he does copy the movements for the sign TREE. But he also copies the mime of drawing—he does not see that as a command. And he copies the encouraging nod, which was not part of the demonstration of the sign, nor is it part of the activity Schaller requested. Ildefonso, in a sense, sees everything that is going on but does not seem to see the sign and the object. Thus he is not in a position to see that there might be an association. Schaller comments:

Pointing and naming objects failed to communicate anything. I led, he followed. I pointed, he pointed. I signed, he signed. We had perfect rhythm but no music. What to do?⁴⁴

5.4.4 The First CAT Lesson: A Picture and a Sign

Schaller next tries to illustrate the name-thing connection using a picture and a sign, the picture of a cat and the sign CAT. Ildefonso has the standard picture book. Earlier another helper had encouraged him to draw a pencil line from the picture of a cat to the printed word C-A-T. Schaller chooses this page because she thinks it might have sparked some sort of association.

I reached for the workbook, hoping that pictures might convey what my miming did not. I found the page with C-A-T and the penciled line to the picture. It was just possible that Ildefonso's unconscious might have carried an association between the meaningless C-A-T and the picture. Desperately, I pointed to the picture. His callused fingertip landed on the cat's head. Still pointing with one hand to the picture, I signed "cat" with my other hand. He dutifully copied me and signed a sloppy "cat." I smiled and nodded my head up and down to show my pleasure. He looked satisfied or perhaps relieved as his broad hands again disappeared into the crooks of his arms.⁴⁵

⁴³ Schaller, 1995, 34.

⁴⁴ Schaller, 1995, 40.

⁴⁵ Schaller, 1995, 40.

Again Schaller does not seem to doubt that the first step is obvious—object there. Schaller indicates the object, a cat, by pointing to the picture. Ildefonso points to it too, and she moves straight on to step two. She signs CAT. Ildefonso copies the sign. It looks as if he might have “got” the cat and “got” the sign. After all, he is not pointing at lots of things, just the picture, and the only gesture he makes resembles the sign CAT. I think Schaller assumes, at this point, that steps one and two are straightforward for Ildefonso.

Before moving on to the more complex lessons I want to question whether Ildefonso really has got step one and step two. I do not think that his behaviour in itself shows that he has in fact focused his attention on the object and the sign. When Schaller points to the picture of the cat and signs cat, we are justified in assuming in her case, that such behaviour shows that she has focused her attention on the picture, or object, and on the sign. Ildefonso’s echoing of that behaviour, however, is not enough to show that he too has focused his attention in the same way, and I see two reasons for this.

Firstly, if we consider general background behaviour, Schaller’s behaviour is nothing out of the ordinary. She, and most of us, interact in a milieu where what she is doing is normal behaviour. But what she does in normal interaction is not everyday behaviour for Ildefonso. It is important to remember she has inferred that Ildefonso has no *language*, not just that he has no ASL or no English. So languaging behaviour is not part of his everyday interaction. He is clearly baffled by her behaviour but he copies it. Thus, his behaviour may look like the behaviour of someone whose attention is focused in the same way as hers. That is why it *seems* so obvious to her, and probably to others, that Ildefonso has at least got his attention in the right place, what he does is appropriate. But what he does is not consistent with his everyday behaviour. His mere echoing of her behaviour is not sufficient to show that what he is doing is “pointing to the cat” or “making the sign CAT.”

Secondly, Schaller has tailored her behaviour to the situation in a particular way. She has tried to eliminate any miming that might confuse the issue. She performs only the bare essentials in an effort to show Ildefonso exactly what to focus on. Ildefonso’s copy

is convincing because there is nothing to copy but the behaviour which shows, in Schaller's case, that she is paying attention to the picture of the cat and to the sign CAT. That is precisely why it looks as if Ildefonso has steps one and two. There is nothing else to echo except behaviour which suggests, "I am paying attention to this object," and, "I am paying attention to this sign." Ildefonso's imitation does not show him selecting this object from among other objects. And Ildefonso's imitation does not show him selecting this sign from among other movements.

Thus, Ildefonso's response does not show that he has focused his attention on the object, the cat, and on the sign CAT, which are the things Schaller focuses on in this lesson. Firstly, in his obvious bewilderment, his behaviour is an echo of hers and not drawn from his own repertoire of similar behaviour. And, secondly, all that there is for him to echo is behaviour which is appropriate. It is inevitable then, that if he copies her, his behaviour will be convincing at first glance.

At this stage, Schaller certainly seems to have no reservations about step one, picking out the object. And, she only spends a little time on the sign. Ildefonso's sign is "sloppy" so she forms his hand into the correct shape and she signs CAT again.

He repeated the sign with the right shape this time. I applauded with head nods and smiles, again pointing to the picture while signing "cat." He visually echoed everything I did, in the same way a four-year-old tries to obey incomprehensible orders that will make Mama happy.⁴⁶

This shows that she has no doubt that he sees the sign, all she is doing is tidying it up. So she never does anything to check that he is paying attention to the object and the sign in the way that she is, she just takes it for granted. If Ildefonso has any problem, then, it must be associated with step three—making or grasping the name-thing connection. All his bewilderment suggests to her is that he hasn't grasped any connection "name for" or "symbol for," while her perseverance and what she says, show that she has no doubt that there is a connection to be grasped.

⁴⁶ Schaller, 1995, 40.

5.4.5 *The Second CAT Lesson: A Written Word and an ASL Sign*

The next example is a desperate attempt to get Ildefonso to grasp the connection between the object and the sign. It is probably partly prompted by the material available. If Ildefonso does not see the “obvious” connection between TREE and the tree, or between CAT and the picture of a cat, then maybe the repetition of purely mechanical associations will help. Schaller shows him what she sees as two different *symbols* for a cat, one is the written word in the book and the other is the ASL sign.

I’m sure that for him the written “cat” did not carry a clue as to what the sign meant, but I believed that this mechanical association might be his only stepping stone to the universe of symbols.⁴⁷

I don’t think step one and step two are anywhere in the picture here. It is all about noticing the connection. It seems as if Schaller will accept any mechanical association she can get going for Ildefonso, and that includes a mechanical association between the written word and the sign. The relation between these two items is certainly not a name-thing relation. Whatever the relation between the written *cat* and the sign CAT is, it is secondary to the relation of each to the cat. English and ASL are different languages so the relation between *cat* and CAT is not likely to mean anything to Ildefonso who knows no language. He could not see such a secondary relation if the primary relation, the naming relation, was a mystery to him.

Furthermore, suppose Ildefonso was able to make such a mechanical association between the written word and the sign, how would it help? Take a situation where I do not understand *x* and someone is trying to help me understand it. I just can’t see what it is all about. So they point out that *y* is about the same thing and now I have that piece of knowledge at least. Does it help? Not if I have no idea what *y* is all about. I may know that *x* and *y* are about the same thing but that does not help me understand what *x* is about. The piece of information I have been given would only help if *y* was known to me. Ildefonso is in an even worse position than I am. I at least know that *x* is about something. He is not even in a position to be told that that *x* and *y* are about the same thing. So, making a mechanical association between *cat* and CAT, if it is possible, will

⁴⁷ Schaller, 1995, 40.

not help Ildefonso to understand any name-thing relation, because *cat*-CAT just isn't that sort of relation.

This lesson makes some sense in the context of second language learning where one of the names is known. In fact, much of what Schaller does would work for teaching a second language. Ildefonso's situation is so different, however, and it is important to remember that. And it is important to remember that she has not ever taught anyone like Ildefonso before. Although Ildefonso is not an isolated case, most of us, in our interpersonal interactions, never meet anyone who is as normal as Ildefonso yet who knows *no* language. His very normality makes it hard to believe that he does not focus on what is pointed out.

5.4.6 *The Third CAT Lesson: A Mime*

In the next lesson Schaller reintroduces mime by pretending to interact with an imaginary cat. In general, however, this mime is not directed at Ildefonso, so it is not like a mimed communication, it is still a demonstration. There is at least one simple attempt to get Ildefonso to interact but it fails.

I called my imaginary cat to my lap and petted it before signing "cat." Ildefonso called the cat to his lap and signed "cat." I hid the invisible cat behind my back and asked where it was with mime. Ildefonso did the same.⁴⁸

It seems there was not enough in this mime to encourage Ildefonso to respond to the question.

In the rest of these cat lessons Schaller continues to focus on the third step—realising a connection. The sign CAT, the written word *cat*, the picture of the cat, and an imaginary cat are all used. Schaller describes no attempt to make sure that Ildefonso's attention is focused on these. She still seems to assume that Ildefonso is paying attention to such entities. She will try any combination of them, and the face to face pantomime of the cat continues for days as she tries to get Ildefonso to see the connection between the sign and the cat.

⁴⁸ Schaller, 1995, 41-42.

Cat sign, *cat* [written word], cat picture, and imaginary cat danced together in various partnerships. I stayed with the same lesson, variation after variation. Still he insisted on copying everything I did.⁴⁹

Schaller seems to think that something will spark the right association eventually, and Ildefonso will realise what it is all about when it does. She assumes that he has made “unconscious connections” as a result of the lessons. The one she wants to surface, of course, is the name-thing connection.

My hope was that Ildefonso’s unconscious connections between the sign “cat,” the word *cat*, the cat picture, and a real cat might begin associations that would eventually surface.⁵⁰

This is all to no avail, Ildefonso continues to copy what he can and Schaller continues to feel frustrated because of it. She makes an interesting and insightful point about her dependency on names blocking her view. Once we see words or signs as names, it is as if we just *can’t* see them as anything else. So how could we *begin* to appreciate Ildefonso’s position?

For four days, face to face, we failed to connect. My dependency on names blocked my view into his mind of no names. His survival strategy of mimicry kept him from listening—that is, paying attention to a conversation.⁵¹

Ildefonso is, of course, paying attention. The trouble is, the very thing he is supposed to be paying attention to, is the very thing he is quite ignorant of. How do you draw someone’s attention to something that they have never apprehended before, never even thought of? We usually do it with language. When the thing in question is language itself, however, there is a problem. This is how it is with Ildefonso, whether it is the conversation, as Schaller says here, or the name-thing connection as she says elsewhere. She is trying to communicate “Pay attention to *this*,” without any way of saying what *this* is.

⁴⁹ Schaller, 1995, 42. In this passage Schaller has omitted the quotation marks which usually indicate an ASL sign. Elsewhere she writes “cat” sign.

⁵⁰ Schaller, 1995, 41.

⁵¹ Schaller, 1995, 42.

Even after the reintroduction of mime into the lessons Ildefonso's avenue of communication and possible understanding has not really been opened up. The miming is not about Schaller interacting with the cat. The miming is about the sign, the written word, the cat, and about how these entities relate to each other. Since Ildefonso apparently knows nothing of these things he cannot make anything of the miming. This changes, however, in Schaller's next strategy.

Just to go over things so far, Schaller originally abandoned BOOK because Ildefonso misunderstood it. That is to say, he behaved as if it was a mimed command. It is her intention to show him the symbol-thing relation, so it is essential that he must not be able to interpret the sign as a mime or he will miss the point. The lessons which follow the BOOK incident, confront him with something totally beyond his understanding. That is how I see the tree lessons and the earlier cat lessons. By avoiding signs which Ildefonso might be able to see as miming, Schaller avoids the very thing he can make something of. As she elaborates the cat lessons, however, she reintroduces miming. At first it is just in relation to the cat. During this time she continues to face Ildefonso and nothing she does signals to him what he should do. But then she turns away from him.

5.4.7 *The Fourth CAT Lesson: The Cat Drama*

Schaller ignores Ildefonso and, without any eye contact, performs the cat drama for him—over and over, in different ways. She acts out the roles of both teacher and student. This drama is not just about the name-thing relation, it is about how language works, as well. Schaller has her own view about what the unvarying main idea of the drama is—"the main idea of *cat* [written word] or "cat" [sign] triggering a picture in the brain." She mimes taking something out of one head and putting it into another. This is all portrayed in a mime of student-teacher interaction. The cat drama continues for days as she tries to get Ildefonso to see the connection or relation between the sign, and the thing, the cat.⁵² Ildefonso just doesn't grasp what seems so obvious, *this means "cat."*

I stood at the blackboard facing an empty chair, signed "cat" and wrote *cat*. I petted an imaginary cat and read the word *cat* on the

⁵² When I say that the drama continues for days, I mean that it continues during the lesson times that Schaller has with Ildefonso. She does not work full time.

board. Sitting down in the chair, I became an imaginary Ildefonso. I studied the word and frowned. Then I tilted my head back, opened my mouth slightly, and nodded as if to say, “Oh, I get it. That’s a cat.” As Ildefonso, I went to the board and started petting the word *cat*. Of course, the chalk streaked. I looked bewildered. What happened? Wasn’t that a cat? I turned back to the teacher position and explained via mime that *cat* is not a real cat but puts the idea of cat in my head. After pointing to *cat*, I mimed taking something out of my head and putting it in the invisible Ildefonso’s head. Becoming Ildefonso again, I looked thoughtful while I pointed to the word, pointed to my head, held and stroked an imaginary cat, then pointed to my head again.

I carefully avoided meeting Ildefonso’s eyes, but I knew he was watching. My peripheral vision showed me that his arms were folded and not echoing my movements. I repeated the teacher-student act over and over, varying it as much as possible without losing the main idea of *cat* [written word] or “cat” [sign] triggering a picture in the brain. The *cat* on the board was written and rubbed out, and rewritten until my fingers were white.⁵³

The imaginary Ildefonso pays attention to the *word* and not the teacher. The imaginary Ildefonso thinks about the *word* and realises something, acts on that realisation, and finds it is not what he thought. The imaginary Ildefonso has clearly made a mistake so there is an opportunity for the teacher to correct the mistake by further explanation. The imaginary Ildefonso again focuses his attention on the word, but acknowledges the *object* too, he strokes the imaginary cat. The imaginary Ildefonso also realises something about his head. We can see by his behaviour, that the imaginary Ildefonso takes the explanation into account. The teacher saw what was missing or misunderstood, and transmitted some fresh input relevant to the mistake.

What might a languageless person make of this cat drama? Could this possibly work? Pointing and naming objects failed to communicate anything. Drawing a line from the picture to the written name didn’t work. Signing while pointing to the picture didn’t work. Trying to set up an association between the written name and the sign didn’t work. Miming all sorts of connections between the sign, the word, the picture, and the object, real or imagined, didn’t work. Then, finally, Schaller performed a drama of human interaction. She portrayed both teacher and student. Something happened

⁵³ Schaller, 1995, 42-43.

Ildefonso was galvanised into action. He slapped nearby objects, he pointed to others, and Schaller gave him the name of each one. This is the epiphany or the breakthrough.

5.5 The “Breakthrough” and its Aftermath

The apparent breakthrough is a really compelling or gripping moment in Schaller’s account. When we first read it we feel sure that Ildefonso has indeed finally “got it.” I do not feel that it is appropriate to talk of Ildefonso *interpreting* the cat drama, but it appears he did make something of it. Schaller tells her husband about it when she gets home.

“He did it!” I cried. “Ildefonso understood today. He realized language.”⁵⁴

What makes the apparent breakthrough even more compelling or gripping, however, is its aftermath. We read on to hear about Ildefonso forging ahead, but it is just not like that. Schaller realises the very next day that she has really no idea what the apparent breakthrough was about.

5.5.1 The “Breakthrough”

There is no doubt that something So far as Schaller is concerned the cat drama worked. Furthermore, so far as she is concerned the cat drama is not about *cats*, it is about *language*, so, if Ildefonso learned anything from it, he must have learned something about language. Schaller was sure at the time that Ildefonso realised that things have names.

“One more time,” I told myself. While I was correcting the imaginary Ildefonso, the real Ildefonso shifted in his chair. I stopped. Suddenly he sat up, straight and rigid, his head back and his chin pointing forward. The whites of his eyes expanded as if in terror. He looked like a wild horse pulling back, testing every muscle before making a powerful lunge over a canyon’s edge. My body and arms froze in the mime-and-sign dance that I played over and over for an eternity. I stood motionless in front of the streaked *cat*, petted beyond recognition for the fiftieth time, and I witnessed Ildefonso’s emancipation.

⁵⁴ Schaller, 1995, 46.

He broke through. He understood. He had forded the same river as Helen Keller did at the water pump when she suddenly connected the water rushing over her hand with the word spelled into it. Yes, w-a-t-e-r and c-a-t *mean* something. And the cat-meaning in one head can join the cat-meaning in another's head just by tossing out a *cat*.

Ildefonso's face opened in excitement as he slowly pondered this revelation. His head turned to his left and very gradually back to his right. Slowly at first, then hungrily he took in everything as though he had never seen anything before: the door, the bulletin board, the chairs, tables, students, the clock, the green blackboard, and me.

He slapped both hands on the table and looked up at me, demanding a response. "Table," I signed. He slapped his book. "Book," I replied. My face was wet with tears, but I obediently followed his pointing fingers and hands. Signing: "door," "clock," "chair." But as suddenly as he had asked for names, he turned pale, collapsed, and wept. Folding his arms like a cradle on the table, he lay down his head. My fingers were white as I clutched the metal rim of the table, which squeaked under his grief more loudly than his sobbing.

He had entered the universe of humanity, discovered the communion of minds. He now knew that he and a cat and the table all had names

⁵⁵
...

Does Ildefonso now understand steps one, two and three? Is slapping the desk step one—object here? Is accepting Schaller's gesture step two—sign there? Does his reaction, his readiness to move on, show that he has grasped step three—got the object-sign connection? Schaller certainly thought he had. "He now knew that he and a cat and the table all had names ..." She thinks that he had "understood the meaning behind the symbol *cat*."⁵⁶

Schaller is not the only one to see the breakthrough in this way. This incident is what Pinker refers to as an epiphany. He thinks that Ildefonso has "grasped the principle of naming."

In an epiphany reminiscent of the story of Helen Keller, Ildefonso grasped the principle of naming when Schaller tried to teach him the sign for "cat."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Schaller, 1995, 44-45.

⁵⁶ Schaller, 1995, 92.

⁵⁷ Pinker, 1994, 68.

Carruthers thought Ildefonso “sucked in words hungrily.” Is this what Ildefonso is doing in the breakthrough?

When introduced to ASL (American Sign Language) he learned it extremely fast, sucking in each new word hungrily.⁵⁸

All of them, Schaller, Pinker, and Carruthers, focus on the word, the sign, or the name, as if those are what Ildefonso now has. They assume that Ildefonso now connects CAT with a cat, and TREE with a tree.

Suppose Ildefonso has made some sort of connection between the signs and the objects. What does he do now? A naïve view of language said just show him the words—the name-thing connection in this case—and things will start happening. Well, they don’t for Ildefonso. His reaction to this “revelation” helps us to see the emptiness of the idea that connecting words with things is the place to start acquiring language. His bewilderment makes pause in the way that Virgil’s bewilderment at seeing made people pause. Ildefonso has no idea what to do now, and Schaller has no idea what she should do next.

In the following discussion I am going to keep the focus on names because that is what Schaller assumes Ildefonso has grasped. She assumes that Ildefonso, in some way, associates ASL signs with objects. I wonder if this is a reasonable explanation for what he makes of the cat drama. And I wonder if any such association could be useful to him.

5.5.2 After the “Breakthrough”

If Ildefonso did realise that things had names, it is not clear what this amounted to as an understanding of language. In other words, if someone understands that things have names but knows nothing else about language what should we expect of them? Would they do anything with the names? Would they see names as useful? Would they think there was any point to naming things? I don’t see how anyone can, in fact, understand that things have names while not understanding anything else about language.

⁵⁸ Carruthers, 1996, 43.

The real test of Ildefonso's understanding must include more than the breakthrough incident. Whatever he has realised, especially if it is fundamental to language, should be reflected in his subsequent behaviour. Can we tell from that behaviour whether he understands anything about naming? His subsequent behaviour is certainly not what Schaller expected. Although it is clear that something happened in the "breakthrough" it is not clear what Ildefonso *actually* made of the cat drama.

As soon as Schaller tries to build on Ildefonso's new understanding things do not go well and, as early as the next day, she has misgivings about her interpretation of what happened in the so-called breakthrough. There is no real change in Ildefonso's behaviour and suddenly she is not sure what exactly he has realised—about names, about a symbol-thing relation, or about ideas in heads.

The next day Schaller shows Ildefonso his own name, and her name and the teacher's name. Ildefonso appears to accept these but it not as exciting as she thought it would be. After getting involved in helping some other students she hurries back to Ildefonso and her excitement is dampened by his self-absorbed mechanical repetition of the signs she has shown him.

I had run back from Mary Ann hoping to express my excitement over his new knowledge of personal names, especially his own new name. His dwarfed signs and self absorption checked me. I was somehow frightened of this sombre, stiff man as I watched his mechanical repetitions. He couldn't see me, he was looking into some private corner.

How was I to build on the previous day's breakthrough? What did Ildefonso's experience mean? I was no longer sure. What did he understand exactly? What should I do next?⁵⁹

I think that Schaller is unsure what to do next because she no longer sure what has been done so far. In their regular interaction not much has changed and the slow plodding continues. This is a place where Schaller's account brings us up with a jolt, in the way that Sacks' account of Virgil brings us up with a jolt if we have a naïve view of seeing. We may have thought that after the operation Virgil could see. But he couldn't. We

⁵⁹ Schaller, 1995, 49.

may have thought that after the “breakthrough” Ildefonso realised names at least. But he didn’t, Schaller is quite clear about this.

His reaction to names and to our world of names contained more grief than joy. And the joy had come with not the discovery of language, but merely of names. Actually, not even names, only the idea of the existence of names. How foolish I was that morning. Of course we couldn’t converse. My fantasy had sprung from the knowledge of what is possible with language, which we still didn’t share. My hopes receded.⁶⁰

Schaller thought that realising that signs named things would be a real stepping stone for Ildefonso. She thinks that Ildefonso did realise that, but nothing seems to come of it. She says, “My fantasy had sprung from the knowledge of what is possible with language...” For her, the notion of naming is *nested* in something much larger, her whole languaging experience. I don’t see how Ildefonso could see any potential in naming without some overall idea of what we do when languaging. It is as if he has been told that we put labels on things but he has never had the need to label things and he is waiting to find out why it is important or useful.

Schaller’s fantasy also springs from view that focuses on words, symbols or names as basic. But naming only looks fundamental against a background knowledge of what is possible with language. I have described naming as *nested* in language, because I cannot see how you could explain the utility of naming things without weaving it into an account of languaging. Naming on its own does nothing, it does not get things started. If there is no potential in the “foundation” there is no incentive to build on it, so it is not really a foundation at all. Thinking about Ildefonso’s situation and looking at his behaviour highlights this.

Yet it is not easy to shake off the idea that naming is basic. When Ildefonso’s behaviour does not change Schaller admits that he has not discovered language, and not even names but “only the idea of the existence of names.” That idea itself, however, requires an understanding of language in general. It requires an understanding of how names are

⁶⁰ Schaller, 1995, 50.

different from adjectives, perhaps. But maybe adjectives are names of properties. I do not know what it might be to have just the idea of the existence of names. Schaller is not alone in this sort of supposition. Pinker, who is a linguist, says, “In an epiphany ... Ildefonso grasped the principle of naming.”⁶¹ I don’t think we have any idea what, if anything, Ildefonso grasped. Furthermore, in the “breakthrough,” Ildefonso did not name anything. He did not make even one ASL sign. All he did was slap and point.

Nevertheless, Ildefonso, with Schaller’s help seems to gather a “list of names,” beginning with the signs that *Schaller*, not Ildefonso, produced in the “breakthrough.” Two days after the “breakthrough” Schaller successfully introduces him to the signs MALE and FEMALE in an interactive lesson.⁶² She adds these new signs to his “list,” which at this stage seems to be a collection of signs that she has shown him. It is not clear how this list was put together in the first place, nor how it is reviewed.

... we reviewed the signs of the week, which Ildefonso had seen and probably understood but had never signed: “chair,” “table,” “book,” “door,” “paper,” “pencil.” I added “male” and “female.” Ildefonso seemed to assimilate the gender signs more easily than the names Susan, Ildefonso, and Elena. They fit his new list better.⁶³

Schaller does not explain what she means by, “*probably understood but had never signed.*” It is not clear what sort of understanding *could* be meant here. It seems to me there must be some indication that Ildefonso associates what Schaller signs with various objects in order for her to feel there is some understanding.⁶⁴ He still copies the signs she makes—he still “repeats mechanically.”⁶⁵ He *never signed* the signs on his list. He has seen them but never used them. This is not like us hearing and understanding a word

⁶¹ Pinker, 1994, 67.

⁶² This lesson is discussed in more detail below.

⁶³ Schaller, 1995, 51.

⁶⁴ There must be more than copying, as Schaller did not previously think that copying showed understanding. The most likely reason is that she has established an exercise to do with pointing and signing—Ildefonso points to the correct object if she makes the sign, or he makes the appropriate sign if she points to an object. Perhaps behaviour like this suggests to her that he probably understands the signs.

⁶⁵ Schaller, 1995, 47.

that we ourselves never actually use. Ildefonso never signs *any* of the basic signs he “probably” understands.

What leads Schaller to think he has the idea of the existence of names, or Pinker to think that he has grasped the principle of naming? Ildefonso does not do the one thing we might expect him to do—he does not use the signs. He did not use them in the “breakthrough” and he does not use them at this stage. I think this is surprising if Ildefonso really had a useful understanding of the signs—an understanding commensurate with realising something basic about language.

There are several sorts of activity we could reasonably expect from Ildefonso. He might have asked for the names of more objects. That is what he seemed to be doing in the “breakthrough”—he might have done, less dramatically, something like that. He might have mimed a question about the names he had been shown, to check that he had got the right name for that object, or to check the handshape. He might have mimed something about an object and incorporated the sign for that object into the mime. He might have at least shown off to get some positive feedback—Schaller does this with smiles and nods. Surprisingly, Ildefonso does none of these things. He *does not* do these things *even though* he has a list of signs.

What Ildefonso *does* do after reviewing his list of signs is also surprising. He directs this next step. He mimes something about written words and signs and at first Schaller does not understand. She encourages him to repeat his question and she guesses that he is asking about the relationship between them.

He mimed something I didn’t understand. When I gestured, shook my head, frowned, and raised my shoulders—a visual “huh?”—he pretended to write by moving his pencil back and forth above the paper. Then he gestured as if signing. His eyes opened wide, his eyebrows arched up, and he glanced quickly from his hands to the imaginary writing. He repeated the last bit, shrugged his shoulders, and threw up his hands, which I interpreted as “What’s all this about?” I didn’t understand what he wanted so I repeated my “huh,” attempting to show enough interest to encourage him to try again. He simulated signs again, bent over the paper, and scribbled some marks. He looked at where he had signed, held the paper, studied the marks, looked back at the signspace, then at me with an inquisitive face. He was obviously

comparing signs and words, but I didn't know what he was asking. Asking about the relationship between signs and words seemed too abstract for someone who knew only one word and less than a dozen signs. What explanation did he want?⁶⁶

This is certainly not what Schaller expected. It seems ironic that Ildefonso might have achieved the mechanical association that she hoped for—the association between a written word and an ASL sign—and now he is asking her what it is all about. She had hoped that it would be a stepping stone to the universe of symbols but for Ildefonso it looks as if it has remained a mechanical association. That is, he still seems to have no inkling about what to do with either words or signs. Schaller clarifies his request through mime and it turns out that he just wants words to go with his signs, *even though he still does not use either*. She proceeds to give him what he wants, a list of written English nouns.

I tried to clarify his comparison by writing *cat* on my left, shifting to the right and signing “cat.” He nodded, took the paper, signed “cat,” pointed to *cat*, pointed to the door, and half-signed “door,” pointed to the table and described it with his own invented sign, and returned to the paper, guiding his pencil down an imaginary column under *cat*. He wanted the words. A deaf person asking for words instead of signs. He wanted me to teach him the written names first, the symbols that represented the sounds he could not hear.⁶⁷

Ildefonso brings the list every day and adds to it. Much to Schaller's surprise he initiates another interchange a few days later. Schaller doesn't understand his question at first. He repeats himself, he tries using different gestures, he tries different tacks, all the while wearing a question on his face.

When we got back Ildefonso mimed a question—something about his skin and words. Although he repeated it and changed the gestures, I still didn't understand what he was asking. He tried a third time. He pointed out all of the brown-skinned people in the room, pointed to himself, mimed infants or young children eating and sleeping together, then pointed to the words while wearing a question on his

⁶⁶ Schaller, 1995, 51-52.

⁶⁷ Schaller, 1995, 52.

face. I guessed at the question, but couldn't believe he was capable of asking what I was thinking: "Are these the words my family uses?"⁶⁸

Schaller provides the Spanish equivalents of the English words on the list. Ildefonso then checks the connection between brown skin and the Spanish list.⁶⁹

Schaller surmises that Ildefonso showed the list of English words to his uncle, and his uncle hadn't understood them. Ildefonso sets to work copying the Spanish words and soon collapses into another bout of sobbing. Schaller seems to think that he is overwhelmed by learning about names in ASL, English and Spanish, while barely grasping the notion of language. She never gives up the idea that he has names.

The table rocked with his grief. It was too much: in less than a week he had learned about ASL, English, and Spanish names. How could he imagine or accept more than one language when the notion of any language was a vague new dream.⁷⁰

It is hard to know what Ildefonso makes of all this. There are many possible connections here—between signs and English words, between English words and Spanish words, between brown skinned people and Spanish words—but the crucial one, if there is such, seems to be elusive. Ildefonso has an English word list that includes *cat, table, chair, door, desk, blackboard, book, paper, pencil, male, female, Susan, Ildefonso, Elena*, and he has a list of as many Spanish equivalents as Schaller knows. He appears, to Schaller, to know the equivalent ASL signs but he never uses the signs.

I think this shows our obsession with words or symbols being *basic* to languaging. The focus has been on giving Ildefonso those things, and Ildefonso seems to have been infected by this obsession, even though he does not appear to know what words are.

⁶⁸ Schaller, 1995, 55. I am aware of the apparent contradiction in saying that Ildefonso is languageless and that he asks a question. The following points are relevant here. Firstly, Ildefonso has been interacting with Schaller for some days, we cannot tell, just as we could not tell with Virgil, how Ildefonso might have developed linguistically. Secondly, the characterisation of the incident is Schaller's characterisation, Ildefonso did not sign, "Are these the words my family uses?" Thirdly, Schaller is not merely interacting with Ildefonso, she is making him the centre of her attention and interaction is a priority. Fourthly, it turns out that interaction between an enlanguaged person and a languageless person is not the same as interaction between languageless people. This last point is discussed in detail in a later chapter.

⁶⁹ Schaller, 1995, 55-56.

Schaller focuses on ASL signs, but because of the nature of the class—it is a reading skills class—there are written English words too. Ildefonso’s family focus on words as well. Schaller produces a list of words that Ildefonso’s family will understand.

Meanwhile Ildefonso does not begin to interact linguistically by using the signs. He does not do any of the simple things we might expect. There are no interactions about pencils and paper, books and desks. It is as if the signs and the words are things to be listed, sorted and, correctly connected with an object if an object is indicated and Ildefonso is diligently entering into *this* activity.⁷¹ What is more, he does not just “collect” ASL signs, as would be appropriate for a deaf man, he has lists of written words in Spanish and English. All this is being done by a man who is languageless.

It seems to be time to stop and ask what these activities have to do with languaging. It may be that the crucial connection involved in language is not to be approached this way, or it may be that we should rethink the notion of a “crucial” symbolising connection. The level of interaction between Schaller and Ildefonso concerning the signs and word lists seems out of proportion with Ildefonso’s level of language, but it seems to be appropriate to the activity in the classroom. There is a peculiar dissociation between the lessons and actual languaging and Schaller begins to feel that Ildefonso is still “outside language.” It is as if naming, or whatever it is that he realised, got him nowhere.

Schaller thought that being able to grasp that there was a connection between names and things was part of the essence of language, if it wasn’t the whole thing. Ildefonso behaves in a way that, to her, suggests that he is making this connection but he seems unable to attach any significance to it. Just having that connection, as it appears Ildefonso now does, gives Schaller no sense of his having language.

⁷⁰ Schaller, 1995, 56.

⁷¹ MALE and FEMALE, which Schaller treats as nouns, are a slight exception here. When she introduces these signs in a lesson she does so in an interactive way and a conversation results. This indicates understanding on Ildefonso’s part—he uses MALE appropriately. Nevertheless, he does not use either sign subsequently. I will discuss this lesson in detail below.

In ten days, Ildefonso had tried to vault over the wall that had separated him from the rest of the world for almost three decades. But despite his first running start, he remained outside of language. I began to wonder if it were possible for an adult to travel from languagelessness to all the rules for manipulating symbols and the complicated structures of language.⁷²

Here Schaller is giving the distinct impression that Ildefonso now needs the wherewithal to put together something more complex than a list of names. He needs more than the symbols. He must have all the rules for manipulating the symbols, and he needs to learn about the complicated structures of language. She does not question the starting point of the name-thing relation. The name-thing relation is so firmly basic for her that when she realises it is inadequate she does not question its position in her picture of language. Having matched the names up with the things the next step is to put them together in the proper sort of combinations, and, of course, you have to know about grammar to be able to do that.

Schaller does not attempt to introduce grammar, earlier she has been concerned that news about rules would discourage Ildefonso.⁷³ She goes on helping him to build his vocabulary, and her sense of his continuing languagelessness is reinforced by the lack of any significant change in day to day interaction. Carruthers said that when introduced to ASL Ildefonso “learned it extremely fast, sucking in each new word hungrily.”⁷⁴ This is just not so.

After his first awareness of names, his progress became agonizingly slow. All he and I shared was the idea of language, not language itself. We had to wade through the murky vagueness of mime and temporary symbols. Ildefonso poked at new signs for hours or days, trying to figure out their shapes and uses. Sometimes he found the right niches in his brain for them, and his vocabulary grew slowly.⁷⁵

⁷² Schaller, 1995, 58.

⁷³ Schaller, 1995, 55.

⁷⁴ Carruthers, 1996, 43.

⁷⁵ Schaller, 1995, 62.

How is Ildefonso going to learn how to use his vocabulary? It really looks as if he has been given a collection of things, a collection that he can add to, but he has no idea of what can be done with that collection. Schaller thinks he might need rules for manipulating the things in his collection, but she does not attempt to introduce him to grammar.⁷⁶ Ildefonso needs to be told what the names are, they have to be explained to him. But Ildefonso has no language, and Schaller has done her best to explain without language—this looks like an impasse.

Ildefonso does make progress, however, even though Schaller finds it agonisingly slow. She keeps the focus of their activity on names for some time, but she does not just *demonstrate* all the names that are added to the list. Some of the names get added in an *conversationally interactive* way. Ildefonso is drawn into that sort of interaction as a participant.

5.6 The Importance of Participating in Interaction

In the formal lessons the names have been presented to Ildefonso in the context of language learning, not in a context of use. Those lessons isolate the signs from interaction in which they are normally used. When Ildefonso has learnt a list of ASL signs that he can match with objects, it is not clear whether he has any idea of how to use them in an interactive way, because participation in that sort of interaction is generally missing from his classroom experience. All the focus has been on just giving him the signs. There are, however, two early lessons which are different in that they draw Ildefonso into a sort of conversational interaction as a participant. I think we can learn from Ildefonso's behaviour how different the interactive lessons are and how important they are. I will now look at and discuss two examples of learning in an interactive situation, or of learning while doing.

⁷⁶ This is reminiscent of John Searle's, Chinese Room.

5.6.1 *The First Interactive Lesson: MALE and FEMALE*

The first interactive example shows Ildefonso interacting in a conversation using ASL. Two days after the “breakthrough” Schaller introduces the signs MALE and FEMALE by pointing to the people in the room and classifying them.

“Ildefonso you, Ildefonso—male. Susan me—female.” I pointed to each man in the room: He—male, he—male, he—male, and then to each woman with the sign for female (the generic pronoun sign is the same as pointing so it was easy for Ildefonso to understand).⁷⁷

Within a short time Schaller is able to engage Ildefonso in a signed dialogue where she comments on the gender of others and then asks him what gender he is. This results in a short but real conversation

“Ildefonso—what?” The gesture for *what* is open hands facing up, circling slightly, with the fingers pointing out to the world. The head tilts back and the mouth opens a little. This is an almost universal request for an explanation....

“Me? ...Ildefonso.”

“Yes. Ildefonso. Ildefonso—male; Susan—female; he—male, Ildefonso—what?”

“Me? Me—male.”

We had talked. It was a real conversation, a very little conversation, but a conversation. We had used language without mime for the first time to carry an idea. Then we reviewed the signs of the week, which Ildefonso had seen and probably understood but had never signed: “chair,” “table,” “book,” “door,” “paper,” “pencil.” I added “male” and “female.” Ildefonso seemed to assimilate the gender signs more easily than the names Susan, Ildefonso, and Elena. They fit his new list better.⁷⁸

Schaller does not record any earlier attempts at dialogue, either with the names of objects or with the names of people. Her mimed dialogue about the cat was about transferring ideas from one head to another, a notion Ildefonso was not familiar with, it was not a dialogue about a cat. In the MALE and FEMALE lesson there has been an activity appropriate to the signs being introduced. Within the context of that activity,

⁷⁷ Schaller, 1995, 51. In a later lesson Ildefonso learns the colour signs and Schaller comments that he has learnt his first adjectives. I assume, therefore, that MALE and FEMALE are taught as nouns as in, “She is a female and he is a male.”

⁷⁸ Schaller, 1995, 51.

Ildefonso has been drawn into linguistic interaction as a participant. Certainly this example is different from other lessons where she introduces new signs.

5.6.2 *The Second Interactive Lesson: Colours*

What takes place in the colour lesson is similar to what takes place in the gender lesson. Schaller lines up books and crayons and uses them and other things in sight to talk about colour. There is an interaction about colour within the context of a colour sorting activity. Although naming comes into it there is a real sense in which Schaller is *not* talking to Ildefonso about language or words.

One morning I thought of colors as an introduction to descriptive words. I lined up different books and signed, "Book blue, book red, book orange." Ildefonso looked confused when he saw two names for one item. I used the crayons, pointed to clothing and pictures and as many different things of the same color as possible. This red, that red, that red, I repeated, until the redness became separate from what was red. After seeing colors used with many unrelated objects about eight different times, he understood. We both regained some of the enthusiasm of the previous week. Ildefonso double checked, "Book blue, table brown?"

"Yes, yes, right," I signed, smiling over the first successful communication in days.⁷⁹

It would be so easy to get side-tracked here into discussing Ildefonso's understanding of "red." It would be easy to get side-tracked into discussing whether he, or anyone, can separate the redness from the objects. None of this discussion is relevant to my investigation here. What I see as relevant is Schaller's pleasure over a "successful communication." How like the gender example where she said, "We had talked." The success and the sense of achievement derived from these interactions is not about Ildefonso adding adjectives to his repertoire it is about what goes on between them. Schaller is very clear about this in the gender example for she adds, "It was a real conversation, a very little conversation, but a conversation."

⁷⁹ Schaller, 1995, 63-64.

The very first lessons distanced language from the interaction in a way that suggested “let’s get the words first and then we will use them.” This is explicit in some of what Schaller says, for example, in these remarks after the gender lesson.

Then we reviewed the signs of the week, which Ildefonso had seen and probably understood but had never signed: “chair,” “table,” “book,” “door,” “paper,” “pencil.” I added “male” and “female.” Ildefonso seemed to assimilate the gender signs more easily than the names Susan, Ildefonso, and Elena. They fit his new list better.⁸⁰

When we see, after the “breakthrough,” that names seem to mean nothing to Ildefonso, we see that he needs to have words or names explained to him before he can use them. This looked like an impasse for a languageless man. We need the words for the explanation. Schaller made a determined attempt to help Ildefonso to understand in the absence of any explanation and it did not work. Ildefonso needs to be able to engage in some sort of conversational interaction so she can explain. This is what looked like an impasse.

However, the two interactive lessons show that it is not an impasse after all. Schaller got the first interactive lesson going without using symbols and without relying on anything that Ildefonso had learnt in the way of ASL. She did use the names “Ildefonso” and “Susan,” but she did not rely on them. The second lesson take place after Ildefonso has made some progress so some signs are used. These signs are not necessary, however, Schaller could have relied on the pointing as she introduced the colour signs in the context of sorting the things in the room, or sorting the books on the table.

These two lessons stand out for me because of Schaller’s reaction to them. After the first lesson she does not immediately focus on the acquisition of signs. Rather, she says, “We had talked. It was a real conversation, a very little conversation, but a conversation.” Then she goes on to talk of it in terms of language, but it is a conversation first. After the second interactive lesson, what makes her smile is not that

⁸⁰ Schaller, 1995, 51.

Ildefonso knows some colour signs. Rather, she smiles “over the first successful communication in days.” Later she talks of it in terms of language.

I think of Schaller’s initial responses to these two lessons—excitement about a conversation, and pleasure at communicating with Ildefonso—as the first step in the change to the second picture of language. Very soon after the colour lesson they engage in what I see as an important first dialogue—I discuss this in detail in a later chapter. Schaller remarked that they always made progress in their dialogues, unlike the lessons. What is more, in the dialogues the focus is no longer on language acquisition as such, the interaction becomes a joint exploration.

What is particularly significant about this joint exploration is that we lose the sense of Schaller “sending” language to Ildefonso. She began by thinking that he had to be given information or messages, he had to stop reacting and begin to receive. What actually happens is that she stops trying to send him anything and she begins to respond to his reactions. The notion of language users as transmitters and receivers of information is called into question when we look closely at Schaller’s account of Ildefonso’s progress. Furthermore, it is not clear how Ildefonso could learn to receive. I will now look at this aspect of the early lessons—becoming a receiver.

5.7 Receiving

The transmission of information picture influences the way Schaller approaches the role of teacher in Ildefonso’s early lessons. She has an important message about language and she wants to pass this on to him. The message is that words or signs are symbols which trigger ideas. Words and signs allow one person to trigger an idea in the head of another. Thus it is possible for people to share ideas, to share information, to argue and to explain. None of these things can get going if the word or sign does not do this triggering.

The triggering, as Schaller depicts it, is the result of receiving a message transmitted by another. This is mimed in the cat drama by taking something out of one head and putting it into another head. Signs do not trigger ideas for Ildefonso. Firstly, because

he does not see them as symbols. That is, he does not see that they mean something beyond themselves. And, secondly, because Ildefonso, according to Schaller, does not know how to receive, he mostly just copies what she does.

From Schaller's point of view, then, this is a double problem. Ildefonso has to realise that there is meaning behind the signs, and the idea has to be got to him. As Schaller puts it, he has to receive.

Still he insisted on copying everything I did. He didn't know how to receive. He could act and react, but he couldn't get the idea of conversing without doing.⁸¹

A certain circularity is apparent. Ildefonso needs the symbols to receive ideas but first he needs to receive the idea that signs are symbols. With this circularity problem in mind, I will now look at Schaller's account of Ildefonso's apparent breakthrough into language. I will begin with the notion that Ildefonso is a non-receiver.

5.7.1 A Non-Receiver

Schaller thinks that Ildefonso is not receiving because of the persistent nature of his copying. The copying is a block to any sort of dialogue because Ildefonso begins to copy almost as soon as she begins to sign.

He tensed as I approached. I greeted him with a gesture and my namesign. He imitated my movements and inaccurately copied my namesign. "Your name?" I signed. Again he copied my movements. His eyes never left mine; his taut arms and face showed his readiness to respond. I sat down opposite him and raised my hands to begin another communication. Immediately he, too, put his hands in the air. I lowered my hands and took a listening position. He lowered his hands and watched me. I began a mime routine that reminded me of "Me Jane, you Tarzan." He repeated each facial expression and movement while his eyes asked for my approval. I held his hands down on the table and repeated my Tarzan routine with one hand. I removed my restraining hand and immediately he continued to imitate my gestures.⁸²

⁸¹ Schaller, 1995, 42.

⁸² Schaller, 1995, 26.

This sort of copying, of hands and face, right down to the raising of hands to begin and laying them down in exasperation, is not what Schaller expects. There is nowhere for her to go in terms of affirming or rejecting this as a linguistic response. It is not wrong and it is not right. The same thing happens when she tries to introduce drawing into one of the “tree” lessons. Ildefonso copies her movements, even including the encouraging no that she gives him.

Back in the bungalow we faced each other once more. I signed “tree.” He signed it after me. With sudden inspiration, I jumped out of my chair. Found a piece of paper and laid it in front of him. I signed “tree,” mimed drawing, and gave him an encouraging nod. He signed “tree,” mimed drawing with his pencil on the paper, gave me an encouraging nod, and put his pencil down. I signed “tree,” again. When he once more copied me, I lost patience and signed, “No, watch me.” I signed/mimed a leaf falling from the tree, which I picked up and offered to him. He repeated my moves. Frustrated, I didn’t risk a third try.⁸³

Ildefonso shows no sign that he thinks Schaller has a message to convey, and that very thing, conveying a message, is central to Schaller’s thinking here. If Ildefonso thought there was a message he would pay attention, that is, he would “listen.” For deaf people listening is watching and Ildefonso did not do that. “Ildefonso imitated whatever he could and never stopped to watch me.”⁸⁴ This is the sort of behaviour that prompted her to lament that he didn’t know how to receive, but only act or react. He jumps in before she has finished and without taking time to think or even watch. Conveying a message means that *the receiver gets what the transmitter intends*. Ildefonso isn’t even on the lookout for a message.

Sometimes Ildefonso’s hasty reaction isn’t copying, but it doesn’t seem to be receiving either. When Schaller attempts to show him the name for a book she sees that he didn’t get the intended message.

I nodded my head and signed “book.” Instead of copying, he opened the book as if I had ordered him to. He didn’t see the sign as a symbol but rather as a mime/gesture command, “Open the book.” The sign

⁸³ Schaller, 1995, 34.

⁸⁴ Schaller, 1995, 41.

for *book* is one of the few that is a pictograph: two flat hands with palms together spread open from the thumbs while the little fingers stay together.⁸⁵

Ildefonso reacts and Schaller thinks he sees the sign as a command. That was not the intended message. So Schaller's complaint is not that Ildefonso reactions are unintelligible or absurd, it is just that he isn't getting *the message that she is sending*.

The same thing happens later when Schaller tries to teach Ildefonso verbs. After he has apparently mastered the names of a few objects, she starts on visually easy verbs, where the ASL sign is a bit like a mimed action. If he sees some signs as symbols for things, perhaps he will see some signs as symbols for actions. He does not. Ildefonso responds to the signed verbs as if they were commands.⁸⁶ This is not what Schaller expects, given her intended message. She goes on to say, "Ildefonso never once repeated them as signs to learn and use with names ..."⁸⁷ So copying in itself is not wrong, she is looking for a particular *sort* of repetition, something that is directed at the sign in some way. The intended message is about the signs and there is no indication that Ildefonso sees—receives—*that*.

5.7.2 Receiving Behaviour

So, what does Schaller expect from Ildefonso? Schaller's expectations are based on her own intentions. She knows what the input is and she has expectations of the behaviour that input should elicit. When the input is received the behaviour will indicate an understanding of her intended message.

The message might be received, however, but misunderstood. In that case we would see behaviour which gave the sender the opportunity to modify the message or offer a correction. Persistent copying does not show that Ildefonso has any understanding of

⁸⁵ Schaller, 1995, 32.

⁸⁶ Schaller, 1995, 63.

⁸⁷ Schaller, 1995, 63.

the signs that he mimics. Nor does it show that he has misunderstood the message, it is not the sort of behaviour that offers scope for correction.

Schaller doesn't say explicitly what would count as evidence that the information was received but I think this can be worked out. Evidence for receiving behaviour will include an obvious listening attitude, and the behaviour will indicate that Ildefonso has paid attention to the same thing that Schaller has paid attention to. For instance, the cat drama, where she plays the role of both teacher and student shows what she expects.

I stood at the blackboard facing an empty chair, signed "cat" and wrote *cat*. I petted an imaginary cat and read the word *cat* on the board. Sitting down in the chair, I became an imaginary Ildefonso. I studied the word and frowned. Then I tilted my head back, opened my mouth slightly, and nodded as if to say, "Oh, I get it. That's a cat." As Ildefonso, I went to the board and started petting the word *cat*. Of course, the chalk streaked. I looked bewildered. What happened? Wasn't that a cat? I turned back to the teacher position and explained via mime that *cat* is not a real cat but puts the idea of cat in my head. After pointing to *cat*, I mimed taking something out of my head and putting it in the invisible Ildefonso's head. Becoming Ildefonso again, I looked thoughtful while I pointed to the word, pointed to my head, held and stroked an imaginary cat, then pointed to my head again.⁸⁸

As the sender, the teacher determines the nature of the input the student is meant to receive, and so she knows what subsequent behaviour is appropriate. That includes behaviour appropriate to misunderstanding the message as well as understanding it. The imaginary Ildefonso didn't get it right the first time but the teacher was able to correct that. The real Ildefonso's reaction, his persistent copying, is not appropriate. It is not that he got the input wrong, it is that he didn't appear to get the input at all. Schaller cannot affirm or reject his copying reaction. It doesn't show understanding of the message, but it doesn't show misunderstanding of the message either. It looks as if he didn't receive any message at all.

⁸⁸ Schaller, 1995, 42-43.

We can see what many people would accept as successfully receiving the message by looking ahead to the geography lesson.⁸⁹ This takes place over a number of days as Schaller introduces Ildefonso to maps. Working through sketched maps of the room, the school, the neighbourhood streets, and local area, they get to the stage where they can use real maps.

I showed him giant maps hung from a roll on the ceiling. Starting with the now familiar western American coast, we reviewed his new names: ocean, mountain, river, city, nation, United States, California, Mexico, Los Angeles. Ildefonso stared, mesmerized. He repeated everything with a question on his face, “California?” “Mexico City?” “Yes,” I responded.⁹⁰

They are looking at the maps together and going over various features shown on them. The interaction certainly looks like the transfer of information from Schaller to Ildefonso, and his behaviour seems to indicate that it has been received. He pays attention to the maps, stares mesmerised, in a way that suggests both discovery and understanding, and checks out the names with her. That is, he stops to watch her signing, he’s “listening,” and he repeats the sign in the right sort of way.

The whole procedure—the attention focused in the right place, the sign copied in conjunction with that focus, and the question expressed with reference to the sign—satisfies Schaller who feels she can now confirm that the message has been received. Ildefonso is not wearing his “Is-this-what-you-want-me-to-do” face, and he does not appear to be just reacting. Ildefonso looks as if he received the message about California, especially when he checks it out with the signed expression, “This is California?”

Ildefonso’s supposed transition from non-receiver to receiver is not a transition from misunderstanding the message to understanding the message. I see three rough stages that capture the notion of receiving as described. In the first Ildefonso is completely

⁸⁹ This is described in detail in a later chapter.

⁹⁰ Schaller, 1995, 99.

mystified about language. In the second he is a novice learner, and in the third he knows what is going on. They can be outlined as follows with Schaller's responses.

(1) Mystified expression, copying, obeying.	Nothing to affirm or reject.
(2) This is a cat?	Wrong.
(3) This is California?	Right.

The transmission of information is best illustrated in the geography lesson, where it appears that information is transmitted by Schaller and received by Ildefonso. Beforehand she knew about California and he did not. He now knows its name and he knows how it lies with the rest of the continent. That looks like the information he has after the lesson. That looks like the information Schaller wanted to give him. As pointed out in the discussion above, however, receiving the message doesn't necessarily mean the receiver got it right. In the cat drama Schaller illustrates the receiver misunderstanding the message and the sender has a bit more work to do. Thus, becoming a receiver is not a transition from (2) to (3). Becoming a receiver is a transition from (1) to (2).

The transition from (1) to (2) is a transition from just reacting to the sender, to responding in a receiving way. If Ildefonso didn't know how to receive, did the cat drama demonstrate how to do it? If Ildefonso didn't know how to receive, how could he *get* that message from the cat drama? Ildefonso eventually make the transition from a position where he did not understand what the whole language business was about, to a position where he learnt about California and maps. It is one thing to say that Ildefonso eventually becomes a receiver, it is another to say how this can come about. If he does not know how to receive in the first place how does he learn to do it. Is it just something that happens? Is receiving innate, and all that is needed is the right sort of input?

5.8 Exploring

I do not think we have to explain how Ildefonso becomes a receiver. Nor do we have to claim that receiving is innate and Ildefonso just has to stop reacting and watch, while he is exposed to the right sort of input. If we look closely at how Ildefonso become

enlanguaged, those notions start to look inappropriate. Schaller offers us some insights in her description of Ildefonso's development. These insights do not give us an alternative linguistic theory. Rather, they suggest another way of thinking about what is going on. We might try thinking of languaging in a different way and see what that yields as we look closely at Ildefonso's development.

For instance, if we look at an exploration model of interactive development the transition from "just reacting" to "receiving" can be characterised as getting to know the linguistic territory, or becoming familiar with the linguistic surroundings. This is not something Ildefonso can do on his own. As he learns to language his way around he is necessarily involved in human interchange. The linguistic equivalent of bumping into chairs and tripping on rugs happens in this human interchange. Thus, Schaller is involved in this process. We might think, then, of Schaller *guiding* Ildefonso in this exploration.

Surprisingly, this is *not* the way Schaller sees it. One of her insights is to see her work with Ildefonso as a *joint exploration* into unknown territory. She is not transmitting information to Ildefonso, nor is she guiding him, she is discovering too. As they push each other to explore they are *both* discovering.

During many discouraging days, I wondered what kept us working. In the first few weeks of our work together, Ildefonso's progress was not great enough to encourage the student in him or the teacher in me. What pushed us every morning to face each other? It's obvious now, in retrospect. When I look back, I don't recall the student Ildefonso, but Ildefonso, my friend. As friends, we pushed each other to explore. Without understanding any specific objectives or direction, we knew we were involved in an adventure together. Our work included discovery of the self, the other, and possibilities—the stuff of all friendships. Life was re-examined and re-viewed and found new. Inner thoughts and feelings, which surface in an atmosphere of trust, create new combinations and alter perceptions. A new friendship can sometimes cause one to feel that life is happening for the first time. Ildefonso and I experienced this newness and the challenge of rethinking Everything.⁹¹

⁹¹ Schaller, 1995, 76.

Schaller's account shows us what sort of human interchange is needed for this exploration—and also what sort of human interchange this should *not* be. This is the contrast between the lessons and the dialogues. Schaller's insight here is that understanding progresses in the *absence* of the transmission of information. The dialogues fostered understanding “even if they failed to convey the intended message.” The lectures never fostered understanding.

In a dialogue the teacher is indistinguishable from the student. My lectures to Ildefonso never fostered understanding or created new paths; our dialogues, in contrast, were never wasted experiments, even if they failed to convey the intended message. We always improved, at least a little, with each round.⁹²

It looks as if Schaller and Ildefonso are learning to language their way around together in dialogues that do not have to have anything to do with the transfer of information. This is the other picture of languaging. It does not involve the notion of transmitters and receivers. It does not involve the notions of input and output. It does not involve the notion of information transfer. Ildefonso and Schaller are involved in a joint exploration which happens in dialogues where the teacher is indistinguishable from the student. There is not a strong focus on words either. It is true that Schaller knows ASL and Ildefonso does not. But if there is no transfer of information, then Ildefonso's acquisition of ASL is not a transfer of information about ASL from Schaller to him.

How then does Ildefonso acquire ASL? That, apparently, is the information that Schaller has, and that, apparently, is the information that Ildefonso needs. The best way to find out is to look at Ildefonso's development. I will do this in two stages. In the next chapter I will consider the role of communicative interaction in developing understanding—any understanding. I will then go on in the following chapter to look at characterise Ildefonso's transition from languagelessness to being enlanguaged.

⁹² Schaller, 1995, 73-74.

CHAPTER 6

When Ildefonso does not understand the formal lessons, Schaller feels powerless to explain further. She is temporarily buoyed up by Ildefonso's behaviour in the "breakthrough" and thinks that he understands something, perhaps that things have names. This is not borne out by his subsequent behaviour in the days following the "breakthrough." Ildefonso shows none of the linguistic behaviour she expects. In fact, she says he is still "outside language." If he makes any association between things which we call "objects," and movements which we call "signs," we cannot say what that association amounts to.

Ildefonso has his lists, however, particularly his collection of ASL signs. But he doesn't do anything with the signs. We get the impression that outside the context of languaging, there is no way of understanding what the signs are or what they are for. How can Ildefonso get such an understanding? How do people get *any* understandings? On an everyday level we ask questions, engage in discussions and listen to explanations. This is just what Schaller says about her interaction with Ildefonso, their dialogues always foster understanding. This is so even in the absence of anything we might call information transfer.

In a dialogue the teacher is indistinguishable from the student. My lectures to Ildefonso never fostered understanding or created new paths; our dialogues, in contrast, were never wasted experiments, even if they failed to convey the intended message. We always improved, at least a little, with each round.¹

In this chapter I will look at the role of human interchange, dialogue, in the development of understanding, as suggested in Schaller's account. I will use the term "conferring" as a general blanket term for the sort of activities we usually associate with being enlanguaged—conversing, explaining, arguing, questioning, answering,

¹ Schaller, 1995, 73-74.

disagreeing, agreeing, confirming, and so on—all the things Schaller feels Ildefonso has missed out on. Ildefonso does not engage in this sort of conferring behaviour even though Schaller says he interacts with mime and gesture. If Ildefonso does not confer at all, about anything, what sort of understandings can he have? Schaller's musings about this lead her to wonder about Ildefonso's whole world view.

6.1 Shared Understanding Through Conferring

Conferring is the sort of linguistic interaction in which there is the potential for two people to share something through expressing and listening. When we confer we express our ideas and opinions and listen to the ideas and opinions of others. We ask questions and give answers. The very nature of such discussions, in which we develop and modify our ideas and opinions, implies a shared understanding of the topic. By shared understanding I do not mean that there is total agreement. People with different views can argue about and discuss a topic without misunderstanding each other, and without being baffled. They may use the same kinds of explanations even when they disagree.

Schaller claims that conferring is something which Ildefonso cannot do. So he cannot share his ideas with others and others cannot share their ideas with him.²

When Ildefonso and I first met, Ildefonso had no concept of shared ideas. He could not express his thoughts, and he also could not listen—that is, anticipate any meaning in other's expressions.³

This makes things unusually difficult for Schaller who, firstly, wants to share her ideas with Ildefonso, and secondly, wants know something of his ideas. For instance, when she realises that he has no language she wants to tell him about it. She wants to explain not just what it is like but that such a thing exists.

I tried once more to explain without language that language existed, to explain without names that everything had a name. I failed, and his face showed that he knew he had let me down. We were only inches

² What *sort* if ideas Ildefonso has is not an issue here. Whether or not he has ideas that *could* be expressed in language—he knows but he just can't tell you what he knows—is another issue.

³ Schaller, 1995, 108.

apart, but we might as well have been from different planets; it seemed impossible to meet.⁴

She also wants to try and understand Ildefonso's languageless state. Later she is curious about the details of his prelinguistic thinking, but at first she just wants to get some sense of his situation so that they can "connect," as she often puts it. In a way, what she wants is to share Ildefonso's ideas. If sharing ideas or understanding is, as she claims, accomplished by conferring in language, then Ildefonso is just not in a position to share his ideas. She cannot tell him anything. He cannot tell her anything.

Schaller can only think of his situation in terms of all the linguistic interaction he has missed.

I kept trying to imagine being in a world without language, to conceive what it would be like to have to invent and project meaning onto the world without any information or clues, without any feedback. This man had never received one explanation. Even a year-old baby must have a more cohesive view of the world than he did.⁵

No one had ever agreed or disagreed with him, mirrored, confirmed, or argued with his impressions. He had only his own mind to connect experiences, find patterns, imagine meanings, and fit together semantic puzzles. Even with shared meaning, feedback, and help in interpreting the world, many people have trouble with reality. How does one stay sane when all interpretation is generated by one's self alone?⁶

Ildefonso hasn't been encouraged by agreement, stimulated by disagreement, or helped with feedback and explanations, to develop shared understandings. Schaller is not just suggesting that he has no shared understanding of history and geography, and things like that—she is considering his whole understanding of his own here and now. That is how I take what she says about a "cohesive view of the world," "interpreting the world," and "having trouble with reality." Ildefonso is standing there among his classmates, but is his reality anything like their reality if there are no shared understandings?

⁴ Schaller, 1995, 26.

⁵ Schaller, 1995, 27-28.

⁶ Schaller, 1995, 36.

Schaller is not clear about this—she seems to be saying “yes” and “no.” The inclination to say “yes,” comes from an overwhelming feeling that Ildefonso is a *fellow* rational human being. He does not respond in a strange way—for instance, he responds in the way that any of us would if we were mystified. There is nothing bizarre about his behaviour—for example, in the way that some people with severe mental disturbance behave as if the most innocuous things are personally threatening. That is, he does not behave as if the world that he perceives is a very different one from the world that we perceive. There is no evidence that he had some radically different view or interpretation of the world, so, “yes,” his reality is basically like everyone else’s.

Schaller is also inclined to say “no,” his reality is not like ours. She talks as if we have got some things clear about the world by sorting them out in conferring with others. We needed feedback and explanations to get an understanding of some things. We revised some things through disagreements. Some things only came to our attention in discussions with others. All kinds of conferring contributed to the sense that we make of things—it is as if our world view has emerged in conferring. Ildefonso cannot confer. That is, there is circumstantial evidence that he has some radically different view or interpretation of the world. So, “no,” his reality is not like everyone else’s.

I am not going to try to resolve this tension. I want to explore the way our understanding of things, emerges in conferring, and in doing so, I think the tension dissolves.⁷ When we say that Ildefonso has a world view, we initially mean that he has a world view something like ours. When it turns out that our world view emerges in conferring we realise he can’t have a world view “like ours.” We then say he has a world view, it just isn’t like ours. But how can we say this? What does it mean to say that something which is not like a world view *as we know it*, is, indeed, a world view. We cannot conceive of a world view that not like ours. That is, if a world view is something that

⁷ The expression “an understanding of things” is not precise. Maybe it will become clearer in my discussion. The Deaf who did not acquire their first language until they went to a deaf school often say that before that, they “never understood what was going on.” They don’t mean that they did not understand long division, or colonisation, or the subjunctive mood. They mean something different and I am focusing on finding out more about *that*.

emerges in conferring, then those who do not confer do not have a world view. We can discuss culturally different world views, but there seems to be nothing to say about any world view Ildefonso might have.

I have selected some examples from Schaller's account to investigate the issue of Ildefonso's "reality" or "world view." I am thinking of this "world view" in terms of the sort of shared understanding that emerges and develops in conferring. Schaller has contrasted "shared meaning" with meaning invented "by one's self alone." Since Ildefonso does not confer, he does not participate in shared meaning. This leads her to assume that his understandings have emerged and developed without linguistic interaction. His interpretation has been generated by himself alone. Such an interpretation is mysterious, given what she says about the importance of linguistic interaction. Can we have any notion of an *individual* understanding which is anything like *shared* understanding?⁸

Schaller's account draws attention to the crucial importance of conferring to shared understanding as she contemplates someone who has never conferred. The examples show that, in certain areas at least, shared understanding *cannot* emerge and develop in the total absence of feedback and explanations. In a shared understanding, things like distinctions and discriminations, contrasts and similarities, are drawn to the attention, clarified, and refined in conferring. Without conferring, those distinctions and discriminations, contrasts and similarities may not be apparent. Many, if not all of our understandings are *shared* understandings. How much of our understanding of things, that is, our "world view," is *created* in conferring?

6.1.1 Justice and Fairness

Schaller suggests that without conferring we just cannot develop an understanding of some things at least, and that seems obvious in certain cases. What she says in the following passage about justice and fairness illustrates the importance of linguistic interaction. Here I think she points to the sort of understanding that *cannot* develop

⁸ Wittgenstein's argument against the possibility of a private language is relevant here, if we are taking an individual understanding of things to be like our shared understandings.

without conferring. She implies that Ildefonso does not think in terms just and unjust, fair and unfair. These notions are examples of the sort of understanding that develops through sharing ideas with others.

Ildefonso had never indicated to me that he thought his arrests and deportations were possibly unjust, or that his starving family's situation was unfair. He seemed to assume that some system or plan, some reason, existed, and that he was incapable of figuring it out, along with so much of his life. He believed life was confusing only because he didn't understand the rules.⁹

As Schaller describes it, conferring—expressing and listening—is a way, in fact *the* way, that we share ideas with others, and in doing so we develop and change our opinions. Ildefonso cannot do this. “Figuring it out” in the case of justice and fairness is the sort of thing that calls for feedback and explanations, agreement and disagreement, confirmation and argument. That is, “figuring it out” calls for the very things Schaller feels that Ildefonso has missed out on because he has no language. He needs all that linguistic interaction if he is to develop any notions of justice and fairness, in fact, if he is to have any idea that there are such notions.

For instance, no one had ever conferred with Ildefonso about the difference between injustice and misfortune. No one had ever argued with him about whether something was unfair or just bad luck, was unfair or just rude, was unfair or just inconvenient. No one had ever explained how an unfair state of affairs could be altered so that it was fairer, nor explained why someone might be worse off if justice is done. Ildefonso had received no feedback about the fairness or unfairness of his own behaviour, feedback which would have developed his own understanding of what is fair. He had never had to deal with differing opinions of justice from different groups, differing opinions which would have influenced his own ideas. Ildefonso could not have figured out any notions of justice and fairness in the absence of all *that*.

It is in this sort of conferring that the very notions of justice and fairness emerge. They emerge as people express ideas and listen to ideas. It is this interactive manner of

⁹ Schaller, 1995, 96.

development that makes any such understanding a shared understanding, even if there is disagreement. In discussing the justice of a practice we might have different opinions—corporal punishment is/isn't sometimes just punishment. We might use some different criteria in reaching our opinions—citizenship is/isn't relevant. Nevertheless, when it comes to discussing justice, or arguing about it, we use the same sorts of explanations. It is that joint activity of conferring which makes it a shared understanding. So *any* understanding of justice and fairness is a shared understanding.

Thus, it is not that Ildefonso has a different view of what is just or what is fair. Nor does he have some hazy undeveloped knowledge that others make these distinctions. He simply *cannot* have those notions at all. While Schaller and his classmates are all likely to have some understanding of them, some opinions and doubts, Ildefonso stands outside that shared understanding. This gives us a way to begin grasping the difference Schaller felt between Ildefonso and herself. It is more than a cultural difference, that is why she says they might as well have been from different planets. It is also a possible way to begin explaining how Ildefonso's reality differs from the reality of his classmates.

This difference, however, is not at all easy to grasp. Most of us will never meet someone like Ildefonso, and until she took the teacher's aide job, neither had Schaller. She is trying to capture a difference that is not part of her, or our, everyday experience, and it is not easy to explain. Ildefonso is very much an outsider in that he cannot confer, but he is nonetheless present with his eager manner and questioning face. There is no shared understanding of justice, and there is not a common foundation of understanding on which to base an explanation of justice. But it is not easy to think of Ildefonso as having no understanding. Thus there is a tension between Ildefonso not being able to understand, as we do, and Ildefonso having some understanding as we do.

This tension is evident in Schaller's account. She seems to accept that Ildefonso has no notions of justice and fairness but she goes on to assume that he does have some understanding.

He seemed to assume that some system or plan, some reason, existed, and that he was incapable of figuring it out, along with so much of his

life. He believed life was confusing only because he didn't understand the rules.¹⁰

To even assume that there is a plan or system means figuring out that there is a plan or system rather than random occurrences. Sometimes life is confusing because there are no rules, so why should Ildefonso assume that in this case there were rules? Can he even understand what rules are? It is obvious to us who are accustomed to crossing borders, that there are rules, but there are also exceptions to rules, and there are extenuating circumstances. There are also difficult interpersonal interactions where there are no rules but optional customary courtesies which may ease the situation—for instance, in minor accidents, and in overcrowded supermarkets aisles. Ildefonso has conferred about none of these distinctions or comparisons. So it doesn't really mean anything to say that he doesn't understand the rules. He has no concept of rules as such.

Difficulties arise in understanding the notions of plans and systems in the same way that difficulties arise in understanding the notions of justice and fairness. Sometimes plans are complex and hard to figure out and sometimes there is just a state of disarray which can't be figured out. We could not know if Ildefonso had made any such distinction. Sometimes systems keep things ticking over in a routine way, sometimes systems are designed for progress, sometimes things work out by chance, sometimes systems don't work. Ildefonso is not in a position to compare these possibilities without conferring.

Despite conferring, some people see plans and systems where others do not—for example, God's plan. We live with plans and systems, order and confusion, normal variations and anomalies, natural cycles and coincidence, and all these notions and distinctions emerge in conferring. So there is no justification for assuming that Ildefonso has any notion of plans, systems, or rules as such—even baffling ones which he can't figure out—in the absence of conferring. It seemed easier to accept his lack of understanding in the case of justice and fairness but the same reasoning applies to any understanding that there is a plan or a system.

¹⁰ Schaller, 1995, 96.

Ildefonso does not participate in all these sorts of shared understandings. He is an outsider in that he does not confer. He does not share understandings with others, but it is so hard not to credit him with *some* understanding. What that understanding might be is hard to define, describe or explain. When Schaller wonders about this she often puts it in term of “what is in his head.” At the same time she notes what he has missed in the way of human interaction using language—feedback and explaining, agreeing and disagreeing, confirming and arguing—and she acknowledges the importance of that interaction to our understandings.

Thus, Ildefonso could not indicate that he thought his arrests were unjust because he needed to confer with others to have any understanding of justice and injustice. The example of justice and fairness is just that, an example. Justice and fairness is just one area of understanding, but for Ildefonso human interaction using language is absent in *all* areas and it is so hard to infer that understanding is absent in all areas. Schaller credits him with some understanding of plans or systems, there is a plan or system that has to be figured out. This sort of move has to be resisted because conferring is absent in the area of plans and systems too. But maybe conferring isn’t necessary for all understanding.

6.1.2 Colour Preferences

It might seem reasonable to assume that Ildefonso does not need to confer in areas that are more personal to him, and less to do with conventions like social justice. Perhaps conferring is not involved in developing an understanding in all areas. In particular, many people would want to describe Ildefonso as having his own likes and dislikes. Schaller considers just such an example—the notion of preferring one colour to another. When Ildefonso uses some colour words correctly she asks him which colour he likes.

Using his new vocabulary, I introduced the verb *like*. After spreading three crayons out, I studied them while signing “red,” “blue,” and “orange.” I looked at them a long time and then chose the red one, saying, “Red I like, blue okay, orange okay, but”—and I shifted my posture and body position to show a difference—“red I like.” I lined up the crayons of all the colors Ildefonso could sign, listed them as I pointed to each one, and, with a sweep of my hand, asked Ildefonso to state his preference. I repeated the question after setting up different choices, but Ildefonso didn’t answer.

The question of what was in his head continued to plague me. His experiences as an isolated individual must differ dramatically from those of people in communities. The more abstract the concept I introduced him to, the more I wondered about his interpretation. If, as seemed likely, no one had ever asked him for his preference, if he had never practiced asserting his likes and dislikes, how could he form “I like” in his head? Life had forced him to be passive and accept whatever came his way.¹¹

Here Schaller contrasts Ildefonso’s experience with what is usual. “His experiences as an isolated individual must differ dramatically from those of people in communities.” Ildefonso was no wild child like Victor, nor was he isolated by abuse like Genie, he lived with his family and mixed with friends. Ildefonso was isolated in that he was not one of the community of those who confer with each other. So Schaller’s speculation—“If, as seemed likely, no one had ever asked him for his preference, if he had never practiced asserting his likes and dislikes, how could he form “I like” in his head?”—deserves careful consideration. If he has no idea that other people have preferences, does he have preferences? Does he, as Schaller puts it, have “I like” in his head?

Liking is not just a matter of selecting something from among a range of options where choice is possible. All sorts of things besides preference motivate our choices. If Mary takes the plain scone rather than the cream cake maybe that is because she prefers the scone. But maybe Mary is just being polite by taking what is nearest to her when the plate is handed round. Or maybe she knows that Jane just adores cream cakes, and she feels kindly towards Jane today, so leaves it for her friend. Maybe Mary is on a diet and reluctantly avoids the cream cake, which she would prefer. Maybe Jane is on a diet and Mary is annoyed with her and wants to see her discomfiture when she is offered only a cream cake.

“I like” does not necessarily stand from other motives—such as, being polite, a sense of duty, consideration of others, or annoyance. Schaller mentions two interactions relating

¹¹ Schaller, 1995, 64-65. I do not think that Ildefonso merely fails to understand Schaller’s performance, in the way that we might fail to understand a foreigner. Firstly, Schaller is too experienced to overlook that. Secondly, this is the sort of performance that would mean something to those who used other signed languages, or who had developed home signs. I feel most hearing people would understand it too.

to preference, which Ildefonso had probably missed in his life—being asked for his preference, and asserting his likes and dislikes. These are part of the conferring process in which an understanding of preference develops. Further feedback and explanations distinguish between situations where it is appropriate to assert likes and situations where it is not, and between motives of preference and other motives. Only by conferring about these things could Ildefonso explain that he chooses something because he likes it and not because it is expedient to do so. Understanding the notion of preference involves understanding some distinctions like these.

So Schaller's account suggests another way in which Ildefonso's reality might differ from that of his classmates, he may have no understanding of personal preference. Again, this is just an example, but because it is a personal one it seems more challenging. It highlights the importance of conferring even in areas that we do not associate with a shared understanding. Why can't Ildefonso make up his own mind, *on his own*, about which colours he likes? It is not because he likes them all. Ildefonso's reality is not different from his classmates in that he just has no preferred colours. Rather, Ildefonso's classmates know what it is to like some colours better than others, Ildefonso does not. *That* is the understanding that Ildefonso does not share with his classmates.

For us, any understanding we care to discuss involves things like making distinctions, discriminating between possible options, sorting out confusions, or making comparisons. And we learn to do those things in conferring. Any understanding we care to discuss, then, is a shared understanding. I can make sure that I am discriminating in the same way that you are. If you think differently about something I can compare your opinion with my own. You may be surprised by my judgment and you can point out a possibility I had never thought of at all. If Ildefonso makes discriminations he can check them with no one. If Ildefonso has an opinion he cannot compare it with someone else's, he cannot find out that others think differently about that issue. If Ildefonso appears to have missed a possibility no one can point it out to him.

If Ildefonso is not in a position to do these things, to interact in these ways, is it possible for him to understand things like symbols, names or words if they are merely shown to

him? Schaller's stated aim, is to show him symbols so that he can confer. But surely in showing someone a symbol system it is important to do things like make distinctions, discriminate between possible options, sort out confusions, and make comparisons. This shows up a major difficulty in any theory of language which takes symbols to be basic. Learning a symbol system seems to require that there be some shared understanding. Drawing on what has been highlighted in the above examples I will now look the role of conferring in learning symbols.

6.1.3 Understanding Symbols is a Shared Understanding

Schaller begins her lessons by showing Ildefonso some ASL names for things because the names for everyday things look like the easiest starting place. They look like an easy starting place because the things she chooses are part of Ildefonso's life already. He sits on chairs, he walks through doorways, he has almost certainly encountered cats, and he sees trees every day. If Ildefonso is shown symbols for these things, she seems to assume, he will not only be able to talk about them, he will also realise how language works.

Schaller initially thinks that she has been successful. Ildefonso's behaviour in the "breakthrough" suggests to her that he has his first symbols.

Welcome to my world, Ildefonso, I thought to myself. Let me show you the all the miracles accomplished with symbols, all the bonds and ties between human beings, young and old, and even with those dead for centuries.¹²

"...all the bonds and ties between human beings, young and old, and even with those dead for centuries," captures the breadth of shared understanding developed through language. Whatever is shared directly through languaging, can also be shared indirectly. Messages can be passed through intermediaries, and language is a means of sharing ideas through generations as histories are passed down.

It is one thing, however, to say that ideas are shared through language but it is another to give an account of that sort of sharing. How does it come about? And, in particular,

¹² Schaller, 1995, 45.

how could Ildefonso be helped to begin sharing in this way? Is it, as Schaller suggests, a matter of showing him a symbol system, starting with some simple symbols? Teaching Ildefonso signs as symbols or names for objects, in the absence of conferring did not work. And when he did have a list of ASL signs, he didn't appear to understand what they were. It turns out that conferring is needed in order to explain what the ASL signs are. I will illustrate some of the conferring that normally takes place by using an example of students being shown symbols for the planets. This is a very different process from the first lessons Schaller gives Ildefonso.

6.1.4 Symbols for the Planets

Schaller is not in a position to show Ildefonso symbols in the usual way that people are introduced symbols which are new to them. Take, for instance, introducing some school students to new symbols. By that stage the students may already know what symbols are, and know how to use them, but if they don't the teacher can explain. The difficulty for Schaller is that she cannot explain anything to Ildefonso because they cannot confer. Conferring is the very thing she thinks they need the symbol system for.

Suppose a teacher wants to introduce students to the symbols for the planets. The first thing is to make sure they know what planets are, and which ones are covered by these symbols. They need to distinguish the planets, *prior* to talking about the symbols. They must be clear about what a planet is as distinct from a star. The planets in question are the ones which orbit our sun, and we don't count moons as planets and we don't count asteroids as planets. The students ask questions. What about the morning star, that's not really a star, and nor is the evening star, are they planets? Do the symbols always have to be in the same order moving outwards from the sun? When a comet swings in around the sun does it become a planet for a while.

The teacher answers, sometimes by explaining and sometimes by asking his own questions. Who knows another name for the morning star? The evening star? Okay then, the symbol for Venus is always used for Venus. It doesn't matter whether Venus appears in our morning sky or evening sky, that particular piece of matter is always the planet Venus. Answers require discussion of whatever it is that is symbolised without

resorting to the symbols. If the class goes something like this then it seems that there is quite a bit of explaining going on and the students get plenty of feedback. By the time they have got a reasonable understanding of what the planets are for the purposes of this lesson, the teacher introduces the nine symbols.

☿ Mercury, ♀ Venus, ♂ ⊕ Earth, ♂ Mars, ♃ Jupiter, ♄ Saturn, ♅ Uranus, ♆ Neptune, ♇ Pluto,

The next step is to distinguish the symbols. There are possible confusions to avoid. One of the symbols for the earth is similar to the symbol for Venus but it is the other way up so it is important not to rotate the symbols. Mercury is similar to Venus but has another part on top, so it is important to note the components of each symbol. The symbols are not like letters, with upper and lower case, and there is no cursive form. Keep them clear and separate. There are two possible symbols for the earth—choose one and stick to it. These symbols are not letters, they don't fit into words. They are not abbreviations so don't put a full stop after them.

It is important that the students apply the symbols correctly. These are not symbols for planets in general they are symbols for the planets in our solar system. If you want to say something about the evening star remember that the symbol for Venus doesn't tell you anything about when we observe it. You cannot make the morning star-evening star distinction with the symbols. The students must apply the symbols in the way that the teacher does or some of their answers may be seen as incorrect. So how might the teacher ensure that the correctly application is mastered? There is no fixed set of instructions. The understanding grows in an environment of feedback and explanations, agreeing and disagreeing, confirming and arguing—exactly the things Schaller noted.

That is, there is conferring. What is the symbol for the outermost planet? The symbol for Pluto is used for Pluto not the outermost planet, and sometimes Pluto is actually closer to the sun than Neptune. So there is no symbol for “the outermost planet.” Draw quick diagrams using the symbols. Illustrate planetary positions essential for observing the transit of Mercury. Maybe the student gets that one wrong, she muddles

the symbols for Mercury and Mars. Someone disagrees with the diagram saying you can't observe the transit of *Mars*. Another argues that you can, and illustrates with a diagram where the observer is on Saturn. The more examples that are tossed around, the more accurately the students apply the symbols. The more challenging questions that are asked and answered, the more accurately the students apply the symbols.

In this sort of situation feedback and explaining, agreeing and disagreeing, arguing and confirming, all play a part in the process going on in the lesson. And the lesson was to simply introduce the students to some new symbols. All that conferring was needed. They needed to be able to sort out confusions and correct mistakes by conferring and checking *independently of using the symbols*. They needed to confer about the *planets* prior to discussing the symbols. They needed to confer about the *symbols* themselves before using them. They needed to confer about the *use* of the symbols. Finally they practised using the symbols by tackling some curly questions and problems about the planets and conferred about their efforts. After this final step the teacher might have said, "now they have the symbols they need."

This is not the sort of process Schaller envisages for Ildefonso when she wants to give him the symbols that she thinks he needs. She wants to show him symbols *so that* he can confer. She wants him to have symbols *so that* he can convey a thought. If Ildefonso is to be shown any symbols, however, he first needs to be able to confer about what it is that is symbolised. He needs words for that. He needs explanations about the distinctions between what is symbolised and what might be mistakenly included or substituted. He needs words for that. He needs to be able to discuss the symbols themselves. He needs words for that. He needs explanations about correct and incorrect usage of the symbols. He needs words for that. He needs to be able to discuss illustrations and to get feedback on his own attempts at using the symbols. He needs words for that. When it comes to developing an understanding that words are symbols, then, it seems, Ildefonso must *already have words*.

Schaller's assumption that words are the symbols Ildefonso needs first, and her insight into the conferring activities that Ildefonso has missed, together give rise to a paradox.

Symbols are needed in order to confer, and conferring is needed in order to learn symbols. The very thing that we need in order to be able to confer cannot be something which requires us to be able to confer in order to learn it. But maybe the notion of teaching the symbols for the planets was misleading. The children already knew the names of the planets and so could discuss them. What Schaller tried to show Ildefonso was just the names of things.

6.2 Understanding Names is a Shared Understanding

As a starting point, the notion of names is even more seductive than the notion of symbols. Schaller talks in terms of teaching Ildefonso the names of things. What happens if we put the notion of language as a symbol system to one side, and assume, instead, that Ildefonso needs to know the names of things, or needs to know that things have names, before he can begin to talk about them? Is this essentially a different approach? By conferring we distinguish and clarify what a symbol symbolises, we clarify what counts as a symbol, and we give and receive feedback about the acceptable use of the symbol. Is all this conferring needed for names too? Is naming a shared understanding which emerges and develops in conferring?

When Schaller first meets Ildefonso he has no idea of naming, he does not know what it is for people to have names, he has no experience at all of personal names. Nor does he know what it is for a thing to have a name, he has no experience at all of naming things. Before Schaller met him she had a conventional notion that many of our words name things, and she saw this as a basic feature of language. Like the symbol notion, the name-thing relation seemed so obvious, that Schaller did not see it in relation to her musings about all the linguistic interaction Ildefonso had missed. It did not occur to her that he had missed out on all the information and clues, all the feedback, about *names*.

In everyday circumstances for us there is no difficulty with new names. It is not difficult to introduce Mary Ann to John by name, *if he already uses personal names*. Likewise, it is not difficult to tell someone the name of something, for example explaining what a pottle is, *if they already use common names*. In both these cases, however, shared understandings underlie any questions we might ask. Who is Mary

Ann? What is the name of your new neighbour? What do you call that thing? What is a pottle? For us, however, it is difficult to imagine a situation where an adult of normal intelligence knows *nothing* of personal names or common names.

Ildefonso's case presents us with just such a situation. Schaller's account makes us think again about naming. That is, a name-thing relation looks perfectly reasonable until this particularly unusual situation throws a different light on it. Firstly, we see the bewilderment as someone who is clearly not stupid fails to see the name-thing relation. Secondly, Schaller makes us think about the role of conferring in any "simple name-thing relation."

6.2.1 *Understanding Personal Names is a Shared Understanding*

One of the most striking incidents described in Schaller's account occurs a number of years after Ildefonso had learnt ASL. Ildefonso tries to introduce Schaller and Elena to his languageless deaf brother, Mario, using names. Ildefonso fails. It is hard to believe that he cannot do this, given that he and Mario can communicate in mime and gesture. Introducing by name is something we do so easily we never even think about it. It even seems to transcend language barriers.

In what we consider *usual* circumstances, it is easy for me to introduce John to my new neighbour, Mary Ann, by telling him her name, and telling her his name. John might even enquire whether she ever shortens her name to Mary or does she prefer to be addressed as Mary Ann. Suppose another neighbour, Takesh, passes by and we are faced by a language difficulty. We speak no Japanese, and Takesh still has to rely on his wife to help him with English. Since his wife is not there, we just wave and smile, we point to Mary Ann and say "Mary Ann," and tell her who Takesh is. Takesh smiles, bows slightly and shakes her hand and says "Mary Ann." She smiles and says "hello Takesh." We notice that we didn't even need a common language for introductions, but we *don't notice* that we all share an understanding of naming.

Now contrast this with *unusual* circumstances. Ildefonso could communicate with his deaf and languageless brother, Mario, by using mime and gestures. But after Ildefonso

was fluent in ASL, he did not seem to be able to tell Mario the names of his teachers. Ildefonso and Mario meet up with Schaller and Elena to go out to dinner and Ildefonso decides to show Mario their namesigns.¹³

Soon the two men came towards us, both smiling. While Ildefonso strode purposefully and slowly, Mario strolled lightly, with a carefree gait. He was obviously the younger brother, teasing Ildefonso with his frequent impish grin. He hugged Elena and looked at me shyly. Ildefonso and I hugged hello, and Elena introduced me to Mario, using a strange sign I didn't understand. Later I figured out it was their sign for friend. No names were exchanged. We shook hands.

Names meant nothing to Mario, as they had meant nothing to Ildefonso when I met him. Ildefonso read my thoughts and decided to teach Mario his namesign. Mario looked bewildered and turned to Elena. She pointed to each person and signed each name, including his. She signed hers on her cheek as I did mine, but with a different movement and shape. Then she showed Mario his namesign and Ildefonso's. she repeated the signs once more, and Mario nodded his head. Ildefonso turned to him and asked if he understood by bringing his hands and chin up and frowning at his brother. Mario nodded affirmatively, but Ildefonso wanted evidence. Ildefonso pointed to everyone in turn, turned to Mario, and demanded a response. Mario pointed to Ildefonso and called him "Mario," then shrugged his shoulders, implying he forgot the rest. "No, no," Ildefonso said, using the common Mexican gesture of wagging the index finger side to side. "Mario—you." Ildefonso insisted on repeating the lesson, but Mario only grinned at his demanding brother and shrugged his shoulders a few times.¹⁴

There is an overwhelming inclination to ask, "Why does Ildefonso not just tell Mario that we have names?" Since Ildefonso does not do this I think we need to look closely at the circumstances. Before beginning, I think there is one way in which Mario is *not* confused. I do not think he has been overwhelmed with quantity. As his gestured and mimed communication later shows, Mario's visual acuity is excellent. Furthermore, only four namesigns are presented to him. Thus there is not too much for him to take in. It seems, then, to be the whole procedure of naming that bewilders Mario.

¹³ At this stage it is seven years since Schaller taught Ildefonso. Mario has only recently come to live near Ildefonso so they have not been in close contact since Ildefonso learnt ASL. Elena is no stranger to Mario, she has already met him, and Ildefonso's languageless friends. She is used to communicating with them using gestures and mime, but clearly names have never been part of this communication.

¹⁴ Schaller, 1995, 175-176.

The first point to note here, is that Mario does not know his own namesign, nor his name. They are used by others who wish to refer to him. For, instance, Ildefonso would presumably use the namesign if talking to Schaller or Elena about his brother. And Elena used “Mario” when telling Schaller about Ildefonso’s brother. So, Ildefonso begins by just showing Mario his namesign, MARIO, and Mario is bewildered. The second point to note is that it is not clear that Mario did, in fact, call Ildefonso “Mario.” I think Schaller describes it that way because that is what it looks like to those who understand naming. It is, however an isolated bit of behaviour and nothing in that bit of behaviour itself, nor in the rest of what goes on, shows that Mario understands naming.

What is more, when Schaller later observes introductions among a group of Ildefonso’s languageless friends, there is no use of names. Again it is important to note Schaller’s description. The introduction is a *story*—it is Schaller who reduces it to its essence, not the storyteller. What the storyteller does is *not* naming behaviour. Rather, it is like the construction of a narrative identity for the young man who is introduced, if introducing is, in fact, what is going on. So many of our quick assumption are based on our own enlanguaged activities. We think things like, “Ah-ha! That is their way of introducing people,” before we have looked carefully at the way these languageless people interact.

No one had a name. The introductions consisted of descriptions. The older man introduced the youngest with a story of how his mother had died while he was still a baby. In essence, his name was the description *the motherless one*.¹⁵

It seems, then, that there is no evidence of naming behaviour, as we know it, among the languageless friends. Schaller recalls that names meant nothing to Ildefonso when she met him. Mario did not know his own namesign, nor Ildefonso’s. When Schaller meets a group of their languageless friends it appears that no one has a name, and anything that is remotely like an introduction involves a story. So there is nothing in Ildefonso’s and Mario’s shared experiences and communication to provide a basis for Ildefonso just *telling* Mario that we call people by name.

¹⁵ Schaller, 1995, 182.

If Ildefonso cannot just tell Mario that we name people, then why does he not *explain* that we do. There is no obvious way to begin an explanation. It is as if Ildefonso has nowhere to go, and he knows this because he doesn't even *try* to explain. For example, if we already do something like naming, that is where we would begin an explanation. Suppose the astronomy teacher had said that today the class were going to learn the *proper names* of the planets, and the first question was, "What do you mean by *proper names*?" The teacher could draw on established languaging to explain. "The planets are called by their own individual names in the way that you are called Paul and she is called Jane. This boy is named Paul and that planet is named Mercury." Naturally, there would be more to say, because we don't greet planets, or introduce them, but the teacher has, at least, somewhere to go to start the explanation.

Of course Mario cannot articulate any question like, "What do you mean by *names*?" but let us suppose for the moment that he can. Ildefonso would still have nowhere to begin an explanation, in the way that the teacher had, for there is nothing for him to hark back to in the languageless interaction. Ildefonso cannot explain by harking back to something equivalent to "The planets are called by names in the way that you are called Paul and she is called Jane" *or anything like that*. Ildefonso has nowhere to go to begin explaining names to Mario. That makes Ildefonso's position look difficult enough. However, Mario cannot even articulate any such question in the first place, because he is languageless. So there is no easy explanation of personal names.

We might ask then, "Why does Ildefonso not just explain from scratch to Mario that we call people by name?" this assumes that in miming and the gesture system of the languageless friends, explaining is an established activity. If, however, explaining is also absent from the languageless interaction, then that is not an option for Ildefonso either. Mario's miming and gesture system exhaust the range of communicative activities available to Ildefonso in his immediate interaction with Mario.

It appears that explaining is, indeed, not part of the languageless interaction. When Schaller gets the opportunity to visit the group of languageless friends she describes

situations where we expect to see explaining, but there is none.¹⁶ She watches them tell and retell many border-crossing and border-patrol stories in mime and gesture and sometimes the story is not understood. There is no explaining, there is only repeating.

These people all lived on the edge, in constant fear of starvation. Their biggest challenge collectively and individually was figuring out how to stay on this side of the mysterious border, where jobs and food for their families existed. Each story contained a grain of information about how to enter white-man's land or avoid deportation. No one could say to another, "Guess what I found out. In order to cross or stay legally ...". Instead, a story that contained some fact had to be told and retold until someone else either understood the significance or at least understood that the teller knew something important.¹⁷

Schaller's description suggests that each story has a point, its grain of information, which is important to the group. Sometimes the point is not understood, so the story is repeated. Neither the storyteller nor the listeners behave as if something is being explained. Telling and retelling is not explaining, even if someone else eventually understands something. The audience cannot confer with the storyteller about what is understood from the repetitions. Apparently the storyteller cannot clarify the point, and the audience makes no attempt to question the storyteller.

This suggests that Ildefonso cannot try another starting point for his explanation of naming. Not only is there no naming activity among the languageless friends, there is no explaining activity. There is nothing beyond repeating, even when the story is crucial to their well-being. There is no way of highlighting a significant point.¹⁸ No other familiar story is turned to if the "grain of information" is not understood. No one attempts to link the current story to another anecdote, even though there is a shared repertoire. There is no harking back, or linking, or expanding. The story is merely told and retold. Furthermore, sometimes all that can be understood by the audience, Schaller

¹⁶ The languageless interaction is explained in detail in a later chapter.

¹⁷ Schaller, 1995, 183.

¹⁸ In this way the mimed stories are unlike the kind of story where we can say something like "now mark this point." Not that highlighting a significant point has to be done so explicitly, for language offers subtle ways as well.

claims, is that the storyteller knows something important. This is definitely not the sort of understanding we expect an explanation to deliver.

In the languageless interaction, we see none of the conferring activity needed for explaining. No explaining behaviour comes into play when Mario is baffled by personal names. Ildefonso's behaviour is not *explaining* behaviour as he shows Mario the namesigns. It might look as if Ildefonso attempts to explain but really all he does, after rejecting Mario's response, is *repeat* a demonstration that is already a mystery to Mario. Mere repetition is nothing like explaining, but it is all Ildefonso tries. Nor is Elena's behaviour *explaining* behaviour. She points and gestures and then *repeats* herself. We know from Schaller's account of Ildefonso's early lessons in the classroom, that pointing and naming failed to communicate anything. Explaining, then, seems to be beyond the scope of the gesture system that Ildefonso and Mario have used.

Ildefonso and Mario do not really confer in any way for Mario, like the earlier Ildefonso, is languageless. It might as look if Mario is engaged in conferring when he nods his head "affirmatively," but Ildefonso senses otherwise—that is why he wants evidence of understanding. It might look as if Mario is engaged in conferring when he points to Ildefonso and makes a gesture which looks like MARIO. But his subsequent behaviour betrays disengagement, because there is no reasonable response to Ildefonso's attempt at clarification. Mario's bewilderment, his shrugged shoulders and his grins are not, in this situation, conferring behaviour. This does not look like Mario failing to understand an explanation. It looks like Mario failing to understand what is going on in a wider sense.

Ildefonso's attempt to show Mario names so that he can incorporate names into the introductions, is a complete failure—in contrast to the easy introductions of my neighbours, even where there was no common language. Ildefonso and Mario have a common communication system but not a shared understanding of a particular sort of activity, naming. There is no problem with personal names for those within the shared understanding but it is a complete mystery to those who do not participate in that shared understanding. In addition, Ildefonso is the sort of person who would explain if he

could. But if Mario does not do anything like explaining, then there is nothing Ildefonso can do. The idea of an explanation of personal names right there on the sidewalk begins to look absurd.

Even more than Schaller's earlier classroom exchanges with Ildefonso, the exchange between Ildefonso and Mario shows up the difference between the enlanguaged and the languageless. The contrast is more marked in this exchange because Ildefonso and Mario have communicated with each other in the past.¹⁹ Ildefonso's failure to communicate anything about names to Mario is a graphic illustration of the difference conferring makes—a difference Schaller had wondered about when she first met Ildefonso.

This man had never received one explanation. Even a year-old baby must have a more cohesive view of the world than he did.²⁰

No one had ever agreed or disagreed with him, mirrored, confirmed, or argued with his impressions.²¹

Mario is in the same situation, and now Ildefonso faces the same problem that Schaller faced all those years ago in the classroom. We see the difference between the languageless and the enlanguaged again. Back then Schaller sensed in immense difference. It now appears that the same difference exists between the brothers.

I tried once more to explain without language that language existed, to explain without names that everything had a name. I failed, and his face showed that he knew he had let me down. We were only inches apart, but we might as well have been from different planets; it seemed impossible to meet.²²

We who share language, whether we understand each other's language or not, participate in many shared understandings which we do not readily notice. It is easy to accept that

¹⁹ "...Ildefonso and his brother were separated, first by their age difference of about seven years and then by Ildefonso's various jobs. As a result they had never had a chance to develop their gestural communication to the degree that some deaf siblings and children have." Schaller, 1995, 185.

²⁰ Schaller, 1995, 27-28.

²¹ Schaller, 1995, 36.

²² Schaller, 1995, 26.

the notions of justice and fairness are shared understandings which emerge and develop as we confer. It is possible to show that the notion of preferring one colour to another emerges and develops in conferring. It is not obvious to many people, however, that just having a personal name also emerges and develops only in conferring. There is a feeling that you just tell someone the name, there is no apparent conferring involved in understanding that. A name is just a word that applies to an individual, all I had to do to introduce Mary Ann to Takesh was to point to her and say her name. But Ildefonso could not do this with Mario.

On reflection we realise that shared understandings underpin not only the activity of naming, but also the activity of explaining. That is why Ildefonso cannot tell Mario about names, nor explain them. Only by beginning to participate in conferring, in a linguistic environment where names are used, can Mario develop the shared understanding of naming people. He needs to see names bandied about, in commands, in warnings, in questions, in introductions, in endearments, in congratulations. And he needs to get involved, to behave this way himself, he must at least begin by addressing people by name, by referring to people by name, and by introducing himself by name. Then he is in a position to get affirmation or correction, to be understood, to be misunderstood—the sort of feedback that Schaller pointed out was missing from Ildefonso's experience when he was languageless.

It is in that sort of setting that ELENA *becomes* a name, and it is only within that setting that ELENA can be seen as a name. Mario has to be *in there* and being in there means being a participating member of the conferring community. That is what it takes to put something on the canvas for Mario, something that is there for everyone in that community it now there for him too. Then it is something that seems to stay there so that it can just be pointed to, or so that it can be used in explaining. If Mario is not a participant in using namesigns, then for Mario there are no personal names. Nothing shows that more clearly than the apparent emptiness of merely associating a gesture with a person in the absence of any activity where names are used. Mario can't *see* "this is Elena" because Mario doesn't *do* things like "this is Elena." What seems most startling

about the naming incident, however, is that Ildefonso made no attempt to explain any of it to Mario.

It would be easy to dismiss Ildefonso's failure with Mario by saying that the so called languageless friends do things their way, and if personal names play no part in their life then that is a sort of cultural difference. It is not so easy to dismiss the apparent absence of explaining behaviour, and it is not so easy to dismiss the apparent difficulty they have in drawing attention to something like a significant point in a story. The communicative behaviour of the languageless friends suggests something more radical than what we normally mean by a cultural difference. In the absence of conferring there are no shared understandings of the sort which contribute to what we might call a world view. This is what I think Schaller had in mind when she said, "Even with shared meaning, feedback, and help in interpreting the world, many people have trouble with reality."²³ It begins to look as if the reality of languageless people, whatever that may be, is radically different from the reality of enlanguaged people.

6.2.2 *Understanding Common Names is a Shared Understanding*

The next obvious issue is shared understandings of everyday things. Someone might say that the languageless people have an understanding of these because they sit in chairs and sleep in beds. They know or understand about things like that. Surely they don't need to confer to have that sort of reality, and that sort of reality is like our reality. Schaller thought the names of everyday things was a good way to start introducing language. She began by trying to point out the things and their names but was soon discouraged. "Pointing and naming objects failed to communicate anything."²⁴ I have discussed the difficulties with explaining above, in relation to personal names. Ildefonso could perform everyone's namesigns for Mario but he could not explain what they were, or how to use them. Without *that* understanding Mario was baffled. It looks as if common names are no easier.

²³ Schaller, 1995, 36.

²⁴ Schaller, 1995, 40.

Let us stay with Mario for the moment. If Mario doesn't use anything like common nouns—if the activity of naming things is not part of the languageless communicative behaviour—Ildefonso cannot tell him that people call this TABLE and that CHAIR. Schaller spends an evening with Ildefonso, Elena, and the four languageless friends (Mario and three others), she observes many stories and performances. She watches out for “common signs”—signs which are used by everyone in the languageless group—and sees very few all evening.²⁵ Most of the storytelling is mimed or acted out. She mentions no possible common noun apart from “their sign for friend,” and she sees only Elena using that one. As she describes it, then, the languageless men do not use common names.

They told many border-crossing and border-patrol stories. The most breathtaking adventure involved a horse chase. The older man not only played himself running and sweating, but also played both the mounted officer and the horse.²⁶

The youngest took the next turn on stage and began to describe his experience riding in an airplane. Everyone watched his story of the trip with an intense interest. Since even getting fed regularly is a problem for this group, a trip in an airplane is a rare adventure indeed. First the young man and his outstretched arms became the airplane taking off with bumping and rough vibrations. Then with his hand he showed the airplane becoming small and flying into the sky.²⁷

But what they lacked in standard vocabulary and structure, they tried to make up for in a tremendous variety of facial expressions and acting skills. Their repertoire of mimed stories seemed endless.²⁸

The older storyteller does not use a common name like “officer” or “horse.” He *becomes* the officer, and he *becomes* the horse, he acts them out. The younger storyteller does not use a common name like “aeroplane.” First he becomes the aeroplane and then his hand becomes the aeroplane, as it gets further away. In this last example the handshape might

²⁵ The only one she mentions is not a noun.

²⁶ Schaller, 1995, 182.

²⁷ Schaller, 1995, 185.

²⁸ Schaller, 1995, 185.

look like AEROPLANE, but Schaller say that the stories are mimed and acted out because these men lack a standard vocabulary.²⁹ This acting out is not naming behaviour.

Thus we see no evidence that Mario is ever involved in naming behaviour. He needs, then, to be drawn into the sort of conferring in which an understanding of the names of things will develop. The example of proper names showed the sort of conferring needed there—greetings, introductions, commands and so on. In what sort of conferring do common names or nouns emerge? Presumably there will be different linguistic activities performed for we do not greet and introduce tables and chairs. When we look closely it is not so simple.

Suppose I meet some one in the street and greet him. Consider the possibilities “Good afternoon, John,” and “Good afternoon, constable.” How can Mario begin to understand this distinction? In a wider setting JOHN will develop as a namesign but CONSTABLE will not. To understand CONSTABLE Mario has to be a participant in activity where, for example, designations of rank or profession are used like names in greetings but not in introductions—we do say, “Good afternoon, constable,” but we don’t say, “This is constable.” But there is more to it than that. Just as JOHN had to emerge as a namesign within a particular linguistic setting, so CONSTABLE has to emerge as a designation of rank or profession within its particular setting where conferring makes distinctions about jobs and status.

I might, however, have said “Good afternoon, uncle,” making another distinction requiring a very different understanding from JOHN and CONSTABLE. What linguistic interaction would Mario have to have participated in to understand this greeting? What shared understanding enables him to decide whether it is appropriate for him to use “Good afternoon, uncle,” also? It is important to remember that Mario is languageless. He would have had to get involved in a lot of conferring to provide the setting in which personal names could have emerged for him. Similarly, he has to get involved in a lot of

²⁹ Schaller, 1995, 185.

conferring to provide the setting in which UNCLE emerges for him. Distinctions to do with immediate family relationships, at the very least, are needed.

Common names are beginning to look quite complicated for the likes of Mario. Earlier I raised the hypothetical issue of Mario asking something like, “What do you mean by *names*?” where the names in question are personal names. Of course Mario cannot do this, but even if he could, Ildefonso would not be able to explain it to him. The corresponding question, “What do you mean by names of things?” doesn’t really make sense, because any answer to that question will not help Mario to understand CONSTABLE or UNCLE. This hypothetical questioning, however, can be repeated by substituting, “What do you mean by *constable*?” or “What do you mean by *uncle*?” If Mario does not use any gestures that involve the sorts of distinctions that are needed to understand CONSTABLE and UNCLE, then Ildefonso will not be able to explain either. What is more, sorting out an understanding of one is not necessarily going to help in sorting out an understanding of the other. That is, each requires a *different* setting.

This illustrates the fact that understanding common names does not have the cohesiveness that we can give to the idea of understanding personal names. It looks as if each common name might need its own setting, its own sort of conferring. Personal names, sometimes, to a large extent, have the same setting. *That is Elena*. Elena is her name. When you greet her you say “Hi, Elena.” When you want her attention you call “Elena.” If she is not here you ask for Elena. When someone asks to meet her you introduce her as Elena. *That is Susan*—the same sort of setting. *That is John*—the same sort of setting. So the question “What do you mean by *names*?” seems reasonable. The corresponding question for the names of things is not reasonable because they do not emerge in the same sort of setting. *That is a constable*—has its own setting. *That is my uncle*—has its own setting.

This is analogous to Virgil seeing objects. It did not make sense to talk about Virgil’s ability to see objects, to understand them visually. Having a visual understanding of the fruit and the cutlery and so on, was absolutely no help in giving him a visual understanding of the blood pressure cuff. Each object had to be explored visually, from

this way and that, from near and far, at rest and moving. Each object had to be brought forth, as it were. After his operation Virgil sees but he does not see the fruit, he does not see the cutlery. In his interactive activity with his surroundings, these objects begin to make sense visually.

The languageless Ildefonso is, in a sense, not unfamiliar with relatives and officers of the law. But what sense does it make to talk of his understanding of them? The languageless Ildefonso is enrolled in Elena's class by his uncle, and the languageless Ildefonso has been arrested by the border guards. But he does not have the linguistic understandings UNCLE and CONSTABLE. He has to engage in the sort of interactive activity in which UNCLE and CONSTABLE are brought forth. Each one must be manipulated and explored linguistically and individually.

Now let us go back and look again at Ildefonso's early lessons where Schaller aims to teach him the names of things. In her formal lessons there is nothing beyond associating what she sees as the name with what, in her eyes, it names. There are no settings. Nothing in a mere association hints at *any* of the conferring needed for a shared understanding to develop. Nothing in a mere association gives any hint of how we *use* names. And now we are able to see especially, that nothing in a mere association hints at the *diversity* of the shared understandings in which common names emerge. No wonder nothing came of the "breakthrough." Ildefonso had no hint of any of these things so of course he couldn't *use* the signs.

What is absent from Ildefonso's experience, and absent from the lessons is any shared understanding or experience of what goes on in languaging. We can contrast Ildefonso's situation with Ishi's.³⁰ Ishi was the last survivor of the Yahi tribe in North America, and after three years living alone he sought human company. He, at this stage, shared language and culture with no one, and Schaller wonders if his story will help her to understand Ildefonso. On the one hand, she considers Ishi as a guide to help her

³⁰ Schaller, 1995, 102-109.

understand Ildefonso, and on the other hand, she is struck by the dissimilarity of the cases.

Even though he shared a language with no one, Ishi participated in the shared understanding of language. This does not mean that it was easy for him to begin conferring in another language because, some languages are very different, but he was not an outsider in the way that Ildefonso was. He listened patiently as lists of words from different tribal languages were read to him.

Ishi listened carefully and attentively even though the first word he understood came quite far down the list. He knew that an exchange of ideas was possible, and he waited for the key to be found. Ildefonso had never experienced this kind of exchange. He performed and copied and guessed at my expectations, but he had no clue that listening could be valuable.³¹

What Schaller says on the day after the breakthrough suggests that she has missed the exceptional nature of Ildefonso's situation.

His reaction to names and to our world of names contained more grief than joy. And the joy had come with not the discovery of language, but merely of names. *Actually, not even names, only the idea of the existence of names.* How foolish I was that morning. Of course we couldn't converse. My fantasy had sprung from the knowledge of what is possible with language, which we still didn't share. My hopes receded.³² (My italics.)

This just cannot be right—Ildefonso cannot have any idea of the existence of names. Ishi has that sort of idea because he has shared understandings about language. Ildefonso does not. Schaller's claim attributes to Ildefonso, an understanding of something which is beyond anything in his experience. And the relevant experience here, the only experience that will generate understanding, is conferring.

³¹ Schaller, 1995, 109.

³² Schaller, 1995, 50.

6.2.3 *The Clock: A Revelation*

The amount of conferring necessary to understand just one common name is brought home to Schaller very graphically when Ildefonso “asks” about the clock. Earlier I suggested the imaginary questions—“What do you mean by *names*?” “What do you mean by *constable*?” “What do you mean by *uncle*?” Of course, a languageless person could not ask these questions. Ildefonso, however, has made some progress and has his list of names, by the time he “asks” about the clock. He cannot say “What do you mean by *clock*?” or sign CLOCK MEAN-WHAT? Nevertheless, Schaller interprets his behaviour in this way.

In her second week with Ildefonso, the week after the “breakthrough” Schaller had attempted several lessons about time and tried to teach him what the numbers on the clock meant. She hadn’t had any success with the lessons, but she counted CLOCK as one of the signs which Ildefonso “knew,” it had even figured in the “breakthrough.” Then one morning Ildefonso asked his question.

The subject first came up during our second week together—Ildefonso’s first week of language. His vocabulary, with the exception of *cat*, was the names of things in view chair, table, book, door, and clock. Without thinking I signed “clock” (literally *timepiece*) along with furniture names and parts of the room. During that week when Ildefonso met his first names, I was too overwhelmed to reflect on what was most alien to him. Clocks and watches were so much part of my everyday life, I considered them as familiar as chairs and doors.

One morning Ildefonso saw Elena point to the clock while scolding a habitually tardy student. He pointed to it, shrugged his shoulders, and brought his hands up, asking me to explain why that piece of furniture attracted so much attention. He didn’t know the number ten yet, and he didn’t know minutes from hours from years. How could I explain time to him? I sat staring at him as he stared back, waiting for the clock lesson.³³

Nothing could show more clearly than this, the emptiness of a mere sign-thing association. If Ildefonso has made any such association what does it amount to? Is it really part of a vocabulary for him? It is as if Ildefonso has learned that the sign for this thing is CLOCK and then out of curiosity he asks what a clock is.

³³ Schaller, 1995, 116.

Schaller had used CLOCK without thinking when she tried introducing time words, but the time lessons didn't work. For instance, one week after the "breakthrough" she missed the bus and was late.

Using my lateness, I signed "clock" and began talking about time. Ildefonso sat and stared.

During that week, I tried several times to teach him what the numbers on a clock meant. He seemed to understand that they corresponded to an event like class or lunch break, but they could just as well have been pictures of flowers. The movement or position of the black hands, meant nothing to him.

I shifted to more general notions of time: morning, evening, and the idea of a day based on the sun rising and setting. Ildefonso eventually learned the signs for sun, sunrise, sunset, but not day or night. I acted out working and eating lunch and working again, then going home, resting, and eating once more as the sun disappeared. I signed "morning," "noon," and "evening" after the appropriate mimed acts, repeated the whole thing, and signed "day," which looks like the previous signs all put together. His face was blank.³⁴

Here, Schaller has captured some of the richness of the conferring from which an understanding of CLOCK develops—statements, questions, arguments about being on time for the bus, being late, lunch time, times of the day, working hours, bedtime. These only make sense to Schaller, however, because of her understanding of clocks, and she sees them as part of the setting or background for an understanding of clocks.

When Elena reprimanded the tardy student, Ildefonso was curious about the fuss over the thing on the wall. All he seemed to be able to do was associate a sign with it, and that didn't give him any understanding of it. Now, perhaps, he can associate work, meals, going to bed, and the sun with the clock. But he doesn't know how or why they are associated with the clock, any more than he knew how or why the sign CLOCK was associated with the clock. No amount of associating seems to be useful if we remember that Ildefonso has no experience of these things having any connection with clocks. No amount of associating answers his question about the scolding. No amount of

³⁴ Schaller, 1995, 62.

associating gives rise to an understanding of CLOCK. For each association set, up his shrugged question might be “So what’s the connection?”

Schaller doesn’t seem to think in terms of a background or setting of conferring from which CLOCK will *emerge* for Ildefonso as he participates. Nor does she seem to see the possibility that *all* the shared understandings involved in languaging will emerge in this way. Rather she sees the background as something which must be built up *first*; then, against that background, CLOCK can be explained or understood. She says nothing about the background needed for the background. She sees SUN as part of the background for CLOCK, but says nothing about the background for SUN.

I think it will be useful to consider Virgil here. Virgil does not build up his visual understanding by taking in his surroundings object by object. In fact, Virgil does not even start with objects. Virgil starts by walking around. At first he walks blindly with Amy as a support, and then they set up the canonical line. At first it was just through the sitting room to the kitchen and Virgil traversed it repeatedly. He had to keep on it for if he deviated everything looked different. With time his visual understanding allowed him to take small excursions from the line, and also to extend the line. He gradually built up a background visual understanding within which he could see things like his favourite chair and the dining room table. Then he could go to the fruit bowl and explore the fruit. Then he could go to the mantelpiece and explore the knick-knacks on it. A visual understanding of these small objects alone would not have enabled him to find his way around visually.

We could think of Ildefonso as being a bit like that. In learning to language his way around it is important to explore the surroundings linguistically. If he can get around a bit then he can begin to build up a linguistic understanding within which it is possible for him pick things out to explore further. Maybe that is how he was able to “ask” about the clock. It is also how I think he began to pick out signs which he brought to Schaller for “deciphering.” Without some languaging ability Ildefonso would never have seen movements of signs. He would have been unable to pick them out in the way

that he was unable to pick TREE out from the activity which included the mimed instruction to draw, and the encouraging nod, in the second TREE lesson.

When Ildefonso begins to pick out some signs for himself he brings them to Schaller for “deciphering.” Sometimes he guesses correctly by himself. She makes an apparent distinction between the ones that he guesses and the ones that need more background.

He would not participate [with other students], but he was fascinated by conversations and studied signers constantly. He began to pick out one or two signs a day and bring them to me for deciphering. Sometimes he guessed a sign’s meaning and would surprise me by using it in our mime-sign conversations. One morning, for example, he casually tossed the sign “school” into a mostly mimed description. He had picked it up and guessed its meaning correctly. Other times he would need days or weeks of lessons to provide the background information and additional language before understanding a sign or a phrase. Once he brought in the sign “monthly” and wanted an explanation. The question had to be shelved. He didn’t yet understand that we measured time, and he couldn’t understand my first lesson on the clock.³⁵

After Elena’s behaviour has drawn the clock to his attention Schaller tries another time lesson. Again she comments on the importance of the background.

... I launched another lesson about time. As so often happened, Ildefonso’s immediate question had to wait while a series of lessons provided enough background and vocabulary to explain the significance and reason for the clock.

“Time,” I signed, the first part of the sign for clock. Ildefonso waited for meaning. So did I.

“Sun,” I signed, describing a yellow ball in the sky. Puzzled, he searched for something round on the ceiling. I took him outdoors and pointed to the sun. “Sun.” Then I repeated my earlier description of day and night, adding a few new signs that Ildefonso knew. Ildefonso, arms folded, still waited patiently for meaning.³⁶

In these extracts I see three subtle implications which I think are misleading. Firstly, there is a subtle implication that Ildefonso *can* pick up or guess some signs correctly *on his own*. This implication is misleading because the statement, “He would not

³⁵ Schaller, 1995, 110.

³⁶ Schaller, 1995, 117.

participate ...,” overlooks the ways in which Ildefonso is already being drawn in as a participant in languaging with Schaller herself. If he has no idea what is going on then there is nothing to give him an inkling of what might even count as a possible guess. He must participate in some languaging activity if he is to be in a position to pick up and guess correctly. A guess will not emerge prior to this, as it might have emerged for Ishi.

Secondly, there is a subtle implication that the additional vocabulary to be provided for understanding CLOCK might not itself have to have a background provided, or need any additional vocabulary. That is, some signs in the additional vocabulary will not have to be dealt with in the way that CLOCK has to be dealt with, otherwise there would be a continuing problem of “additional vocabulary.” This implication is misleading because, providing background, as Schaller calls it, is just confronts Ildefonso with another name or set of names. This misses the role of conferring, rather than vocabulary, as the starting point for all shared understanding.

Thirdly, there is a subtle implication that a particular background precedes the understanding of a particular word or sign. That is, for instance, an understanding that we measure time precedes an understanding of MONTHLY. Rather than the notion that perhaps it is in coming to understand terms like MONTHLY that we develop an understanding of measuring time. This implication is misleading because the shared understandings that happen to appear prior to others, in any particular case, depend to some extent on the way that conferring happens. Different circumstances and different experiences result in differences in ongoing conferring so far as each individual is concerned. It so happens that there is a clock on the wall of the classroom and not a calendar. Something like this has implications for Ildefonso’s initial understanding of DAY.

To begin to understand CLOCK, Ildefonso has to be drawn into an interactive setting where CLOCK emerges for him. Part of that setting may involve TIME, so Ildefonso has to be drawn into an interactive setting where TIME emerges. The idea of *giving* Ildefonso, DAY, MORNING, SUNRISE, BEDTIME, and so on, *so that* he can understand

CLOCK perpetuates the mistaken idea of building a structure with units. Furthermore, it does not address the difficulty of getting started. If we think, instead, of all understanding emerging from conferring we get a different picture. CLOCK emerges in the same way that DAY does, and TREE does, and CAT does. These shared understandings all get started in conferring and understanding one is no guide to understanding another even though we can see a connection—they are all names of things.

There is no neat network to be articulated. There is no common name that does not emerge in conferring. Each common name will have various connections with others and there is no way of saying which ones are necessary or sufficient for understanding others. It is possible that a useful shared understanding of CLOCK involves no understanding of SUN. But the understanding of CLOCK cannot emerge in isolation from other shared understandings. Various distinctions will be involved. It is a mistake, however, to think that we can “set up” those distinctions. It was an unrealistic simplification when I said earlier that CONSTABLE needed distinctions of profession and rank, as if we could say what Mario would need. An understanding of those notions themselves has to emerge in conferring, and there is no way of specifying what particular conferring is needed.

All shared understandings emerge in conferring. Each common name emerges as a *particular* shared understanding, as conferring makes adequate distinctions. Those distinctions are themselves shared understandings which emerge in conferring. The shared understanding of one common name is no guide to understanding another, even where the understanding of one name involves the understanding of another. The very notion of “common name” itself is a shared understanding which seems to need certain linguistic distinctions. Thus, the shared understanding of CLOCK is different from the shared understanding that CLOCK is the name of that object, or the understanding that CLOCK names something.

The idea that Ildefonso must *first* know the names of some everyday things, or the idea that he must *first* know that things have names, are the ideas that drive some of

Schaller's early lessons. Those ideas are mistaken and it becomes clear that Ildefonso must be *first* be drawn into conferring as a participant. Furthermore, it doesn't matter what sort of conferring so long as he learns to language his way around. There is no way of saying what sort of conferring Ildefonso must participate in to understand common names. There is no way of saying what sort of conferring he needs to participate in to understand even one common name.

6.3 Going Beyond the Examples

The neat divisions of language into categories like time words, names of things, and names of activities, misses the turbulent aspect of conferring. DAY doesn't have the same setting as MONTHLY, even though they are both "time words." CLOCK and TREE emerge differently in conferring, even though they are both "names of things." There is no way of telling whether or not an understanding of RUNNING needs an understanding of WALKING, even though they are both "names of activities" which we may see as ordered. This new turbulent picture emerges when we see the futility of trying, in the absence of conferring, to teach Ildefonso the names of things. In place of the "simple" name-thing relation a multitude of activities has to be mastered instead.

When thinking about language in relation to people like Ildefonso and Mario, terms like *system*, *network*, *structure*, and even *woven in*, do not seem appropriate. They are too neat and we cannot find a good place to begin. There is just no way to present language like that, as if teaching school French to English speaking students. *Turbulence* seems a more appropriate term when we see what Ildefonso has to come to grips with—it captures the apparent disorder of our languaging activities, a sort of disorder revealed by attempts to present language in an orderly fashion.

In the above examples I have covered very few of our shared understandings. Notions of justice and fairness are representative of notions which definitely seem to be shared understandings. Schaller has drawn attention to the shared aspect of the notion of colour preference. The interaction between Ildefonso and Mario shows that using personal names is a shared understanding, and it is not as simple as it looks at first. Moving on to common names the idea that we can talk about *a* shared understanding becomes absurd.

There is a multitude of shared understandings, none of them specifiable, and none of them simple, involved in the understanding of any one common name. *All* these shared understandings develop in conferring—and conferring is not neat, as Schaller’s later account shows.

I do not want to push the notion of disorder to the extreme of random confusion, but I want to use the notion of turbulence to move away from the idea of language as a neat structure. When Schaller began to present Ildefonso with ASL signs she was thinking in terms of an ordered structure. First she presented the names of things, and later tried to add verbs, the names of activities, and time words.

He continued to react to verb lessons as orders, and when he did seem to understand, to add a verb to his vocabulary, he used it only when prompted. He never combined a verb with a noun. Verb plus noun did not seem as natural or automatic as names to him. I drilled him on verb phrases and added new verbs, always hoping to improve our exchanges of questions and answers.

Many times, I tried to hard. Once I created two giant columns in space on either side of me. In the left hand column I mimed, then signed: “see,” “walk,” “sit,” “stand,” “read,” “eat,” “run,” and “teach.” On the right I listed Ildefonso’s vocabulary: “door,” “table,” “book,” etc., and, of course, “cat.” “Names, here,” I signed above the now-invisible list on my right. “Activities, over here,” I signed on my left side. Ildefonso suddenly looked sleepy. Instead of expressing bewilderment or lack of comprehension, he just blanked out.

I met the same poker face and sleepy eyes whenever I attempted to teach any of our conventions concerning time. I tried more clock lessons. He yawned. I described parts of the day and practiced greetings, such as “Good morning” and “Good evening.”³⁷

She thinks in terms of things like verb plus noun, names here and activities over here, time words, adjectives to add to his names. She worries at first about teaching him rules and grammar, and the “complicated structures of language.”³⁸ This gives the impression of something orderly and fixed. And whether the supposed order is on the surface or at a deeper level, she assumes it is there to be grasped, or to be shown, and so the lessons are, at first, structured reflect some order. In general, such lessons just do

³⁷ Schaller, 1995, 72-73.

³⁸ Schaller, 1995, 55,58.

not work. Language acquisition is so often talked of in terms of an ordered process, and mastering vocabulary and rules. The following just does not capture Ildefonso's development—and I do not think this is because he is an adult.

The task of language acquisition requires that children learn much more than patterns of sound, grammar and vocabulary. They must also learn to use these patterns appropriately in a rapidly increasing range of everyday social situations.³⁹

When Schaller goes on, however, to describes the real progress that she and Ildefonso made—the frustrations as well as the successes, and above all how she herself felt about those interactions where shared understanding began to emerge—she is not describing an ordered process or activity. She is not describing anything like the acquisition of a vocabulary and grammar. It is surprising how much languaging can take place without a vocabulary and without any knowledge of grammar. But nor is she describing a confused or disordered process. Patterns are created, or patterns emerge, and I see this as more like the patterns that emerge in turbulence, than as fixed patterns that are revealed. It is as if conferring begins like that.⁴⁰

For hours, days, weeks and finally months, Ildefonso and I played mountain climbers. We plaited, tossed, tugged, and tested strands of meaning. Lines had to be thrown repeatedly until they were finally caught and attached. Gradually, sometimes with agonizing slowness, we tied knots, wove a pattern, and added breadth, height, and thickness to our rickety bridge. Slowly, as imperceptibly as a tree grows, we communicated.⁴¹

When we consider Ildefonso in his everyday life among family and friends, wanting to go to school, looking for a job, and avoiding the border guards we know he manages. But I have suggested that he has no understanding of things like UNCLE and CONSTABLE. Just living among family and friends, and just, dealing with border guards, does not provide settings for those sorts of understandings to emerge. When Schaller meets Mario and the other languageless men, she interprets a gesture that Elena makes as “their sign for friend.” It seems to me that this may be a shared understanding, but if it doesn't

³⁹ Crystal, 1987, 246.

⁴⁰ This is discussed in the next chapter.

⁴¹ Schaller, 1995, 71.

emerge in conferring as distinct from, say, ACQUAINTANCE, LOVER, COLLEAGUE, ALLY, GUEST, then FRIEND may not quite capture the shared understanding of the gesture.

If we try, then, to conceive of what understanding a languageless person does have, it seems impossible. Anything we care to mention will, I suggest, turn out to be dependent on conferring. That is the only sort of world view we can conceive of when we discuss whether or not Ildefonso has a world view.

6.4 Ildefonso is Just Like Us but Different

At the beginning of this section I mentioned that in Schaller's account there is a tension between Ildefonso being just like us and radically different from us. Ildefonso's languagelessness is at the heart of this tension. Does languagelessness make him radically different or not? So far as Schaller is concerned, she thinks of his situation in terms of all the linguistic interaction he has missed.

I kept trying to imagine being in a world without language, to conceive what it would be like to have to invent and project meaning onto the world without any information or clues, without any feedback. This man had never received one explanation. Even a year-old baby must have a more cohesive view of the world than he did.⁴²

No one had ever agreed or disagreed with him, mirrored, confirmed, or argued with his impressions. He had only his own mind to connect experiences, find patterns, imagine meanings, and fit together semantic puzzles. Even with shared meaning, feedback, and help in interpreting the world, many people have trouble with reality. How does one stay sane when all interpretation is generated by one's self alone?⁴³

On the one hand, Schaller finds it hard to imagine interpreting the world by one's self alone. It is not Ildefonso's world view itself that she says she cannot imagine here, rather, it is putting it all together on one's own that she cannot imagine. But that, she

⁴² Schaller, 1995, 27-28.

⁴³ Schaller, 1995, 36.

says, is what Ildefonso had to do. He had to invent meaning, and project that meaning onto the world. He had to connect experiences, find patterns and imagine meanings in his own mind “without any information or clues.” She seems to be saying that Ildefonso had to make sense of his experiences by constructing a coherent story, so that what he ends up with is some sort of world view. So, on this hand, Ildefonso just does what he can with his own resources. He generates his own interpretation.

On the other hand, Schaller seems to question whether he could interpret the world at all. She points out some of the important things he has missed—feedback and explanations, agreeing and disagreeing, confirming and arguing. These are not especially classroom interactions, they are normal everyday interactions. She says, “Even with shared meaning, feedback, and help in interpreting the world, many people have trouble with reality.” She has picked out some of the more obvious things that enable us to make sense of our experiences, and even then it isn’t easy for us. Thus, we don’t usually generate interpretations on our own, it happens in the very interactive environment of human languaging. This is not to say that our ideas come from others, or are determined by others. Rather, by conferring, that is, in expressing and listening, our individual understandings develop.

So on the one hand, Schaller suggests that Ildefonso invents or imagines meaning, projects meaning, connects experiences, finds patterns, and comes up with an interpretation. That is, he has a world view of his own. On the other hand, she suggests that a world view normally develops through feedback and explanation, agreement and disagreement, confirming and arguing. That is, we come up with an interpretation through all sorts of linguistic interaction. If this is indeed *the* way it is done then Ildefonso is just not in a position to do it. He has not participated in the everyday linguistic interactions that his hearing peers have been involved in all their lives. Because he has no language, he cannot develop an understanding in the way that we do, and it is not clear that there is any other way to do it.

This tension is apparent in Schaller’s writing. It is a tension between Ildefonso being one of us, and Ildefonso being so different that it is as if he is from a different planet.

This sense of his being different arises from his languageless state, not from any bizarre aspect of his behaviour, or his way of communicating in gesture and mime. Schaller senses the difference *right from the start*, from the failed introduction—that is where she says, “we might as well have been from different planets.” Despite realising this gulf, however, she is reluctant to admit an extreme difference. I think this is because Ildefonso’s being like us accords him equal value as a human being, and his being unlike us might be taken as according him less value in some way.

While value is attached to something like having a “view of the world,” or to “interpreting the world,” it is difficult to suggest that Ildefonso has not managed to make some sense of the world on his own. Any suggestion that he cannot do this doesn’t just reflect badly on his ability, it can give us the uncomfortable feeling that Ildefonso’s humanity is being subtly downgraded. For instance, to say that Ildefonso has no coherent world view, or no world view at all, or to say that he has not been able to interpret the world, may seem presumptuous or derogatory—but this man has ability. If we say he has no understanding of things the implication is that he is stupid—but clearly he is not.

The same tension arises when Schaller compares Ildefonso with Ishi, the last survivor of the Yahi tribe. Firstly, she realises that both Ishi and Ildefonso think in isolation and she thinks this similarity might help her to learn something about Ildefonso from Ishi’s case.

Ildefonso’s one-sign questions gave me a hint of the capacity of an individual human mind that had always thought in isolation. I knew that I would never be able to imagine that kind of isolation, and I daily wished that he could learn language faster so that I could learn more about his unique conclusions and impressions.

I continued to try to fathom what his thinking had been like without language, to imagine his aloneness. The closer I could get to understanding his world, the easier it would be to explain mine to him. Where, I wondered, could I find clues to help me. There must be someone else who had experienced such solitude. As I tried to think of one, I remembered the story of Ishi, the last wild Indian in North America. After all the rest of his tribe, the Yahi, were killed, Ishi, the last speaker of his language, lived alone for two or three years. In August 1911, out of desperation, starvation, and loneliness, he

wandered from his tribal territory into the corral of a slaughterhouse near Oroville, California.⁴⁴

No one speaks Ishi's language so there is no linguistic interaction to help Ishi make sense of the culture in which he finds himself, it appears he has only his own resources to do this. In this way he is like Ildefonso, who also has only his own resources. But even as Schaller introduces the similarity she mentions the difference.

As I mentally compare Ishi and Ildefonso, I found that their similarities revealed their human nature, and their differences showed the importance of language and of belonging to a tribe. Both lived alone and outside of society and could be described as wild men.⁴⁵

As Schaller's discussion continues she again notes the importance of language. *We* develop our view of the world or our understanding through linguistic interaction. What does Ishi do? *We* have "acquired tools," as she puts it, through feedback and explanations, agreeing and disagreeing, confirming and arguing. What does Ishi have? It turns out that Ishi does what we do, and Ishi has what we have.

In contrast to Ildefonso, who had no clues as to how to interpret what he saw, Ishi understood the concepts of culture, social structures, and systems of relating. No matter how strange modern culture appeared, he knew that sense and order must exist in it, and could be explained. Even though Ishi's language and culture dealt with an aboriginal world, he had lived as part of a community. Although he had had no contact with another human being for years, he had the tools and the help of the minds of his people. He carried the memories of all the people in his life. Their words, information, and advice fed his thoughts and perceptions. Language provides a kind of immortality. Ishi's people, even after death, continued to help him survive and interpret life. Unlike Ildefonso, he had a system of beliefs, ideas and assumptions that could be used to process the new information from the strange world around him. He could make analogies and comparisons, manipulating all the symbols and ideas that his language had given him.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Schaller, 1995, 102.

⁴⁵ Schaller, 1995, 104.

⁴⁶ Schaller, 1995, 105.

However we choose to describe these cases, it turns out that in the area where it counts, Ishi is not like Ildefonso—Ishi is not a guide to understanding Ildefonso because Ishi is like us. Ishi knows how to confer with others. Schaller looked to the story of Ishi as a guide—“The closer I could get to understanding his [Ildefonso’s] world, the easier it would be to explain mine to him. Where, I wondered, could I find clues to help me. There must be someone else who had experienced such solitude. As I tried to think of one, I remembered the story of Ishi...”—and she found that Ishi was just like us, and not like Ildefonso. Ishi had language.

Language, as Schaller points out, is often spoken of as a characteristic of being human, and this gives rise to at least some of the tension in her account. To say Ildefonso has no language is to suggest that he is less than human, so to counter this she affirms his humanity—human intelligence, human nature, human personality, and self-awareness—without considering the part language might play in any of these notions. She addresses the point very forcefully.

In *The Man With a Shattered World*, Luria writes that “what is distinctly human [is] the ability to use language.” One can easily alter this truth so that instead of thinking of language as a distinct human attribute, one thinks of language as a definition of humanness. I cannot conceive of human life without language. Yet, from the first day I met Ildefonso, I never doubted his human nature. Although his attempts to communicate reminded me of a mimicking chimpanzee, and he could express little more than a cat or a dog, I knew he had human intelligence, a human personality, and an awareness of himself as a human. I can understand Ishi more than I can understand Ildefonso, but *my* lack of understanding does not subtract from Ildefonso’s humanness.⁴⁷

I see no reason to treat any of this as a matter of value in a human being. It may indeed turn out that conferring is absolutely fundamental to our understanding, that it is absolutely fundamental to having a world view, and that it is even absolutely fundamental to having a self-understanding. If this is so, it does not follow that someone like Ildefonso is devalued, or is considered to be defective in any way. Schaller is cautious on this because, in the past, having language, or using a particular language, *has*

⁴⁷ Schaller, 1995, 103.

been taken as a matter of value. The most salient prejudice here is the attitude of the hearing to the deaf.

Schaller is acutely aware of the depths of this prejudice and so backs off the most extreme claim about the importance of conferring. She points out the importance of linguistic interaction, and then credits Ildefonso with inventing, imagining and projecting meaning, and with connecting experiences and finding patterns, all in the absence of linguistic interaction. She says she cannot imagine doing these things on one's own, but she assumes that Ildefonso has done it on his own. She notes that even with linguistic interaction some people have trouble with reality, and then marvels at Ildefonso's sanity after generating his interpretation alone. She takes Ishi as a guide and then recognises the richness of what he can do. Even this insight does not lead her to doubt that Ildefonso has made some sense of his world in that he has his own understanding of things.

That is, Schaller still credits Ildefonso with inventing, imagining and projecting meaning, and with connecting experiences and finding patterns, as if these sorts of things can be done, in the *total* absence of linguistic interaction. In the light of all she says about feedback and explanations, agreeing and disagreeing, confirming and arguing, however, it is not clear that any of these things *can* be done in the absence of linguistic interaction. But, it is perfectly clear that Ildefonso has ability and intelligence. Furthermore, making the more extreme claim—that conferring is absolutely fundamental to our understanding, that it is absolutely fundamental to having a world view, and that it is even absolutely fundamental to having a self-understanding—does not compromise Ildefonso's value as a human being.

We can have no real insight into why oralism is regarded as a crime by people like Goldberg, if we do not try to find out something about the consequences of oralism. Ildefonso was not subjected to oralism, but he did not acquire any language and that, the Deaf claim, can be a consequence of strict oralism. If it appears that Ildefonso has no understanding of the world in the way that we usually think of an understanding of the world, then we should consider that as a possible consequence of oralism. If it appears

that Ildefonso has no understanding of the world in the way that we usually think of an understanding of the world, despite being an intelligent man, that is an important consideration too. So often the failure of oralism was attributed to deficiencies in the children who failed.

Sacks said that we have no idea how much has gone into our visual understanding of the world. Virgil makes us aware of some of what is needed just to be able to see our way across the room or to see an apple.

As Virgil explored the rooms of his house, investigating, so to speak, the visual construction of the world, I was reminded of an infant moving his hand to and fro before his eyes, wagging his head, turning it this way and that, in his primal construction of the world. Most of us have no sense of the immensity of this construction, for we perform it seamlessly, unconsciously, thousands of times every day, at a glance.⁴⁸

The rest of us, born sighted, can scarcely imagine such confusion. For we, born with a full complement of senses, and correlating these, one with the other, create a sight world from the start, a world of visual objects and concepts and meanings. When we open our eyes each morning, it is upon a world we have spent a lifetime *learning* to see. We are not given the world: we make our world through incessant experience, categorization, memory, reconnection. But when Virgil opened his eye, after being blind for forty-five years - having had little more than an infant's visual experience, and this long forgotten - there were no visual memories to support a perception; there was no world of experience and meaning awaiting him. He saw, but what he saw had no coherence. His retina and optic nerve were active, transmitting impulses, but his brain could make no sense of them; he was, as neurologists say, agnostic.⁴⁹

If we let passages like this guide us when we think of Ildefonso learning to language his way through a simple dialogue, or learning to talk about cats, or his uncle, Ildefonso's bewilderment and persistent copying no longer puzzle us. We have gained some understanding of his languagelessness when we are no longer so puzzled by his behaviour.

⁴⁸ Sacks, 1995, 120-121.

⁴⁹ Sacks, 1995, p.108.

We can get some understanding, then, of what Pivac means by saying that some deaf people feel lost in the hearing world and lost in the Deaf world, if we think of some of the issues Schaller raises in her discussion of Ildefonso. For instance, it is not only complex concepts like justice that develop in conferring activity, it is personal things like preferences, and everyday things like naming objects. It might be thought that I didn't really choose simple enough objects when I chose to discuss, "constable," "uncle," and "clock." I chose them, however, because they were appropriate to Schaller's discussion.

I do not think that other names, like "tree," "cat," or "table," are any easier for Ildefonso. Think of Virgil again—"When we open our eyes each morning, it is upon a world we have spent a lifetime *learning* to see." We have spent a lifetime learning to language names like "tree," "cat," or "table," and we have spent a lifetime learning to language our way through dialogues. Of course it looks simple to us—"Most of us have no sense of the immensity of this construction, for we perform it seamlessly, unconsciously, thousands of times every day, at a glance [or in an utterance]." Ildefonso did not use any of the signs on his list. That should no longer be surprising. The signs or words or names are not fundamental when it comes to language acquisition, no matter how basic they seem to us. Conferring is what is important, that is how the words or signs are brought forth for Ildefonso.

In the next chapter I will discuss Ildefonso's development from being languageless to being enlanguaged and show that the best way to characterise that transition is in terms of conferring. Any discussion of words, names, or grammar will not capture the process.

CHAPTER 7

In this chapter I want to show how a view of language as interaction emerges from Schaller's account. This view focuses on the way people interact rather than on what they use. This puts the focus on conferring rather than on words, signs or grammar. Schaller does not make this point explicitly because so often she thinks of Ildefonso's progress in terms of what he uses to communicate, and what he needs to confer. She says things like:

...he didn't have enough symbols to convey a complete thought.¹

He must be able. I insisted to myself, to progress, to learn more signs and actually link two, then three together.²

This seems like a fairly conventional notion of progress in language acquisition. A quantity of signs are acquired. Simple sentences appear first. Longer and more complex sentences are evidence of progress.

These criteria—quantity of signs, and length and complexity of expressions—are part of the evaluation of linguistic development in deaf children who develop homesign systems with non-signing parents. These systems are sometimes described as systems with language-like properties which develop in the absence of a conventional language model, where a conventional language model is taken to be some particular language like English or ASL.³ What does happen in the homes of these children, however, is lots of conferring. The parents communicate with each other, and make the effort to communicate with and to understand their children. Somehow the parents and the children make their wishes known to each other as all sorts of interaction goes on. The greatest focus on this sort of “try anything” interaction is found in the informal comments of parents who have been persuaded to embrace oralism, but who, in

¹ Schaller, 1995, 70.

² Schaller, 1995, 68.

³ Goldin-Meadow, 1993, 64.

desperation, devise their own means of communicating with their children by trying anything that seems to work.

Ildefonso does not seem to interact in this way and he does not appear to have any home signs. Perhaps Schaller has missed it, but perhaps family circumstances precluded such development, as so much time and energy had to go into surviving in difficult circumstances. Any behaviour which looks like conferring does not seem to come easily to Ildefonso, even after he and Schaller have begun to interact. This seems to suggest that he has not been as involved in family interaction as children who develop homesigning.

Some of the things Schaller says about Ildefonso's *actual* progress do hint at the importance of an environment of conferring, and his apparent unfamiliarity with it. She describes situations in which she herself will try anything she can to communicate with Ildefonso, and remarks on how slowly they seem to progress. That is how the other view emerges for me, it is in her descriptions of her continuing day to day *interaction* with Ildefonso. One of the most interesting things she points out is the sort of *situation* or *activity* in which progress occurs. It occurs in their dialogues, even though these are not always "successful," nor are they neatly structured. At first very little, if any, ASL is used.

In a dialogue the teacher is indistinguishable from the student. My lectures to Ildefonso never fostered understanding or created new paths; our dialogues, in contrast, were never wasted experiments, even if they failed to convey the intended message. We always improved, at least a little, with each round.⁴

For hours, days, weeks and finally months, Ildefonso and I played mountain climbers. We plaited, tossed, tugged, and tested strands of meaning. Lines had to be thrown repeatedly until they were finally caught and attached. Gradually, sometimes with agonizing slowness, we tied knots, wove a pattern, and added breadth, height, and thickness to our rickety bridge. Slowly, as imperceptibly as a tree grows, we communicated.⁵

⁴ Schaller, 1995, 73-74.

⁵ Schaller, 1995, 71.

The dialogues are thus an important place to look at Ildefonso's progress, but what should we look *at*? Schaller seems to describe a two way activity, she and Ildefonso are constructing something together. From what she says I get the sense of a mutual back and forth sort of interaction developing in the dialogues. Neither of these passages suggest that Schaller is giving Ildefonso something that he needs in order to get started, least of all an orderly collection of ASL signs partitioned into nouns, verbs, and so on. There is progress in the dialogues, "even if they fail to convey the intended message," because in those situations Ildefonso is learning to participate in a particular sort of interaction that is crucial to conferring.

I will use three dialogues between Ildefonso and Schaller to show the progress that Ildefonso makes in conferring. The first dialogue takes place when Ildefonso signs DUMB-ME. Schaller immediately abandons her planned lesson and tries to tell Ildefonso that he is not dumb, he just didn't have the opportunity to go to school. The second dialogue is a geography, or history, lesson initiated by Ildefonso's question about their different skin colour. The third dialogue is an argument about who will pay for the burritos they have ordered for lunch.

I see a particular sort of progression in these three dialogues. The progression that seems relevant to me concerns the way that Schaller and Ildefonso interact. What changes dramatically from the first dialogue to the third dialogue is the nature and the degree of Ildefonso's participation. Of course his use of ASL signs improves too but I think the dialogues show that this is not central to his linguistic development. That is, the dialogues illustrate the claim from the previous chapter, that Ildefonso must first begin to confer. Thus, the aspect of the interaction that I will concentrate on is a reciprocal aspect that has the back and forth nature of conferring, and that shows a growing engagement between the participants.

When Schaller began her lessons with Ildefonso he was very much a non-participant, in that he couldn't even watch in an interested way. It wasn't that he merely failed to understand her language, rather he didn't seem to know what sort of activity was going on, so he had no idea how to join in. This was the difference between Ildefonso and

Ishi. Ishi knew what was going on, and so he listened patiently to the list of words that was read to him. He was participating, or at least showed knowledge of how to participate, by waiting expectantly for a word he could recognise. Ishi knew what words were, but, more importantly, he knew how to confer. I think that knowledge of how to confer was what kept him listening.

When Ildefonso begins to participate in back and forth interaction, that is, interaction which has the appearance of conferring, signs do not appear to play the crucial part that Schaller initially thought. Furthermore, mime and gesture are not as inadequate as she initially suggests, when all her focus is on giving him “the symbols he needs.”

Although he now knew of something beyond languagelessness, he didn't have enough symbols to convey a complete thought. Mime and gesture could not describe how he had survived or who he was. Nor could his primitive acting and pointing ask the questions he had puzzled over all his life.⁶

Part of what I want to show in this chapter is that this way of thinking is misleading because it draws a line between using words or using mime. It makes us focus on what is used, signs or mime, rather than on the way people are interacting—for instance, asking questions, explaining, arguing, gossiping.

In showing how Ildefonso begins to confer with Schaller, I am not denying that he already interacts with people using gestures and mime. Part of Schaller's claim about the invisibility of languageless adults, however, is that many hearing people take any sort of miming or gesturing to be signed language, whereas Deaf people see differences between mimed or gestured interaction which is conferring and mimed or gestured interaction which is not conferring.⁷ I think the dialogues help to call attention to this difference, because they show Ildefonso coming to *interact* differently. Yet some of the most intense back and forth reciprocal interaction in these dialogues is still mimed. That is, the difference is in the interaction and not in what is used.

⁶ Schaller, 1995, 70.

⁷ Schaller, 1995, 138-139, 189-190.

7.1 The First Dialogue: “Dumb me.”

The first dialogue I have chosen took place a week after the “breakthrough,” and Ildefonso was still not really using the ASL signs Schaller had shown him. She felt that, although there was little sign of progress, a developing friendship encouraged them both to continue with the lessons, despite her inexperience and Ildefonso’s lack of understanding.

During many discouraging days, I wondered what kept us working. In the first few weeks of our work together, Ildefonso’s progress was not great enough to encourage the student in him or the teacher in me. What pushed us every morning to face each other? It’s obvious now, in retrospect. When I look back, I don’t recall the student Ildefonso, but Ildefonso, my friend. As friends, we pushed each other to explore.⁸

The idea of a developing friendship in the absence of conversation is worth thinking about. In the early stages there were not even greetings or “baby-talk” sentences, and Schaller and Ildefonso could barely follow each others miming. Yet Schaller gives the impression that a friendship began to develop anyway, and there was a mutual push to explore. The idea of a personal relationship, such as friendship, preceding Ildefonso’s acquisition of a language will be discussed in a later chapter. For the moment, however, I just want to point out that despite the apparent absence of any *means* of interacting, the interaction between Schaller and Ildefonso was developing.

The first dialogue begins when Ildefonso shows Schaller a sign he has been shown, or has seen, elsewhere, DUMB-ME. There is a sudden break from the lesson format as Schaller reacts to this sign.

We began as teacher and student. Ildefonso’s first vocabulary naturally related to our classroom and our initial relationship: paper, book, teacher, student. Our teacher-student relationship became secondary, however, two weeks after we met, one week after he discovered names. That morning Ildefonso surprised me with a sign I hadn’t taught him. He signed, “Dumb me.” Then he pointed to me and described my head as big (full). He slouched, and hung his jaw, made miniature nonsense gestures, and signed, again: “Dumb me.”

⁸ Schaller, 1995, 76.

“No! Not (Head shaking) dumb,” I argued. Where did he pick up that sign? I was glad that he was learning signs on his own, but “dumb”! What a terrible first sign to share with me. I was very sorry that he learned an insult and used it against himself.

“Dumb me,” he repeated, and lowered his head as if in shame.

“No, no, no!” I shouted with both hands. I tried to explain for the first time the difference between hearing and deafness. My description of sound and hearing basically showed names being absorbed into my ears, whereas his ears were stopped up. The names couldn’t get through. The light in his eyes dimmed, and he folded his arms—reliable evidence that this communication began and ended as a monologue. ...

I immediately changed to another explanation: “Baby you (over there), baby me (here).” I exaggerated “baby,” which is one of the more iconic signs—that is, a picture sign that can convey meaning even to a nonsigner. I put the two babies on the floor and with two flat palms on top of the babies’ heads, I slowly raised my hands and the babies grew to be children. “This child,” pointing to one and then to myself, “this one, Susan. She went to school, to a classroom like this one,” I gestured and mimed. My flat palm, once again on the child’s head, rose some more, showing growth. I acted out, “This child continued to attend school. This other child—no school. This child—you, Ildefonso. School me, no school you.” I mimed and signed, “No dumb you, smart you, smart,” and taught him a new sign.

Ildefonso followed my movements with interest, which I interpreted as an indication of some understanding. He had unfolded his arms. This lesson was far more important than my prepared lesson on verbs. I would pound this comparison into the air until I convinced him of our essential equality. During the third round, I saw an opportunity not only to see how much he understood, but to ask my first question regarding his life: “This child, me—school. This (other) child, you—what?” I was hoping he would guess the right question and describe what he did as a child.

“Child this-high me?” Ildefonso responded.

“Yes. What’s that child doing?” I mimed, by appearing to have trouble seeing the child and by describing a few activities in the context of the question.

Ildefonso extended his arm and held his cupped hand out. Then he moved his open hand back and forth in front of imaginary people. He begged. The height of the child was the height of a four- or five-year-old. While I ate three meals a day and sat every week for years in school, this boy begged. I’m sure some days he received nothing in his upturned palm, and he and his family went hungry. The verb lesson could wait.⁹

⁹ Schaller, 1995, 78-79.

7.1.1 *Dialogue or Monologue*

In her account of this dialogue Schaller explicitly makes a distinction between a dialogue and a monologue. This distinction is sometimes clear only in Ildefonso's facial expression or general demeanour. Ildefonso with eyes open, leaning forward, arms unfolded contrasts with Ildefonso looking sleepy, sitting back in his chair and folding his arms. Here, her first attempt to describe the difference between herself and Ildefonso in terms of hearing and deafness is a monologue as evidenced by Ildefonso's behaviour.

The light in his eyes dimmed, and he folded his arms—reliable evidence that this communication began and ended as a monologue.¹⁰

She then tries to describe the difference by showing how different their childhood experiences were—she went to school and he did not—and Ildefonso's demeanour is quite different.

Ildefonso followed my movements with interest which I interpreted as an indication of some understanding. He had unfolded his arms. I repeated the entire story.¹¹

As yet this does not look like a dialogue as we normally think of a dialogue. Ildefonso does not appear to be participating in any way other than as an interested spectator. That at least, is different from the lessons, where he watched uncomprehendingly. What makes this interaction begin to look like a dialogue is Ildefonso's response to Schaller's mimed "question" in the third telling of the story. Then we see that he has clearly picked up the fact that her story is about their childhood, even though he made no attempt to add to her story or to fill any gaps in the two earlier tellings. It is only when Schaller draws him in with her questioning face and by miming a sequence where she has trouble seeing something, that he joins in and responds, not to the story in general, but to her specific "question." This is what makes the interaction look like a dialogue.

¹⁰ Schaller, 1995, 77-78.

¹¹ Schaller, 1995, 78.

7.1.2 Asking a Question?

I have reservations about saying that Schaller asks a question and that Ildefonso answers it. In a way this is what the interaction amounts to but it is not exactly what they do. Sacks talks of the difficulty many deaf children have with questions even those with some competence in ASL, and cites Isabelle Rapin to illustrate this.

Asking questions of [deaf] children about what they had just read made me aware that many have a remarkable linguistic deficiency. They do not possess the linguistic device provided by the question forms. It is not that they do not know the answer to the question, it is that they do not understand the question. ... I once asked a boy, "Who lives in your house?" (The question was translated to the boy in sign language by his teacher.) The boy had a blank look on his face. I then noted the teacher turned the question around into a series of declarative sentences: "In your house you, mother ..." A look of comprehension came onto his face and he drew me a picture of his house with all family members, including the dog. ... I noted again and again that teachers tended to hesitate to put questions to their pupils, and often expressed queries as incomplete sentences in which the deaf children could fill in the blanks.¹²

The distinction that Rapin makes here depends on looking at the form of what is used in the interaction and not the nature of the interaction itself. The incomplete declarative sentence is different from a question, and seems to be regarded as an inferior way of interacting. Thus the absence of the question form is classed as a "remarkable linguistic deficiency." Nothing is said about how the teacher managed, by engaging the boy in some back and forth interaction, to achieve what we would normally expect to be achieved by asking and answering a question. That is, nothing is said about the successful interaction.

Is seems easier to focus on the successful interaction in Ildefonso's case because, in the absence of any specific language, the means is not an issue. Schaller could not use an incomplete sentence as Ildefonso did not know enough ASL, but she created a sort of blank by appearing to have trouble seeing the child, Ildefonso, and Ildefonso fills in this

¹² Rapin, Isabelle, 1979, "Effects of Early Blindness and Deafness on Cognition." In *Congenital and Acquired Cognitive Disorders*, edited by Robert Katzman, Raven Press, New York, 210. Cited in Sacks, 1990, 57.

blank. What happens in this little piece of reciprocal interaction is, in the circumstances, a significant step forward. Schaller has abandoned all thoughts of giving Ildefonso a lesson and has set out to convince him of something. In the process Ildefonso has been drawn into a particular sort of interaction. Whether or not a question *form* is used, however, seems irrelevant, when we can see the *successful interaction*.

We can see that Schaller finds out what Ildefonso did as a child. It looks, to me, as if Schaller here encourages Ildefonso to confer, although it is hard to say exactly what conferring is. I have suggested that conferring might be thought of as a kind of back and forth reciprocal interaction but this can seem as vague as the term “conferring.” Schaller has mentioned some of the things Ildefonso has missed out on, explaining, agreeing, disagreeing, arguing, confirming, and these all seem to be forms of conferring. So the relevant sort of back and forth interaction is much richer than playing peek-a-boo with a baby. Ildefonso’s interaction with Schaller is also much richer than playing peek-a-boo and seems more in line with something like explaining.

Can we make it more precise by trying to say what sort of conferring takes place? For instance, in the first dialogue is a question asked and answered? There was no equivalent to the particular vocal inflection which makes a word or words into a question, as in “Coffee?” There was no equivalent to a word like “what,” “where,” or “how.” There was no equivalent to an altered word order like using “Is it raining?” instead of “It is raining.” My inclination is to say that seeking this sort of precision can obscure both success and development in Ildefonso’s case.

Did Schaller find out what she did by asking a *question* and thus eliciting an *answer*, or did she find out what she did by engaging Ildefonso in some other sort of discussion about their childhood? I do not know, and I am not sure what insights, if any, might be gained by pursuing this. I do feel sure that we see some kind of successful back and forth interaction in the first dialogue, and I see this as Ildefonso beginning to confer. It does not seem reasonable at this point in his development to ask what sort of conferring is taking place but it does seem important to try and see the success, regardless of whether or not a question was asked.

7.1.3 *A Contrast with the Lessons*

This dialogue contrasts with the lessons in two surprising ways. Firstly, Schaller has gone from presenting Ildefonso with what she sees as simple manageable material, in the form of signs such as PAPER and BOOK, to telling him about the “essential equality” of people. That is, there is a contrast in the content. In the lessons she restricts herself to pointing at objects and showing him one sign at a time. In the dialogue she seems to assume that she can convince this languageless man of their essential equality, and she sets out to explain this notion using almost no signs at all. Ildefonso does not seem to be as mystified by the content of the dialogue as he was by the content of the lessons.

The second contrast is in Schaller’s behaviour. It is not only the lesson plan that goes out the window, it is her teacher behaviour as well. She becomes first and foremost a communicator. She is fired by the importance of communicating something to Ildefonso *right now* and she will use any means at her disposal to do this. Essentially, that means mime for there has not been enough time or interaction for them to have developed much else. Schaller does not behave as if this is a barrier to convincing Ildefonso of their essential equality. She does say that she signs some things and she attempts to teach Ildefonso SMART. She uses some gestures, and mentions head shaking for “not,” and pointing to establish the identities of the babies. In the main, however she mimes or acts out the story.

That is, in this dialogue she not only has no thought of “teaching or showing Ildefonso language,” but also she uses very little of what we think of as language. Yet Schaller is so positive about the value of dialogues to Ildefonso’s improvement, and I take this improvement to include the acquisition of ASL.

My lectures to Ildefonso never fostered understanding or created new paths; our dialogues, in contrast, were never wasted experiments, even if they failed to convey the intended message. We always improved, at least a little, with each round.¹³

¹³ Schaller, 1995, 73-74.

It seems to me that the improvement we see in the first dialogue is Ildefonso beginning to participate *naturally* in some back and forth reciprocal interaction which looks like conferring. He is not only participating he is doing so independently in that his response is not anything like an attempt to “get it right for the teacher.” Schaller elicited “student” responses from Ildefonso in the lessons. At first he copied and then later formed signs in response to her pointing at something or someone. She talks of going over or revising his signs. In the lesson situation she, as teacher, was in a position to confirm or correct his student responses, all the authority was on one side. It was as if Ildefonso had no say in directing the activity, and what is more, no opportunity to have a say. Thus there was a one-sidedness about the lessons.

In the dialogue Ildefonso stands more as an equal through the way that Schaller behaves towards him. There are no concessions in terms of the topic, and she wants to tell him something, not teach him something. This leads to different opportunities for Ildefonso. When he shows her that he begged as a child this is no student response, he responds to her curiosity, not any lesson or exercise. What is more, he responds as an independent participant, she is in no position to confirm or correct his response. Thus the dialogue has a distinctly two-sided appearance, and it is that two sided appearance that makes this interaction look like conferring.

7.2 The Second Dialogue: The Geography Lesson

The second dialogue I have chosen to discuss is initiated by Ildefonso. At this stage he uses very few ASL signs and his interaction with Schaller still depends very much on other things such as mime and gesture. Nevertheless, she has learned to read his changes of posture, gaze and facial expression as a guide to his engagement or possible understanding. When she senses his engagement she is encouraged to continue and when she senses his disengagement she stops and tries something else. For example, she describes this in the context of introducing new signs.

Usually, I started the game by introducing a new sign, using it in four or five different mimed contexts to define it. Ildefonso raised and lowered his head slowly, either to demonstrate possible understanding or to nudge me to continue trying; I never knew which. Then Ildefonso tried. His eyebrows pushed up a wrinkle on his forehead—

his question mark. I watched his gestured question over and over and attempted a guess after the fourth try, another guess after the fifth. I knew that I guessed wrong when he sat back, lowered his eyelids slightly, and crossed his arms. The next hour or the next day we started again.¹⁴

Ildefonso has begun participating with his own “gestured questions” even when Schaller is unable to guess what he means. Thus the back and forth interaction seems much more developed in that he keeps “asking” and she keeps guessing. Presumably some of her guesses are successful for they have made progress. For instance, here she describes him *using* the signs TEACH and LEARN, which is a definite advance from her earlier description of him knowing, but never using, signs.

I used the writing lesson to explain that I “teach” letters and he “learns” letters. After a few variations on that theme, Ildefonso used his first verb signs, teach and learn. The verbs that finally registered as verbs, that is, as permanent symbols for specific actions, were ones that couldn’t easily be mimed. They were signs he needed.¹⁵

We can see that Ildefonso has become much more of a co-participant as back and forth reciprocal interaction now appears regularly. Thus, Schaller does not have to encourage Ildefonso to participate in the second dialogue. This is not because he uses more ASL signs. As we shall see their dialogue depends heavily on mime. It looks as if Schaller proceeds with the dialogue because she feels that Ildefonso is following what she “says.” Whatever he is doing, and it is not signing, he never gives her the feeling that she has lost him, or that he is merely copying. I do not think Schaller could have continued with the geography dialogue in the way that she did if she had not sensed that Ildefonso was engaged, that is, was participating by at least “nudging” her to continue. So much of what she does would not have been futile if Ildefonso was not obviously responding, and the geography lesson would not have had a sense of dialogue if he did not indicate that he was up with the play.

¹⁴ Schaller, 1995, 67-68.

¹⁵ Schaller, 1995, 72.

Despite the introduction of new signs the second dialogue is not like the early language lessons. It is, indeed, a geography or history lesson. There is no set structure and nothing happens quickly, but Schaller keeps focused on Ildefonso's question and persists due, I assume, to Ildefonso continued participation in back and forth interaction. If he had not been engaged in that sort of way I do not think that this dialogue would have the form that it does, it had to stay on track for days.

Earlier, Schaller has shown Ildefonso the signs for various colours and when he seems to understand those signs she introduces the sign COLOUR. Soon afterwards Ildefonso puts his brown arm next to Schaller's pale skin and asks his question.

I taught him the name for colors, "color," and for the next few days pointed out the color of everything. I asked him routinely what color various things were, and he answered with his first two-sign sentences. After three or four days he knew what [the sign] "color" meant. He signed "color" for the first time, then put his wrist and hand next to mine. He pointed from one to the other and gestured, "What's-this-about?" signing "color" again.

I sat staring helplessly at his expectant face. He had no idea how big the answer was to his question. How could I explain ethnicity and racism in mime and the vocabulary of a two-year-old? He repeated the question by pointing to a black student and signing "color" again.¹⁶

Schaller cannot use ASL to answer this question, she says that his vocabulary was small and restricted to their classroom activity, BOOK, PAPER, and so on. So the explanation has to take another form. As with the first dialogue, it never seems to cross her mind that she should shelve this question, despite all her earlier lip service to the idea that Ildefonso needs to have signs in order to confer. In this case Schaller uses diagrams and begins with one where she can establish a common context with Ildefonso, she draws a diagram of the classroom. Gradually, over a number of days, with the addition of pictures and real maps Ildefonso becomes involved in a discussion about geography and history.

¹⁶ Schaller, 1995, 97-98.

As Schaller moves from the diagram of the room to maps of the world over several days she gives no indication that Ildefonso ever sat back to watch with folded arms. Moreover, she encourages him into active participation in two ways. Firstly, she takes the opportunity to introduce new signs, MOUNTAIN, RIVER, CITY, MEXICO, LOS ANGELES, and describes Ildefonso using some of these signs. Back and forth reciprocal interaction occurs as he checks these signs out with her and she confirms them. This interaction looks like conferring. Secondly, she asks him to describe his jobs and locates them on the map. Much of the interaction here is necessarily in mime, but it looks like ordinary conferring.

Towards the end of the dialogue Schaller describes European migration to the Americas, the fighting, and the steady move westwards. The question of what she uses in this description is not an easy one to answer. She says that she mimed the fighting between the whites and the natives, but I am not sure that “mime” or “gesture” captures some of the other stuff she does. What I am sure about is that she describes European migration to the Americas, the fighting, and the steady move westwards. At the time of the dialogue Ildefonso is extremely attentive and asks her to repeat her description but he makes no comment to show what he makes of it. There is a postscript, however, which, although it occurs years later, shows that Ildefonso made something of her description.

The dialogue, as described, looks straightforward and compact, and it is easy to forget that it took days. For instance, they made and studied maps for a week before Schaller introduced more than a continent. During that time she took the opportunity to engage Ildefonso actively by assuming that he would have travelled about to various jobs. Those who overlook the length of time taken may feel that Ildefonso was not as inexperienced in language as Schaller thought.¹⁷ Thus I think it is important to note her comments about the time taken.

How could I begin? If I started with geography, he would have to learn what a map is. His three-dimensional world had never been represented in two dimensions. Taking out a piece of paper, I sighed

¹⁷ For instance, Carruthers, 1996, 43.

and started, I drew the table, Ildefonso, Susan, and the room. "Room," I explained, signing it very big and then smaller and smaller, until it was the size of the room on the paper. I took another piece of paper and drew the school. "School, cafeteria, room, grass," I pointed out on my map. On another piece of paper, I made the school smaller and added the bus stop and the closest streets and intersections. The next map showed other landmarks, downtown, and some hills. The next map showed farms beyond hills on one side and the ocean on the other. I brought in pictures to help indicate different places. For two days I drew map after map, representing larger and larger areas until I could include Mexico.

Assuming that Ildefonso had been deported at least once from California, I described Tijuana, the crowded city where the green men [Ildefonso's term for the border guards once he had been shown GREEN] took him. Ildefonso began to learn of boundaries drawn by humans instead of nature. The ocean and mountains were not the only barriers separating peoples. He learned about white-skin land and brown-skin land, the political entities called countries, which were named the United States of America and the United States of Mexico.

Finally he knew enough details and could recognize a representation of a large enough area for us to study a real map of North America. With the aid of pictures of California and Mexico, Ildefonso learned geography. I asked him to describe what he did on farms. For the first time, he understood a question instantly. He guessed that I was going to try to figure out his travels. From the mimed descriptions of farmwork, I guessed crops and where he might have traveled: apple-picking - Washington; potatoes - Idaho; grapes, tomatoes and cotton - California. I matched pictures of the various plants with their homes. Ildefonso was fascinated and memorized everything as fast as I could give him the information.

We made and studied maps for a week until he was ready for more than a continent. I showed him giant maps hung from a roll on the ceiling. Starting with the now familiar western American coast, we reviewed his new names: ocean, mountain, river, city, nation, United States, California, Mexico, Los Angeles. Ildefonso stared, mesmerized. He repeated everything with a question on his face, "California?" "Mexico City?"

"Yes," I responded. Finally I could begin to answer the question he had asked over a week ago. I put the back of my hand next to his hand. "Native American (in ASL, this sign is not related to the ambiguous name *Indian* but refers only to the natives of America)," I signed and pointed to him. "White," I signed, and pointed to me. "A long, long time ago," I emphasized by repeating, enlarging, and slowing the only tense sign he understood, "whites here (I pointed to Europe); a long time ago, Native Americans here," and I passed my flat hand over all of the Americas. I pointed to a black man in the room, then pointed to Africa. "A long time ago, blacks here." I

pointed to an Asian student and then to China. Ildefonso went back to Europe, then North America, looked confused, and signed, “White?” What a question.

With my right hand spread crablike over Europe, I signed “white” with my left hand. I lifted my right hand, keeping my hand rigid as if I had picked up a great crowd, and crossed the Atlantic Ocean. The crowd landed on New England. The left hand swept over the Americas, and the right hand signed “natives.” I mimed fighting between the whites and the natives, and with my flat hand I formed a wall that slowly took over North America, pushing the natives south. “Now United States—whites, Mexico—natives,” I inaccurately summarized. I couldn’t give a very thorough account, and Ildefonso missed many details even in my simplification, but it was a start to answering his question.

Ildefonso’s eyes grew huge. He wanted me to repeat the story several times. I repeated that it was a long time ago when the natives filled the continent and there were no white people. He swept his hand over the Americas: “Natives?” he asked and pointed to his wrist.

“Yes,” I answered, “a long time ago.” He turned back to the map. His facial muscles were tense as he studied the strange new shapes. He said nothing more. He stood and stared and stared.¹⁸

The postscript that I mentioned refers to a conversation that Schaller and Ildefonso have when they meet up again after her seven year absence from California. Ildefonso and Elena come to see Schaller when she is staying with some English friends in southern California. Ildefonso, now fluent in ASL, is initially surprised that her English friends look “the same as all of you,” and then he remembers Schaller’s description of European migration. He may not have said much at the time of the dialogue but it seems clear that he made sense of Schaller’s description. What is more surprising, he remembers that she thought he picked apples in Washington State, and he corrects that.

Ildefonso asked about England, and my friends and I interpreted a few comments in answer until Elena picked up the conversation and began describing her trip there. Since everyone was listening to her, Ildefonso began our first private conversation with, “I’m disappointed. When I heard your friends were from England, from so far away, I thought they would look different, but they look the same as all of you.”

Then, as if he suddenly figured out why, he said, “The history lesson ...?” I nodded instantly. He didn’t need to say more. “I remember that,” he continued. “Whenever I can, I find an interpreter

¹⁸ Schaller, 1995, 98-100.

to interpret the television news. It's important to know what's happening in the world. ..."¹⁹

"Do you remember when you asked me about apple picking?" Ildefonso asked. "That was in New York." He had understood my question, or worked it out later, but since he had no place names, he could not answer my "where" question. I had guessed Washington State, and he accepted my guess at the time. But he remembered not only the question but my wrong guess, even though at the time he didn't know Washington from India.²⁰

7.2.1 *The Interaction Looks Like Conferring*

There are several points about the interaction in the second dialogue which make it look like conferring, and none of them has anything to do with what is used. That is, it is not gestures rather than acting out, or ASL signs rather than mime, that give the dialogue the appearance of conferring. Although Schaller carries the story-line, there is a greater degree of reciprocity in the interaction. There is more immediacy in Ildefonso's responses. His participation shows more versatility in the variety of his responses. There is also a sense of engagement or connection between the participants. These four things, increased reciprocity, immediacy, versatility, and engagement, give the interaction the appearance of conferring. What seems particularly interesting, however, is that these four things do not *depend* on Ildefonso's acquisition of ASL.

Reciprocity is much clearer in the second dialogue. Overall the geography lesson can be seen as Schaller's answer to Ildefonso's question, but the back and forth aspect of questions and answers also permeates the dialogue. Ildefonso, within the context that is defined by the interaction, the maps and the pictures, repeats the signs "with a question on his face," and Schaller responds affirmatively. This is not mere copying. There is a strong sense of conferring here, much more so than in the first dialogue where *Ildefonso* did not elicit responses from Schaller in the same way. In the first dialogue, the DUMB-ME dialogue Ildefonso participated by watching attentively and there was only one point

¹⁹ Schaller, 1995, 163-164.

²⁰ Schaller, 1995, 165.

of back and forth interaction—when she asked what he did as a child, he clarified that the child was Ildefonso, she confirmed, and he gestured that he begged.

In the second dialogue we see much more extended back and forth interaction. For example, Schaller “asks” about his jobs, he mimes the different types of work, she guesses the crops, and matches pictures of the crops with their homes, he watches and memorises. She gives names, he tries them with a questioning expression, as if asking for confirmation or correction, and she confirms—as in the CALIFORNIA exchange. In the geography dialogue, then, there is a much greater sense of *reciprocal* interaction.

The greater immediacy of Ildefonso’s responses in the second dialogue is most apparent when Schaller asks him about his jobs. At this point she felt that for the first time “he understood a question instantly.” This suggests that Ildefonso’s response was immediate, appropriate to the context, and did not involve any clarifying or checking activity. When Schaller asked her question in the first dialogue Ildefonso appeared to check that she meant him. “Child this-high me?” She confirmed this and then asked what that child was doing, “Yes. What’s that child doing?” In the second dialogue we see Ildefonso unhesitatingly carrying the interaction forward by responding immediately to Schaller’s question about his work.

This aspect of Ildefonso’s development does not seem to depend on acquiring ASL signs. When Schaller asked him to describe what he did on farms she would have mostly mimed her question, because Ildefonso did not know enough relevant ASL signs. At this stage he certainly did not know question signs like WHAT, WHO and WHERE, as Schaller describes their introduction later. She also makes it clear that in the geography lesson she works mainly with diagrams, mime and pictures, and against this sort of background she introduces ASL signs. Thus the question she asks is more likely to be mimed than it is to be framed in signs. In fact the question, and Ildefonso’s mimed descriptions of his jobs, offer another opportunity to introduce new signs.

From the mimed descriptions of farmwork, I guessed crops and where he might have traveled: apple-picking—Washington; potatoes—Idaho; grapes, tomatoes and cotton—California. I matched pictures of

the various plants with their homes. Ildefonso was fascinated and memorized everything as fast as I could give him the information.²¹

Despite the lack of relevant ASL signs, despite the dependence on diagrams and pictures, despite the use of mime, and despite the necessity for so much guessing, this interaction suggests the unhesitating flow of a conversation between friends. In the second dialogue one apparent aspect of Ildefonso's development is the immediacy of his responses, and this immediacy does not seem to depend on the acquisition of ASL.

Another aspect of Ildefonso's development that can be seen in the second dialogue is the more varied nature of his responses. Initially Schaller thought that Ildefonso needed signs in order to be involved in explaining, agreeing, disagreeing, arguing and so on. Yet here he is enquiring, apparently understanding an explanation, responding appropriately to questions, and acquiring new signs, all without having a significant ASL vocabulary, and without knowing the rules of grammar. This sort of versatility seems to have more to do with a way of interacting than with what is used in the interaction. Ildefonso's early participation was to copy or to merely watch. Later there were classroom routines such as making lists of words and "reviewing the signs."²² Eventually Ildefonso began to offer what Schaller sees as mimed stories or descriptions but often she had no idea what he meant and little interaction resulted.

Gradually, however, the periods of interaction between Schaller and Ildefonso become longer, and take on the more reciprocal nature of a conversation where each response has much more to do with whatever may happen to arise. In back and forth interaction questions and answers mingle with explanations and disputes. Promises and disclosures may be elicited or distrust and evasion aroused. There is no set format and in conversation the participants tend to be influenced by what immediately precedes any response, thus creating a back and forth type of reciprocal interaction which calls for versatility.

²¹ Schaller, 1995, 99.

²² Schaller talks about "reviewing the signs" but does not describe what is involved in this activity.

There is no succinct way of describing this interaction or teaching it, but once Ildefonso has been encouraged, pushed, goaded and enticed into further participation he is on the way to participating in all the activities that, according to Schaller, he had missed. For instance, Schaller does not teach him the “question forms” as such, but once he begins to participate in the new sort of interaction he is on the way to asking and answering questions. And he is also on the way to understanding and giving explanations, seeking confirmation, and so much more. This sort of versatility seems to develop independently of, even prior to, the ASL signs.

Finally, there is a strong sense of mutual engagement in the interaction of the second dialogue. For instance, Schaller says that Ildefonso “guessed” she was going to try to figure out his travels. So she didn’t tell him that. He apparently makes something more of her question, that is, he “guesses,” from within the shared context of this discussion. I take it that his behaviour indicated this in some way. And Schaller hasn’t had to explain to Ildefonso that Idaho is where potatoes are common, nor that his travels can be followed on the map. Ildefonso has picked up the way that one map follows from another and the way that things or activities can be located on a map.

Schaller worked towards this sort of understanding by beginning with diagrams of the classroom and the school. She deliberately included things Ildefonso would be familiar with. By the time she moved on to places like Tijuana, Ildefonso’s engagement must have been obvious, or she would not have continued in the way that she did. His guesses and his apparent understanding beyond what she actually expresses, seem to confirm his engagement with the topic. Thus this interaction has the connectedness or intimacy of a conversation between friends where understanding goes beyond what is actually “said.”. This mutual connectedness, which allows Schaller to move on to maps of other continents, and to offer an explanation of migration, develops in the absence of a shared language. It seems to be possible to foster this sort of development even where much of the dialogue is mimed.

The second dialogue illustrates Ildefonso’s progress. The most startling progress has to do with the developed nature of the back and forth interaction—its greater degree, its

immediacy, its versatility, and the mutual connectedness or engagement of the participants. I see these aspects of Ildefonso's progress as interactive skills which do not seem to need ASL signs. In the first dialogue there was very little back and forth interaction. Ildefonso was hesitant. He did little more than briefly and precisely fill the gap created by Schaller's mime. She reports no sense of his independent thinking, he filled the gap when it was clear to him, and nothing she says about the DUMB-ME dialogue indicates that he understood how his response was relevant. In the second dialogue Ildefonso seems much more engaged by the topic, and this demands much more mutual participation. Certainly his ASL has improved but that is not what makes the geography lesson look like conferring. It is Ildefonso's more developed interactive skills which give this dialogue the appearance of conferring.

7.2.2 Explaining and Language

Much of the back and forth interaction in the second dialogue can be described as explaining. Schaller explains maps, geography and migration. When she first met Ildefonso and found that he had no language, no signs, she thought about all the things he has not experienced. One activity he had missed out on was explaining. "This man had never received one explanation."²³ There are two ways of construing this. On the one hand, we might say that Ildefonso has no signs, therefore he cannot engage in explaining because you need signs in order to do that. On the other hand, we might say that if Ildefonso had been involved in activities like explanations, then he would have some signs because signs arise in languaging activities like explaining. I think the second dialogue suggests which is better.

The first way is to reason that signs are needed for explanations. That is, without signs, or words, or language, it is impossible to explain anything. Therefore signs, or words, or language must be worked on first and *then* explanations can begin. This seems to be the way Schaller thought when she began by presenting Ildefonso with ASL signs in the absence of any explanation, in fact, initially in the absence of any kind of discursive

²³ Schaller, 1995, 28.

activity. Ildefonso was languageless so there was, she thought, no way to begin trying to explain anything to him until he knew some signs.

The second way of thinking about language and explaining, is to reason that if Ildefonso *had* ever engaged in an activity like explaining then some language-like features would appear in his interaction with others.²⁴ No such features appear, therefore he has never received one explanation. This makes the emergence of language-like features a consequence of the interaction. This second interpretation says that if Ildefonso cannot participate in some reciprocal back and forth interaction then he cannot get the hang of ASL signs, because such language-like things are only generated in that particular sort of interaction.

This second way of thinking seems to be the better way to describe what is happening in the geography lesson. In this dialogue we see that the explaining which is taking place *gives rise to* the opportunity to introduce new signs. The dialogue produces a context in which Ildefonso gets some idea of what the signs are about, and Schaller has not needed to use the signs themselves to create that context. The relevance of the signs depends on the understandings which emerge from the dialogue. Ildefonso participates in reciprocal back and forth interaction and *then* understands the signs.

By the time Schaller gives the explanation in which she describes European migration, her whole focus is on the answer to Ildefonso's question and that takes priority over introducing more new signs. No more new signs are needed at this stage so long as Ildefonso can continue participating. He asks her to repeat the story several times and shows definite interest and thoughtfulness. If he had not got the message it is hard to see how any new signs, to do with migration, could have helped. The earlier part of the dialogue shows that some sort of understanding must be established in the interaction before a new sign can be introduced.

²⁴ By "language-like features" I mean what are commonly taken to be language like features—something like standard signs or words, and some sort of syntactic structure.

By looking at the way explaining happens in the second dialogue I think we can see how some reciprocal back and forth interaction develops before anything like ASL signs are introduced. Schaller's activity becomes explaining because of Ildefonso's response to it. If he had not obviously picked up on at least some of what she expressed, then the dialogue could not have continued in the way it did. Once Ildefonso has started to pick up on what Schaller "says" she in turn responds to him. This is the back and forth interaction of the dialogue, and when that is established it provides an opportunity to introduce ASL signs, to check them, and to correct or confirm them. Only when there has been some relevant back and forth interaction can Schaller start to introduce signs like CITY, or MOUNTAIN, or CALIFORNIA. Thus Schaller does not give Ildefonso the signs *so that* explaining can begin, rather, when explaining begins it is then possible to give Ildefonso some more signs, particularly signs relevant to the current interaction.

7.2.3 *A Tension in Schaller's Account*

Now that we have established that the primary factor in Ildefonso's development is interaction, and that having a store of signs is of secondary importance, we must recognise a tension in Schaller's account. She enthusiastically describes successful interaction which does not rely on signs and yet she frequently emphasises the importance of the signs. If we focus on the interaction we can understand why Schaller feels that the dialogues were never wasted even when they failed to convey the intended message.

In a dialogue the teacher is indistinguishable from the student. My lectures to Ildefonso never fostered understanding or created new paths; our dialogues, in contrast, were never wasted experiments, even if they failed to convey the intended message. We always improved, at least a little, with each round.²⁵

If Ildefonso had not understood the story of European migration to North America, he still had over a week of back and forth interaction under his belt. The second dialogue, because it is so long, shows how all sorts of progress was made besides "conveying the intended message." The progression from a diagram of the classroom to a map of the country was no mean feat, and he learnt how to use pictures in conjunction with the

²⁵ Schaller, 1995, 73-74.

maps and miming. If we focus on the interaction we can also see why Ildefonso might express satisfaction, and willingly persevere, as Schaller says that he does.

Schaller herself, however, is not always so positive about Ildefonso's progress. She sometimes describes the interaction as hours of work for a small achievement in understanding. For Ildefonso, on the other hand, those hours are hours of reciprocal back and forth interaction, quite a significant achievement in themselves.

He expressed much more satisfaction than I over understanding a simple conversation that had sometimes taken hours to work out. He thought that was excellent. He thought that was language. I knew better, but I could not tell him how much better and faster thoughts could travel.²⁶

There is a contrast between what Schaller says here and her remark that the dialogues were never wasted because they always led to improvement, even if they failed to convey the intended message. I feel this contrast has to do with placing the emphasis in a different place. Is interaction the important issue, or is ASL the important issue? If it is interaction then there is bound to be improvement in any dialogue regardless of the message, and Ildefonso has every reason to feel satisfied after several hours of active participation. Despite all Schaller says about the importance of learning ASL signs, when her skill as a communicator comes to the fore good interaction precedes the signs. Thus the tension is resolved if we recognise the primary importance of the right sort of interaction. The second dialogue helps us to see the real significance of the hours taken to work out a simple message.

7.2.4 A Shared Understanding

In the Chapter 6 I argued that understanding an ASL sign was a shared understanding, and concluded that in order to develop shared understandings Ildefonso must first confer. It is initially difficult to see how he can do this without language. The geography lesson shows, I think, how conferring precedes signs. If we look at one of

²⁶ Schaller, 1995, 82.

the new ASL signs that is introduced in the second dialogue I think we can see how the shared understanding associated with that sign emerges for Ildefonso.

Take CALIFORNIA, for instance. Ildefonso's understanding of what the state of California is emerges from the interaction which begins with the diagram of the classroom with table and chairs. This leads to maps and the idea of discrete areas. Schaller introduces the sign CALIFORNIA when she feels it is appropriate, and Ildefonso checks this out using the map. Before he uses CALIFORNIA himself, however, he clearly is at ease with the map. It is something he and Schaller have interacted about and come to *some* understanding about in their interaction.

This shared understanding of CALIFORNIA doesn't have to be what we might think of as a full or clear understanding. Ildefonso and Schaller have come to an understanding together in that it is possible to move on. She is not confronted by his sleepy eyes or folded arms, the things that showed his disengagement from interaction in the early lessons. Nor is she confronted by a puzzled questioning face, which is the sort of thing that generally prompts her to try another tack, or, if the puzzled look persists, give up. In the geography lesson there is continued progress. What seems to allow progress, or what seems to allow them to move on, is the slowly increasing understanding that they share. Each new move comes as she senses that Ildefonso has grasped something.

If Ildefonso was still puzzled about the map, introducing the sign CALIFORNIA would not clarify anything. Schaller introduced it when an opportunity arose, but it could only be used in the dialogue if Ildefonso understood what had been introduced. Once he is comfortable with the map in the interactive situation, he and Schaller have established a shared understanding and it may be *helpful* to introduce the sign but it doesn't seem to be *necessary*. There are other signs that Ildefonso could have been introduced to, but Schaller does not try to get all of the dialogue into ASL. Thus, the interaction of conferring *precedes* the signs, and Ildefonso can refer to something from that conferring when he wants to check on a new sign. In this case he referred to a map.

Ildefonso stared, mesmerized. He repeated everything with a question on his face, “California?” “Mexico City?”
 “Yes,” I responded.²⁷

Right from the beginning of this dialogue, from the very first sketch, showing the table, Ildefonso, Susan and the room, with only the signs TABLE, ILDEFONSO, SUSAN, and ROOM, and using the technique of reducing the sign ROOM to show that the rectangle on the paper is the classroom, Schaller seems to be “talking” to Ildefonso. Clearly, Ildefonso is able to participate more and more actively. What seems most significant about this dialogue is that signs are *not* needed to get it going, and signs are *not* necessary for the final explanation. Rather the shared understandings that begin to develop in the reciprocal back and forth interaction seem to form a basis for the acquisition of signs.

7.2.5 A Conventional Language Model

At the beginning of this chapter I pointed out that some of what Schaller says tends to shift the focus from words, signs or grammar to the activity of conferring. If a particular kind of interaction is crucial in language acquisition then it seems to me that the opportunity to become a participant in the right sort of interaction is paramount. I think this is what we see in Ildefonso’s development, despite the lip service that Schaller pays to the importance of teaching him ASL signs. Ildefonso’s linguistic development takes off when he has the opportunity to participate in some reciprocal back and forth interaction, that is, when he begins to confer.

If this sort of interaction takes precedence over things like signs, words and grammar, then it should figure in what we call a “conventional language model.” For instance, it might be more pertinent to ask if the children that Goldin-Meadow studied were exposed to any reciprocal back and forth interaction.²⁸ The second dialogue between

²⁷ Schaller, 1995, 99.

²⁸ The deaf children in Goldin-Meadow’s study lived with their hearing parents. It is clear from what she says that the parents interacted a lot with the children using speech, their own gestures, the children’s gestures (but not ASL). The study mentions a lot of interaction but focuses on the gestures and the structure of the gesture strings. Goldin-Meadow says that the children’s gesture systems have developed “without the benefit of a conventional language model.” (Goldin-Meadow, 1993, 75.)

Schaller and Ildefonso shows what looks like conferring, or languaging in terms of the interaction, but not necessarily in terms of the morphology and syntax. That is, from one point of view the second dialogue has language-like properties, from another it does not.

If the emergence of conventional signs, syntax and structure is considered to be a sign of emerging language, what are we to say of the second dialogue? Few, if any of the ASL signs are crucial to the dialogue, Schaller uses a hodgepodge of visual aids, and she uses various improvised techniques, some of which are not easily described as mime or gesture. Despite all this Ildefonso has made progress in something, and he and Schaller are participating in some sort of interaction. I think that this *interaction* displays clear language-like features.

7.3 The Third Dialogue: The Burrito

In the third dialogue both Ildefonso and Schaller use ASL sentences, so parts of this dialogue do have language-like features in terms of morphology and syntax. Nonetheless, very significant parts of the dialogue are still mimed. In this dialogue Ildefonso and Schaller have a heated argument about who is going to pay for lunch. When we look closely at Schaller's account we see an argument that is a cohesive whole. The fact that some parts of the dialogue are in ASL and some parts are mimed does not in any way disrupt the flow or cohesiveness of the argument.

There are two particularly interesting points about this dialogue. Firstly, Ildefonso seem to be on an equal footing with Schaller, this is a full on argument. Secondly, the mimed parts of the dialogue are equal to the signed parts in intensity, in immediacy, and in the way they contribute to the dialogue.

Ildefonso and Schaller sometimes go to a burrito stand for lunch, and on these occasions Schaller takes the opportunity to replace mime with signs appropriate to the activity. Ildefonso has clearly become comfortable with some of the relevant signs, relevant, that is, to ordering lunch. About three weeks after the "breakthrough" Schaller orders two burritos and gets out the money. Ildefonso intervenes and says he will pay. What

strikes Schaller first is that he signs his first ASL sentence of more than three signs, NO, BURRITO BUY I.²⁹ Quickly she insists on paying and explains why using mime and signs. Ildefonso argues, using mime, he counters by saying why he is able to pay. Schaller continues to argue using mime and signs and Ildefonso responds firmly using signs including a new one, GOD, which surprises Schaller. She is surprised that he knows it and she is surprised by the way that he uses it.

Often we continued our “lessons”—our dialogues and study of each other’s world—through class breaks. Many times we had lunch together, sometimes in the company of other signers, sometimes alone. We began to make it a habit to walk to a neighborhood burrito stand when we wanted to be alone for lunch, to continue a especially sensitive or intense discussion. Outside of the confining classroom, we could be less formal, less like teacher-student and more like friends. Also the practical tasks of ordering lunch were easy vocabulary lessons. I would ask in mime, for example, if he wanted chicken, beef, or beans in his burrito, then replace the mime and gestures with signs as he understood.³⁰

Only three weeks after Ildefonso had connected with language, I ordered two chicken burritos at the burrito stand, but when I took out money to pay for them, he pushed my hand down and signed his first, complete ASL sentence of more than three signs: “No, burrito buy I.”

“No, (that’s) OK, burrito buy I,” I argued. I mimed-signed that I worked and earned money and he was in school, so I could buy the burritos.

He mimed mowing a lawn and receiving money, then repeated, “Burrito buy I.”

“Put your money in your pocket for later,” I mimed and signed, then realized he didn’t understand “later.” “Burrito buy I,” I insisted.

“No!” his fingers snapped; “God, friend. Burrito buy I.”

Did I see that correctly? Not only had he signed his most complicated thought to date, without any mime, but “God”? Where did he find that sign, and how did he leap to such an incredible guess on how to use it? He connected God and friend and placed them above burrito buying. His anger was that of a religious instructor. I was properly rebuked for my concern for the material world. Who had more money was trivial. Buying a burrito was only significant as an act of friendship.

Later he asked me what did the sign “God” mean, specifically. He had guessed correctly that it stood for unseen greatness, apart from

²⁹ This is grammatically correct ASL.

³⁰ Schaller, 1995, 110-111.

and more important than the tangible stuff in front of us. I couldn't add anything to his use of "God," because we didn't have enough language between us to discuss the difference between religion and physics or individual beliefs and common assumptions.³¹

Schaller is impressed by two things, firstly, by Ildefonso's use of an ASL sentence and, secondly, by his use of a new sign. What I find most impressive, however, is the dynamic interaction of the argument. Schaller makes no mention of the interaction in her discussion. She sees Ildefonso's acquisition of ASL as the goal they are working towards. Thus she remarks on his first complete ASL sentence of more than three signs. That is the key indication to her that he is progressing.

Schaller also spends a lot of time discussing Ildefonso's use of GOD. Where did he find it? How did he guess how to use it? When he asks her what it means she feels that they don't have enough *language* between them to deal with the ramifications of this sign. She thinks about the possible notion of two separate realms, physical and spiritual, and credits Ildefonso with placing friendship above material things. This intense focus on the signs and their meanings, especially GOD, leads Schaller to wonder again about Ildefonso's prelinguistic thought.

Could his attachment of meaning to the sign "God" really be an independent thought? I began to realize that anything Ildefonso expresses could be an answer to one of two questions: What can an individual mind create? Or, How much culture and even abstract thinking can be communicated without language? What had his mother or father or priest taught him with pictures and mime?³²

This sort of focus completely sidelines the *interactive* nature of the argument over the burrito. Even when Schaller refers to Ildefonso's parents and the priest, it is in terms of them giving Ildefonso something, or showing him something. There seems to be a complete absence of the notion of Ildefonso as a participant in human interchange, especially the back and forth reciprocal interaction of conferring.

³¹ Schaller, 1995, 111-112.

³² Schaller, 1995, 112.

7.3.1 *Equality of Participation*

Signs figure more prominently in the third dialogue because Ildefonso is becoming more proficient in ASL, but he and Schaller are still far from equal in that respect. Schaller realises in the course of the argument that he doesn't understand the sign LATER which she uses in one of her responses. Despite this there is no pause in the argument, there is no request for clarification and there is no attempt to explain the sign. He didn't understand it and she knew he didn't but they still seem to be equal participants. The impression of equality has nothing to do with Ildefonso's increased use of ASL signs. Ildefonso and Schaller appear to be equal in this dialogue because of the way they interact.

Ildefonso does not check *anything* out along the way and Schaller does not attempt to introduce new signs to replace any of her miming. Ildefonso knows what he is about and Schaller responds to him as she would to anybody else who knows what they are about. The whole business of this dialogue is their argument, he wants to pay for the burritos and he doesn't pause in putting any of his points across. That is proficiency. It is proficiency in the sort of interaction that Ildefonso had to be enticed into in the first dialogue. It is proficiency in the sort of interaction that he had to be nurtured in, in the second dialogue. In the third dialogue he just does it, as does Schaller. In arguing about who will pay for the burritos they are equal participants.

7.3.2 *Signs and Mime in Conferring*

Alongside the equality of conferring we see the inequality in ASL. Schaller is forced to improvise with mime because she knows the limitations of Ildefonso's vocabulary. Because of these limitations, Ildefonso himself uses mime. As a consequence, some of the dialogue is signed and some of it is mimed. Their argument, however, is not sloppy or inferior because it is not all signed. Ildefonso signs some complete sentences, at the beginning and end, but he mimes the reason why he is able to pay. As Schaller describes it, all of this dialogue was perfectly clear to both of them, that is, there is no sense that the signed parts are clearer, or easier, or more complex, or more efficient, than the mimed parts.

If Ildefonso knew more ASL and he and Schaller didn't have to use mime, the dialogue would be different in that respect. I do not think, however, that a difference in what is used is equivalent to any difference in the *arguing*. This dialogue is fully fledged arguing as it stands. If the mimed parts were signed nothing would be added, or improved so far as the arguing goes. If we focus on the interaction of arguing here, we can see, once again, that the importance of signs, words, and grammar becomes secondary. Ildefonso's development is primarily in the way he interacts with Schaller. In that sort of interaction he may learn the signs and the grammar of ASL, but it is not the ASL that has enabled him to engage in an argument, for here we see mime standing equally with signs. Arguing is a form of conferring, so in this dialogue we can see that Ildefonso did not *need* something like ASL first, he needed to learn to confer.

7.4 Ildefonso Learns to Language his Way Around

The thing that particularly strikes me about the third dialogue is that it appears to happen so spontaneously. Ildefonso just begins to argue as soon as he sees Schaller getting out her money. The difference from his earlier halting, unsure or tentative behaviour is obvious. In Chapter 3 I drew parallels between Virgil learning to see his way around and Ildefonso learning to language his way around. Virgil's competence also improved from early halting, unsure, tentative behaviour, to the extent that a big difference was obvious. When he went home to visit his family they noticed the difference in his behaviour.

No less important was the change in the family's attitude toward him. 'He seemed more alert,' his sister said. 'He would walk, move around the house, without touching the walls – he would just get up and go.' She felt that there had been 'a big difference' since he was first operated on and his mother and the rest of the family felt the same.³³

There is a big difference in Virgil's behaviour, he just gets up and goes. Similarly there is a big difference in Ildefonso's behaviour, he "just gets up and goes" in the third dialogue.

³³ Sacks, 1995, 136.

What we see clearly in Virgil's case is that in order to see his way around he had to start moving around himself. He could not learn to see by being *shown anything* or by being shown how to *do anything*, his sight developed in a situation where he had to *do something himself*. Amy could not show him his house and furniture, she could not show him how to unlock his front door without feeling the lock with his fingers. She did, according to Sacks, help him set up the canonical line through the sitting room to the kitchen but that in itself did not help Virgil to see anything. Virgil had to traverse the room walking on the line. What is more he had to do it again and again.

Because conferring inevitably involves another person it is tempting to see it as one person showing something to another. This is accentuated by the back and forth nature of the interaction because, again inevitably, there are moments when one person is watching and the other speaking or signing. It may look as if Schaller is showing Ildefonso something, or showing him how to do something. What she does not show him however, is how to interact in a back and forth way. She tried to do that in the cat drama by being both student and teacher, but that did not lead to any improvement in their interaction.

Something begins to happen in the DUMB-ME dialogue when Schaller mimes a story with a deliberate gap—an invitation to “walk there” perhaps. Ildefonso takes an early step in an unfamiliar environment. When he does not understand what she is getting at there is nothing that Schaller can do to help other than trying again by repeating herself in a different way—some of his early steps involve “listening.” When she cannot follow his mimed expressions all she can do is encourage him to try telling again—some of his early steps involve “telling.” It does not help to *show* him anything. In fact, more happens when she forgets about showing him anything and instead begins to respond to him. In that way she sets up opportunities for him to start “moving around,” and “feeling his way” in a languaging sense.

Virgil had to walk his canonical line again and again, he had to handle things again and again. I think repetitive behaviour is very important for Ildefonso too. Schaller does not mention it as such but I think we can see evidence of it in some other things she

says. Here she finds his progress slow as they “wade through the murky vagueness,” and Ildefonso “poked at new signs for hours or days.”

After his first awareness of names, his progress became agonizingly slow. All he and I shared was the idea of language, not language itself. We had to wade through the murky vagueness of mime and temporary symbols. Ildefonso poked at new signs for hours or days, trying to figure out their shapes and uses. Sometimes he found the right niches in his brain for them, and his vocabulary grew slowly.³⁴

Schaller’s judgment is made in terms of the acquisition of ASL and so she does not notice Ildefonso beginning to interact going through the motions again and again. At least Amy could see Virgil traversing the line yet again, or handling his cat yet again, so she was moved to say, “You’d think once was enough.”³⁵ Much other repetition would not have been so obvious but from these two examples we can see the sort of thing Virgil needed to do to learn to see his way around. I think we can guess that Ildefonso is doing the same sort of thing that Virgil did if we look at what gives him satisfaction and leads to progress.

Ildefonso showed satisfaction over dialogues that had taken hours with what Schaller saw as little or no result. She didn’t count the hours of interacting that Ildefonso had had, even though she acknowledges that with *all* their dialogues they improved.

Yet he continued. Even after meaningless interactions of two hours of work for just one complete thought, he still tried. ...

His persistence inspired me to keep trying. Even with hours of no mutual understanding, or after a day of no progress, I couldn’t give up. His animation since he had gained his awareness of names communicated his desire. His more alert face, movements, and posture encouraged me.³⁶

I no longer expected another sudden revelation. We both accepted our plodding, uphill conversations and were encouraged whenever one day seemed better than the day before. Replacing some gestures and mime with one or two signs sometimes took weeks, when it was

³⁴ Schaller, 1995, 62-63.

³⁵ Sacks, 1995, 115.

³⁶ Schaller, 1995, 68.

possible at all. Baby-talk signing, two-sign sentences, began to appear among our gesturing and charades.³⁷

He expressed much more satisfaction than I over understanding a simple conversation that had sometimes taken hours to work out. He thought that was excellent. He thought that was language. I knew better, but I could not tell him how much better and faster thoughts could travel.³⁸

When we focus on the *interaction*, these passages suggest that Ildefonso and Schaller were really getting on with a sort of linguistic exploration. Although, we must remember that it is only Ildefonso who is learning to language and he has to get the feel of doing that for himself. He needs the hours of “meaningless interaction”. Here we might think of Virgil walking his canonical line again and again without really seeing anything. Schaller sees no progress only because progress is a slow process of learning to function in an unfamiliar environment. She, like Amy, expects a “sudden revelation” but this just isn’t the sort of thing that will happen for either Virgil or Ildefonso. The “plodding” day after day that Schaller describes seems very like the sort of thing Virgil was doing. It took him a month to see a tree and during that month there must have been times when it seemed he was making no progress.

Amy had commented in her journal on how even the most ‘obvious’ connections – visually and logically obvious – had to be learned. Thus, she told us, a few days after the operation ‘he said that trees didn’t look like anything on earth’, but in her entry for October 21, a month after the operation, she noted, ‘Virgil finally put a tree together – he now knows that the trunk and leaves go together to form a complete unit.’³⁹

Often, however, Virgil’s “doing it himself” is much more obvious than Ildefonso’s “doing it himself” because, as Schaller remarked, human exchange is necessary for acquiring language. So there must always be someone else co-participating where languaging is concerned. Furthermore, sometimes there is no sense that Ildefonso is doing *anything* in a failed dialogue when he doesn’t come out of it with any new sign.

³⁷ Schaller, 1995, 69.

³⁸ Schaller, 1995, 82.

³⁹ Sacks, 1995, 117.

To Schaller it looks like two hours of work for nothing, but really it is two hours of doing the most important thing. Thinking about Virgil can help us to see Ildefonso's progress from another point of view even though Ildefonso is interacting with Schaller.

He [Virgil] continued to improve, visually, over the ensuing weeks, especially when he was free to set his own pace. He did his utmost to live the life of a sighted man ...⁴⁰

Ildefonso can be seen as doing his utmost to live the life of an enlanguaged man in terms of interacting. Somehow he has to have the opportunity to begin to "wander around" for himself, just as Virgil did. For both men, it was something they had to do for themselves and Ildefonso, like Virgil, sets his own pace. Schaller describes him as directing his own course too.

My worries about how to continue finding ideas, materials, and lesson plans for Ildefonso proved to be unnecessary. He himself demanded his long-awaited feast.⁴¹

I soon abandoned my worries about priorities. Ildefonso continued to direct the course as he always had, with his questions.⁴²

Schaller, or someone else, must interact with Ildefonso but learning to language his way around in the world is something Ildefonso must do for himself. Considering Ildefonso's progress in conjunction with Virgil's progress helps to give us a sense of Ildefonso doing this independently, and helps us to focus on the relevant activity. Both men are learning to respond to an unfamiliar environment and they can only get the sort of feedback they need to adjust their responses by "doing it for themselves." Virgil has to walk around and handle things with his eyes open. As Virgil gets used to things in this way the unfamiliar becomes familiar and he can deal with it naturally. Ildefonso can only get feedback in the unfamiliar linguistic environment by bouncing his responses off another person. In that way he gets used to the unfamiliar environment, and as he adapts to it his activity become appropriate, as in the argument of the third dialogue.

⁴⁰ Sacks, 1995, 137.

⁴¹ Schaller, 1995, 92.

⁴² Schaller, 1995, 129.

If we catalogue Ildefonso's acquisition of ASL signs and the increasing complexity of his ASL expressions it gives no sense of how he learns to language his way around. If, on the other hand, we look at the way Ildefonso's interaction with Schaller changes, and if we think also of Virgil's progress, we find that the real development and progress has little to do with the acquisition of ASL.

7.5 Progress: A Difference

The progress that both Virgil and Ildefonso made is noted in their behaviour. Virgil's sister said that she saw a big difference in Virgil's behaviour because "he would just get up and go." The difference in Virgil has to do with his ease of movement without touching. He begins to move around in the world like a sighted person.

'He seemed more alert,' his sister said. 'He would walk, move around the house, without touching the walls – he would just get up and go.' She felt that there had been 'a big difference' since he was first operated on and his mother and the rest of the family felt the same.⁴³

Schaller notices a big difference with Ildefonso too, and what she says is reminiscent of what Virgil's family said. She sees the same ease of interaction as Ildefonso "moves" in his environment like an enlanguaged person. The "big difference" for Schaller is not in Ildefonso's grammar or vocabulary which are still simple.

I ... lost track of Ildefonso for over six months. Then one day, on a street corner, I ran into him at a bus stop. Emotion tightened my throat when I saw him sign. His grammar and vocabulary were still simple, like a young child's, but *his arms and hands and face worked together smoothly in new fluid patterns that looked like adult language*. He signed with confidence and unhesitating rhythm. His whole stature, including the way he held his metal lunch pail and wore his hard hat, expressed his pride in his new life.

Our short bus *conversation* renewed our friendship.⁴⁴ [my italics]

Schaller has distinguished Ildefonso's behaviour from the vocabulary and grammar. It is his behaviour as an individual that looks like adult language. In a languaging sense

⁴³ Sacks, 1995, 136.

⁴⁴ Schaller, 1995, 131.

Ildefonso can “just get up and go.” But it is not just the way he moves. Ildefonso’s behaviour here is *interactive*. Schaller reports that their *conversation* renewed their friendship. It is really the ease and confidence in *interacting* in a certain way that looks like adult language. I feel that the big difference here is in the development of the reciprocal back and forth interaction of conferring. And this is not necessarily measured in terms of vocabulary and grammar.

In the dialogues I see the progress in the interaction itself, and in some cases it is most evident in mimed sequences, so vocabulary and grammar do not seem particularly relevant. Despite her early focus on vocabulary and grammar Schaller sees something that looks like adult language in the way Ildefonso interacts rather than in what is used. What Ildefonso has acquired is not a system of signs, rather he has come to behave in a particular way and the dialogues show that he didn’t need signs to do that. Ildefonso has learnt to confer.

Ildefonso has also learnt ASL so he now confers in ASL. However, it seems important to distinguish between *learning ASL* and *learning to confer*. The three dialogues show that some sort of interaction which looks like conferring must precede the introduction of words or signs. The distinction is difficult to make because we are not accustomed to making it. Most of the conferring we are familiar with is done in some language, Spanish, English, ASL and so on. When Schaller first met Ildefonso he knew no ASL or Mexican Sign Language, and he knew no Spanish or English. It was *because he had no signs or words* that, in her opinion that he was languageless. She thus thought that the best thing she could do was to give him *a language*, that is, ASL signs.

If, on the other hand, we think of Ildefonso as languageless *because he cannot confer*, the best thing to do is to try and engage him in some reciprocal back and forth interaction. The contrast between the lessons and the dialogues shows that progress is much more likely to be made in the dialogues, and it also shows that progress amounts to learning to confer, regardless of whether ASL signs are used. As Ildefonso learns to confer Schaller is able to introduce ASL. That is, as Ildefonso learns to confer, Schaller is able to teach him a language. The *important* difference between being languageless

and being enlanguaged, however, is the difference between being unable and able to confer.

Another interesting aspect of this difference which shows up in light of this discussion is the difference between Ildefonso's prelinguistic miming and his later miming as seen in argument of the third dialogue. Some of Ildefonso's languageless deaf friends have, as we shall see in the next chapter, excellent miming ability. If Ildefonso's miming in the third dialogue can be seen as languaging, why, then, is the miming of his friends not languaging? I want to make it clear here how important it is to shift the focus from what is used in languaging to the actual interacting. This goes for miming too. The quality of the miming does not make any interaction into reciprocal back and forth interaction. That is, the quality of the miming does not make any interaction into languaging. The interaction of the languageless friends is different from languaging.

In the next chapter I want to explore this difference further. I will do this through Ildefonso's eyes and through Schaller's eyes, by examining her account of an evening with a number of Ildefonso's languageless friends. It is all too easy to dismiss the unusual interaction of these languageless friends by saying that what they do is just their form of languaging, that is, they have developed their own language. If they have indeed done something like that, then I think we should at least expect to see some reciprocal back and forth interaction. If, on the other hand, they are languageless, then their interaction should look very different. That is precisely what Ildefonso claims and, after seeing it for herself, Schaller appears to agree.

CHAPTER 8

Ildefonso is described by Schaller as a man learning his *first* language at the age of twenty-seven. Thus, in her book we have, on the one hand, the languageless adult Ildefonso, and, on the other hand, the enlanguaged Ildefonso. In Chapter 7 I discussed the difference between being languageless and being enlanguaged drawing on Schaller's account of Ildefonso's development. The difference highlighted in the conclusion of Chapter 7 is a difference in the way that Ildefonso *interacts* with Schaller. In general, this is not where Schaller herself puts the emphasis. She focuses, mostly, on what is used in the interaction, and thus characterises his development as a transition to using ASL. Nevertheless, his interactive development is evident in her account.

I wish to continue making interaction the focus of my discussion. Furthermore, I want to test the conclusion that the transition to reciprocal back and forth interaction is the really crucial factor in becoming enlanguaged. One way to do this is to compare reciprocal back and forth interaction with languageless interaction, that is, with interaction where *all* the participants are like the languageless Ildefonso. Is there anything in such languageless interaction that looks like reciprocal back and forth interaction? That is, is there anything that looks like conversation, questioning, answering, explaining, arguing, agreeing, disagreeing, probing, or confirming?

One thing that we do not see in the account of Ildefonso's development is interaction that does not involve an enlanguaged person. Interaction necessarily involves more than one person and in his development he is always seen interacting with an enlanguaged person, mostly with Schaller but briefly with Cal. In these circumstances Ildefonso is being enticed, or goaded, or drawn into responding by people who know how to confer. We see the development of reciprocal back and forth interaction but we get no picture from that of languageless interaction. What did Ildefonso do, prior to meeting Schaller, when he interacted with other languageless deaf people?

We get the opportunity to find out in Schaller's final chapter, where she describes an evening spent with Ildefonso and some of his friends. Several years after Ildefonso has learnt ASL she meets up with him again and renews the friendship. One evening he takes her to visit some of his still languageless deaf friends, and much of the interaction she sees on that evening does *not* involve any enlanguaged participants. I think that this interaction helps us to see the difference between languageless interaction and enlanguaged interaction. It does this better than other cases like Genie and Victor, better even than Ildefonso's development. Even though Schaller sometimes seems to focus on what is *used* in the interaction she describes much more than that. I think she says enough to allow us to focus firmly on the *interaction itself*, rather than on what is used in the interaction. Before I discuss that interaction, however, I will look at what led to the meeting.

The circumstances leading up to Schaller's meeting with the languageless men are as interesting as the meeting itself. This meeting is Ildefonso's answer to her questions about his life and thinking before language. She has often wondered about his languageless state, and her most persistent question is about how and what he thought before language. The way Ildefonso goes about answering the question is an insight into any question about language and thought. He does not try to describe his thinking nor does he tell her anything about his thoughts. Instead, he deliberately and purposefully goes to some trouble to show her a certain sort of *interaction*. This answer shows us what we could not see in the account of Ildefonso's development—*languageless interaction*.

I will discuss Schaller's question and the way she asks it. I will look at a case where a similar question was asked of the deaf man, Jean Massieu, who had been a pupil of Sicard.¹ His answers show the sort of thing Schaller, or we, might have expected. Then I will look at Ildefonso's three attempts to answer Schaller's question. The way Ildefonso answers is quite unexpected, compared to the way Massieu answered. Ildefonso's answer forces our attention onto the way that people interact.

¹ This occurred in 1798.

8.1 Schaller's Curiosity

In general Schaller wondered about Ildefonso's understanding of the world, or his understanding of what was going on. Sometimes she seemed to think that he had interpreted life on his own; sometimes she thought that without language there could be no interpretation. Did Ildefonso have a world view or not? Sometimes she thought he had questions about everything, but no means of asking them, as if the questions were clear to him in his mind, just waiting for the words or signs to make them clear to others. Did Ildefonso have thoughts in the absence of a language? Here are some of the things she says.

How did the man think without language? What did he see in all the apparently senseless interactions around him?²

I would have dearly loved to pry open his skull and peer into the storm of thoughts that held him captive.³

The question of what was in his head continued to plague me. His experiences as an isolated individual must differ dramatically from those of people in communities. The more abstract the concept I introduced him to, the more I wondered about *his interpretation*.⁴ [my italics]

Although he now knew of something beyond languagelessness, he didn't have enough symbols to convey a complete thought. Mime and gesture could not describe how he had survived or who he was. Nor could his primitive acting and pointing ask *the questions he had puzzled over* all his life.⁵ [my italics]

His mind was certainly not a *tabula rasa*; thousands of experiences and sensations had etched impressions and stimulated thinking. But his mind was empty of all information that needed language as its conduit.⁶

He was starved for all the information that language could feed him. His brain, full of twenty-seven years of experience and stimulation, had kept busy, *building as much sense of the world as an isolated*

² Schaller, 1995, 27.

³ Schaller, 1995, 53.

⁴ Schaller, 1995, 65.

⁵ Schaller, 1995, 70.

⁶ Schaller, 1995, 74.

mind could. He had the tools of a scientist: observation and deduction.⁷ [my italics]

...I daily wished that he could learn language faster so that I could learn more about *his unique conclusions and impressions.*

I continued to try to fathom what his thinking had been like without language, to imagine his aloneness.⁸ [my italics]

Names and language organize more than our inner lives. Language *influences* and, to some extent, *determines our perceptions and understanding* of the world.⁹ [my italics]

What is in our heads before language integrates the collective human mind with our individual thoughts?¹⁰

Ildefonso's mind *contained the answers.* Everything in his head not invented by him got there through non-verbal communication or observation.¹¹ [my italics]

No one could describe languagelessness except Ildefonso himself.¹²

8.1.1 *Ildefonso's World View and Schaller's Ambivalence*

Schaller's eventual question is not merely a philosophical question about language and thought, it is driven by a tension in her own mind about Ildefonso's difference. It's one thing to have a hypothetical question about languagelessness, it's another thing altogether to have been confronted by someone like Ildefonso—a languageless person who is sane and clearly not stupid. This particular situation generates the tension. On the one hand, because he is sane and not stupid, she assumes Ildefonso is another person just like us, when it comes to making something of the world, and she would like to know about his world view. On the other hand, she wonders how he could possibly have a world view at all, because she repeatedly sees how important conferring is to having a world view, and Ildefonso doesn't appear to be able to confer.

⁷ Schaller, 1995, 92.

⁸ Schaller, 1995, 102.

⁹ Schaller, 1995, 108.

¹⁰ Schaller, 1995, 112.

¹¹ Schaller, 1995, 112.

¹² Schaller, 1995, 82.

Schaller's doubt about Ildefonso's world view is explicit in the colour preference example. If he has never conferred about preferences, his own or anybody else's, then he could not have any notion of what preference is. Without the feedback we get in conferring, she thinks, the notion of preference, or "I like," is not part of his world view, as it were.

If, as seemed likely, no one had ever asked him for his preference, if he had never practiced asserting his likes and dislikes, how could he form "I like" in his head?¹³

So despite her focus on mime and signs, Schaller does seem to realise how important conferring is to our understandings. At one stage, in an attempt to think this through further, she turned to the story of Ishi. She initially thought that Ishi would provide her with clues for understanding Ildefonso. Ishi was the last speaker of the Yana language, who had lived alone for several years before venturing into the unfamiliar surroundings of western culture. He shared language with no one. In that way, she thought, Ishi was like Ildefonso. When she thought further, however, and considered the backgrounds of these two men, she found that Ishi was no guide to understanding Ildefonso.

Language influences and, to some extent, determines our perceptions and understanding of the world. Ishi's confusion about the modern world didn't stem simply from ignorance, but from a different picture of the world and the way things are supposed to be. But at least he had a complete picture. Ildefonso could not have organized a coherent view of the world or have imagined one.¹⁴

When Ildefonso and I first met, Ildefonso had no concept of shared ideas. He could not express his thoughts, and he also could not listen—that is, anticipate any meaning in others' expressions. In contrast, Ishi, who couldn't understand any language spoken to him, knew what conversations and questioning were.¹⁵

The tension apparent in Schaller's attitude to Ildefonso is just not there with Ishi. Ishi is confused merely because he has a *different* "picture of the world." She does not doubt that Ishi has a world view—"at least he had a complete picture." Ishi is different from

¹³ Schaller, 1995, 65.

¹⁴ Schaller, 1995, 108.

¹⁵ Schaller, 1995, 108.

Ildefonso who “could not have organized a coherent view of the world or have imagined one.” Ishi doesn’t confer with anyone when, apparently lonely, bewildered and afraid, he emerges, from his isolation, because he doesn’t share a language with anyone. But, Schaller realises, Ishi *has* conferred, he *knows how to* confer. Ildefonso doesn’t confer with anyone, but he has *never* conferred, he *does not know* how to confer. That is why Schaller feels Ishi has a world view, and why she feels Ildefonso does not. Thinking about Ishi and Ildefonso seems to bring out the importance of conferring to having a world view.

What, then, could Schaller’s question about thinking before language mean? If we are interested in what Ishi thinks we may find the means to ask him, and thus find out about his different world view. Sometimes Schaller seems to think it can be like that with Ildefonso when he is fluent in ASL, but if her misgivings about the languageless Ildefonso’s world view are justified, his answer cannot be like Ishi’s. Ildefonso had *no different* world view that he can now tell us about, because he didn’t have a world view at all.. What, then, are we supposed to expect?

8.2 Schaller’s Question

Schaller expects Ildefonso to *describe* something, to *describe* languagelessness.

No one could describe languagelessness except Ildefonso himself.¹⁶

When Ildefonso has learnt ASL, he, more than anyone else, is in a position to realise the nature of the difference that language makes. He has experienced the move to language in adult life and if anyone can explain the difference, surely he can. Schaller eventually gets the opportunity to ask him about his thinking before language when she meets him again, about seven years after their classroom experience. She finds he is fluent in ASL and has a keen interest in politics and the world in general. She persists with the following question.

“Ildefonso, could you help me?” I asked. “What did you think before language? What was your life like?”¹⁷

¹⁶ Schaller, 1995, 82.

¹⁷ Schaller, 1995, 170.

It seems to me that Schaller expects Ildefonso to *tell* her the answer. After all, they now have a common language. We can get an idea of some of the answers she might have expected if we look at Massieu's answer to a similar question. As we shall see, however, Ildefonso's response is startlingly different from any of Massieu's answers.

8.3 Massieu's Answers

The following exchange occurred between Jean Massieu and those who heard a reading of his autobiographical sketch of 1798. Massieu was in a different situation from Ildefonso as he communicated with several deaf siblings in homesign. Nevertheless, the questions and answers seem relevant in that they present us with some possible answers to think about.

Among other things, Massieu wrote that he had been made to pray by his father, and that he did not know there was a god so he prayed to the sky. A question from the audience then asks *how* he prayed.

When I was a child my father made me pray morning and evening with gestures: I got on my knees, clasped my hands, and moved my lips imitating speaking people when they prayed to God. Today I know there is a God, the creator of heaven and earth. But as a child I worshipped the sky, not God. I did not see God, I saw the sky.¹⁸

“Were your prayers in ideas, words, feelings?”

“It was in my heart that I prayed. I did not yet understand words or their meaning,” replied Massieu.

“What did you feel in your heart?” we asked.

“Joy, when I found the plants and fruit growing; pain, when I saw them damaged by the hail and when my sick relatives remained sick,” said Massieu.¹⁹

It seems to me that Massieu has not directly answered the first question, “Were your prayers in ideas, words, feelings?” The audience, however, seem to take his answer as feelings. This might be the sort of thing Schaller wants to know about when she asks Ildefonso *how* he thought before language.

¹⁸ Lane, 1984*b*, 76-77.

¹⁹ Lane, 1984*b*, 79.

Massieu answers a further question by saying that he cursed the sky for causing disasters and not healing his sick relatives. The audience then ask if Massieu is not afraid of being punished for his curses.

“Were you cursing the sky?” we asked him in surprise.

“Yes,” he replied. We asked him the reason for his curses.

“Because I thought I could not reach to give it a beating and kill it for causing all these disasters and not healing my sick relatives.”

“Weren’t you afraid of provoking it [the sky] and of being punished?”

“I didn’t then know my good teacher Sicard and I didn’t know that it was only the sky. It was only after a year of education that I became afraid of being punished by it.”²⁰

These might be taken as two possible answers to a question about *what* Ildefonso thought before language. Massieu’s first answer here, is like an interpretation which he has come up with himself, although we must remember that he was not strictly languageless. He reasons that the sky caused the misfortune. His answer to the question about provoking the sky shows, I think, a sort of absence of interpretation altogether. Massieu means that it did not occur to him that he would provoke anything, or that he would be punished for his curses, regardless of where the punishment might have come from. He just doesn’t think about provocation or punishment at all. So here are two possible types of answer to Schaller’s “What did you think?” question—the first is, “I interpreted it this way; and the second is, “It never entered my head at all.”

Thus when Schaller says, “No one could describe languagelessness except Ildefonso himself,” and goes on to ask her question about how and what he thought, there are three possible ways she might think Ildefonso’s answer will go.

He might give some indication of a way of thinking other than in language.

He might describe an unusual interpretation of what he experienced.

He might tell her that certain things never occurred to him at all.

In fact, surprisingly, Ildefonso does *none* of these things.

²⁰ Lane, 1984*b*, 79.

8.4 Ildefonso's Answer

Ildefonso first responds to Schaller's question by telling her the story of his early life. After all, part of her question was, "What was your life like?" But that is not what she meant by her question, and it becomes clear later that Ildefonso did not miss the rest of the question.

He didn't really answer the question of what or how he thought, but he needed to tell me this story. He wanted to tell me and later the readers of my book that although he was ignorant, he had always had a desire to learn. Several times then and later, I repeated my question of how or what he thought, but he always answered by describing what had happened to him and why he remained uneducated. I sensed some embarrassment or the same self-blame that he had expressed years before with "dumb me." He considered it more important to communicate the frustration and darkness of his life than what he thought. And he probably couldn't imagine anyone being interested in his languageless state.²¹

Schaller has a point, no doubt, that Ildefonso needed to tell his story, but I do not think that this need and his embarrassment explain his failure to answer her question. Nor has he misunderstood the question. His subsequent behaviour shows that he did indeed understand it, but it also shows that when he was alone with Schaller, he was not in a position to answer. Remember the question. It amounts to "What did you think *before language*?" What is Ildefonso to say? What *words*, what *signs*, what *language* could ever answer a question like that? Any answer in language is likely to be misleading because it puts into language what was not in language before. It seems impossible to get at that answer, the answer about the thoughts of a languageless man. But Schaller thinks that Ildefonso can *describe* languagelessness, and so when she gets him on his own she keeps asking him about it.

Other parts of Schaller's account—that I will look at below—suggest that Ildefonso not only understands the question, but *he understands the difficulty of answering it*, and he wants to attempt an answer. Apart from the answer about his upbringing, which Schaller finds unsatisfying, he makes no attempt to *tell* her anything, and neither does he attempt

²¹ Schaller, 1995, 171.

to *describe* anything. What he does is attempt to *show* her something. It becomes clear that he is looking for the opportunity to produce an answer to her question about his thinking. He eventually answers her question by *showing* her the kind of interaction that he engaged in before he became enlanguaged.

8.4.1 *The Question Ildefonso Answers*

One thing that we must be clear about is that Ildefonso is not showing Schaller what languageless people *use* in their interaction. His answer is *not* about signs, gestures or mime. In Chapter 7 we saw so clearly in the argument over paying for the burritos, that it didn't seem to matter what was used. When Ildefonso answers Schaller here, he makes no particular mention of what his languageless friends use. He does not draw Schaller's attention to their gestures or miming. He does not draw her attention to what his languageless brother uses when interacting with Elena in the restaurant. He does not draw her attention to some strange syntax in the gestures. He does not demonstrate any particular gestures. He does not tell her about any of the gestures. What, then, are we to look at?

What we see is *a very different sort of interaction*. Its real difference does not lie in the fact that the men use mime and their own gestures. This interaction is truly different because it is *not reciprocal back and forth interaction*. This interaction *is* the answer to Schaller's question about how and what Ildefonso thought before he arrived in her classroom. There is no strange world view to be extracted from Ildefonso's answer. There is no tricky gesture system to be discovered. Becoming enlanguaged means engaging with others in the reciprocal back and forth interaction of conferring. *That* is the development that we saw in Ildefonso's classroom progress. *That*, Schaller sees, is how Ishi came to have his world view.

Knowing just this, however, is not enough to diminish our curiosity about the languageless men, but it makes us reconsider the question. We cannot begin to think of any implications of languagelessness until we realise the central importance of coming to interact in a particular way. If we think in those sorts of terms we do not wonder what Ildefonso thought before ASL. We wonder what Ildefonso *did* before ASL—or at

least, what he did before beginning to participate in reciprocal back and forth interaction. And *that* is the very thing that Ildefonso purposefully and deliberately shows Schaller.

So to satisfy our curiosity the question changes. The correct question to ask here is: “If the languageless men are not engaging in reciprocal back and forth interaction, then what *are* they doing?” The real insight of Ildefonso’s answer comes through in his series of attempts to answer Schaller. His two unsuccessful attempts along with his successful attempt, together direct our attention to the right place—to the interaction itself.

8.4.2 *Ildefonso’s First Attempt to Answer*

Ildefonso makes his first attempt to answer Schaller’s question when they are at the restaurant with Mario and Elena. There is no doubt about Ildefonso’s intention show Schaller the sort of thing he used to do before he knew ASL. Clearly he does not think that merely looking at what Mario does will answer the question. Even though Mario is communicating animatedly with Elena, Ildefonso makes no attempt to draw this to Schaller’s attention. This cannot show the way he and his languageless friends interacted before he knew ASL because one of the participants, Elena, is enlanguaged. Instead Ildefonso himself tries to lapse into the old way of interacting with Mario. He chooses the moment to give a demonstration and makes sure Schaller is watching. There is something specific—something “really different”—that he wants to *show* her. Unfortunately his attempt at a demonstration does not work.

Ildefonso sat across from me and next to Mario. He signed to me, “Watch this; it’s really different.” He turned to Mario and ordered him to start gesturing so I could see what it looked like. Mario didn’t understand that Ildefonso wanted him to start a conversation. He kept trying to figure out what Ildefonso’s conversation was about. “Later, you’ll see,” Ildefonso assured me.²²

Ildefonso makes it clear that he thinks this attempt is quite *unsatisfactory*. Not only could he not get the interaction going, he seems to have no intention of persisting,

²² Schaller, 1995, 176-177.

Schaller will have to wait until later. Despite a lot of interaction which includes Mario, when the meal is over Ildefonso complains that Schaller has not seen what he particularly wants her to see.

Ildefonso complained to Elena that I was not getting the full and complete picture of how they used to communicate. "This isn't right," he said. "She's not seeing it."²³

When they leave the restaurant Ildefonso repeats this complaint to Elena and offers Schaller an explanation. It appears that he had tried to interact with Mario in the way that he did before learning ASL, but he had found that he could not do so. This does not seem to be a case of being a bit rusty, nor of forgetting something. Ildefonso feels he and his thinking have been changed since he mastered ASL. If that is the case, then to interact in the way he used to, he would have to somehow un-master ASL. As things stand now, any interaction between Mario and himself is interaction involving an enlanguaged person, and that is not what he wants Schaller to see.

He then turned to Elena and repeated his earlier complaint. He really wanted me to see the equivalent of a video showing Ildefonso and Mario growing up. He turned to me and apologized, explaining he could no longer gesture and mime with his brother the way he used to. He knew too much ASL. Language had changed him and his thinking.²⁴

Ildefonso's explanation here does not just show that he has understood Schaller's earlier question about his thinking. It also shows that he knows perfectly well what will count as an answer. Something has to be *seen*. Not only has Ildefonso experienced languagelessness as an adult, he is also, being congenitally deaf, a visual person through and through. He knows what he wants Schaller to see, and he knows that what happened in the restaurant did not show it. That is why he complained to Elena and apologised to Schaller. He wants her to see languageless people *doing* something. He wants her to get "the full and complete picture of how they used to communicate," he wants her to see how he used to "gesture and mime with his brother." He wants her to see *languageless* interaction.

²³ Schaller, 1995, 179.

²⁴ Schaller, 1995, 179.

8.4.3 Ildefonso's Second Attempt to Answer

Ildefonso's first attempt to answer Schaller's question was no good because he knew too much ASL. He is now an enlanguaged person and he said that language had changed him and his thinking. So he needed to find someone else to interact with Mario—someone who had not been changed by language. His second attempt to answer Schaller's question is to engineer a situation where the interaction is between languageless people. Elena drives them to another restaurant where a friend works and Ildefonso brings this man out to gesture with Mario. Ildefonso's behaviour again suggests that he knows exactly what Schaller has to see. He makes sure he has her attention. "Watch, look at this." He wants her to see something specific—"languageless communication;" "his old gestural state." Ildefonso, however, is unable to make Mario and the other man understand that he just wants them to communicate with each other in the way they usually do.

Elena drove behind a restaurant, and we followed Ildefonso to the back door by the garbage cans. He walked in while we waited. Soon he came out with a young man in an apron, who waved hello to us. "Watch, look at this," Ildefonso said to me, and began making gesture motions at the young man. The man looked at Ildefonso, then at Mario, then back at Ildefonso. "Come on, say something," Ildefonso ordered, a difficult performance in mime. The young man didn't understand, and Ildefonso nodded goodbye and walked quickly to the car. He wanted me to see languageless communication. It was very important to him to show me his old gestural state.²⁵

Nothing Ildefonso does suggests that *one* person can demonstrate "languageless communication" or "his old gestural state." Rather, he tries to get some *interaction* going between Mario and the other man, because it is *interaction* that Schaller must see. This attempt is unsatisfactory too because there is no interaction. Neither Mario nor the young man understand Ildefonso. This is not because Mario and the other man are unfamiliar with Ildefonso's miming. Nor is it because they themselves cannot mime, Mario mimed readily in the restaurant. The men just do not understand Ildefonso at all, and Ildefonso does not attempt to explain further. Explanation would require reciprocal back and forth interaction and Ildefonso makes no attempt to get anything like that

²⁵ Schaller, 1995, 180.

going between himself and the other men. I suspect that Ildefonso does not try to explain because he knows it will be as fruitless as the attempt to tell Mario that people have names.²⁶

Two points need to be clarified here. Firstly, I think it is reasonable to assume that the other young man is languageless. Schaller does say that he waved hello to them, perhaps giving the impression that he is not languageless. However, I read this as her hasty interpretation of what the young man does, for the same reasons I mentioned in the namesigns episode.²⁷ There I claimed that Mario calling Ildefonso “Mario” was her interpretation of what Mario did when Ildefonso was trying to show him the namesigns. Schaller’s interpretation was natural because that was what it looked like to *her*, but when we looked at the wider picture, it appeared that Mario did no such thing.²⁸

It is not even clear in the present case that Schaller thinks the young man did anything like sign HELLO, but it is clear that he acknowledged the people outside when Ildefonso ushered him out. This is an indication that, apart from Schaller, the young man knew them. Such an acknowledgement, a wave, does not have to be spelled out as a verbal expression, especially when other things work against such an interpretation—for example, Ildefonso does not try to explain anything; Mario and the other man do not understand, despite knowing Ildefonso.

Secondly, we may be tempted to think that, although Mario and the kitchen-hand do not know what Ildefonso wants them to do, they at least know that he wants them to do something. What they don’t understand is merely what it is that he wants them to do. However, nothing that Mario and the other man do shows that they even think Ildefonso wants them to *do something*. Understanding that Ildefonso wanted them to do

²⁶ Described above in Chapter 6. (Schaller, 1995, 175-176.)

²⁷ Schaller is not in an easy position. She is writing for a wide audience, and has to describe something which is beyond the experience of most of us. If we jump to the conclusion that this young man knows HELLO, or something like that, on the basis of her remark, then I think we will miss something more important in her account.

²⁸ In the wider picture we saw that Ildefonso’s was unable to tell Mario about the namesigns, and there was no explaining behaviour, and no conferring behaviour.

something would itself require some reciprocal back and forth interaction. But, as we shall see, reciprocal back and forth interaction is not an option in languageless interaction.

This whole incident is clearly an unsatisfactory outcome for Ildefonso. He ends the session abruptly as soon as he sees that Mario and the other man do not interact. He makes no further attempt to get them to understand him. His behaviour and what he says to Schaller, again suggest that he knows exactly what he wants her to see. It seems that the interaction must be *between* languageless people. It didn't work in the restaurant because only one person, Mario, was languageless. The second attempt was a failure because nothing happened between Mario and the other man. Ildefonso had asked Schaller to *watch* and *look* and there was nothing to see.

8.4.4 Ildefonso's Third Attempt: An Answer

In a third attempt to answer Schaller's question, Ildefonso takes everyone to a room where three other languageless men live. The group now consists of Mario and the three men who live there, all languageless, Ildefonso and Elena, who are both used to communicating with these men, and Schaller herself. Once there Ildefonso needs to do nothing for interaction occurs naturally. During the evening the languageless men interact with each other in the way that they usually do. Ildefonso does not try to act as a catalyst, and there is a wealth of interaction which does not involve any enlanguaged people. Much of the time Ildefonso, Elena and Schaller watch without participating.

Now Ildefonso seems to be satisfied that Schaller will see what he wanted to show her, and she remarks that throughout the evening he constantly watched her to see if she understood, and to see if she was *watching*. He kept asking, "Did you *see* that?" Since he did not say anything like that, in relation to Mario's mime and gesture, I think we can assume that he wants her to see what the men are *doing* with the mime and gesture. And he wants her to see what *languageless* people do with the mime and gesture, without the participation of enlanguaged people. Hence, when he repeatedly exclaims about how completely different it is, he is referring to the way mime and gesture is used in

languageless interaction.²⁹ Thus interaction is the focus of his answer to her question and that is where we should look to see the important difference between being languageless and being enlanguaged.

Ildefonso was proud of his languageless friends and very pleased to see me clearly mesmerized. He stood by my side, alternatively watching the skits and observing me and my expressions. Every two minutes he nudged me and asked, "Understand? Can you understand the gestures?" He looked at his brother and his friends, at where he used to stand, then back at me. His manners were serious and business-like. He was the ringmaster, keeping the rhythm, keeping the show moving. His eyes leaped back and forth from my eyes to the storytellers, measuring my response and their performance. "See? See? Did you see that? Look!" He constantly directed my gaze to make sure I didn't miss a movement. He had to answer all those unanswerable questions I had asked years before. He wanted me to know who he had been, how he had lived, and his only experience with tribal life, with community. He knew who he was now and knew that what he had learned could not be appreciated without knowledge of where he had started.

"Look! Look! See? Do you see? It's so different, so different, completely different," he signed again and again. He looked at his friends, who stared back at him across the mysterious gulf that he had managed to cross. He was standing with his arms raised in the sign "different." One pointing hand aimed above my head, to the world of language; the other pointed across the room to his friends. Ildefonso, the conductor, stood between the cacophony of tuning instruments and the beginning of music. His two hands remained in their sign, an eye's echo, a whisper of awe—"different."³⁰

Ildefonso clearly feels that here, finally, he has answered Schaller's question. His answer is nothing like any of Massieu's answers. Ildefonso does not tell Schaller how he thought before language. He does not describe his own interpretation of his experiences. He does not tell her that certain things just never occurred to him. Ildefonso produces a *completely* different sort of answer. He *shows* Schaller the difference between being languageless and being enlanguaged. He goes to some lengths to show her *interaction*.

²⁹ Ildefonso did ask Schaller if she understood the gestures but, as in the other attempts to answer her question, he did not focus on any gestures by demonstrating them, which would have been relatively easy for him to do.

³⁰ Schaller, 1995, 188.

And he goes to some lengths to make sure the interaction he shows her is between *languageless* people.

More than anyone else ever could, Ildefonso realises the difference that he repeatedly points out to Schaller. There is no indication that he thinks this is a second class answer to the question of how he thought before language. He seems to be sure that this shows *exactly* what he wanted her to see. This public display is not, to Ildefonso, a *substitute* for the answer, this public display *is* the answer, there to be seen by any one who cares to look. He never attempted to describe or discuss anything about thinking before language. Instead, he worked hard to find the right answer and that is exactly what he shows Schaller as he points to his friends interacting.

“Look! Look! See? Do you see? It’s so different, so different, completely different,” he signed again and again. He looked at his friends, who stared back at him across the mysterious gulf that he had managed to cross.³¹

The whole tenor of Schaller’s account suggests that she accepts Ildefonso’s answer, “He had to answer all those unanswerable questions I had asked years before.” She describes that evening as if it is the answer to the question she recently asked, and sums it up as, “One pointing hand aimed above my head, to the world of language; the other pointed across the room to his friends.” But what exactly is the answer? The question about Ildefonso’s thinking before language has turned into a question about how he used to *interact*, with other *languageless* people. For Ildefonso, the significant difference between then and now, where “then” was a languageless man and “now” is a languaging man, lies in the interaction.

The wording of Schaller’s question does not foreshadow this sort of answer. Ildefonso, however, has gone to some lengths to make sure she sees languageless people *interacting* with each other, and he has said nothing about what he thought, or how he thought, before he learnt ASL. Nor has he focused on the particular sort of miming and gestures languageless people use, even though he had ample opportunity to do so. This does not

³¹ Schaller, 1995, 188.

prevent Schaller discussing the miming and gestures that she sees on that evening. Her account thus blends a discussion of the interaction itself with a discussion of what is used. She does not say explicitly that Ildefonso is showing her the interaction, or that the difference lies in the way the men interact, but I will argue that it is implicit in much of what she says.

8.5 Interpreting Ildefonso's Answer

In her account of Ildefonso's answer, Schaller has indeed captured some very surprising or puzzling interactions which differ from our usual languaging activities. I have already discussed the lack of any explaining behaviour as the border-crossing stories are repeated. And I have also discussed the elaborate creation or re-creation of settings and contexts, in situations where we would just draw someone's attention to something, as in the "remember when" example. It is all too easy, however, to lose sight of the interaction itself and to slip back into thinking that the languageless men have some kind of language after all.

This is particularly easy when Schaller herself uses the sorts of that terms we associate with languaging. She uses terms like "sign," "gesture," "mime," "story," "storyteller," "act out," "communicate ideas," "description," "phrase," "translation," "conversation," "idiom." It is easy to be distracted by words like these, and to imagine that the languageless men *might* be using something like language. We have to take time to read her account slowly and carefully if we want to see what the men are actually doing.

We can be distracted, firstly, by terms which focus our attention on what is *used*, rather than on the interaction. For instance, when Schaller meets Mario, and again, when she meets the other languageless men, Elena introduces her using a strange sign. Schaller interprets Elena's gesture as "their sign for friend."³² What Schaller says suggests that this is a gesture which *all* the men use. Also, what she says suggests a shared understanding, something like the ASL sign FRIEND. A sign such as FRIEND emerges in

³² Schaller, 1995, 175, 180.

conferring like, for example, *CONSTABLE*, discussed in Chapter 6. Also, a sign like *FRIEND* emerges in conferring as distinct from, say, *SISTER*, *COLLEAGUE*, or *GUEST*.

Do the languageless men, in fact, have some signs for things in the way that we have words or signs for things? Is the gesture that Schaller describes as “their sign for friend” like the ASL sign *FRIEND*? Before we assume that they have a sign that is something like the ASL sign *FRIEND*, or something like our English word “friend,” we need to know how it is used in their interaction. What do the *men* do with “their sign for friend.” Do they use it in the way that ASL signers use the sign *FRIEND*? Do they use it in the way that English speakers use the word “friend”? What do we see when we look at the interaction?

We do *not* see the men using this gesture, Schaller describes only Elena using the gesture. And Elena does not incorporate the gesture in any conferring. There is nothing in the interaction to confirm that this gesture is a sign for “friend.” Furthermore, in her description, Schaller does not single out other gestures as “their signs for such and such.” If we are not cautious the terms that Schaller uses may distract us from paying attention to the interaction itself. Here we might end up thinking that the languageless men have gestures for things in the way that we have words for things. Thus we need to be cautious of relying on Schaller’s expressions, instead of paying close attention to what the men are actually doing.

We can be distracted, secondly, by terms which seem to characterise the interaction itself. For instance, in the following example we may assume that sometimes the languageless men have conversations. Schaller says of the young man’s rolling gesture:

Would it survive to become a permanent symbol, or would it die with this “conversation”?³³

The first thing to note here is that Schaller uses quotation marks. A conversation is a prime example of reciprocal back and forth interaction but a “conversation” may not be. She has certainly noticed a difference from our usual notion of conversation but does not

³³ Schaller, 1995, 182.

explain this difference. If we are not cautious we may implicitly assume that some sort of conversation is going on, to the extent that there is some reciprocal back and forth interaction. Again we may assume too much.

Certainly we cannot rely solely on Schaller's qualified use of a particular conferring term to classify the interaction of the languageless men. Indeed, we may *miss* the difference she is signalling if we don't check out the interaction itself. Do we see anything in her account of that evening that looks like a conversation? We need to be on the look out for actual instances of reciprocal back and forth interaction. That, more than Schaller's qualified use of the term "'conversation,'" will help us to understand what Ildefonso is pointing out in his answer. Thus we have to be cautious about some of the terms Schaller uses.

Schaller says a lot about the interaction. And much of what she says is not clouded by ambiguous terms. If we keep focusing on that aspect of her description, we find a very revealing account of languageless interaction. The languageless men are not, in fact, interacting in the way that we expect enlanguaged people to interact.

8.6 Interacting Without Language

I watched mesmerized as they communicated for hours in mime.³⁴

This is how Schaller begins her account of the evening spent with the languageless men. Towards the end of the account she says:

Their ability to communicate without language astounded me.³⁵

This all reads perfectly clearly, but what does it mean?

- These men do with *mime* what we do with *language*.
- These men communicate with *mime* and we communicate with *language*.
- These men interact using *mime*, we interact using *language*.

³⁴ Schaller, 1995, 181.

³⁵ Schaller, 1995, 186.

These possibilities tell us *nothing* about languageless interaction. And they miss the point of Ildefonso's answer completely. We cannot even begin to understand what languageless "communication" amounts to until we realise what Ildefonso wants Schaller to see.

- He wants her to see that the way the languageless men interact is different from the reciprocal back and forth interaction of enlanguaged people.

8.6.1 Introduction

It seems quite fortuitous that Ildefonso's first two attempts to answer Schaller's question were unsatisfactory, for we learn a lot from those unsatisfactory attempts. In the first attempt we see that interaction between Elena and Mario isn't the sort of thing Ildefonso wants Schaller to look at, he makes no attempt to draw her attention to that. Then he complains that interaction between himself and Mario won't do either because he, Ildefonso, is enlanguaged, "He knew too much ASL. Language had changed him and his thinking."

Ildefonso's second attempt, his deliberate attempt to initiate some interaction between Mario and the languageless kitchen-hand, shows decisively what was unsatisfactory about the first attempt. Even though the second attempt is also unsatisfactory, we see that the interaction *must* be between languageless people. That was not the case in the first attempt. Ildefonso wants Schaller to see *languageless* people *interacting*. We learn from these first two attempts that interaction between a languageless person and an enlanguaged person just does not look like languageless interaction. In the following discussion, therefore, I will focus on the way that the men interact with each other. I will try to see how all that Schaller says helps us to understand their interaction and to see how it differs from reciprocal back and forth interaction.

When Schaller begins her discussion of that evening spent with Ildefonso's friends, she comments on the gestures and mime that the languageless men use. She remarks on the very small number of what she calls standard signs, or common signs. These standard signs are signs that are shared, that is, they are *used* by everyone in the group. During the course of the evening she sees only about a dozen. In contrast to these standard

signs, she describes other signs and gestures as either spontaneous inventions or as the property of one individual.

Schaller next interprets some interaction as a sort of testing procedure for signs that are adopted by the group. The first impression we get from Schaller's description is that there is a discussion going on. Initially the sign is repeated by each of the languageless men. Then each man "tries" the sign in question by using it in several different stories. It appears that they all watch each other doing this, because Schaller goes on to say that if there is not "total consensus" about the sign, it does not get adopted by the group. Adoption by the group means, I presume, that they all use the sign subsequently, that is, it becomes one of the "standard signs." If the sign is not adopted by the group it is dropped or "remains the property of one person."

With some help from Elena and Ildefonso, I was able to figure out the few standard signs the men in the room had developed. In the course of that evening, they used only about a dozen common signs. Every other gesture was either a spontaneous invention or used by only one individual. Any sign that became adopted by the entire group had to be repeated and tested in many different stories and tried by everyone. If they could not achieve total consensus, the sign was dropped or remained the property of one person. I saw no common grammar or structure, but individuals developed their own systems for communicating ideas. Although the group may have understood an idea or a sign, it was never copied by anyone else.³⁶

Although Schaller gives some account of what the languageless men are doing, she does not say specifically how consensus was achieved. All she says is that the sign was repeated, the sign was tested in many different stories, and the sign was tried by everyone. What is puzzling here is that she describes no reciprocal back and forth interaction in this testing procedure. This does not mean, of course, that there was none, but my point here is that she describes none just where we expect to see it.

We already know from the earlier discussion of Ildefonso's development, to be on the look out for any reciprocal back and forth interaction. Reciprocal back and forth

³⁶ Schaller, 1995, 181-182.

interaction is certainly what we expect to see if people are achieving consensus. Yet in Schaller's description there is *no hint* of any interaction that might be the sort of interaction we associate with a group reaching consensus. There is no mention of back and forth interaction that might be a discussion of pros and cons; she does not say anything about the reactions of the others to each person's trial of the sign; there is no suggestion that the men are canvassing opinions; there are no reported questions, or arguments, or comments.

As Schaller describes it, everyone seems to be participating in some way, and initially the result looks like the outcome of a discussion. On the other hand when we look more closely at what she actually says, the overall activity appears to be, strangely, more individual than communal. That is, it does not seem to be a discussion, or dialogue, or conferring as we know it even though several people are involved. This is the first place that a subliminal feeling of *disengagement* may strike the reader. These men just don't seem to be talking to each other—not about the sign, not about adopting the sign, not about anything.

We have to find other clues in Schaller's account to help us decide whether or not the men are engaged in a discussion. These clues lie in the strangeness of what the men do, or sometimes don't do, in their interaction. Or they lie in the strangeness of the outcomes of the interaction. So often, when we look at the interaction itself, we do not find what we normally expect in situations where people discuss things, question each other, argue among themselves, or explain things to each other. In Schaller's description, there is good evidence to show that the languageless men are not engaged in the reciprocal back and forth kind of interaction we use in conferring. They are engaged in a different sort of interaction.

As we examine Schaller's account slowly and in detail, the strangeness of the interaction of the languageless men begins to come through. When we begin to feel that the interaction is strange we start to notice other remarks that Schaller makes, almost in passing, about the interaction she observes. For example, "Each man took a turn on

stage ...”³⁷ This isn’t a show for Schaller, this is the way the men interact, so this remark is one to note. As we pay more attention to those remarks I feel that we begin to get an clearer idea of the nature languageless interaction as shown to Schaller by Ildefonso. Drawing on her account, I see the different sort of interaction as a kind of *performer-audience* interaction, in which the absence of any discussion, questioning, arguing, or explaining, is not surprising.

I will explore the difference between reciprocal back and forth interaction and performer-audience interaction in the following seven steps.

- i. I will discuss what Schaller says about standard signs, particularly the small number of standard signs.
- ii. I will discuss the inventive aspect of the gestures.
- iii. I will discuss the idiosyncratic aspect of the gestures.
- iv. I will discuss Schaller’s remarks about the men achieving total consensus.
- v. I will offer a characterisation of the languageless interaction as performer-audience interaction.
- vi. Given the performer-audience interaction, I will offer an alternative explanation of the so-called testing procedure.
- vii. I will look, finally, at two examples of particularly communal activity which are, surprisingly, not examples of reciprocal back and forth interaction.

8.6.2 *Standard and Non-standard Signs*

Schaller notes that the languageless men have developed what she calls standard or common signs. These are gestures which are used by *all* the men. Other gestures are either spontaneous inventions or, if they appear repeatedly, are used by only one person. It seems so natural to us that communication is facilitated if we all use the same words and the same expressions—in fact, we take this to be so natural or normal that it hardly merits discussion. If you and I both speak English, then my current dictionary is certainly almost identical to your current dictionary in content. We would be very surprised if this were not the case. I take this standard lexicon to be the basis of the

³⁷ Schaller, 1995, 187.

notion of standard signs that that Schaller means—signs like CAT and TREE, the first ASL signs that she tried to teach Ildefonso, are standard signs.

Schaller says that the languageless men have *developed* these signs, so I take it that they are not widely used signs which the men have seen elsewhere, like “the OK sign used by hearing people” which the older man uses in one of his descriptions.³⁸ And she says that she needed help from Ildefonso and Elena to “figure out” the standard signs. So if these men have indeed developed signs which are something like our words how did they do it? And do the standard signs reflect shared understandings? We cannot answer these questions directly, but if we look closely at what Schaller says we find something strange about the standard signs—there are hardly any of them.

With some help from Elena and Ildefonso, I was able to figure out the few standard signs the men in the room had developed. In the course of that evening, they used only about a dozen common signs. Every other gesture was either a spontaneous invention or used by only one individual. Any sign that became adopted by the entire group had to be repeated and tested in many different stories and tried by everyone.³⁹

What I find most surprising about the standard signs is that Schaller reports only seeing about a dozen during the evening. This seems to be an incredibly small number compared to the number we might expect where people are used to interacting with each other. What is more, she describes seeing some signs adopted by the group, so the dozen that she saw includes some that were added during that evening. If a few were tested and adopted regularly we would expect them to have accumulated to some extent, for adopting a sign doesn’t sound like a transitory thing. Where are the standard signs from previous nights? Is there is a substantial bank of standard signs which are never used, or do any standard signs that are used tend to be transitory after all?

There is something not quite right about standard signs which are adopted and not used, or which are adopted today but are not available for use tomorrow, or next week. I think

³⁸ Schaller, 1995, 184.

³⁹ Schaller, 1995, 181.

the *paucity* of so-called standard signs throws doubt on the claim that the signs themselves are indeed standard signs, where standard signs are taken to be something like our words. Once our words have been developed they stay developed. If these men have developed some shared understandings then I think we would expect to see more evidence—either in the form of a considerable number of standard signs, or in the form of some reciprocal back and forth interaction. In the absence of such evidence as yet, it seems to me that we should reserve judgement on whether or not we are justified in calling some gestures “standard signs.”

8.6.3 *A Non-standard Aspect: Inventions and Experiments*

In contrast to the standard signs or gestures that Schaller mentions, she notes two non-standard aspects of the signs and gestures of the languageless men. Apart from the few so-called standard signs, the gestures are generally either inventions, or are used by only one person. Taking the first of these, inventiveness, she says that each movement was an experiment, and that gestures were often spontaneous inventions, thus giving the impression of something that is very non-standard. This is a sort of wholesale inventiveness and there is no suggestion that there is any significant standard background to it.

I assume that the non-standard aspect of inventiveness that Schaller talks of applies to something other than the mimed or acted out activity of the languageless men for two reasons.⁴⁰ Firstly, we don't expect standardisation in mime. Each new experience that is mimed is inventive in the sense that the mimer may not have done it before. One person's effort in miming a horse ride may differ from that of another, but both may be clear and well done. I do not think Schaller means that sort of inventiveness when she suggests invented gestures are non-standard. Secondly, the languageless men are competent, practised mimers, so it doesn't seem right to think of them as inventing the

⁴⁰ I take it that Schaller is talking about movements which look to her like gestures rather than mime. Elsewhere in her account of that evening she specifically talks about events and characters being acted out (184), and I assume she is making a distinction between that and gestures. For example, the rolling movement which she interprets as “moving ahead in the story,” (182) is a gesture and not a mime or acting out.

art of mime, or to think of their miming as *experimental*. Schaller certainly does not give *that* impression.

My sense of awe increased with each story as I took in the *tremendous detail contained in* a face, the twisting of three fingers, or one *perfectly timed* change in posture. Each man took a turn on stage—the middle of the room—and acted out events from his life—a bullfight in Mexico City, the tragic drought that ruined the family farm, the repeated arrests by the border patrol. I could have watched their *mimed* conversations all night.⁴¹ [my italics]

So Schaller seems to be remarking on gestures and not miming when she talks about spontaneous inventions and experiments. Although she does not say what counts as a gesture rather than mime, I think it is possible to say something here without making this distinction.

In the course of that evening, they used only about a dozen common signs. Every other *gesture* was either a *spontaneous invention* or used by only one individual.⁴² [my italics]

I consciously stuffed every *gesture* and interaction into my memory. *Each movement was an experiment*. Would it survive to become a permanent symbol, or would it die with this “conversation”?⁴³ [my italics]

What then should we make of her claim that the languageless men use invented or experimental gestures? Is this part of what Ildefonso wanted her to see? I do not think it is specifically what Ildefonso wanted her to see, because Schaller is used to seeing invented gestures and does not remark on them specifically as *invented* gestures. Invented gestures, even in quantity, are not in themselves different from things we have seen elsewhere in her account. Let us look at three examples of invented gestures.

Firstly, once Ildefonso started to make progress in the classroom he and Schaller used lots of inventions and experiments in their back and forth interaction, because they shared very few standard signs. Even before there is anything which clearly looks like a

⁴¹ Schaller, 1995, 186-187.

⁴² Schaller, 1995, 181.

⁴³ Schaller, 1995, 182.

dialogue Schaller is eliciting some responses with strange and unrehearsed behaviour. The invented gestures are incidental here. Ildefonso's attentiveness and support are vital as she tries, by whatever means, to draw some response from him. The sort of response encapsulated in her expression, "until he glimpsed meaning," is what is central here, not the gestures.

I could not have stretched my imagination to capture ideas for converting concepts into pictures in the air without his forehead's tense muscles and his rigid, alert posture. Ildefonso searched and studied my strange behavior until he glimpsed meaning. Without the support of his earnest black eyes, my unrehearsed mime and caveman gestures would have collapsed.⁴⁴

Secondly, we have the first dialogue, the DUMB-ME dialogue. The way Schaller elicited a response from Ildefonso in the first dialogue, when she pretended to have difficulty seeing what the child was doing, was very inventive. She does say that she mimed this, but she was not telling Ildefonso that she had bad eyesight, so it was not a mime in that sense. It was an experiment to goad or provoke Ildefonso in a gentle way to get some conferring started.

Schaller was not interested in what sort of gestures were used in this incident, not her clever invention nor Ildefonso's ordinary gesture/mime that he begged. We know from her account that she expected a response. "During the third round. I saw an opportunity not only to see how much he understood, but to ask my first question regarding his life..."⁴⁵ Ildefonso's response that he begged was not particularly interesting as a gesture or as a clever invention. It was, however, really significant as a *response* to Schaller. She saw the opportunity to ask her "first question regarding his life"—her *first* question. And Ildefonso *answered*. What is central here is that we see special type of interactive engagement. *That* is what excited Schaller.

A third example of invented gestures that Schaller describes is Ildefonso's interaction with her Deaf friend, Cal. The way she describes it, Cal draws Ildefonso into a question

⁴⁴ Schaller, 1995, 76-77.

⁴⁵ Schaller, 1995, 78.

and answer session. It is not clear whether this is more like the questioning in the first dialogue—Schaller “asked” what Ildefonso did as a child, and he “answered” that he begged—or like questions and answers as we usually think of them. Invented gestures had to be used here because Ildefonso knew very little ASL at this stage.

Ildefonso crossed his arms and blended in with the wall. I met his eyes and signed, “My friend C.” Cal shook his hand with enthusiastic warmth and greeted him with, “Good morning, how are you?” I quickly explained to Cal that Ildefonso didn’t understand fluent signing and was just beginning to learn his first language. Cal immediately turned to Ildefonso, ignored me, and continued as if I had simply made a casual remark about how we met. He mimed and gestured and used no standard signs. At first Ildefonso stared and responded with his habitual stiffness and open-eyed defensiveness. Within sixty seconds, however, he began to respond with his own gestures and mimed expressions. Cal, via gestures and a rapid progression of facial expressions, asked Ildefonso about his life, his school, and his plans. The gist of his questions was similar to some of mine. Had he ever been in a classroom? How did he get to this country? How did he support himself? What amazed me—no, shocked me—was the speed and fluency of the gesturing. Except for the wealth and variety of his eyebrow and mouth movements, Cal didn’t mime or invent a single gesture that I couldn’t have thought of, but his expressions flew through his hands ten times faster than mine. He never had to pause to think.

Within five minutes, Cal had asked, and Ildefonso had answered, more questions than Ildefonso and I had in an entire morning.⁴⁶

Schaller was not amazed that Cal’s gestures were invented, that again was incidental. In the circumstances they had to be invented. Nor were they unusual, she could have thought of them. What did amaze her was the speed and ease with which Cal elicited responses from Ildefonso. Schaller and Ildefonso toiled all morning to confer to the extent that Cal and Ildefonso did in five minutes.

In these examples we see invented and experimental gestures being used to elicit some response. And we see the response. That is we see invented gestures being used in reciprocal back and forth interaction. So what do we learn from the fact that the gestures

⁴⁶ Schaller, 1995, 85-86.

of the languageless men are inventions or experiments? We learn *nothing* about languageless interaction. Ildefonso has taken Schaller to see languageless interaction, something “completely different,” and we want to know something about this interaction. Is it anything like reciprocal back and forth interaction? To find that out we need to see whether the languageless men use their invented gestures to try and elicit responses from each other. We need to see whether there are, in fact, any responses to the invented gestures.

This is the sort of interaction we should be looking for in Schaller’s account of the evening with the languageless men. All their skill at miming stories, and all their use of inventions and experiments rather than standard signs, does not, on its own, tell us how the men are interacting. It is important to see what sort of interaction any gestures are involved in. For instance, what sort of response or uptake is there?

8.6.4 *A Non-standard Aspect: Idiosyncratic Signs and Gestures*

The second non-standard aspect Schaller mentions is that gestures may be peculiar to one person. Some clearly identifiable gestures are seen repeatedly but are only used by one person. Such a sign is described as one person’s “property.”⁴⁷ If we think in terms of our words for a moment, this gives a sense of “my words” and “your words,” which seems unusual. Our words are generally standard, and using the same words in our conversations reflects a degree of mutual understanding.

Despite the individuality or idiosyncrasy of the gestures, Schaller feels that these men understand the gestures of others even, though they do not use (copy) each other’s individual gestures. What is more, even after the so-called testing procedure, after everyone has tried a sign, and, according to Schaller, understood the sign, it may be used by only one person, not the group.

Any sign that became adopted by the entire group had to be repeated and tested in many different stories and tried by everyone. If they could not achieve total consensus, the sign was dropped or *remained the property of one person*. I saw no common grammar or structure,

⁴⁷ Schaller does not appear to mean anything like an idiolect here. That is, she is not describing individual forms of a particular dialect.

but individuals developed *their own systems* for communicating ideas. Although the group may have understood an idea or a sign, it was *never copied by anyone else*.⁴⁸ [my italics]

Schaller does not say much about particular idiosyncratic gestures, but she does describe one such sign which is used by only one of the men. The youngest man uses a rolling sign which she interprets as “moving ahead in the story.” He clearly uses this more than once because she initially thinks it has something to do with time, future and past. She finds that this interpretation doesn’t quite seem right, so she must have seen the sign used in various stories. Her description of this sign follows the comment that the group does not copy signs. That comment, along with the identification of the person who used the sign, the youngest man, conveys the notion of a sign that “belongs to” that man.

I saw no common grammar or structure, but individuals developed their own systems for communicating ideas. Although the group may have understood an idea or a sign, it was never copied by anyone else. The youngest man used a forward rolling sign and then the same shape and movement backward, which I thought might suggest future and past, but my translation didn’t quite work. Later, I realized that it didn’t refer to time directly but acted as a fast-forward or reverse sign within the narrative. He wasn’t saying “a little while later,” but “moving ahead in the story.”⁴⁹

This looks like a useful sign or device for storytellers but, only one of the storytellers uses it. What is more he uses it regularly and the others see him using it. Schaller gives no hint that the others have their own equivalent of this, there is just a sense of an idiosyncratic, useful gesture used freely by one man in interaction with others. Although this seems unusual to us, it does not seem to be unusual in the interaction between the languageless men, as Schaller uses this example to make her point about the idiosyncratic nature of each man’s activity.

... individuals developed their own systems for communicating ideas. Although the group may have understood an idea or sign, it was never copied by anyone else.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Schaller, 1995, 181-182.

⁴⁹ Schaller, 1995, 182.

⁵⁰ Schaller, 1995, 182.

If the youngest man's rolling sign is typical, then the idiosyncratic signs or gestures used by the languageless men are not like the casual idiosyncratic expressions that pepper our speech. For example, the person who says "well there you go" when informed of something, even when no one is going anywhere; the use of expressions like "you know" to fill gaps; or unusual expletives or exclamations. The youngest man's rolling movement is a fundamental kind of sign. Furthermore, it does not seem to be an idiosyncratic variation on some usual communal way of saying things. For this group it appears that, in general, there just is no usual way of saying anything.

I see two things here to bear in mind when exploring the interaction. The first is that the idiosyncratic signs are peculiar to *one* person. This is unlike the homesign systems deaf children use to confer. When deaf children develop homesign systems, the system is shared to some extent by all who use it. Homesign often develops where hearing parents do not want to introduce their deaf child to a signed language. While the parents persevere with speech, gesturing is often the only way to get communication going. The child is more proficient but inevitably the parents end up using at least some of the gestures. Massieu reports that he and his deaf siblings communicated ideas using their own signs and gestures, and that his parents and neighbours understood them.

Until the age of thirteen years and nine months, I remained at home without ever receiving any education. I was totally unlettered. I expressed my ideas by manual signs or gestures. At that time the signs I used to express my ideas to my family were quite different from the signs of educated deaf-mutes. Strangers did not understand us when we expressed our ideas with signs, but the neighbours did.⁵¹

Massieu and his two deaf brothers and two deaf sisters would have used a system that was peculiar to their family—something like an argot without the overtones of secrecy. There would not have been five different homesign systems. The parents and neighbours would presumably have used some of the gestures from that system in their responses, so an observer would have seen gestures peculiar to the group rather than gestures peculiar to each deaf child. This is the first thing that is strange about the idiosyncratic gestures

⁵¹ Lane, 1984*b*, 76.

of the languageless men—they are idiosyncratic to single individuals and not to the group of the four, nor even to the group of three who live together.

The second thing to bear in mind when exploring the interaction of the languageless men, is the *persistence* of idiosyncrasy. It is strange that, even after the so-called testing procedure, after everyone has tried a sign, and in the face of the continued use of that sign by the “owner,” the idiosyncrasy persists. It would have been strange in Ildefonso’s development if Schaller had used the signs and he had never used them. Suppose, for instance, he had *gone on* miming a cat and she had *gone on* signing CAT in their conversations.

What is really strange then, is not so much the idiosyncrasy itself but its peculiarity to *single* individuals, and its *persistence*. If signs are singled out, repeated, and tried by each man, why is it so common for the signs to remain the property of *one* person?⁵² And furthermore, if these men are doing anything like conferring, how do such individual systems *persist* in such a wholesale fashion that Schaller can perceive their individuality. What signals something different about the interaction of the languageless men is not that they have idiosyncratic gestures and systems, but that this idiosyncrasy is personal and does not seem to diminish with continued interaction.

We would expect personal idiosyncrasy to diminish with reciprocal back and forth interaction so that gestures became peculiar to the group. That is, we would expect there to be more group idiosyncrasy, as with homesign systems, and less individual idiosyncrasy if the men were doing anything like conferring. In this languageless interaction what each man does is, in general, peculiar to him and it stays that way. What sort of interaction, then, might we have here, such that this is not unexpected? Let us look at some more examples.

⁵² Schaller report seeing only about a dozen repeated signs that were not the property of one person.

8.6.5 *The Testing Procedure: "Achieving Total Consensus"*

I will begin looking at the interaction in more detail by considering Schaller's description of the languageless men testing a sign. One of the most puzzling things she says is that the men will not adopt a sign, thus making it a common or standard sign, unless they can "achieve total consensus." This suggests that when a sign is adopted the men have achieved total consensus, that is, they have reached an agreement. What Schaller says is puzzling because she does not describe any of the sort of interaction we expect when people are reaching an agreement.

Any sign that became adopted by the entire group had to be repeated and tested in many different stories and tried by everyone. If they could not achieve total consensus, the sign was dropped or remained the property of one person.⁵³

Schaller does not describe anything wildly *unexpected*, but the little she says about the testing procedure leaves us wondering. The idea of consensus, or reaching an agreement, is very suggestive of reciprocal back and forth interaction, yet Schaller mentions no such interaction. She describes no discussion, no comments, no explanations, no arguments, no questions and answers—the sorts of things we expect if a group is achieving consensus about something. Do the men discuss the pros and cons of adopting the sign? Do they discuss the way the sign looks in each other's stories? Do they comment on the sign at all? We cannot be sure because Schaller just says that they repeated it and tested in stories. Each man tries the sign in his own stories, and either continues to use it or ceases to use it.⁵⁴

There is just not enough in Schaller's description of the testing procedure to help us understand what sort of interaction we have here, so we have to look elsewhere for clues. Do we find evidence that the men might discuss a sign anywhere else in her account? During the whole evening only Ildefonso is described doing something which looks like a comment on a sign. What is surprising, however, is that when he makes his

⁵³ Schaller, 1995, 181-182.

⁵⁴ I am not arguing that the absence of any description of reciprocal back and forth interaction means that there is no such interaction. It is just that the little that Schaller does say does not even hint at reciprocal back and forth interaction.

comment Schaller does not describe any response or any uptake from the languageless men. It looks as if his “comment” is ignored, or just goes unnoticed.

Ildefonso makes his “comment” when the older man is describing the farm work he did in Mexico. Ildefonso interrupts the story to add “a better description of oxen and the yoke,” and then lets the man continue with his story. There is no indication that Ildefonso’s description is seen, by the languageless men, as a better alternative. Indeed, there is no indication that Ildefonso’s “comment” is seen as anything. “Here good,” is not a response to Ildefonso, it is part of the story—life is better here (in the USA).

They complained of the worst jobs they had in Mexico. The older man hated plowing and began to describe oxen. Ildefonso interrupted and added a better description of oxen and the yoke, then let him finish his description. “Here, good,” he [the older man] signed by pointing to the ground, then giving the OK sign used by hearing people. He pointed to his back, aching under a plow, then repeated that it was better here on this side of the border.⁵⁵

Not only is this the only comment that Schaller describes, it is also the only interruption she describes. Ildefonso broke the continuity of the story but the older man continued without apparently acknowledging the interruption. No one else is described breaking the continuity of another’s story in this way. Of course we cannot be sure that there was in fact no acknowledgement of Ildefonso’s interruption but when we look at all Schaller does describe we find no other comment, no other interruption, and no response that looks like an acknowledgement of someone’s miming or gesturing. In fact, the whole evening is more like a series of performances and each man is left to have his say—except in this one instance.

The overall absence of described discussion and comment does not show that the languageless men do not discuss things or make comments. Nor does it show that there was no discussion or comment in the testing procedure. It does, however, raise doubts about whether there was any discussion. Without any discussion or comment the notion of “achieving total consensus” is puzzling. If the consensus is about the adoption of a

⁵⁵ Schaller, 1995, 184.

sign we expect some discussion of the issue. We see none. We expect some comment on the sign that is being tried out. We see none. We expect some comment on the stories in which the sign is tried. We see none. We expect to see a number of standard signs. That is, there is a stronger feeling that people are addressing the same topic, and agreeing about the same thing, if everyone is using the same terms. We don't see that.

Furthermore, it is not just that we do not see what we expect in the testing procedure. Schaller does not describe the languageless men discussing or commenting on anything during the whole evening. So it is hard to see what makes her think that the languageless men are testing signs and sometimes achieving consensus. I am sure there is something about the interaction that has given her the germ of this view—that the men are testing the signs—but we should, I think, treat this example with the same scepticism as her remark, “Mario pointed to Ildefonso and called him “Mario”...”

Of course, what Schaller describes is unfamiliar to her, and to us, so we are tempted to say that the men may have their *own* way of “achieving total consensus.” But we don't see *any* reciprocal back and forth interaction, and there is *no hint* in their gestures that all the men are addressing the same topic. Thus, the whole idea that these men come to any agreement about a sign in the way we usually associate with the notion of consensus, has now faded. It is certainly not obvious that they have done anything like test a sign. There is no clear evidence that a sign which is used by everyone in the group has been adopted by agreement. Maybe if we understand more about the sort of interaction we have here we will find a better way of thinking about the so-called testing procedure.

8.6.6 *Four Cases of Unusual Interaction*

When we look closely at Schaller's account of what the languageless men are doing we find no evidence that they actually do confer. What we do find, are incidents where our expectation are repeatedly not met in terms of how the interaction proceeds.

For instance, in Ildefonso's attempt to get Mario and the languageless kitchen-hand to begin a conversation. We expect Ildefonso to be able communicate easily with Mario and the kitchen-hand for several reasons. Ildefonso is not trying to say anything

complex. Schaller understands him, so, although she says it is difficult, it is possible by miming, to instruct two other people to begin a conversation. Mario and the kitchen-hand interact using mime. All three men know each other. And there is no obvious reason why they should not do as Ildefonso asks. Yet Ildefonso does not succeed. Mario and the kitchen-hand do not understand him.⁵⁶

As long as our expectations are based on a mistaken view, we cannot understand why Ildefonso failed in this instance. The mistaken view we are most likely to have is that the languageless men do confer, but not in the way that we do. Given that assumption, Ildefonso's failure is, indeed, strange. I think, however, the view that these men confer *in any way* is mistaken. We *keep* finding examples of strange interaction in Schaller's description of her evening with the languageless men. Let us look at some more of that interaction.

The first example of unusual interaction concerns the absence of explaining just where an explanation is important. Schaller mentions border crossing "stories" each containing a "grain of information" about how to enter white-man's land or avoid deportations. She points out that there is a serious side to this storytelling, these stories are not just entertainment, border-crossing knowledge is crucial to the well-being of all these men and their families. So it is important that the "grain of information" is shared, and one way to do that is to tell a story. We might imagine therefore that these stories are somewhat like our fables, and the "grain of information" is like the moral of the fable. When we look carefully at what Schaller says, however, we find that understanding the significance of these stories is not straightforward for the languageless men—not for the audience, and not for the storyteller either.

They told many border-crossing and border-patrol stories. The most breathtaking adventure involved a horse chase. The older man not only played himself running and sweating, but also played both the mounted officer and the horse. These people all lived on the edge, in constant fear of starvation. Their biggest challenge collectively and individually was figuring out how to stay on this side of the mysterious border, where jobs and food for their families existed.

⁵⁶ Schaller, 1995, 180.

Each story contained a grain of information about how to enter white-man's land or avoid deportation. No one could say to another, "Guess what I found out. In order to cross or stay legally ...". Instead, a story that contained some fact had to be told and retold until someone else either understood the significance or at least understood that the teller knew something important.⁵⁷

There seems to be no doubt that the languageless men treat these stories seriously. Also it is somehow evident that the audience either do, or do not, understand the significance of the story. When the audience do not appear to understand the "grain of information," the story is told and retold repeatedly. That seems reasonable to us at first, until we realise that *nothing else can be done*. When no one understands, the *only option* is to repeat the story. This is very surprising. No one asks for further explanation. No one offers further explanation. Even in this crucial situation Schaller reports no comment of any sort.

We have here a situation where someone has told "a story that contained some fact." That fact is important to the audience. Nevertheless, when the languageless men do not understand the significance of the story, they do not seek clarification, they do not probe, and they do not ask questions. We know from the second dialogue, the geography lesson, that mime can be used to ask for and give an explanation. And we know that all the languageless men are competent mimers and storytellers. But when these men do not understand a story, or the point of a story, there is no explaining at all. Schaller describes no mimed explaining here, just where we most expect it—just where the languageless men most need it.

No one could say to another, "Guess what I found out. In order to cross or stay legally ...". Instead, a story that contained some fact had to be told and retold until someone else either understood the significance or at least understood that the teller knew something important.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Schaller, 1995, 182-183.

⁵⁸ Schaller, 1995, 183.

Schaller draws our attention to a strange situation when she describes the difficulties these men face in trying to share a “grain of information.” When the audience do not understand the significance of the story, even after it has been repeated, she suggests that they at least understand that the teller knows something important. The result, in this case, is a strange sort of “understanding”—the audience understand that the teller knows something important even though they have not seen the point of the story. In a situation like this it is not clear what, if anything, is understood by the audience. What is more, it is not clear what is understood by the storyteller himself.

I do not think it is useful to speculate on exactly what the languageless men might understand. Nor do I want to go into what Schaller means by “a story that contained some fact” or “a grain of information.” I will take these things at face value. What is worthwhile looking at here, given the focus of the investigation, is the interaction of the languageless men. This situation is strange because of the way the men behave. They do not interact in the way that we expect, given the importance of the border-crossing stories. This is a situation where explaining is important. If these men could engage in explaining they would do so here. What Schaller describes, however, is a situation where no explaining seems possible. The interaction of these men is unlike our interaction in similar circumstances.

When we first read about these men we may think that we know what sort of interaction this is—after all, we too tell stories. Some of our stories have “significance,” or are stories that “contain some fact,” or have a point which might be said to be a “grain of information.” Thus we have certain expectations about how the interaction might proceed when it is apparent that the other men do not understand the story. We expect the teller of a border-crossing story to be able to draw his audience’s attention to the “significance” of the story, or to be able to focus on the “fact” or “grain of information.” We might do that with a story which had a point, a fable say. For example, in the fable about the ant and the grasshopper, if the moral of the fable is not clear, or if the audience just does not see the point at all, then the storyteller can respond in various ways to make the moral clearer.

When we tell a fable the audience can be alerted to the moral in an *introduction*. We might say, “This story shows the importance of planning for the future.” If the audience does not understand the story, then the storyteller could explain further. The storyteller might *single out* or *focus* on the point to make it more explicit. For example, by pointing out that the plight of the grasshopper in winter was a direct result of its earlier profligate living. Or the story might be *amplified* such that more is said about the moral. “Sure the grasshopper is having more fun than the ant *now*, but soon it will be winter and there won’t be much food about. What will happen *then*? Think about that.”

When we tell a story with a point, then, we have ways of emphasising or drawing attention to the point. The teller can signal the point beforehand. The teller can make the point explicitly after telling the story. Or the teller can amplify the story and dwell on the point to highlight it. And initially we expect the languageless storyteller to be able to do these things too. We expect to see this sort of explanatory interaction develop when it is apparent that the audience do not understand the story.

The languageless storytellers do none of these things. In fact, it seems that they *cannot* do these things. Schaller says that no one could say to another, “Guess what I found out. In order to stay legally...” Such an introduction alerts and engages the listeners, preparing them for the important “grain of information.” This is the sort of clarifying introduction we might expect at the beginning of a border-crossing story which contained some fact about how to enter the country or avoid deportation. That is, it is the sort of introduction we expect if this storytelling is like our storytelling in similar circumstances. But these men *cannot introduce* a story in that way. That is, according to Schaller, they just cannot signal to the audience the significance of the point that they wish to make.

Furthermore, the languageless storytellers *cannot subsequently draw attention* to the point of the story. Schaller just says that the story had to be told and retold, as if it is the *whole story* each time, and as if that is the *only option* to further understanding. That is, there is no evident reciprocal back and forth interaction in which the participants move on in the way that we move on through probing, questioning, rephrasing, and voicing our

confusion as we try to understand something. The apparent lack of audience understanding does not elicit any response that looks like an attempt to explain. The languageless men do not do any of the things we expect to see in explaining. And they do not effect an explanation in any other way.

The storytelling of the languageless men no longer looks like our storytelling in similar circumstances, because the interaction in which the storytelling occurs *cannot* develop beyond the storytelling. There is *only* the telling and retelling of a story where there is a need for further explanation. If the languageless men could explain surely they would explain here. They do nothing remotely like explaining *right where an explanation is very important*.

This is strange indeed. Well, this is part of Ildefonso's answer to Schaller's question about how and what he thought before he had acquired any language. These men are *languageless*. He took her to meet his brother and his friends so that she could see them interacting. Ildefonso points out to Schaller how different it is, and she sees how different it is. She sees them telling stories but the storytelling she describes is not like our storytelling. There is no reciprocal back and forth interaction even when an explanation is needed. These men do not interact like that, their interaction lacks that sort of engagement. This difference is part of what Schaller characterises as a "mysterious gulf."

"Look! Look! See? Do you see? It's so different, so different, completely different," he signed again and again. He looked at his friends, who stared back at him across the mysterious gulf that he had managed to cross.⁵⁹

So it is not that these men do not interact with each other. What is different is that they do not interact in a particular way. That is the source of the "mysterious gulf." And this "mysterious gulf" between languageless interaction and enlanguaged interaction is one that not even Ildefonso can bridge. We see this in the way he interacts, or refrains from interacting, with his friends. Of course he wants Schaller to see the languageless men

⁵⁹ Schaller, 1995, 188.

interacting on their own without the participation of any enlanguaged person. This does not mean, however, that he stands back for the whole of the evening. Schaller describes some instances where he gets involved in the interaction. But also some instances where, surprisingly, he does not get involved. That is, instances where we expect Ildefonso, who is not uncaring or unhelpful, to explain some important everyday things to his friends. He just does not do this.

The second example of unusual interaction is one where we expect Ildefonso to explain something to his friends but he does not even attempt to do so. The languageless men have a treasured collection of cards that they show to Schaller. She thinks the cards are mostly useless but the men treat them all like gold.

Eventually, they all saw that little cards worked to repel green men [border guards]. They showed me their collection. I think only one or two cards had any validity. The others were either inappropriate or out of date. All of them were treated like pieces of gold.⁶⁰

The men have seen cards used and presumably the most important sort is the Green Card. Nobody has informed them about the cards, but they can see, and they are not stupid. It is tempting to say that the men have, through observation, an understanding of what is going on regarding the cards—Schaller almost says that, but she says it in a funny way. “Eventually they all saw that little cards worked to repel green men.” Is that really what the men saw? People do not use cards to repel guards, they use them to justify their entry to, or residence in, the country. I don’t think we can even say that the men see the cards as objects to *repel* the guards. Anything we say is *our* idea of the situation.

It is clear from what Schaller says about the collection of cards, that the men do not understand what is going on. Most of the cards are rubbish, but she reports that all were treated like gold. The men value cards that are inappropriate or out of date just as highly as cards which are appropriate. This is where we expect Ildefonso to help them. He is now fluent in ASL, and follows world affairs when he can get someone to interpret the

⁶⁰ Schaller, 1995, 183.

news. He knows about Green Cards. He know these men, and how important it is for them to know about the cards. And he does not seem to be an uncaring or unhelpful person. Yet Schaller does not report that Ildefonso did anything to explain about the cards, or even to point out which ones were of real value. I think that Schaller would have reported this sort of thing if she had seen it. I also think that when we ask why Ildefonso didn't explain the cards to his friends, we have not grasped the nature of the "mysterious gulf."

In the third example of unusual interaction, Ildefonso again does not attempt to explain something. The youngest man writes dates, like 1986, on his arm. in answer to "certain questions" from the border guards. The other languageless men admire his skill. Apparently *none* of the languageless men, *including* the one who writes the dates, has any idea what the dates mean. Schaller's description juxtaposes this lack of understanding—no one knows what it means—with something the young man had figured out—when to use his skill. He doesn't understand what he is doing (saying) but he knows when to do (say) it. That sounds more like a party trick than languaging.

During one story about arrest and deportation, the storyteller turned to the youngest, who wrote on his forearm: 1986. No one, including himself, knew what that meant, but he had figured out that it worked as an answer to certain questions. He had three different years associated with three different events relating to border-crossings or arrests and proudly displayed his arm as a chalk board when the moment seemed right. Everyone showed great respect and admiration for his skill.⁶¹

At first it looks as if the young man understands certain questions—perhaps "When did you first come to the United States?" How else would he know that it was appropriate to display one of the years on his arm? But Schaller says that he has no idea what "1986" means. It would be very strange if the young man understood the questions yet not his own answer. However, Schaller does not say that he *understood* the questions. She says he wrote a date on his arm "*when the moment seemed right*." Is that what figuring out

⁶¹ Schaller, 1995, 183.

that it worked as an answer to certain questions amounts to? However we want to fill this out, we have to be aware that anything we say is *our* idea of the situation.

It appears, from Schaller's description, that the young man can write the date on his arm but he has no idea what he is doing. Writing the date on his arm seems to be something that he just does "when the moment seems right." We do not know why this might have worked. We do not know what the border guards made of it. And we certainly don't know what, if anything, the young man thinks of it. Schaller again does not report Ildefonso doing anything to help here. Again we want to ask why Ildefonso does not try to explain anything. Ildefonso knows what "1986," but he apparently does not try to explain "1986" to this young man? And again I think that Schaller would have reported it if he had.

In these two examples, the card collection and the date on the arm, Ildefonso apparently makes no attempt to explain anything. We may already suspect that he cannot do this, because we saw the difficulties he had with Mario in the restaurant. Back then we saw that Ildefonso could not explain namesigns to Mario, and he could not get Mario to make the ASL sign THANK-YOU when Elena paid for the meal. Would he face the same sort of difficulties if he tried to explain about the cards and the date? We get the feeling that he might when we look at the following instance where he did interact with one of the languageless men.

In the fourth example of unusual interaction Schaller does report Ildefonso doing something as if in an effort to help. Ildefonso interacted with the youngest languageless man, the one who wrote the date on his arm, when Schaller enquired how old this young man was. All the men can count but the youngest is the fastest, and he also has some grasp of arithmetic.

The same man seemed to have the best arithmetic skills; he had figured out addition. All of them could count but not as high and as fast as the youngest. They counted by holding their palms out and extending their fingers, then they pushed their hands slightly forward to indicate ten. They turned their hands around, palms facing in, and pushed forward for twenty, and so forth until the counter lost track. I

asked the youngest how old he was. After Ildefonso's translation, he answered, "ten-twenty-one."

"No, no, no," corrected Ildefonso. "Try again," he gestured.

"Ten-twenty-four, no, no, ten-twenty-five," he asserted without conviction. Ildefonso gave him the OK sign. I wondered whether Ildefonso had taught him that answer and if the man had any idea what he was counting.⁶²

At first this may give the impression of a successful question and answer interaction mediated by Ildefonso, but, as has happened before, when we read Schaller carefully the first impression fades. Schaller herself is not convinced that the young man has any idea what he is counting. Firstly, he gives a number which Ildefonso rejects. Secondly, he gives two other numbers "without conviction." After the third number Ildefonso gives the OK sign and the young man does not try again. Did the young man know he had the right number, or did the OK sign stop him? At least the numbers were in the right range, so we have a suspicion that the young man might know roughly what age he is, but this is not enough to convince Schaller.

She says that Ildefonso "translated" her question, but we do not know whether he gave a different version of "How old are you?" or whether he did something else to guide the young man to the numbers. Something makes her feel uneasy about taking this as a genuine question and answer—she wonders whether Ildefonso had taught the young man that answer, like a party trick, maybe, and she wonders if the young man has any idea what he is counting. So we are not sure what happened when Ildefonso "translated" the question. Nor can we be sure about his "correction." Ildefonso clearly rejects the first answer, and after some encouragement—"Try again."—the young man gestures two more numbers. We might say that the young man realised his number was wrong but yet again, anything that we say in these circumstances is *our* idea of the situation.

Even in this instance where Ildefonso does get involved in some interaction, he does not attempt to *explain* anything when the young man does not appear to understand.

⁶² Schaller, 1995, 183-184.

Schaller sees the lack of conviction in the young man's "answers" but Ildefonso does not behave as if he is trying to make anything clearer. He just seems to be getting the young man to perform. And then he leaves the matter at that. I do not think that Schaller had left anything important out of her description. That is she has not omitted any reciprocal back and forth interaction between the languageless men. Ildefonso's difficulty with this young man just would not arise if the young man could confer in some way. What Schaller describes looks like a state of affairs where there never ever has been any explaining.

It is so easy to see the languageless men merely as friends yarning together, but after looking at these examples we have to back right off assuming anything like that. What we might think initially—for example, their storytelling is just like our storytelling—seems untenable when we read Schaller carefully. At first we expect to see comments, probing, questions, or explaining when the border-crossing story is not understood. But that is to expect reciprocal back and forth interaction. The persistent absence of reciprocal back and forth interaction just where it seems to be needed shows us what these men cannot do—they cannot interact in the way that we do.

The mysterious gulf that Schaller describes, is between people who cannot engage in reciprocal back and forth interaction and people who can. We see evidence of this when we see what Ildefonso cannot do in the second, third and fourth examples above. When we ask why Ildefonso does not explain we are not paying attention to the languageless interaction, we are paying attention to our own ideas of how people interact. We should instead note: *Ildefonso does not explain*. When we ask why Ildefonso does not explain, what do we think he can do? What do we think is possible? We are, of course, thinking that he can engage in reciprocal back and forth interaction with the languageless men. That is what explaining is—reciprocal back and forth interaction. We are thinking in terms of the sort of interaction that we engage in. But we, and Ildefonso, are enlanguaged and Ildefonso's friends are not.

In languageless interaction there is no asking for or offering explanations. In languageless interaction telling stories with a grain of information isn't like us telling

fables with a moral. In languageless interaction there is no discussing, questioning, probing, arguing. All the stuff we initially assume or expect is built on the tacit assumption that the languageless men are engaged in their own sort of reciprocal back and forth interaction. But they aren't. The examples in this section show us that languageless interaction is just *not* like reciprocal back and forth interaction. In the next section I am going to try and say more about the nature of languageless interaction.

If it is not like reciprocal back and forth interaction what is it like? It is like a sort of performer-audience interaction.

8.6.7 *A Different Kind of Interaction: Performer-Audience Interaction*

The characterisation of languageless interaction as performer-audience interaction is drawn from Schaller's account of her evening with the languageless men. She makes remarks which refer to the men as taking the stage, and when one of them is telling a story the others are referred to as the audience. These remarks, like the unusual instances described above, suggest something very different from reciprocal back and forth interaction. These men are giving performances and watching performances.

Schaller is first explicit about the notion of giving a performance when she tells us about the youngest man describing his ride on an aeroplane. He takes his "turn on stage," he has a "fascinated audience," and he is "applauded" for his telling of this prize story.

The youngest *took the next turn on stage* and began to describe his experience riding in an airplane. Everyone watched his story of the trip with an intense interest. Since even getting fed regularly is a problem for this group, a trip in an airplane is a rare adventure indeed. First the young man and his outstretched arms became the airplane taking off with bumping and rough vibrations. Then with his hand he showed the airplane becoming small and flying into the sky. Then as passenger he sat snugly in a chair, watching the world and its inhabitants shrink to toy size. He looked up and a woman stood waiting to serve him. He settled into the luxury of a king; the world at his feet and service at his side. Regardless of how many details and repetitions he added to his story, he never lost his *fascinated audience*

for a moment. I could tell he would be *applauded* for telling this prize story for many years.⁶³ [my italics]

This is an unusual story and we might think that the young man tells it in the spotlight because none of the others have experienced a plane ride. Schaller makes it clear later, however, that so far as the languageless men are concerned, this is not an unusual setting for their interaction in general. Any person who tells a story takes the stage, and the men take it in turns to do so.

My sense of awe increased with each story as I took in the tremendous detail contained in a face, the twisting of three fingers, or one perfectly timed change in posture. *Each man took a turn on stage—the middle of the room—and acted out events from his life—a bullfight in Mexico City, the tragic drought that ruined the family farm, the repeated arrests by the border patrol. I could have watched their mimed conversations all night.*⁶⁴ [my italics]

So we have performers stepping out from the group, standing apart. They take it in turn to stand apart like this. It is not a case of taking a turn to speak in a group discussion. Rather, it is taking a turn on the stage and giving a solo performance, usually telling a story. Schaller refers to some of the stories as “mimed skits” which contribute to a cohesive group history, or to a group sense of community. Thus, for the solo performer, the audience is very important, and important in a special way. These performances are not for *an* audience. These performances are for *this* audience.

Telling stories from their similar histories and reminding each other of shared experiences were not trivial pastimes. Their *mimed skits* made them human, providing them with the only sense of community they could experience. Their storytelling was their main entertainment and education. Like the ancient Greeks telling and retelling the story of the Trojan war to keep their history and language alive, Ildefonso’s friends repeated all of their stories to form their history and identity.

For a languageless tribe, *repetition and audience participation* are even more important than they were for the Greeks and are for present-day signing communities trying to preserve their language. This group is not passing on what is inherited; it is creating language.

⁶³ Schaller, 1995, 185-186.

⁶⁴ Schaller, 1995, 187-188. Schaller refers to mimed conversations in this passage but what she describes, a series of performances, is nothing like a conversation. Earlier (182) she put quotation marks around the term “conversation,” as if to show that the interaction was not really a conversation.

In order to understand one another, they all have to remember most of the details, especially chronology, for they can act only in the present tense.⁶⁵ [my italics]

In performer-audience interaction we get the sense of group interaction in two ways. Firstly, being one of the people who take a turn on stage makes one a participant in this group interaction. Schaller says, “Their mimed skits made them human, providing them with the *only* sense of community they could experience.” Secondly, through the performed skits group ties are reinforced or extended. Schaller describes Ildefonso’s friends as a languageless “tribe,” forming their history and identity through the repetition of their stories.

Schaller points out that for this group audience participation is more important than usual. This importance, however, does not mean that here we have some extreme form of participation. We must be careful how we think of the behaviour of the languageless audience. We might think of audience *participation* as something over and above just being there and paying attention—like heckling, or children calling out “Look behind you, Mr Punch,” at a puppet show. That is the sort of audience participation we think of when someone says, “The audience were really participating tonight.” In these cases the performer is eliciting a response from the audience. The languageless men, however, do not elicit responses when they perform.

When one of the languageless men is performing the others are interested and attentive watchers. They are not dozing, or paying attention to something other than the performer. But nor are they interjecting or commenting on the performance. They do nothing to interrupt, the performance. The overall impression we get from Schaller’s description is that in this situation the audience is made up of interested and attentive watchers. That is the important audience participation that she sees here. It is interested attentive watching—and *that’s all*.

⁶⁵ Schaller, 1995, 186-187.

Now we can see why Ildefonso was not satisfied with anything Schaller saw in the restaurant. We do not confine ourselves to that sort of watching once we are used to reciprocal back and forth interaction. Enlanguaged people participate in interpersonal interaction in a different way, as is shown by Ildefonso's comment about the oxen. Ildefonso just could not help putting his oar in when the older man was telling his story. Even if we don't actually interrupt, we do respond with more than attentive watching. That is what Elena did when she was interacting with Mario in the restaurant, she couldn't *do* the audience part of performer-audience interaction, and neither could Ildefonso.

Schaller notes something else about the attentive watching of the languageless audience. They seem to pay as much attention to the signs and gestures as they do to the story itself. When we tell a story, or attend to a story, we generally focus on what the story is about, the plot, the point or the content. We might also notice a nice turn of phrase or overly flowery language, but we don't normally scrutinise the words themselves. This is not the case in languageless performer-audience interaction.

For a languageless tribe, repetition and audience participation are even more important than they were for the Greeks and are for present-day signing communities trying to preserve their language. This group is not passing on what is inherited; it is creating language. In order to understand one another, they all have to remember most of the details, especially chronology, for they can act only in the present tense. *Each individual phrase or idiom is as important as the piece of information it carries, carefully examined by the storyteller and the audience together.*⁶⁶ [my italics]

I assume that by "phrase or idiom" Schaller means gestures or pieces of miming. Why are the gestures so important? Why do they have to be carefully examined by the audience *and the storyteller*? We don't usually do anything like this. We don't normally "carefully examine" each phrase or idiom of the language, unless we are involved in some special literature or language study project. That is, we listen to the story and may not even be aware of the actual words used. So what are the languageless men doing? I think that here we have to again make a conscious effort to remember that

⁶⁶ Schaller, 1995, 187.

these men are *languageless*. We must not slip back into thinking that their mime and gesture is like our language.

When we are involved in storytelling it is generally the case that the stories are in English. That is a sort of *background* fact, and it is so because English is our language. In Mexico the same would be true except that the stories would most likely be in Spanish. But how are we to think of storytelling if the storytellers and their audience are *languageless*? In considering this languageless storytelling, what do we put in place of “English” or “Spanish?” The first inclination is to say “mime and gesture.” But we have already found out that the mime and gesture of the languageless men is not like that. The gestures in particular are often spontaneous inventions. That does not give the impression of something that will pass without notice. Now Schaller tells us that even the storyteller carefully examines these invented gestures.

So the languageless men, audience and storyteller, are not comfortably familiar with their own gestures in the way that we are comfortably familiar with the phrases and idioms of our particular language. Their phrases and idioms are not standard in the way that our phrases and idioms are—we have already seen that they have very few, if any, standard signs. When these men participate in performer-audience interaction, the signs and gestures are as much a part of what they attend to as the story is. Thus, in performer-audience interaction we should look at the gestures at least, and maybe the miming, as a part of the performance. That would explain why the audience, and storyteller must give the same attention to the phrases and idioms as to the stories.

Again we realise that the storytelling of the languageless men is not like our storytelling. Familiar phrases and idioms do not flow over this audience. Therefore, when we think of storytelling in performer-audience interaction, we have to be careful not to assume that the languageless men are following the story in the way that Ildefonso, Schaller and Elena are following it. The gestures are not unfamiliar to these men in the way that a foreign language is unfamiliar to us. In their careful examination the men are not trying to do anything like translate the gestures. They are not trying to

make sense of them in that way. They do not, like Ishi, have any understandings acquired through previous conferring.

The languageless men do not go away after a series of performances and have a chat. They do not have any form of reciprocal back and forth interaction. Performer-audience interaction is *the* way the languageless men interact as a group. That is, it is their *only* way of interacting. When one of the men acts out his own experiences in front of the others, he participates in the group activity by performing to them. The others participate in the group activity by watching him. That is, they participate by being an audience. And they do all this in the absence of anything like English or Spanish.

Schaller has characterised the difference Ildefonso points to as a “mysterious gulf.” It is not easy to grasp what that might be. First we have to drop all our own familiar conceptions of performer-audience interaction where the notion of something comfortably familiar, our language, is part of the background. We must not think that performer-audience interaction is like us going to the theatre. When we go to the theatre the performer-audience interaction involves people who are part of something that is established—an enlanguaged community—even *if we do not all speak the same language*. The performer-audience interaction of the languageless men is performer-audience interaction without that sort of community in the background.

Schaller helps us to see how the languageless men are different as a group. She sees them interacting. She sees them paying as much attention to the gestures as to the stories. We must not miss what Schaller says.

For a languageless tribe, repetition and audience participation are even more important than they were for the Greeks and are for present-day signing communities trying to preserve their language. *This group is not passing on what is inherited; it is creating language.* In order to understand one another, they all have to remember most of the details, especially chronology, for they can act only in the present tense. Each individual phrase or idiom is as important as the piece of information it carries, carefully examined by the storyteller and the audience together.⁶⁷ [my italics]

⁶⁷ Schaller, 1995, 187.

“This group is not passing on what is inherited...”—that is, there is something important which is not established as far as this group is concerned. “[This group] is creating language”—that is, this group is involved in establishing something. They are doing this through performer-audience interaction where attentive watching is as important as the performance. Telling a story in the absence of an audience will keep nothing alive in a community in the way that Schaller suggests when she mentions the Greeks. Similarly, telling stories in the absence of an audience will provide no sense of community. But each performance by one of the languageless men, in front of the others, provides some sense of community in the absence of the sort of established background that all enlanguaged people share. These men are indeed interacting as a group.

As we build up a picture of this interaction we can make sense of some of the things Schaller sees. We can understand why there are so few “standard signs,” that is, signs which are used by all the men. Standard signs presume an established communal background. We have found out that some gestures are the “property” of one individual. These men have, to some extent, developed their own style, in that some of what they do is idiosyncratic to the individual. So while they are innovative there is, as well, an element of individual routine in their performances. That is, there is some idiosyncrasy in the gestures and that idiosyncrasy persists. We don’t have a choir or a chorus line here. A performance is an individual thing in this case, “Each man took a turn on stage ...” Given this, it no longer seems strange that the men never copy each other’s signs.

The performer-audience interaction of the languageless men could so easily be misunderstood or misdescribed if we allow any notions of conferring, or the consequences of conferring, to slip into our thinking here. For this reason I now want to take a quick look at two incidents where we might be tempted to think that the interaction of languageless men is not so different from our interaction.

8.6.8 *Not All Interaction Looks Strange: Two Examples*

There are two incidents in Schaller's account which do not seem particularly different. In the first, the oldest man gives a humorous performance showing the cultural attitude that having sons is better than having daughters. In the second, one of the men, "addressing" Schaller, describes a trick that they played on Elena.

The first incident appears to show a personal preference, sons rather than daughters. In the classroom Schaller wondered how Ildefonso could have any notion of personal preference if he had never conferred about it.

If, as seemed likely, no one had ever asked him for his preference, if he had never practiced asserting his likes and dislikes, how could he form "I like" in his head?⁶⁸

When the older languageless man describes how his wife only has girls, and praying for a boy, he appears to be showing a preference.

Later in the evening, the oldest described how his wife gave birth only to girls. He prayed and prayed for a boy, but the next baby was also a girl. He acted out a downcast and depressed man who went out with his drinking buddies for consolation. He mimed drinking and drinking until he was drunk. He straightened up at the end of the story, gave a mischievous smile, and laughed. He hadn't needed any language to pick up certain attitudes and behaviours in his culture, from the act of kneeling with his hands together and pleading to drowning his sorrows in a bar.⁶⁹

There are several points I wish to make here. Firstly, it is not clear that sons rather than daughters is a personal preference. Schaller sees the source of this performance as cultural attitudes and behaviours. I am not sure that we can say that if no one ever talked to the languageless men about these attitudes they could not, in Schaller's terms, "form something in their heads" about those attitudes. In my own terms, I am not sure that *all* distinctions must be made through talking about them. This man lives among others whose overt behaviour may be said to reveal a distinction and this man reveals the same distinction in his behaviour even though he does not confer.

⁶⁸ Schaller, 1995, 65.

⁶⁹ Schaller, 1995, 186.

Secondly, this incident does not show that distinctions like the one between UNCLE and CONSTABLE could be made without conferring. There is no widespread behaviour apart from languaging which makes that sort of distinction. Thirdly, certain instances of performer-audience interaction, taken in isolation, may look just like some of our interaction. That makes it difficult to show that we do in fact have an instance of performer-audience interaction. Fourthly, this incident does not in any way, make the examples of unusual interaction any less strange.

The second incident that does not look strange occurs when one of the men, “addressing” Schaller, describes the time they spiked Elena’s corn patty with a hot pepper, and she had to drink a gallon of water. They all laugh at this performance.

Another, specifically addressing me, described the time Elena ate a corn patty spiked with their favorite hot peppers. She had to drink a gallon of water. Everyone laughed with particular delight at remembering that incident.⁷⁰

Here we have another instance of interaction that is not clearly performer-audience interaction. If these men were able to confer, the telling of this story and the behaviour surrounding it would not look substantially different. The points I wish to make here are, firstly, in “addressing” Schaller the storyteller has turned to the one person in the room who is not familiar with the incident. Focusing on a specific member of the audience for a reason like that is not conferring with that person—the term “addressing” is misleading.

Secondly, in this incident we have another example of something that could be “picked up” from the surrounding behaviour—an acceptable practical joke. Languagelessness has not isolated these men from everything. In fact, by finding out more about people like these men we learn more about the part language plays in our lives. Thirdly, I do not think that the laughter is in any way a comment on the story. Rather, laughing

⁷⁰ Schaller, 1995, 186.

together in these circumstances it is part of the sense of history, community and identity that these men share through repeating their stories.⁷¹

These examples do not illustrate the different sort of interaction that Ildefonso points out to Schaller. But nor do they show that some of the languageless men's interaction is reciprocal back and forth interaction. Neither example implies conferring just because it does not seem strange to us. I have made no claims about what attitudes, or conventions may be picked up or understood when people are restricted to performer-audience interaction. I feel, however, for reasons argued above, that if these men exhibit certain distinctions in their behaviour those distinctions do not reflect conferring because these men do not confer.

Given, then, that the languageless men do not confer I want to look more closely at the so-called testing procedure. Schaller allowed notions of conferring to slip in when she used the expression "achieve total consensus" in her account of the men "testing" a sign. Achieving consensus in the usual way, however, is not possible in performer-audience interaction as described above. I will suggest another way of looking at the so-called testing procedure, which will, I hope, show that the languageless men are not engaged in any sort of reciprocal back and forth interaction.

8.6.9 The Testing Procedure: What is Really Happening

Schaller has stressed the importance to the languageless men of carefully examining the signs. They must all, storyteller included, examine each phrase and idiom *together*.

Each individual phrase or idiom is as important as the piece of information it carries, carefully examined by the storyteller and the audience together.⁷²

This is precisely what the languageless men are doing in the so-called testing procedure.

Any sign that became adopted by the entire group had to be repeated and tested in many different stories and tried by everyone. If they

⁷¹ Schaller, 1995, 186-187.

⁷² Schaller, 1995, 187.

could not achieve total consensus, the sign was dropped or remained the property of one person.⁷³

The “careful examination” of a sign involves more than gazing at the gesture—the phrase or idiom—as it passes fairly quickly in a story. If the languageless men are carefully examining a sign together then I think they are doing more than just paying attention to it, they are doing more than just looking at it. They are trying to make sense of it in the way that Virgil was trying to make sense of objects after his operation. The so-called testing procedure is a group examination of a sign, in which the languageless men, as a group, examine the sign in the way that Virgil examines objects. The difference is that for these men the examination is a group activity.

How can these men, as a group, examine or scrutinise a sign without engaging in reciprocal back and forth interaction? Won’t they have to discuss it? I do not think that this examination of a sign is the sort of thing that requires discussion. It is nothing like an evaluative assessment. Rather, it is more like a discernment or apprehension of the sign. I think we can better understand how the languageless men examine a sign in this way, if we look first at Virgil examining objects after his operation. Virgil was not making any evaluative assessment of the object, he was trying to discern or apprehend them.⁷⁴

In one sense, an important sense, Virgil is still a sightless man immediately after the operation, in that he does not seem to see objects when he looks at them. Virgil isn’t merely seeing strange objects that he has never seen before. The languageless men aren’t seeing a strange foreign language that they have never seen before. It seems to me that in both these cases, Virgil and the languageless men, we have a deep sort of unfamiliarity, or unawareness, that is mysterious to we who can see and who are

⁷³ Schaller, 1995, 181-182.

⁷⁴ We cannot know what the languageless men make of the sign any more than we can know what Virgil makes of what he looks at immediately after his operation. What is significant here is the interaction. By comparing the languageless men with Virgil, who is clearly not doing what we do when we look at things, we get the same sense that they are not doing what we do. We are not, however, at a loss to say something about their interaction.

enlanguaged. We miss the mark if we think that the men have to examine the sign because it is foreign to them in the way that Chinese phrases and idioms are foreign to us. Thinking about Virgil examining objects can help us avoid this misconception.

Let us look first at Virgil examining his cat. Virgil handles his cat as he looks at it. Much to the surprise of his wife he seems to have to do this again and again. She thinks once should be enough. This repetitive behaviour seems to be important. Sacks suggests that the repetition is necessary because the new ideas and visual recognitions keep slipping away. I take this to mean that Virgil, in “correlating the cat,” is trying to get his visual apprehension of the cat established. It is not, for him a simple matter of just having a look, as Amy seems to assume.

Sometimes, Amy said, she would see him examining the cat carefully, looking at its head, its ears, its paws, its tail, and touching each part gently as he did so. I observed this myself the next day – Virgil feeling and looking at Tibbles with extraordinary intentness, correlating the cat. He would keep doing this, Amy remarked (‘You’d think once was enough’), but the new ideas, the visual recognitions, kept slipping from his mind.⁷⁵

We must be careful how we interpret the term “examining.” Virgil is not baffled by the appearance of the cat, as if it was a weird cat, like nothing he’d ever seen before. He is not looking for fleas or wounds on the cat. He is not assessing the cat’s chances of winning a prize. This is a very different kind of examination. Virgil is not examining the cat in any way that we examine things, for we can see and he, at this stage, cannot see.

The languageless men also engage in repetitive behaviour. In the testing procedure the sign has to be repeated. And Schaller remarks on the repetitive telling and retelling of stories. For example, repetition is used to assist “understanding” of the border-crossing stories.

⁷⁵ Sacks, 1995, 115.

Instead, a story that contained some fact had to be *told and retold* until someone else either understood the significance or at least understood that the teller knew something important.⁷⁶ [my italics]

Whatever it is that these men are doing it is not like anything we do when we repeat a word or a story. Just as when Virgil looks at the cat again and again as he touches, it is not like what we are doing when we look at a cat. These languageless men are more like Virgil in the way that they are using repetition to make sense of something. And whatever it is they are doing, it seems that once is *not* enough.

Virgil does not just look again and again at things as he handles them. As he examines objects he also twists them and turns them. Sacks remarks that solid objects are difficult for Virgil because their appearance is variable. There is no quick grasping the appearance of the object, it must be seen from close up and at a distance, from this angle and that angle. When Virgil examines a solid object he tries out all sorts of angles and distances.

Solid objects, it was evident, presented much more difficulty, because their appearance was so variable; and much of the past five weeks had been devoted to the exploration of objects, their unexpected vicissitudes of appearance as they were *seen from near or far, or half-concealed, or from different places or angles*.⁷⁷ [my italics]

This first month, then, saw a systematic exploration, by sight and touch, of all the smaller things in the house: fruit, vegetables, bottles, cans, cutlery, flowers, the knick-knacks on the mantelpiece – *turning them round and round, holding them close to him, then at arm's length*, trying to synthesize their varying appearances into a sense of unitary objecthood.⁷⁸ [my italics]

Virgil cannot see an object if he just looks at it. He must handle it and move it, and even then the visual recognitions will slip away. So he goes on twisting it and turning it on other occasions. We do not have to do this to see objects. We can go to museums and look at objects in glass cases. We can examine pictures of objects in a catalogue and

⁷⁶ Schaller, 1995, 183.

⁷⁷ Sacks, 1995, 120.

⁷⁸ Sacks, 1995, 121.

know which one we want. But what we do is no guide to understanding what Virgil is doing. This is a lesson we should remember when we look at the languageless men.

If the languageless men were to examine a sign how would they handle it so as to twist it and turn it to see it from different angles? Putting the sign in stories might be a way of seeing it from different angles. After all, the sign first appears in a story, the sign has a setting. So handling the sign is trying it out in a story. To twist and turn the sign, to see it from different perspectives, they try it in different stories. This activity is as natural to these men as is continually twisting an ornament or piece of fruit to Virgil. But when the men are examining a sign in this way they are not doing anything like the sort of thing we do when we examine an unfamiliar word or sign.

We too come across unfamiliar words, for example, “ontogenic” may be new to us. We can get a definition, we can ask for more explanation, and we can try the word out in our conversations. Or we may meet an unfamiliar term from another culture, for example, the Maori term “utu.” We can ask about this also, and one particularly good way to get some understanding of it is to read or listen to stories where it is used. But, just as was the case with Virgil, what we do is no guide to understanding what the languageless men are doing.

Using the lesson from Virgil’s case, we should be careful of assuming that the activity of the languageless men is just like our activity when we examine an unfamiliar word. We should not think of their examination of a phrase or idiom as a focused and practised activity like ours. Nor should we expect them to have a good grasp of the sign just because they have examined it carefully. If they are in the same sort of situation as Virgil then we should expect that, despite the careful examination, whatever they manage to make of the sign is likely to slip away from them. Perhaps that is why we do not see them using very many gestures which look like “standard signs.”

Finally, in keeping with the nature of performer-audience interaction, the careful examination of a sign includes the audience position as well as the performer position. Each man tries the sign in different stories in front of an audience and each man is an

audience for all the others. Virgil can examine the fruit on his own but the languageless men must do what they do together. In performer-audience interaction a sign is performed *and* watched. In performer-audience interaction a careful examination involves performing and watching. Each man tries the sign in different stories, that is, he twists it and turns it from the performer perspective. Each man watches the others try the sign in various stories, that is, he twists it and turns it from the audience perspective.

What we have in the so-called testing procedure, then, is a group of languageless people carefully examining a sign.

Each individual phrase or idiom is as important as the piece of information it carries, carefully examined by the storyteller and the audience together.⁷⁹

Although this is a group activity, it does not involve any reciprocal back and forth interaction. It involves only performer-audience interaction. Every member of the group takes a turn at being the storyteller, and every member of the group is an audience for every other member as the performances proceed. And they go over things again and again because once is not enough—even with repeated watching and storytelling what the men make of any particular sign is likely to slip away from them. That is what “examining” a phrase or idiom amounts to for these men. The so-called testing procedure is the most comprehensive instance possible of the languageless men carefully examining an individual phrase or idiom. This is a performer-audience examination of a phrase or idiom.

8.6.10 Seeing Ildefonso's Answer

Schaller asks Ildefonso about his thinking before he acquired his first language, and he shows her the answer. He couldn't say what was different about his thinking before language, and he couldn't do anything himself to demonstrate the difference. He couldn't interact with his languageless brother in the way that he used to. So he had to take her to see the difference for herself. So to answer Schaller's question he shows her other people who *can* interact in the way that he used to. He shows her *languageless*

⁷⁹ Schaller, 1995, 187.

people interacting. He points to his languageless friends and says “see how different it is.” Schaller agrees.

I have shown that the difference Ildefonso points to is a difference in the way that languageless people interact. In order to describe this difference I have developed the notions of reciprocal back and forth interaction and performer-audience interaction. Ildefonso’s answer to Schaller’s question about his thinking before language amounts to showing her how he interacted with others before language. This languageless interaction is not the reciprocal back and forth interaction that we see when enlanguaged people confer. Rather, it is performer-audience interaction.

I think that that the notion of performer-audience interaction, to some extent, captures the difference that Ildefonso is pointing out. He would be so aware of that difference once he had learnt to confer. His whole way of interacting with others had changed. He could not go back to behaving as if conferring was not an option for him, just as we cannot go back to the stage of seeing objects that Virgil is at. That is why Ildefonso could not do the demonstration with Mario in the restaurant. Mario interacts in a performer-audience way. Ildefonso now interacts in a reciprocal back and forth way. Ildefonso is now an explainer, an arguer, he cannot help agreeing or disagreeing, commenting, interrupting or probing. That is how Ildefonso now interacts *even when he is miming and using the old gestures*.

Ildefonso’s languageless brother and friends do not interact in a reciprocal back and forth way. There is nothing like discussing, explaining, arguing, asking or answering questions—*that* is what makes their interaction look very different. The turn-taking of performer-audience interaction does not have the mutual engagement of reciprocal back and forth interaction. Ildefonso, in his enlanguaged interaction, has become mutually engaged with others in a way that we cannot really comprehend *until we see the languageless men interacting*. That is precisely why Ildefonso answered Schaller’s question by taking her to meet his friends. That way she could see the answer, and because she has written an account of it, so can we.

8.7 Communal Interaction in the Absence of Conferring

One thing that is particularly puzzling is how the languageless men, using mime and gesture, participate in communal interaction without the mutual engagement of reciprocal back and forth interaction. Each single example showing a lack of conferring could be an example of a difficult case which might have another explanation—for example, if they are illiterate, of course “1986” will not be understood by any of them. There is a temptation to think that when they get down to the nuts and bolts of everyday life they *will* confer. But they simply *don't*—even when it looks as if the interaction is really communal. I will discuss two examples of particularly communal interaction and try to show how they differ from conferring as we know it.

Schaller says that the storytelling of the languageless men provided them with a sense of community.

Their ability to communicate without language astounded me. Telling stories from their similar histories and reminding each other of shared experiences were not trivial pastimes. Their mimed skits made them human, providing them with the only sense of community they could experience.⁸⁰

How then, do these men build a sense of community? The idea of a performer before an audience, where audience participation is just to be an interested and attentive watcher and no more—they are not commenting, not interrupting in any way, not following up with questions or remarks later, they are just watching attentively—gives a rather thin notion of community. It certainly seems somewhat at odds with the notion of communal interaction where the group is engaged in a joint effort. I want to consider two examples which I think show particularly communal interaction within the constraints of the performer-audience framework.

8.7.1 Communal Interaction: “Remember when...”

The first example is the “remember when ...” example discussed earlier. The men come from the same area so there are shared experiences from their village life. It is not, however, an easy matter to reminisce about these experiences because there is no

⁸⁰ Schaller, 1995, 186-187.

quick easy way to begin. The first performer sets the scene with a story of an earlier experience. The next performer tells the story but adds more detail to show that it is his story about the same incident, and not merely a repeat of the first performance.

The men began to describe life in their Oaxaca villages. Different events and characters were acted out. One person started to describe someone or an incident as a way of saying, “remember when ...” Another would have to repeat the story, adding a few details to prove that he understood the right reference.⁸¹

If three people do this there are three performances where the second is a repeat of the first with some extra details added, and the third is a further repeat with yet more details. The performances are not *merely* repeats, one person has started the picture and the others have added to it. If the performances are interleaved or superimposed, as it were, they build up something which is a communal creation or construction to which all three have contributed. The performances on their own are not enough, however, each person must be an audience too. The second performer cannot perform in the requisite way if he has not first been an audience. The second performer’s performance is not part of this communal creation if the first and third performers do not become an audience, and so on.

This is not like the sort of thing we might do in a “remember when” case, such as:

“Remember when Harry cooked hamburgers at the beach?”

“Yes, and dropped three in the sand, when he...”

“Oh, I’ll never forget the look on his face.”

It is more like:

First performer takes the floor: “Harry cooked hamburgers at the beach.”

First performer goes off stage.

Second performer takes the floor: “Harry cooked hamburgers at the beach and
dropped three in the sand when he went to hand
them out.”

⁸¹ Schaller, 1995, 184.

Second performer goes off stage.

Third performer takes the floor: “Harry cooked hamburgers at the beach and dropped three in the sand. What a look of abject misery came over his face.”

Third performer goes off stage.

Even with a simple example the difference comes through as less intimate than just talking together. I am sure the experience of the languageless men would mean that the series of performances was smoother than my example might suggest, but, nevertheless, the difference from conferring would not escape the notice of an experienced signer.⁸² An experienced signer would notice the individual nature of the expressions, they do not follow in that reciprocal back and forth way as in a conversation. Such back and forth reciprocation is needed for arguing, heckling, interrupting, commenting, agreeing, disagreeing, explaining, correcting—all the things we do when we confer. The interaction of the languageless men is not like that, it is different from conferring, even when the interaction is a kind of joint performance.

8.7.2 *Communal Interaction: A Question Answered*

The second example of a communal interaction involves Ildefonso. Schaller asks him how many deaf people came from the area of his village and he addresses the languageless men. That is, he begins his own performance with the languageless men as his audience. Schaller does not say that he translated her question. Rather she describes what Ildefonso did. He performed until “someone understood” and then that person performed so as to add to Ildefonso’s performance without repeating it. This does not look anything like asking and answering a question.

I asked Ildefonso how many of the people came from the same village and how many in this circle of friends and relatives were deaf. Everyone watched Ildefonso in awe. His leap to language dumbfounded them. They didn’t see language, of course, but they saw that he could communicate with outsiders, even people like Elena and

⁸² Schaller makes one point very strongly. Most hearing people, even those who work with the deaf, do not differentiate between gesturing which is languaging and gesturing which is not languaging. The latter might look like languaging to an outsider but not to an insider, as revealed in a survey of Deaf and hearing counsellors. (190) The implication is that, without intimate experience, this distinction is not obvious.

me, who could talk without any hand movements. They considered him a genius and treated him with great respect. He had become the leader of the languageless clan. He addressed the group and asked how many people were like them in the village. He asked this by describing each person he could remember, including them, until someone understood and added one or two. They came up with about nine people, most of whom lived in or near the same village.⁸³

Again, as in the “remember when” example, if the performances are superimposed there is a larger picture that various people have created giving it the feel of a communal interaction. The languageless men are able to do this, however, only after someone responds with a performance. Ildefonso could not tell the men what Schaller wanted to know and he could not explain anything. He just started describing people and had to hope that someone would eventually start describing more people. As it happened someone did and that performance, to us, looks like “someone understood.”

Alongside this obvious connection there is a strange disconnection. We cannot be sure what the languageless performer understood, it is certainly not clear that he understood there had been any question, when all he saw was Ildefonso describing people. And it is not clear that he understood that he was responding to a question when he performed. Schaller says of Ildefonso, “He asked this by describing each person...” as if this might be the languageless men’s way of asking questions, or as if they have ways of doing what we do. Other incidents, however, show that this assumes too much.

Ildefonso is often not able to act as an intermediary, as with the namesigns at the restaurant. In general, however, he does not act as an intermediary or translator. Instead we see his strange abstention from the interaction when we expect it. Furthermore, Schaller does not need an intermediary or translator for much of what she sees—dealing with languageless communication does not seem to be at all like dealing with a foreign language. So we should not think of Ildefonso as a translator. In the case of Schaller’s question about the number of deaf people, it just so happens that Ildefonso sees a way of approaching the problem. And it just so happens that the languageless men join in.

⁸³ Schaller, 1995, 184-185.

First, Ildefonso becomes a performer with the four languageless men as his audience. Then someone from the audience takes the stage, and Ildefonso and the other three languageless become the audience. Then another languageless man takes a turn at being the performer, and so on. Ildefonso takes his turn at being a performer *and* being an audience. When Ildefonso is performing he isn't explaining why he is performing, and the audience isn't asking why he is performing. When the languageless men join in as performers they are not responding as if in answer to a question. There is just taking turns at performing and watching. Ildefonso is not asking these men anything, and nor is he telling them anything. All we have here is a number of people taking turns at performing to keep the interaction going.

Some interaction is a series of solo performances, but sometimes the interaction can be more of a joint effort. This is what happens in the follow up to Schaller's question. The interaction is like a series of specially *connected* performances before an attentive audience. It is a mistake to see this as equivalent to asking and answering a question. What happens when Ildefonso begins describing people, is that someone in the audience seems to get a sense of how to keep this particular interaction going. They see how they can take a turn in something Ildefonso has started.⁸⁴ This is not at all like asking and answering a question because there is no explanation or discussion of Schaller's question. There is nothing that looks like conferring going on. The only way we can make the performances of the languageless men into a response to Schaller's question is to describe them as such. If we do *that* we completely miss what is different about this interaction.

Sometimes the interaction does not happen so felicitously, as when Ildefonso failed to show namesigns to Mario. Then Ildefonso's performance was making the namesigns and pointing. But he also turned to Mario and, as Schaller describes it, "demanded a response." Mario took a turn and gave a performance by making a namesign and pointing—"Mario pointed to Ildefonso and called him "Mario," then shrugged his

⁸⁴ This is reminiscent of Schaller's remark about the young man writing the date on his arm when questioned by the border guards—he did this "when the moment seemed right." (183)

shoulders, implying he forgot the rest.”⁸⁵ Despite encouragement Mario does not perform again, he does not take another turn at performing, and all we can say is that he did not. Presumably he did not because he had no sense of how to keep the interaction going.

Sometimes, however, no one in the audience sees an opportunity for a follow up performance—as when a border-crossing story is told and retold to no avail. The storyteller performs and the audience watches. When the storyteller leaves the stage no one from the audience gets a sense of how to take a turn. Again that is all we can say. The only person who does feel moved to perform is the storyteller and he can only repeat his performance. If no one gets a sense of how to keep this particular interaction going it just comes to an end.

When the interaction or turn-taking does happen felicitously, however, as in the two communal examples, it may look like conferring to us because we can describe connections between the performances—we may say that the men are reminiscing about their life in the village, or that they are answering a question. Thus, when the interaction goes smoothly we are tempted to overinterpret what we see—we think of the men as responding to each other in the way that we do when we confer. When we take that overinterpretation seriously, we are committed to saying that the languageless men can confer. So we are surprised when the men do not confer among themselves about the border-crossing stories, or with Ildefonso about the cards and the dates.

It is a mistake to expect to see things like answering, explaining or commenting in any of the examples, because those expectations are based on a misconception of what the languageless men do in their interaction. When we look carefully at their interaction, there is no evidence that they make the connections that we describe. There is no evidence that they are responding as we do when we confer. There is no evidence that they engage in reciprocal back and forth interaction. These men take turns at performing for an audience. Even in the particularly communal examples that is what

⁸⁵ Schaller, 1995, 175. As usual we must remember to be cautious about taking Schaller’s descriptions at

they are doing. When we see that interaction for what it is, felicitous turn-taking, we no longer get the feeling that such communal examples are instances of conferring. This realisation can only be helpful when we consider what it is for someone like Ildefonso to be languageless.

What is important for communal interaction in performer-audience interaction is seeing how to take the opportunity to become a performer. This was all Ildefonso could do when Schaller first met him. He kept taking a turn at performing and Schaller described it as copying. When he didn't see how to take a turn he just watched her. In the so-called breakthrough he and Schaller suddenly began to take turns in a different way as he pointed to objects or touched them and she made the ASL signs. There is no indication at that time, or in the days following, that Ildefonso had any idea what was going on. But he got a sense of how take his turn, and how to keep the interaction going. Then when he participated in what Schaller saw as their failed dialogues, Ildefonso showed satisfaction because he had felt a sense of how to take his turn. So far as she was concerned there was no conferring, but for Ildefonso there was successful turn-taking.

Ildefonso went on from this turn-taking to eventually participate in reciprocal back and forth interaction but the turn-taking was not itself reciprocal back and forth interaction. In performer-audience interaction there just is or isn't getting a sense of how to keep things going by taking a turn as a performer. When several people get a sense of how to take a turn, of how to keep a particular instance of performer-audience interaction going, then we have communal performer-audience interaction. It is possible that this is where things involved in languaging begin to emerge.

The clearer we can make the distinction between languageless interaction and enlanguaged interaction, the more it helps us to understand what is going on when people like Ildefonso acquire a first language in adulthood. A clear distinction can also help us to see why Deaf people are so angry about certain methods of education which

do not seem to promote, first and foremost, participation in reciprocal back and forth interaction. We will miss that all important distinction if misdescribe the communal interaction of Ildefonso's languageless friends. When things go felicitously the proper description is that *taking turns* goes felicitously, or everyone sees how to take a turn.⁸⁶ The proper description is *not* that the men are answering a question, or that they see what is wanted, or anything like that.

8.8 "The Difference" of Ildefonso's Answer

Schaller asks Ildefonso about his thinking before language and he answers by pointing to his brother and friends interacting. All he says is that it is completely different. He does not answer by discussing what they use—signs, gestures or mime. He does not indicate in any way that they have their own peculiar techniques for doing some of what we do with language, like asking questions, or explaining. Ildefonso just says "Look! Look! See? Do you see? It's so different, so different, completely different."⁸⁷ Describing this difference, however, is not easy.

Schaller begins by saying that the languageless men communicated in mime, and she follows this up with a discussion of signs, which are rarely standard, sometimes idiosyncratic, but mostly spontaneous inventions. When we read that the men use non-standard signs and gestures, and that they mime or act out experiences, it is natural to focus on the signs, the gestures, the miming, and the acting out. How are *those things* different from language? If the men don't use something equivalent to our words and sentences, what do they use? Schaller's introduction seems to direct the reader's attention in this way.

I think this is the wrong way to look at the difference Ildefonso shows Schaller. It does not seem to occur to him that the difference lies in having standard signs, a symbol system or syntactic structure, as he says nothing about those sorts of things to her. In fact, in the restaurant he complained to Elena, "She's not seeing it." But Schaller was

⁸⁶ Maybe this is saying too much, but it is *not* saying that they recognised any "why."

⁸⁷ Schaller, 1995, 188.

seeing every gesture and mime that Mario used, so Ildefonso couldn't have meant that she wasn't seeing the gestures and mime. What she was not seeing was the way that languageless people *interact*.

Furthermore, interacting with mime and gesture does not, in itself, preclude the sort of interaction that is missing where the languageless men are concerned. We can mime a question, and answer a question in mime. We can act out an explanation. We can argue in mime. We can comment using gestures. Schaller and Ildefonso began to interact like that in the classroom *before* Ildefonso was fluent in ASL, for example, in the second and third dialogues. The languageless men, however, do not ask or answer questions; they do not explain or argue; they do not comment on anything—not using signs, not using gestures, not by miming, and not by acting out. No matter how communal their interaction may look to us initially, these men do not do those sorts of things, and *that* is the difference Ildefonso wanted to show Schaller.

This difference is not always obvious. For any one incident we extract from Schaller's account, we can find a similarity in parts of our own interaction. We do not always engage in the intimate back and forth interaction of discussion. Someone may tell an anecdote that seems disconnected from what went before, there is nothing strange about that. Someone may hold forth but elicit no comment, reply or interruption from listeners, there is nothing strange about that. Nor do we always see how back and forth some of our own interaction is. An explanation may look like something which is declaimed, but it is not so. It is important for the explainer to try and find out how much the listener has grasped, or to try and correct things which have been misunderstood, so the listener must participate too. If there is none of this sort of back and forth interaction then there is no explaining going on.⁸⁸

Some of our interaction may look a bit like performer-audience interaction but it can never be that sort of interaction. Even Ildefonso could not interact in that way once he had learnt ASL. The sort of intimate back and forth interaction of negotiating,

arbitrating, repartee, bargaining and debating, for instance, can show the sort of thing that is absent from the interaction of the languageless men, and, in fact, absent from their experience altogether. Nothing in Schaller's account of the languageless interaction has the back and forth flow of those kinds of interaction.

The nearest thing to a back and forth interaction occurs when the youngest man is encouraged by a storyteller to show how he writes 1986 on his forearm. This happens during the course of the storytelling, making it look like a conversational aside. But there is no "discussion" about 1986, it is not remarked upon, it is merely displayed in a "cameo spot" in the performance.

During one story about arrest and deportation, the storyteller turned to the youngest, who wrote on his forearm: 1986. No one, including himself, knew what that meant, but he had figured out that it worked as an answer to certain questions. He had three different years associated with three different events relating to border-crossings or arrests and proudly displayed his arm as a chalk board when the moment seemed right. Everyone showed great respect and admiration for his skill.⁸⁹

* * *

The whole evening might be seen as a sort of performance put on for Schaller's benefit. She is their guest and maybe the languageless men wish to entertain her, the implication being that when they are on their own they behave differently. I do not think this is so for two reasons. Firstly, Ildefonso seems so sure that he has shown her the answer to her question. What she sees would not be an answer if these men conferred when no guests were present. Secondly, during the evening there are times when conferring would be most appropriate. If the men could confer we would see it or see the results of conferring. Instead we see no conferring and what we do see—for example, a lack of understanding about the cards—indicates that conferring has not occurred.

⁸⁸ The listener does not have to ultimately understand the explanation, for us to be able to say that explaining was going on.

⁸⁹ Schaller, 1995, 183.

When Schaller asks her question about the number of deaf people in the village, she and Ildefonso are interactively engaged in a way that just does not happen between Ildefonso and his friends. Nor does it happen between the languageless men. The interaction of the languageless men interact by taking turns to perform and watch, whereas Ildefonso, Schaller and Elena interact in a reciprocal back and forth way. This interactive difference is the difference Ildefonso wanted to show Schaller. The languageless men participate in performer-audience interaction and not the reciprocal back and forth interaction of conferring.

Ildefonso's answer invites us to shift our attention from what is used in the interaction to the interaction itself. Schaller accepts Ildefonso's answer and she sees that the languageless men's interaction is completely different. But she is also still in the thrall of the other way of looking at language and so she comments on the signs, gestures and mime that the men use. Once we look only at the interaction, however, we find that she has indeed described something strange. She has captured the disengagement of the interaction, and she has seen the performer-audience aspect of it. If we go through her description looking for one example of an intimate comment or remark, anything that looks like reciprocal back and forth interaction, we find none. It all just turns out to be performer-audience interaction and that *is* different from conferring.

CHAPTER 9

Schaller's account of Ildefonso's development as he acquires his first language, ASL, draws our attention towards human interaction and away from what is used in that interaction. In Chapter 6 we see the frustration and futility of trying to give Ildefonso, an intelligent adult, the "tools of communication." In Chapter 7 we see that when Schaller abandons such formal lessons in favour of dialogue, the interaction between them develops. We also see that Ildefonso's progress does not seem to be dependent on what is used in the interaction. In fact, what is used seems to be almost inconsequential. The most important aspect of Ildefonso's truly significant transition, from being languageless to being enlanguaged, is the way he interacts.

This is not a case of a shy man merely gaining confidence in an unfamiliar setting, for in Chapter 8 we see what Ildefonso has progressed from. We see languageless interaction. Ildefonso's deaf brother and deaf friends do not interact among themselves in the way that enlanguaged people do. They cannot, apparently, interact in a reciprocal back and forth way. *That* is what being languageless is. *That* is where we should focus when we consider the difference between being languageless and being enlanguaged—on the *interaction*.

In this chapter I will outline a theory whereby we focus on language as interaction. This is a theory of living systems which was developed by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. It is a biologically based theory which firstly explains how living systems differ from non-living systems. Interaction is central, in that the very process of living involves interacting with the environment. Every phenomenon associated with living systems—for example, adaptation, learning, habituation, culture, language—is somehow generated in this process of living. Therefore, those phenomena are generated through the interactions of the living system with its environment.

This theory, then, provides a framework for saying more about the difference between languageless *interaction* and enlanguaged *interaction*. I will subsequently use this theory of living systems and Maturana's theory of language to say more about Ildefonso's development, his answer to Schaller's question, and the interaction of his languageless friends.

9.1 Language: Symbol System or Interaction

When we discuss human language there is often no explicit recognition that it arises in the interaction of living systems. Maturana and Varela claim that this can lead to misdescriptions of language. It is not easy, however, to discuss language in terms of interaction, because people just do not normally talk about language in that way. If interaction is considered, it is not usually seen as *central*. Language is usually taken to be what we *use* in the interaction in order to communicate with each other. I will begin by showing how a certain sort of misdescription might arise, because it is the very thing that is avoided in the work of Maturana and Varela.

9.1.1 Language: A Symbol System

Any approach that looks at language without considering the sort of interaction in which language arises, or in which language is acquired, tends to isolate language from the interaction. That effectively isolates language from language users. Language is something, maybe a tool, that we have to acquire. In such an approach language is endowed with a sort of ontological independence. It is seen as *fundamentally* a symbol system with a structure, patterns, rules and so on. This is how Schaller seemed to think of language in the early lessons when she wanted to show ASL to Ildefonso.

Language, the independent entity, is assumed to have various properties, and these are sometimes spoken of as if they are intrinsic properties. It has words, phrases, sentences, structure, grammar, or patterns, for instance, which can be studied by examining the system of signs or symbols which is language. Language learning, then, is thought of in terms of acquiring a knowledge of, or proficiency in, handling this system. The sort of behaviour that is thought relevant concerns things like forming two-word sentences,

then three-word sentences; mastering things like negation, tenses, passive voice, or question forms, and learning the meanings of words.¹

This leads to theories which try to explain how a person might acquire and use such a symbol system. Common proposed models often involve the notions transmitter and receiver, inputs and outputs, information processing, and information transfer. This is how Schaller talked of language when describing her early work with Ildefonso—"He didn't know how to receive."² It is important to note that these notions of transmitter and receiver, and so on, originate in the proposed models, not through any consideration of the nature of living systems. There is little or no attempt to find out whether the entities generating and using language do, in fact, operate or interact in the way that the models suggest.

Schaller eventually gave up on lessons which were underpinned by the idea of language as an independent symbol system, and by the notions derived from the input-output model. She did not explicitly adopt a new view of language. Rather, her natural ability as a communicator came to the fore, and she just got on with the job in any way that the moment suggested. In her account of Ildefonso's subsequent progress, I find a view of language as interaction emerging. This view is reinforced, for me, by her account of Ildefonso's answer to her question about thinking before language. It seems important, therefore, to find out, if we can, something about the way that humans interact with each other, and then to work from there. This is precisely what Maturana and Varela do.

9.1.2 *Language as Interaction*

I have shown that what it is for Ildefonso to become enlanguaged has more to do with the way he interacts than with what he uses to communicate with others. I have also shown that his languageless friends do not interact in the way that enlanguaged people do. The notions that are needed to take this project forward, therefore, must be notions to do with the way that people *interact*.

¹ The work of Roger Brown, and the testing of Genie show the focus on the intricacies of the system.

² Schaller, 1995, 42.

So far, I have claimed that reciprocal back and forth interaction is central to becoming enlanguaged, and that performer-audience interaction is not enlanguaged interaction. I have filled this out in two ways. Firstly, in reciprocal back and forth interaction we see conferring behaviour that does not seem to be possible in performer-audience interaction—behaviour like agreeing, disagreeing, explaining, confirming, arguing, questions and answers, and giving and receiving feedback in discussion. In Ildefonso’s case this sort of behaviour starts to develop as he begins to interact in a reciprocal back and forth way, despite his lack of ASL, or any equivalent.

Secondly, reciprocal back and forth interaction *looks* different from performer-audience interaction. Reciprocal back and forth interaction has an immediacy and an intimacy about it even when the participants are on an unfamiliar track. The participants appear to be in something together in a way that allows much to go unsaid—for example, as happened in the second dialogue, the geography lesson, when Schaller asked Ildefonso about his farm work. She thought that he “guessed” what she was going to do, figure out his travels, presumably by the way he carried the discussion forward as if this had been explicit. It is as if there is some unspoken joint understanding. This contrasts with the need for the frequent scene setting that appeared in the interaction of the languageless men, particularly in the “remember when” incident.

I think it is possible to say something more, and something quite different, about the distinction between reciprocal back and forth interaction and performer-audience interaction, drawing on the work of Maturana and Varela. This chapter is an outline of their theory. The theory *begins* with questions about the nature of living systems and their interaction, and then follows up with questions about how such interaction might give rise to language.

9.2 A Theory of Living Systems

Language arises in, or is generated in, the interaction of living organisms. Accordingly, Maturana’s account of language, or languaging, begins with an explanation of living systems in general. He explains how they are different from non-living systems. He explains how living systems with nervous systems interact with their environment. He

explains how, when there are other living systems in the environment, living systems interact with each other. Given *that* sort of system, and given *those* possibilities for interaction, he then asks how language might arise in the interactions of living systems like human beings.

Thus, Maturana and Varela set out to develop an understanding of the sort of system that they are dealing with. This understanding underlies their explanations of phenomena which arise in the interactions of living systems. The phenomenon of language is explained in terms of interaction between living systems. This explanation says nothing about how this interaction has to be realised, what is used in the interaction is no part of the groundwork of the explanation. Understanding the interaction is fundamental. The value of later explanations depends on getting the initial characterisation of living systems clear.

Maturana and Varela have not only developed a comprehensive theory of living systems, they have developed a detailed terminology too. This is, in part, to counter some of our traditional ways of thinking. Two concepts in particular are very important. Firstly, the traditional notion of cause and effect, where the effect is determined by the cause, is not appropriate. Maturana and Varela speak of *perturbations triggering* changes in living systems, but the perturbation which triggers a change does not determine what that change will be. Rather, as the living system changes in response to perturbations, the way in which it changes is determined by the state of the living system itself. Furthermore, it also determines what things in the environment will perturb it. Thus, living systems are *state-determined* systems or *structure-determined* systems.³

Secondly, the notion of information transfer is inappropriate. That is, Maturana and Varela particularly wish to reject the notions of input and output. The way a living system changes in response to its environment is *not* the result of any transfer of something that we might call information. When perturbations trigger changes in a

³ I will discuss this in more detail below.

living system there is no suggestion that this can be characterised in terms of input and output. Living systems are *organisationally closed*.

* * *

I will introduce as few terms as possible, and concentrate on the parts of the theory that I have found particularly helpful in understanding Ildefonso's progress, and in understanding the interaction of his languageless friends. I will try to show how Maturana's theory of language allows us to extend and deepen the discussion of language as a certain kind of interaction.

9.3 Structure-Determined Systems

The notion of causal determinism is often implicit in the way we talk about things affecting living systems. The smallpox virus causes a nasty disease, and we may assume that the effects that appear in the patient are determined by the virus. Maturana and Varela say that this is not the best way to characterise the interaction between virus and patient. Rather, whatever happens in the patient is determined by the structure of the patient.

9.3.1 Organisation and Structure

Maturana and Varela make a distinction between the *organisation* and the *structure* of a composite unity—any entity which is made up of components, a system. When we have any particular composite unity there are two things we might ask about it. Firstly, what sort of system is this, how is it classified *as a system*? Secondly, how is this system built, or how is it realised in this particular instance that is before me now? The first question, about the sort of system it is, concerns the organisation of the composite unity. The second question, about how this concrete instance is built, concerns the structure of the composite unity.

The organisation defines a system as a particular sort of system—it tells us what sort of system we have here. The organisation refers to a set of relations between components which specify the identity of that system. The organisation of a clock, for instance, is a set of relations between the components of a system, such that the system continuously

indicates regular intervals of time. The organisation does not tell us how the system is concretely realised or built. It does not tell us what the components are, or what their properties are, or how they are all arranged. It just tells us that it is a clock.

The structure of a system, a clock say, refers to the actual make-up, or concrete realisation, of that particular system. This includes the type of components, weights, springs and cogs, or silicon chips; the properties of the components, size, shape, composition; and *all* the relations between the components. The structure, the actual makeup, is not what specifies the identity of the class of system. The structures of clocks may vary widely—there are grandfather clocks, mantel clocks, digital clocks, water clocks, atomic clocks—the structure is different in each case, but as systems, they are all clocks. What defines the clocks as clocks is their organisation.

The organisation, as a set of relations between the components, is part of the structure of a system. If any actual concrete system is a clock, then within its structure—that is, within the actual components, the properties of those components, and *all* the relations between those components—there must be a set of relations between some of those components, such that the system indicates regular intervals of time. Thus, the organisation of a system is a subset of *all* the relations between the actual components of any system. As such, it is not separate from the structure of the system, it is part of the structure.

Structure

1.Components, actual	
2.Properties of components	
3.Relations (all) between components	3a.Relations in <u>organisation</u>
	3b.Relations not in organisation

The relations between components that define a composite unity (system) as a composite unity of a particular class constitute its organization. In this definition of organization the components are viewed only in relation to their participation in the unity (whole) that they integrate. For this reason nothing is said about the properties that

the components of a particular unity may have, other than those required by the realization of the organization of the unity.

The actual components (all their properties included), together with the actual relations that concretely realize the system as a particular member of the class of composite unities to which it belongs by its organization, constitute its structure.⁴

A system retains its identity only while the organisation is unchanged. If the structure changes so that the organisation is also changed—there are changes in 3a in the diagram above—we no longer have the same sort of system. For instance, if the mechanism of the mantel clock is used to rotate the drum of a barograph instead of the hour and minute hands, we no longer have a clock, we have a barograph. A change in organisation results in a change of name, the system now belongs to a different class. The identity of the system has changed so that it now operates as a barograph and not a clock, it records atmospheric pressure, it does not indicate regular intervals of time.

Whenever the structure of an entity changes so that its organization as a composite unity changes, the identity of the entity changes and it becomes a different composite unity—a unity of a different class to which we apply a different name.⁵

Alternatively, the structure may change without there being any change in the organisation. There may be changes in 1, 2 or 3b, but no changes in 3a, in the diagram above. For instance, the decorative wooden angels may be removed from the mantel clock, it is still a clock. The weights may go missing from the grandfather clock and be replaced with horseshoes, it is still a clock. The mechanism of a clock, may be adjusted so that it fits better into its case, it is still a clock.

Whenever the structure of a composite unity changes and its organization remains invariant, the identity of the entity remains the same and the unity stays unchanged as a member of its original class; we do not change its name.⁶

⁴ Maturana, 1981, 24.

⁵ Maturana, 1978, 33.

⁶ Maturana, 1978, 33.

A particular organisation, 3a in the diagram above, may be realised in different structures. All sports cars have the same organisation which identifies them as sports cars, but they have different structures. Furthermore, different organisations may be abstracted from one structure. The structure includes all the actual components, their properties, and all the relations between the components. Different subsets of the relations may be abstracted, such that they specify different classes. That is, different sets of relations from 3 may fall into 3a in the diagram above. For example, one and the same entity may be identified as a vehicle, a car, or a sports car—3a will be different in each case. This is so for living systems. All cats have the same organisation which identifies them as cats, but the structure of each individual is different. And one and the same system may be taken as a mammal, a cat, or a Siamese cat.

Therefore, the organization of a system, as the set of relations between its components that define it as a system of a particular class, is a subset of the relations included in its structure. It follows that any given organization may be realized through many different structures, and that different subsets of relations included in the structure of a given entity may be abstracted by an observer (or its operational equivalent) as the organizations that define different classes of composite unities.⁷

The operation of a system *as a system* is also specified by the organisation. If a system has the organisation of a clock, it may be a grandfather clock where the mechanism is worked by weights, it may be a mantel clock which is worked by springs and cogs, it may be digital clock worked by a silicon chip. The organisation of the system *as a clock* is indifferent to these variables. We can also say that the operation of the system *as a clock*, is indifferent to these variables too. A clock cannot be said to operate, *as a clock*, with cogs and springs—a grandfather clock has no springs, an atomic clock has no cogs or springs. The way that a clock operates *as a clock* is specified by its organisation. A clock must operate so that it indicates regular intervals of time. This distinction will also apply when it comes to talking about the operation of living systems *as living systems*.

⁷ Maturana, 1981, 24.

It is also important to remember that the identity of a system as a *composite* unity is specified by a set of relations between its components. Its identity is not specified by some way that we might describe the system, or use the system, without regard for its organisation—that is, without regard for the relations between its components. For instance, if I manage to open a bottle of beer with a foot-pump I might say, “That made a good bottle-opener.” This does not mean that under some circumstances the system can be identified as a bottle-opener. If I turn my attention to the system as a *composite* unity, I will find that nothing in the relations between the components *specifies* its identity as a bottle-opener. The identity of a system, *as a system*, is not specified by what I say about it in terms of some function which takes no account of the relations between the components. If I am asked what sort of a system the foot-pump is, and I reply that it is a bottle-opener, I have misdescribed it as a system. This distinction is important when we come to describe living systems.

What we say about the identity of a system can also be said about the operation of a system, *as that sort of system*. When I describe the foot-pump as a bottle-opener I am not describing its operation *as a system*—I am doing something else entirely. I am describing an object in terms of how I use it, with no particular regard for the relations between its components. Nothing in the relations between the components specifies the operation of the system in terms of what I do with it, or in terms of the numerous things that I could do with it. If I am asked how the foot-pump operates *as a system*, and I reply that it operates as a bottle-opener, I have misdescribed its operation. This distinction is important when we come to describe the operation of living systems.

9.3.2 Autopoiesis: The Organisation of Living Systems

Maturana refers to composite unities as *structurally plastic*. This just means that when the system changes without losing its identity, the change is a structural change and not an organisational change—there may be changes in 1, 2 or 3b, but no changes in 3a, in the diagram above. If we think of a car engine, say, as the car is driven things wear, or get out of alignment, things change in size depending on whether they are hot or cold, the pistons change their positions. What does not change is the way the system is organised as a system. Some relations between the components change but not the

relations which specify its identity as a car engine. We still have the engine but its structure is always changing while it is being driven.

Living systems are structurally plastic systems. They undergo structural changes while maintaining their identity as living systems. In the process of living, cells are dividing, the heart is pumping, the kidneys are functioning, muscles changing position. Structural change in a living system, however, is special in a particular way. Structural change in a living system *must be continuous*. If a car is parked in the garage and is not undergoing any structural change we still have a car engine—it is still the same sort of system when it is not operating. A living system, however, is such that if it ceases to operate it ceases to be a living system, it dies.

A living system, then, is not just a system which *can* undergo changes of structure while maintaining its identity. A living system is a system which *must* continually undergo changes of structure in order to maintain its identity as a living system. In that respect living systems differ from dynamic systems like a car engine, there must be a continuous process of change. The organisation of a system specifies its identity as the particular sort of system it is. Since a living system ceases to be a living system if its operation is not continuous, the organisation of living systems specifies a continuous process.⁸

Maturana and Varela sought to characterise the organisation of living systems. They wanted to say something about what makes all living systems living systems regardless of their structure. What is characteristic of the continuous processes that are going on in living systems? What are living systems doing in living? They are, according to Maturana and Varela, continually producing, maintaining and renewing the components involved in their operation as living systems. This is what is characteristic of living systems.

⁸ Maturana and Varela, 1980, 79.

Maturana and Varela coined the term “autopoiesis” to describe the processes characteristic of living systems. *Autopoiesis* can be loosely thought of as self-production. Living systems, then, have an autopoietic organisation, in that the system, in its operation, produces the components involved in its operation as a living system. Living systems, like all systems, are identified in terms of their organisation. In saying that living systems have an autopoietic organisation, we say nothing about what components there have to be, or about the nature of the components.

Nor do we say anything about how autopoiesis is achieved. Thus, as with the clocks, the organisation does not specify how the living system is concretely realised, nor how its operation is concretely realised. The organisation of the clocks was realised concretely with weights, or springs, or silicon chips, and so on, but the system’s organisation *as a clock*, was indifferent to these variables. Their operation *as clocks* was indifferent to these variables. The organisation of actual living system is realised in different ways—bacteria, slime moulds, plants, fish, insects, reptiles, mammals—and as a result autopoiesis is realised in different ways. The operation of living systems as living systems is indifferent to the actual way in which autopoiesis happens.⁹

While the living system persists as a living system its organisation does not change. Thus, the continuous changes that are *necessarily* going on in the process of autopoiesis are changes of structure. As the cat grows old and arthritic over time we still have a living system but its structure has been changing. The cat remains a living system through the structural changes of illness and recovery, through wounds and healing. If structural change ceases in living systems they are no longer living systems. The continuous dynamic nature of living systems is part of their autopoietic organisation.

When we talk about the processes of living, we are talking about the way living systems operate *as living systems*. We are not talking about the way in which concrete realisations of living systems operate. What we say must hold for all living systems. What can we say about that sort of operation? Maturana and Varela say that living

⁹ Maturana and Varela, 1980, 78-84.

systems in their operation, as living systems, are structure-determined, and are organisationally, or operationally closed.

9.3.3 Structural determinism: Perturbations Trigger Changes

It is important to be clear how we think of structural change coming about in a system or composite unity. Maturana and Varela reject the notion that environmental factors cause, in a deterministic way, particular changes in a system. So far as composite unities are concerned they want to replace the notion that the cause determines the change with the notion that the structure determines the change. This way of thinking about changes in systems, as I will illustrate in the next section, better reflects the way that systems operate. That is, it is a more useful way of looking at causation.

When we ask whether a particular environmental factor will cause a change in a system, that depends. It depends on the sort of system we have, and it depends on the state of the system at the time that particular environmental factor arises. When we ask whether a particular state might arise in a system, that depends. It depends on the sort of system we have, and it depends on the state of the system. When we know that a particular environmental factor causes a change in a system, and we ask what sort of change it will cause, that depends. It depends on the sort of system we have, and it depends on the state of the system at the time the environmental factor arises. In this way of thinking about causation the environmental factors are not the determining conditions of change in a system.

Environmental factors can *trigger* changes in a system. The environmental factors which do trigger a change in a system are called *perturbations*. Whether any particular environmental factor is a perturbation, is determined by the organisation and structure of the system. That is, the organisation and structure of the system determines its *domain of perturbations*. Whether any particular environmental factor triggers a change in the organisation (identity) of the system, is determined by the organisation and structure of the system. That is, the organisation and structure of the system determines its *domain of disintegrations*. The organisation and structure of the system determines what states the system may adopt, without loss of identity, when changes are

triggered by perturbations. That is, the organisation and structure of the system determines its *domain of states*.

So, what perturbs or disintegrates a system, what changes may take place in a system, and the nature of the change triggered by a particular perturbation, are all determined by the system, not by the perturbation. At most the perturbations, or interactions, can be said to select from among the possible states of the system. In this way systems are *structure-determined*.¹⁰

Structural determinism, as an alternative to causal determinism, encourages us to think as follows.

- The organisation and structure of the system determines whether any particular environmental factor will or will not perturb the system.
- The organisation and structure of the system determines whether any particular environmental factor will or will not destroy the system.
- The organisation and structure of the system determines what states the system may or may not adopt when changes are triggered by perturbations.
- The organisation and structure of the system determines the nature of any particular change triggered by a perturbation.

Systems, then, are such that their own organisation and structure determines what will and will not trigger a change in them. Their own organisation and structure determines what will and will not trigger their disintegration—their loss of identity. Their own organisation and structure determines what changes actually take place in them. These things are not *determined* by some independent causal agent. That is what it means to say a system is structure-determined. This is not a mysterious concept, as I will illustrate below. Rather the notion of causes determining effects in systems gives way

¹⁰ Maturana, 1978, 34. Maturana, 1975, 316. Maturana uses both the terms “state-determined” and “structure-determined.” I will only use “structure-determined.” Changes of state are defined as a changes of structure without loss of identity. (Maturana, 1978, 34.)

to a more useful notion which captures the way that the structure of the system is implicated in what actually takes place in the system.¹¹

9.3.4 Living Systems are Structure-Determined Systems

Living systems are structure-determined. They are also dynamic systems, as the processes which maintain them, and the processes through which they operate, are happening continuously. Thus, the structure of living systems is always in a state of activity. The perturbations which trigger changes in a living system should not be thought of, then, as triggering a change from one static state to another static state. Rather, perturbations trigger changes in the dynamic structure of living systems. It is that dynamic structure which determines what will or will not perturb, or disintegrate, the system. And it is that dynamic structure which determines what actually takes place when a change is triggered by a perturbation. That is, when we think of living systems changing, without loss of identity, in response to the environment, we should not think in terms of causal determinism. Let us look at two examples.

The herbicide 2,4-D¹² is effective in killing dicotyledons but not monocotyledons. When put on the lawn, 2,4-D kills the weeds but not the grass. The structure of the grass, it is a monocotyledon, is such that it is not perturbed by the 2,4-D.¹³ The structure of the weeds, they are dicotyledons, is such that 2,4-D triggers a destructive change in them. The structure of the grass determines that 2,4-D is not one of the things in its environment which will perturb it. The structure of the weeds determines that 2,4-D is one of the things in its environment which will disintegrate it. That is, the structure of the living system determines its domain of perturbations and its domain of disintegrations.

¹¹ The kind of system, organisation, *and* its actual structure, determine the domain of states and the domain of perturbations, but for ease of expression I will say “the structure determines...,” instead of “the organisation and structure determines...”

¹² Dichlorophenoxyacetic acid.

¹³ For the purposes of this example the fact that the grass is not killed by the 2,4-D is taken as an indication that it is not perturbed by the 2,4-D.

When a perturbation does trigger a change in a living system, the nature of the response is determined by the structure of the living system. For example, the response to a virus differs depending on whether or not a particular living system is immune to that virus. The structure of the living system without immunity is different from the structure of the living system which is immune. When the living system has no immunity the virus triggers an infection. When the living system is immune the virus does not trigger an infection, it triggers a series of changes which we call an immune response. How the structure will change when perturbed by a virus—an infection or an immediate immune response—is determined by the structure of the living system. This is so for all perturbations. That is, the structure of the living system determines its domain of states.

In these examples we can see that the environment has no way of compelling the living system to be perturbed by something. Nor does the environment have any way of forcing a living system to respond in a particular way. The 2,4-D cannot trigger a change in the grass, because the structure of grass determines that it is not perturbed by 2,4-D. A virus cannot trigger an infection in an immune animal. The structure of the animal determines what states it will adopt when it is perturbed by the virus. The states adopted by the immune animal in response to the virus result in the destruction of the virus before the virus can establish itself in the system. The structure of the animal determines what the response will be.

The medium, or the environment, is not the only source of perturbations for the living system. The structural dynamics of the living system itself can give rise to states which further perturb the system.¹⁴ As observers we distinguish between internally and externally generated perturbations but these are intrinsically indistinguishable for the living system itself.¹⁵ Internal perturbations do not compromise the structure-determined character of the system. Even when the perturbation is generated by the changing structure of the system itself, the perturbation does not determine what the

¹⁴ Maturana and Varela, 1980, 98.

¹⁵ Maturana and Varela, 1980, 99.

resulting change will be. It is always the structure of the system that determines what will be a perturbation and the nature of any change triggered by a perturbation.

Structural determinism is a thoroughgoing feature of living systems. It is a feature of any component or group of components in a living system—as we see for instance, in the virus example, the structure of the immune system determines the response. This can be seen at the cellular level too. Cells have different structures and the structure of each cell determines what will and will not perturb that cell. For example, parts of the structure of some cells are what we describe as hormone receptors. Cells with that sort of structure will be perturbed by hormones, and cells without that sort of structure will not be perturbed by hormones. The way that any particular cell responds to a perturbation depends on the structure of that cell at the time of the perturbation. In that way, structural determinism is a feature of living systems at all levels. This does not change with complexity. Nor does it change when a nervous system is embedded in an organism.

9.3.5 Nervous Systems are Structure-Determined Systems

Nervous systems are structure-determined. The structure of the nervous system determines its domain of perturbations. An example, particularly relevant to this project, is the case of sensorineural deafness. This arises as a result of a defect in the auditory nerve. In this case the structure of the nervous system determines that certain levels of sound, or certain frequencies of sound, will not perturb it. Since the nervous system is embedded in a living system this affects the domain of perturbations of the living system.¹⁶ The living system is not perturbed by the sounds which do not perturb its nervous system.

The structure of the nervous system determines the nature of any change triggered in it. In the case of a specific perturbation the resulting change depends on the state of the nervous system at the time of the perturbation. For example, when one's foot “goes to sleep” because the nerves have been temporarily pinched off, the structure of the

¹⁶ I will say more about the way that the nervous system is embedded in the living system below.

nervous system is different from usual. There is a response to touching the foot, the system has determined that touching is a perturbation, but the sensation experienced by the living system is different. Instead of the usual specific local sensation on the skin, there is deeper more diffuse sensation.¹⁷ The change triggered in the nervous system is different from usual, because the structure of the nervous system is different from usual. The structure of the nervous system, not the perturbation, determines the nature of the change and hence the nature of the sensation.

... the nervous system operates only by generating relations of neuronal activity determined by its structure, not by the environmental circumstances that may trigger changes of state in it.¹⁸

Maturana and Varela point out the structure-determined nature of living systems and nervous systems, from the cellular level to the level of human languaging. We recognise structural determinism more easily in some cases than in others. Structural determinism seems obvious when we find out that cows and horses get very sick, and even die, when they eat ragwort, yet sheep may eat it with impunity, they suffer no ill effects. Not all heavy smokers die early of lung disease or heart disease, some live to a ripe old age. At other times structural determinism is not so obvious, and we talk as if the changes in a living system *are* determined by an independent causal agent. We say that asbestos causes cancer, or the officer's command determines the response of the soldiers, in a way that implicitly suggests that the structure of the patient and the structure of the soldier have nothing to do with the response.

Maturana and Varela, however, describe structural determinism as a thoroughgoing feature of living systems. Thus, they encourage us to think in terms of structural determinism at all levels and in all circumstances, and in that way they lead us away from *ever* thinking in terms of causes determining effects.

¹⁷ From the point of view of the writer, of course.

¹⁸ Maturana, 1978, 41.

9.4 Organisational Closure

The other important characteristic feature of both living systems and nervous systems, according to Maturana and Varela, is *organisational closure*, this is sometimes referred to as *operational closure*. When a system is organisationally closed, or operationally closed, the only product of its operation is further operation of the system, such that its organisation is maintained. Put another way, all possible states of activity of the system, must lead to or generate further activity within the system.

This contrasts with open systems where the product of the operation is something other than the continued operation of the system. For instance a lighting system produces light from electricity, light and not the further operation of the system is the product. A heating system is organised, or operates, such that it produces heat from gas. It does not operate merely to keep itself going. On the other hand, the pilot light of the gas heating system *is* organised to keep itself going. The light heats the thermocouple which then allows gas to flow to fuel the flame which heats the thermocouple, and so on. From an *organisational* standpoint the gas heater is an open system and the gas pilot light is a closed system.¹⁹

A characteristic feature of open systems is that they are designed or organised such that in their operation they turn **A** into **B**. That is, they operate with inputs and outputs—gas in and heat out, or electricity in and light out. This is not a characteristic of closed systems. They are designed or organised such that in their operation they ensure their continued operation. How that organisation is realised, in the case of the pilot light, involves gas being used to generate heat. This particular realisation is not characteristic of the organisation of the pilot light, however, just as operation with cogs and springs is not characteristic of the organisation of a clock.

Thus, *even though the pilot light does use gas and generate heat*, it would be a mistake to describe a pilot light as a system which takes in gas and puts out heat. That is a misdescription of the kind of system we are dealing with. If we think of the operation

¹⁹ Mingers, 1995, 32.

of the pilot light in terms of input and output we miss the important characteristic of a pilot light—it is a system organised to keep itself going, and no more. A closed system is one organised so that the product of its operation is its further operation. It is organisationally indifferent to what comes in and goes out. Maturana and Varela say precisely the same thing about living systems.

Section 1.3 shows how Maturana and Varela lead us away from thinking about living systems in terms of causes determining effects. They show us another way of thinking about living systems—living systems are structure-determined systems in all respects. This section shows how they lead us away from thinking that living systems are the sort of systems that operate with inputs and outputs. If we think of the operation of living systems, *as living systems*, in terms of inputs and outputs, we miss the important characteristic of a living systems. We misdescribe their operation and go on to misdescribe their interactions, and we misdescribe the phenomena which arise in their interactions.

9.4.1 Living Systems are Organisationally Closed

In what sense are living systems organisationally closed? Like all organisationally closed systems the product of their operation is their further operation. Thus, living systems are organisationally closed in that the product of their autopoiesis is their continued autopoiesis, as long as they persist as living systems. *Any* state of activity in a living system is a state of autopoietic activity generated by previous states of autopoietic activity. And, provided the system continues to live, all states of autopoietic activity lead to, or generate, further states of autopoietic activity.

An autopoietic system is, from the point of view of its dynamics of states, a system that, while autopoietic, only generates states in autopoiesis; that is, with respect to its states, an autopoietic system is a closed system that only generates one kind of states—states in autopoiesis. ...the notion of closure is essential for understanding the operation of living systems as systems.²⁰

²⁰ Maturana, 1981, 22.

This seems counterintuitive at first, as we see living systems taking in food, and getting oxygen from the air. We see the resulting activity of living systems, or their material production, as output. Oxen might be thought of as “grass in, work out” systems; cows as “grass in, milk out” systems. These notions, however, have nothing to do with the organisation of the animals *as living systems*—that is, these notions have nothing to do with the organisation of the animals *as autopoietic systems*.

Autopoietic systems are different from closed systems like the pilot light, in that they produce the components involved in their operation. The pilot light does not operate such that it produces its own components. The living system, on the other hand, produces, maintains and renews the components involved in its operation. So it may look as if an output is produced, namely, the components. From an organisational point of view, however, the components are not output. Rather their production is a necessary part of the continued operation of the autopoietic system.

There are other necessary conditions for the realisation of autopoiesis in physical systems. It is *inevitable* that any physical realisation of autopoietic organisation will involve material interchange—material is needed for the production, maintenance and renewal of components. Material interchange is *necessary* for the continued operation of living systems but it has nothing to do with the way that the living systems are organised. That is, the organisation of living systems—the relations in 3a of the structure diagram—do not characterise living systems as systems as operating with inputs and outputs.

It will help, here, to look at the pilot light again. The pilot light could not operate as a concrete realisation of its organisation without fuel. But if we describe the operation of the pilot light, *as a pilot light*, in terms of converting an input into an output, just because it uses fuel, we miss an important defining characteristic of pilot lights—organisational closure. That is, if we take the *necessary* use of fuel, and describe a pilot light in terms of *that*, then we have not explained what kind of system a pilot light is. We have not described how it operates *as a pilot light*.

Similarly, autopoiesis cannot be realised in a physical system without material interchange between the living system and the environment. If we describe the operation of living systems in terms of converting inputs into outputs, just because of that material interchange, we miss an important defining characteristic of living systems—their organisational closure. That is, if we take the *necessary* material interchange and describe living systems in terms of *that*, then we have not explained what kind of systems living systems are. We have not described how they operate *as living systems*.²¹

It is also inevitable that any physical realisation of an autopoietic organisation will conform to the laws of physics. Thus, living systems are also energetically open in the production maintenance and renewal of their components.²²

nothing is said in the characterization of living systems as autopoietic systems about the operational constraints under which their autopoiesis must be realized. This is because whatever constraints must be satisfied, they are determined by the properties of the components, and they are implied when it is said that an autopoietic system exists in the space in which its components exist. Thus autopoietic systems in the physical space must satisfy thermodynamics and must be materially and energetically open, even though they are necessarily closed in their dynamics of states.²³

Various sorts of material and energy interchange support the structures which realise the autopoietic organisation of the living system. In that respect, living systems are organisationally closed but materially and energetically open.²⁴

The product of the processes of living is living. In this continuous autopoietic activity there are no “end points” which might be distinguished as inputs or outputs. When we describe the interaction of living systems in terms of input and output, we have missed an important characteristic of their organisation as living systems. Namely, the only

²¹ Maturana and Varela, 1980, 81.

²² Maturana and Varela, 1980, 89.

²³ Maturana, 1981, 22.

²⁴ Maturana, 1978, 36-37.

product of their operation is their continued operation—autopoiesis is a continuous process of self-production defined only by the organisation of the system, and not by characteristics of the structure which realises that organisation. Thus, autopoiesis as a process is not characterised using the traditional notions of input and output. A living system is not that sort of system.

This means that the notion of information transfer is inappropriate, because it implies inputs and outputs. So, if we want to describe how living systems operate, without misrepresenting the sort of system we are dealing with, then we will not describe its operation in terms of input and output, or information transfer. How then can we describe the operation of living systems, particularly their interactions, without misrepresenting their organisation? This will, I hope, become apparent in the discussion of structural coupling.

9.4.2 Nervous Systems are Organisationally Closed

Organisational closure is still a characteristic of living systems when we consider living systems with nervous systems. According to Maturana and Varela, the nervous system is itself an organisationally closed system. This seems counterintuitive because we talk about getting information about the environment through our senses—that is how they operate. We think that when we see, we get information coming in through our eyes, that is then transferred via the optic nerve to the brain.

This notion of information transfer, however, plays no part in the explanations that Maturana and Varela give of organisation of nervous systems. It must be remembered that closure is a feature of the *organisation* of a system—the relations in 3a of the structure diagram. The only product of an organisationally closed system is its further operation.

Activity in the nervous system is continuous. Even when it is in a state of relative quiescence, its structure is constantly changing in response to perturbations. That is, its operation is continuous. There are no breaks or end points. No matter when we observe the nervous system we see a state of neural activity. The organisation of the nervous

system is such that *any* state of activity in the nervous system is a state of neural activity which is the result of previous states of neural activity. And *any* state of activity in a nervous system is a state of neural activity which generates further states of neural activity, while the system persists. In this way the product of the operation of the nervous system is the further operation of the nervous system. The nervous system, like the living system and like the pilot light, is not organised to take in **A** and transform it into **B**.

Because the nervous system is not organised to take in **A** and transform it into **B**, we mischaracterise it as a system if we describe it as a system which operates with inputs and outputs. We mischaracterise it if we describe its operation as a system in terms of information transfer. That is we mischaracterise the sort of system we are dealing with. The organisation of the nervous system identifies it as the sort of system it is. The organisation of the nervous system specifies continuous neural activity, it is indifferent to what we choose to call end points or beginning points, it is indifferent to what we choose to call to inputs or outputs. No particular neural states can be characterised as “input,” and no particular neural states can be characterised as “output.” All that ever results from any neural activity is further neural activity as long as that nervous system persists.

This is so even when the sensory and motor neurons are involved. Those neurons are part of the neural network which is in a state of continuous activity. Light on the eye triggers changes in the activity of the sensor neurons in the eye, and thereby triggers a change in the neural activity of the nervous system.²⁵ This is just part of what is happening all the time—continuously changing states of neural activity. The organisation of the nervous system is indifferent to which neurons are perturbed—sensory neurons or neurons elsewhere in the system. The organisation of the nervous system is indifferent to origin of the perturbations—environmental factors, or factors within the nervous system itself.

²⁵ This particular sort of triggering is explained in more detail below.

The nervous system is defined as a system (a unity) by relations that constitute it as a closed network of interacting neurons such that any change in the state of the relative activity of a collection of its component neurons always leads to a change in the state of relative activity of other (or the same collection of) neurons: All changes in relative neuronal activity in the nervous system always lead to other changes in relative neuronal activity in it. With respect to its dynamics of states, the nervous system is a closed system.²⁶

As a closed neuronal network the nervous system has no input or output, and there is no intrinsic feature in its organization which would allow it to discriminate through the dynamics of its changes of state between possible internal or external causes for these changes of state. This has two fundamental consequences:

(i) The phenomenology of the changes of state of the nervous system is exclusively the phenomenology of the changes of state of a closed neuronal network; that is, for the nervous system as a neuronal network there is no inside or outside.

(ii) The distinction between internal and external causes in the origin of the changes of state of the nervous system can only be made by an observer that beholds the organism (the nervous system) as a unity, and then defines its inside and outside by specifying its boundaries.²⁷

We who observe living systems responding and interacting in their environment may describe some of what we see in terms of input and output but that does not apply to the organisation of the living systems. Nor does it apply to the organisation of their nervous systems. That is why Maturana and Varela warn against describing any behaviour in a way that implies that the living system, or the nervous system is the sort of system that *operates* with inputs and outputs.

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²⁶ Maturana, 1978, 40-41.

²⁷ Maturana and Varela, 1980, 128.

Structural determinism and organisational closure are two key concepts which sensitise us to a different way of thinking. Structural determinism counteracts thinking of environmental causes determining particular effects in a living system, or in a nervous system. Organisational closure counteracts thinking of living systems or nervous systems as the sort of system that operates with inputs and outputs—that is, describing their operation in terms of information transfer is misleading.

9.5 Interaction Between Closed Structure-Determined Systems

If the environment does not determine the changes and there are no inputs or outputs four points in particular need to be explained. Firstly, how do we explain the way a living system seems to be in accord with its environment, if the environment doesn't determine the changes in it, and if the living system does not get any information about its environment? Secondly, how do we explain the way that the nervous system seems to be in accord with the living organism in which it is embedded? Thirdly, how do we explain the way that the nervous system seems to be in accord with the environment in general? Fourthly, how do we explain the way that living systems are in accord with each other? The answer to all these questions begins with the concept of *structural coupling*.

9.5.1 Ontogenic Structural Coupling

So far as the first point is concerned, the living system being in accord with its environment, there is nothing to be explained beyond the closed structure-determined nature of living systems. A structurally plastic system is in accord with its environment because that is the sort of system it is. It is a system whose structure changes in response to perturbations in its environment. That is, it is a system whose structure adjusts to, adapts to, or compensates for changes in the environment which perturb it. Depending on the state of the system at the time of the perturbation, appropriate changes of state are adopted by the system, where possible. It makes no sense to think that the changes determined by the structure would not be appropriate, to the extent that the domain of states specifies.

As long as living systems persist, that is, as long as autopoiesis continues, structure-determined change is continuously occurring—at all levels. This sequence of structural change is referred to as *ontogenic* change, because it happens over the life history of the living system.²⁸ In the process of living, then, there is a continuous sequence of adaptive or compensatory change, in which the structure of the living system is continuously adjusting itself to the environment. It cannot be otherwise if the living system continues to survive. This is what we see as the living system being in accord with its environment. This way of thinking about accord with the environment does not involve notions of the environment determining changes. And it does not involve the idea that the living system gets, by way of input, any information from the environment.

As the system adjusts or matches itself to the environment, Maturana says that a “dynamic structural correspondence” is established through a sequence of structural changes. This dynamic structural correspondence is termed *structural coupling*.²⁹ Since this matching happens during the life history of the living system, the living system is *ontogenically* structurally coupled to its medium, or environment. That is what adaptation is. Furthermore, this happens *necessarily*.³⁰ If the living system is surviving and developing then the compensatory changes must have taken place.

In other words, if a composite unity is structurally plastic, then adaptation as a process of structural coupling to the medium that selects its path of structural change is a necessary outcome.³¹

There are two sorts of adaptive changes—conservative changes and innovative changes. The difference here may be thought of as a difference between structural changes involved in the maintenance of the system, and structural changes involved in development.³² In conservative changes only the relations between the components change. In innovative changes the structure of the components changes as well as the

²⁸ Maturana and Varela, 1980, 98. “Ontogenic” is a variation of “ontogenetic.”

²⁹ Maturana, 1978, 35, 43.

³⁰ Maturana, 1978, 39.

³¹ Maturana, 1981, 29.

³² Development includes degenerative changes, like going blind.

relations between components. So long as the set of relations involved in the autopoietic organisation of the system does not change, the living system retains its identity through conservative and innovative changes.

The compensatory changes that an autopoietic system may undergo while retaining its identity, may be of two possible kinds according to how its structure is affected by the perturbations: they may be (a) conservative changes in which only the relations between the components change; or they may be (b) innovative changes in which the components themselves change. In the first case, the internal or external interactions causing the deformations do not lead to any change in the way the autopoiesis is realized, and the system remains at the same point in the autopoietic space because its components are invariant; in the second case, on the contrary, the interactions lead to a change in the way the autopoiesis is realized and, hence, to a displacement of the system in the autopoietic space because its components changed.³³

Conservative changes take place in a living system as the heart pumps, as the pupil dilates and contracts, as the lungs inflate and deflate, or as the sailor remains standing on the deck of a rolling ship. The structure of the components does not change but some of the relations between components change. Innovative changes take place as animals develop and mature, or when they acquire an immunity. In innovative changes there is structural change in some components.

Innovative change, unlike conservative change, results in a different domain of perturbations, and a different domain of states being specified.³⁴ Damage to the nervous system can result in the loss of feeling. Thus, with respect to touch, the living system is not perturbed by the same range of environmental factors—its domain of perturbations changes. The changed structure triggered in an animal by a vaccination, determines an immune response rather than an infection, should that animal be perturbed by the relevant virus—its domain of states changes.

³³ Maturana and Varela, 1980, 99. The word “causing” appears in this quotation. Given the views of the writers, this should be understood as “triggering.”

³⁴ Maturana, 1978, 35, 45.

Structural coupling is not a simple a matter, it occurs wherever perturbations trigger structural changes. The living system is structure-determined at all levels, from the cellular level upwards. Perturbations may arise in the environment of the living system, in the environment of its components, or in the environment of the cells. All these perturbations may trigger conservative or innovative changes. Thus structural coupling occurs at all levels. No part of this network of processes compromises the organisational closure of the living system.

Also, as stated above, the medium or the environment is not the only source of perturbations for the living system. The structural dynamics of the living system itself can be a source of perturbations. Perturbations may arise through the operation of the system itself, and trigger changes in the system. This internal perturbation can also happen at the level of the components or at the cellular level. All these sorts of perturbations may trigger conservative or innovative changes. Thus, these perturbations can also be involved in structural coupling. No part of this network of processes compromises the organisational closure of the living system.

The notions of structural change and structural coupling provide a different way of thinking about the process of adaptation and learning. I am going to digress here and look at the case of Virgil within the framework provided by Maturana and Varela. I find that this case helps to make the notion of structural coupling clearer, *and* Maturana and Varela help in understanding more about the recovery from blindness. The notion of innovative structural change is relevant to the change that Virgil and others like him experience. We can think of Virgil's developing sight as a process of structural coupling following this change.

9.5.2 A Digression: Recovery from Blindness

When Virgil had his operations, the structure of some of his components, his eyes, changed. This was, therefore, an innovative change in his structure. This innovative change resulted in a different domain of perturbations for Virgil. His system was now perturbed by light, colours, shadows, and so on. His domain of states was also different. What we might call visual states became a possibility for him. As a result of

the circumstances of this innovative change, Virgil was no longer structurally matched to his environment in the way that he had been.

The innovative change in Virgil's structure was not a result of his adaptation, of course. So the new domain of perturbations, and the new domain of states have been sprung on Virgil's structure suddenly. The process of adaptation involves a re-establishment of a "dynamic structural correspondence," or structural coupling. The structural matching of the living system to the environment is re-established as Virgil *interacts* with the environment. He is exposed to the different possibilities in his changed domain of perturbations and in responding, he experiences different states which are specified by his changed domain of states. As a result of the interaction, Virgil undergoes a sequence of structural changes. Patients like Virgil, experience an unsettling period, and report either feeling as if they have changed radically, or as if they are in a different world.

Sacks suggests that Virgil is a changed person when he says that before the operation Virgil had been "a touch person through and through."³⁵ Valvo puts it in terms of a changed world, when he describes the disorientation and psychological depression that invariably followed the operations on the patients he observed.

He [the patient] discovers, above all, a constant stream of simultaneous impressions whose importance is not clear; nor is it clear what few points of reference there are which link to *his older world*. He begins to realize that he must work indefinitely with this new sense modality; that he is now considered a sighted person on whom increased demands will be made. The task of functioning in a *visual world* acquires a very serious significance to him.³⁶ [my italics]

It is easy to think of these descriptions in relation to the changed domain of perturbations and the changed domain of states. Within the framework of the structural coupling, both ways of describing the change have relevance. The changed domain of states suggests a changed person and the changed domain of perturbations suggests a

³⁵ Sacks, 1995, 132

³⁶ Valvo, 1971, 28.

changed world. No wonder the patients feel unsettled. As they begin to adapt to a different world they find that they themselves are also different.

Maturana and Varela provide a different way of thinking about what is happening in a living system, and in its interactions. Virgil's case gives us an opportunity to consider the notions of structural coupling and structural change in a living system. If we think of the newly sighted in this way we find that often there is no conflict with what close observers like Sacks and Valvo have described, despite the different way of thinking.

Other previous descriptions are not so appropriate, they are misdescriptions. For instance, when Valvo is discussing rehabilitation, he says that as vision is re-established the patients must build up visual engrams and then evaluate them.³⁷ We cannot think of this in terms of closed structure-determined systems interacting with their environment. The notion of an engram is closely connected to the notion of a representation, and the idea of inside versus outside is often implicit in the way we talk about representations. As pointed out above, according to Maturana and Varela, the idea of inside versus outside is not part of the organisation of nervous systems. Thus the notion of representations, or engrams, is misleading.³⁸

Thus, Maturana and Varela help us to see the complexity of a sudden innovative change in a living system. The magnitude of the impact of an innovative change depends on the degree to which the domain of perturbations *and* the domain of states change. The subsequent process of structural matching depends on the plasticity of the system and the level of interaction in which the relevant perturbations trigger the system.

This digression into Virgil's case has side-stepped the second and third points, both of which are relevant to his development. Namely, how do we explain the accord between the nervous system and the living system in which it is embedded? And, how do we

³⁷ Valvo, 1971, 19, 24. Most of what Valvo says about his patients *does* sit well with Maturana and Varela's theory.

explain the accord between the nervous system and the environment? These explanations build on the notion of ontogenic structural coupling, and it is appropriate to deal with them together.

9.5.3 *Living Systems with Nervous Systems: Reciprocal Structural Coupling*

If the environment or medium of a structurally plastic system is itself structurally plastic, then the environment may undergo structural changes while maintaining its identity. That is, perturbations may trigger changes in the environment. Those changes in the environment may be triggered by the structurally plastic system. Suppose this happens—the environment triggers changes in the system and the system triggers changes in the environment—the adaptation or structural coupling is *reciprocal*. Again the nature of any change is not determined by the perturbations. So the nature of any environmental change triggered by the system, is determined by the structure of the environment.

If the medium is also a structurally plastic system, then the two plastic systems may become reciprocally structurally coupled through their reciprocal selection of plastic structural changes during their history of interactions. In such a case, the structurally plastic changes of state of one system become perturbations for the other, and vice versa, in a manner that establishes an interlocked, mutually selecting, mutually triggering domain of state trajectories.³⁹

This ongoing structural adaptation of system and environment is *reciprocal ontogenic structural coupling*. In this ongoing mutual adaptation of system and environment, none of the changes in either are explained by causal determinism. None of the changes in either are explained using the notions of input and output.

Reciprocal structural coupling explains the way in which the nervous system interacts with the organism in which it is embedded. We can think of the organism as the structurally plastic medium in which the nervous system exists and operates. The nervous system is also structurally plastic. In their interaction these two structurally

³⁸ Maturana and Varela, 1980, 132.

³⁹ Maturana, 1978, 36.

plastic entities become reciprocally structurally coupled. Just as the living system was necessarily structurally coupled to the environment, so reciprocal structural coupling is a *necessary* outcome of the interaction of two structurally plastic entities.

The nervous system is a network of interacting neurons coupled in three ways to the organism in which it is a component:

(i) The organism, including the nervous system, provides the physical and biochemical environment for the autopoiesis of the neurons as well as for all other cells, and hence, it is a possible source of physical and biochemical perturbations which may alter the properties of the neurons and thus lead to (ii) or (iii).

(ii) There are states of the organism (physical and biochemical) which change the state of activity of the nervous system as a whole by acting upon the receptor surfaces of some of its component neurons, and thus lead to (iii).

(iii) There are states of the nervous system which change the state of the organism (physical and biochemical) and lead recursively to (i) and (ii).

Through this coupling the nervous system participates in the generation of the autopoietic relations which define the organism which it integrates, and, accordingly, its structure is subordinated to this participation.⁴⁰

Thus we describe the relationship between the nervous system and the organism in which it is embedded, as reciprocal ontogenic structural coupling. We do not need notions of causal determinism or information transfer to explain the apparent accord between the nervous system and the organism in which it is embedded.

This brings us to the third point—how to explain the way that the nervous system seems to be in accord with the environment in general? The organism in which the nervous system is embedded is structurally coupled to its environment. Many of the states of the organism arise as a result of environmental perturbations. Some of these resulting states may perturb the nervous system, as in (ii) above. Thus, the nervous system responds to changes in the organism which have been triggered by the environment. In addition, the

⁴⁰ Maturana and Varela, 1980, 124-125.

states triggered in the organism by its nervous system, as in (iii) above, are part of the structure which responds to perturbation in the environment. Thus the organism's response to environmental perturbation is, in part, determined by structural changes which have been triggered by the nervous system.

The nervous system is structurally matched to the environment in general through its interactions with the organism in which it is embedded. The organism, as a living system, is structurally coupled to its environment. Thus the organism is in accord with its environment. The nervous system, through reciprocal structural coupling, is in accord with the changes triggered in the organism. This includes changes triggered by environmental perturbations. Therefore the nervous system is in accord with the environment in general.⁴¹

The organization of the nervous system as a closed network of interacting neurons must remain invariant, but its structure may change if it is coupled to the structural change of other systems in which it is embedded, such as the organism, and through this, the medium in which the organism exists as an autopoietic unity, or, recursively itself.⁴²

Thus, the environment does not determine the responses of the living system or its nervous system, and the living system and its nervous system do not acquire information about the environment.

This is different from the way we often talk about the environment impinging on the living system, particularly its brain. Take sensory perception for example. We may say that the environment determines the response in a living system, when we describe perception. We may say that we get information about the environment through our senses. Maturana says that this is to misdescribe the way that living systems interact with their environment, and he provides a replacement description.

⁴¹ This is not meant to be a precise or comprehensive account. It is only a sketch which is an attempt to convey the way that we can work up to the complex interactions of living systems without ever having to introduce the traditional notions referred to earlier.

⁴² Maturana, 1978, 43.

When an observer sees an organism interacting in its medium, he observes that its conduct appears to be adequate to compensate for the perturbations that the environment exerts on it in each interaction. The observer describes this adequacy of conduct as if it were the result of the acquisition by the organism of some feature of the environment, such as information, on which it computes the adequate changes of state that permit it to remain in autopoiesis, and calls such a process *perception*. Since instructive interactions do not take place, this description is both operationally inappropriate and metaphorically misleading.⁴³

In fact, for any given animal, the structure of its nervous system and its structure as a whole organism, not the structure of the medium, determine what structural configuration of the medium may constitute its sensory perturbations and what path of internal changes of state it undergoes as a result of a particular interaction.⁴⁴

Maturana and Varela, then, provide an account that shows how the nervous system, a closed structure determined system, embedded in an organism, a closed structure determined system, can be in accord with the environment of that organism. The notions of causal determinism and information transfer play no part in this way of thinking. This remains so when living systems interact with each other. Even when it comes to human languaging we still have closed structure-determined systems—there is no level at which we have different kinds of systems operating or interacting in a different way. Given this foundation of reciprocal structural coupling, I will now consider the fourth point—the accord between living systems.

9.5.4 Consensual Domains

When the environment contains several living systems, it is then possible that those living systems are implicated in perturbations which trigger changes in each other. That is, one living system can be an integral part of the environment to which another living system is structurally coupled, and this relationship can be mutual. Thus, given the right sort of structures, living systems may become reciprocally structurally coupled to each other.

⁴³ Maturana, 1978, 46. When Maturana says that interactions are not instructive in this context, I take it to mean only that there is nothing like the transfer of information. (Maturana, 1978, 34.)

When two or more organisms interact recursively as structurally plastic systems, each becomes a medium for the realization of the autopoiesis of the other, the result is mutual ontogenic structural coupling.⁴⁵

Where reciprocal ontogenic structural coupling is between a living system and its environment, the result is mutual adaptation of organism and environment. Where reciprocal ontogenic structural coupling is between living systems, the result is a *consensual domain*. This is a kind of mutual adaptation. The structure of one living system changes in an innovative way in response to changes in the structure of another living system, and vice versa. This results in the same appearance of accord that is seen between a living system and its environment, as discussed earlier. What is different here is that other living systems are part of the environment so an observer sees living systems in accord with each other. A consensual domain is as much a *necessary* outcome of interaction, as is adaptation to the environment. The extent of the consensual domain depends on the structural plasticity of the organisms and the level of interaction

Maturana and Varela describe the observed behaviour in a consensual domain as co-ordinated actions—co-ordinated actions are the components of a consensual domain. As the living systems trigger successive structural changes in each other, each resulting changed structure may give rise to further perturbations. There is an ongoing sequence as the structures adjust themselves to each other within the context of the interaction. Since the systems are dynamic systems, the result is a dynamic structural correspondence, as it was in the coupling of the organism to its nervous system. The actions of the living systems become co-ordinated—or their conduct becomes interlocked. The domain of interlocked or co-ordinated conduct, is a consensual domain.⁴⁶

Two plastic systems become structurally coupled as a result of their sequential interactions when their respective structures undergo

⁴⁴ Maturana, 1978, 46.

⁴⁵ Maturana, 1978, 47.

⁴⁶ Maturana, 1978, 47.

sequential changes without loss of identity. Therefore, the structural coupling of two independent structurally plastic unities is a necessary consequence of their interactions, and is greater the more interactions take place. If one of the plastic systems is an organism and the other its medium, the result is ontogenic adaptation of the organism to its medium: the changes of state of the organism correspond to the changes of state of the medium. If the two plastic systems are organisms, the result of the ontogenic structural coupling is a consensual domain, that is, a domain of behaviour in which the structurally determined changes of state of the coupled organisms correspond to each other in interlocked sequences.⁴⁷

The observed co-ordinated behaviour of a consensual domain reflects the dynamic structural correspondence of the members of that consensual domain. It does not reflect any sharing of information. Living systems, as they interact in a consensual domain, do not operate with inputs and outputs. Thus, according to Maturana and Varela, the notions of causal determinism and information transfer play no part in the explanation of interaction between living systems. When living systems establish a consensual domain it is a matter of closed structure-determined systems each generating perturbations which trigger structural changes in the others, such that there is a structural matching of each system to the others. The degree of structural matching, or the degree to which actions become co-ordinated, depends on the structural plasticity of the participating systems, the extent of their interaction, and the complexity of their nervous systems.

Let us look at an example. When a farmer interacts with his new dog, it is inevitable that in adjusting to each other the farmer and the dog respond to perturbations arising from their ongoing structural dynamics. The dynamic states of the farmer give rise to perturbations which trigger changes in the dynamic structure of the dog, and vice versa. This results in reciprocal structural coupling. There is a degree of structural matching between the farmer and the dog. As this happens, we observe that they get used to each other. This is the beginning of co-ordinated action.

⁴⁷ Maturana, 1975, 326.

Over time this co-ordinated action increases. In behavioural terms we might say that they sense each other's mood, for example, and respond accordingly. The dog leaps excitedly when the farmer comes out. They may each have a heightened sense of when something is wrong and respond in a specific way. The farmer goes to investigate when he senses something out of the ordinary in the dog's behaviour. Co-ordinated action is not limited to the obvious, it also includes what, in this case, we might see as empathy.

Thus, it is possible to explain the apparent accord between living systems as they interact with each other—the dog and farmer form a relationship—within the theoretical framework that Maturana and Varela develop, it is a matter of reciprocal structural coupling. That is, the fourth point is explained without introducing any of the traditional notions previously mentioned.

9.6 The Generation of Language in the Interaction of Living Systems

There are, so it seems to us, limitations on the extent of the consensual domain that can be established by the farmer and the dog. For instance, when the farmer goes to discuss the worrying implications of government policies with a colleague, we get the feeling that this is a radically different sort of interaction between living systems. Radically different, that is, from the sort of consensual domain established by the farmer and the dog. Even when there is a high degree of co-ordination of actions, or a high degree of empathy, between the farmer and the dog there does not seem to be the same sort of interaction as there is between humans whose consensual domains involve discussions of politics. How do we explain the sort of accord we see in elaborate discussions, in terms of the structural coupling of closed structure-determined systems?

9.6.1 Recursive Perturbation

Let us begin by considering a different sort of interaction between the farmer and the dog. On the basis of the relationship that develops between them, the farmer goes on to train the dog as a sheepdog. That is, on the basis of the reciprocal structural coupling a new sort of behaviour develops. What seems different about this behaviour is its one-sidedness. The farmer, in this interaction, is not just responding to the dog. The farmer

appears to respond to the co-ordinated action as well. In everyday terms, the farmer is thinking about the co-ordinated action in a way that the dog is not.

The farmer behaves as if the interaction is correct or incorrect, by rewarding or rebuking the dog. The farmer displays an evaluative attitude to the developing interaction, showing satisfaction or frustration. That is, some of the farmer's behaviour is directed to the interaction. The dog does not behave as if it has *any* attitudes to the interaction. It doesn't behave as if the farmer got things wrong. It doesn't behave as if a routine is good enough for the purpose, so it is time to start working on another one. It does not appear to respond to the co-ordinated action as such. What, then, is different about the responses of the living systems in this interaction?

The structure of the farmer is different from the structure of the dog in the degree of structural plasticity and complexity of the nervous system. This leads to a particular sort of difference in their domains of perturbations and in their domains of states. This difference is governed by more than just the individuality of the living systems. I do not want to say merely that the farmer's behaviour is more complex, or that the degree of structural coupling is more complex on the part of the farmer. That will not capture the nature of the difference. The difference lies in the way that the structure of the farmer can be perturbed by internal states generated by the structural coupling.

When the states generated in an organism by a particular interaction give rise to further perturbations which trigger further states *of the same kind*, then we have, according to Maturana and Varela, *recursive* perturbation. This is what happens with the farmer in interactions with the dog. The initial structural coupling of farmer and dog results in co-ordinated action. This co-ordinated action generates particular states in the farmer and the dog. The states so generated in the farmer, trigger, in the farmer, further states of the same kind. This is recursive perturbation. Recursive perturbation does not happen in the dog. The farmer is recursively perturbed by the interaction, the dog is not.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ I cannot say for sure that there is *no* recursive perturbation in the dog. What does seem to be clear is that there is a great difference in the degree of recursion. I am assuming there is none for the purposes of the example.

How do we know when we have states *of the same kind*? They give rise to the same sort of behaviour. The trained routines are further components of the consensual domain that was established initially—they are co-ordinated actions of farmer and dog. If the further states generated in the farmer were not of the same kind we would observe a different sort of behaviour. For example, the farmer might go and tell a friend about the good relationship he has with his dog. The farmer is then responding to the co-ordinated action, but this response does not give rise to behaviour of the same kind, because it does not give rise to further components of the consensual domain that has been established between the farmer and the dog.

When the farmer goes on to train the dog, the one-sided difference that we see does not lie in the way that the dog and the farmer respond to each other. The difference lies in the fact that the farmer is recursively perturbed in this interaction, and the dog is not. We do not observe the dog responding to the co-ordinated action as such. We do see the farmer responding to the co-ordinated action as such. Since the structure of the dog is not recursively perturbed this is not a reciprocal process. That is why the training seems one-sided to us.

When the farmer discusses politics with a colleague we do not see the same sort of one-sidedness in the interaction. This interaction, however, is not a different sort of interaction between living systems. It is interaction in which *both* living systems are recursively perturbed by their co-ordinated actions.

9.6.2 Recursive Reciprocal Structural Coupling

When living systems, in their interaction in a consensual domain, are recursively perturbed by that interaction, *and* when that recursive perturbation gives rise to further co-ordinated action of the same kind, *recursive reciprocal* ontogenic structural coupling has occurred. This is a second-order structural coupling, and the result is a *second-order* consensual domain. The components of a first-order consensual domain are co-ordinated actions. The components of a second-order consensual domain are a co-ordination of the components of the first-order consensual domain—a co-ordination of co-ordinated actions.

For example, suppose the co-ordinated action of a consensual domain is dancing. The members of that consensual domain may go on interacting and the dancing becomes more and more elaborate—there are dances about war, dances about love, dances about loyalty. If recursive reciprocal ontogenic structural coupling occurs then a second-order consensual domain is established. The components of the second-order consensual domain must also be dancing, but they cannot be just another dance, like a dance about betrayal. The dancing in the second-order consensual domain might be thought of as dances about dancing. Or, if the members of the first-order consensual domain were songbirds their co-ordinated action might be bonding songs, and mating songs—birdsong about bonding and birdsong about mating. If a second-order consensual domain were established, the components of that domain might be thought of as birdsong about birdsong.

The process of recursive reciprocal structural coupling happens when the states generated by a previous reciprocal structural coupling become the source of perturbations for a further process of reciprocal structural coupling, *within the same consensual domain*. This results in a second-order co-ordination of action, or a second-order consensual domain. We begin, then, with a consensual domain. The co-ordinated action in that consensual domain triggers particular dynamic structural states in the members of that domain. Every member of the consensual domain may be recursively perturbed by those resultant dynamic states, their own and others'. If these recursive perturbations are involved in further reciprocal structural coupling, and the resulting co-ordinated action is of the same sort as the original co-ordinated action, then the consensual domain is extended recursively—a second-order consensual domain is established.⁴⁹

We have now arrived at the level of interaction where language appears—a second-order consensual domain. At no stage, in their explanation of second-order consensual domains, do Maturana and Varela introduce the notions of causal determinism, information transfer, transmitters and receivers, or input and output. Nor does their

⁴⁹ Maturana, 1978, 48-50. Maturana and Varela, 1980, 119-120.

account of the interaction of languaging involve these notions at all. To begin the discussion of languaging I will say more about the way Maturana and Varela characterise a consensual domain.

9.6.3 Linguistic Behaviour

Maturana and Varela describe communicative interaction as co-ordinated action in which responses are mutually triggered in living systems. There are two kinds of communicative interactions, instinctive and learned. Instinctive communicative interaction, like any instinctive behaviour, is not established through the ontogenic structural coupling of living systems. That is, it does not arise through a process of ontogenic adaptation, it is a result of genetic properties.

Learned communicative interaction, on the other hand, is co-ordinated action or interlocked conduct, which is established when ontogenic mutual structural coupling occurs between living systems. That is, it is interaction in a consensual domain. This sort of communicative interaction is *linguistic behaviour*.

In other words, if the interacting organisms as dynamic systems have continuously changing structures, and if they reciprocally select in each other their respective paths of ontogenic structural changes through their interactions without loss of autopoiesis, then they generate, as a recursive or expanding domain of communicative interactions, interlocked ontogenies that together constitute a domain of mutually triggering consensual conducts that becomes specified during its generation. Such a consensual domain of communicative interactions in which the behaviorally coupled organisms orient each other with modes of behavior whose internal determination has become specified during their coupled ontogenies, is a linguistic domain.⁵⁰

According to Maturana and Varela, then, interaction in a consensual domain is learned communicative interaction, and communicative interaction which is established in this way is linguistic interaction. That is, behaviour in a consensual domain is linguistic behaviour. As such, linguistic behaviour is not languaging but it is the basis of languaging.

⁵⁰ Maturana and Varela, 1980, 120.

This is a very broad notion of linguistic behaviour, but this characterisation is in keeping with the interactive approach Maturana and Varela take. They want to show how language arises in living systems and this is where it starts, in a consensual domain. That is the sort of *interaction* that is needed. No specification is made about how this interaction is realised. That is, no particular consensual domain is singled out. Whatever languaging is it has to develop out of this sort of interaction—learned communicative behaviour or linguistic behaviour.

This broad definition of linguistic behaviour raises a problem for the discussion of languaging. According to Maturana and Varela, *any* behaviour in a consensual domain is linguistic behaviour. We, on the other hand, often use the term “linguistic behaviour” in relation to languaging, as we usually think of it. We often refer to other co-ordinated action as “*non-linguistic behaviour*.” It is necessary here, therefore to assume that there are many kinds of linguistic behaviour—for instance, the co-ordinated action of the farmer and the dog, dancing in a consensual domain, learned communicative birdsong.

Both Maturana and Mingers talk about linguistic behaviour in relation to the generation of languaging. So far as the generation of a second-order linguistic domain is concerned I am assuming that there are *different kinds* of linguistic behaviour. Thus, the linguistic behaviour in a second-order consensual domain must be of the *same kind* of linguistic behaviour as the linguistic behaviour in the relevant first-order consensual domain. I will say more about this point below.

9.6.4 Languaging

The first condition for languaging is that *the living systems involved establish a consensual or linguistic domain through reciprocal ontogenic structural coupling*. The interactions which take place in such a domain are linguistic interactions, and the resulting states triggered in the living systems are linguistically generated states. If the initial process of reciprocal ontogenic structural coupling merely continues, the consensual domain is extended, the co-ordinated action increases. The mere continuation of this process, however, does not result in languaging.

The second condition for languaging is that the living systems involved in the first-order consensual domain, establish a *second-order* consensual domain of linguistic interactions. That is, the living systems are recursively perturbed by the internal states, linguistic states, generated in them through their interactions in the linguistic domain. Then recursive reciprocal structural coupling occurs. The resulting behaviour is the same kind of behaviour as that in the first order consensual domain. That recursively generated behaviour constitutes the components of a second-order consensual domain. The behaviour or interaction in the second-order consensual domain is languaging.

Linguistic behavior is behavior in a consensual domain. When linguistic behavior takes place recursively, in a second-order consensual domain, in such a manner that the components of the consensual behavior are recursively combined in the generation of new components of the consensual domain, a language is established.⁵¹

It may be helpful to have another phrasing of this. John Mingers puts it as follows.

Linguistic acts by themselves do not constitute language. For Maturana, the process of using language, or *languaging*, can occur only when the linguistic behaviors themselves become an object of coordination. This in turn can happen only when the nervous system has developed in such a way that it can interact with its own symbolic descriptions. Thus linguistic behavior is the consensual coordination of action. Languaging is a recursion of this, i.e., the consensual coordination of consensual coordinations of action.⁵²

This account of languaging *says nothing about what is used in the interaction*. What might be used is left open. In fact, this account of languaging says nothing about what *kind* of behaviour languaging is. It does not have to be conferring behaviour, that is left open too. Maturana and Varela have given an account of language as *interaction*, where the defining feature of that interaction is the way it arises in living systems.

⁵¹ Maturana, 1978, 50.

⁵² Mingers, 1995, 78. In the context of Maturana's theory, the nervous system "interacting with its own symbolic descriptions" amounts to the nervous system being perturbed by its own states where those states are the result of interaction in a consensual or linguistic domain. Maturana's account of things like symbols and representations is given within the framework of his theory and so we should not interpret them in the usual way.

According to Maturana and Varela, if recursive structural coupling occurs, the resulting consensual co-ordination of consensual co-ordinations of action, is languaging. This behaviour does not have to be conferring behaviour. All that is required for *languaging* is that the recursively co-ordinated actions be of the same kind as the initial co-ordinated actions.

* * *

It is important to see how this sort of *interaction*, languaging, arises between living systems. If languaging happens it will be necessarily realised in some form of behaviour. It is not any particular form of behaviour that makes interaction languaging. The defining feature of language is that it is recursive co-ordination of action. The recursive interaction we are most familiar with is the sort of human language in which we confer, particularly spoken and signed languages, although the congenitally deaf and blind develop a tactile language. I will focus on languaging as conferring behaviour

We might say that human language, as we think of it, is all conferring behaviour—all languages have questioning, arguing, explaining, correcting, greeting, and so on. It is as if we have, in general, all the same kind of second-order linguistic behaviour, or second-order co-ordinated action—conferring—whether in French, Russian, or NZSL. Conferring, then, is co-ordinated action in a second-order consensual domain.

The first-order linguistic interaction which gives rise to conferring, is not itself conferring. What *kind* of linguistic behaviour do we have in that first order consensual domain? Although it is not conferring, it must be the same *kind* of behaviour as conferring, since it is a component of the same consensual domain. I do not know what to call it, but I feel that it is the sort of behaviour Schaller described when she told of her evening with the languageless men.

9.6.5 Recursion in Human Languaging

The recursion from a first-order consensual domain to a second-order consensual domain, then, is the part of this theory that is most relevant to my project. It provides a

theoretical framework for performer-audience interaction and reciprocal back and forth interaction. I see it roughly as follows. Performer-audience interaction is interaction in a first-order consensual domain. Reciprocal back and forth interaction is interaction in a second-order consensual domain.

I will try and illustrate this with the example of a description, since Schaller refers to much of the performer-audience interaction as describing. Maturana says that descriptions or describing arise in a second-order consensual domain, so co-ordinated action in a first-order consensual domain cannot be a description.

If the organisms that operate in a consensual domain can be recursively perturbed by the internal states generated in them through their consensual interactions and can include the conducts generated through these recursive interactions as behavioural components in their consensual domain, a second-order consensuality is established from the perspective of which the first-order consensual behaviour is operationally a description of the circumstances that trigger it.⁵³

The interaction in the first-order consensual domain is linguistic interaction triggered by some circumstances. When a second-order consensuality is established, this provides a perspective from which, for the members of that domain, the initial linguistic interaction relates to the triggering circumstances. This can be observed in the behaviour of the members of that second-order consensual domain. They behave, *as a group*, as if their original co-ordinated action were a description.

For instance, a description can be corrected, filled out, or commented on by others. This sort of behaviour would show that the original co-ordinated action was *operationally* a description. Although Schaller says that the languageless men “described,” they did not behave among themselves, as if their interaction was operationally a description—they did not correct, fill out, or comment, in any way, on their co-ordinated action, they just performed it and watched it. That is, they were not behaving as if they were interacting in a second-order consensual domain.

⁵³ Maturana, 1978, 48.

This is how I understand Maturana. The first-order linguistic behaviour is not in itself a description of the circumstances that triggered it—it is not *intrinsically* a description. It cannot be treated as a description by those who only interact in the first-order consensual domain. It can only be treated *as a description* by those who have been perturbed by *both* the triggering circumstances and by the initial co-ordinated action, and who, as a result of these perturbations, become recursively reciprocally structurally coupled. When a second-order consensual domain is established in this way, the initial co-ordinated interaction becomes a description for the members of the domain. They behave as if there is a describing relation between the co-ordinated action and the circumstances which triggered it. They behave as if there is describing going on. That, is, they treat the co-ordinated action as a description.

What is it to treat linguistic behaviour as a description? We could comment on it—“That was an awful accident you saw.” I think this is the sort of thing Ildefonso did when he gave a better description of the oxen, when the older languageless man was “describing” ploughing. It was as if Ildefonso’s comment was, in an indirect way, “That’s not the best way to describe oxen,” or, “Oxen are more like this.” What Ildefonso did appeared to mean absolutely nothing to the languageless men—it was as if they didn’t even see it.

We could treat linguistic behaviour as a description by making comparisons. “It seems from what you say, that the park is nicer than the zoo, so we will go there.” This is not like the comparison the older languageless man made when he said his life was hard there (Mexico), and good here (USA). He was “describing” his work experience. But neither he, nor any of the other languageless men, behaved as if his performance was a description.

We could treat linguistic behaviour as a description by seeking clarification. “Does the fence you mentioned look secure?” This sort of behaviour shows co-ordinated action being treated as a description. When the languageless men did not “understand” the border crossing story there was no behaviour like this. They did not seek clarification and they did not probe. They did not address the storyteller in any way—it appeared

that they *could not* do so. So although their behaviour looked like describing to Schaller, they did not behave as if it was describing.⁵⁴

Maturana talks of language happening, the phenomenon of languaging taking place, or languaging arising. The above example can help us to understand this. It is not until the members of the consensual domain start interacting in a second-order consensual domain that a description happens, or the phenomenon of describing takes place, or describing arises. This happens as the members of the consensual domain begin to behave, in their interaction, as if the co-ordinated action was a description of the triggering circumstances. And this is how other conferring behaviour arises in the interaction of living systems. The process of recursive structural coupling can open up a whole new realm of possibilities for the interacting organisms.

At the level of this recursion, where languaging is established, Maturana also says that observing arises. I think that the example above, about descriptions, illustrates what Maturana means by “observing arises.” From the perspective of a first-order consensual domain the interacting organisms do not have descriptions, or anything like descriptions. It is in descriptions, or something equivalent, that we make distinctions. When we comment on “the accident,” a particular incident has been picked out, and when something is picked out, we are observing it. The older languageless man did not seem to be in a position to pick out the oxen in the way that Ildefonso did in his comment. Observing then, in terms of making distinctions like picking something out from its background, happens in recursive reciprocal structural coupling. When describing happens observing happens. Or, as Maturana puts it, when languaging happens observing happens.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ It should not be thought from this that language is essentially descriptive, in fact, in Maturana’s view it is not. “In his early work Maturana talked of descriptions and descriptions of descriptions, but now he refers to consensual coordination of action. This emphasizes his view that language is not essentially a descriptive domain but always an activity, embedded in the ongoing flow of actions.” (Mingers, 1995, 78-79.)

⁵⁵ Maturana, 1988, 47.

Thus Maturana and Varela, in their account, work up to the level of human language as we normally think of it. This operational account aims to show how language arises in the interaction of living systems—or how language arises *as* the interaction of living systems. The notions of causal determinism and information transfer are not involved in this account. Furthermore, nothing is singled out as a symbol system, and the “tool” metaphor, often used to characterise language, seems inappropriate here. This account of language is clearly an account of a particular sort of interaction.

Before I return to looking at Ildefonso and the languageless men, I will give a brief overview of what Maturana says about further recursions of the process of reciprocal ontogenic structural coupling. Although I want to confine my discussion of languageless and enlanguaged interaction mainly to the first recursion, from a first-order to a second-order consensual domain, the further recursions are not irrelevant.

9.6.6 Third-Order and Fourth-Order Consensual Domains

If recursion is possible, then there is, in principle, no limit to the number of times it may happen. The recursively co-ordinated action of the second-order consensual domain can be a source of perturbations which trigger further structural changes in the members of the consensual domain. When this new source of perturbations gives rise to further recursive reciprocal structural coupling between the members of the domain, a third-order consensual domain is established. The co-ordinated action of the second-order consensual domain is treated in relation to the first-order co-ordinated actions and the initial triggering circumstances.

According to Maturana, when this happens the phenomenon of the observer arises.

The second-order co-ordinated action is treated as observing, or it is operationally observing, from the perspective of the third-order consensual domain. Observing implies an observer, so the observer, or the community of observers arises in the third order consensual domain. That is, the observer is *implicitly* acknowledged in the interaction of the members of the third-order consensual domain. Expressions like, “You are not looking in the right place,” entail the notion that the speaker is addressing

an observer. Maturana says there is “the operational realisation of observing in a bodyhood,”⁵⁶

If recursion happens yet again, a fourth-order consensuality is established, and the phenomenon of self-consciousness is generated, as the members are perturbed also by the third-order co-ordinated actions in which the observer is realised. In the fourth - order consensuality, there is operational realisation that the members of the domain, oneself included, are the observers. One’s bodyhood is realised or the sense of self arises. This happens in the group interaction, through successive recursions. Maturana is thus saying that the notion of self, or self-consciousness, is a phenomenon which is generated in recursive linguistic interaction. This might be described as the social construction of the self, or the linguistic construction of the self.

Maturana describes the sequence of recursions as follows.

Furthermore, I also claim that with languaging observing and the observer arise; the former as the second-order recursion in consensual co-ordinations of actions that constitute the phenomenon of distinction and the latter in a third-order recursion in which there is the distinction of the operational realisation of observing in a bodyhood. Indeed, when languaging and observing take place, objects take place as distinctions of distinctions that obscure the co-ordinations of actions that these co-ordinate. Finally, when languaging, observing and objects take place, the phenomenon of self-consciousness may take place in a community of observers as a fourth-order recursion of consensual co-ordinations of actions in which the observer distinguishes his or her own bodyhood as a node in a network of recursive distinctions.⁵⁷

In this account, it seems to me that the interaction of languaging, in the sense of conferring can be extended in two ways. Firstly, there can be an extension of the interaction in a second-order consensual domain, but this in itself does not result in all the possibilities for conferring. Secondly, in keeping with the notion of language as a particular kind of interaction, new possibilities are opened up when there is recursion to

⁵⁶ Maturana, 1988, 47.

⁵⁷ Maturana, 1988, 47.

third-order and fourth-order consensual domains. Different distinctions are made at different levels, so some language, as we think of it, won't arise in a second-order consensual domain—"self-talk," for instance. Thus *some* of our everyday languaging is interaction in a second order consensual domain, but other languaging only arises in further recursions.

By saying that languaging arises in a second-order consensual domain, Maturana is emphasising the importance of a particular sort of interaction—recursive reciprocal structural coupling. The most important step in the development of human languaging is the first recursion, that is what opens things up. But there are further developments in languaging with successive recursions. If we think of languaging as using words and sentences it is difficult to see the different levels of interaction. If, however, we look at the interaction first, and understand the different recursions, we can see these reflected in the words and sentences. For example, if the notion of the self is not implicit in the way that a person talks then that person is not participating in a fourth-order consensual domain.

The final thing I want to mention is the place of the words, sentences, and patterns of our everyday languages in this account of language as interaction.

9.6.7 Words, Sentences, Grammar

So far as most of us are concerned the "consensual co-ordinations of consensual co-ordinations of action" that are languaging, are realised in the particular language we use, its words and sentences. Words and sentences are what predominate for us. What, then, is the status of words and sentences in a theory of language as interaction? They are not the components of the second-order consensual domain. We must be very careful not to backslide from the notion of co-ordinated actions as components. What is fundamental in languaging is the consensual co-ordinations of consensual co-ordinations of action.

Sounds happen to be the way that some co-ordinations of action are realised. From the perspective of a second-order consensual domain, some sounds are operationally

distinctions in the first-order co-ordinations of actions. For example, when co-ordinated actions are treated as descriptions, distinctions like “accident,” “oxen,” “park,” and “zoo” are made, as described above. That is, words occur, or sounds become words, as distinctions of consensual co-ordinations of actions. Sentences are sequences of distinctions of co-ordinations of actions. Sounds become words, and sequences of sounds become sentences, as the requisite distinctions are made in a *second-order* consensual domain.

The notion of words as symbols happens when we make further distinctions concerning the words that arise in the interaction in a second-order consensual domain. That is, we take distinctions like “accident,” “oxen,” “park,” and “zoo,” and, through further recursive co-ordination of actions, we make distinctions concerning those initial distinctions. It is in this interaction that the notion of a word as a symbol occurs. Thus words are not *intrinsically* symbols, rather they are distinctions of consensual co-ordinations of actions.

Language as a domain of recursive consensual co-ordinations of actions does not operate with symbols, yet symbols arise in language *as distinctions of relations of distinctions*. Also, according to this, words are not symbolic entities, nor do they connote or denote independent objects. They are distinctions of consensual co-ordinations of actions. This is why sounds, marks, or movements do not constitute words by themselves, and sequences or groups of sounds, marks or movements do not constitute languaging.⁵⁸ [my italics]

Now we can get some idea of why Schaller’s early lessons did not work. Pointing and naming was incomprehensible to Ildefonso. His bewilderment is understandable when we realise how words arise, and when we realise that he was not interacting in a second-order consensual domain. In the early lessons, Ildefonso imitated Schaller’s actions but he was not signing. Movements are only ASL signs from the perspective of a second-order consensual domain where distinctions are made, and Ildefonso was not participating in a second-order consensual domain.

⁵⁸ Maturana, 1988, 47.

There is a particular path of recursive interaction which leads to thinking of language as a symbol system. We, in our interaction are not aware of the co-ordinations or recursive co-ordinations of actions as such. What is salient for us are the sounds, or movements, in relation to the circumstances which trigger them. At first the sounds, or movements, are implicitly words or signs. It then takes further recursion for the sounds and movements to be explicitly those words and signs. In further recursions we make the distinctions in which words become symbols. Thus, in this particular sequence of recursive interaction, when we get to the stage of discussing language we are treating it explicitly as a symbol system.

Many accounts of language are unconcerned about the sorts of systems that living systems are. Many accounts of language are unconcerned about how language might arise in the interactions of such systems. In fact, many accounts treat language as *fundamentally* a symbol system, and assume it is an ontologically independent entity which must be acquired by living systems—that is, they assume that language is independent of human interaction. Maturana and Varela, on the other hand, take language to be fundamentally a kind of interaction, so that is where they look to gain a further understanding of the phenomenon of language.

Maturana and Varela do not just show us a different way of thinking about language, they show us how the standard way of thinking about language arises. They bring us to that realisation by turning our attention to the sorts of systems which generate language in their interaction. First we must understand what sort of system a living system is, and how it operates. Then we must understand how such systems interact. When we understand those things we no longer see language as *fundamentally* a symbol system. We have been encouraged to think of it in a completely different way—it is a particular kind of *interaction*.

That is, language takes place in the flow of consensual co-ordinations of actions of organisms whose actions co-ordinate because they have congruent dynamic structures that have arisen or are arising through their recurrent interactions in a co-ontogenic drift. Due to this, interactions in language are structural interactions that trigger in the

interacting organisms structural changes contingent on the course of the consensual co-ordinations of actions in which they arise.⁵⁹

* * *

I will now discuss how this theory can help in understanding Ildefonso's situation and his development; how it can help in understanding the interaction of the languageless men; and how it can help in understanding the seemingly radical claims made by the Deaf.

⁵⁹ Maturana, 1988, 48.

CHAPTER 10

In this chapter I am going to apply Maturana's theory of language to some of the issues that have been discussed in this thesis. I will begin with Ildefonso. In the early lessons Schaller began by showing Ildefonso the names of things. This only looks like a good starting point if language is fundamentally a symbol system and some of those symbols name things. Maturana shows us that this is not so. Denotation is not primitive. Ildefonso begins to progress only when he and Schaller begin to confer, even though we see no specific progress or immediate result in that conferring.

Maturana's theory provides a way of exploring languageless interaction further. Once we understand what happens in the first recursion of co-ordinated action, it is possible to reassess some of the languageless interaction with the aim of finding a second-order consensuality beginning. I believe we can, indeed, see this happening. We can also say what is happening in the languageless mime and gesture, and say how it is different from enlanguaged mime and gesture.

We know that Ildefonso was dissatisfied with his first two attempts to answer Schaller's question about his thinking before language. He wanted to show her languageless interaction. Clearly interaction between his languageless brother, Mario, and Elena did not show languageless interaction. Ildefonso never drew Schaller's attention to this interaction. I will consider the interaction between a languageless person and an enlanguaged person in the light of Maturana's theory, and say why we do not see languageless interaction in that situation.

Finally I will consider three deaf issues using Maturana's theory to explore them in more depth. This theory helps us see why the profoundly deaf might not acquire any language in an environment of oralism. The theory also explains the disadvantages of mainstreaming, even when a sign language interpreter is present. I will conclude with a discussion of home signs, the language-like systems generated in the gestured

interaction between young deaf children and their hearing families. And I will discuss why I think the languageless men did not develop home signs.

10.1 Ildefonso's Progress

Maturana's theory explains why Schaller and Ildefonso got nowhere in the classroom when she presented the ASL signs as symbolic entities denoting independent objects. His theory also explains Ildefonso's progress—particularly the interactive development in which ASL signs arise. I will make four brief points about Ildefonso's progress.

- Denotation is not primitive—Ildefonso could not begin with names of things.
- Ildefonso's does not copy the names.
- We cannot say what the “breakthrough” was about.
- Naming happens in a second-order consensual domain.

10.1.1 Denotation is not Primitive

When Schaller and Ildefonso stood by the tree and she kept pointing at the tree and signing TREE, *nothing* happened. She herself said, “Pointing and naming objects failed to communicate anything.”¹ Schaller thought the signs were symbols that were needed first, and she thought she could show them to Ildefonso. Ildefonso could just not grasp what we think is so *basic*, certain signs denote things. Maturana says that this is not basic at all.

A language, whether in its restricted or its generalized form is currently considered to be a denotative system of symbolic communication, composed of words that denote entities regardless of the domain in which these entities may exist. Denotation, however, is not a primitive operation. It requires agreement—consensus for the specification of the denotant and the denoted. If denotation, therefore, is not a primitive operation, it cannot be a primitive linguistic operation, either. Language must arise as a result of something else that does not require denotation for its establishment, but gives rise to language with all its implications as a trivial necessary result. This fundamental process is ontogenic structural coupling, which results in the establishment of a consensual domain.²

¹ Schaller, 1995, 40.

² Maturana, 1978, 50.

According to Maturana, it is not surprising that pointing and naming objects failed to communicate anything, conferring is needed first to reach agreements about the denotant and the denoted. In Chapter 6 I described the sort of conferring that was needed for school pupils to learn the symbols for the planets, and the sort of conferring that was needed for Mario to understand the names of things. That conferring gives rise to a second order consensual domain and languaging interaction. In that languaging interaction sounds may become words and movements may become signs, but there is no realisation at that level that words and signs denote entities. That sort of idea emerges in a further recursion. The languaging interaction itself recursively perturbs the participants and a further recursion of structural coupling occurs—that is, the language itself becomes a topic of discussion.

There are two things, then, that Ildefonso cannot be expected to learn before beginning to confer. Firstly, he cannot be expected to learn the names of things. Secondly, he cannot be expected to learn that things have names, or that some signs denote things, or, as Pinker puts it, grasp the principle of naming.³

10.1.2 The Copying

Whatever Ildefonso was doing in the early lessons when he made particular movements, he was *not* making ASL signs. This was because the movements that he made—movements which looked to Schaller like ASL signs—did not occur “in the flow of recursive consensual co-ordinations of actions between organisms in recurrent interactions.” That is how Schaller uses names, and that is why for her TREE was a name, but it was nothing to Ildefonso. He did not behave as if it had particular significance, and in his copying it often did not stand out in any way from other movements.

...sounds, marks or movements do not constitute words by themselves, and sequences of sounds, marks or movements do not constitute languaging. Language occurs only in the flow of recursive consensual co-ordinations of actions between organisms in recurrent interactions ...⁴

³ Pinker, 1994, 68.

⁴ Maturana, 1988, 47.

Words are not words and ASL signs are not ASL signs for a particular person, if they do not arise in the right sort of interaction. The movements that Schaller demonstrated only became ASL signs for Ildefonso once he began to interact with her in a reciprocal back and forth way. That was when he began to use the movements as signs. This leads me to feel that we can equate reciprocal back and forth interaction with the recursive consensual co-ordinations of actions. That is what was happening as Ildefonso began to interact with Schaller in a different way.

10.1.3 What was the “Breakthrough?”

The “breakthrough” was different interaction but not, apparently, the right sort of interaction. What, then, was the “breakthrough,” which happened as Schaller performed the cat drama? It was so easy to see the highly charged emotional interaction as some sort of linguistic realisation for Ildefonso. After the “breakthrough” Schaller thought that Ildefonso had language at last, but his subsequent behaviour showed that he did not. Once we find out that nothing really comes of the “breakthrough” we have no good alternative explanation of it. All we can say is that the interaction was different. We now know that the requisite *conferring* for using names had not occurred at the time of the “breakthrough,” but that does not help us to understand what the “breakthrough” was all about.

The “breakthrough” certainly looks like a piece of co-ordinated action. Ildefonso pointed to or slapped objects, and Schaller responded with the appropriate ASL sign—*but Ildefonso made no ASL signs*. Ildefonso perhaps responded to some of what Schaller was doing at the time as she acted out the parts of student and teacher. It seems meaningless, however, to talk of Ildefonso’s interpretation, or to try and say what he understood. He certainly didn’t understand naming. Ildefonso just did what he did and that is all we can say.

10.1.4 Naming Happens

The first recursion of the co-ordination of actions from linguistic behaviour to languaging captures the transition that Ildefonso made in the classroom once Schaller stopped trying to give him the signs. As the interaction developed and a second-order

consensual domain was established, Ildefonso acquired the signs. According to Maturana's theory, this is exactly what we should expect.

Language as a domain of recursive consensual co-ordinations of actions does not operate with symbols, yet symbols arise in language as distinctions of relations of distinctions. Also, according to this, words are not symbolic entities, nor do they connote or denote independent objects. They are distinctions of consensual co-ordinations of actions. This is why sounds, marks, or movements do not constitute words by themselves, and sequences or groups of sounds, marks or movements do not constitute languaging. Language occurs only in the flow of recursive consensual co-ordinations of actions between organisms in recurrent interactions.⁵

The signs arise only as the actions are recursively co-ordinated. Signs and words are not something that languageless people can be shown or given. Movements or sounds *become* signs and words for living systems as those living systems, through their interaction, establish a second-order consensual domain. Ildefonso began to use ASL signs as he began to participate in the right sort of interaction, and the right sort of interaction was the dialogues. As Schaller and Ildefonso interact in that way, a second-order consensual domain is established. Participation in that sort of interaction is the real progress.

10.2 The First Recursion

The first recursion of the co-ordination of actions from linguistic behaviour to languaging is, I think, particularly relevant to the distinction between performer-audience interaction and reciprocal back and forth interaction. This is a very clear-cut way of expressing the point about recursion but I feel that it is not necessarily such a neat process.

There is some performer-audience interaction which, I feel, hints at recursion, but it is not easy to describe. In the co-ordinated action of a second-order consensual domain it appears that the members of that domain "see" the first-order co-ordinated action. The most obvious behavioural evidence is if they comment on it in some way. But it is not

⁵ Maturana, 1988, 47.

always easy to say what counts as a comment. What happens when recursion is just beginning, for instance? I will discuss what might be an example of recursive structural coupling, in the interaction of the languageless men.

Sometimes when a second-order consensual domain is well established the recursive interaction is not immediately obvious to those of us who expect to see the emergence of symbols. I have argued that languaging, for Ildefonso at least, does not always involve signs. His *miming* in the third dialogue has the same status as signs or words. Maturana says, “Language as a domain of recursive consensual co-ordinations of actions does not operate with symbols, yet symbols arise in language as distinctions of relations of distinctions.” But symbols, as we normally think of them, did not always arise as Ildefonso’s interaction with Schaller became enlanguaged interaction. In the third dialogue—the argument about paying for the burrito—as much of the argument was mimed as was signed.

10.2.1 The First Recursion Begins

As discussed in Chapter 8 and Chapter 9, only Ildefonso is described doing something which looks like a comment on the interaction of the languageless men. He “comments” during the older man’s description of farm work. Ildefonso interrupts the story to add “a better description of oxen and the yoke,” and then lets the man continue. The older man merely gives a description. Ildefonso, on the other hand, comments on that description in a way that looks like a description of a description. He is not saying anything about oxen, he is saying something about the description—“here’s a better description of oxen.” The languageless men do not appear to comment on any of their own performances, and there is no response to Ildefonso’s comment. There is no indication that Ildefonso’s comment is “seen,” by the languageless men, as a better alternative. Indeed, there is no indication that Ildefonso’s comment is “seen” as anything.

They complained of the worst jobs they had in Mexico. The older man hated plowing and began to describe oxen. Ildefonso interrupted and added a better description of oxen and the yoke, then let him finish his description. “Here, good,” he [the older man] signed by pointing to the ground, then giving the OK sign used by hearing people. He pointed

to his back, aching under a plow, then repeated that it was better here on this side of the border.⁶

It looks to me as if performer-audience interaction is the co-ordination of actions and no more. That is what all the turn-taking and performing is, a kind of interlocked conduct, or consensual co-ordination of action. The languageless men are interacting in a consensual domain, their behaviour is linguistic behaviour, but they are not languaging. They do not behave as if they “see” interaction, they just do it. Ildefonso’s comment about the description is so different from what the other men do. The comment shows how “the components of the consensual behavior [the older man’s description] are recursively combined in the generation of new components of the consensual domain ...[Ildefonso’s comment on the description].”⁷ That is something the languageless men just cannot do, or so I claimed.

Maturana’s account of recursive perturbation as a gradual and natural process, suggests that there will not be a clear demarcation between reciprocal back and forth interaction and performer-audience interaction. For example, if we return to the evening with the languageless men one incident is not so clearly performer-audience interaction. During the telling of one story, the youngest man “is given the opportunity” to participate by writing the date on his arm. When the young man writes the date on his arm it seems he is merely giving a performance, and I described it earlier as a sort of “cameo spot.” Neither the young man nor the story teller who turned to him understands what the date is.

During one story about arrest and deportation, the storyteller turned to the youngest, who wrote on his forearm: 1986. No one, including himself, knew what that meant, but he had figured out that it worked as an answer to certain questions. He had three different years associated with three different events relating to border-crossings or arrests and proudly displayed his arm as a chalk board when the moment seemed right. Everyone showed great respect and admiration for his skill.⁸

⁶ Schaller, 1995, 184.

⁷ Maturana, 1978, 50.

⁸ Schaller, 1995, 183.

When the storyteller turned to the young man he was not leaving the stage to allow another person to perform. It is not clear from what Schaller says whether or not the storyteller is alluding in some way to a particular performance that the young man is known for. If the storyteller is making that sort of allusion then, on Maturana's account, we have a second-order recursion here, even though we see no evidence that the men understand what the performance is.

Maturana's description of languaging as the second-order consensual co-ordination of action says nothing about "understanding." He no longer talks in terms of describing, and says nothing about other linguistic activities like commenting, naming, or explaining. Mingers says that this is to emphasise his view that "language is ... always an activity embedded in the ongoing flow of actions."⁹

I now think that when the storyteller turns to the youngest man, and the youngest man responds by writing the date on his arm, that we might be observing a second order recursion. We could fill it out by using the expression, "Show them that thing you do on your arm when you meet the border guards." If this even hints at what is happening then the storyteller and the youngest man both "see" the thing done on the arm. They are both recursively perturbed by some previous co-ordinated action. What is more, their present co-ordinated action seems to be about that thing that they "see," but do not appear to understand. Thus they are recursively reciprocally structurally coupled. That is all we need for languaging to occur.

If no one understands what the young man's performance means, and there is not generally reciprocal back and forth interaction between these men, it appears that a very early distinction is being made in second-order co-ordinated action. Something is being picked out, it looks as if the two men involved are interacting recursively, but we cannot say what, if anything, they might understand. Schaller says that the youngest man "proudly displayed his arm as a chalk board when the moment seemed right," when he was confronted by the border guards. Without negating the possibility of recursive

⁹ Mingers, 1995, 79.

interaction, we might ask whether this particular incident, “the cameo spot,” is another occasion when the moment seems right.

That is not the way we usually think of linguistic responses. There is a greater sense of intentionality in the way we talk about languaging activities. Languaging isn’t just something that we do when the moment seems right. If we look back to the third dialogue, however—the argument over paying for the burritos—there was another example of interacting without understanding.

“Put your money in your pocket for later,” I mimed and signed, then realized he didn’t understand “later.” “Burrito buy I,” I insisted.

“No!” his fingers snapped; “God, friend. Burrito buy I.”

Did I see that correctly? Not only had he signed his most complicated thought to date, without any mime, but “God”? Where did he find that sign, and how did he leap to such an incredible guess on how to use it? He connected God and friend and placed them above burrito buying. His anger was that of a religious instructor. I was properly rebuked for my concern for the material world. Who had more money was trivial. Buying a burrito was only significant as an act of friendship.

Later he asked me what did the sign “God” mean, specifically. He had guessed correctly that it stood for unseen greatness, apart from and more important than the tangible stuff in front of us.¹⁰

Schaller assumes that Ildefonso has some understanding of GOD, or that he guessed something about it. Later Ildefonso asks what it means and we cannot be sure what he understands by it. Did it just slip out? Or did the moment seem right?

When children start using words we feel that they understand them but it is not easy to say what extent they understand them. It is recognised that it may take children years to fully understand some of the words that they use.¹¹ Ildefonso’s use of GOD shows recursive interaction in which a word is used but not, apparently understood. The incident of the date on the arm shows, perhaps, recursive interaction beginning in an environment where there are no words.

¹⁰ Schaller, 1995, 111.

¹¹ Crystal, 1987, 245.

Thus there no quick realisation or understanding that comes with recursive co-ordinations of action. Languageing begins as naturally and gradually as any other sort of adaptation. This is as natural as Virgil interacting visually with his environment. As second-order consensual co-ordinations of action become more developed, the people involved in that interaction become enlanguageed. Whether it is in an environment with ASL signs, as it was for Ildefonso, or an environment without ASL signs, as it was for the languageless men, recursive reciprocal structural coupling develops, and that is the basis or foundation of languageing.

Language must arise as a result of something else that does not require denotation for its establishment, but gives rise to language with all its implications as a trivial necessary result. This fundamental process is ontogenic structural coupling, which results in the establishment of a consensual domain.¹²

10.2.2 Languageless Miming and Enlanguageed Miming

Schaller and Ildefonso both used a mixture of ASL and mime in the third dialogue, and this is clearly enlanguageed interaction so far as both of them are concerned. Schaller said that when she met Ildefonso he had no language and he used mime and gestures to communicate. She also says that the languageless men use mime and gesture. Schaller never explicitly makes a distinction between enlanguageed miming and languageless miming. What then, is the status of the mimed parts of the third dialogue compared to the miming of the languageless men?

I think this is an important distinction to understand because it has practical implications. In both instances we, and most hearing people, just see deaf people miming, and we make no distinction. Others, however, particularly Deaf people, do make a distinction. Schaller, citing the results of a survey, notes that even hearing rehabilitation counsellors who work with the deaf do not tend not to see this distinction.

Most of the rehabilitation counselors had met between two and ten languageless deaf adults in their work, sometimes more. Three counselors, however, said they had never met a languageless deaf adult, even after years of working with deaf clients. These three counselors are all hearing. Every Deaf counselor had met at least one

¹² Maturana, 1978, 50.

languageless deaf person. It is possible that one or all of these hearing counselors had met a languageless deaf person but hadn't differentiated between spontaneous gestures and mime and the ASL of a non-English speaking Deaf client. (Many hearing people sign manually coded English and cannot understand ASL.)¹³

Schaller's comment about the differentiation is, I feel, slightly misleading. If the counsellors did not respond with ASL then a Deaf client with no English might resort to spontaneous gestures and mime, but this would be enlanguaged miming. The important distinction is between the miming of those who are enlanguaged and the miming of those who are not.

Ildefonso's attempts to answer Schaller's question about his thinking before language, show, I think, that he wants her to see a different kind of interaction. This difference is very difficult to describe when we talk in terms of what is used. Ildefonso used mime in the fully fledged argument of the third dialogue and the languageless men use mime. Those fluent in ASL often resort to spontaneous gestures and invented movements, to communicate with hearing people who know no signed language. The languageless men also use spontaneous gestures and invented movements. Nevertheless, the distinction comes through in Schaller's account. Maturana's theory gives us a way of describing it.

The miming of the languageless men is, in general, linguistic behaviour but not languaging. It is the consensual co-ordination of action. The languageless men have established a first-order consensual domain. On the other hand, Ildefonso's enlanguaged miming, for example, in the third dialogue, is the consensual co-ordination of consensual co-ordinations of action. He is interacting in a second-order consensual domain. In that interactive sense his enlanguaged miming is equivalent to the ASL signs. That equivalence is hard to see if we focus on what is used in the interaction. We might say that in his mimed enlanguaged interactions, Ildefonso uses the *very same*

¹³Schaller, 1995, 190.

sort of thing that the languageless men use. This is a mistake, and Maturana helps us to say why it is a mistake.

We can see the difference if we take an example of mime from each. One of the languageless men mimes a hard farming job that he did in Mexico, and his mime amounts to a mime of his hard farming job in Mexico. Ildefonso mimes mowing a lawn and getting some money, and his mime amounts to a mime of why he can pay for the burritos. He is not telling Schaller about the time he mowed lawns and got paid. From the perspective of their second-order consensuality, Ildefonso's mime is arguing.

Given Maturana's account of languaging, Ildefonso's miming in the third dialogue has the same status as his ASL. The miming of the languageless men does not have that status. If we think of these as the same sort of thing—it's all miming—then we may miss the all important difference between languageless interaction and enlanguaged interaction.

10.3 Ildefonso's Dissatisfaction

One of the most interesting parts of Schaller's account is the way in which Ildefonso goes about answering her questions about his thinking before language. Ildefonso was apparently dissatisfied with his first attempts to show her languageless interaction. Two particular points come to our attention in the unsatisfactory answers. The first is that interaction involving an enlanguaged person like Elena as a participant, does not show languageless interaction. Ildefonso never pointed that interaction out to Schaller at all. The second is, that someone who used to use the mime and gesture system, namely Ildefonso, cannot be a participant either, if Schaller is to see languageless interaction. Ildefonso said as much in his remarks to Elena, and in his explanation to Schaller.

Ildefonso complained to Elena that I was not getting the full and complete picture of how they used to communicate. "This isn't right," he said. "She's not seeing it."¹⁴

¹⁴ Schaller, 1995, 179.

He turned to Elena and repeated his earlier complaint. He really wanted me to see the equivalent of a video showing Ildefonso and Mario growing up. He turned to me and apologized, explaining he could no longer gesture and mime with his brother the way he used to. He knew too much ASL. Language had changed him and his thinking.¹⁵

If we now think of what is going on in terms of consensual co-ordinations of action it seems clear that it is not just a matter of looking to see what Mario is doing. Co-ordinated interaction between Mario and Elena is what *they* are doing, and because Elena is enlanguaged she is bringing her experience of recursive structural coupling to the interaction. How does that bear on Mario's behaviour? I will look at the interaction at the restaurant between Elena and Mario.

10.3.1 *At the Restaurant*

When we first looked at Ildefonso's first two attempts to answer Schaller we just had to accept Ildefonso's dissatisfaction, but now I think that Maturana's theory gives us a way of explaining why the interaction is not *languageless* interaction.

Some of the things that Schaller says in her description of the interaction between Mario and Elena at the restaurant, might be taken as evidence that Mario is not languageless. I think this would be a hasty judgment, and maybe a mistaken one—just like the judgments about the significance of the “breakthrough.” Schaller does use expressions which suggest that Mario may not be languageless. However, at no time does Schaller herself seem to doubt that Mario is languageless.

Elena asked Mario about his new job, using mime and some strange signs. I understood most of the conversation because at least 80 percent was mime. Mario described opening a door, rubbed his arms as if freezing, and mimed stacking cartons or pies or something flat onto shelves while he shivered.¹⁶

¹⁵ Schaller, 1995, 179.

¹⁶ Schaller, 1995, 176.

I turned to watch Elena and Mario. As I studied their gestural conversation, I could tell Ildefonso was studying me. He looked from their conversation to me and constantly checked to see if I needed anything interpreted. Mario described a time when someone gave him some marijuana. To show the results, he squeezed his head while crossing his eyes and sticking out his tongue. Then he moved his hands, still in the shape of his head, and mashed the imaginary head while shaking his own.

The subject changed, and I picked up something about a child. I thought I saw Mario putting imaginary rings on. He was either saying that he was married or perhaps referring to his wife. I interrupted and asked, in mime, if he had children. Mario grinned broadly, either glad of the opportunity to share his good news or happy that he had understood my sign/mime communication. He held up three fingers and widened his smile. Elena had a picture of the oldest. He looked exactly like Ildefonso. Even Mario agreed. They were handsome children, and I signed “beautiful,” which Mario seemed to understand. He nodded enthusiastically. I asked him if I could have one. He shook his head with a definite, “No.” I signed “share.” He immediately looked at Ildefonso, so I explained the sign by holding up three fingers with my left hand. With my right I patted the tops of three small heads and pointed to my fingers. I gave one finger-child to Elena, one to him, and kept one for myself. “Share,” I repeated. He laughed and protested. Holding his hands over his heart he stooped over and showed a pained and saddened face. Immediately, he laughed and returned to his proud smile.¹⁷

Elena asked Mario if he wanted sugar in his tea. He didn’t understand. Ildefonso held his fist to the side of his mouth as if holding a stick and gnawed at the air with his teeth. Mario nodded instantly and looked at the sugar. Ildefonso explained that they had worked together picking sugar cane when they were young and used to chew on it during breaks. Their way of eating sugar cane became their common sign for sugar.¹⁸

The waiter came with the bill, and Elena insisted on treating. Ildefonso signed “Thank you,” nudged Mario and signed “Thank you” again slowly, towards Elena but looking at Mario. Mario stared blankly at Ildefonso. I remembered that look so well. Ildefonso tried again.¹⁹

¹⁷ Schaller, 1995, 177-178.

¹⁸ Schaller, 1995, 179-179.

¹⁹ Schaller, 1995, 179.

As Schaller describes it, the interaction with Mario at the restaurant is a strange mixture of success and failure. One thing which is surprising is the strange contrast between Schaller's success and Ildefonso's failure in communicating with Mario. Schaller was able to develop the communication about sharing the children. Ildefonso was not able to get Mario to thank Elena—he was not even able to get Mario to perform the gesture. Ildefonso had also been unable to get Mario to use or understand namesigns.

Let us look at some of the things Schaller says. Mario “described” opening a door. Elena “asked” Mario about his job. Elena and Mario had a “gestural conversation.” Ildefonso might be needed to “interpret.” Mario might have been “referring” to his wife. Mario was perhaps glad to “share” his good news, or he “understood” Schaller's sign/mime communication. Mario “agreed” his son looked like Ildefonso. Schaller “explained” sharing the children to Mario, and he appeared to understand. Mario “protested” when he understood. Mario and Ildefonso have a “common sign” for sugar.

We must remember that Schaller's perspective on what is going on, is from a higher order of consensual domain. Maturana says that from the perspective of a second-order consensual domain, certain co-ordinated action is operationally a description. From the perspective of a third-order consensual domain it is explicitly a description. When Schaller says, then, that Mario described opening a door, that is her perception of what Mario does. We would need to look at more of Mario's behaviour to see if it is describing from his perspective. I do not think that we have enough material here to do that, so we cannot say for sure whether there is good evidence that Mario is languaging.

There is, however, a more significant issue to note about Mario's behaviour at the restaurant. All the interaction Schaller describes here, is between Mario and an enlanguaged person. How does that influence Mario's participation? I will consider this by discussing questions and conversation.

10.3.2 Questions

Did Elena “ask” Mario about his job using mime and gesture? That is not clear. Remember how cleverly Schaller elicited a response from Ildefonso in the first

dialogue—the DUMB ME dialogue—Ildfonso indicated that, as a small child, he begged on the street. “Ask” can be a misleading term if we are interested in characterising that interaction. If Elena elicits a response we may describe it as a question and answer and miss something interesting. What was particularly different about the DUMB ME dialogue was the way that Schaller enticed Ildfonso into responding, by pretending that she couldn’t quite see the child, Ildfonso, and by miming some activities in context.

Question forms as described in relation to language acquisition, say nothing about this sort of enticement. There is nothing about ingenious or circuitous ways of eliciting a response. What we can say about ingenious or circuitous ways of eliciting a response, is that they are the sort of behaviour in which reciprocal back and forth interaction begins. Furthermore, it is the sort of behaviour in which recursive structural coupling takes place for Ildfonso in the following way.

In the DUMB ME dialogue it is not a child that Schaller has difficulty seeing, it is the *previously mimed or described* entity that she has trouble seeing. She is not describing how she once had difficulty seeing a child, this is not just a story now, this is recursive behaviour about a story. When Ildfonso mimes that he begged, his behaviour is recursive behaviour about a story. He did not merely relate an incident from his life—a story about begging—in the way that the languageless men related incidents from their lives. His response required that he be perturbed by the events of his childhood *and* by the interaction with Schaller, watching her initial story, *and* that these perturbations generate conduct which was a further behavioural component of their co-ordinated interaction. In this way there was recursion of the co-ordinated action.

From the perspective of Ildfonso’s response, Schaller’s story was operationally a description of his childhood. If that had not been the case he would not have known what Schaller was having trouble seeing. He does, however, know what Schaller has trouble seeing. She has trouble seeing something in the story she told him. He responded as if her story was a description. This sort of interaction is interaction in a second-order consensual domain. This is perhaps the sort of situation Mario was in when interacting with Elena.

In contrast to the interaction about Mario's job—the apparent “asking”—Ildefonso and Elena were both unable to ask Mario what sort of food he wanted.

Elena asked what kind of food Ildefonso wanted: Mexican? Chinese? Italian? Ildefonso shrugged and said it didn't matter. Mario looked confused. He didn't understand any of the signs. Elena began to describe the different foods, but Ildefonso interrupted. He could see that Mario didn't understand the descriptions. He told her what kind of food Mario liked. They decided he might like to try Vietnamese food.... [they go to the restaurant] Elena described different dishes to Mario in mime, with occasional help from Ildefonso. Mario motioned that she should decide.²⁰

It didn't matter to Ildefonso what they ate, so he might have asked Mario what he would like, but he didn't. Mario is not unfamiliar with food even though he doesn't eat in restaurants, yet no one asks him what he might like. Mario shows no understanding before they choose the restaurant, he is strangely outside that interaction, and Ildefonso does not draw him in. In the restaurant nobody is described asking Mario what he would like. We cannot be sure Mario understands that anything like “asking what people would like to eat” is going on—of course, maybe he does understand and just can't make up his mind.

I think we need to interpret Schaller's description with care, that is, we cannot assume that it is a simple matter to ask Mario anything. Recursive co-ordinated interaction develops like any other adaptation, and Virgil showed us that it did not happen across categories like “seeing objects.” The interaction between Schaller and Ildefonso in the DUMB ME dialogue, and the interaction between Mario and Elena when she “asks” about his job, illustrates the appearance of recursive structural coupling. It does not illustrate that Ildefonso or Mario have learnt to answer questions. It does not illustrate that they have answered one question in the usual sense of answering questions. In particular, in the case of Mario, no other questioning is described. How much of the appearance of “asking” is due to Elena being enlanguaged?

²⁰ Schaller, 1995, 176.

10.3.3 Conversation

Elena and Mario are described as having a gestural conversation. How should we evaluate Mario's part in this? Is he participating in a conversation in the way that enlanguaged people do? We know, from Ildefonso's attempts to answer Schaller's question about thinking and language, that the interaction between an enlanguaged person and a languageless person does not show languageless interaction. Maturana can help us to see why this might be different. Elena and Mario are members of a consensual domain and so their interaction is co-ordinated action. Elena, however, is a member of higher orders of that consensual domain. She interacts recursively within that consensual domain to a much higher degree than Mario.

I do not want to say that Mario does not interact recursively at all. Once a languageless person begins to interact with an enlanguaged person new co-ordinated action begins to develop, *necessarily*. It is just as hard to say what that gradual development is in interpersonal interaction, as it was to say what sort of development took place as Virgil repeatedly traversed his canonical line. Schaller said that in her early dialogues with Ildefonso they always improved. Those dialogues were never wasted experiments, even when they failed to convey the intended message. I have likened that claim also to Virgil always improving as he traversed his canonical line, even though he did not appear to see anything. The development of recursive co-ordinated actions is just as gradual.

If this process leads to a consensual domain, it is, in the strict sense, a conversation, a turning around together in such a manner that all participants undergo nontrivial structural changes until a behavioral homomorphism is established and communication takes place. These precommunicative or anti communicative interactions that take place during a conversation, then, are creative interactions that lead to novel behavior. The conditions under which a conversation takes place (common interest, spatial confinement, friendship, love or whatever keeps the organisms together), and which determine that the organisms should continue to interact until a consensual domain is established, constitute the domain in which selection for the ontogenic structural coupling takes place. Without them, a consensual domain could never be established, and communication, as the coordination of

noncreative ontogenically acquired modes of behavior, would never take place.²¹

The process in which structural changes lead to co-ordinated actions, is as orderly as any natural process. In this process there are “precommunicative or anti communicative interactions.” These are not in themselves communication. But if the interaction continues under the right conditions, they lead to novel behaviour in which languaging eventually occurs. Maturana gives us a way of characterising what occurs during that process—in terms of structural change, reciprocal structural coupling, and recursion. This characterisation will not be satisfactory to those who want to know whether Mario is conversing with Elena—“Yes,” or “No.”

Maturana points out that adaptation, as structural change, is a necessary outcome of any interaction. Some sort of adaptation cannot fail to happen when a languageless person like Mario interacts with an enlanguaged person like Elena. Because of the circumstances of this interaction, I presume a second-order consensuality is established as subtly as Virgil’s capacity to see his way around. It may not be possible to say with any certainty when this happens, nor to say what co-ordinated action is recursive and what is not recursive. According to Maturana, the development of languaging is essentially like any other adaptive development.

We must be careful here not to think of enlanguaged people in the environment *determining* Mario’s development. Living systems, as structure determined systems, determine what will or will not perturb them, and what possible structural changes they may undergo. But living systems cannot determine the *actual* perturbations that occur. Mario’s *potential* for being enlanguaged is determined by his structure, but the *actual* historical sequence of structural change depends on the perturbations which arise in his environment. Thus we may see very different behaviour as he interacts with Elena from when he interacts with his languageless friends.

The richness attained by a language throughout its history, therefore, depends necessarily both on the diversity of behaviours that can be

²¹ Maturana, 1978, 54-55.

generated and distinguished by the organisms that participate in the consensual domain, and on the actual historical realization of such behaviours and distinctions.²²

Thus, in Mario's case the actual interaction differs when he interacts with Elena because the perturbations that arise are different from the perturbations which are possible when there are only languageless people in the environment. I suspect that Ildefonso sees this difference. He does not point to Mario interacting with Elena when attempting to answer Schaller's question. In everyday terms, Elena, as an enlanguaged person used to interacting with people like Mario, can elicit responses, as Schaller did in the first dialogue. The interaction then looks conversation-like because of Elena's own enlanguaged behaviour, and because of the way that she can coax responses from Mario.

Nor is it just a matter of Elena eliciting responses from Mario. Elena herself responds as an enlanguaged person. What Mario does might look quite different if no-one responded to him. If Elena picks up on what Mario does and then works to elicit another response the interaction becomes reciprocal back and forth interaction through her actions. By thinking of Elena's interaction as recursive to a higher level than Mario's we can see how the total interaction is not like the interaction between two languageless people. That was the very thing that Ildefonso tried to set up in the incident with the kitchen hand—interaction between two individuals, neither of who participate in a second-order consensual domain.

Ildefonso was not satisfied that his own interaction with Mario showed languageless interaction either. And he said language had changed him and his thinking. Ildefonso is no longer just a performer. When he explains that "she's not seeing it," this is not just a matter of Ildefonso being unable to get Mario to interact, Ildefonso himself realises he cannot do it anymore. He cannot become a languageless person in Mario's environment.

²² Maturana, 1978, 51.

10.4 Deaf Issues

I will look briefly at only three issues raised in Chapter 1—oralism mainstreaming and home signs. Maturana's theory of language suggests that the Deaf are justified in condemning oralism as policy for educating all deaf children. They are justified in having reservations about mainstreaming even where a sign language interpreter is present. I will look at home signs because of the claims the languageless men may have developed their own home sign system.

10.4.1 *Oralism*

One of the most telling sentences in the oralist's credo states:

He [the oralist] knows the price that teaching speech to the deaf demands, not only from the teacher, but also from the pupil. But, he believes it is one that can, and should be paid.²³

Why should any child have to pay a price for becoming a member of a consensual domain? Why should something as natural as recursive reciprocal structural coupling, something which happens necessarily in interpersonal interaction, come at a high price. This price cost John and Diana dearly.²⁴ John spent hours trying to learn to say "s," "g" and "h," sounds he could not hear. Ildefonso was not able to use CAT, TREE, DESK CHAIR. The ASL signs were no use to Ildefonso in the absence of conferring. We cannot now begin to imagine how John could have done anything with "s," "g" and "h."

John's structure determined his domain of perturbations. The actual perturbations which occur, however, depend on the environment. For John, oralism resulted in an environment which eliminated, or at least restricted, the very things to which he could respond, and he was expected to respond to, or be perturbed by, things which were not in his domain of perturbations, for example, sounds. The visual perturbations that he had to rely on, like lipreading, did not give rise to the sort of distinctions he needed to be able to make in order to co-ordinate his actions with others. Under these circumstances, establishing a consensual domain, especially one in which languaging

²³ Di Carlo, 1964, 115.

²⁴ Chapter 1, 1.3.1.

arises, was next to impossible. This is what results from the first two points in the oralist's credo.

1. Deaf children should be taught lipreading and speech from the beginning.
2. Deaf children must be in an exclusively oral environment.²⁵

What happened when the deaf child was forbidden to sign or gesture? The living system's natural response was suppressed.²⁶ Maturana points out that the richness of a consensual domain depends on the degree of interaction. What happened in strictly oral classes was that the degree of interaction was severely restricted. The environment was restricted and the child's responses were restricted. There was no chance of a consensual domain being established such that languaging could develop naturally. The oralists just didn't see that, in the case of profoundly deaf children, they were inhibiting the very thing they sought to develop, namely language.

3. Systematic signing must be eliminated during the critical period of speech and language development.²⁷

For profoundly deaf children, then oralism did not foster the sort of interaction in which languaging happens. Children like John and Diana had little chance of becoming members of a consensual domain and participating in higher levels of recursive reciprocal structural coupling.

10.4.2 Mainstreaming

The policy of mainstreaming a few, or sometimes just one, profoundly deaf child in a hearing school, but allowing them to use sign language, results in a different sort of restriction. In this situation a deaf child may use sign language but few others in the environment do, and often few want to learn. Lyneen and Craig felt lonely and isolated

²⁵ Di Carlo, 1964, 115.

²⁶ For me, the naturalness of signing for Deaf people is embodied in the remark of a Deaf woman remembering her schooling. It went something like: "We weren't allowed to sign in class, but my hands would come up all by themselves." Oralism is not like telling a noisy hearing child not to talk so much. Oralism is like telling a hearing child not to communicate by talking.

²⁷ Di Carlo, 1964, 115.

for this reason.²⁸ Again the interaction is restricted, but this time it is because the other living systems do not interact with the deaf child.

Pivac pointed out the importance of mixing with other children in building communication and language. She says the children are learning from each other when they are educated together, and they can build on that.

Other hearing-disabled children can actually communicate and mix with other children but for the deaf child communication is very hard. That child is lost within a hearing environment, [the authorities (?)] think it is a freedom environment but it isn't. But if that child is with other deaf children there is more freedom. There's freedom of communication, of expression. So it's really opposed to what the government says is the least restrictive environment. [i.e. mainstreaming] I'm opposed to that [mainstreaming]. If deaf children mix with other deaf children they build more communication and build more language. They develop more language because they're learning from each other and they have more support from each other. And that is why I'd like to see the children together and educated together so they can build on that; ...²⁹

The *importance* of the incidental interaction is sometimes overlooked by the hearing, but the deaf do not overlook it, because in a mainstreamed situation they so often miss out on this interaction. Even with an interpreter in the classroom the deaf child misses out on casual remarks and incidental comments, because the interpreter does not usually interpret everything that goes on. This is not possible if more than on conversation is going on at a time. Maturana points to the importance of interaction to the richness of the language that develops. He also says that *no* interaction is trivial when it leads to ontogenic structural coupling and a consensual domain. The interacting living systems “undergo nontrivial structural changes” at *every* interaction.³⁰ This includes the casual remarks and incidental interaction.

²⁸ Chapter 1, 1.5.2.

²⁹ Pivac, 1993, 4.

³⁰ Maturana, 1978, 54-55.

The worst situation is a combination of oralism and mainstreaming. Pivac says that at the Deaf Club she meets people who feel lost in the hearing world and lost in the Deaf world.

...because many times when I go to the Deaf Club or whatever, I see a lot of deaf who were mainstreamed, who are oral, who have very poor English - they can't communicate, they feel very lost in the hearing world and in the deaf world. When that person mixes with other deaf they start to develop things but it's too late, it should have been done in their youth. And you hear many sad stories and many people don't know, have never heard these sad stories.³¹

Initially it was not clear how we could think of these people who felt lost in the hearing world and lost in the Deaf world. It seems to me now that these are people who participate in limited consensual domains. Once a consensual domain is established it may become very rich and involved depending on the complexity and the degree of the interactions. The richness of human languaging comes with recursion. That is, languaging becomes more rich and involved with each recursion. Maturana says, however, that a first-order consensual domain may be rich too.

A domain of first-order linguistic co-ordinations of actions can be very rich and involved, depending on the complexity of the history of recurrent interactions in which it takes place...³²

The languageless men showed little behavioural evidence of recursion, but from Schaller's description, their first-order consensual domain seemed very rich. The people that Pivac refers to may have a limited scope in their second-order consensual domain or they may have limited recursion. I do not think we can say which, without examining their interaction in the way that we were able to examine the interaction of the languageless men.

10.4.3 Home Signs

I will briefly discuss two points about home signs. Firstly, I will look at the claim that home signs develop in the absence of a conventional language model. Home signs

³¹ Pivac, 1993, 4.

³² Maturana, 1988, 48.

develop in households where parents do not sign but do, in fact, gesture with their children.³³ Goldin-Meadow says that in this situation “language-like properties can develop in the absence of a conventional model.”³⁴ Secondly, why did the languageless men *not* develop home signs? They were not forbidden to mime and gesture, and they communicated with each other.

I will begin with what Goldin-Meadow says about home sign gesture systems. If children are allowed to gesture freely when communicating with hearing members of their family, they develop and modify their own gestures. As a rule, the child is always more proficient than the parent at using the gestures. The child uses longer gesture strings and consistent linguistic features. The parents on the other hand, use the gestures as “an adjunct to speech” and their gesturing does not have the language-like features of the child’s gesturing.

Goldin-Meadow notes that in cases of extreme deprivation children do not develop language, so she assumes that although a conventional language model may not be necessary, it is necessary to have someone to communicate with.

Thus, language learning is not infinitely robust and although it may be necessary to have a language model to develop the rudiments of a linguistic system, it does appear to be essential to have another human to communicate with³⁵

Goldin-Meadow concludes that the language-like properties which appear, are basic for any system of human communication. These properties do not appear in the parents’ gestures, therefore we cannot classify the parents’ gestures as a communication system. Parental gestures are instead, an adjunct to their communication system, speech. Since the child cannot access the communication system of the parents, the child is not exposed to a conventional language model.

Properties displayed under such extreme conditions are evidently among the most basic and indispensable for a structured system of

³³ Chapter 1, 1.6.4.

³⁴ Goldin-Meadow, 1993, 64.

³⁵ Goldin-Meadow, 1993, 81.

human communication, and they should spontaneously appear in any deliberate communication of meaning. That these same resilient properties are not systematically found in the spontaneous gestures accompanying the speech of both hearing children and hearing adults underscores (and continues to clarify by contrast) the language-like nature of the deaf children's gestures.

In sum, we have shown that a child who is not exposed to a usable conventional language model can create a communication system that is indeed language-like.³⁶

This suggests some innateness of language but since no language develops in the extreme cases of deprivation the child must at least be in the presence of others who communicate—it is not all innate.

Thus, although it may not be necessary for a child to be exposed to a language model in order to create a communication system with language-like structure, it may be necessary for that child to experience the human cultural world.³⁷

Goldin-Meadow further concludes that the techniques the deaf children use are fundamental to human *interaction*.

Thus the techniques necessary to communicate in language-like ways appear to be fundamental to human interaction – so fundamental that they can be reinvented by a child who has access to the artifacts of the of the modern world but not to a culturally shared linguistic system.³⁸

In the light of Ildefonso's development and Maturana's theory, it seems to me, that if we talk about a language model at all, it will be in terms of interaction. Human languaging is a particular sort of interaction, and whether the humans speak, or sign, or gesture, or mime, reciprocal back and forth interaction is displayed. What is used in the interaction is not important as long as we have the right sort of interaction. The deaf child who has the opportunity to become a participant in the right sort of interaction, develops home signs. *That is why the home signs develop.*

³⁶ Goldin-Meadow, 1993, 82.

³⁷ Goldin-Meadow, 1993, 82.

³⁸ Goldin-Meadow, 1993, 82.

When parents interact with their deaf child, the child participates directly in a particular sort of interaction. When the parents interact with each other, or other hearing people, the deaf child is in the presence of a particular sort of interaction—and the child may be subtly included in some of that interaction. When we focus on language as a particular kind of interaction instead of a symbol system, we see that home signs do not develop in the absence of a conventional language model. The deaf child who develops home sign is part of a languaging milieu. As the deaf child participates in this interaction he or she begins to participate in a second-order consensual domain. *That is why the home signs develop.*

Goldin-Meadow's final conclusion comes close recognising the fundamental nature of interaction—"Thus the techniques necessary to communicate in language-like ways appear to be fundamental to human interaction..." She still, however, retains the notion of language as something apart from the interaction, and as a system which we have invented and the child reinvents. According to Maturana, any human language, in the conventional sense, and that includes home sign, arises, or occurs, naturally as we interact in the way that the deaf child and the parents interact.

Language occurs only in the flow of recursive consensual co-ordinations of actions between organisms in recurrent interactions or, in the operation of a single organism, in the flow of actions that an observer may see in it as belonging to an implicit domain of consensual co-ordinations of actions with other organisms ...³⁹

What is interesting in the case of home sign, is the fact that there is successful communication despite the apparent disparity in what is used by the parents and by the child. The child is proficient and fluent in home sign and the parent is not; the child has a wider range of signs of the parent; the lexical scope of the child's signs differs from the scope of the parent's signs. All in all, in terms of what is used in the interaction, there is a poor fit between parent and child and it didn't generally improve over the time of the study. Goldin-Meadow says of one case:

One might have expected, over the two-year period during which we observed one of our deaf subjects and his mother, that the mother

³⁹ Maturana, 1988, 47.

would have adapted her gestures to her child's, since gesture was essentially the child's only means of communication. However, the fit between the child's gesture system and the mother's remained at the same low level throughout the two-year period.⁴⁰

I assume that nonetheless there was good communication between parent and child. As we look at some unusual situations of language development—or lack of development—we see again and again that the symbol system is not fundamental.

Why, then, did the languageless men not develop home sign in their interaction? Schaller has given us a basic reason for this and I think that more can be said about this situation. She points out that the languageless men had not known each other all their lives, and because they were poor, work and not socialising, dominated their lives. They did not have the opportunity to interact frequently.

They had met at different ages and could not interact frequently or regularly due to their poverty and the constant need to work or find work. Even Ildefonso and his brother were separated, first by their age difference of about seven years and then by Ildefonso's various jobs. As a result they had never had a chance to develop their gestural communication to the degree that some deaf siblings and children have. But what they lacked in standard vocabulary and structure, they tried to make up for in a tremendous variety of facial expressions and acting skills. Their repertoire of mimed stories seemed endless.⁴¹

I think that poverty is a significant factor for another reason. Keeping a family housed and putting food on the table can take a lot of time and energy. While there is no question of abuse, interacting with the children may have a low priority in circumstances where just feeding them is a major problem. Ildefonso, as a small child, begged on the street. Goldin-Meadow studied children whose parents had time to interact with their children. The development of home sign is not just a matter of some deaf children being thrown together. In fact the most common scenario is a single deaf child in a hearing family. The presence of enlanguaged individuals with time to interact makes a difference.

⁴⁰ Goldin-Meadow, 1993, 79.

⁴¹ Schaller, 1995, 185.

In the restaurant, Elena and Mario interacted in a way that was different from the languageless interaction. The importance of interaction with an enlanguaged person gets overlooked when we say things like, “in the absence of a conventional language model.” The presence of an interacting enlanguaged person makes the world of difference to a deaf child’s language development *it doesn’t matter what that enlanguaged person uses as long as there is interaction*. I think that may have been an important factor missing from the environment of the languageless men. That is why they did not develop home signs.

10.5 Conclusions

This investigation began with the provisional assumption that Ildefonso was a languageless man. It did not seem possible, at that time, to say anything specific about his languageless condition. It was not clear what he was doing when he communicated in mime and gesture. I have no doubts now that in an important sense, Ildefonso was languageless. In Schaller’s account it is possible to see the development of what I have called reciprocal back and forth interaction. A clear development in interaction occurred without a clear concurrent development of signs. Although he used some signs, Ildefonso still mimed and gestured, but his mime and gesture was now languaging. What was significant was the interactive development.

The focus on interaction is reinforced by Ildefonso’s attempts to answer Schaller’s questions about his thinking before language, and by her description of the interaction of the languageless men. The languageless interaction is clearly not reciprocal back and forth interaction. The notion of language as interaction has been explained in depth using Maturana’s theory of language. Using this theory, it becomes possible to say so much more about Ildefonso’s transition from languageless interaction to enlanguaged interaction.

When we see Ildefonso’s development in terms of recursive reciprocal ontogenic structural coupling, Schaller’s description of what happens is just what we would expect. We see why Ildefonso could not have learnt the names first, and we see why even the failed dialogues fostered progress. Some of what Schaller says is just an

expression of her hunches or of her gut feeling, for instance she thought of their interaction as a joint exploration. Maturana shows how appropriate these expressions are.

I found Sacks' account of Virgil a helpful guide, and, interestingly, the theory of ontogenic structural coupling links the acquisition of sight and the acquisition of language. Language, like seeing, is firmly rooted in the way that living systems operate and interact. This does not mean that Maturana's theory dispenses with the notion of language as a symbol system. Maturana just says language is not *fundamentally* a symbol system. His theory shows us how the notion of language as a symbol system arises in out interactions.

My interest in languagelessness did not begin with Ildefonso, it began with what the Deaf said about their education. Maturana furthers our understanding of these issues too. In particular, we can see how languagelessness is a real possibility in certain circumstances for some deaf children. I have not discussed these issues in depth, and I feel there is more that could be looked at. For instance, when some Deaf people, like Craig and Lyneen, learn to speak they wish they never had. It appears that their spoken interaction with the hearing is not satisfying, it is almost a burden to them. Why is that? I wonder whether the limited language that John and Diana, had was limited because there was a lack of recursion, and if so, to what degree.

My greatest curiosity is about Joe, the languageless young man who is described by Mckinney. Joe eventually learnt ASL. Maturana's theory suggests that perhaps Joe did not participate in the sort of *first-order* consensual domain in which language arises. This does not mean that Joe did not participate in other first-order consensual domains. Mckinney's study of Joe's case is from an anthropological perspective rather than from a psycholinguistic perspective. It thus provides the right sort of material—descriptions of interaction—for evaluating Joe's development in the light of Maturana's theory.

We can look at more than case studies in the light of Maturana's theory. Some philosophical writing on language is consistent with Maturana's way of thinking about

language. For example, Arthur Cody argues that we have no way of fixing our attention on a single action independently of a description of it—there are not two things, the action and the description.⁴² Furthermore he makes the same claim about objects.

I prefer to think that when we notice a material object we simultaneously and in the same deed achieve the power to describe it.⁴³

Describing is part of being enlanguaged. If languageless people cannot describe objects then they do not notice them. Of course, this cannot mean that they do not see anything. It does not mean that they are always tripping over things because they do not notice them. Languageless people see what is there to be seen. I take Cody to be saying that we see what we see, but if we make anything of what we see then that “making something of” is a description. If there is no description then we haven’t managed to make anything of what we see. This fits with what Maturana says about the first recursion from a first-order consensual domain to a second-order consensual domain—when describing, or languaging, arises, objects arise.

* * *

Thus, Maturana helps us to understand Ildefonso’s transition from languageless interaction to enlanguaged interaction, and to understand the interaction of the languageless men. Schaller’s description of Ildefonso and of his languageless friends provides us with ideal illustrations of Maturana’s account of the emergence of languaging. Finally with Maturana’s theory in mind it is possible to explore practical languaging cases further, for example, Joe. And it is possible to get a fresh outlook on philosophical ideas about language.

⁴² Cody, Arthur B., 1967, “Can a Single Action Have Many Different Descriptions?” *Inquiry*, 10, 164-180.

⁴³ Cody, Arthur B., 1967, “A Reply to Mr. Dowling?” *Inquiry*, 10, 449.

APPENDIX

Schaller, Susan, 1995, *A Man Without Words*, University of California Press,
Berkeley.

CHAPTER 17

I watched mesmerized as they communicated for hours in mime. To the right of Elena was a middle-aged man of slight build with wiry arms that had grown strong from years of hard labour and skin that was leathery from decades in the sun and wind. The others seemed to defer to him, and the fact that he sat in the only chair appeared to be evidence of their respect. On the bed closest to the door sat the youngest, who could have been in his twenties but looked like a teenager. His bright eyes looked out from a smooth boyish face. To his right stood Mario with his almost permanent grin. Between Mario and me was Ildefonso, looking like an umpire, surveying every player and checking every interaction meticulously.

With some help from Elena and Ildefonso, I was able to figure out the few standard signs the men in the room had developed. In the course of that evening, they used only about a dozen common signs. Every other gesture was either a spontaneous invention or used by only one individual. Any sign that became adopted by the entire group had to be repeated and tested in many different stories and tried by everyone. If they could not achieve total consensus, the sign was dropped or remained the (181) property of one person. I saw no common grammar or structure, but individuals developed their own systems for communicating ideas. Although the group may have understood an idea or a sign, it was never copied by anyone else. The youngest man used a forward rolling sign and then the same shape and movement backward, which I thought might suggest future and past, but my translation didn't quite work. Later, I realized that it didn't refer to time directly but acted as a fast-forward or reverse sign within the narrative. He wasn't saying "a little while later," but "moving ahead in the story."

I didn't dare blink, I was so afraid of missing something. I felt as if a time machine had flown me back to the Neanderthal Age, and I had the privilege of witnessing the invention of language. I

consciously stuffed every gesture and interaction into my memory. Each movement was an experiment. Would it survive to become a permanent symbol, or would it die with this “conversation”? Would that rolling movement become the beginning of tense? The beginnings of the collective human mind emerged before me.

No one had a name. The introductions consisted of descriptions. The older man introduced the youngest with a story of how his mother had died while he was still a baby. In essence, his name was the description *the motherless one*. It reminded me of the *Iliad*. Names are secondary or incorporated into a description. Hera is not called “Hera,” but “Hera with the white arms.”

They told many border-crossing and border-patrol stories. The most breathtaking adventure involved a horse chase. The older man not only played himself running and sweating, but also played both the mounted officer and the horse. These people all lived on the edge, (182) in constant fear of starvation. Their biggest challenge collectively and individually was figuring out how to stay on this side of the mysterious border, where jobs and food for their families existed. Each story contained a grain of information about how to enter white-man’s land or avoid deportation. No one could say to another, “Guess what I found out. In order to cross or stay legally ...” Instead, a story that contained some fact had to be told and retold until someone else either understood the significance or at least understood that the teller knew something important. Eventually, they all saw that little cards worked to repel green men. They showed me their collection. I think only one or two cards had any validity. The others were either inappropriate or out of date. All of them were treated like pieces of gold.

During one story about arrest and deportation, the storyteller turned to the youngest, who wrote on his forearm: 1986. No one, including himself, knew what that meant, but he had figured out that it worked as an answer to certain questions. He had three different years associated with three different events relating to border-crossings or arrests and proudly displayed his arm as a chalk board when the moment seemed right. Everyone showed great respect and admiration for his skill.

The same man seemed to have the best arithmetic skills; he had figured out addition. All of them could count but not as high and as fast as the youngest. They counted by holding their palms out and extending their fingers, then they pushed their hands slightly forward to indicate ten. They turned their hands around, palms facing in, and pushed forward for twenty, and so forth until the counter lost track. I asked the youngest how old he was. After Ildefonso’s translation, he answered, “ten-twenty-one.” (183)

“No, no, no,” corrected Ildefonso. “Try again,” he gestured.

“Ten-twenty-four, no, no, ten-twenty-five,” he asserted without conviction. Ildefonso gave him the OK sign. I wondered

whether Ildefonso had taught him that answer and if the man had any idea what he was counting.

Similarly, they all described the changing faces of the clock by counting out two pairs of numbers, ten-one, six. This meant 11:30. none of them knew hours and minutes or why 11:30 came twice a day, but they had managed to figure out when they had to be at work by memorizing the appropriate face of the clock. Numbers, a friend speculated after hearing this story, must be easier than other ideas, for we are all born with a dictionary for counting on our hands.

The men began to describe life in their Oaxaca villages. Different events and characters were acted out. One person started to describe someone or an incident as a way of saying, “remember when ...” Another would have to repeat the story, adding a few details to prove that he understood the right reference. They complained of the worst jobs they had in Mexico. The older man hated plowing and began to describe oxen. Ildefonso interrupted and added a better description of oxen and the yoke, then let him finish his description. “Here, good,” he signed by pointing to the ground, then giving the OK sign used by hearing people. He pointed to his back, aching under a plow, then repeated that it was better here on this side of the border.

I asked Ildefonso how many of the people came from the same village and how many in this circle of friends and relatives were deaf. Everyone watched Ildefonso in awe. His leap to language dumbfounded them. They (184) didn’t see language, of course, but they saw that he could communicate with outsiders, even people like Elena and me, who could talk without any hand movements. They considered him a genius and treated him with great respect. He had become the leader of the languageless clan. He addressed the group and asked how many people were like them in the village. He asked this by describing each person he could remember, including them, until someone understood and added one or two. They came up with about nine people, most of whom lived in or near the same village.

They had met at different ages and could not interact frequently or regularly due to their poverty and the constant need to work or find work. Even Ildefonso and his brother were separated, first by their age difference of about seven years and then by Ildefonso’s various jobs. As a result they had never had a chance to develop their gestural communication to the degree that some deaf siblings and children have. But what they lacked in standard vocabulary and structure, they tried to make up for in a tremendous variety of facial expressions and acting skills. Their repertoire of mimed stories seemed endless.

The youngest took the next turn on stage and began to describe his experience riding in an airplane. Everyone watched his

story of the trip with an intense interest. Since even getting fed regularly is a problem for this group, a trip in an airplane is a rare adventure indeed. First the young man and his outstretched arms became the airplane taking off with bumping and rough vibrations. Then with his hand he showed the airplane becoming small and flying into the sky. Then as passenger he sat snugly in a chair, watching the world and its inhabitants shrink to toy (185) size. He looked up and a woman stood waiting to serve him. He settled into the luxury of a king; the world at his feet and service at his side. Regardless of how many details and repetitions he added to his story, he never lost his fascinated audience for a moment. I could tell he would be applauded for telling this prize story for many years.

Later in the evening, the oldest described how his wife gave birth only to girls. He prayed and prayed for a boy, but the next baby was also a girl. He acted out a downcast and depressed man who went out with his drinking buddies for consolation. He mimed drinking and drinking until he was drunk. He straightened up at the end of the story, gave a mischievous smile, and laughed. He hadn't needed any language to pick up certain attitudes and behaviours in his culture, from the act of kneeling with his hands together and pleading to drowning his sorrows in a bar.

Someone described traveling to the mountains and seeing white cold snow, an unimaginable substance to a native of southern Mexico. Another, specifically addressing me, described the time Elena ate a corn patty spiked with their favorite hot peppers. She had to drink a gallon of water. Everyone laughed with particular delight at remembering that incident. The stories went on and on, about their various jobs, a murder they witnessed, their funniest relatives, and always one more border-crossing incident.

Their ability to communicate without language astounded me. Telling stories from their similar histories and reminding each other of shared experiences were not trivial pastimes. Their mimed skits made them human, (186) providing them with the only sense of community they could experience. Their storytelling was their main entertainment and education. Like the ancient Greeks telling and retelling the story of the Trojan war to keep their history and language alive, Ildefonso's friends repeated all of their stories to form their history and identity.

For a languageless tribe, repetition and audience participation are even more important than they were for the Greeks and are for present-day signing communities trying to preserve their language. This group is not passing on what is inherited; it is creating language. In order to understand one another, they all have to remember most of the details, especially chronology, for they can act only in the present tense. Each individual phrase or idiom is as important as the piece of information it carries, carefully examined

by the storyteller and the audience together. The ostracized humans from Oaxaca, without education and without encouragement, found each other and began to form their individual and collective histories, having no past before the start of their conscious lives. They were a first generation, creating their own culture and language much as our prehistoric ancestors must have done. Their repertoire of stories spanned decades, covered thousands of miles, included a huge cast of characters, and held the keys to their survival. I sat spellbound as I watched the evolution of language.

My sense of awe increased with each story as I took in the tremendous detail contained in a face, the twisting of three fingers, or one perfectly timed change in posture. Each man took a turn on stage—the middle of the room—and acted out events from his life—a bullfight in Mexico City, the tragic drought that ruined the family farm, the (187) repeated arrests by the border patrol. I could have watched their mimed conversations all night.

Ildefonso was proud of his languageless friends and very pleased to see me clearly mesmerized. He stood by my side, alternatively watching the skits and observing me and my expressions. Every two minutes he nudged me and asked, “Understand? Can you understand the gestures?” He looked at his brother and his friends, at where he used to stand, then back at me. His manners were serious and business-like. He was the ringmaster, keeping the rhythm, keeping the show moving. His eyes leaped back and forth from my eyes to the storytellers, measuring my response and their performance. “See? See? Did you see that? Look!” He constantly directed my gaze to make sure I didn’t miss a movement. He had to answer all those unanswerable questions I had asked years before. He wanted me to know who he had been, how he had lived, and his only experience with tribal life, with community. He knew who he was now and knew that what he had learned could not be appreciated without knowledge of where he had started.

“Look! Look! See? Do you see? It’s so different, so different, completely different,” he signed again and again. He looked at his friends, who stared back at him across the mysterious gulf that he had managed to cross. He was standing with his arms raised in the sign “different.” One pointing hand aimed above my head, to the world of language; the other pointed across the room to his friends. Ildefonso, the conductor, stood between the cacophony of tuning instruments and the beginning of music. His two hands remained in their sign, an eye’s echo, a whisper of awe—“different.” (188)

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