For more than a hundred years, American Sign Language (ASL) was characterized as a crude system of gestures, something less than a "real language," both by hearing people who had no idea how it worked and by the Deaf people who used it daily. Then, in the mid-20th century, a revolutionary discovery was made when linguists (Stokoe, Cronberg and Casterline, and later Bellugi and Klima) subjected ASL to academic scrutiny and found that it actually did have all the elements required of a "real" language, some in novel forms. American Sign Language has fascinated linguists ever since and has taken its place in the world panoply of languages. Now, Deaf people can feel proud of their unique language and fight for their right to use it.

Deaf people in America are best described as being bilingual because they use two languages, American Sign Language (ASL) and English, in their daily lives, both within the Deaf community and in mainstream
society. However, deaf people's linguistic competence can vary greatly in both English and ASL, from being equally fluent in the two languages to being semi-lingual with weak or no skills in either language. This wide variation in linguistic fluency may stem from differing philosophies about the way deaf children should be raised and taught, ranging from an English-only approach to a bilingual approach in which both ASL and English are used. Because of the predominance of deaf children whose families only use English at home and deaf education programs that are based solely on English, there has been relatively limited success in meeting the educational, linguistic, and communicative needs of deaf children (Fleischer, 2008; Hoff, 2008; Hoffmeister, 1990; Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996; Mahshie, 1995; Wilbur, 2008). As a result, many deaf high school graduates are exiting secondary programs with limited English skills and comparatively poor ASL fluency. Nevertheless, both English and ASL play an important role in the lives of American Deaf people.

Although some form of English is used on a daily basis by most deaf Americans, ASL is considered to be the most accessible language for deaf people because of its visual properties. Kannapell (1989) claimed that only ASL could provide deaf people with 100% access to information, whereas English offers fragmented access because of its limited visibility on the lips and its ungrammatical structure in its Signed English presentation. It can be argued that ASL is the most powerful and important solution created by Deaf people for effective living. Without a visually based language, deaf people are often doomed to a substandard lifestyle with severely limited access to information.

WHAT AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE IS AND IS NOT

For years, misconceptions about ASL were prevalent (Dively, Metzger, Taub, & Baer, 2001; Hoff, 2008; Hoffmeister, 1990). It was long believed that signs were just English words and grammar represented on the hands. And, since many deaf people couldn't master English, their productions of signs resulted in a "broken English" reflecting their limited knowledge of the English language.
Today, with enlightened views of Deaf culture and its language, ASL is recognized and accepted by the majority of linguists and the academic community as a legitimate language, with the ability to express any thought, idea, or concept, just like spoken languages. Research has clearly determined that ASL has an independent grammar that happens to be quite different from English (see Dively et al., 2001 for review). Just like all other languages, ASL possesses a compositional structure at all linguistic levels including phonology, morphology, syntax, and discourse (Liddell, 2003; Lucas, Bayley, & Valli, 2003). Uniquely, though, the linguistic rules of signed languages all over the world have been found to prioritize the need for signs to be formed for clear visibility, ease of production, and the requirements of the body (Knapp & Corina, 2008; Neisser, 1983; Valli & Lucas, 2000). Yet, myths about ASL perpetuate, creating confusion about what ASL is and is not.

All languages utilize arbitrarily created symbols to assign meanings to the objects they represent. Why do the English word “brown,” the ASL sign BROWN, the Spanish word “moreno” and the sign MORENO in Mexican Sign Language (LSM) all use different symbols and yet represent the same thing? It is because a certain meaning (the color brown) has been assigned to these four symbols, which are understood by specific language communities. In the case of ASL, using the handshape, B, in a downward movement on the cheek, signals the information BROWN to the ASL using community but does not carry meaning to the Mexican signing community nor to English-speaking people. In all languages, symbols (either words or signs) provide quick, effective, and specific references to the concepts they represent, and the ASL sign for brown does exactly that.

Because of the referential nature of symbols in languages, people are able to discuss not only concrete objects, but also abstract thoughts, such as time, morality, and emotions, with remarkable ease and efficiency. In English, as in ASL, it is quite easy to specify a time in the past or in the future, such as “this afternoon,” “next Tuesday,” “10 years ago.” Abstract concepts such as “unfairness” and “freedom,” emotions such as “rage” and “lust” are as easily communicated in signs as in words. People of the same language community recognize their language’s symbols and come to the
same conclusion. Although languages' symbols can be used to describe every idea, feeling, and object known to man, in different languages, certain ideas may require the use of more than one word or sign to adequately convey a concept. As a real language, ASL has the same capacity to describe physical reality as well as hypothetical abstractions, and ASL users can discuss the tangible and the intangible, real and imaginary, concrete and fantastical, just like the users of any other language.

It is important to note that ASL was developed by Deaf people themselves when the American Deaf community was initially organized with the establishment of the first school for the deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817. Prior to 1817, indigenous sign systems were in use in various deaf communities, such as that found on Martha's Vineyard (Groce, 1985). These indigenous signs, combined with the French Sign Language imported by Laurent Clerc, evolved over the years to become a rich, complete, and independent language (Lucas et al., 2003; Singleton & Tittle, 2000; Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989). The phonological, morphological, and syntactic aspects of ASL all conform to the visual properties and requirements that make the language effortless and practical for Deaf people to use. Like all languages, ASL continues to evolve, to become even more efficient, and add terms for new innovations. It is for this reason that ASL, just like spoken English, does not always resemble the language used 100 years ago. For example, in ASL, the location of the sign HELP has changed over the years. Previously, the sign was made at the elbow, but it has now shifted to the more centralized placement on the hand. This phenomenon of language shift is common in spoken language as well (e.g., the English word “can’t” is more often used in everyday speech than, “cannot” and the phrase, “God be with you” has morphed into “good-bye,” for ease of production). Interestingly, the ASL sign HELP traces its roots to the corresponding sign AIDER in French Sign Language (LSF). HELP and AIDER used to be produced identically, but while ASL HELP has moved its location to the body's center, LSF AIDER has kept its location at the elbow.

All these point to the fact that ASL is not a crude form of communication, nor is it a substandard language with limitations in its power to articulate thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Rather, ASL, like any language,
has the capacity to meet the needs of its linguistic community in expressing specific thoughts, ideas, and feelings, as well as abstract concepts.

LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND CULTURE

As is true for cultural groups from small tribes to huge nations, language is intertwined with identity. For this reason, it is impossible to separate language from culture, as the elements of a language reflect the values of the community. American Sign Language is an unmistakable marker of the Deaf community (Hoffmeister, 1990; Lane et al., 2011). One example of the cultural significance held by language is its focal vocabulary, which is “a specialized set of terms and distinctions that is particularly important to a certain group” (retrieved on Nov. 27, 2010, http://www.encyclo.co.uk/define/Focal%20vocabulary). The focal vocabulary of ASL abounds with signs referring to the Deaf experience (Bienvenu, 2008). There are specific signs for at least a dozen types of deaf people, identifying their affiliation with the Deaf community and identity.
Hearing person

Deaf with a hearing attitude
Similarly, there are specific ASL signs for many kinds of hearing people who are involved in the Deaf community, signaling the level of respect these individuals have garnered from Deaf people.

This is not unlike the banks of lexical items that have been developed within the gay community, African American community, Jewish community, and other communities that describe outsiders or those who are perceived to be oppressors, as compared to those who are well-respected and trusted by community members. Similarly, the focal vocabulary reflects the living conditions of the community (Miller, 1999). For example, American English contains scores of words relating to cars and money—not surprisingly, as these items seem to carry great value in our culture. Likewise, the Nuer language in East Africa has dozens of terms for cattle because of the importance of cattle in their lives. For Deaf people, the vocabulary of ASL is rich in descriptors relating to the Deaf experience, with many signs having no simple equivalent or translation in English. Conversely, there are relatively few music-related signs in ASL. For instance, one ASL sign is used to refer to the terms music, song, sing,
Hearing person who signs like deaf people

and concert. To view examples of focal vocabulary in ASL, please go to www.americandeafculture.com.

ANALYZING LANGUAGES

There are two basic approaches to analyzing languages and understanding the ways they are used by members of their linguistic communities. These approaches focus on the prescriptive or descriptive rules of language (Hoff, 2008; Valli & Lucas, 2000). The prescriptive approach examines the rules of the language in the way an instructor or language book might teach its grammar. In this sense, the rules of a language are explained according to someone's idea of correct form and usage. The rules of "pure ASL" can be specified to describe the way it should be presented. Since grammatical rules can be explicitly stated, departing from these rules would make the usage "ungrammatical."
However, not everyone uses a language according to prescriptive standards. For instance, in spoken English, the colloquial use of the term, “I dunno” is commonly heard instead of the more grammatically correct construction “I don’t know.” Descriptively, some of these variations can be attributed to regional differences, or to the educational background or age and ethnicity of the language user. In the case of ASL, factors such as a person’s educational background (whether he or she was taught orally or in ASL or in a variation of Signed English), his or her inclination to think in ASL or English, and parental hearing status can all influence sign production. For these reasons, actual ASL usage does not always conform to its prescriptive rules.

Prescriptive Rules of American Sign Language

From a prescriptive perspective, ASL can be examined at all levels of linguistic analysis: phonology, morphology, syntax, and discourse. Each level will be discussed in detail below.

At the phonological level for spoken languages, words are divided into their smallest contrastive units. This is done to identify and distinguish the sounds distinctive to each language. For example, in English, a certain set of sounds (vowels and consonants) is used, and there are prescriptive rules about which sounds can go together, whereas other languages contain a different set of sounds, such as clicks and guttural rolled r’s.

Similarly, in signed languages, signs can be divided into their smallest contrastive units along four parameters: handshapes, locations, movements, and palm orientation. The set of handshapes used in ASL is rather extensive. Yet, there are certain handshapes that are not employed in ASL but are commonly used in other signed languages throughout the world. For instance, the extended middle finger handshape is not used for any signs in ASL, since it is perceived as an insulting gesture in American culture. By contrast, the extended middle finger handshape is used in Japanese Sign Language, Hong Kong Sign Language, and many other signed languages. Conversely, the ASL “T” handshape, where the thumb peeks out between the first and second fingers of a closed fist is commonly used in ASL but not utilized in the sign languages of France, Japan,
Philippines, Costa Rica, and many other countries where that gesture is considered obscene.

The second parameter, location, refers to the places on the face or body, or in space where signs are produced. The ability to produce signs on many different locations leads to a rule concerning signs made with either one or two hands. The farther away from the eyes that a sign is located, the more likely it is that two hands will be required. This rule makes it easier for the eyes to capture the handshapes used to produce the sign.

The third parameter, movement, includes an array of specific movements that are used to produce signs. The predominance of certain movement patterns, such as the downward movement and circular movement used in ASL signs, can be analyzed and allows for comparison with other signed languages throughout the world. In fact, movement is so significant an inflector that the same sign produced with different movements can convey a range of meanings (e.g., sick, very sick, chronically sick, repeatedly sick). Such movements can be considered adverbial aspects in ASL.

Palm orientation is another parameter that indicates how a sign should be produced. The orientation of the palm of the hand, whether it is upward, sideways, or downward, is an important aspect of constructing a sign. In many cases, the orientation of the palm establishes the relationship of the speaker to the person(s) addressed, with palm orientation toward the speaker's body signifying relationship to self, such as MINE or OUR, whereas palm orientation away from the body demonstrates relationship to others, such as YOUR or THEIR.

Some linguists, such as Valli and Lucas (2000), have proposed that nonmanual signals constitute the fifth parameter of the language. As such, some ASL signs require the incorporation of nonmanual markers such as facial expressions including specific movements of the eyes, eyebrows, lips, and/or body language, including head tilts and nods, shoulder movements, and many other possibilities. The repertoire of acceptable facial expressions and specific body movement varies from one signed language to another, making it a fascinating unit in the analysis and comparison of signed languages.

Another level of linguistic analysis is an examination of the morphemes that exist in a language. A morpheme is the smallest meaningful
unit of a word or sign, whether it be spoken, written, or signed. When looking at an English word, it is possible to determine whether or not it contains more than one meaning by counting the morphemes. For example, the word “disappear” signals two different pieces of information or morphemes; the prefix “dis” communicates “not” or the opposite of the root word “appear.” By contrast, in the word “disappoint,” there is only one morpheme and, in this example, “dis” does not carry the meaning of “not.” Similarly, by adding “s” to the end of an English word, an additional piece of information is often provided, making it a two-morpheme word. Nouns with “s” at the end of the word signal plurality (e.g., dog/dogs). Yet, when you add “s” to a verb, it signals that the verb is attributed to a singular person (walk/walks). It is also possible to determine whether a word is a noun, verb, adjective, or adverb by observing the suffix. For instance, adding -ly to an English word usually signals that the word is an adverb. Similarly, adding -ed to an English word communicates the past tense of a verb (laugh/laughed). “dis,” “s,” “-ly,” and “-ed” are all morphemes that provide additional information about a word and its meaning.

Morphemes also exist in ASL. One example of the morphological aspect of ASL is the numbers incorporated into certain noun signs. It is possible to quantify an ASL noun using only one sign (e.g., 3-WEEKS, 2-PERSONS, 6-YEARS-OLD), whereas two or more separate words are needed in English to express the same concept. Another example of morphemes in ASL is the noun-verb pairs, in which the signs are identical in handshape, location, and palm orientation, but differ only in the movement. The nouns are derived from verbs by repeating the movement. An example of a noun-verb pair is SIT, using one downward movement while a repeated up/down movements is used for the noun, CHAIR. Other noun-verb pairs include FLY/AIRPLANE, PRINT/NEWSPAPER, to OPEN A BOOK/BOOK, and PULL INTO A GARAGE/GARAGE.

Another aspect of morphological studies in ASL focuses on meanings that are conveyed through location. Identical signs that differ only by location communicate information in specific categories. For example, numerical signs produced at the chin location indicate the age of the person, whereas the same sign produced at the wrist location communicates time, and those made at the side of the forehead signal a monetary
value of cents (so, the same “5 handshake” would mean 5 years old, 5:00, and 5 cents, made at the chin, wrist, and head, respectively). Other location morphemes can convey information regarding gender. For example, ASL signs produced at the forehead signal male relatives (e.g., FATHER, GRANDFATHER, MALE COUSIN, NEPHEW), whereas the same signs made at the chin location represent the female relatives (e.g., MOTHER, GRANDMOTHER, FEMALE COUSIN, NIECE). Interestingly, while these gender-specific locations around the head exist in ASL, they are not found in most other signed languages in the world. To view the discussion on morphemes in ASL, please go to www.americandeafculture.com.

Unlike the phonological and morphological levels where the basic construction of a single word or sign is the typical unit of study, at the syntax level, the focus of analysis shifts to sentences. The study of syntax examines word order and sentence types. Just like any language, syntax in ASL is rule-governed. In ASL, however, certain grammatical delineations are primarily produced through nonmanual markers, such as facial expressions. For example, the use of eyebrows signals the type of question being asked. By raising the eyebrows, a yes or no response is expected. By contrast, wh- questions (where, when, who, what, why), are accompanied by pulled-down eyebrows.

Although the word/sign order in ASL is not extremely rigid and allows for many possible combinations in constructing sentences, it is the accompanying nonmanual signals that make the order grammatical. Many sentences in ASL employ a “topic-comment” structure, in which the topic of the utterance is established first, and then a comment is made about it. The order of such ASL sentences would be object-subject-verb (OSV), following the rule of topicalization in which the topic is clearly stated at the beginning, accompanied by an appropriate nonmanual signal. For example, STORE, ME-GO NOW is a typical OSV sentence structure in ASL, with the grammatical features of the head leaning forward and raised eyebrow made with the sign, STORE, and then head nod accompanying ME-GO NOW.

The discourse level of linguistic analysis focuses on the flow of communication. For example, how conversations begin and end, how turn-taking and interruption strategies are employed, and when the climax of a story
is revealed. In spoken English, remarks often flow from the general to the specific. Listeners are used to a possible ambiguity of topic at the beginning of a conversation and understand that the point may be reserved until the last part of the narrative. Unlike spoken English, topicalization is an important element in ASL conversations. The topic is usually made clear by the speaker/signer at the beginning of a conversation to prevent potential misunderstanding. This is accomplished by a quick reply from the listener/receiver that the topic is understood before the conversation can proceed. Otherwise, the receiver of the conversation will indicate frustration or confusion as to what topic is being discussed. At the end of the conversation, the topic is usually reiterated to assure that the point has been clearly made. This process is often called the diamond structure, as opposed to the funnel structure that could represent the general-to-specific approach typical in English discourse.

Another aspect of discourse analysis involves turn-taking and interruption strategies. In ASL, these elements of conversation are dictated by the use of eye gaze, hands, and facial expressions, whereas tone of a voice serves this function in spoken English. All these conversational regulators function to ensure a smooth linguistic exchange between the parties involved in conversations.

Finally, the study of discourse analysis examines the range of registers in which languages are utilized to address the needs of specific audiences. For instance, intimate utterances exchanged by lovers are drastically different from formal presentations delivered by academicians. Although we know what characterizes Academic English, new findings associated with the linguistic and sociolinguistic features of Academic ASL are beginning to emerge (Harris, 2011; Ross & Berkowitz, 2008). Such findings include a clear diamond discourse structure, proper formation of signs, and reduced use of nonmanual markers, in addition to the use of an unmarked grammatical structure (S-V-o), the use of space for referential purposes, frequent use of fingerspelling and initialized signs, and deliberate use of pausing as a boundary marker. With the ever-expanding pool of Deaf scholars presenting academic work in ASL, the features of Academic ASL will become more delineated with further studies and analysis.
Descriptive Rules of American Sign Language

In contrast to prescriptive rules, descriptive rules of ASL focus on how the language is actually used by people. American Sign Language, like every language in the world, is used by a multitude of people, resulting in many variations. Historically, ASL was transmitted to generations through the residential school setting. Although most schools banned sign language in classrooms with young children from the late 1800s to the early 1970s, outside class, however, older students and Deaf counselors in the residential halls conversed with the children in ASL, serving as language models to the younger generations of deaf students. Today, with the decline in numbers of residential schools and the subsequent growth of mainstreamed programs utilizing Manually Coded English, many deaf children learn how to sign from parents, teachers, and interpreters who are often not fluent in ASL, instead of from Deaf adults. In addition, educational and communicative philosophies differ from school to school, and from region to region. As a result, variations in sign language usage have resulted from these differences (Lane et al., 2011; Lucas et al., 2003).

Since 1975, most deaf children have not been students at residential schools, but instead attend local public schools, only some of which have a specific program for deaf students. Due to the lack of Deaf adults in their environment, deaf students do not usually have access to strong ASL signing models. In addition, the 1970s saw a shift in many schools (both residential and day programs) from an oral instructional method to an English-based sign system (often called SEE or Signed English) with the goal of improving English language acquisition among deaf students (Bornstein, 1990; Branson & Miller, 2002; Marschark, 2007). As a result, the initial exposure to sign language for most deaf children since the 1970s has not been the full-fledged language of ASL, but rather one of the contrived systems (that mix English grammar with signs) used by the classroom teachers (Lane et al., 1996). Nevertheless, as part of Deaf people's journey toward the Deaf community, after leaving school, they usually seek out and gain exposure to Deaf elders, many of whom use ASL. These young adults begin to absorb ASL into their signing repertoire, but their fluency in ASL is often not at par with those who were exposed to ASL from an early age, such as the Deaf children born into Deaf families.
who learn ASL at home. As a result, language usage in the Deaf community is marked by a wide variety of signing, from a more English-based signing style to a more traditional ASL structure. All these variations call for a descriptive analysis of ASL, with a focus on how people actually use the language.

Because of the confusion regarding the role and influence of English in sign language usage, a continuum of sign language was proposed in 1980 (Baker & Cokely, 1980) to help better understand the variations. Although this model is perhaps outdated, it helps us examine the potential influence of English on ASL. American Sign Language is placed at the left end of the continuum, as a separate language without influence from English. The right end of the continuum features signing that follows English word order (either through Manually Coded English systems or the Rochester Method, where fingerspelling is used to spell out complete sentences in English). And then there is a wide zone in the middle where ASL and English are blended in different amounts to form what is commonly known as Pidgin Sign English. Pidgin languages emerge all over the world and are defined as “the attempts by the speakers of two different languages to communicate and that is primarily a simplified form of one of the languages, with a reduced vocabulary and grammatical structure and considerable variation in pronunciation” (retrieved August 12, 2012 from http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Pidgin?src=t). Today, the ASL academic community prefers the term “Contact Signing” to describe the phenomenon of fluent ASL signers accommodating novice signers by shifting to more English-like signing. Similarly, many people who learn how to sign later in life are unable to leave behind the English grammar they grew up with when trying to produce signed utterances, resulting in “English-ly” signing style.

Because of the differing ways ASL is used in the Deaf community, Bragg (1990) developed a descriptive model illustrating these differences, including Englished ASL. Other categories in this model are Traditional ASL, Modern ASL, and Rarefied ASL. It is important to note that these variations are not based on prescriptive rules of language but rather constitute a description of how ASL is used by Deaf people today. In this model, Englished ASL is not to be confused with any variations of Signed English systems. In Englished ASL, ASL signs are presented in English
word order incorporating ASL grammar through nonmanual markers. As mentioned previously, Signed English systems are not a language, in that the rules of sign usage are contrived. For example, ASL has a sign glossed “RUN,” which refers to using the legs to move quickly through space. In some signed English systems, the same sign RUN would also be used in sentences to refer to homonyms of the English word “run,” such as a run in one’s stocking or running for office, even though ASL possesses other conceptually accurate signs for each of those other English phrases. In addition, Signed English systems require the signers to use invented signs for gender-specific terms such as “HE” and “SHE,” and English suffixes like “-ING” and “-ED,” whereas Englished ASL simply utilizes traditional ASL signs in an English word order. Another aspect of the move to Signed English in the 1970s involved speaking and signing at the same time. This simultaneous use of two language systems is a difficult and awkward process and has been shown to produce unwieldy and often incoherent signed utterances. As young deaf people mature and become more assimilated into the Deaf community, they often reject the old school and parental insistence that speech must accompany signs. They begin to sign “more naturally” and more comfortably by dropping speech, resulting in a more traditional form of ASL. Bragg describes this signing style as Modern ASL, as it appears that the signing of a majority of young deaf people today is still heavily influenced by their Signed English background. By contrast, people who sign in a Traditional manner would show minimal influence from newer versions of signing and would approximate the signing style of older generations of signers. For instance, among older signers, very little mouthing and limited use of initialized signs are typical. Finally, Bragg gave the label Rarefied ASL to the type of signing that is poetic in quality. Rarefied ASL is often seen in stage performances. Such eloquent delivery requires careful planning and rehearsal of the way signs are to be presented, resulting in a vividly expressive presentation of ASL. The question as to whether Modern ASL or even Englished ASL can be labeled ASL has been debated among linguists and academicians, but is usually not a concern of average Deaf people. Descriptively speaking, Bragg’s categories are appropriate in describing the variations in ASL usage within the Deaf community. Prescriptively speaking, probably only Traditional
ASL and Rarefied ASL can be classified as “proper” ASL. However, like all languages, ASL is evolving through usage—and even misusage—by newer members of the Deaf community (Hoffmeister, 1990). It remains to be seen whether Modern ASL becomes the standard way that ASL is used and described in the future.

Interestingly, many invented signs from the Signed English system have crept into ASL and become standardized in the Deaf community (Hoffmeister, 1990; Gamache, 2004). For example, in traditional ASL, there was only one sign representing the concept of group/community. The same sign (similar to the sign for CLASS) was used for family, group, department, team, office, association, league, and society, whereas in Signed English, different signs were contrived for each of these terms by taking the base sign, CLASS, and using the handshape that represents the first letter of these words. In this regard, the handshape “f” is used for FAMILY, the handshape “g” for GROUP, “d” for DEPARTMENT, and so on. This initialization of signs created an expanded vocabulary for the Deaf community and has since become an integral part of ASL. However, initialized signs for words related to STREET (such as street, avenue, road, way, pathway) have not been accepted by the Deaf community. Similarly, initialized signs for meat-related products (ham, pork, beef, etc.) have been completed rejected. The reasons why certain sets of initialized signs are accepted and used widely while others are completely rejected provides an interesting glimpse into the way ASL, just like any language, has naturally evolved over the years. One contributing factor in the use of initialized signs might be the growth of Academic ASL. Consequently, Academic ASL and the use of initialized signs are often used in academic environments, such as graduate schools, and in high-tech environments where there is a need to express specialized vocabulary (Ross & Berkowitz, 2008; Woodward, 1990).

Bilingualism Among Deaf People
As mentioned before, many Deaf people are bilingual because they live and interact among both deaf and hearing people. As briefly discussed in Chapter 5, linguistic fluency among deaf people ranges from being fluent in both ASL and English to being semi-lingual, in which the deaf person
has extremely limited linguistic skills in either language. Dr. Kannapell (1989) identified six linguistic variations among deaf people:

1. **ASL monolinguals**—Deaf people who are competent only in ASL.
2. **ASL dominant bilinguals**—Deaf people who have skills in both ASL and English but are more fluent in ASL.
3. **Balanced bilinguals**—Deaf people who are able to use both languages equally well.
4. **English dominant bilinguals**—Deaf people who are more fluent in English than ASL.
5. **English monolinguals**—Deaf people who have no knowledge of ASL and use English as their primary language.
6. **Semi-linguals**—Deaf people who have limited skills in both ASL and English.

As Americans, it can be assumed that almost all deaf people have some level of English fluency, whereas conversely, not all deaf people know ASL (Burke, 2008). Nevertheless, ASL has repeatedly been cited as a central icon of the Deaf community and the main reason for its existence. Because ASL was developed by Deaf people themselves and has evolved over the years, it is culturally bound to the Deaf community and has the power to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas that are critical to the Deaf existence.

Exactly how ASL is being used among Deaf people is of little concern to the majority of Deaf people. The same holds true for English usage among Americans, except for outspoken critics on both sides who decry the erosion of proper English and ASL. In light of this, the descriptive analysis of language usage among deaf people and English-speaking Americans demonstrates a wide range of linguistic fluency and variation. However, concern for the proper modeling and instruction of the language for both deaf and hearing children remains in the academic arena, and appropriately so. For this reason, prescriptive rules of language must be respected and taught in school; and for deaf children, fluency in both English and ASL should be the goal. To this end, many Deaf leaders advocate the bilingual model as the best solution to achieve this end, based on
the historical success of achieving a high level of fluency in both ASL and English for Deaf children of Deaf parents as well as for Deaf children in bilingual programs.

This philosophy entails a formal and parallel curriculum in both ASL and English for all deaf children throughout their academic career. Just like hearing students who continue to take English classes from kindergarten to high school and even in college, deaf children also need equal exposure and attention to the language that is most accessible to them. Since ASL is attuned to visually oriented people, Deaf students are often able to master the language with ease. With a native-language command of ASL, it is theorized that Deaf children will be able to develop English skills with less difficulty. Some Deaf students will be comfortably bilingual in both ASL and English right from the start and continue to exhibit a strong command of both languages throughout their lives. For others, ASL will develop more quickly because of its visual properties, and, with ASL as a base, these students will eventually master English skills. For some, English will always be a “foreign” language because of the challenges in mastering its nuances. Regardless of the outcome, it is theorized that the century-old challenge of teaching English to deaf children is best addressed through the bilingual approach (see Marschark, 2007, for review; Simms & Thumann, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Whether as a teaching philosophy, a linguistic right, or simply a communication mode, ASL is considered to be the primary cultural marker of the Deaf community. Correspondingly, Deaf people have fought long and hard to ensure that deaf children have access to this historically created and most powerful solution for effective living. American Sign Language, even as it evolves over the years, continues to be the primary focal point of Deaf culture and the unifying element of the Deaf community and will continue to be the most visible marker of Deaf culture for years to come.