Sign Language: The Open Sesame to the World of Social Communication
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When playwright Nina Raine was asked what inspired her to write Tribes, she said: “I first had the idea of writing Tribes when I watched a documentary about a deaf couple. The woman was pregnant. They wanted their baby to be deaf. I was struck by the thought that this was actually what many people feel, deaf or otherwise. Parents take great pleasure in witnessing the qualities they have managed to pass on to their children. Not only a set of genes. A set of values, beliefs. Even a particular language. The family is a tribe: an infighting tribe but intensely loyal.”

However, what makes the play so intriguing is that Nina Raine moves away from those parental comfort zones by writing about a hearing family (cum tribe) that has three children, one of whom is deaf.

The unspoken question is: What if the baby is a bit different than any other member of the tribe? The result is a play that’s packed with outrageous humor, amazing insightfulness and a feeling of empathy that is sustained to the very end.

One of the main points of contention within the family (the father, to be exact) revolves around the relative merits or shortcomings of the two predominant means of communication among the deaf: lip-reading (oralism) as compared to sign language.

This controversy has been going on for centuries and has not yet been settled to everyones’ satisfaction. Both skills are invaluable but the scope of ASL is indispensable. It is a complete language in every sense of the word by virtue of its structure, because it opens the door to human relationships, it permits the free give-and-take of ordinary conversation, a serious discussion about scientific concepts, and even the enjoyment of a theatre performance.

But this did not happen easily or quickly. It took centuries for sign language to reach the acceptance it has today.

Nearly 2,400 years ago, Aristotle asserted that “people could only learn through hearing the spoken word.” The deaf were therefore seen as being unable to learn or be educated at all. (Beethoven, Edison and Helen Keller, please take note.) This led to stringent laws banning the right to marry or own property in some places; and in the extreme, the law had them labeled as “non-persons.”

In the beginning of Christianity, St. Paul declared “faith comes only through hearing,” and about 350 years after that, St. Augustine said “deafness prevents faith.”

Ironically, while theology justified the exclusion of the deaf from full engagement with the divine, it was a French Catholic priest in 1771 who was the first to fully appreciate the extent to which signing was an integral part of understanding among the deaf community. Abbe Charles Michel de L’Epee observed how two deaf sisters communicated not only between themselves
through gestures but also with other deaf people on the streets of Paris who seemed to share the same ability. The more he watched, the more convinced he became that these gestures were not, as most assumed, simply wild and primitive pantomime, but rather “the language of the signs.”

This observation led him to acknowledge with humility, that as a hearing man he could actually learn from the deaf and use their “language” to teach them. In line with this, he refused to try to make the deaf “more like us.” And in so doing “he tacitly accepted their deafness as well as their language.”

However, Abbe de L’Eppe knew he was not following the religious doctrine of the day. To this he said as he set out on his mission, “I will attempt to get to heaven by at least trying to lead others there.”

He opened a school and eventually enrolled 200 deaf students. He is known today and historically as the “Father of the Deaf.”

But Abbe de L’Eppe’s innovative ideas were not accepted by all. In 1773 Samuel Heinicke, known as the “Father of Oral Deaf Education” was his main adversary.

His idea of teaching the deaf to speak rather than sign was certainly not new. It dates back to the 1500-1600s when it was believed that spoken language was essential to the development of thought processes. But Heinicke claimed he had remarkable success and since he was very influential, he had the support of the German government behind him.

The American timeline of sign language is intimately linked to Abbe de L’Epee.

1815: Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, a minister in Connecticut, was teaching the alphabet to a neighbor’s deaf child when the child’s father heard that deaf children in Europe were being formally educated. As quickly as possible he arranged to send Gallaudet abroad. By fortunate coincidence Gallaudet met the successor to Abbe de L’Eppe in London where he was giving a demonstration of his teaching methods. Gallaudet returned with him to Paris, spent four months learning the French Sign Language (FSL) and returned to Hartford bringing with him one of the most talented teachers from the Paris school, Lauren Clerc.

1817: The American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb opened. Based on Epee’s instructional material they created a manual that was a blend of the French and the English; and so the formal American Sign Language was born. The Hartford school, now called the American School for the Deaf, is still active.

1861: Abraham Lincoln opened a school for the deaf in Washington, D.C. and appointed Gallaudet’s son, Edward, as the first president of what is now Gallaudet University.

As sign language gained popularity, the oralist proponents both in America and Europe raised their voices in opposition with the backing of such prominent supporters as Alexander Graham Bell in the forefront. After 1900 Bell and Edward Gallaudet went head-to-head, debating in Congress, in public and in print. On the international scene and at home, ASL lost the battle but
ultimately won the war. Those who had learned ASL taught it to younger deaf children. It remained the language of choice among older deaf communities but in formal classrooms it was essentially banned for the next fifty years.

1960s: Dr. William Stokoe, a hearing linguist and English professor at Gallaudet, had a “Eureka moment” when he noted as he was analyzing sign language, that specific facial expressions consistently accompanied very specific grammatical constructions. ASL was indeed “rule governed.” This led to modern ASL linguistic research and its acceptance as a true language. The shadow of skepticism was lifted and it is now the fourth most-used language in the United States.

Primary Research Sources: ASL Start publication; Vassar alumnae Quarterly, 2003