
1 History

The present chapter provides an introductory framework for the next parts of the grammar. First mentions of gestures in historical documents, educational methodologies applied over the centuries for training deaf people and the history of LIS are topics which will be addressed in the following sections.

The term *Deaf* (written with a capital letter 'D') relates to the common culture shared among Deaf community, by contrast the term *deaf* (written with a lowercase 'd') concerns the medical and clinical condition of deafness.

It is difficult to trace back how deaf people were treated in primitive societies. Probably, deafness started to be considered a deficit in societies influenced by the Judeo-Hellenic tradition, where the oral language played a prominent role in religious rites and social activities. Indeed, the Judaic laws prescribed by the Torah (which were orally transmitted by rabbis until CE 70) were the first to contemplate society as a guardian of the deaf population, considered unable to assume the responsibilities of adults. This attitude is exemplified in the *Baba Kamma* treatise (*The Babylonian Talmud*, AD 3th-6th century), which can be considered an ancient Judaic civil code.

Deaf people were considered either as idiots or minors, this is the reason why they were not subject to punishment. Furthermore, they were not allowed to possess any object found by chance. The first reference of a gestural language is found in the description of a Judaic ceremony of marriage, when the rabbi sanctified the union by means of a ritual sign. In the Judaic culture, deaf people were considered to be possessed by demons and their life was an admonishment for the sins committed by their forefathers.

In ancient Greece, especially in the Spartan culture (900-146 BCE), when a baby was born with some kind of impairment, he was considered useless and killed. However, deaf babies were probably not affected by these executions because their deafness would be noticeable only later on.

A different perspective is found in the *Cratylus*, written by Platon in the 4th century BCE: here an imaginary dialogue between Socrates and Hermogenes is reported. They discuss the necessity of communication among people. Language is so essential that even without an acoustic communication channel people communicate through a visual-gestural code.

Aristotele (384-322 BCE) claimed in his *Historia Animalium* that “all people who are deaf from birth are dumb as well”. This sentence has been misunderstood in the following centuries, allowing scholars of Aristotele to confuse deafness and muteness with senselessness and lack of reason. What the philosopher was saying was that deaf babies cannot learn to speak, if not properly instructed. Furthermore, he differentiated the concept of deafness and mutism, carrying out some studies on the acquisition of language. He also identified a sympathetic connection between the auditory and vocal organs. In the following centuries, his affirmation was assumed by scientists such as Galeo who searched for shared nerves between the tongue and the ears.

One of the first lives of a deaf person attested in ancient documents is found in the *Gospel of Matthew*, where Jesus works the miracle of *Effatà* by making a deaf man hear.

Pliny the Elder (23-79 BCE) in the *Naturalis Historia* (77-78 BCE) discussed Quintus Pedius, a noble mute who lived in Rome during the Augustan Age and instructed on the art of painting.

It was under the Emperor of Justinian (CE 527-556) that we may find the first distinction between different types of deafness: people who were deaf from birth and people who became deaf after some illness or accident. Civil rights were granted to the latter, if they were educated before becoming deaf, and the same rights were assured for men and women, but people who were born deaf were still considered to be dumb as well.

In the Middle Ages, the history of the education of the deaf begins with the Venerable Bede, a priest of the Abbey of Jarrow. In 731, he wrote the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and in the same text he also mentioned the cure of a young deaf-mute boy. The story narrates that the Bishop of Hagulstad, in 685, trained this boy and in about two years he became capable of expressing his desires and thoughts. In his book, Bede also refers to a new system based on numerical signs matched with the letters of the Greek alphabet. This system facilitated the education, but it was not used as a communication system, rather as a tool in stimulating intelligence.

One of the first forms of gestural language is mentioned by the Cardinal Jacques de Vitry (CE 1170-1240). During his visit to a monastery, he notes that in accordance with the rule of silence, the monks used their hands in order to communicate with each other. Curiously it seems that their communications were not only about primary urgencies.

Except for these few famous examples, during the Middle Age deaf people were employed in menial jobs. Without receiving any educational training, they were often marginalized and locked in the silence of incommunicability.

In the 16th century, an Italian physician named Girolamo Cardano (1501-1576) expressed the necessity to train and educate deaf people. He studied the physiology of the ears, the mouth, the eyes and the brain and reasoned that the sense of hearing and the capability of speaking were not indispensable for understanding ideas. In any case, his ideas were never put into practice, and two centuries passed by before some visible changes were made.

In the 16th century an increasing interest for new experimental educational methods started to spread among educators, and especially among the religious spheres. The first teachers of deaf people worked in isolation, and were very highly paid to follow very few and selected pupils. A silence hid their method from the risk of plagiarism and little information exists about their educational systems.

The history and development of LIS is strictly connected to the history and educational methods for the Deaf developing in Europe.

In Spain, a Benedictine monk named Pedro Ponce de León (1520-1584) set up a school for deaf pupils of high social status in the village of San Salvador de Oña. He taught them the written alphabet and then instructed them on the pronunciation of each sound, showing the correct position of the mouth. Once they learned to combine the letters composing the words, he associated the correspondent object to these words. Unfortunately, most of his writings concerning his method were lost in a fire that destroyed the monastery's archives.

Another interesting account of the use of signs comes from Ambrosio de Morales (1513-1591), historian to Felipe II (1527- 1598), King of Spain. In his *General Chronicle of Spain* he reported some information about the Ottoman Empire, where the deaf guardians of the Sultan checked the entrance of his Staff. According to his telling, these people were used to communicate with signs and other people in the court, including the Sultan himself, were able to understand them.

During the early 17th century, another important figure in the history of deaf education was born in Spain, the priest Juan Pablo Bonet (1573-1633). He published *Reduction de las letras y arte para enseñar a ablar a los mudos*, a book considered to be the first modern treatise of the phonetics of sign language. The manual alphabet used by Bonet probably comes from other previous alphabets, such as the one ac-

quired by Yebra (taken in turn from St. Bonaventure), or maybe from an Italian one published in Rosselli's *Thesaurus* in 1579.

Other famous educators were Emanuel Ramirez de Carrión (1579-1652), who behaved with his deaf pupils more like a wild animal tamer than a teacher, and the Physician Pietro deCastro (1603-1663), who wrote the *Colostro* (1642) about childhood illnesses. In this book, he supported the possibility of teaching deaf-mutes to speak. During the 17th century, many references were found about the issue of deafness and the education of deaf people, in particular, from a medical or a philosophical perspective. Sometimes these speculations remained at a theoretical level, but sometimes they attempted to develop the empirical structure of language useful for the instruction of deaf.

An important physician of this period, John Bulwer (1606-1656), analysed the use of the hands to communicate, considering it a natural language in the art of rhetoric. He took lip-reading into account as an important tool for teaching deaf people to speak, showing how this use is common among hearing people. Nonetheless, he considered the use of manual alphabets and signs to be much more effective for deaf people, affirming the necessity of setting up academies for deaf people where this system of communication could be taught.

In Great Britain, other figures famous for having studied the methods of teaching to deaf people were George Dalgarno of Aberdeen (1616-1687) in Scotland, who, in an attempt to elaborate a universal language, studied the techniques of deaf education for 20 years and coined the term *dactylology*, today known as fingerspelling. The other figures were the mathematician John Wallis (1616-1703) and the theologian William Holder (1616-1698), both members of an Academy founded by the philosopher Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626). The former (John Wallis) wrote a very successful work about the sonic elements of language, useful not just for foreigners, but also for deaf people, while the latter (William Holder) was the arch rival of Wallis. Holder was in favour of teaching writing before every other stimulus, because the learners were able to easily memorize the combination of sounds with the written symbols. Their rivalry was based on the demonstration of the efficiency of each of their own educational method. Since Bonet, teaching methods have not been deeply modified; however, each instructor claimed the novelty of his own method, taking credit for its paternity.

The first teacher who described his method in detail was Johann Konrad Amman (1669-1724). He recommended gradually increasing the degree of difficulty in the education of deaf people. With his method, the word became the aim of instruction, taking a clear oralist connotation and laying the basis for the so-called *German school*, which is oriented towards orality, in opposition with the *French school* for philosophical and methodological choices. Germany, France and Eng-

land promoted different educational system. In Germany, the principalities were in favour of opening public schools, while in England the schools were privately financed by rich exponents of the noble class. In France, centralized education favoured deaf people.

The Spaniard Jacob Rodrigues Péréire (1715-1780) developed further strategies to improve the speech skills of deaf-mutes in France, using an improved fingerspelling system. According to his technique, the handshapes represented the phoneme of spoken French. This method will become part of teaching system used by the Abbé de l'Épée in France.

The public education of the Deaf in Europe crucially improved in the 18th century, which represents an important turning point in the history of deafness. In line with the spirit of Enlightenment, the interest in improving and sharing knowledge also grew concerning the public education of the Deaf. During this century, two prominent figures were very influential in the development of the teaching methods for Deaf people: Samuel Heinicke (1729-1790) and the Abbé De l'Épée (1712-1789). The former adopted a vocal oriented approach, thinking that everything should be directed toward the spoken language. This is the reason why he is considered the father of *oralism*, an approach which refused to use signs. On the contrary, the Abbé De l'Épée is recognized as the main promoter of *methodical signs*. Methodical signs were a mixture of a gestural system combined with other invented signs representing grammatical functions of written French, as verb endings, articles, prepositions or auxiliary verbs. This system was used for supporting the teaching of the spoken language. Although he did not contest the validity of teaching spoken words, as the most useful means for becoming part of the hearing society, he considered signs as the natural means of communication for Deaf people.

In the past, the education of Deaf people was individual and elitist, while the Abbé created the conditions for the establishment of a little Deaf community by founding the deaf school in Paris in 1755. In this little community, Deaf pupils developed and increased the sign language system thanks to their daily contacts. Consequently, in 1760 he founded the *Institut National de Jeunes Sourds de Paris* [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 2.4]. There, the very promising Deaf students were encouraged to become teachers after having finished the training courses, as happened to Laurent Clerc. Indeed, Clerc (1785-1869), at the age of 12, entered the Royal Institution for the Deaf in Paris, where he excelled in his studies. After the graduation, the school asked him to stay as an assistant teacher and consequently he was promoted to teach the highest class, as evidence of the innovative nature of the Parisian system, which was training and fostering deaf professional profiles.

Another great difference between the previous educators of Deaf people and the Abbé was that he made his methods available to foreign educators. He also established a teacher-training course that allowed the methodical signs to be exported to other countries. Since the first educational experience, and with the collaboration of Roch-Ambroise Cucurron Sicard (1742-1822) who headed up the School after the death of De l'Épée, the method was improved and spread across different countries.

As evidence of this open methodological system, in 1815, the National Institution for Deaf children in Paris hosted Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet (1787-1851), an American preacher interested in deaf education. There, he was trained with the manual method taught by the Abbot Sicard and the deaf teacher Laurent Clerc. This teaching approach impressed Gallaudet who persuaded Clerc to accompany him back to America. The two men raised private and public funds to establish a school for the Deaf in Hartford, the *American School for Deaf* (ASD) in 1817. In 1864, Edward Miner Gallaudet (1837-1917), son of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, founded the first college for the deaf, which became the important *Gallaudet University* in 1986.

Influenced by the French method three schools for the deaf opened in the early 19th century in Switzerland: one in Zurich by M. Ulrich, a second one in Geneva, in 1822, managed by Isaac Etienne Chomel, a deaf teacher trained by Sicard, and a third one in Berna, in 1823. The French method also spread to Austria, in 1871, when the Abbey Storck returned to Vienna and founded the first deaf school there. Few years later, the same methodology was exported to the Netherlands and Belgium by M. Delo (for further information, see [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 2.4]).

As for Italy, in 1784 the first school for the Deaf was founded by the Abbot Tommaso Silvestri (1744-1789) in Rome, financed by the lawyer Concostorale Pasquale Di Pietro. Nevertheless, after a brief experience with the Abbé De l'Épée, he came upon the Amman's writings and converted his French method into a new spoken-oriented method. The person considered by Deaf people as the true promoter of a sign-oriented method was the Abbot Ottavio Giovan Battista Assarotti (1753-1829). He taught in Genoa, but he was never directly influenced by the French method; his system was based on the widespread dissemination of the books of French educators. In 1802, he founded an Institute for the Deaf which received funds from the Government of France and then from the King of Sardinia.

In 1841, the new directors of the Institute in Rome, which was founded by the Abbot Silvestri, introduced the method of the Abbot Assarotti into the school, which was based on signs and fingerspelling, although in 1865 the oral method was once again restored by Padre Muti and Madre Kuntz, the following directors. This intermittency be-

tween methodologies continued until the Congress of Milan in 1880, a date representing a watershed in the educational system for all European Countries. The Congress took place in the *Regio Istituto Tecnico di Santa Maria* (Royal technical Institute of Holy Mary) from the 6th to the 11th of September to improve the condition of Deaf-mutes. The delegations came from about ten European Countries and one, led by Thomas Gallaudet and his son Edward Gallaudet, came from the USA. The Abbot Giulio Tarra, a stronger supporter of oralism, was designed to preside over the Congress and the prof. Pasquale Fornari was the Secretary instructed to write the Acts of the Congress. Very few Deaf people were invited to the Congress, and those who participated were deliberately chosen for their positions in favour of oralism. Except for Thomas and Edward Gallaudet, who were openly in favour of a mixed method of signs and words, the larger majority supported oralism. The debate was therefore closed under the slogan *Viva la parola* (Hooray for the word) and *Viva la parola pura* (Hooray for the pure word). As a consequence, at the end of the Congress, sign oriented methods or mixed sign and spoken-written systems were banned from all official circles - academic, social and political - the oral method used in Germany was considered the most scientific and reliable. Signs were also considered to undermine the acquisition of the spoken language. However, other reasons were identified for the rejection of signs, some of these were driven by national interests. One of the reasons concerned the intention to eradicate linguistic deviations according to the national project of literacy started in Italy since its unification in 1861. Another possible cause was the philosophic conviction that words reflect the superior dimension of abstraction and ideas necessary to acquire intellectual and moral faculties. Finally, religious reasons supported the necessity to give voice to Deaf people in order to actively participate to the Sacrament of Confession. Based on these political, scientific and religious reasons, the Congress of Milan settled the issue of the choice of the best educational system by supporting the superiority of the pure word.

Although neither the opinions nor the requests of Deaf people were considered during the Congress of Milan, in these years Deaf people increased the awareness of their social rights, thanks to the acquisition of a deeper education and training. Indeed, several associations and friendly societies were founded by Deaf people in different cities, such as Milan (1874), Turin (1880), Genoa (1884) and Siena (1890). These types of societies laid the foundations for the following development of the National Body for the representation of Deaf people: the *National Deaf Institution* (ENS). In 1888, Francesco Micheloni (the president of the friendly society of Rome) printed a record condemning abuses against Deaf people and defending the mimic-gestural method. This and other examples testify a rising awareness

of Deaf educators about their rights. In 1911, the *First International Congress of deaf-mutes* took place in Rome, in order to demand improvements in the educational system, in the workplace and in all domains of society. Ten years later, the *Second International Congress* in Rome demanded the extension of the legal recognition of compulsory schooling to all deaf-mutes. Only in 1923 the Gentile Reform applied the extension of the mandatory school to deaf children from 6 to 16 years. Moreover, the Congress demanded the revision of the Article no. 340 of the Civil Code in order to grant deaf-mutes their social and civil rights. This Article stated that deaf and blind people, when they reached the legal age, had to be automatically considered unfit to plead, except for those who had been defined fit by the Court. The Article was repealed by the Decree 12 December 1938. In 1932, the Paduan Antonio Magarotto (1891-1966) organised a national meeting among groups and associations which, after a long and heated debate, established the *Deaf of Padua* and the birth of the *Ente Unico* (Unique Institution) on behalf of the national Deaf community.

Ten years later, in 1942 the Law no. 889 on 12 May 1942 officially recognized the Institution. Later on, the Law no. 698 on 21 August 1950 established the legal status of the *Ente Nazionale Sordi* (ENS), the Italian National Association of the Deaf. Since then, ENS officially became the national representative Institution to protect Italian Deaf people. During this period, the debate about public schools with equal opportunities for all children was reopened and ENS was the main forger of the vindication of right and services. In the 1950s, the State reconsidered this topic in relation to the effectiveness of the special school managed by different institutions across Italy. The debate about public education of Deaf people was driven by medical and social reasons connected to democratic administrations and associations. Indeed, the necessity to reconsider the function of the special school was threefold: political, scientific, and pedagogic. Politically, there was an attempt to weaken the strong dominion of religious Institutions, in favour of a national control over education. Scientifically, medical sciences claimed their primacy over religious institutions in managing the condition of Deaf people. Finally, from a pedagogical perspective, the intention was to encourage a secular purpose released by religious power.

After a long debate, in the 1970s, deaf children began to be mainstreamed into schools for hearing people thanks to the Law no. 517 of 1977. After the administrative decentralization, ENS was changed into a private-law Charitable Trust by the Decree Law no. 616/1977. One year later, in the same vein of the Law no. 517/1977, the Law no. 833/1978 set up a new *National Health Service* which granted deaf people health-care services.

After the Law no. 517/1977 Deaf people could attend either special schools or public schools. The consequences were chaotic, since

neither the teachers nor the assistants of the public schools were trained on deafness. Consequently, during that transitional period from special to public schools, Deaf children did not learn much either in Italian or in signs. Another cause of disorder, indeed, was the lack of linguistic standardization. Signs around Italy varied greatly, since Deaf students came from different Institutes [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 2.4]. Although signs were not officially used in education, and they were not accepted in official circles or at work, the daily interactions among Deaf scholars, living within the Institutes, and the unofficial communications between Deaf students and educators allowed signs to survive and to develop anyway. However, neither the conception of a common national sign language nor the awareness of the linguistic status of signs spread among Deaf and hearing people until the first linguistic investigations started in the late 1980s [SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 3]. Indeed, only in the last 30 years has linguistic research on LIS begun to make any inroads, and the situation has slowly begun to change.

A crucial step toward the improvement of educational conditions for deaf scholars has been reached with the Article no. 13 of the Law no. 104/1992 which established the presence of individual communication assistants for people with physical or sensory impairments. This professional profile was already mentioned within the Law no. 616/1977, however only with the Law no. 104/1992 the presence of these professionals became mandatory in the public schools. The individual assistant has been introduced in the class with the function of facilitating and support the communicative relationships of deaf students with teachers and other scholars. This professional role could be covered by Deaf educators (in kindergarten) or by hearing assistants who know LIS. The Law no. 104/1992 also grants the support of a special education teacher whose task is to facilitate the educational programs and to enhance the growing of scholars. The presence of these professional profiles in the schools allowed to develop a contemporary model of bilingual bimodal educational programs. Bilingual programs consist in training deaf scholars by fostering the development of both communication channels (the spoken and the sign language).

Since 2005, the *Instruction and University Research Ministry* (MIUR) recognized the *National Deaf Institution* (ENS) as an accredited training centre for LIS, in order to create professional educators and individual assistants' profiles for promoting and supporting bilingual bimodal educational approaches into schools (Decree, July 18, 2005).

Although the education and training system needs to be improved in order to assure deaf people (and people with other types of disabilities) a higher quality in services and rights, the current Italian educational model for inclusion represents an important sign of civilization, and a forefront of social and cultural changes.

Information on Data and Consultants

The descriptions in this chapter are based on the references below. Please see the data and consultant information in these references.

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