

# IRISH URBAN CULTURES

*edited by*  
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## 7 When women and men talk differently: language and policy in the Dublin deaf community

Barbara LeMaster

Anthropologists have traditionally studied exotic, marginal, and small-scale societies in rural settings. Because of this interest in the exotic, often non-Western "other", there has sometimes been an *anti*-urban attitude discernible among some anthropologists. In earlier research this resulted in a "bi-polar moralistic model", in which rural communities were associated with positive connotations, such as "community, natural, tribal society, moral, human in scale, personal, integrated, sacred"; urban communities, on the other hand, were viewed as "noncommunity, spurious, mass society, corrupt, dehumanized, anonymous, anomic, secular" (Gulick 1989: 8-10).

In spite of, or perhaps because of, this anthropological reductionism, many anthropologists have studied communities within cities. Many of these urban community studies failed to delineate the relationship between the local group and the larger society. When urban anthropology studies do not extend beyond the micro environment, little is learned about how people's local experiences affect, and are affected by, the urban context. Many urban anthropologists have made this criticism of anthropological studies, calling for a more holistic approach to the study of city life (Fox 1975; Gulick 1989; Mullings 1987).

This criticism does not negate the study of an individual community within a city as an appropriate focus for urban research. "Clearly there is no single 'correct' unit of analysis in urban anthropological research. There is always something to be learned anywhere" (Sanjek 1987: 165). What is important is what one does with the study, namely, to delineate the reciprocal relationship between the unit of analysis and macro-level structures and concerns, and to demonstrate how the "people being studied are also actors, making choices within a structure of constraints that then modify that structure" (Mullings 1987: 9). Some increasingly important arenas in cities,

within which actors attempt to modify structures beyond their local communities, are neighbourhoods and school systems (Ogbu 1987).

This chapter examines the relationship between deaf people in Dublin and educational policy.<sup>1</sup> Many deaf people moved to the city of Dublin from throughout Ireland (since 1846 for girls, and 1855 for boys) to attend sex-segregated residential schools for the deaf. These people tended to stay in Dublin upon leaving school, which resulted in a very large deaf population residing in the city.<sup>2</sup> Although there has never been a census taken of the number of deaf people living in Ireland, in 1988 Niall Keane, of the National Association of the Deaf, estimated that 15,000 either partially or profoundly deaf people lived in Dublin. Of these, he estimated that 8,000 are profoundly deaf signers. Another estimate by the National Chaplaincy for the Deaf (National Association of the Deaf 1988) was significantly lower, estimating only 1,000 adult deaf people living within the Dublin diocese.

Although the precise number is unknown, there does appear to be a large number of deaf people residing in Dublin city. The residential schools for the deaf brought many deaf people to Dublin, trained them in various trades, and assisted them with finding work after graduation. Rather than return to their family homes, many deaf adults remained in Dublin. Although deaf people make their homes in various areas within the city,<sup>3</sup> many stay connected through their participation in the Dublin Deaf Centre, the city's deaf club. Regardless of where they live, their affiliations with other deaf organizations, their degree of deafness, or preferred style of communication, deaf Dubliners recognize and use the Dublin Deaf Centre as *their* club. It is where deaf people can and do go to meet other deaf people.<sup>4</sup> It is also a place where foreign deaf people go to meet other deaf people in Dublin, and it was where I met many of the people who later participated in this research. Adults who maintained connections to other deaf people through participation in the club, who were signers in school,<sup>5</sup> and who continued to reside in Dublin, comprised the membership of what I am calling the "Dublin deaf community".

The term "the Dublin deaf community" reflects a heterogeneous mix of people whose commonality must be understood in terms of emic interpretations of symbols.<sup>6</sup> In this case, language variation and changes in language over time reflect the reciprocal relationship between this group of people and macro-level processes. More specifically, educational language policies at the two Dublin residential schools for the deaf had a profound influence on the construction of deafness as a *disability*.

The two Cabra schools, St. Mary's School for Deaf Girls and St. Joseph's School for Deaf Boys, employed sign language for all face-to-face communication for approximately one hundred years. But in 1946 and 1957, respectively, the language policy changed, replacing signing with oralism (a method of speaking and lip-reading). The shift from sign language to

oralism reflects more than a change in language use. It reflects a change in the kinds of symbolic behaviours deemed appropriate by deaf people, and the interpretations deemed appropriate for these behaviours (LeMaster 1990). When signing was taught as a matter of school policy, two distinct varieties emerged -- one for deaf girls, and one for deaf boys.

The emergence of distinct gender vocabularies in Irish sign language produced an unusual language situation. Very few communities exist in which men and women have different words for nearly every concept (Haas 1964; Bodine 1975), as is found in this situation. Because these signs were taught at the residential schools prior to the shift to oralism, today only men over the age of fifty, and women over the age of sixty, know these distinct vocabularies. People who attended school after the change to oralism generally do not use the gender-segregated vocabularies, and if they do, they generally do not recognize these vocabularies as having belonged to the formerly "male" and "female" school languages. This change in educational language policy created communication problems among most members of the deaf community -- between older and younger people, and within the younger generation itself.

The emergence of male and female signs among the older members of this population, and the subsequent loss of these signs by younger signers (with the shift to oralism), are indicative of the community's continuing adaptation to the wider, non-deaf society. My field research in Dublin made clear that the use of sign language in the schools by deaf and hearing people de-emphasized the disability aspect of deafness for older members of this population, whereas oralism emphasized disability (LeMaster 1990). The construction of deafness as a disability is perhaps most apparent in the current separatist movement carried on by the younger generation. One of the primary goals of this movement is to gain power over the decisions affecting their own lives, including language policy decisions.

This chapter on the Dublin deaf community examines the reciprocal relationship between micro-level and macro-level structures; that is, it considers how deaf people attempt to modify the structures that constrain them. Specifically, it explores the symbolic meanings of language variation over time by considering the effects of educational language policy on the deconstruction (among the more senior population) and later construction of disability in this culture. Further, it contextualizes the community's attempts to change gender-specific language in order to unify the language of education (thereby deconstructing not only disability but also gender), and the response to the construction of disability reflected in the more recent attempts by younger deaf people to gain power over local organizations and macro-level controls. In other words, this chapter attempts to show the process of "how symbols are used in action within [an] 'historically specific contextual approach.'" in order to demonstrate "the way in which people

create history within the constraints imposed by social structures and forces" (Mullings 1987).

#### **Deaf education in Dublin from 1846 to 1957**

Unlike other groups that migrate to cities, in this instance there was no centralised Dublin deaf community prior to the establishment of the Cabra residential schools. Since the majority of deaf children were born into families with no history of deafness, many of these children arrived at school without language. It is important to note that deaf children differ from non-deaf children who attend residential schools in one extremely important and obvious way -- their deafness creates an unusual communicative isolation. The condition of "deafness" itself is, of course, not isolating. It becomes isolating within the context of a largely aural/oral society. The deaf residential school, then, became an extremely important vehicle for deaf socialisation and for the emergence of a deaf community (cf. Johnson and Erting 1989). Once deaf children were at school, they began to learn the symbolic behaviour that was important to their lives as deaf people living in Ireland, including (as Cohen said for his City men, 1974: xix-xx) "accent, manner of speech, etiquette, style of joking, play," and the "archaic norms, values, and codes" that govern this network of people.

In Ireland, the Catholic Church had not been able to respond to the educational needs of deaf children until the mid-1800s, owing primarily to the extreme poverty that characterised much of the island up to that time. There were so many needs in the community-at-large that there simply was no money, food, clothing, facilities, or energy to start a Catholic school for deaf children. Yet, in spite of these hard times, in 1846 the Order of the Dominican Sisters found a way to open a school for deaf girls. The priority of the school was to teach written English so that deaf children would be able to understand, and receive, the Sacraments. St. Mary's School for Deaf Girls was opened on convent grounds in Cabra. Children came from all parts of Ireland to attend (sometimes regardless of religious background), paving the way for the beginning of a deaf community in Dublin. A pedagogical method and a sign language were borrowed from a French school (*Le Bon Saveur* in Caen) for use at St. Mary's. These French signs were adapted to English morphology, and were also modified to both look more feminine and to accommodate other school concerns.

Some ten years later, in 1855, St. Joseph's School for Deaf Boys was established. The same corpus of French signs that was initially used at St. Mary's in 1846 was borrowed for use at St. Joseph's. These signs were subsequently modified according to the school's needs and interests. However, over time, the two school vocabularies became so distinctive that

boys and girls could not understand each others' signs. This extensive difference in vocabularies does not have a simple explanation. Most Irish schools at this time were sex-segregated, but strong gender differences did not emerge in spoken languages. There was something peculiar about this language learning situation that led to the emergence of female and male vocabularies that were later maintained outside of the school setting. At least two sociocultural factors appear to have contributed to the emergence of sex-differentiated language in the Dublin deaf community -- residential school segregation by sex and educational language policy.

### **Residential school segregation by sex**

Gender-segregated schools do not generally result in the emergence of strikingly different vocabularies for boys and girls, as evidenced by the general lack of sex-segregated vocabularies among non-deaf, sex-segregated Dublin schools (whether residential or not). However, in the case of the Cabra residential schools for the deaf, sex segregation led to extreme differences between the signs used at each school. As a result, the graduates from these schools had difficulty communicating with each other.

Three types of sign differences could be observed: (1) signs completely different in form, but having the same meanings, (2) signs somewhat similar in form, and having the same meanings, and (3) signs identical in form, but having completely different meanings. Analyses of male and female signs in 1986 and 1988 (LeMaster 1990) showed nearly seventy percent of the elicited vocabulary to be different for men and women. Of this seventy percent, twenty-five percent were either completely different in terms of form (#1 above) or in terms of meaning (#3 above), and approximately forty-five were similar in form, but had different meanings (#2 above).<sup>5</sup>

Figure 1 provides an example of male and female signs which are completely different in form but identical in meaning. As the figure illustrates for this class of sign difference, when women and men want to express the same concept, as in the concept 'green,' they employ two completely different signs. These two signs for 'green' differ in terms of three important parameters -- the shape of the hand ("handshape"), the place in which the sign is made ("place of articulation"), and the movement of the sign ("movement") -- yet they have the same meaning. Such synonymous signs differing along all three parameters are classified as morpho-phonemically 'unrelated' signs. In these cases, it is as though the deaf girls and boys had learnt two separate languages, making this a very unusual gender language situation.





**Figure 1**  
Male and female signs GREEN differ in handshape, place of articulation, and movement. They are unrelated in form.

In the second type of sign difference, one or two of the three parameters differ(s), while the meaning of the signs remains identical. Linguistically, these signs are said to be "related" since the sharing of at least one of the three features between the male and female signs may suggest a common or related etymology (although the commonality among the signs is not always sufficient to ensure mutual intelligibility). Figure 2 illustrates the related female and male signs for "Easter." Note that both signs use the same handshape (hence making them *related*), yet differ in terms of articulation and movement.



**Figure 2**  
Male and female signs EASTER differ in place of articulation and movement, but with the same handshape. They are related in form.

The third type of sign difference is observed in identical but semantically distinct signs. Figure 3 shows the example of the male sign for 'brown' and the female sign for 'red,' which are identical in form.

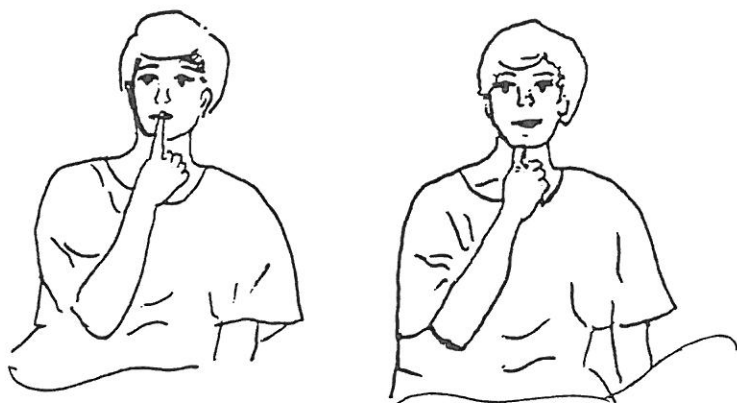


Figure 3  
Male sign BROWN and female sign RED are identical.  
Left start of sign action; right action completed.

Across cultures, it is rare to find this extreme difference in language used by men and women. There have been reports of gender-marked vocabulary differences among other groups of people (Bodine 1975; Harding 1975; Schieffelin 1987), but these differences generally reflect the different activities in which women and men engage (Coates 1988; Dundes et al. 1972; Edwards and Katbamna 1988; Maltz and Borker 1982; Milroy 1980; Nichols 1983; Schieffelin 1987) -- for example, discussions of child bearing for women, and circumcision for men -- rather than wholly different vocabularies. In fact, most of the language and gender research has focused on stylistic language differences (Goodwin 1980; Goodwin and Goodwin 1987; Henley in press; Lakoff 1973; 1975; Tannen 1990) rather than vocabulary differences, because it is rare to find the type of extreme vocabulary difference observed among deaf Dubliners. Even in a situation among the Kaluli in New Guinea where men and women live largely separate lives, wholly divergent vocabularies did not develop outside of vocabularies for specifically female or male oriented activities (Schieffelin 1987). Why, then, did the Dublin deaf men and women develop such widely different vocabularies as described above?

The differences in these male and female signs appear to be a product of differential opportunities to learn and use language. In the case of the Cabra schools, the signs developed as though these girls and boys grew up on separate islands. And, in essence, this is what happened. For one thing, it is known that although the schools are located near each other, boys and girls

did not interact frequently. Co-educational activities were not organized during the century in which sign language was the primary school language. Also, as a result of religious practice, the Dominican Sisters (sequestered until the 1960s) were unlikely to take the girls on trips outside school grounds. Since the two schools provided little opportunity for the children to interact with each other, it was unlikely that the boys and girls had much opportunity to learn each others' signs.

During interviews with deaf adults, many reported that they did not even talk to a peer of the opposite sex until they had completed their education and begun dating. This is not to say that deaf boys and girls never saw each other before leaving school. In fact, it is highly probable that they did interact on trips home during holidays. Also, although most families had no history of deafness, I did interview some deaf adults who either had deaf parents, or deaf siblings. Therefore, it is certain that some deaf children had deaf siblings of the opposite sex, or deaf parents, or other deaf relatives of the opposite sex with whom they would interact, who also knew the Cabra school sign language. But even these deaf children (whose numbers were few) had limited opportunities to interact with their relatives, since they only saw them during holidays and other occasional visits home. The regular day-to-day interaction patterns necessary for language accommodation and assimilation did not exist for virtually all cross-gender linguistic communication.

Although some signs could have been shared between the sexes, through family and friendship ties, linguistic studies of these differences (LeMaster 1990; LeMaster and Dwyer 1991) suggest that the informal ties were insufficient to standardise signs while the children were still in school.

#### **Educational language policy between 1846 and 1945**

The Irish educational language policy also played an important role in the emergence of the sex-marked vocabularies in the Cabra schools. For at least one hundred years the language policy was to use sign language as the principal method of face-to-face communication. Oralism (lip-reading and speaking) was not used with signs, nor was it introduced into the curriculum until around 1946 at the girls' school and around 1957 at the boys' school. Both the instructional and non-instructional language was sign language. It is important to note that the entire school community -- both hearing and deaf people -- used sign language fluently for all face-to-face interactions. Sr. Nicholas, a former teacher and Principal at St. Mary's School remarked in a 1985 interview:

the deaf here in Cabra were a community -- a deaf community, . . . completely. We were like deaf people. We didn't speak either. That was lovely for the deaf. In general, teachers were primarily members of

Catholic Orders, . . . who were all hearing people. However, there were a few deaf lay teachers as well.

In order to understand the range of possible sociocultural factors that led to the emergence of distinct male and female vocabularies at the two schools for the deaf, one must focus on the language-learning opportunities that led to the eventual differentiation of boys' and girls' school signs, and on the effects of a "visual community" on deaf socialisation. It is important to remember that while the outside world gained and conveyed information primarily through auditory language, the Cabra schools created an atmosphere in which primary communication was visual, and in which deafness was the norm. Hearing people changed their primary means for communication to sign language; that is, a means of communication more suitable for deaf people's primary means for accessing information. Within these microcosm communities, all communication -- whether formal classroom instruction or idle wondering -- was easily accessed by deaf people. However, ease of communication was largely limited to each campus, meaning that boys could understand other boys, and girls could understand other girls, but boys and girls could not understand each other. Considering that the school signs were not mutually intelligible, how did boys and girls reconcile their language differences when they did interact with each other once they completed their education?

#### **The use of gender vocabularies by deaf adults in the wider community**

Not surprisingly, when deaf girls and boys left the Cabra schools and began to interact with each other, they found that they could not readily understand each others' signs. This, of course, did not stop them from dating and eventually marrying (my fieldwork indicated that many Irish deaf people marry other deaf people). Yet, in order to begin dating they had to find some way to mitigate their language differences. Learning each others' vocabulary was not an easy task considering that their lives outside of residential school were also largely segregated.

One of the most prominent meeting places for many deaf communities is the deaf club (Padden 1980; Hall 1991). At the time that male and female signs were still used in the schools, Dublin had two deaf clubs -- one for men and another for women. Also, even though men and women both typically worked once they completed their education, they tended to do different types of work. Women were often employed to do domestic work, such as knitting, or housework; whereas, deaf men were typically employed as shoe-makers and tailors.

Men and women either met at church, or during less formal encounters on the street, on a bus, at the market, and so on. Such casual meetings

apparently did not provide sufficient opportunity for men and women to learn the others' signs (LeMaster and Dwyer 1991). However, once they began dating and interacting more frequently, they gained the necessary exposure to signs. Interestingly, instead of each learning the others' signs, the acquisition of signs seemed to be largely unidirectional: women learned the men's signs, but men did not learn the women's signs. This, at least, is what deaf men and women suggested to me during my research in Dublin.

The myth that exists in the community today is that once women left school and began interacting with deaf men, they completely gave up their female signs in favour of the male signs. Both women and men say this is true. Yet, research has shown that while it is true that women know more male signs than men know of the female signs, it is not true that women completely abandon their signs, nor is it wholly true that men do not know the female signs (LeMaster 1990; LeMaster and Dwyer 1991). In a 1988 study (LeMaster and Dwyer 1991), a small number of women and men were asked to provide the opposite sex's signs for one hundred and six lexical items.<sup>7</sup> Women were able to produce sixty-six per cent of the male signs accurately, whereas men were only able to produce twenty-four per cent of the female signs accurately.

There seem to be two occasions when the female signs are most commonly used: when only women are the intended audience, and when conversing with a woman who does not know the male signs. Because men deny knowledge of the female signs, women will occasionally use the female signs with other women in order to keep a man from understanding what is said. Yet, although men may deny knowledge of the female signs, analysis of their understanding of female signs (LeMaster and Dwyer 1991) reveals that they understand more female signs than they are able to produce. When shown female signs and asked to provide the meanings for these signs, men were able to correctly identify a majority of the female signs. Out of 148 female signs shown to eight men, on average, these men could understand nearly sixty per cent of them (LeMaster and Dwyer 1991: 382). These results of current-day knowledge suggest that men know more female signs than they claim to know, which further suggests that men have gained access to these female signs in some way.

The second situation in which women use female signs with other women is when they are talking with a woman who does not know any male signs. A small number of women who have completed their education at the Cabra residential school for the deaf have not interacted with deaf men frequently enough to have acquired the male signs. Typically these are women who have never married, and who spend most of their time with other women, rather than with men. Although these women may go to the deaf club (where most of the announcements are made in male signs, and where men are usually present), they tend to associate primarily with other

women. Also, they tend to go to special events at the club which attract other women, such as "Ladies' Night" and "Bingo" night. There is usually at least one woman present at these events who will interpret the male signs into female signs for these women. These women also attend mixed-gender religious retreats (which occur at least once annually) where two interpreters are provided -- one who translates the spoken messages into female signs, and one who translates these messages into male signs. At these retreats, men certainly have greater access to female signs than they do normally.

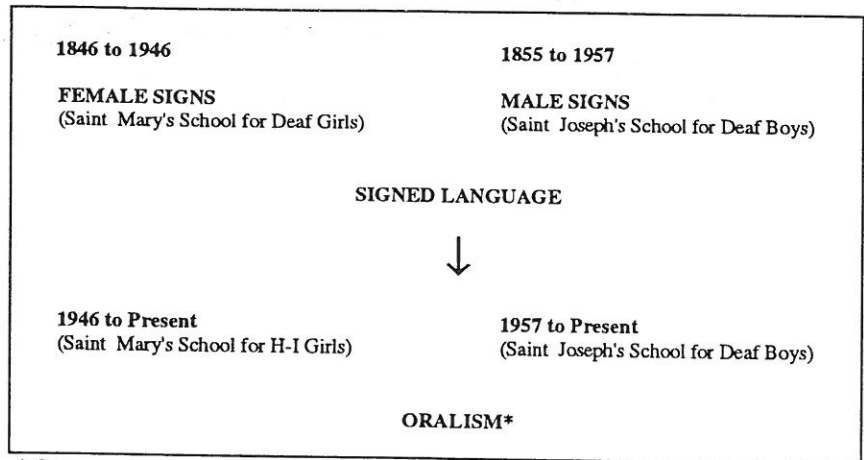
Men who acquired male signs at the residential school for the deaf rarely use female signs. They consider these signs to be within the domain of women, and therefore effeminate. This attitude is reflected clearly by considering the community's reaction to one exception to it. There is one older man who prefers many of the female signs to the male signs, and uses these selected female signs on a regular basis. He is constantly ridiculed by other men in his age group for acting effeminately. This group's sanction of men's use of female signs is consistent with cross-gender talk in general. Women may use male language, but "men who 'talk like women' are called 'effeminate' and regarded with disdain" (Thorne and Henley 1975: 19).

For these men and women, deafness was not the focus of their lives. They did not distinguish among themselves on the basis of degrees of deafness, nor did they separate themselves from hearing people. These people willingly worked together with hearing people, as they did in the production of a dictionary, in establishing sign language teacher-training programmes, and in producing a journal about deaf people. Although deafness was a constant variable, it was not a politicised focus for these deaf people. Several factors account for this. Although a deaf identity was always present, it was not employed as often as other identities -- such as gender, age, neighbourhood, occupation, family history -- as deafness was an accepted immutable identity. Deaf people were not expected to mask their identity. Because of this cultural construction of deafness, both hearing and deaf people made accommodations in intergroup face-to-face communications. If signing was not used, then writing was employed. Consequently, the disability aspect of deafness was mitigated. In the sense that deafness was normalised for these people, disability was deconstructed.

#### **Actors and constraints: changes in language**

The reason for the shift (see Figure 4) to oralism in 1946 for girls and 1957 for boys is rather simple -- deaf adults asked the schools to provide training in speech and lip-reading. These adults were satisfied with their level of education and their written English proficiency, but when they secured work in Britain, they felt that they were at something of a disadvantage because

they were unable to speak and lip-read.<sup>8</sup> The cultural conception of deafness in Britain required a different intergroup communication strategy from deaf people, namely, oralism. Although the Irish deaf workers' written English was superb (and they often assisted the British deaf with written work [LeMaster 1990]), British employers would not speak directly to Irish deaf employees through writing. Instead, the employers had the British deaf workers interpret for the Irish deaf employees. Because of this cross-cultural experience with deafness, some Irish deaf adults asked the Dublin schools to add oralism to the curriculum so that they would never have to feel disadvantaged. However, school officials felt that oralism could not simply be *added* to the curriculum, but, instead, had to *replace* sign language since the oralist methods of the time did not allow for joint usage of signs and speech in the classroom.



**\*Notes**

'H-I' = Hearing impaired

Signed language is currently used only in the multiply handicapped units.

Women who use female signs are approximately 60 years old today or older.

Men who use male signs are approximately 50 years old today or older.

Younger people have less access to male/female signs today.

Younger people in the Dublin schools today have less access to signed language.

At the two Cabra residential schools for the deaf in Dublin, the educational policy changed from exclusive use of signed language for face-to-face interactions (in the mid-1800s) to exclusive use of oralism for face-to-face interactions (in the mid-1900s).

**Figure 4.**

Schematic representation of change from signing to oralism in Dublin deaf schools

Coincidentally, at about this time, the Department of Education expressed an interest in sponsoring the schools. Previously, the schools had been successfully run by the Dominican Sisters and the Christian Brothers on inadequate tuition fees and supplemental donations. In part because the schools had earned an international reputation for the pupils' superb written

English proficiency, the Department of Education was eager to participate in the schools' administration. The nation-wide recognition and financial support was welcomed by the Catholic Church, and the schools became affiliated to the Department of Education in the mid-1950s.

One of the consequences of affiliation to the Department of Education was that the schools had to abide by the department's rules and regulations. Among these was a rule that all teachers must be university certified. Ironically, most deaf people could not attend university for the necessary degree since they did not speak Irish, nor had they been given appropriate pre-college coursework.

Clearly these new rules and regulations, combined with the new language policy to use oralism rather than signs, dramatically affected the availability of sign language on the campuses. Prior to these changes, there had been several deaf lay teachers at the schools. These teachers were transferred to the multiply handicapped units at the schools where sign language was still permitted. The teachers were asked to sign only within the multiply handicapped units. They were no longer permitted to sign in front of the newly oral students. Also, all new teachers brought into the schools had no knowledge of sign language. Eventually, very few remaining teachers or staff members knew or used sign language.

This change to oralism affected the signs of those who attended the schools after the mid-1900s. While students who were educated as "oral deaf" people still acquired signs, they did so covertly rather than learning them legitimately through school. Use of signing on campus would be punished, and deaf adult signers were either discouraged from visiting the campuses, or if they worked there, they were discouraged from interacting with oral deaf children. Consequently, oral students left school with a quite different knowledge of signs than that possessed by the older members of this community.

One noticeable difference between the signs of the older adults and the younger adults is in the younger adults' knowledge and use of the male and female signs. Younger deaf people do not use these signs as frequently as do the older people, and when they do, the younger signers appear to be largely unaware of the historical connection of the signs, both with regard to the deaf schools and to the signer's gender.

Another difference is that when younger people use these gender-marked signs, typically they use more male than female signs. The reason for this is straightforward. Younger people did not acquire sign vocabularies formally at the schools once oralism was introduced. These oral children either covertly acquired the signs used in the multiply handicapped sections of the schools (obtained from a dictionary of Irish sign language that was published in 1979), invented signs among their peer groups, or acquired signs through some other informal channel.



The Irish sign language dictionary attempted to neutralise the male and female sign differences by listing only one of the two varieties for each dictionary entry. The committee who compiled the dictionary consisted of deaf and hearing women and men. For each dictionary entry, this committee voted on whether to retain the male or the female sign for inclusion. By this means, male signs were the most frequently adopted, but some female signs were selected as well, and it is these that tend to continue in use among the younger generation.

When young men use female signs, they usually do not recognize them as originating from the female school for the deaf, but rather, as originating from the dictionary. During a videotaped vocabulary elicitation session, two young men in their twenties used some of the formerly female school signs in their responses for the days of the week. When I mentioned that they were using what were formerly the signs used in the girls' school, they quickly corrected me by saying that they were "using dictionary signs, not female signs," thus denying any possible implication of effeminate behaviour. The ultimate fate of female signs is uncertain at this point, but it seems that disuse of female signs and continued use of male signs is likely.

The language variation within the younger generation appears to coincide with a change in the community's sense of identity. Rather than dividing the community in terms of men and women, as the gender-marked signs did for the older people, younger signers have begun to divide their community in terms of degrees of hearing. In short, whether someone is partially deaf, profoundly deaf, hard-of-hearing, or hearing has begun to make an identity difference among Dublin's deaf people.

This coincides with the two schools' emphases on distinguishing among children with various types of hearing loss. Those who have residual hearing to aid their speech and lip-reading are separated from those who have no hearing. And both groups of oral children are separated from the multiply handicapped sections of the schools where sign language is used.

The struggles that children experience from this kind of emphasis on various degrees of hearing loss are perhaps best exemplified through the example of a deaf family currently living in Dublin. The mother of this family had attended the deaf school after the change to oralism, so she has the ability to speak *and* lip-read. The father of the family had attended the deaf school when only signs were used. He signs without lip-reading or speaking. The couple communicate primarily through the use of the husband's sign language. Most of their deaf children are in the oral programmes at school. At the time of the interview, one child was in the multiply handicapped section of school where sign language is used. According to the family, they were given instructions from one of the schools on how they should communicate within the home. They were instructed to separate their signing child from the oral children. When the children

wanted to communicate with each other, they were to use the mother as an interpreter. Similarly, it was recommended that the oral children talk directly to the mother and have her interpret their comments to the father. The emphasis was on separation of oral children from signing children, because the oral children might pick up signs, thereby degrading their oral abilities.

This example embodies one of the greatest ironies of the change to oralism. Although it is believed that oralism will provide a better vehicle for the integration of deaf children into hearing society, this policy change has actually further accentuated differences between deaf and hearing people. As Cummings (1986) describes, this is not uncommon in bilingual education when a second language (in this case, oralism) is intended to be a substitute rather than a complement to existing forms of communication. By replacing sign language with oralism, deaf children are denied their deaf status. They are, in essence, instructed to mask their disability. Yet, the ineffectiveness of oralism (especially lip-reading) simply reminds these children that they are deaf, and that deafness means disadvantage in a conversation -- hence, disability. Every time a deaf person is misunderstood, or misunderstands an utterance, the disability of deafness is accentuated. In this way, disability is constructed through this educational language policy.

Along with the change in language policy has come a change in deaf group structure. Instead of a division by gender, the division among the deaf people is now more commonly based on a deaf-hearing paradigm. Perhaps the appropriate framework for this discussion is to understand the change in terms of the increasing secularisation of Ireland and of this deaf community. Nic Ghiolla Phadraig quotes Wilson's definition of secularisation as "the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance" (1986: xiv). In fact, secularisation often happens as "the outcome of modernisation or development drawn out by urbanisation and industrialisation" (Nic Ghiolla Phadraig 1986: 145).

In this community, the church has decreased in importance in the *institutional* lives of deaf people over the last forty or fifty years. This declining influence began, perhaps, with the involvement of the Department of Education in the Cabra deaf schools. Although the two Catholic orders continued their presence and involvement in curriculum development, the Department of Education's rules and regulations also had to be observed. The schools' curricula became much broader, and the original religious goals of deaf education -- achievement of one's salvation through a grasp of English in order to understand and receive the sacraments (O'Dowd 1955) -- were gradually forgotten.

The church remains active in its support of the deaf community's social activities. It has contributed financially to many deaf-centred activities, including the deaf club with its many social activities, and some newsletters

and journals. However, with the participation of Ireland in the European Community, deaf people have found another financial support outside of the church. The European Community has provided funds for Irish deaf people to attend conferences and other educational meetings which disseminate information on the status of deaf people in Europe. Through these contacts, deaf people have become further enabled to form organisations, write newsletters, and establish other autonomous activities.

Although the church remains a vital part of individuals' and families' lives, since the Year of the Disabled in 1980 there has been a small segment of the deaf community which has begun to seek autonomy from previous authoritative structures including, to some extent, the church. This small segment of the deaf community has embraced a Deaf-rights<sup>9</sup> position which seeks to empower deaf people through deaf segregation. The emphasis within this movement is to remove hearing people from deaf community decision-making positions, and to replace them with deaf people. Deaf people want the right to make all of the decisions that concern them, especially in terms of education and employment. Increasingly, deaf people seem to be involved in activities which are autonomous from the church, such as the production of newsletters, television and radio programming. More deaf people than ever before are expressing their opposition to certain school curricula and language varieties used within deaf education. The increasing globalization of this community has encouraged a more separatist attitude among younger deaf people especially.

### Conclusion

Ireland adopted a policy in the 1940s to provide deaf children with the ability to lip-read and speak in the belief that it would enable them to interact more effectively with non-deaf people. This laudable effort was based on the mistaken belief that the communication strategies used by hearing people could be as effectively employed by deaf people. Instead of increasing the integration of deaf people into mainstream Irish life, this strategy not only sparked a separatist movement among younger deaf people away from hearing people, but it also divided the deaf community in terms of language and identity.

The existence of gender-segregated vocabularies among the more senior members of the Dublin deaf population underscores the importance of *gender* to them. Gender was the principal aspect of cultural identity that differentiated community members, and that appeared to be supported by the church in terms of the language policies allowing the emergence of gender-marked vocabularies. Deafness as a disability was not a central focus for these deaf people. Instead, deaf people of this era described themselves in

terms of social identities other than deafness (e.g., gender, place of origin, family business, father's job, age). Whether or not someone was deaf was a given -- the degree of hearing loss was not the focus for differentiation among the more senior members of this community.

This chapter has attempted to show how these people have not simply been passive recipients of policy decisions, but instead, have had changing relationships with a number of macro-level structures, including the deaf schools, a government department, and employers. Since gender, rather than disability, was a more salient identity for the more senior segment of the population, they had a different relationship with these macro structures than do the younger generation. Because *disability* became salient for the younger generation after language policy changed, their response has been to reject traditional authority structures through a separatist movement. Both groups of people responded to these policy decisions by actively creating their own histories through the reformulation of intra-group structures and the locus of power.

#### Notes

1. I conducted intermittent field research in Dublin from 1984 to 1988. A variety of methods was used, including examination of documents, surveys, structured and semi-structured interviews, videotaped elicited and naturalistic language samples, and participation in the activities of the community (including residence with two community leaders). In addition to my academic research, I responded to community requests for assistance with developing interpreter training and sign language teacher training programmes, also acting on occasion as an interpreter, and delivering a lecture series on academic, applied, and advocacy issues of American deaf people in the United States. I gave similar lectures in Belfast in 1986 and 1988.
2. Until the early 1980s, nearly all deaf children in the Republic of Ireland attended the two residential schools for the deaf in Cabra. Many deaf Catholic children from Northern Ireland also attended the schools. Those who attended the Cabra schools use the gender signs and language of the Dublin schools, while other Northern Ireland deaf people of this era use Ulster sign language (more similar to the sign language used in parts of Britain). Other deaf schools have been established in Cork, Limerick, and Galway, although the Dublin schools were still the largest in 1988.
3. Deaf people live in various areas within the city of Dublin. Many, however, continued to live near the Cabra schools, and in my research I also became familiar with the large deaf community in the Tallaght section of Dublin.
4. See Hall 1991 for a discussion of the importance of deaf clubs in America.
5. All of the participants in this language study were former students of the two Dublin residential deaf schools during the time that sign language was the primary method of face-to-face communication. At the time of the videotaping of these signs in 1986 and 1988, the women were over the age of 55, and the men were over 45 years old.
6. See Cohen (1974) for a discussion of a similar type of group coherence.

7. Two women and six men participated in this part of the study. Since women exhibited their knowledge of male signs in daily interactions, the women were tested on male signs as more of a control than an exploratory effort.
8. Personal communication from Sister Nicholas.
9. As is the convention in America, I here use a capital 'D' to represent a cultural or ethnic identity, and a small 'd' to represent a hearing loss.

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