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## Abstract

Many Australian Aboriginal people use a sign language ("hand talk") that mirrors their local spoken language and is used both in culturally appropriate settings when speech is taboo or counterindicated and for community communication. The characteristics of these languages are described, and early European settlers' reports of deaf Aboriginal people signing are surveyed. The article also considers the use of these sign languages by deaf people in their communities and by deaf children in schools. Suggestions are made as to how the acceptance of signing in Aboriginal culture might help reduce the communicative isolation of Aboriginal deaf people.

European settlement began in Australia in 1788, initially with convicts transported from Britain and their guards. Free settlers, most of whom were administrators, farmers, and shopkeepers, began arriving in the early 1800s, and slow expansion took place from the original settlement at Port Jackson (modern-day Sydney) (Kelly 1978).

The Aboriginal[1] people of Australia are believed to have come from Asia by sea and land forty to fifty thousand years ago, possibly even earlier.[2] They lived all over Australia, even in the harsh desert areas. At the time of European settlement, tribal groups were speaking approximately 250 languages, only about 20 of which are still being spoken by sufficient numbers of people to be judged viable (Tsunoda

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2005). Many of these languages had a parallel sign language, which was used when speech was taboo, counterindicated, or difficult to use (e.g., by women in times of mourning, during initiations, while hunting, and over longer distances where speech could not be heard; Jassar and Hunter 2006; J. Green 2009), as well as for occasional communication in communities, especially among women. While the vocabulary and syntax of the sign language reflected those of the accompanying spoken language, there must have been some signs in common. For instance, Philip Roberts (whose tribal name was Waipuldanya), an Alawa man from the Roper River in the Northern Territory, was able to converse with strangers whose language he did not speak. He used "their expressive finger-talk which is common to all tribes. . . . Finger talk is also constant among men who speak the same tongue. It not only saves unnecessary speech but has the added advantage that evil spirits cannot hear it" (Lockwood 1962, 121). Why the evil spirits could not see signing is not mentioned.

## Early Reports

Reports of sign language use among Aboriginal people surfaced as early as the last quarter of the nineteenth century. One of the early reports notes:

> the wonderful state of perfection to which the gesture language has attained in the [Warramunga (a tribe near the Warlpiri in the Central Desert of the Northern Territory)]. . . . [The women] talk away in camp as fluently with their fingers as they can with their tongues, even those who are not under the ban of silence use the gesture language for choice and most wonderful of all the little children of 6 or 7 years of age evidently understand their mothers. (Spencer and Gillen (1899/1968, 141)

Although there are no records, one may presume that there were deaf people among the Aboriginal Australians prior to European settlement and that they used local signs in those early days. A few mentions of "deaf and dumb" Aboriginal people are found in early colonial documents.

The noted explorer Edward Eyre reported the following:

> Deaf and dumb persons are not often found among the Aborigines, but I have met with instances of this kind. One of the most intelligent

> natives I ever met with, was a deaf and dumb youth at the Wimmera [in western Victoria; a state in southeastern Australia]. From this poor boy, I could more readily and intelligibly obtain by signs a description of the country, its character, and localities, than from any native I ever met with, whose language I was at the time quite unacquainted with. (ca. 1842, chap. 6, unpaginated)

Similarly, Oldfield describes the acumen of a deaf boy:

> A deaf and dumb boy about nine years of age evinced considerable powers of understanding. To test these powers I have often shown him a bunch of flowers, making signs to him to fetch me similar ones, but not the same; an errand which he always successfully accomplished. In all respects he proved of greater service to me than others in full possession of their faculties. (1865, 224)

An account of the early settlement of the Upper Murray River region of Victoria mentions a Joseph Slack, who "took Barnawatha or Barnawoodtha (a deaf and dumb blackfellow)" with him when he established a "run" (a sheep and/or cattle ranch) in that district (probably in 1836) ("First Settlement of the Upper Murray"). Barnawatha must have been seen as a helpful employee. He may have left his name to posterity as there is a town called Barnawartha in that district ("Barnawartha, Victoria"), and dictionaries of Aboriginal place names give "without hearing/deaf and dumb" as a translation of "Barnawatha."

Another report tells of a well-regarded deaf man in the Cooma/Monaro Plains area of southern New South Wales who lived from about 1854 to 1916:

> The last [full-blooded native] in Cooma was one known throughout the district as "Biggenhook." . . . Though deaf and dumb from birth, [he] was extraordinarily intelligent. A good bushman and stockman, he attached himself to the family of Wallace, . . . and though he would stay with them for months, the longing to get away would come upon him, and he would, without any explanation, go away to another part of the district where he knew he was welcome. He made himself understood almost entirely by signs erked [*sic*] out by sketches in the dirt. His sign language was extraordinarily descriptive, and he picked out, with uncanny accuracy, any physical peculiarity of an individual, wherewith to describe him. He indicated cattle, sheep and horses, by drawing their brands, and in this way could give

> information of stock owners and stock movements. After the Wallace family left the District, he attached himself to the writer, who was able to understand him, and thus had many opportunities of gauging in him, what it is asserted the Australian Aboriginal does not possess [a] high degree of intellectuality. Biggenhook who except during the last three or four years of his life, preserved his extraordinary activity, died at about the age of 62 some ten years ago. (Mitchell 1926, 35)[3]

As a boy, Biggenhook had apparently been "sold" to a local farmer by his father ("Boney Jack").

It appears there was some trade in Aboriginal children, possibly precipitated by the labor shortage in the early period of settlement. "An Aboriginal boy called Nimmitabel (also Biggenhooke) who was both deaf and dumb . . . was purchased by a Harry Rapmund from the Aboriginal Boney Jack, for the princely sum of half a sovereign and a bottle of rum presumably as a general hand" (New South Wales Government 2003, 29).

"The well-known Bony [*sic*] Jack and his son Biggenhook were surviving members of the Ngarigo people, with Biggenhook living into the twentieth century . . . Ngarigo numbers were dwindling by this time and when Biggenhook died in 1914 at the age of 62, the Ngarigo people became extinct" (New South Wales Government 2008).

It would be interesting to know what "signs" Biggenhook used. It seems more likely that they would have been conventional and descriptive gestures accompanying speech rather than Aboriginal signs, which were not likely to be known to the authors of these reports.

Among the papers of Daisy Bates (a European woman who lived for many years among Aboriginal people in South and Western Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) is a mention of a "deaf and dumb" man named Winjarroo, a member of the Amangu people from the edge of the Nullarbor Plain (Bates Papers, 41, n.d.; cited by Gerritsen 2004). Winjarroo was the husband of one of Bates's informants.

One interesting sidelight to the use of sign language by Aboriginal people was what Kendon (2008, 388) calls a "curious account" by the explorer John McDouall Stuart, who saw what he believed to be "Masonic signs" used by an Aboriginal man he met while looking

for water. Apparently the Warumungu sign for "water" is similar to a "sign of fidelity" used in some Masonic lodges. For some years this idea was taken seriously by a few inquirers, and there was at least one other report of Masonic sign use by an Aboriginal man to a Queensland surveyor, a Mr. Bedford. Bedford was about to shoot an Aboriginal man when the latter addressed Bedford with a "penal sign of the master mason," to which Bedford replied with several other signs that the man "appeared to understand." When Bedford's attention was distracted, the man took the opportunity to escape through the surrounding long grass (Kendon 1988, 389; citing Fraser 1892). It was soon realized that Aboriginal signs bore only a passing resemblance to Masonic signs, and the idea passed from currency (Kendon 2008).

## Aboriginal Sign Languages

As noted earlier, Aboriginal Australians in many areas used quite complex systems of signs in their communities, especially during hunting, initiation, or mourning, when speech was counterindicated or prohibited. These signs were capable of expressing all that the cognate spoken language could. The Warlpiri sign language in the Central Desert of the Northern Territory is one of the most highly developed.

The Warlpiri people in Aboriginal Australia treat their sign language and spoken language as equally valid, saying anything in one that they can say in the other; cultural rules indicate when it is appropriate to use each and who should do so (Stokoe 2001).

Opinion is divided among modern researchers as to whether those signs were used by deaf people in communities that have been studied. Kendon (1988) has expressed the view that deaf Aboriginal people did not use their local sign language:

> From the few observations available . . . it looks as if deaf persons, in a community where an alternative sign language is in use, do not themselves use this language, but develop one of their own" (406). In addition, "a deaf man I met . . . used a 'home sign' system and the few signs for common items . . . that he showed me were quite different from any of the local sign language forms[, and he used] his face a great deal as he signed in a way that was quite different from the virtual non-use of facial action that is characteristic of [North Central Desert] signing (440,n6).

Among Western Desert Aboriginal deaf people, "the deaf aboriginal suffered the same communication isolation as deaf [people] anywhere" (N. Green 1975, 54). On the other hand, Kendon states that "Everyone understands it [the local sign language] and uses it at various times, for example: . . . to communicate with deaf people (who are thus not socially isolated, as tends to be the case among European Australians)" (52, citing Elwell 1982). Kendon also reports that "All the tribes of North-East Arnhem Land have a very elaborate sign language which is used . . . between the deaf and dumb" (52, citing Warner 1937). In addition, deaf members of the Central Anmatyerr people also use signs: "We use hand signs to talk to people who are deaf—to talk about food or to ask them to come over to eat or drink tea or sit down with us. We just use hand signs. [April Campbell, Ti Tree, May 2008]" (J. Green 2009, 224).

Meggitt (1954) does not mention the use of Walpiri signs with deaf people but does talk about their use by a hearing mute woman, who, "although she could hear and understand spoken Walpiri as well as anyone else, most people 'spoke' in sign language to her, as well as to each other in her presence" (411). Miller (1978, 436) reports another use of sign language by a hearing person, "often used in lieu of speech by a man who was asthmatic."

Kwek (1991) provides an extensive report of the use of signs with a deaf girl in the small community of Punmu in the Central Western Desert of Western Australia. Observations there found the deaf girl using signs with her family (including her two-year-old brother), who were said to be the best signers in the community. She also used signs with other community members when talk was not possible (the example given was a sign conversation with two hearing men in a noisy truck on a long trip into the desert) and in telling an extended sand-drawn story. The girl attended the local community school, and despite the fact that several Aboriginal staff members were "particularly adept at signing," they did not use signs to interpret lessons to the girl (except for an occasional videotaped program) but expected her to cope by doing the same written exercises the hearing children did.

Reports therefore are mixed. It may be that deaf people used local signs in some communities and not others, but why this would

be so is not clear. There are not sufficient reports available to make a confident statement.

## The Present Day

Sign languages ("hand talk") are still used among both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, though much less so than in earlier times. Recent reports (K. Fayd'Herbe and C. Nixon, pers. comm., October 2008; Salee 2007) note the emergence of "Ailan" among deaf and hearing people in the Torres Strait and the Cape York area, and its users have brought it to northern urban areas such as Cairns. Ailan is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (sign) Language; it is a mixture of Auslan (Australian Sign Language, the sign language of Australia's Deaf community), Australasian Signed English, which is taught in "hearing-impaired units" at school, and Aboriginal signs learned in communities.[4] Local signing deaf people say that they are very comfortable communicating with one another in Ailan and that they can also communicate with hearing Aboriginal people quite well because of the presence of a large number of indigenous signs in Ailan:

> We have our own language in Injinoo [a town on northwestern Cape York], and everybody understands each other well. I can talk to anybody, and they know exactly what I mean. I didn't find it difficult communicating with them since I grew up hand signing. . . . In Injinoo everybody uses hand signing all the time. It wasn't so different communicating with them [signing deaf people], although they went to school to learn signing. I felt comfortable, a little bit different perhaps, but I understood everything. It was just normal. We use hand signing every day, every minute. We don't even have to talk, just use signing or body language. It's normal for everybody. Even my little brother does it. (Irene Kindau Salee, pers. comm.)

This is confirmed in Fayd'Herbe and Teuma's (2010) report on interpreting in judicial proceedings in North Queensland:

"Anecdotal observations [by teachers and interpreters] in social, educational, consultation and interpreting settings indicate that individuals often use an obscure or idiosyncratic indigenous sign language that may be a dialect of Auslan, a dialect of the hearing indigenous community['s] sign language and sometimes a blend of both."

Moreover, in Far North Queensland, many indigenous Deaf people belong to and identify with the Deaf community in Cairns

and may sign using Auslan and/or an indigenous dialect of Auslan (O'Reilly 2005). Many indigenous Deaf people were either born in or now reside in Cairns, having moved during childhood from their indigenous community to attend the local school programs for deaf children and children with hearing impairment. Others have returned home after schooling and no longer have any ties with the Deaf indigenous community in Cairns, or any other contact with Deaf people in their villages.

Further confirmation and description of school signing experience is provided by Patty Morris, a deaf Aboriginal caseworker for Deaf Services Queensland:

> When I first came here for preschool . . . it was a big culture shock because I was the only Aboriginal kid among many white kids. It was very strange and confusing. I used to say, "Why am I here? Why am I here?" The teacher tried to teach me [with] lipreading and Signed English (an outdated form of sign language[5]). When I became an adult, I rediscovered my family up in Cape York. I realized that I was ashamed . . . because I couldn't communicate with my family [and] because I had gone and learned this Signed English in Cairns. But then someone signed to me in Aboriginal sign language. It was my grandfather, who was a medicine man. He had done some signing, and he asked me to go on a cultural journey with him, and he taught me about my culture going back through the generations.

In this way Morris was able to reconnect with her family and learn her people's cultural traditions.

Leah Kerinaiua, principal of Murrupurtiyanuwu Catholic School at Nguiu on Bathurst Island, reports that staff members routinely use local Tiwi tribal signs with all of the pupils in the school, which a number of deaf children attend (pers. comm., July 28, 2010). Shepherdson College at Galiwinku on Elcho Island reports that one of its deaf students uses Yolngu signs with his family and is also learning Auslan at school (K. MacDonald, pers. comm., August 16, 2010). There may be other occasional uses of Aboriginal signs in schools and communities, but reports are difficult to obtain.

## Aboriginal Signs in Deaf Education

Aboriginal signing seems to have mostly been ignored or even discouraged by educators of Aboriginal deaf students. This was in part

due to the fact that teachers of deaf students were often not aware of the existence of Aboriginal signing. Moreover, in Queensland, for example, by the time significant numbers of Aboriginal deaf students were being educated, any signing was prohibited as a result of the insistence on oral-only methods from the early 1950s until the late 1960s. Deaf Aboriginal students in those days were brought to the residential school in the state capital, Brisbane, and effectively severed from their communities: "These kids were isolated because of their deafness from the mainstream of their cultures . . . and also from proficient communities of deaf signers [i.e., Auslan users]. So I would suspect many had even less access than their hearing peers to Aboriginal sign systems" (M. Hyde, pers. comm., April 29, 2010).

We have also seen that Green (1975) reported of Aboriginal students at the Western Australian School that they "may have used some Aboriginal signs but relied mainly upon a locally developed family sign system," presumably before learning Auslan at school. Their experience seems to have been similar to that of children in Queensland:

> [After having spent the whole term boarding in Perth, the state capital,] they all would return home at the end of each term, and it was a major concern because the local communities would not have the sign language [i.e., Auslan] to communicate with them. . . . Almost without exception in my experience the deaf child would return to their [*sic*] local community from boarding in Perth and would use gesturing to communicate—a mixture of signs used in Perth and other gestures the local communities had developed. (J. Richards, pers. comm., May 4, 2010)

Both the "other gestures the local communities had developed" (Richards) and the "locally developed family sign system" (Green) were probably derived from the local community sign languages.

On the other hand, Green (1975) reports the use of Aboriginal signs in education at the Warlpiri language-using school at Warrabri in the Central Desert, where five deaf students were using local signs and Warlpiri signs were included in the school syllabus. This was the result of the influence of Cheryl Wright, a teacher of the deaf working there who was the compiler of a Warlpiri sign language dictionary (Wright 1980). As Green says, the survival of such attempts is tenuous and dependent upon the teachers' dedication and may not survive their eventual transfer. Green closes with a pessimistic view:

> In Western Australia, the Aboriginal sign language has only a limited value within the immediate family groups of deaf Aborigines. Within the wider society of their home community, where a combination of English and [spoken] dialect is used, the deaf individual becomes an isolate, he does not readily mix with his peer group which displays the same level of intolerance as non deaf in urban societies, and he does not acquire an understanding of the complex culture of his tribal group. (1975, 64)

Saxton-Barney (2010) points out the importance for Aboriginal deaf people of maintaining close cultural ties to community and family, which includes their being able to learn and maintain their local sign language. Such bonds often break down when the children are sent away to school; if this happens, these connections are very difficult to restore. Auslan is also important for them to learn for educational purposes, but, for community communication, so is their local oral and signed language. In relation to the acquisition of Auslan by deaf Aboriginal people, Saxton-Barney says Auslan is important for some, but "Their connection to family and country is more primary than any Deaf cultural identity of the type that is more important in non-Indigenous community" (8). Furthermore, "the use of cultural language and signs [must be] respected and used with English and Auslan to enhance communication choices" (13).

Though some Aboriginal students learn and cope well at school, the results of inadequate cultural support for them can be extreme:

> Indigenous Deaf people are often engaged with their communities, and many work at supporting others within the community. Those who have talents and abilities are in paid work and living productive lives. However, there are also those who are not coping let alone able to be productive in their life. They are often at the extreme edge of family and society. They are subjected to family and community violence/abuse and have a high level of dis-engagement from education and other services. They often become targets of "scape-goating" or are exploited in their work for their families doing duties around the home or sent to work for others in a way that is exploitative. Indigenous Deaf people that are targeted as scapegoats are often subjected to being left with illegal goods, believing that they are "care taking." Often their limited communication skills make them easy targets for taking the blame for other's mistakes. They are used for free baby-sitting or used for their resources such as cars, housing, and caring for Elders. (Saxton-Barney 2010, 8)

The "DeafNT" organization of the Northern Territory has put forward an enlightened view of allowing deaf children access to local sign languages as well as Auslan:

> Indigenous children who are deaf can have the advantage of living in a community where signing is not stigmatized and may have access to local hand talk. This advantage needs to be capitalized upon, with children (and ideally their community) also learning Auslan. This would enable children to have a complete language and also to be able to work with Auslan interpreters when they need to access educational, medical, legal and other services. (DeafNT n.d.)

Again in the Northern Territory, Jassar and Hunter (2006) point out the importance and usefulness of hand talk in the rehabilitation of Aboriginal people with communication problems:

> [Hand talk] clearly represents a valuable part of Aboriginal culture with an important practical function in a situation where Western models of communication rehabilitation are difficult to apply. While attempts to improve conventional communication rehabilitation should continue, these should be combined with efforts to foster Hand Talk through education and facilitating its dissemination by existing users so it does not suffer the fate of other lost Indigenous languages. (532)

Given the acceptance and prevalent use of signing in Aboriginal communities, it would be culturally appropriate and desirable to reduce the isolation of Aboriginal deaf people. To accomplish this, efforts should be made to increase the use of Auslan among Aboriginal hearing people so that it can play a part in the education and community communication choices of all Aboriginal Australians.

## Notes

1. In addition, indigenous Australians of Melanesian descent are living on the Torres Strait islands. They also use a local sign language (Bani 1981).

2. Please see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prehistory_of_Australia.

3. Photographs of Biggenhook are available at http://www.monaropioneers.com/aboriginals.htm.

4. There is also a spoken Torres Strait Islander Creole called "Ailan" (said to be from the local pronunciation of "island").

5. Not all would agree that Signed English is "outdated." It is still used in some educational contexts. Members of the community who are deaf or hard of hearing learn and use the Arandic sign language with the hear-

ing members of the community. Moreover, for elderly people who have a hearing or speech impairment, sign language can become their most useful communicative resource (Wilkins, 5).

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