



May 23, 2016

UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON  
DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS

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Office of News & Information  
University of Washington

Dear Colleagues,

We are writing in response to the way in which the UW's Office of News & Information (as well as its counterpart at MIT) have recently publicized the SignAloud project, promoting it as a "sign language translation device." This publicity perpetuates misunderstandings about the linguistic structure of American Sign Language (ASL) and more damagingly perpetuates cultural appropriation and audism, as we will explain below.

We would like to be clear that our criticism is not for the two students behind this project, who have created interesting technology which has the potential to help people. Rather, we address ourselves to the UW's Office of News & Information. We are writing this open letter on the one hand to ask that guidelines and policies reflecting best practices in research and publicity affecting members of minority groups be established and followed and on the other hand to educate you and the public at large about audism and cultural appropriation.

**Linguistic Structure** The phonological components of an ASL sign are called parameters, and all signs are articulated using multiple parameters at once: handshape, location of the hands, palm orientation, movement, and facial expressions. For example, the only difference between the signs for LATE and NOT-YET is the facial expression. In addition, some signs (such as CORRECT) are signed using both hands, but other items (e.g. a table in front of the signer) can stand in for one of the hands. Even perfectly functioning gloves would not have access to facial expressions or other objects standing in for hands. Furthermore, the complexity of ASL extends beyond its phonology. ASL, like any other language, has rules of morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics, and the meaning of an utterance depends not just on the words but on the grammatical structures used to combine them. Non-manual signs (facial expressions) are also key grammar components, and raised or lowered eyebrows, a shift in the orientation of the signer's torso, or a movement of the mouth can express such things as negation, the difference between a statement or a question, or signal a direct quote.

A well-functioning translation system would need to record information not just about the hands but about all the articulators involved in signing and map that information to English sentences that fully capture the intent of the signer. A word-by-word translation system cannot do so. In designing a system that does not reflect an understanding of ASL as a language, the developers have created something that is not suitable for ASL. Deaf signers who have viewed the demonstration video of SignAloud do not recognize what is being demonstrated as ASL:<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The use of "Deaf" with a capital D to denote Deaf cultural identity in English began in the 1980s and refers to the Deaf community where ASL and Deaf culture are embraced. In this letter, we use "Deaf" in this sense. However,



“What they signed on YouTube did not make sense. I didn’t understand them until I turned on the captions. What they signed is not even close to grammar accuracy in ASL. Where is a Deaf person in that research team?” —Jeremy Quiroga, Seattle Deaf artist, college ASL professor and certified Deaf interpreter.

“There are several errors with the signs produced by these guys and what they are signing is not authentic ASL. I felt like we would have to reduce and change our ASL grammar into English ordered sentences, word for word exactly to make this project work. It also looks like one way communication here. How can hearing people respond back without knowing sign language? How is this a bridge? Did they ask the Deaf community before and during this project?” —Michael Ratzlaff, Deaf Par educator

There is much more that can be said about the linguistic structure of ASL and how it should inform any technology related to the language. The fact that there is no way that the gloves actually work as advertised is, however, not the biggest problem. It is far eclipsed by the ways in which the promotion of this project has demonstrated audism and cultural appropriation.

**Audism** The term audism was coined in 1975 by the Deaf scholar Tom Humphries who gave it the definition “the notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears.”<sup>2</sup> Humphries elaborated this definition with the examples:

1. “[Audism] appears in the form of people who continually judge deaf people’s intelligence and success on the basis of their ability in the language of the hearing culture.
2. “It appears when the assumption is made that the deaf person’s happiness depends on acquiring fluency in the language of the hearing culture.”

Harlan Lane, writing in 1992, recognized audism as deeply rooted in our societal systems, which he referred to as the “audist establishment”: “The corporate institution for dealing with deaf people—dealing with them by making statements about them, authorizing views of them, describing them, teaching about them, governing where they go to school, and in some cases, where they live; . . . in short, audism is the hearing way of dominating, restructuring, and exercising authority over the deaf community . . .”<sup>3</sup>

Within the Deaf community and Deaf scholarship there has been a continued discussion of audism, the forms that it takes, and the ways in which it is internalized. H-Dirksen Bauman, in 2004, described audism as a metaphysical “orientation that links human identity with speech”<sup>4</sup> and notes

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in historical quotations we preserve the form “deaf” even where modern usage would prefer the upper-case form. In addition, lower-case “deaf” is often generally used in reference to education, where deaf children have yet to develop their cultural identity.

<sup>2</sup>Humphries, T. (1975). Audism: The making of a word. Unpublished essay.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, H. (1992). *Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community*. New York: Alfred Knopf.

<sup>4</sup>Bauman, H-D. (2004). ‘Audism: Exploring the Metaphysics of Oppression.’ *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 9:2 Spring 2004.



that it leads to a logical fallacy which is prevalent in the thinking of those who have internalized audism:

1. Speech = language (sign language excluded)
2. Language = human (to differentiate humans from animals)
3. Therefore, to be human you have to speak (if you sign but not speak, you are sub-human)<sup>5</sup>

This explains the centuries of language colonialism and oppression experienced by the Deaf community at the hands of hearing people who have internalized audism. It was not until 1960s that ASL was finally recognized as a language through the important work of William Stokoe and his research team, including Dorothy C. Casterline and Carl G. Croneberg, both Deaf. ASL was slowly acknowledged as a language (by linguists and then others) and deaf education is finally realizing the huge benefit of bilingual acquisition and bicultural education for deaf children. Throughout the history around the world, Deaf people have fought for their rights to learn and use sign languages. (About 400+ sign languages exist and 130+ are recognized.) They will continue to fight to guard their signed languages as sacred part of their cultural identity against modern colonialism, misrepresentations, financial exploitation and cultural appropriation.

“As long as we have deaf people on earth, we will have signs. And as long as we have our films, we can preserve signs in their old purity. It is my hope that we will all love and guard our beautiful sign language as the noblest gift God has given to deaf people.”  
—George Veditz, 1913 Deaf activist and 4th President of National Association of the Deaf.

“It is a lamentable fact that, in matters relating to the deaf, their education and well-being, few if any take the trouble to get the opinion of the very people most concerned—the deaf themselves” —John H. Keiser, 1905 Gallaudet graduate (Gannon, Deaf Heritage)

Historically, technological advances that “build a bridge” between Deaf and hearing persons have relied on the premise that it is the responsibility of the Deaf person to cross that bridge, to adopt the speech and mannerism that are desired by hearing people. This is a manifestation of audist beliefs, specifically, the idea that the Deaf person must expend the effort to accommodate to the standards of communication of the hearing person.

The UW News piece promoted the SignAloud gloves as a “bridge” between signers (typically Deaf people) and non-signers (hearing). The SignAloud gloves, if they worked as advertised, would only overcome communication barriers for hearing people who don’t know how to sign. They do not provide a two-way communication channel; the gloves do not translate from spoken English to ASL. The only effort expended is on the part of the Deaf person—who must put on the gloves, link up the equipment, and then sign. The hearing person merely has to listen. The hearing person’s

<sup>5</sup>Here we paraphrase the fallacy as articulated by Brenda Brueggemann (Brueggemann, B. (1999). *Lend me your ear; Rhetorical constructions of deafness*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.).



needs are met, while the Deaf person's needs for reciprocation are overlooked. The gloves are not a "bridge". They are a convenience, designed for hearing people.

Another manifestation of audism in this case is the belief that sign languages are merely manual versions of spoken languages. ASL is often perceived as a weak imitation of English, which it is not. The assumption that translating ASL to English is a simple task of encoding signs into English words denies the independent history and linguistic structure of this language and further represents this audist point of view.

**Cultural Appropriation** In discussing cultural appropriation, we begin with the definition provided by *Unsettling America*:<sup>6</sup>

"Cultural appropriation is the adoption or theft of icons, rituals, aesthetic standards, and behavior from one culture or subculture by another. It generally is applied when the subject culture is a minority culture or somehow subordinate in social, political, economic, or military status to the appropriating culture."

The Deaf community in the US and elsewhere has experienced linguistic colonialism throughout history: Sign language has historically been forbidden in schools for the deaf, and in some places still is today. Furthermore, the Deaf community has experienced a long dark history of colonialism in which hearing people have created ways of benefiting financially through "research", publication and products with Deaf culture, language and even bodies of Deaf people.

Examples of cultural appropriation include:

- Taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission
- The use of cultural symbols from a marginalized culture for your own profit
- Taking those symbols out of context or changing those symbols to suit your own needs
- Disregarding the concerns and feedback from those of the marginalized culture

The use of ASL "translation" as a case study for these motion capture gloves without any involvement of the Deaf community is another example of cultural appropriation. Reaping rewards (the Lemelson-MIT Student Prize as well as the associated publicity) for the work on this minority language without involving or recognizing any of its signers is an example of cultural appropriation. Similarly, using this research study, again with the claims that it is "building bridges" for Deaf people, again without consulting any Deaf people, for University PR is another example of cultural appropriation.

Katie Roberts, ASL Professor at Seattle Central College and guest speaker on cultural appropriation in UW's Intro to Deaf Culture Class put it this way:

"Cultural appropriation is when members of a non-marginalized society adopt ele-

<sup>6</sup><https://unsettlingamerica.wordpress.com/2011/09/16/cultural-appreciation-or-cultural-appropriation/>



ments of a marginalized culture and take them out context to reap benefits for themselves. It is a form of exploitation. The SignAloud project reduces the complex grammar and linguistic properties to a trick of the hand, to mere electrodes and a technological gimmick. While well-meaning, those students have demonstrated that they do not understand what American Sign Language is or how their act of cultural appropriation has deeply insulted the Deaf community. This project was not a collaborative project with the Deaf community, either in execution or in completion. This project requires no effort to communicate by the hearing person—it is a technological advance that places the burden upon the Deaf person. There is very little benefit from this project to persons of the marginalized culture. The SignAloud project is a feather in the cap—for members of the non-marginalized culture—hearing people. This is cultural appropriation. It is exploitation.”

Cultural appropriation stands in contrast to cultural appreciation, such as:

- Learning about cultural symbols from a marginalized culture
- Supporting the marginalized culture in their efforts to share their culture
- Showing respect for the meaning and value of their customs
- Appreciating the beauty while learning about the deeper meanings

True partnership between Deaf and hearing people means hearing people allowing the Deaf people lead and define accessibility to create the right bridges. A wise Deaf man once said, “The best friend of the deaf is not the fellow who gives them advice or assistance. It is the man (person) who asks them for it.” (George Propp; Gannon, Deaf Heritage)

ASL is a beautiful language and we understand how that beauty attracts the interest of students and the public. What we wish to see is a University community in which students interested pursuing research related to ASL and/or Deaf heritage are guided to connect with those on campus who can help them understand the actual needs of the Deaf community and find collaborators within that community. What we wish to see is a University that honors its commitment to diversity and equity and consults with stakeholders before engaging in cultural appropriation for the sake of publicity.

We are confident that the University community can continue its progress towards living its ideals of justice, equity and inclusivity. As Navid Azodi, one of the students behind the SignAloud project has told us:

“Although this began as a small student project, I have realized that technology and the media can have an adverse effect and do more damage than good if the proper steps to understand a culture are not taken. As someone with hearing privilege, it is not my job to determine what is accessible to Deaf individuals, but support, advocate, and educate using a definition crafted from the Deaf community themselves. If the goal is to increase diversity and be more inclusive, recognizing cultural appropriation and audism is integral in that process.”



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We ask that the Office of News & Information, and the University of Washington more broadly, establish guidelines concerning cultural competence or best practices in handling icons, rituals, aesthetic standards and behaviors from minority groups. Without such guidelines, there are risks of continued cultural appropriation in the future with new research and technological advances by our students and faculty and in the promotion of the University through offices such as yours. The ASL Studies program, in collaboration with other stakeholders, is developing a set of recommendations for best practices for research, product development and publicity activities that concern the culture and language of the Deaf community. These will be made available on the Program's web page.

Sincerely,

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