

Essays in Honor of William C. Stokoe

The Study of Signed Languages

David F. Armstrong,
Michael A. Karchmer,
and
John Vickrey Van Cleve
Editors

The Study of Signed Languages

The Study of Signed Languages

Essays in Honor of William C. Stokoe

David F. Armstrong,
Michael A. Karchmer,
and John Vickrey Van Cleve,
Editors

Gallaudet University Press
Washington, D.C.

Gallaudet University Press
Washington, DC 20002

© 2002 by Gallaudet University
All rights reserved. Published 2002
Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

The study of signed languages: essays in honor of William C. Stokoe/David F. Armstrong, Michael A. Karchmer, and John Vickrey Van Cleve, editors.

p. cm.

Papers presented at a conference honoring William Stokoe's 80th birthday held at Gallaudet University in 1999.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-56368-123-4 (alk. paper)

1. Sign language—Congresses. 2. Sign language—Research—
Congresses. 3. American Sign Language—Congresses. 4. Deaf—Means
of communication—Congresses. 5. Deaf—Education—Congresses.

I. Stokoe, William C. II. Armstrong, David F. III. Karchmer, Michael A.
IV. Van Cleve, John V.

HV2474 .S78 2002

419.7—dc21

2001059781

Ⓢ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

C O N T E N T S

List of Contributors	viii
----------------------	------

Preface	xi
---------	----

William C. Stokoe and the Study of Signed Languages

David F. Armstrong and Michael A. Karchmer

Introduction	1
--------------	---

Bill Stokoe: An ASL Trailblazer

I. King Jordan

PART I: Historical Perspectives

Introduction	9
--------------	---

John Vickrey Van Cleve

1 The Curious Death of Sign Language Studies in the Nineteenth Century	13
---	----

Douglas C. Baynton

2 Historical Observations on the Relationship Between Research on Sign Languages and Language Origins Theory	35
--	----

Adam Kendon

- 3** Modality Effects and Conflicting Agendas 53
Scott K. Liddell

PART 2: Language Origins

- Introduction** 85
David F. Armstrong

- 4** Does Sign Language Solve the Chomsky Problem? 89
Frank R. Wilson

- 5** Continuity, Ethology, and Stokoe: How to Build a Better Language Model 100
Roger S. Fouts and Gabriel S. Waters

- 6** William C. Stokoe and the Gestural Theory of Language Origins 118
Sherman E. Wilcox

PART 3: Diverse Populations

- Introduction** 133
Michael A. Karchmer

- 7** The Impact of Variation Research on Deaf Communities 137
Ceil Lucas, Robert Bayley, Mary Rose, and Alyssa Wulf

- 8** The Impact of Sign Language Research on Black Deaf Communities in America 161
Glenn B. Anderson

9	Bilingualism and the Impact of Sign Language Research on Deaf Education	172
	Britta Hansen	
10	Sign Communication Training and Motor Functioning in Children with Autistic Disorder and in Other Populations	190
	John D. Bonvillian	
11	Gesture and the Nature of Language in Infancy: The Role of Gesture as a Transitional Device En Route to Two-Word Speech	213
	Olga Capirci, M. Cristina Caselli, Jana M. Iverson, Elena Pizzuto, and Virginia Volterra	
	Concluding Thoughts	
	The Future of American Sign Language	247
	Carol A. Padden and Jennifer Rayman	
	Index	263

CONTRIBUTORS

Glenn B. Anderson
Department of Rehabilitation
Education and Research
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, Arkansas

Robert Bayley
Bilingual-Bicultural Studies
University of Texas, San Antonio
San Antonio, Texas

Douglas C. Baynton
Department of History
University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

John D. Bonvillian
Department of Psychology
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia

Olga Capirci
Institute of Psychology
National Research Council (CNR)
Rome, Italy

M. Cristina Caselli
Institute of Psychology
National Research Council (CNR)
Rome, Italy

Roger S. Fouts
Chimpanzee and Human
Communication Institute
Central Washington University
Ellensburg, Washington

Britta Hansen
Center for Sign Language and
Sign Supported Communication
Copenhagen, Denmark

Jana M. Iverson
Department of Psychology
University of Missouri—Columbia
Columbia, Missouri

I. King Jordan
Office of the President
Gallaudet University
Washington, D.C.

Adam Kendon
Visiting Scholar
Institute for Research in Cognitive
Science
University of Pennsylvania

Scott K. Liddell
Department of Linguistics
and Interpretation
Gallaudet University
Washington, D.C.

Ceil Lucas
Department of Linguistics
and Interpretation
Gallaudet University
Washington, D.C.

Carol A. Padden
Department of Communication
University of California, San Diego
San Diego, California

Elena Pizzuto
Institute of Psychology
National Research Council (CNR)
Rome, Italy

Jennifer Rayman
Department of Education and
Social Sciences
University of Central Lancashire
Preston, United Kingdom

Mary Rose
Department of Linguistics
Stanford University
Stanford, California

Virginia Volterra
Institute of Psychology
National Research Council
(CNR)
Rome, Italy

Gabriel S. Waters
Department of Linguistics
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Sherman E. Wilcox
Department of Linguistics
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Frank R. Wilson, M.D.
Department of Physical Therapy
and Rehabilitation Science
University of California,
San Francisco
San Francisco, California

Alyssa Wulf
Department of Linguistics
University of California,
Berkeley
Berkeley, California

P R E F A C E

William C. Stokoe and the Study of Signed Languages

David F. Armstrong and
Michael A. Karchmer

The right man in the right place at the right time.

This volume celebrates the work of William C. Stokoe, one of the most influential language scholars of the twentieth century. To understand his impact on both the educational fortunes of deaf people and on the science of language, it is necessary to consider briefly the status of these two related fields in the early 1950s. The almost universal educational goal for deaf people at this time was acquisition of spoken language and the ability to discern speech on the lips—other educational goals, including the acquisition of general knowledge, were arguably secondary to the development of “oral” skills. It was perhaps not coincidental that linguistic science had no interest in the gestural language of deaf people—language was synonymous with speech. This point is well captured in the title of one of the most influential books on linguistics of the first half of the twentieth century, Edward Sapir’s *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*. Sapir, writing in the 1920s, dismissed sign languages as substitution codes for spoken languages—speech was dominant (Sapir 1921: 21). The

views of “experts” on deaf education in the mid-1950s may be best summed up by Helmer Myklebust, a product of Gallaudet’s graduate school.

The manual language used by the deaf is an ideographic language . . . it is more pictorial, less symbolic. . . . Ideographic language systems, in comparison with verbal systems, lack precision, subtlety, and flexibility. It is likely that Man cannot achieve his ultimate potential through an Ideographic language. . . . The manual sign language must be viewed as inferior to the verbal as a language. (Myklebust 1957: 241–42)

It’s all here in this short passage: sign language is equated with the despised, non-alphabetic writing system of a non-Western people (the Chinese), it is said to lack the precision of speech, and it is stated, without any evidence, that deaf people will not achieve their full potential through its use. When Stokoe arrived at Gallaudet in 1955, he was entering an environment that was dominated by thinking like this. His achievements with respect to the value of signed languages were essentially fourfold. Stokoe’s first achievement was to realize that the signed language his students used among themselves had all the important characteristics common to spoken languages and that it had the same potential for human communication. His second achievement was to devise a descriptive system that would convince language scholars of these facts. This was what gave him the legitimacy to pursue his third achievement—convincing much of the general public and the educational establishment of the human and educational value of allowing deaf children to communicate in natural signed languages. His fourth grand achievement was then to apply what he had learned from the study of signed languages to the larger problems of the nature and evolution of the human capacity for language.

In his introduction to this volume, I. King Jordan refers to Stokoe as being in the right place at the right time, and we will elaborate on that theme here. Before he arrived at Gallaudet, Stokoe, of course, had had little experience communicating with deaf people and no professional training in the education of deaf children. It is a matter of great

interest to understand why Stokoe was able to see these things when the bulk of professionals trained in the relevant areas could not—if we come to even a partial answer to this question, we will have gained a bit of insight into the nature of human genius. With hindsight, it seems obvious that one of the things he had going for him was precisely his *lack* of training (or prejudice) in areas relevant to deafness. He also brought a first-rate mind (an inquiring mind) and training in the study of language generally (he had bachelor's and Ph.D. degrees in English from Cornell). The final ingredients seem to have been his persistence (some would say his obstinacy), his predisposition to question authority, and a well-developed sense of fairness or justice (see Maher 1986, for a discussion of his childhood, his education, and his first years at Gallaudet).

For someone with an open and inquiring mind, and an interest in language and communication, there can be few more stimulating environments than that provided by Gallaudet. Here deaf people communicate among themselves and with hearing people using a great variety of communication systems and codes that we can now recognize, thanks to Stokoe, as ranging from natural signed languages (mainly ASL), to what look like languages of contact between ASL and English, to invented sign codes syntactically modeled on English. During the course of an average day, members of the Gallaudet community are likely to have to negotiate a number of communication situations involving a number of these systems and codes. In this environment, one develops a heightened sense of the range of possible forms that languages can take and a sensitivity to the differences among them.

We have established already that Stokoe was the right person, and now we have located him in the right place. What about the time? Stokoe arrived at Gallaudet just as the civil rights movement was beginning to challenge the traditional caste structure of the United States. As this movement matured during the 1960s, an idea became firmly entrenched in the United States that individuals should not be deprived of legal, civil, educational, or economic rights because of their membership in any particular ethnic, religious, or linguistic group. Ultimately, this idea was extended to include people with physical disabilities. It cannot be completely coincidental that the nascent movement that

Stokoe helped to launch came ultimately to be seen as a civil rights movement in its own right.

What He Did

So what was it exactly that he did? He is often described as having “discovered” ASL or as having “proved” that ASL is a language. A good deal of mythology seems to have sprung up around this question, and we think that, to some extent, Stokoe felt about it the way Columbus should have felt when he was described as having “discovered” America. Just as American Indians had known about the Americas for more than 10,000 years before Columbus arrived, so deaf people had been aware of the “linguageness” of their signing and of the benefits that it conferred long before Stokoe came on the scene. They were also “proving” that it was a real language on a daily basis by using it to perform all of the functions that languages usually perform. But just as Columbus had done with respect to the scope of the physical world, Stokoe’s accomplishment was to reveal these facts to a larger, skeptical public; and, in doing so, he made a “Columbian” addition to our knowledge of the linguistic world and to our understanding of the human condition.

One aspect of Stokoe’s genius was to recognize that it would not be good enough simply to announce the “good news” that sign language was really a language—he would need to show it using the tools of the science of language, the tools of descriptive linguistics. Linguistic science in the mid-1950s was just about to be turned on its head by a young scholar named Noam Chomsky. He launched an intellectual revolution following which language came to be seen more as a cognitive than as a social phenomenon, but that revolution need not concern us here. Stokoe was mainly influenced by an older anthropological linguistics that had as its most urgent goal describing exotic languages that were facing extinction. Anthropological linguists, and anthropologists in general for that matter, had for a half century been trying to overcome Western prejudices that had depicted non-Western languages as somehow inferior to those of Europe. These scholars had developed an

armamentarium that could be used to describe any spoken language and commit it to paper.

They had come to realize that all languages have regular structures at a level below that of the individual word—according to the terminology of linguistics, they have sublexical or phonological structure. This structure is based upon systems of contrast—differences in meaning must be based upon perceptible differences in language sounds, as in *bat* and *bat*. It is this sublexical structure that makes phonetic writing possible, and all spoken languages have it. Stokoe's masterstroke was to show that ASL has such a structure and that it too can be written in a phonetic-like script (Stokoe 1960; Stokoe, Croneberg and Casterline 1965). By devising a workable script, he was able to convince other language scholars that ASL employs such a system of linguistic contrast, that it has a regular internal structure, and that is, therefore, not simply ad-hoc pantomime or a corrupt visual code for English. It is beyond the scope of this introduction to describe Stokoe's system (see Armstrong 1999, for a description of the system and a discussion of its historical importance), but it is worth noting that it has held up well, despite numerous attempts to improve upon it, and is still used to transcribe signed languages. Stokoe, along with two deaf colleagues, Carl Croneberg and Dorothy Casterline, used this notation system to compile the first comprehensive dictionary of ASL in 1965.

Having completed this initial descriptive work, Stokoe then set about convincing the larger world of the linguistic qualities of ASL, he took these ideas "on the road" so to speak. At Gallaudet, he put in place several operations that would further bolster the legitimacy of ASL and other signed languages. First, he set up the Linguistic Research Laboratory in 1971 and invited people in from around the world to work on problems in the description and interpretation of signed languages. This provided an institutional home for signed language research. Second, in 1972, he founded the journal *Sign Language Studies* to provide an outlet for publication of increasingly complex and sophisticated scholarly articles on linguistic and other aspects of the signed languages of deaf people. This was at a time when mainstream linguistics journals showed little interest in publishing work from this incipient field.

Stokoe owned, edited, and published this journal himself for more than twenty years, and the journal chronicles the growth and maturation of the fields of signed language research and deaf studies. It is now owned and operated by Gallaudet University Press.

During the early 1970s, Stokoe began to see that his work on ASL might have a larger significance, beyond the development of increasingly complex linguistic studies and the support these were providing for the reform of deaf education. At this time, Stokoe became interested in the newly reinvigorated scientific study of the origin and evolution of the human capacity for language. Because this topic had been the subject of rampant and undisciplined speculation around the turn of the twentieth century, it had fallen out of favor with linguists and anthropologists. Stokoe joined a small group of scholars, including Gordon Hewes, Charles Hockett, Roger Wescott, Stevan Harnad, and Horst Steklis, who began to synthesize new information from paleontology, primatology, neuroscience, linguistics, and, significantly, sign language studies into more coherent scenarios for the evolution of language (see Harnad, Steklis, and Lancaster 1976). During the past quarter century, these scenarios have grown more sophisticated and plausible, due in large part to Stokoe's efforts.

Stokoe concerned himself especially with evolutionary problems that might be solved by postulating a signing stage in human evolution. He participated in several important symposia on this topic, one of which resulted in the book *Language Origins* (Wescott 1974). In order to get this book into print, Stokoe established a small publishing company, Linstok¹ Press, which also took over publication of the journal *Sign Language Studies*. Stokoe came to believe that iconic manual gesture must have played a key role in the transition from non-human primate communication to human language. In making this assertion, he was rediscovering a line of thinking that went back at least to the Abbé de Condillac, an influential figure in the French enlightenment of the

1. It is worth noting for posterity that the name "Linstok" was a play on the words "linguistics," "Stokoe," and "linstock," the last referring to a device used to hold a match for firing a cannon.

eighteenth century. According to this line of thinking, the introduction of iconic manual gesture might solve the problem of attribution of meaning to arbitrary vocal signals—iconic gestures which resemble the things they refer to might form a bridge to the symbolic relationship of speech sounds to their referents. This might occur if iconic gestures became paired with non-iconic sounds in reference to objects and events in the environment. But Stokoe went a step beyond this to suggest that iconic manual gestures might also have been involved in the thornier question of how syntax might have originated. This goes to the question at the heart of Chomskyan linguistics which posits syntax as the defining characteristic of human languages—how do languages come to refer not only to objects and events, but to the infinite number of possible relationships among them?

Although Stokoe was no fan of Chomskyan linguistics, there is an interesting parallel between his later thinking and that of Chomsky. We alluded above to the increasing complexity of the linguistics of signed languages. Stokoe began to see in this an unnecessary and ultimately unproductive obscurantism. In response to this trend, he published in 1991, an extraordinarily original article entitled “Semantic Phonology.” At the same time, Chomsky was moving in the direction of a “minimalist program” for generative linguistics (Chomsky 1995). According to this program, the number of essential linguistic parameters could be reduced to two: a logical form and a phonetic form. Stokoe proposed that all of the multilayered complexity that had been introduced in linguistic descriptions of signed languages could also be reduced to two parameters: something acting (in the case of manual gesture, a hand) and its action. Stokoe pointed out, moreover, that this acting unit had the essential characteristics of one of Chomsky’s elementary sentences, a noun phrase plus a verb phrase. The final link in his chain of reasoning is that use of such iconic manual gestures by early humans might have led to analysis of the agent/action relationship that is inherent to them, leading ultimately to the elaboration of syntax and, hence, language. His views on these and many other issues are summed up in his final major work, a book entitled *Language in Hand*, published posthumously by Gallaudet University Press (Stokoe 2001; and see Armstrong, Stokoe, and Wilcox 1995).

This Volume

This volume contains papers that were presented at the Gallaudet conference honoring Bill Stokoe's eightieth birthday. It is important to emphasize that the fall 1999 conference and this volume originally were planned as a living tribute, not as a memorial to mark his passing. Indeed, Stokoe was very much present at the conference—sitting with family and friends close to the presenters and drinking in every word and sign. In the months that followed, despite rapidly deteriorating health, Stokoe's spirits were buoyed in discussions of the issues raised by each of the presenters. Sadly, the time left to him was all too brief and Bill Stokoe died on April 4, 2000, a few months short of his eighty-first birthday.

It was the intention of the conference's organizers to engage leading scholars in the many scholarly disciplines that his work had influenced, and the wide range of his ideas is represented here. The volume is divided into three major topical sections, bracketed by introductory and closing papers by I. King Jordan and Carol Padden. The sections have to do with the historical context of Stokoe's work, the issue of language origins, and the diverse populations, deaf and hearing, that have benefited from the work he began. Each section is preceded by a brief introduction, and we leave discussion of the individual papers to authors of those introductions. However, we point out that Stokoe's impact is at least partly revealed by the range of time during which the scholars represented in this book have known him and been influenced by him. The range is wide indeed, from deaf scholars such as Jordan and Padden who had known and worked with Stokoe for thirty years or more, to Frank Wilson, author of the widely acclaimed book, *The Hand*, who had known of Stokoe and his work for only a few years before Stokoe's death. The point, of course, is that the work that Wilson drew on in his book was done during the 1990s, when Stokoe was already in his seventies. It is a measure of his full achievement, that he was still doing fresh and original intellectual work forty years after he began.

One final note—the authors of many of the papers were Stokoe's close personal friends, as well as his professional colleagues, and many were aware that they were probably seeing him for the last time at the

conference in October, 1999 where the papers were first presented. For this reason, some of the papers present scholarly findings with a personal tone. It was the judgment of the editors, in several cases, that it would be appropriate to retain these personal references in final print form. It is in that spirit that we close this section in the way that Bill Stokoe ended each of his e-mails. It is the way that ham radio operators signal “over and out.” Here’s to you, Bill—“73.”

References

- Armstrong, David F. 1999. *Original signs: Gesture, sign, and the sources of language*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press.
- Armstrong, David F., William C. Stokoe, and Sherman E. Wilcox. 1995. *Gesture and the nature of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1995. *The minimalist program*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Harnad, Stevan R., Horst D. Steklis, and Jane Lancaster. 1976. *Origins and evolution of language and speech*. New York: New York Academy of Sciences.
- Maher, Jane. 1996. *Seeing language in signs. The work of William C. Stokoe*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press.
- Myklebust, Helmer. 1957. *The psychology of deafness*. New York: Grune and Stratton.
- Sapir, Edward. 1921. *Language: An introduction to the study of speech*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World.
- Stokoe, William C. 1960. *Sign language structure: An outline of the visual communication systems of the American Deaf*. Studies in Linguistics: Occasional Papers, 8. Buffalo, N.Y.: University of Buffalo Department of Anthropology and Linguistics.
- . 1991. “Semantic phonology.” *Sign Language Studies* 71: 107–14.
- . 2001. *Language in sign: Why sign came before speech*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press.
- Stokoe, William C., Dorothy Casterline, and Carl G. Croneberg. 1965. *A dictionary of American sign language on linguistic principles*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet College Press.
- Westcott, Roger. 1974. *Language origins*. Silver Spring, Md.: Linstok Press.
- Wilson, Frank. 1997. *The hand: How its use shapes the brain, language, and human culture*. New York: Pantheon.

INTRODUCTION

Bill Stokoe: An ASL Trailblazer

I. King Jordan

I cannot resist starting this volume dedicated to the work of Bill Stokoe with a personal anecdote illustrating an aspect of his character: an aspect that allowed him to become a revolutionary in support of the language rights of deaf people. Back in the 1970s, during my first few years at Gallaudet, Stokoe and I were flying back to Washington from a conference in Chicago. Halfway through the flight, our plane encountered some serious turbulence, including a sudden drop of about a thousand feet. What was Stokoe doing while I was turning green? He was busy making sure to position his glass so that the scotch that had been in it and was now suspended in front of him would fall back into it when the plane settled down. He succeeded of course.

Before we can truly appreciate what Bill Stokoe did, we need to consider what the world was like for deaf people—for us—when he came to Gallaudet in the 1950s. At that time, many—maybe most—deaf people were ashamed of and often hid their deafness, and this was true not only of deaf people but of people with disabilities generally. A decade earlier, even the president of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, felt compelled to hide his inability to walk and the wheelchair or crutches that he regularly used. In those “bad old days,” deaf people who used sign language were considered “oral failures.” Sign language was not accepted as an appropriate mode of communication for teaching. A majority of schools for deaf children were totally oral.

How bad was it? In an article published in the *American Annals of the Deaf* soon after I began teaching at Gallaudet, my co-authors and I revealed that at the elementary education level, not one school or program in the entire United States acknowledged sign language as its official means of communication. During this period, the preschool operated by Gallaudet's Kendall elementary school was located in one of the college buildings, and a solid wooden fence was erected around its playground. The story at the time was that the fence was there to prevent the young preschoolers from seeing the college students signing to each other. It was also common to hear stories about punishments that were meted out to young children in schools for the deaf who were caught signing. But even though sign language was forbidden in the classroom, it thrived where a considerable part of education always takes place: on the playgrounds and in the dormitories.

The issue of what modes of communication were and were not appropriate was not new when Stokoe arrived at Gallaudet. Sign-based education had been in retreat since the International Congress on Education of the Deaf in Milan in 1880. Throughout Europe and the United States, the goal for both parents and educators was to make deaf children as "normal"—meaning "hearing"—as possible. In practical terms, this meant that no school at any level offered formal education using signing of any kind. Moreover, when a child signed "naturally," that is, in American Sign Language (ASL), it was seen either as "broken English" or as an indication of inferior intellect. Most painful to remember is that because deaf children were denied a language in which they could learn, they were often denied access to the most basic information and experiences. All of us of a certain age can remember story after story showing how the most "progressive" ideas about deaf education during that time were actually the most harmful. Put into practice, those ideas did not educate—they oppressed.

Even some of the brightest deaf leaders internalized and accepted negative definitions of themselves. They "knew" that the hearing world was better than the deaf world. They "knew" they could never hope to have the advantages—the education, the achievements, the careers—that appeared to be so easily acquired in that hearing world. Fortunately, Stokoe was in the right place at the right time to make dramatic

changes in those deeply ingrained attitudes. I say the right time because, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, this country was in the midst of upheaval that would have an impact on all cultural and ethnic groups, and ultimately disabled people as well. He could not have come to Gallaudet at a better moment.

To understand how remarkable and unexpected Stokoe's research was, it is necessary to recall that this was a person who had no knowledge of signing at all when he came to Gallaudet. Remember also that in those days, new faculty at the college did not get intensive training in sign language—they were thrust into the classroom and were expected to fend for themselves. Nevertheless, soon after he joined the English Department faculty, Professor Stokoe became intrigued with the communication that was occurring in his classrooms. Because he had an outsider's perspective without all the accepted "baggage" about sign language, he was able to see what others had not. He saw that his students were indeed communicating among themselves about sophisticated ideas. He became fascinated with their fluency and grace, and he soon perceived a contradiction between what he was observing and what he had been told to expect.

Puzzled by this paradox, he began to look more carefully at the behavior itself, behavior that he saw happening all around the campus. In doing this, Stokoe was doing something that few, if any, educators or researchers were doing at the time. He simply looked at what deaf people were doing instead of blindly accepting what hearing (and even some deaf) "experts" said. He also asked deaf people what they were doing, and often the answers he received surprised him. Many of the deaf faculty members, people who communicated easily and fluently with each other and with their students, told him that signing was not language. In fact, when Stokoe argued that sign language *was* a language, many deaf people not only disagreed with him, they criticized him for saying so publicly.

Stokoe was not deterred by this criticism. He continued his detailed observations of deaf people signing and became even more convinced that he was seeing a language in use, a language that was not transmitted by sound but by sight. Because he wanted to test this belief, he began to study the theories and techniques of anthropology and

linguistics. His work was revolutionary because he was able to cut through the myths and misconceptions that so pervasively influenced the thinking of the time, even at Gallaudet. As a scholar in stubborn pursuit of the truth, he applied his keen scientific mind to the problem of describing how deaf people on Kendall Green (the Gallaudet campus) communicated with one another. While this seems simple today, it was not in 1960. By doing what he did, he changed our world.

I would like to quote here from David Armstrong's *Original Signs*: "The notion that these sign systems might be languages in the same sense as the world's spoken languages originated with William C. Stokoe, a language scholar who began working at Gallaudet University . . . during the 1950s" (1999, 18). A simple statement with profound implications. Stokoe was the first researcher to apply linguistic principles to the signed communication that was taking place around him. His work resulted in the first demonstration that American Sign Language could be described according to the same principles as those used to describe all languages. What inspired him to do it? I think this is best summed up in a statement written by Sherman Wilcox shortly after Stokoe's death: "His study of language was inspired by his deep understanding that the people who use language come first. His profound respect for Deaf people and their language was the bedrock of his work" (2000, 9).

I indicated earlier that Stokoe had landed in the right place. Of course, it is no accident that his research was conducted at Gallaudet. Gallaudet was then and still is both the center of the world of deaf education, and an institution of higher learning. Stokoe's work represents all that is best about American higher education. In an environment of academic freedom, he was able to pursue what seemed at first glance to be an odd notion—doesn't something have to be spoken to be a language? On a college campus even those who opposed his thinking could not finally obstruct his work. And you can be sure that many educators, both hearing and deaf, did object to his thinking. Stokoe took a centuries-old debate and changed its focus by challenging accepted interpretations of reality. He openly questioned conventional wisdom and refused to be deterred by the naysayers.

Stokoe's research was also possible because Gallaudet was and still is the mecca for the American deaf community. Deaf and hard of hearing people at Gallaudet have always represented a broad spectrum of perspectives. Just as the American deaf community reflects the larger American society, so Gallaudet is a microcosm of the deaf community. Stokoe's research found fertile ground on this campus. Looking back on more than forty years of his research, I find that I cannot fully measure its impact. By legitimizing a language he legitimized a culture. By legitimizing a culture he set the stage for a profound change in the lives of countless deaf people. He shattered the notion best expressed as "deaf world bad, hearing world good." He shattered the paternalistic thinking that had discouraged far too many people from seeking and achieving success.

Although much has changed on the Gallaudet campus since Stokoe first arrived, much has not. Gallaudet had then—and still has today—the largest group of educated deaf individuals to be found in one place anywhere in the world (probably the largest group of deaf people period). Gallaudet was then—and still is—the only university of its kind that the world has so far seen fit to create, a place where visual communication allows every person present to communicate directly with every other person. As a result of Stokoe's work, this ideal has expanded. As a result of his work, students who come to Gallaudet—no matter where they fall on the continuum of deafness or on the spectrum of communication experience—leave with a greater sense of pride in themselves. The coexistence of two languages at the university, ASL and English, continues to raise issues that are difficult and complex, and the university continues to work to resolve them. Just as Bill Stokoe stepped up to the challenge more than forty years ago, we will continue to step up to that challenge today. If the world deaf community owes Stokoe a debt of gratitude, the debt owed by Gallaudet is even greater.

Armstrong writes that Stokoe's "success in winning acceptance of ASL as a natural human language, at least from the scientific community, is one of the great achievements in the behavioral sciences" (1999, 69). As a behavioral scientist, I heartily concur. Without Stokoe's

seminal work, the papers in this volume that follow could not have been written. Of course, I must hasten to add that the impact of his work on the community at large has been at least as great as that on the scientific community. Without his work, for example, I am not sure that the Gallaudet community would have had the self-confidence it took to launch the Deaf President Now (DPN) movement, and we might not today be benefiting from all the positive changes that have rippled through our lives as a result.

Stokoe's work is still visible on the Gallaudet campus today. Gallaudet now has a Department of American Sign Language, Linguistics, and Interpretation, a Center for American Sign Language Literacy, and sign language classes for faculty, staff, and students. Gallaudet University Press has revitalized *Sign Language Studies*, the journal Stokoe founded in 1972, returning this irreplaceable periodical to print. In sum, Stokoe's work has resulted in a revolution in communication for deaf people, greater self-esteem, more employment opportunities, and the belief that deaf individuals can pursue and achieve our dreams, whatever they may be.

Bill Stokoe died about six months after the Gallaudet conference celebrating his eightieth birthday. One predominant theme ran through the entire conference, and it can be summed up in these words: "Thank you, Bill, for all you did for the deaf community, for the community of scholars, and for Gallaudet University."

References

- Armstrong, David F. 1999. *Original signs: Gesture, sign, and the sources of language*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press.
- Jordan, I. King, Gerilee Gustason, and Roslyn Rosen. 1976. Current communication trends at programs for the deaf. *American Annals of the Deaf* 121: 527–32.
- Wilcox, Sherman E. 2000. Appreciation. *Sign Language Studies* 1: 7–9.

PART I

Historical Perspectives

INTRODUCTION

John Vickrey Van Cleve

Commentators often state that Bill Stokoe was the first scholar to recognize deaf people's signing as a true language, one capable of conveying a broad range of human thought and emotion. This assertion accurately reflects the state of scholarship during the generation in which Stokoe began his work, but it lacks historical perspective. It therefore misinterprets what his work means to the history of ideas. More importantly, such a simplistic and circumscribed view obscures the extent to which the meaning of deafness has been changeable, socially constructed, and therefore capable of further alteration to the benefit of people who are deaf. Careful examination reveals that rich debates about sign language, gesture, and speech once characterized a period that long antedated Stokoe's late twentieth-century studies, a time when philosophers of language took a broad, speculative approach to their subject, one that Stokoe would have embraced.

Chapters in this section by Douglas Baynton and Adam Kendon review the tumultuous history of ideas about signing and signed languages. They show that visual language attracted intense European and American scholarly interest, study, and speculation in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Sign language sometimes attained a lofty status in this milieu. Some argued that it was the original language, arising before speech; others believed that sign was more expressive than speech, that it better conveyed emotions, or that it was closer to the rhetorical ideal mentioned by classical authors. Yet studies of sign language disappeared—indeed, were even banished—from