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I Am My Language: Representing and Misrepresenting Deaf Writers

GLORIA ANZALDÚA, IN HER TEXT “HOW TO TAME A WILD TONGUE,” declares that language and self-identity are inextricable, a claim that resonates loudly for those of us teaching Deaf college students. She describes the shame and diminished identity she feels when using her native language. Naming it “linguistic terrorism” (80), she says:

So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself, . . . and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than have them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. (81)

Given the thrust of Deaf identity politics over the last 25 years, this metaphor strikes us as particularly ironic. The Deaf community has battled with the dominant hearing culture over the very issue of “tongue,” first arguing successfully against the focus within Deaf education on the ability to speak and then arguing for the acceptance of American Sign Language (ASL) as the community’s legitimate language—or “tongue”—and the acceptance of Deaf Culture.

The audiological perspective, formulated by the dominant hearing society, was a formidable foe in the battle for acceptance. From this perspective, deafness as a medical condition was characterized by auditory deficits. Such a perspective naturally led to efforts to try to remediate and was premised on the belief that Deaf people are inferior to hearing people. For the longest time this construction of deafness resulted in “efforts to try to help the deaf individual to become as similar to a hearing person as possible . . .” (Reagan 45). There was little understanding or acknowledgement of the inextricable link between language and identity in the audiological perspective.

Since the 1970s, a re-conceptualization of deafness as identity rather than as disability, coming from within the Deaf community, has prevailed. Deaf cultural identity presupposes competence in ASL, and in fact, the use of ASL as the primary language is “arguably the single most important element in the construction of deaf cultural identity” (Reagan 51). As the 2006 protests at Gallaudet best illustrate, it is not merely signing that is necessary, but specifically the use of ASL, which “functions as a ‘language of group solidarity’ for deaf

people . . . serving both as a badge of in-group membership and as a barrier to those outside the cultural community” (Reagan 51). To suggest such a binary, however—insiders and outsiders—would be inaccurate and misleading. In fact, within the Deaf community, we can see a wide range of groups who identify themselves by virtue of amount of hearing loss, language preference, educational experience, and integration into either the Deaf or the hearing world.

The language of Deaf identity politics continues to evolve. Since 1993, when Paddy Ladd coined the term, some members of the Deaf community have been examining an identity based on “Deafhood” rather than deafness. In this new paradigm, being Deaf is perceived as originating from a colonization process. Deafhood broadens and defines how Deaf people view their Deaf selves, with some deciding to live within existing definitions of Deaf Culture and others deciding to move beyond the category. More recently, an idea has emerged from the Innovation Lab at Gallaudet University focusing on “DEAF-GAIN,” a concept that moves away from hearing loss and de-emphasizes deficit. This idea differs from other readings of colonization to emphasize that Deaf people and their culture constitute an important form of human diversity that can offer significant contributions to the rest of society (Bauman and Murray).

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Despite these distinctions within the Deaf community, it seems safe to say that there is general social acceptance of ASL as a legitimate language and of Deaf Culture as a unique and valued sub-culture in America. Deaf individuals in America today, with the support of ADA legislation, have earned respect for ASL and for the bilingual/bicultural approach to education. Pride in their language yields pride in themselves, not the shame that Anzaldúa describes for those deprived of their native “tongue.”

As teachers of Deaf, college-age students at the Rochester Institute of Technol-

ogy, home to the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, we are in a unique position to observe this pride. Let us offer some examples from our students’ writing.

Student A: Anyway, I consider myself as identity as an American Sign Language user. ASL is completely visual and natural language. ASL has morphology (rules of creation words), phonetics, (hand shape forms), and body/facial

language effects communication as language. ASL defines me as person and symbolizes in Deaf communication that affects Deaf community and values of ASL and I cannot imagine living without ASL. When I am in a hearing world, I always feel Deaf as strong identity. I can merge with the hearing world without a problem with my access in oral communication or writing. In the Deaf world, I am a happy person in Deaf world and Deaf culture. . . . "Be proud of your identity and your language!"

Student B: I primarily use American Sign Language due to my deafness. ASL allows me to communicate with other deaf peers as well as understand what is going on in the environment. . . . Language often times creates a culture of its own. The Deaf has its own culture as well as English speaking people. In the Deaf culture, we have our style of ASL, our tendency to use ASL in a specific way, and add non-verbal behavior to our language. I enjoy using ASL and I know the traits of the deaf culture. I am able to fit into the Deaf culture with no problem.

From these few examples, we can see the pride these students take in their language, in themselves as users of that language, and in their identity. While ASL has been legitimized, Deaf individuals are still accommodating to English users in their academic and professional lives because of the insistence on producing Standard Written English. What concerns us and what is the focus for this paper is how Deaf students' written English influences the ways in which they are perceived by others and, consequently, the ways in which they perceive themselves.

In the article "Toward an Archeology of Deafness: Etic and Emic Constructions of Identity in Conflict," Timothy Reagan discusses the ways in which the construction of Deaf identity provides an especially powerful example of the tension that Michel Foucault discusses. He refers to Foucault when he explains that "identity is constructed both personally and socially. . . tak[ing] place within the context of cultural, social, and historical understandings (and misunderstandings)" (44). Much of Foucault's work analyzes the tensions that have emerged between personal and social constructions of identity as well as tensions between what the anthropologists call etic and emic. Referring to J. Clifton's terminology in *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* (1968), Reagan explains these terms in the following way: "Every construction of identity occurs within a situated context; some constructions of identity are those of participants in the identity [emic], whereas others are those of observers outside of the identity [etic]" (44).

For some of our students, their emic construction of identity reinforces a positive

self-view; they see themselves as fluent users of written English. What happens when this complex identity runs head-on into the assumption commonly held that Deaf people are, at best, not skilled writers, and, at worst, incapable of producing acceptable prose? One former student, a brilliant writer who communicates solely in American Sign Language, describes her experience in a college class in which her teacher mistrusted the originality of her work because of the elegance of the analysis and of the prose. In an email, she writes:

At RIT . . . uhh, I was in Dr. S's . . . class and we were doing an essay on James Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist* and we hadn't done any class discussion at all and she asked us to write a paper about parallelism about the story and Joyce's life (from the blurb on the book). So I wrote a paper and handed it in. She handed it back with a note that said she couldn't grade it as it was and that I needed to see her. So I did, and she said, "Where are your sources?" and I said, "I didn't use any. . . . I didn't know I was supposed to." She said, "You're telling me you wrote this all by yourself without any outside research?" And I said, "Yeah, why?" She said it was because it was an absolutely spot-on analysis. She said that if I could give her an earlier draft to prove that it wasn't plagiarized, she would give me an A.

This was hardly an isolated incident. Another question was raised about the authenticity of this same student's work in a biographical literature course and in a history course. Ironically, that history teacher offered a course in Deaf history and taught in the graduate program at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf.

These sample experiences, no doubt, produce that etic/emic tension that Foucault writes about. These students believe to be true that they are skilled writers and have "dual identities" relative to their abilities to function in both the Deaf and hearing worlds. But, in the face of continual questioning and skepticism about their "written English identity," we can only conclude that their "sense" of their own identity as inviolable is undermined.

The same skepticism and assaults are endured by members of other minority groups. Writing about the work of Maxine Hong Kingston, critic Juan Li says that *Tripmaster Monkey* offers one protagonist who is an American born Chinese, "as competent in mainstream Standard English as white Americans are [but] his Chinese appearance often denies him access to the dominant language and culture" (276). Li describes this protagonist, Witman, as a fluent user of English, both in his academic major and his professional goal to be a playwright. Nonetheless, based on his appearance, he faces the stereotyped assumptions that Chinese-Americans cannot use Standard English. As Kingston has her character say, "The one [question] that drives me craziest is 'Do you speak English?' particularly after I have been talking for hours. . . . The voice doesn't go with the face" (Kingston 317).

While this tension between etic and emic constructions of identity does indeed cross ethnic, racial, and class lines, others would argue that there is a difference for the Deaf. Timothy Reagan claims, "The social construction of deaf identity differs from that of most cultural communities in that it is primarily an emic construction in conflict with a dominant etic construction of deaf identity. . . . What is notable in the case of the deaf and Deaf identity is not the tension, but rather the fundamental incommensurability of the etic and emic constructions" (44). Nowhere is that seen more clearly than in those people who are Deaf but do not have the double self-image resulting from bilingual (ASL and written English) fluency. A large number of these people fall into the category of inter-language users based on their written English.

These writers are not the traditional basic writers who have been identified because of typical surface idiosyncracies, such as comma splices, agreement errors, fragments, shifts in verb tense, etc. Rather, this group demonstrates a written English that contains elements of sign and elements of Standard Written English, sometimes following the syntax of ASL, at other times following English word order. Veda Charrow says that there does appear to be a variety of non-Standard English that the Deaf use instead of Standard English. Her premise is that this "deaf English" possesses variable forms, and that "The deaf have learned many obligatory Standard English grammatical and morphological rules, but they apply them optionally" (144).

Researchers Mayer and Akamatsu, in "Bilingual-Bicultural Models of Literacy Education for Deaf Students: Considering the Claims," describe the genesis of such written texts as coming from the absence of a one-to-one correspondence between signed and written utterances. They claim, "While signing about a topic will undoubtedly assist the student in elaborating and expanding ideas, it does not, at the actual moment of composing, assist the student in making correct lexical, morphological, and syntactic choices." Mayer and Akamatsu cite Biber's work with spoken and written aspects of English and conclude that, "These choices for hearing writers are shaped and determined to a large extent by their knowledge of the spoken language that gave root to the written form" (4). These researchers show clearly the etiology of the surface features of "deaf written English."

For the purposes of this paper, the inter-language used by Deaf writers will be labeled pidgin written English, although we understand that this label is not completely accurate and carries with it serious social stigma. We feel distaste for adopting a term that is so closely associated with the demeaning attitudes of colonialism and that runs counter to the heart of our argument. But, at the same time, we know of no other terminology to describe the texts produced by some Deaf writers and hope that a better and more respectful terminology can be developed in the future. Even Veda Charrow admits that real "deaf English" is probably

more complex than most pidgins but does conclude that it can be considered an example of pidginization (144). Linguists have defined pidgins in a variety of ways from marginal languages, to a means of communication among people of different language backgrounds, to an epitome of the “complex relations between language and social life” (Li 272). We are using the term “pidgin” in the same way Robert Hall does: “for a language to be true pidgin . . . its grammatical structure and its vocabulary must be sharply reduced” (xii). We do not want to discuss the unique linguistic features of what we are calling pidgin written English (nor explain the reduced grammatical structure or vocabulary). Rather, we want to stay focused on the ideological debate of the linguistic rights and status of pidgin written English and its reception, and how that reception influences self-perception and perception by others.

In order to clarify how texts in pidgin written English are received, consider the following student response to a placement test prompt asking writers to examine the idea of public schools requiring school uniforms:

Should some public schools be stricter on a school uniform? Will it affect all of students in High school and Junior High school bad? Are there some positive and negative points about a dress code or a school uniform? There are many schools having different opinions on a dress code. I will tell you some positive and negative points about that. There are three things: Regular dress, a dress of limitation, and a school uniform.

Next, a dress of limitation is the better way to show the people so impression. Dress of limitation is a kind of useless to wear for the students in their junior high schools and high schools. For example, in positive points I was in high school called Illinois School for the Deaf in Jacksonville, Illinois. My school wasn't allow the students to wear tanks, flip-flop, and sweater pants because it wasn't regular to wear during the school except weekend. My high school was the stricter than my junior high school because of the safety. One negative point is some students didn't like to wear simple dresses; for example, on springtime, I can't use flip flop when I need it for let my feet got cooler. They started to be frustrated by that. However, there is a better way to make the students to learn how to wear so right during school time.

The initial response of most readers is to be overwhelmed by the errors at all levels, from syntax to diction to spelling. They may even, privately, consider this text as illiterate, incomprehensible, inadequate, unintelligible. If these readers are also compositionists, they write on these texts in less negative terms, perhaps limiting themselves to comments such as “What does this mean?” “I cannot understand what you mean here.” “This idea is not clear.”

“This sentence is not in Standard Written English.” “I have no idea what you are trying to tell me.” Certainly the pages of these texts would be riddled with under-linings, crossings-out, references to pages in grammar handbooks, whole sentences edited and re-written. Although they might recognize and appreciate the ASL underpinnings to these texts—how the ideas would come through clearly in Sign—their tendency is to view the entire text as a study in error.

They may hold their comments to the polite. In their heart of hearts, however, they may not be so generous, viewing the texts as failures and, by consequence, the

writers of those texts at best as unskilled and at worst as incapable. They see these students not always as themselves but as the texts they produce. While they would not agree professionally or theoretically that language equals thought, their practices and their responses often equate them. So it is that the language equals *the person*. Texts produced by Deaf writers, who are already labeled “language deficient,” seem doomed to reinforce already-negative stereotypes about the writers.

A study of the published research on the reading/writing conditions of Deaf individuals serves only to compound these stereotypes. When we reviewed a sample of articles on ASL and on the bilingual-bicultural approaches to education, we found very positive portrayals of students’ abilities and a strong connection between the importance of ASL to Deaf identity and culture. In contrast, our reading of recent research into the written language challenges faced by the Deaf, the tone and language changed and seemed to revert to the deficit model and the error paradigm.

A representative example comes from the article. “Vocabulary Use by Low, Moderate and High ASL Users Compared to Hearing ESL and Monolingual Speakers” published in the *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 2004. The article focuses on the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and literacy development, showing how Deaf second language learners of English approach English vocabulary acquisition in ways that are different from hearing ESL learners. The study recommends that ASL might be an entry point for vocabulary acquisition, supporting ASL and its users, for Deaf students, educators and literacy instruction. In describing their results, however, the researchers reinforce skewed notions of who these writers of pidgin written English are, based on their writing skills. They state: “Many researchers have documented the *depressed English vocabulary* [emphasis ours] and reading comprehension scores among deaf children.” Singleton et al. provide another example from DeVilliers and Pomerantz, who write that “many hearing impaired students

“their tendency is to view the entire text as a study in error.”

are caught in a vicious circle: their *impoverished vocabularies* limit their reading comprehension and *poor reading strategies and skills limit their ability* to acquire adequate vocabulary knowledge from context" [emphasis ours] (qtd. in Singleton et al. 87).

Another example comes from the 1996 *Journal of Deaf Studies and Education*. In "Can the Linguistic Interdependence Theory Support Bilingual-Bicultural Model of Literacy Education for Deaf Students?" the authors argue, "When it comes to learning to read and write . . . there is general agreement that deaf children find this *much more difficult* than their hearing peers." Mayer and Wells refer to a study done in 1983 by King and Quigley and claim, "In acquiring literacy in English, for example, deaf children *rarely progress much beyond a fourth grade level*" [emphasis ours] (96). Mayer and Wells further suggest that "deaf children have much less to build on. They do not 'know' the language they are attempting to write" [emphasis ours] (99).

Nor can we exempt ourselves from this misrepresentation of Deaf students. In our first collaboratively written article, published in *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry*, 1997, we made this claim:

Equally frustrating for our deaf students are the obstacles presented to them by writing. . . . It is not surprising, then, that in response to college-appropriate writing assignments, students produce narratives using sentence structures that are either short and simple (and thus perceived as childish) or long, cumbersome, and convoluted (and thus incomprehensible) (21).

In our proposal for a 4C's conference a few years ago, we submitted the following:

One particular group for whom this goal of improving the quality of life for themselves and for their communities is deaf students who—like many other basic writers—often come into the classroom 'owning' neither written nor spoken English. Many of these writers who are deaf lack proficiency in critical reading and the language conventions of academic discourse. These 'deficits' coupled with fragmented world knowledge yield prose that does not accurately represent the sophistication of their thoughts.

It is, therefore, not only the teachers' commentary on Deaf students' written texts which communicates to these writers how we feel about the pidgin written English, but it is also the way Deaf writers are portrayed to the public by researchers and other professionals that must, eventually, influence their sense of self as users of written English. One student writes:

Some ways that does not represent my identity is my writing skills. I definitely have a weakness in that. A lot of people misunderstood, thinking that the way deaf people write will explain their intelligence when it does not at all. I feel like I am pretty smart and maybe above average in some cases, but

because of my writing skills isn't the best, they quickly assume I am dumb. Some people just do not understand that when you sign, you don't sign every single word but you still get the picture. So sometimes it makes me ashamed of whom I am and that is stupid of me. The reason why it is stupid of me because that is who I am and it is part of my identity. I should have pride in that.

How much the worse for another student, who writes with grim resignation: "Written English is my biggest barrier in a lifetime and never will change at all."

The broad acceptance of ASL as a language of instruction for Deaf students and the popularity of ASL offerings in high schools and colleges are demonstrable evidence for Deaf people that their language and culture are valued beyond the Deaf community. There is no analogous research or hypothetical stances regarding the possible connection between the use and reception of pidgin written English and its relationship to Deaf identity. Our observations and anecdotal comments from students point to its negative repercussions relative to identity. So, how do we apply the lessons we have learned from the acceptance of ASL to our responses to pidgin written English and the students who use it?

One possible opening is offered by Suresh Canagarajah in his article, "The Place of World Englishes in Composition: Pluralization Continued," in which he argues that we should work towards the acceptance of the integration of local varieties of English into Standard Written English, "contesting the monolingualist assumptions in composition" (586). Canagarajah talks about "a re-consideration of the native/non-native distinction . . . that embodies multiple norms and standards. English should be treated as a multi-national language, one that belongs to diverse communities" (589), a refreshing and encouraging view of Standard Written English. His model encourages teachers to train students to choose consciously those locations in a written text where non-standard usage, resulting from the interference of a first language, becomes an active choice. That choice would be motivated "by important cultural and ideological considerations" (609). He also insists that teachers read these choices not as a sign of error or lack of proficiency, but as evidence of independent and critical writing.

Paul Matsuda and Christine Tardy offer a similar argument in their article, "Voice in Academic Writing," in which they claim that voice (which they define broadly as a combination of discursive and non-discursive features) influences the reader's construction of the writer and, by extension, of the writer's identity. They define discursive features to include "sentence structures, organization, the use of transition devices, word choice, as well as content." They also cite syntax, mechanics, and careful editing as "features used by reviewers in constructing author voice." Matsuda and Tardy conclude that readers do construct identity through voice (as they have defined it). While Matsuda and Tardy include other components of voice, their reference to surface features is most applicable to professionals working with

writers of pidgin written English. These theorists/practitioners base their conclusions on hearing writers of “other Englishes.” However, the opening they offer is wide enough for deaf writers of pidgin English to walk through.

Another compelling change Canagarajah suggests is the importance of “shuttle[ing] between “communities in contextually relevant ways” (593). Students would make deliberate choices about when and how to use their dialect (in the case of deaf writers, pidgin written English). Canagarajah labels this movement between writing communities as “code meshing”—in which writers intentionally take advantage of their language variety for a rhetorical purpose, which results in a “hybrid text” (598). Code meshing is not new to academic writing (for example, bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldúa), but Canagarajah suggests it should become more universal, not limited to those with “elite bilingualism” (598). And it is certainly new for Deaf writers to consider such an intentional rhetorical move. We posit that a more accepting reception by readers trained to understand and value this code-meshing would result in a more positive identity emerging for these writers.

Like Canagarajah, we, too, want to challenge the monolingualists’ assumptions about Standardized Written English and open the ideological debate about the linguistic rights and status of pidgin written English. To do so requires that we shift the lens away from the deficit model, especially for readers both inside and outside the academy or the profession who think of pidgin written English as “dumb” and illiterate. It would also require pragmatic resolutions that we can locate in the academy, particularly in how we teach our students to “code mesh.” Such solutions would prevent these writers from experiencing the emotions expressed in the poem “Discourse on the Logic of Language” by Marlene Nourbese Philip:

“a more accepting
reception by readers
trained to understand
and value this
code-meshing”

. . . and english is
my mother tongue
is my father tongue
is lan lan lang
language
l/anguish
anguish
a foreign anguish
is English-...

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