PEJORISED OR AMELIORATED? AN EXPLORATION OF THE WORD DEAF
RACHEL FEARON (LINGUISTICS)

Abstract: Since the recognition of British Sign Language in 2003 and the denunciation in 2010 of the 1880 decision to ban sign language in deaf education, the Deaf community has taken a positive move forward as a linguistic minority. This study explores the sense relations of the word deaf through a consideration of (a) quantitative data from a questionnaire study, (b) interviews and correspondence with academics in the field of deaf studies. The paper aims to demonstrate how the concept of the term deaf has changed and proposes that the cultural definition of deafness, Deaf (with capital ‘D’), representing a culture and linguistic minority rather than a disability (in essence Deafhood), needs to be included in the dictionary. This addition would serve to ameliorate the word deaf and provide a permanent, mainstream reminder of the positive sense relations of the word d/Deaf.

For the purpose of this article, d/Deaf refers to both audiologically and culturally deaf people. Pejoration is the process in which over time a word acquires negative meaning and amelioration is a process in which a word regains a positive meaning.

Keywords: Pejoration, Amelioration, d/Deaf, H/hearing, Deafhood, Social Model, Medical Model, Culturo-linguistic model.

Introduction
In Milan in 1880, at the International Congress on Education of the Deaf, a pivotal decision was made to introduce an oral education system, in which signing was forbidden. This resulted in a negative semantic prosody of the word deaf, oppressing d/Deaf people and their freedom to communicate with sign language. A plethora of words now exists within the realm of d/Deaf terminology; an extensive expansion of terms used when describing deafness. This includes a dichotomy within the concept of deafness itself: the audiological definition, which promotes a medical need, uses the lower case ‘d’ - deaf, and the cultural definition, which rejects notions of disability or impairment, uses an uppercase ‘D’ – Deaf.

This superfluity of terminology attempts to provide an explanation for every aspect of the condition of deafness, but since it also affects the way d/Deaf people are perceived, it poses the question as to whether certain terms are acceptable or not. Deaf terminology may be introduced to provide more clarity and ‘political correctness’, yet it appears to follow its own set of rules, invariably causing
confusion and unevenness. Additionally, some terms are passed on from generation to generation thereby becoming inherent and attitudinised.

This study investigates a range of terminology currently in circulation, various perceptions of the word *deaf* and the effect this vocabulary has on our perceptions of *d/Deaf* people. The following words and terms form the platform for this investigation: *dull, unspeaking, stupid, dumb, mute, disabled, impaired, silent, ignorant, unintelligent, hard of hearing, hearing impaired, unable to hear, Deaf and Dumb, Deaf-mute, Oral deaf,* and *Deafened.*

Definitions of the word *deaf* are found in many dictionaries - these points of contact should enable society to understand a true representation of the word and its community. If, as Trench suggests, ‘language is the key to identity’ (1912, quoted in Crowley 1996, 133), it is important for dictionaries to document the broadening and narrowing of the meaning of a word as its lexical identity shifts.

Trask concurs that ‘English is changing all the time - new words are constantly coming into use ... at the same time old words ... gradually drop out of use’ (Trask 1994, 1). Thus, when new words are introduced to describe pre-existing terms (e.g. *disabled* replacing *handicapped*), the pre-existing term, in society and in the dictionary, should eventually become obsolete. However, although the word *handicapped* is now regarded as politically incorrect, it is still used in society and is noted in the dictionary (*Collins* 2006, 360-1). The process of amelioration is noted with the term *Black*: historically the term *nigger* (derived from the Spanish word *negro*) was used to describe a black person, but *nigger* was displaced when the meaning of *Black* shifted to include ‘a member of a dark-skinned race’ and *Black Power* became ‘a movement of Black people to obtain equality with whites’ (*Collins* 2006, 546; 73; 74). The *Collins English Dictionary* now notes *nigger* as an offensive word. The quest here is to secure a similar degree of success with words used to describe *deafness*.

**A historical pejoration of deafness**

A brief historical overview demonstrates how the associated sense relations to the word *deaf* have changed over time. The identified terms, which were historically and negatively linked with the word *deaf*, serve to create an opinion that *d/Deaf* people have a *deficiency, an impairment, an inability to hear, are hard of hearing, hearing impaired,* and *disabled.* These terms suggest pathology, ‘a condition that is a deviation from the normal’ (Encarta 2012), rather than a difference. Davis observes that, ‘disability ... is part of a historically constructed discourse, an ideology of thinking about the body under certain historical circumstances’ (Davis 1995, 1-2). Prior to the 1880 Milan
conference, *deafness* was defined in society as ‘performance-based’. It was with the creation of a linguistic minority that the oppression and inequality became evident and ultimately an issue. Corker concurs with Davis stressing that ‘unequal access to discourse has significant consequences in terms of disability oppression for the lives of groups of disabled people’ (1998:54). Even in biblical terms, *deafness* was a condition to be cured (Mark VII, 31-37).

There is an underlying assumption that *d/Deaf* people are incapable of acquiring literacy skills and therefore are classed as substandard human beings, who can be likened or compared to animals. Aristotle differentiates *d/Deaf* people from animals and from other human-beings, observing that ‘animals make noises, human beings speak, and though people who are born deaf have a voice, they cannot talk’ (*History of Animals* 49.536b). The ancient Greeks noted *deafness* to be a curse synonymous with *dumbness, an inability to speak*, with connotations of being stupid and worthless. Intertwined with the notion of speechlessness is an impairment of reasoning and basic intelligence, so that the condition of being *deaf* disempowered *d/Deaf* people and ultimately separated them from being included in the political and intellectual arena. They were thus graded inferior beings, not worthy to be included within the literary elite.

This pejoration continued into the sphere of the oralist regime of the deaf education system orchestrated by the Milan Conference of 1880. Orwell delineates a removal of freedom of choice noting that, ‘if you control the language you control the people. When a people are dependent exclusively on a visual mode to acquire language, the suppression of a visual form of language is doubly oppressive’ (Orwell, quoted in Wilcox 1989, 75). In 2010, the 21st International Congress on the education of the Deaf met in Vancouver and denounced the Milan 1880 Congress, issuing a formal apology to the *Deaf* community worldwide.

**Medical, Social and Cultural influences**

The social construction of *deafness* is based on the *social model of deafness*, a model that considers social identity and empowerment of the *Deaf* individual and the *Deaf Community* (Corker 1998, 51-64). Ladd introduces the *cultro-linguistic model*, which provides a focus for *Deaf* people having an identity as a linguistic minority (2003, 5). Padden states that ‘to use a cultural definition is not only to assert a new frame of reference, but to consciously reject an older one’ (1996, quoted in Senghas and Monaghan 2002, 69), thus promoting the positive use of the term *Deaf*. 
The medical model of *deafness* has a direct impact of refuting the premise that *deafness* can be viewed from a conceptual framework of *cultural Deafness*. This perspective is embraced by people who perceived deafness to be a *disability*. *Deafness* is thus conceptualized from a personal tragedy viewpoint. Therefore, it can be deemed that:

the medical model encompasses the idea that an individual affected by hearing impairment may be admired for their accommodation of the infirmity or their courage in struggling with it, but the infirmity itself is generally seen as undesirable … a ‘personal tragedy’ (Princeton online).

The social model creates amelioration and rejects the negativity of the medical model, which has historically defined and maintained a sense of disability. Senghas and Monaghan define the cultural model of *deafness* as ‘not merely the absence of hearing … deafness is … a social construction’ (2002, 69-70).

Obasi (2008), Ladd (2010) and Lane (1995) all highlight the ‘need to push for a change in terminology that might help to penetrate those doors of power from which *Deaf* people have been excluded for so long’ (quotation Obsai 2008, 6). Lane places the construction of *deafness* in the realms of its oppressive history, identifies the fight between the medical and social construction of deafness and disability and suggests that a process for producing change is required. This should form an agenda, which includes:

building a greater awareness of the difference between hearing-impairment and cultural *Deafness*; greater acceptance of the national sign language; removal or reduction of language barriers; improving culturally sensitive healthcare (Lane 1995, 181).

**Identifying d/Deaf and H/hearing**

In the case of *deaf* terminology, both the meaning and the terms associated with the concept of *deafness* broaden instead of narrow. The word *deaf* attempts to serve as a descriptor for varying degrees of *deafness* and each identified term can be graded by its sense relation to the word *deaf*. If the word *hearing* is added to the equation then there is a robust argument for gradable antonymy. The following lines identify the meaning of *d/Deaf and H/hearing*.

Line 1 below notes gradable medical terms for the word *deaf*. 

Between the antonyms of *hearing* and *deaf* are terms which are used in the medical world to describe a level of hearing loss. These terms may differ from how the public refer to the varying degrees of deafness and whether they consciously link deafness to the medical model or not.

The following line 2 introduces the concept of upper and lower case letters ‘H/h’ for *hearing* and ‘d/D’ for *deaf*. This is an expansion on Line 1 and includes descriptors to denote the differing levels of hearing loss.


Senghas and Monaghan note that:

> conceptually, the Deaf/deaf distinction is significant. Separating audiological issues (that is, measurable hearing levels – deaf and hearing) from those of socialisation, acculturation, and identity (that is, Deaf as sociological or cultural reference) makes otherwise confusing issues far more understandable (2002, 72).

The introduced terms above are clarified as follows. The terms *Hearing* and *hearing* are not generally identified in written or spoken English to note different hearing identities but these are sign differentiated to note h/Hearing identities in BSL. The term *hearing* with a lowercase ‘h’ in BSL provides a reference to those people who identify with *Deaf* people; use sign language and agree with the ethos of the social model. The term *Hearing*, with an uppercase ‘H’, in BSL provides a reference to those people who view life from an audiological point of view and identify with the ethos of the medical model.

The term *deaf* provides reference to people who are *audiologically deaf* and uses assisted technology to enhance their hearing and speak orally. Woodward describes this term as ‘the audiological condition of not hearing’ (1972, quoted in Padden and Humphries 1988, 2). The term
Deaf (uppercase ‘D’ - Deaf) provides reference to someone who is culturally deaf. Their preferred language is sign language and their identity is embedded within the Deaf community. They consider themselves to be part of a recognised and valued linguistic minority.

The term ‘Deaf’ (in inverted commas) provides reference to ‘massive D – Deaf’, as opposed to the concept of ‘uppercase D – Deaf’. This takes the cultural deafness definition to a different level and identifies with Deaf people who are born into a Deaf family, where their Mother and Father are Deaf, they may have Deaf siblings, have a Deaf spouse and possibly have deaf children. Padden and Humphries note that ‘DEAF is a means of identifying the group one’s connected with’ (1988, 39).

The term DEAF (capitalised) Padden and Humphries define the term DEAF through a deaf child’s perspective. They note:

to a child DEAF means ‘us’, but he meets others for whom ‘deaf’ means ‘them, not like us’. He thinks DEAF means ‘friends who behave as expected’, but to others it means ‘a remarkable condition’ (1988, 17).

Quantitative Survey

In an attempt to assess the understanding of terms and words currently in use a quantitative survey was conducted. Quantitative data was collated from a questionnaire. The participants were chosen randomly; the respondents were aged from 18 to over 56 and divided into three groups: 18-35, 36-55, and 56+. The size of each research sample was a consideration, as Sankoff (1980)suggests, ‘samples of more than 150 individuals tend to be redundant, bringing increasing data-handling problems with diminishing analytical returns’ (quoted in Milroy and Gordon 2003, 28). One hundred and fifty questionnaires were disseminated over a period of five months, a hundred were collected, of which ninety-five viable questionnaires were collated for data analysis.

The Questions

Section one asked the recipients if they would associate the word deaf with the identified words and terms: dull, unspeaking, stupid, dumb, mute, disabled, impaired, silent, ignorant, unintelligent, hard of hearing, hearing impaired, unable to hear.

The respondents were asked to circle a number on a descending Likert scale of 5 to 1: 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree.
Section two asked the respondents to indicate yes or no if they had heard of any of the identified words or terms being used in association with deaf people. If yes, then a value response of positive, negative or neutral was required.

Quantitative Survey Results

In the ‘strongly disagree’ category the collated data revealed that male and female respondents in all three age categories strongly disagreed that the words unintelligent, ignorant, silent, mute, dumb, stupid, unspeaking and dull are associated with the word deaf. Interestingly, the female responses (36-55) noted a disagreement with the word impaired; this is in direct contrast with the male response to the word impaired in this age group, who strongly agreed with its association with the word deaf. Further research would be required to explore how male and females view disability terms.

In the ‘strongly agree’ category the data revealed that male and female respondents in all three age categories strongly agreed with the association of the terms hard of hearing, hearing impaired and unable to hear; this notes that these terms are seen as descriptors and serves to explain the level of hearing loss. The 36-55 age group, male response to the word impaired and disabled indicated a strong agreement in association with the word deaf. Both male and female (56+) responses indicate a strong agreement with the words impaired. The 56+ female responses indicate a strong agreement on the word impaired and an agreement on the word disabled, whereas the male respondents (56+) strongly agree with the association of the word disabled, thus indicating a difference in emphasis on how those words are viewed in association with the concept of deafness. Overall, all age ranges noted an agreement that the words impaired and disabled had some association with the word deaf. Although, the 18-35 male responses also linked the words mute and unspeaking in association with concept of deafness, this did not include the term deaf-mute or deaf and dumb.

On the whole, neutrality responses revealed associations with the terms, unable to hear, hard of hearing, impaired, hearing impaired, silent, unspeaking, disabled, unspeaking, dumb and mute. Although, specifically, individual associations were noted: silent, unspeaking, dumb, mute, silent, disabled. These responses highlight a connection with how the participants perceive d/Deaf people’s ability to communicate. The continuous use and association of the identified words linked to deafness reveals a lack of awareness of what sort of impact is created when these words are used in association with the concept of deafness.
These results indicate a case to disassociate the words *dull, unspeaking, stupid, dumb, mute, disabled, impaired, silent, ignorant,* and *unintelligent,* although there remains an association with the terms *disabled, impaired, mute, unspeaking, hard of hearing, hearing impaired, unable to hear* and *deafened.* The overall findings indicate a solid correlation of results which indicates a process of amelioration.

The term *deafened* gained an interesting outcome in the age range 56+ providing a split in value between the positive, neutral and negative responses. The other age ranges demonstrated more of a neutrality value. This is perhaps because *deafness* can be associated in this category through personal experience as *deafness* becomes an age-related condition. All the age ranges revealed a negative value response to the words, *ignorant, unintelligent, dull* and *stupid.* The age range 56+ reveals a small percentage of neutrality with the words *ignorant* and *unintelligent.* This result does not correlate with the results in Section one of the questionnaire as these words were noted in the ‘strongly disagree’ section.

In the case of *Dumb and mute* versus *deaf and dumb* and *deaf-mute,* the age categories 36-55 and 56+ reveal virtually the same split between a neutral and negative response. The words *dumb* and *deaf and dumb, mute* and *deaf-mute* follow the same value responses. In the age range 18-35 these terms differ in the value representation of the term *dumb* and *deaf and dumb;* these terms are deemed more negative in value. The word *mute* has a negative majority value and *deaf-mute* has a majority neutrality value; perhaps this is because the term *deaf-mute* has been used as a descriptive label and is still used in the older generations, whereas the word *mute* used as an adjective is indicated to have negative sense relations.

The terms *deafened, hard of hearing, Deaf and Hearing Impaired* show positive value associations. Age range 56+ reveals a positive value majority on the terms *hard of hearing, Deaf and Hearing Impaired,* although, the term *deafened* reveals a three way split between positive, negative and neutral values. Age range 36-55 indicates a higher neutrality response on the terms *deafened, Oral deaf, hard of hearing, Deaf and Hearing Impaired.* They place positive value on the terms *hearing impaired, Deaf and Hard of Hearing.* Age range 18-35 reveals a high neutrality response for the terms, *silent, deaf-mute, oral deaf, impaired, deafened, Deaf and Hard of Hearing.* The term *hearing impaired* reveals a split between a positive and neutral response with a small negativity response. The term *impaired* demonstrates a split response; 18-35 and 36-55 age ranges deem this word as
either neutral or negative, although the 56+ age range notes a split between positive, negative and neutral. This outcome affords the word *deaf* a process of amelioration.

An important finding from the questionnaire study notes that 15% of the male respondents are *Deaf aware* and 20% of the female respondents’ are *Deaf aware*. These percentages highlight how many lay people do not know that *deafness* has a cultural definition and provides a focus for further research in the area of how the media could positively and proactively portray the cultural definition of *deafness*. This outcome supports the need to introduce the cultural definition of *deafness* – *Deaf/Deafhood* to the dictionary, because it would offer lay people an accessible and positive definition.

**Qualitative Data**

In order to gain an appraisal of this topic from academics in deaf studies, a number of individuals were asked to submit their views in interview and email correspondence.

Frank Harrington (Senior Lecturer in Deaf Studies, University of Central Lancashire) considered all terminology that was used without deaf people’s participation as unacceptable. It is important to note that the use of these words and terms can be context dependent. Harrington advocated the
removal of the words *mute* and *impaired* and the term *hearing impaired*. He did not associate any of the words: *dull, stupid, dumb, mute, ignorant* and *unintelligent*, with the word *deaf* or *d/Deaf* people. He provided evidence of an ameliorated response to the word *deaf*, suggesting that ‘any term which problematizes the being deaf of a deaf person needs to be removed’ (Harrington 2009).

Robert Lee (Senior Lecturer in Deaf Studies, University of Central Lancashire) suggests that, ‘if there is a need to distinguish between the degrees of deafness, then leave it to the professionals to use’ (Lee 2009). He also noted that he would not label a child *Deaf*. He would use the term *deaf* in its generic sense because they have not yet ascertained their primary mode of communication. Lee concurred with Harrington on the point that the use of terms can be dependent on how they are used. Lee noted that some terms are used by non-*Deaf* aware people because they are deemed as polite options.

Nicola Nunn (Senior Lecturer in Deaf Studies, University of Central Lancashire) brought into discussion a political element to terminology, which disables deaf people. She mentions how people in general are affected by labelling and more so if you are *d/Deaf*. She objects to the term *hearing impaired* and suggests that this classification should be phased out noting that ‘society is naive and has labelled all *d/Deaf* people with a medical term, *hearing impaired*. This term was introduced without consultation and without taking into account different types of *d/Deaf* people and what they might find acceptable’ (Nunn 2009). Nunn also disassociates the words *dull, stupid, ignorant and unintelligent* with the word *deaf* and *d/Deaf* people. The term *Deaf* to her means that a *Deaf* person has learnt sign language, uses sign language and is involved in *Deaf* culture. *Massive ‘D’ Deaf* includes *Deaf* people who were born *deaf*, from a *Deaf* family, signed all their lives appreciating the richness of their language, strongly involved in *Deaf* community and *Deaf* culture.

**Re-defining the word *Deaf***

In attempts to redefine *Deaf*, Harrington made the following suggestion:

*D*eaf is about deaf people who have an identity and sense of belonging. *Deaf* is about giving *deafness* a title and not just linguistically being a word. It is making a noun in that sense not simply *deaf* – cannot hear but *Deaf* belonging to a cultural group of people who share a common language (Harrington 2009).

Lee also offered an insightful definition of *deaf* and *Deaf* noting:
the term deaf as a generic term denotes any person who has a significant hearing loss. It is a medical term, which has audiological status, which distinguishes those who have full access to the hearing community as opposed to full access to the Deaf community ... Deaf as a term denotes a person, or a communication who may or may not have a severe hearing loss but their primary mode of communication is sign language. It is a communication status (Lee 2009).

Bencie Woll (Director, Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre, University College London) suggests that:

in some respects we are already in a post- ‘Deaf’ world. I often find that people now use upper-case D not to refer to Deaf community membership, but as a polite term for deaf. For example, I regularly now see academic papers where the participants in an experiment comprise two groups of native signers –those with normal hearing and those with impaired hearing. They are frequently referred to in these papers as Deaf and hearing, although both groups of course are Deaf in the cultural sense of the word. I also see the term ‘Deaf children’ used frequently even though these are not children who belong to the Deaf community. I think this use of upper-case ‘D’ parallels that of ‘Black’ with an upper-case ‘B’, which began to appear in American and British writing in the ‘60s. I often now have to use the phrase ‘deaf members of the Deaf community’ to make this distinction clear again (Woll 2009).

Dictionary definitions
Dictionaries do, of course, respond to the changes in English usage and are continually updating their publications in terms of the revision of definitions and the inclusion of new words. Oxford Dictionaries, for example, identify the following considerations in the process of recommending a new item or word into their dictionaries.

New terms have to be recorded in a print or online source before they can be considered: it’s not enough just to hear them in conversation or on television, although we do analyse material from Internet message boards and TV scripts.
It used to be the case that a new term had to be used over a period of two or three years before we could consider adding it to a print dictionary. In today’s digital age, the situation has changed. New terms can achieve enormous currency with a wide audience in a much shorter space of time.

New words are the most obvious manifestation of language change. But we are also looking for more subtle changes in language – new meanings of existing words, for example, or changes in spelling and hyphenation over a longer period of time, or even grammatical changes (Oxford Dictionaries online).

Since the upper case ‘D’ – Deaf is already in use in some circles, it is hoped that this and other necessary changes will soon be included in the dictionaries.

**Conclusion**

This research reveals that the use of word labelling may perpetuate society’s negative attitude towards d/Deaf people. However, since the recognition of British Sign Language in 2003 and the denouncing of the 1880 Milan Conference in 2010, the Deaf community has made a positive move forward as a linguistic minority. The recognition and inclusion of Deaf /Deafhood into the dictionary would serve to ameliorate the word deaf and provide a permanent mainstream reminder of the positive sense relations of the word Deaf/Deafhood. Additionally, as Harrington points out, dictionaries need to remove ‘any term which problematizes the being deaf of a deaf person’ (Harrington 2009).

This study also exposes the negative ‘assumptions and frames of reference’, that ‘individual words can trigger’ (Stubbs 2005, 7), words that need to be altered. Certainly the results suggest that the following words: dull, stupid, dumb, mute, disabled, silent, ignorant and unintelligent are to some extent already disassociated with the word deaf and d/Deaf people. However, the word impaired gains a split viewpoint in acceptability. These results indicate that being d/Deaf does not mean that you should be labelled in the sphere of disability.

The terms deafened, oral deaf, hard of hearing, hearing impaired and unable to hear are terms which are deemed neutral. This neutrality in established terms reveals an enculturation, which requires perhaps a government-led, or an official working team to introduce future acceptable terms for use, and to suggest the obsoletion of some terms, such as hearing impaired, a term, which has been identified in this study as a term that creates a disability label.
The uses of the historic terms: *deaf and dumb* and *deaf-mute*, were found to be undesirable especially the term *deaf-mute*, although these terms may still carry a place and an ownership in *Deaf* history and *Deaf* identity. The term *Deafhood* provides reference to the pragmatic application of the word *Deaf*; in essence, it encapsulates how a *Deaf* person lives and exists in society. Ladd defines *Deafhood* as ‘a journey to find one’s largest *Deaf* self, to be the largest *Deaf* person one can possibly be’ (2010, 5). He further delineates his theory by suggesting that examples of *Deafhood* are underpinned by one crucial concept – a belief in equality. These not only refer to *d/Deaf* people being equal to hearing people, but also refer to equality among *Deaf* people themselves. The pragmatic application of the term *Deafhood* is associated with additional *Deaf* terms, such as *Deaf identity, Deaf Pride, Deaf Power, Deaf Community, Deaf World, Deaf Nation.*

Furthermore, when words are wanting, we should do as Crystal suggests: ‘if there is no word in the language that meets all your needs – semantic [or] grammatical, then you have to invent one’ (2006, 59). As to *deafness* itself, Harris explains:

*deafness* itself is not an insurmountable barrier ... the lack of good will and ... subsequent ‘bad attitude’ to *deafness* is a very effective one. *Deafness* demands our respect as a condition of difference in the same way that people have different genders, are from different races, ... if we respect the difference of deafness ... we [will be ] on the right track as communicative enablers rather than dis-abelers (1997, 33).

This paper recommends future research is required in this area to implement change and to aid in the progression of this positive shift in the semantic prosody of the word *deaf* and its cultural definition for inclusion into the dictionary.

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