You Look Hearing, But I Love Your ASL Stories!

The title of this review encompasses the continuum of both negative and positive responses to a single individual’s sign language communication during his pursuit of a graduate degree at Gallaudet University. Thus began Dr. Joseph Christopher Hill’s interest in exploring the question: What are the linguistic and social factors that govern language attitudes in the American Deaf community? Dr. Hill establishes the importance of this topic as he describes the mixed reactions he experienced to his own use of both American Sign Language (ASL) and English during his journey as a Deaf man educated in various settings from oral mainstream, to the mainstream with interpreters, and finally within the Gallaudet community. His own experience illustrates how attitudes about ASL use influence one’s social status and acceptance within the Deaf community.

Hill establishes the conceptual framework for this study with an explanation of standard languages versus creoles or dialects and points out how a minority or nonstandard language can be both stigmatized and held in esteem within the context of the minority culture as a way of fitting in or demonstrating solidarity. He then provides a concise history of deaf education in the United States and how the status and use of ASL has impacted deaf education.

Hill examined various aspects of language attitudes in this 4-year mixed-methods research study. The subjects were 74 Deaf or hard of hearing adults recruited from the Washington, DC area. Hill explored the following aspects of perspectives of sign language in this four-part study: (a) subjects’ perceptions of signing types (ASL, Mixed, or Signed English), (b) the effect of social information (e.g., Deaf or hearing family, residential versus mainstream program, level of education) on perceptions of signing types, (c) evaluation of signing types (e.g., the signing is beautiful, the signer looks hearing, the signer looks smart), and (d) a description of forms and features of the signing types on all levels (i.e., phonological, morphological, morphosyntactic, lexical, syntactic, prosodic, and discourse). Hill concluded that there was systematic agreement from all subjects in the perception of signing types. He found limited evidence that social information impacted subjects’ perceptions of signing types. He also reported that in subjects’ evaluation of signing types, most comments for ASL were positive, whereas most comments for signed English were negative.

This study is enhanced with photos depicting samples of sign types and specific signs and classifiers used by signers in the stimulus videos, and by tables providing a clear visual summary of results. Hill also provides a thoughtful discussion of the results and implications of each part of the study, including consideration of uncontrolled for variables and alternative ways of interpreting the data. This thought provoking study, which will be of interest to both students and teachers of sign language and Deaf culture, will cause readers to ponder the nature of standard ASL and possibly to examine one’s own stereotypical beliefs about language.

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