

OBITUARIES

Linguist William C. Stokoe Jr. Dies at 80

Gallaudet University Professor Was an Authority on American Sign Language

By RICHARD PEARSON
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William C. Stokoe Jr., 80, a Gallaudet University professor emeritus of linguistics who became an internationally recognized authority on the history, use and classification of American Sign Language, died of cancer April 4 at his home in Chevy Chase.

He served on the Gallaudet faculty from 1955 until retiring as professor emeritus in 1984. When he arrived at Gallaudet, colleagues at the school, as well as the vast majority of linguists elsewhere, dismissed "signing," or the use of fingers and hands to signify letters and words, as mere "mimicry" of real speech or language.

Dr. Stokoe made it his life's work to prove that American Sign Language (ASL), the signing system he worked with at Gallaudet, was actually a full-fledged language.

With scientific precision, he proved that ASL, on the basis of phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics, was, by all linguistic criteria, a real and mature language.

He illustrated that ASL had its own logical internal system of grammar and the ability to express actions and abstract notions as easily and systematically as spoken languages. It is not a simple translation of English, or any other spoken language, to a signed form, he argued.

Dr. Stokoe, whose master's degree was in education and doctorate in English, found himself attacked not only as a member of the linguistic minority but as one with questionable academic credentials. He persevered.

His groundbreaking 1960 work, "Sign Language Structure," was the first modern linguistic work addressing sign language, and it silenced many critics. It was followed in 1965 by "A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles," which he co-authored.

Then, in 1970, he established the Linguistics Research Laboratory at Gallaudet, which he ran until 1984. In 1972, he founded the influential journal *Sign Language Studies*, which he edited until 1996.

For many years, he and his wife, Ruth, who died in January 1999, operated their publishing venture, Linstok Press. Over the years, Dr. Stokoe co-edited such works as "Language Origins" and "Gesture and Nature of Language." Dr. Stokoe's last book, "Language in Hand," is to be published by Gallaudet University Press later this year.

Dr. Stokoe, a New Hampshire native, received bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees from Cornell University.

He taught English at Wells College in Aurora, N.Y., before joining the English faculty at Gallaudet to teach Chaucer. He had specialized in Old and

Middle English and classical languages in graduate school.

He was technically an English professor until 1971, when he stepped down as English Department chairman to devote his full time to linguistics.

While learning ASL at Gallaudet, Dr. Stokoe, who was not deaf, began to see American Sign Language as a true language and began to express his theories on the matter. Eventually, entirely new ways of looking at ASL developed, affecting not only linguistics scholars but the deaf themselves. Signing was no longer viewed as a crutch but as the expression of a real language. ASL is now the fourth most commonly used language in the United States.

The story of his linguistic crusade is told in the 1996 book "Seeing Language in Sign: The Work of William C. Stokoe," by Jane Maher, with a forward by Oliver Sacks. It was published by Gallaudet University Press.

Dr. Stokoe was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a member of the Cosmos Club. He was a past president of the St. Andrews Society of Washington and had served as pipe major of the Washington Scottish Pipe Band. His hobbies included playing the bagpipes.

Dr. Stokoe's survivors include two children, James Stokoe of Chevy Chase and Helen Stokoe of Poughkeepsie, N.Y.; and three grandchildren.