

The Washington Post DISTRICT WEEKLY

THURSDAY, MARCH 29, 1979

Hands Full of Words: Exploring the Riches Of Sign Language

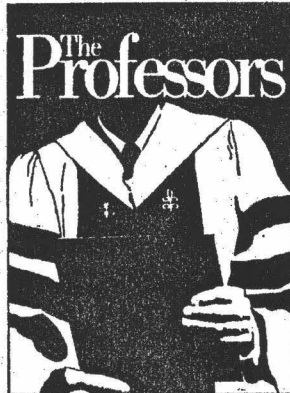
By Bart Barnes

Washington Post Staff Writer

Two decades ago when William C. Stokoe, newly hired as chairman of the English department at Gallaudet College, first proposed a linguistic analysis of sign language, his professional colleagues thought he was crazy.

Although sign language had been the primary means of communication among the deaf for more than a century and a half, it was strictly barred in some schools for the deaf and discouraged or neglected in most others. While its use by students out of class was tolerated, sign language was almost universally ignored by educators of the deaf and there were few who took it seriously as a legitimate language.

"They told me my job was to teach them English," recalled Stokoe (pronounced Sto-kee). "Even some of the deaf people on the faculty thought I was out of my skull. All the experts



were saying, 'Sign language can be ignored. It is not a language.'"

Now, almost 20 years later, there has been a 180-degree turnaround.

Despite his colleagues' skepticism, Stokoe pressed ahead with his idea and in 1960 produced the first linguistic analysis of sign language as part of a series on studies in lin-

See DEAF, Page 10, Col. 1



By Craig Herndon—The Washington Post

Dr. William C. Stokoe, director of the Linguistics Research Lab at Gallaudet College.

City To R Of A

By Jack

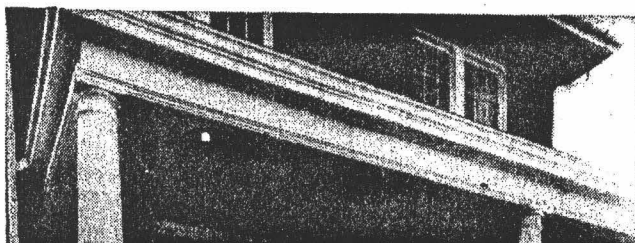
Washington Post

After an emot evoked memori years of the ci ment, the D.C. agreed this wee list the race of a boards and cor cial council repo

Council mer Moore Jr. (R-A the debate by practice, which documents reco il confirmation of the Rental Commission and the Boxing and mission.

"Some of us v newspapers to people by race," "We are reverti that many of u and so hard to g our society."

Council chai Nadine P. Wi who submitted reports, disag going back to c said, smiling i kind of like it."



SE Neighborhood House to

By Vernon C. Thompson

Washington Post Staff Writer

Southeast Neighborhood House in Anacostia, which will celebrate 50 years of operation in April, nearly shut its doors for

ber of the community-based social service agencies, said, "There is a funding crunch and this is causing problems for everybody."

The crisis situation at South-

other funding ing the D.C. Aging, asked S reevaluate its o because there much duplicati use of resource

Hands Full of Words: Exploring the

DEAF, From Page 1

guistics published by the the State University of New York at Buffalo.

For most of the last 19 years, supported by grants from the National Science Foundation and the Center for Applied Linguistics, he has continued his research, on his own at first and later as director of Gallaudet's Linguistics Research Lab.

"What Bill and his colleagues have been saying and proving is that sign language is a language," says Raymond Trybus, dean of the Research Institute at Gallaudet. "It has everything a language has. It has vocabulary, grammar and syntax. It is a language which defines a community and it is worthy of respect just like any other language.

"Not long ago, sign language was looked down on as something deaf people did because they couldn't do any better. Now it is a legitimate topic of academic investigation. All of that can be attributed to the work started by Bill Stokoe."

A graduate of Cornell, Stokoe, 59, came to Gallaudet in 1955 after nine

years at Wells College. When Stokoe started at Gallaudet, the college had just embarked on an ambitious campaign to upgrade its faculty and academic program.

Stokoe's only previous contact with the deaf had been a deaf blacksmith in the town where he grew up.

"I didn't know any sign language, but when I brought in a piece of farm machinery he was able to communicate to me whether or not he could fix it," said Stokoe.

One of the first things Stokoe did after arriving at Gallaudet was to take a crash course in sign language. He had not been on the campus long before he became fascinated with sign language as a potential topic of serious academic scrutiny, but his was a lonely effort at first.

"I used to feel like somebody standing alone on the beach shouting, 'Hey, I've got something interesting here!' but nobody was listening. It felt like the things I was studying and researching were of no interest to anyone."

Gradually, during the decade of the 1970s, it all began to change. Deaf pride and deaf awareness groups organized. Other scholars, at Gallaudet

and elsewhere, began studying the linguistics of sign language.

Stokoe began publishing a quarterly journal called "Sign Language Studies," and there is currently a backlog of articles submitted for publication. Increasingly, hearing people began to develop an interest in learning sign language, and each year scores of courses in sign language are offered throughout the Washington area.

"It is a very sophisticated language," said Stokoe. "Sign language is not English any more than French is English. People used to think there were certain features it didn't have. Now researchers are discovering those features all the time."

Unlike other handicapped people, Stokoe observed, the deaf constitute a special community not unlike a separate ethnic group, in large measure because they have their own language.

"Having a common language joins people with the strongest of bonds," he wrote in a recent article. "One of the most important uses of language is the formation and preservation of social groups. . . . The deaf constitute a social group both by the difference of not hearing, but even more by the social working of language."

To study the language, Stokoe hours examining language corpora or more persons.

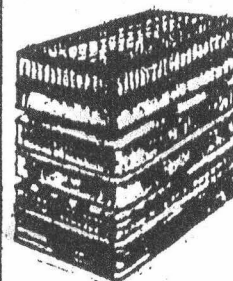
"The signs occur in the in an English occur in different

"A sign series signs for words the English sentence may English sentence word.

"Sign language rules as well as a vocabulary of signs. The con of sign d lexicon of English unique set of language concepts for making statements, non-statements or the language."

While curriculum build a case for language as a language also has uncertainties between spoken language.

ATTENTION
D.C.
HOMEOWNERS
AND



SAVE UP TO
50%—\$300

ON NEW LUXURY TOP QUALITY
QUEEN & KING BEDS
SELECT FROM NEW

Bassett

the rest is in the mattress
OR ANY OTHER FAMOUS BRAND

MINIMUM DISCOUNT \$100
MAXIMUM DISCOUNT \$300

ALL BRAND NEW IN FACTORY WRAPPER—
WARRANTY INSIDE

10-DAY 100% SATISFACTION
OR MONEY BACK
1-DAY DELIVERY VA-DC-MD.

ACCEPT ALL MAJOR CREDIT CARDS
ACCEPT LAY-A-WAY PERSONAL CHECKS
CREDIT APPROVED BY PHONE—COME IN OR

ing the Riches of Sign Language

the lin-

arterly
e Stud-
acklog
ication.
egan to
ig sign
res of
ffered
a.
guage,"
ot Eng-
nglish.
re cer-

Now
se fea-

people,
itute a
a sepa-
ure be-
age.
e joins
onds,"
One of
uage is
of so-
itute a
ence of
the so-

To study the intricacies of sign language, Stokoe has spent thousands of hours examining in minute detail sign language conversations between two or more persons.

"The signs in a sign sentence may occur in the same order as the words in an English sentence or they may occur in different order," he writes.

"A sign sentence may seem to omit signs for words that are essential in the English sentence. Again, the sign sentence may have signs for which the English sentence has no equivalent word.

"Sign language grammar has its own rules as well as its own lexicon, or vocabulary of signs; and rules and lexicon of sign differ from the rules and lexicon of English . . . There is a unique set of rules for making sign language constructions just as there is for making standard English constructions, non-standard English constructions or the constructions of any language."

While current research tends to build a case for recognition of sign language as a language in its own right, it also has uncovered common similarities between sign language and all spoken language.

Stokoe, for example, has found that "persons of the same age group sign alike" and that persons of the same sex sign more alike. Other researchers studying the sign language patterns of black and white deaf people in the Deep South have found signing differences comparable to different dialects of a spoken language. They have also found that sign language is different in different countries of the world just as spoken language is different.

Moreover, says Stokoe, "It is more than an hand language—it is body, face and eyes."

The simple sentence, "I saw what he was doing," Stokoe noted, could mean, with the eyes focused differently, "he saw what I was doing."

And, as with any other language, sign language is always changing. "There is evidence of rapid and widespread change in the 200 years since the sign language behavior of the deaf was recognized and partially recorded," Stokoe said last year in a revised and updated version of his first linguistic analysis of American Sign Language. "Even in the relatively small amount of sign data observed in this study, there is evidence of structural change."

The bulk of Stokoe's work has focused on American Sign Language or Ameslan, based in part on work done with deaf people in France in the 18th century. But there are two other forms of manual communication commonly used by deaf people in the United States. One is finger spelling; the other is interpretation of spoken English into manual signs. But unlike American Sign Language, neither form has an independent linguistic base.

A resident of Silver Spring, Stokoe is married and the father of two children. His son, James S. Stokoe, is an architect and his daughter, Helen Marie Stokoe Phillips, judges Scottish fiddling competitions. Stokoe himself plays the bagpipes for amusement and entertainment.

At Gallaudet, he no longer teaches English but has developed a course in "socio-linguistics," which he describes as the ethnography of speaking. "We try to look at what kinds of social factors, nonlinguistic factors influence the way we use language," he said.

"The study of sign language," he continued, "is basic to the study of all language. Babies communicate with their faces, and their eyes and their bodies long before they use words."

SAVE UP TO
%—\$300

LUXURY TOP QUALITY
IN & KING BEDS
ECT FROM NEW

Issett

est is in the mattress
OTHER FAMOUS BRAND

UNT \$100

UNT \$300

RY WRAPPER—
IDE

ISFACTION
ACK

/A-DC-MD.

REDIT CARDS

PERSONAL CHECKS

E—COME IN OR

the new
m'brides

EFFECTIVE
MARCH 29, 30, 31, 1979

QUANTITY RIGHTS
RESERVED



Noxzema

SHAVE

1 14

11 OZ.

NOXZEMA.



CREAM

73^c

2 1/2 Oz.

CHLORESEPTIC



1 49

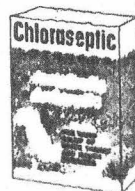
6 OZ.

RAINTREE

CREAM

1 29

2 OZ.



CHLORESEPTIC
LOZENGERS

18's

97^c

BAN ROLL ON



(Scen &
Unscen)

79^c

1 OZ.

WET ONES



70's

99^c

STRIDEX



42's

STRI DEX



75's