

Foreword

In this issue of JASHM, historian Douglas Baynton provides an illuminating exegesis of changing attitudes towards deafness and sign language in American society since the middle of the 19th century. His carefully documented article teaches us a great deal about this specific topic, but also encourages serious consideration of wider theoretical issues that are of considerable importance to the anthropology of human movement, and the discipline of anthropology generally.

Baynton reminds us that it is culturally and historically situated meta-theoretical discourses that shape and define the kinds of questions that can be asked of any subject. Such discourses often provide unquestioned epistemological grounds *from* which theorizing can proceed. In this case, Darwinian evolutionary theory redefined the very nature of being human in nineteenth century western thought, with consequences that reached far beyond academia. The social Darwinism that ensued was not without its political uses as a means to justify sexist and racist assumptions about 'human nature', for example.

Since reinventions of nature are part of cultural politics our constructions of human movement *as constitutive of human being* set on stage what kind of creature we expect to enact the human drama. Baynton describes how evolutionary discourses that defined human body movement as 'animal-like' and 'primitive' provided justification for educational theories and policies which denied deaf people the opportunity to be educated in their native sign languages. I am reminded how a similar rhetoric of "civilizing the savages" led to the ban on American Indian languages in government boarding schools of the same period with disastrous consequences for many individuals thus alienated, and for the languages themselves, most of which are now seriously endangered. A prevailing conception of gesture as "primitive precursor to speech" meant that users of Plains Sign Language were readily classified as "savages" on a presumed social evolutionary scale. In her appreciative essay in response to Baynton's article (*infra* pp. 174-189), Williams notes that the same set of beliefs and ideologies have adversely affected dancers and the

study of dancing in western cultures. Here is an unlikely arena, then, where Deaf persons, Plains Indians, and dancers find common ground.

It would be a mistake to assume that these attitudes toward body movement and signed languages have disappeared because evolutionism is no longer a dominant paradigm in contemporary social theorizing. For example, a quiet revolution began in 1960 when William Stokoe first demonstrated to the linguistic community that the sign language used by American deaf people was not a speech surrogate or a secondary code but a fully grammaticalized discursive system – a natural human language. While Stokoe's work has generated a flourishing subfield of sign language linguistics, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, the importance of this research for linguistics and linguistic anthropology has yet to be realized. Despite three decades of scholarly research into signed languages, gesture, and the anthropology of human movement systems, the assumption among most linguists is that only vocal material can be the basis of natural languages.

In the most recent edition of John Lyons' classic text, *Language and Linguistics: An Introduction*, for example, the author finds nothing wrong with the suggestion that

'[Sign language', 'body language' or the 'language of bees' would be considered by most people as a metaphorical use of the word 'language' (Lyons 1981:2).

Likewise, in the introduction to the 1994 edition of Clark, Escholz and Rosa's textbook, *Language: Introductory Readings*, there is a section boldly headed "Non-Languages" which states:

Other kinds of human communication [besides speech] are sometimes called language: body language, or kinesics, is one example. The way we use our bodies in sitting, standing, walking, is said to be expressive of things we do not say. It probably is but that does not make it language. Body language lacks duality, in that it is not symbolic but rather a direct representation of feeling; discreteness in that there is no alphabet of distinctive movements or postures; and productivity, in that "original" expressions are likely not to be understood. Moreover it appears to be only partly arbitrary, for the movement or posture is often selected by its "meaning" as representational, not arbitrary; "barrier signs" such as crossing one's arms or legs need no dictionary (Bolton in Clark, Escholz and Rosa eds., 1994: 6-7).

The fact that this dismissive, naive restatement of a popular pseudo-psychological model of 'body language' appears in the revised edition of a

widely used American college textbook reveals the depth and ongoing nature of the problem. The author assumes that physical action is either purely instrumental or, *a la* Darwin, the direct biological and external expression of internal feeling. According to this perspective, action signs are decidedly non-linguistic, have no structure, and require no translation from one culture to another; sign languages are ignored altogether.

Although a residual Darwinism is clearly at work here, it is also the case that the western bifurcation of the person into 'mind' and 'body' provides a series of meta-theoretical assumptions that continue to distort our understanding of human action. The unexamined meta-theoretical assumptions behind the kind of statements cited above stem from longstanding Platonic-Cartesian dualisms that locate thinking, reason and vocal signs 'in the mind', in opposition to a mechanistic materiality of 'the body' that houses only emotion (as non-thought, non-reason) and physical experience (sensation), (see Varela 1995 and Farnell 1994 for further discussion).

One consequence of this bifurcation is that analyses of language and communication are usually separated according to modality. Investigations are considered 'linguistic' and 'verbal' if dealing with vocal signs and 'non-verbal' if dealing with action signs (facial expression, gestures and other bodily movements). In marked contrast, ongoing research in the anthropology of human movement from a semasiological perspective embraces instead a post-cartesian reformulation of the notion of person based on Harré's causal powers theory (see Varela 1994). Such research avoids talk of verbal versus nonverbal, or of a body separate from mind: visible bodily actions form systems of embodied knowledge that are socially and culturally constituted and often full participants in the linguistic construction of meaning.

As I have demonstrated ethnographically elsewhere (Farnell 1995), instead of adhering to the disembodied notion of language that is traditional to western thought, we can ground language in dynamic physical embodiment so that vocal gestures (speech) and visual gestures (action signs) may be considered two aspects of the same meaning making and communicative process -- embodied persons using semiotic systems from two modalities that intertwine in meaning, function, and performance. This bottom up reformulation of what counts as "language", inspired by indigenous (Assiniboine)

conceptions, provides an optimistic note on which to end this foreword. Such a reformulation contributes to the emergence of new meta-theoretical perspectives which enable us to leave behind the ghosts of an evolutionary kind discussed by Baynton and Williams. If we are about to enter a new “paradigm of embodiment” in anthropology, as Csordas (1990) has suggested, the anthropology of human movement is well situated theoretically to make substantial contributions.

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