Stokoe gives keynote address at linguistics conference

Dr. William C. Stokoe presented his own historical perspective on sign language research at the Second International Conference on Theoretical Issues in Sign Language Research, held on May 18-21 at Gallaudet University. The three-day conference, sponsored by Gallaudet's Department of Linguistics and Interpreting, was attended by 180 linguists and educators from ten countries. Proceedings of the conference, to be edited by Dr. Cell Lucas, Associate Professor in Gallaudet's Department of Linguistics and Interpreting, will be published by the Gallaudet University Press. Copies will be available in July, 1989, to coincide with "The Deaf Way" festival/conference. (See notice on page 5.)

Stokoe, who was recently awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters at Gallaudet University's 1988 commencement exercises, is regarded by many as the father of sign language linguistics. In the late 1950s, Stokoe, then Chairman of Gallaudet's English Department, was the first researcher to use the techniques of linguistics to analyze comprehensively the sign language used by deaf people. He discovered that "American Sign Language," as he called it, is a sophisticated language, with a grammar and syntax distinct from spoken languages, elegantly suited to the capabilities of signers' eyes and bodies. Stokoe's books, Sign Language Structure: An Outline of the Visual Communication Systems of the American Deaf (1960) and A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles (1965), became milestones in the emergence of deaf culture as a field of study for scholars and a source of pride for deaf people. As Director of Gallaudet's Linguistics Research Laboratory from 1971 to 1984, Stokoe published and lectured widely. He also supported generously the efforts of the many researchers who followed in his footsteps. Excerpts of his address are printed below. A complete version of the speech will be published in the conference proceedings.

The first stage

... The first stage of sign language research, which entailed looking at signing as a system and signs as parts of that system, lasted about ten years, roughly 1955 to 1965, the year A Dictionary of American Sign Language was published. Sign language research at this stage was a small and lonely operation, even at times an uncomfortable one. In 1960, when Sign Language Structure and The Calculus of Structure were published, the whole Gallaudet faculty in a special meeting denounced my sign language research. They charged me, in effect, with misappropriating funds, because, they said, I was paid to teach English, not to do research on sign language. They argued that paying attention to sign language could only interfere with the students' proper education. And in this city of Washington, descendants of the founder of the A.G. Bell Association, the National Geographic Society, and other foundations, on whose boards they still sit, publicly criticized the National Science Foundation for granting money to me and to Gallaudet College for sign language research and the publication of a dictionary of the language. They pointed out that [Alexander Graham] Bell had shown once and for all that signing retarded the deaf in their struggle to enter the world of the hearing.

Lonely and reviled at times, I was not alone. As in any research, the work of many hands, and heads, was needed. Here is a list of people who helped mightily in the first stage of the research. I apologize because I am sure to have left out some names, but many of you will be able to spot what all of these had or have in common:

Leon Auerbach  Vielas Johnson  Don Peterson  Dick Phillips
Tom Berg  Rex Lowman  T.J. O'Rourke
Dot Casterline  Bobby Padden  Allen Grammate  Don Padden  Roy Stewart
Carl Croneberg  Bob Panara  Jack Gannon  Eleanor Wezel

Transition and the second stage

I would locate the next stage of sign language research at about 1971. In the five or six years before it seemed that the whole thing might die and be forgotten. Uncounted copies of my 1960 monograph, Sign Language Structure, and the Dictionary, published in 1965, grew moldy and disintegrated in damp cartons in the basement of Fowler Hall. I kept trying to find out more about the syntax of signing, but by doing so I also kept increasing the resentment of most of my colleagues in the English Department—not so much because they didn't want sign language to be explored but because I maintained that systematic knowledge about American Sign Language could help all of us in teaching English to our students. I kept telling them that we might try teaching English as a second or foreign language to students whose first language was ASL. Of course of that meant radically changing our teaching and our thinking. In response to this threat, the second stage of sign language research on the Gallaudet campus began with a complete split away from the English Department. The Linguistics Research Laboratory (which had hitherto been a name to put at the top of grant applications so that I could be paid for teaching these days) became a full-time operation. I was given one low-ceilinged room in an old building, half a secretary's salary, and one quarter released from the teaching time of three assistants (James Woodward, Bob Lombrano, and the late Judy Williams, who were paid from grant funds).

But I must not too much distort the perspective by focusing on the Gallaudet campus alone. In the five or six years between the first two stages of sign language research, much was happening off campus. In Washington, linguists in the Center for applied Linguistics (CAL), the Georgetown University School of Language and Linguistics, and the Washington Linguistics Club were hearing from me regularly (or annoyingly) on how several aspects of sign language grammar paralleled the language that we were studying. In Reno, the Gardner's were beginning a bold new experiment using sign language [with chimpanzees]. They not only learned more about sign language but they hired deaf native signers as associates. In San Diego, Ursula Bellugi, impressed, as she has written, with the Gardner's work, was beginning to follow the language development of a deaf child of deaf parents, and using deaf persons as

*All were or are deaf.
informants, while graduate students of linguistics and psychology in the University of California, San Diego studied the parameters of sign language. Farther north in California, Wallace Chafe (a well known linguist) who had learned about signers and their culture when Carl Croneberg was his student at Catholic University) was encouraging linguistics graduate students at Berkeley to go all out with their analyses of ASL grammar.

Although the CAL has headquarters in Washington, it is in fact the center of a national and international network of linguists. Through its good offices, linguists at several major universities became interested in sign languages as unusual examples of the class languages. Gallaudet and the CAL collaborated on a comparative linguistics project funded by the National Institutes of Health. Thomas Sebock, a CAL director, proposed an international journal as early as 1970, and with his help, Sign Language Studies first appeared in 1972.

With these and other developments, it is difficult to estimate the size and extent of sign language research in this second stage, the decade of the seventies. In its first two or three years the new journal carried descriptions of sign languages on a Pacific Island, in southern France, and in Denmark, in addition to articles about American Sign Language. National Symposia on Sign Language Research and Teaching and earlier Special Studies Institutes, organized by T.J. O'Rourke, working through the National Association of the Deaf, stimulated research and its relation to teaching and interpreting to an immeasurable degree. And the fever spread: by the end of the decade, an international symposium in Sweden organized by Brita Bergman had brought together practitioners of sign language research from several countries. More nations were heard from at the Second International Symposium on Sign Language Research (ISSLR) in 1981 in Bristol. And at the third ISSLR in Rome in 1983, there were almost a score of national delegations, with signed interpretations provided in ten national sign languages by deaf researchers. But there is no clear count of the numbers of individual researchers actively investigating sign languages....

But this is supposed to be a perspective and not a statistical survey. What impresses me is that in this second stage important new knowledge was being found. Ted Supalla's contribution to syntax by pointing to the highly visible distinction between noun and verb in ASL is a discovery of the kind that make every worker in the field exclaim, "Why didn't I notice that?" Charlotte Baker-Shenk's use of the Ekman and Friesen Facial Action Coding System to describe nonmanual behavior puts knowledge about sign language syntax a long step ahead of the impressionistic notions that usually pass for description. Robbin Battison's dissertation in 1974 (see Lexical Borrowing in ASL, 1978) seems to have settled the question whether a language without sound can have a phonology; the presenters of papers on ASL phonology today have no need to justify using the term.

The third stage

I find it convenient to take all this interest in sign language phonology as marking the third stage of sign language research. In this stage, linguistics of sign language came of age; researchers, instead of working to "break the code," are engaged in finding the latest way to microanalyze its smaller and smaller fractions. Here we see not pioneering efforts to describe an unknown language but competing theories to describe what is now commonplace. How many parameters of a sign are there, and which of various counts is correct? Do signs have parameters in the strict sense of that term at all? Are signs to be considered the result of rules operating on bundles of simultaneous features contained in the HOLD and MOVE segments, as researched by Scott Liddell and Bob Johnson? Are signs, rather, composed in syllabic form with morae of movement and position, as researched by David Perlmutter? Is there something called "autosegmentation" going on in tiers? Are facial expressions and other nonmanual actions part of sign phonology or do they belong to another system? More generally, is a sign language like ASL more interesting because of its similarity to spoken languages or because of its differences?

Right here, in this uncertainty about final causes, which might seem to be a disadvantage, we have one excellent result of sign language research--some of the knowledge it has won has become part of the intellectual equipment of our time. When researchers in increasing numbers are arguing about signs, at least some of the attention that was turned off from signs in 1880 is being refocused. The knowledge that sign language can be argued about then trickles down to the informed public and changes general intellectual notions of what systems can in truth be called languages and what systems cannot.

Continued on next page
But deciding which particular set of rules best defines the phonology of ASL is something to be left to a future stage of sign language research. It is time now to try for a different perspective.

Sign language research and linguistic determinism

What I see as a scramble to find exactly the right set of universal rules for describing natural languages prompts me to take a more personal perspective. Looking not just at sign language research but at linguistic research generally, I see what looks like a mistake in direction, a tendency to treat grammar as an end in itself, a hermetically sealed set of rules—rigorous as mathematics....

My own historical perspective, based in the position of Trager and Smith, who viewed linguistics as a branch of the science of humanity and human culture, that is, of anthropology, prompts me to reflect that we have no certain evidence, either that language is all inside the brain, or that language is entirely outside, in the give and take of human interaction. Lacking evidence for either extreme theory, we will do well to consider language an effect of combined causes, an evolved system with physiological and social origins.... And knowing so many of you as I do, I know too that your interest in the details of sign language never dims your humane interest in the people who use it.

In a recent issue of Cognition (vol. 27, no. 1), for instance, Laura Petitto reports on a piece of sign language research that exemplifies this way of proceeding. It makes a neat distinction between gesture and sign language, and leaves the question open whether language is born in us, or comes from interacting with others, or both. The human gesture of pointing on oneself to mean ‘me’ and pointing at the one addressed to mean ‘you’ is natural, though not universal. (In some cultures the chin is used for pointing; in others the lips point, etc.) The same pair of inward and outward pointings are also the forms of the pronouns ME and YOU in American Sign Language. What more natural than that the deaf child begins using, as all children do, these “natural” gestures and that these gestures then smoothly become parts of the child’s sign language vocabulary and grammar?

In fact, as Petitto discovered in a careful longitudinal study, it does not happen that way. The child she observed used the “self” and “other” pointings at the usual early stage, stopped using them for a time, and then at the age when most children are learning the pronouns of their spoken language, “re-invented” them, but making the kind of mistakes typical of learners. Her study is one clear indication that language and gesture are separate systems; one does not develop smoothly into the other. But whether the child’s use of sign pronouns is driven by an internal language generating device, or by interaction with others who are competent in the language, we do not yet know. The likeliest guess is that both, internal and external, forces operate. In any case, we sign language researchers had better not prejudge the matter nor exclude any inconvenient data. Language research must look not just at what it is in people’s brains that makes language possible but also at what people say to each other and what they believe and expect, what they think about the world and themselves. Data of these kinds must be added to ideas about more and more phonological segments, features, and other constructs to keep sign language research from sterility. Perhaps in the fourth stage it will become easier that language competence and language as it is performed are parts of one system, a system that disappears when parts of it are unhooked from the system and examined separately.

Bringing it up to date

This view, that equal attention must be given to language, and to the people who use it and to what they use it for and about, has not impressed those who want to find in language a perfect, abstract system. It is a view that recent events have vindicated, however. Consider this: if sign language research in America had been directed solely at the internal structure of ASL, and even if a “Standard Model” grammar of all that linguists know were now in print, very few persons other than linguists would even know it existed. What has happened, however, as everyone in reach of print and electronic media now knows, is that, in passionate defense of their own language and culture, deaf people turned Gallaudet University around. It is their right to have their culture and their language respected, not the details of that language in the abstract, that people fight for.

The kind of sign language research that makes a real difference is further exemplified by one study of pairs of people, communicating in their preferred mode and language. Because the information passed from one partner to the other in the experiment could be measured precisely, the investigator who designed and conducted the experiment found that pairs of deaf signers communicated as fast and as accurately as pairs of hearing speakers—and that certain deaf pairs even surpassed the hearing controls. In my view it is no coincidence that this research was done for his doctoral dissertation by I. King Jordan, the scholar and teacher who is now the President of Gallaudet University.

Principal from Lebanese oral school experiments with bilingual approach

A Fulbright Scholarship has enabled Antoine Roumanos, an educator and psychologist from Lebanon, to come to Gallaudet. This fall to study American Sign Language and the linguistic principles of sign language research. Roumanos hopes his four-month experience as a guest of Gallaudet's International Center on Deafness (ICD) and the GRI's Culture and Communication Studies Program (CCSP) will equip him to begin an analysis of signs used by deaf people in Lebanon. Roumanos' visit is being coordinated by Dr. James C. Woodward, a Research Scientist in both the ICD and the CCSP.

Roumanos, who has advanced degrees in clinical psychology from the Sorbonne in Paris and in psychoethnography from Lyon II, teaches at the University of Saint-Joseph in Beirut and is Principal of the Institut de Reeducation Audio-Phonétique (IRAP), in Ain-Aar, one of seven schools for deaf children in Lebanon, a country roughly the size of Connecticut.

The IRAP, like all schools for deaf children in Lebanon (and in Arab countries generally) is fundamentally an oral school. Even the deaf adults who care for the children during after-school programs, evenings, and weekends have traditionally been encouraged to use speech as much as possible and to minimize their use of signs.