

COLUMNISTS

A Controversial Approach to Communication: SignWriting, The "Alphabet" of Signs

by Alexandra Han

Twenty-five years after it was invented by a hearing woman and dancer who never originally intended to use her "Sutton Movement Writing" to record sign languages, SignWriting continues to face a great deal of opposition and ridicule even within the signing communities in North America for its primary goal: to create written versions of sign languages, just as spoken languages have their written versions. Yet SignWriting, with its computer software which allows even children to type signs into sentences, may ultimately turn out to be the most accurate way of recording into print form the hundreds of native sign languages that exist worldwide for many purposes, including linguistic (language), educational, or simply reading-for-pleasure purposes.

The Center For Sutton Movement Writing, in California, is the primary advocating organization for SignWriting, which has been used in other countries such as Norway, Nicaragua, Brazil and Denmark, for linguistic and educational purposes. Ironically, even though SignWriting was originally invented in America in a linguistic lab with the advice and assistance of many native ASL signers, Denmark still became the first country to officially adopt SignWriting, using SignWriting in Deaf education and sign language research since 1982.

As for North America itself, only very recently has a few schools of the Deaf begun to consider SignWriting, although "things are changing now. People are now much more positive than before," says Valerie Sutton, inventor of SignWriting and executive director of the Center For Sutton Movement Writing.

But just what exactly is SignWriting? "It is an 'alphabet' - a list of symbols used to write any signed language in the world," replies Sutton. "The SignWriting alphabet can be compared to the alphabet we use to write English, which is the Roman alphabet.

"The Roman alphabet can be used to write many different spoken languages. While each language may add or subtract one or two symbols, the same basic symbols we use to write English are used to write Danish, German, French and Spanish. The Roman alphabet is international, but the languages it writes are not.

"In the same way, the symbols in the SignWriting alphabet are international and can be used to write American Sign Language, Danish Sign Language, Norwegian Sign Language, British Sign Language, Dutch Sign Language - any signed language you choose."

As for its value, "SignWriting makes it possible to have books, newspapers, magazines, dictionaries and literature written in signs. It can be used to teach sign and sign grammar to beginning students, or it can be used to teach other subjects, such as math, history, or English to skilled signers."

How did Sutton stumbled into SignWriting? "In my youth, I was a dancer. I am an American who moved to Denmark at age 19, in 1970, to work with the Royal Danish Ballet. I developed a way to read and write all body movement called Sutton Movement

Writing....Just as I preserved the historic dance steps of the Royal Danish Ballet in DanceWriting, I also began writing Danish signs, and even though I did not know what they meant at the time, Deaf people whom I met in Denmark could read the signs and they knew what they meant! I decided that I would dedicate my life to developing the written form for hundreds of "movement based" languages.

"I used to take the bus a lot, at age 19, when I first moved to Copenhagen. I was glad, when I stood on the Danish bus, that there was a way for me to read the signs on the bus, which were written in both Danish and English." Due to this experience, she can identify with some Deaf people's frustration in navigating their way through society. "Years later, in 1984, when I returned to Denmark because SignWriting was being used in the Danish school system, I visited some classes of Deaf children learning to read and write Danish and Danish Sign Language. There, on the walls of the classroom, and in the hallways, were signs written in Danish and Danish Sign Language in SignWriting. It was a feeling of *deja vu*, and a memory I will never forget!"

Why would there be such strong resistance to learning SignWriting? "I lived a life of controversy the moment I started writing signs in 1974", Sutton says cheerfully, pointing out that "Historically, new ideas that create 'social change' are always met with resistance in the beginning, and SignWriting is no exception."

When she was first invited to use her Sutton Movement Writing to record sign languages, "people were still getting used to the idea that signed lan-

The SignWriting Teacher's Forum
...home of...
The SignWriting Literacy Project
...read about teacher's and student's experiences in the classroom...



nothing to do with that "war", but many people were wary of any new idea in Deaf education, because they were steeped in controversy between oralism and Sign Language already." As well, "They were skeptical that a hearing person might respect and want to preserve American Sign Language and other signed languages."

Has something like this been attempted before? Sutton points to a Cherokee Indian chief, Sequoyah, who in the early 1800s fought to do the

used for many years to represent ASL, shows a picture of a person signing a sign, with the written English version beneath the sign. Sutton is adamant that English glosses don't work well even for linguistic purposes: "English glosses are awful and definitely not accurate. There are multiple signs for each English word - so which sign are you choosing when you place an English word on the page? It is totally non-visual. It is wrong to try to write one language with another - if I wrote Danish grammar with English words, the Danes would kill me!" SignWriting, because it records native sign languages far more precisely, does a better job.

Sutton observes how learning SignWriting seems to increase self-esteem for both Deaf children and even some Deaf adults, who then find it easier to learn written English; however, she humorously pointed out that "I don't want to save the Deaf - I have enough problems saving myself - thank you very much!" Her primary goal in SignWriting is to merely record sign languages as precisely as possible so that other people can use them for their own purposes.

SignWriter software can be downloaded for free from the SignWriting Site at <http://www.signwriting.org/>.

What Is SignWriting?

SignWriting is a writing system which uses visual symbols to represent the handshapes, movements, and facial expressions of signed languages. It is an "alphabet" - a list of symbols used to write any signed language in the world.

The SignWriting alphabet can be compared to the alphabet we use to write English, the Roman alphabet. The Roman alphabet can be used to write many different spoken languages. While each language may add or subtract one or two symbols, the same basic symbols we use to write English are used to write Danish, German, French and Spanish. The Roman alphabet is international, but the languages it writes are not.

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guages were real languages, and that idea was a major social change too. (Deaf people) had been taught that their own language was inferior, so it took them time to adjust to the fact that they could be proud of their own language now. And reading and writing it (their own sign language) was just one more thing, piled on top of all the changes in thinking, and it was overwhelming for them....It took 25 years for them to get used to ASL and other signed languages as being "true languages". However, "once that idea became more established, the need for writing the language became greater."

"We have all heard about the "war between the oralists and manualists", she adds. "SignWriting certainly has

same thing she is doing, and succeeded: "(He invented) the written form for his language. His own people burned his books and it took him 25 years and the threat of being executed before his own people finally realized the value of preserving their traditions." Today, though, Sequoyah's Cherokee Alphabet is still used by Cherokees.

"SignWriting has been compared to that because we are seeing it being used during the lifetime of the inventor. Most written forms are not used for centuries. English was very slow to be written, and it is only in recent centuries that the average person can read and write English." Compared to English, then, SignWriting took off relatively fast.

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