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LE MASTER, Barbara (CSU, Long Beach) IRISH DEAF IDENTITY¹

What it means to be deaf in the Republic of Ireland has been changing over the years. In order to understand d/Deaf identity of people living in Dublin, one needs to consider the role of residential school language policies historically, as well as various d/Deaf social movements within Ireland. First I will discuss the contributions to d/Deaf identity from school language policy, then will follow with a brief discussion of d/Deaf social movements.

The language policies at the two Dublin residential schools have had a huge impact on southern Irish ideologies of deafness. (See Figure 1.) Sign language was used at the schools nearly exclusively for the first (approximately) 100 years. After that, the schools largely abandoned sign language in favor of oralism (i.e., lip-reading and speaking without the use of sign language). These pedagogical language policies have played a key role in the ongoing construction of d/Deaf identities as this paper will show.

First, let's consider the role of sign language policy in the schools. For over 100 years, both of the schools used sign language as the primary means for face-to-face communication both inside and outside of the classroom. During this time the schools were owned by the Catholic Church. The residential girls' school was located at the sequestered Dominican Sisters' convent. Within walking distance was the residential boys' school which was administered by the Christian Brothers who also lived on site. Although the majority of the teachers at that time were

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from these clerical orders and were hearing, a few of the exceptional deaf students grew up to become teachers at the schools as well (see LeMaster 1990 for more information). It is important to understand that during this (approximately) 100 years, *everyone* used sign language. People who lived at the school referred to themselves as a "silent" community as no one used spoken language with each other. According to stories about this "silent" community, the hearing people who lived there did not talk to each other. Hearing people signed to each other, whether or not deaf people were present. This is uncharacteristic of most residential deaf schools around the world where the teachers are primarily hearing. In those cases, teachers often sign when they believe a deaf person is "listening," but will otherwise speak to another hearing person without sign. That was not the case here. Instead, everyone signed with each other. Not only did hearing residents sign to each other, but they also served as interpreters for any hearing, non-signing visitor who came on campus. Deaf people living at the Cabra residential schools had access to everything that was said both inside and outside of the classroom -- as long as they could see the communication, they could have access to it.

Another language policy that had a profound affect on the deaf community was a policy to ensure that every deaf student become proficient in English literacy. The primary purpose of English literacy was to ensure that Catholic deaf children would be able to receive the sacraments. It is essential for us to realize that these children acquired their English literacy skills through the use of sign language. The result of this pedagogical effort was that these deaf children acquired extraordinary English literacy skills. In fact, the schools became world renown for their incredible success in literacy education (again, see LeMaster 1990 for more information).

The sign and English language policies at the schools had at least two effects on deaf identity. The first involves a societal view of deafness as *normal*, which reinforced this understanding among deaf people themselves. It was expected that

deaf people would use sign language. It was expected that deaf people would hold jobs among hearing people, that they would own homes, be church members, and raise families. It was expected that hearing people who did not know sign language would use written English with deaf people, or an interpreter when on school grounds. (There were no or next to no interpreters outside of school and some churches.) It was expected that deaf people would have good English literacy skills. Because of a general cultural acceptance of deafness and the concomitant need for visual communication, the "deaf" part of one's identity was relatively unmarked. In short, it was expected by both deaf and hearing people that deaf people would be intelligent, well-functioning, contributing members of Irish Society.

However, the second effect of school policy was the emergence of gender signs which had a somewhat different effect on identity *within* the deaf community itself. It served to divide deaf people from each other by gender. To make a very long story short, because the two schools functioned as though they were separate islands, two very different sign vocabularies emerged at the gender segregated schools. (I have reported on this at length elsewhere. See LeMaster 1990, LeMaster & Dwyer 1991, and LeMaster 1997.) Briefly, I'll give you an idea of how different the signs were from each other. If we use the comparative parameters of handshape, movement, and place of articulation, you can see how different these gender signs can be from each other in Figures 2 and 3 (taken from LeMaster 1997). Research has shown that these differences are real (LeMaster 1990, 1997, LeMaster & Dwyer 1991). Two gender-marked codes exist among deaf people in Dublin, Ireland. Although the solution has been to have women adopt the male sign instead of their own, research has also shown that this has not been effectively accomplished in all cases, nor has the female form been entirely abandoned. So how has this affected their d/Deaf identity? Gender is clearly a marked category for deaf people who were at the Cabra schools when exclusive signing was used.

In the mid-1900s the schools moved from exclusive use of sign language to exclusive use of oralism (i.e., a method of lip-reading and speaking). (See Figure 4.) Deaf people who attended schools after 1946 (for girls) and 1957 (for boys) had a very different experience from those who preceded them. As most of us know, strict oral philosophies preclude the concurrent use of sign language. And for this reason, when the schools switched from sign language to oralism, sign language was no longer allowed at the schools. There were two exceptions to this: multiply disabled children, and those deaf children who did not succeed with oralism were allowed to sign if they transferred to the multiply handicapped section with parental permission. Multiply disabled children were automatically transferred to the manual section of the school, but oral children needed parental permission to be transferred. Such permission was rarely granted, however, since the manual schools often took on a stigma of "oral failure" and multiple disability.

Oral education brought with it several changes: 1) The Department of Education took over financial administration of the schools which led to most non-university-certified deaf teachers leaving the school; 2) Most signing Sisters and Brothers were transferred out of the schools and new, non-signing teachers were brought in, 3) children were increasingly segregated by hearing abilities. Those with residual hearing, those with profound loss, and manual students were not allowed to have social times together. 4) Many oral and manual siblings were instructed to go through interpreters at home rather than talk directly to each other; 5) School curriculum was expanded to include college preparatory courses, but English literacy skills greatly declined; 6) Few oral deaf children had good access to standard versions of sign language so many new forms of sign emerged from both schools. 7) Also, many other deaf schools have emerged in many different locations, some using the "total communication" approach. Therefore, the two

Dublin schools, while still the largest in the Republic, no longer have as long-reaching effects as they used to.

So what effect did the school policy change from sign to oralism have on a d/Deaf identity? First of all, and most critically, it treated deafness as an *abnormal* condition. Children were now expected to act as though they were not deaf, and were taught to reject sign language. Deaf adult role models were rapidly disappearing from the school scene for a number of reasons: 1. Deaf employees (e.g., cooks, gardeners, etc.) were not allowed to sign in front of oral children and since they could not talk, this diminished their abilities to serve as role models. 2. Deaf teachers were generally not certified because they did not have university training required by the Department of Education. Because they had to be paid through the Catholic Church at a lower rate than other teachers, many left their jobs. 3. Since sign language was not permitted at the schools for use with oral deaf children, few non-oral deaf adults felt welcomed at the schools. In short, oral deaf children did not have the same access to adult role models as did previous generations of Cabra school children. Also, because of the emphasis on hearing abilities, children became much more focused on how much hearing they had. In general, this generation of Cabra school children were no longer focally concerned with gender differences, but with their abilities to mask their deafness.

The policy change from exclusive use of sign language to exclusive use of oralism has had a profound effect on the community as a whole, and certainly on d/Deaf identity. One has only to go to the centralized deaf club in Dublin to see the variety in communication styles to see how school policy has affected people generationally. Older people sign without lip movements. Some older women only know female signs and use them exclusively with other women. Younger people speak and lip-read and use more varied forms of sign language than found among the Cabra signers. When I was there in the late 1980s, most of the leaders

were male and signed without lip-movement. The younger leaders generally grew up oral and learned sign later in life.

Many other factors have affected how people portray d/Deaf identity in Dublin, Ireland. Among them are the formation of new Deaf organizations, linkages with other deaf communities outside of Ireland, and publication of Deaf reading materials. The Year of the Disabled in the 1980s had a profound effect on this community. A few people took the opportunity to form a group called the "Irish Deaf Society," or IDS. The formers of this group were mainly those who had attended school under the sign language policy. From earlier interviews with these founders, they said that they formed this new group to protest the dis-use of sign at the schools, among other policies and practices in the community more generally that seemed unfavorable to the image of deaf people. The organization did not last long with its original founders. However, it was revived by people who had attended school as oralists. Interestingly, these new leaders were (generally) politically in opposition to the group's original founders. This new leadership promoted the IDS as one run by and for d/Deaf people; however, the same organization had been one run by and for d/Deaf people previously. So the fundamental change was from a signing leadership to an oralist based leadership with more militant practices.

The other primary organization about and for d/Deaf people when I was there in the late 1980s was the National Association of the Deaf, as the IDS was still relatively new in the existing power structure. At the time of my research, the NAD was the organization that enjoyed mainstream recognition, and hence, funding. It's structure included prominent society members on its Board of Directors, yet also included lesser recognized deaf people on the Board. The sole Social Worker for deaf people for all of the Republic worked out of this office. And up until the late 1980s (when this changed) there was no one, other than the Social Worker, in this

office who knew how to sign. This organization went through a lot of changes in the 1980s. Among them were the hiring of employees who could sign (namely a secretary and office director), and the funding of projects that were run by and for deaf people (e.g., a dictionary project).

Perhaps one of the most significant factors contributing to ever-changing d/Deaf ideologies in this community is the influence of outside communities. Irish d/Deaf people have read literature and met with people from the United States and have learned how d/Deaf identities are constructed here. But more importantly to their community, they have been able to interact with other deaf people in the European Common Market and read their literatures. Travel and conference monies have been made available to Irish deaf people which have enabled many to learn first-hand about deaf experiences elsewhere. Within this more European, and sometimes more international context, the relationship of d/Deaf identity to language type and variety has entered into discussions of the Irish d/Deaf identity.

Particularly these discussions occur among younger d/Deaf people, those who had attended school when oralism was the primary method of classroom communication. These "oralists" now talk about the necessity to differentiate between Irish Sign Language (ISL) and versions of signed English. It is actually these "oralists" who claim Deaf ethnic identity. Whereas, the older, "signing" generation take little part in this kind of public discourse. It was quite a strange thing for me, coming from the United States, to try to understand how people conceptualized themselves as ethnically Deaf when most of these people preferred to use their voice and sign in English. The majority of older deaf people who primarily used Irish Sign Language without lip-movements felt no need to be involved in these kinds of discussions.

Comparing this situation to what I know about d/Deaf identity in the United States and elsewhere, I believe that the school language policies have had a

tremendous impact on d/Deaf identity in Dublin, Ireland. Because of these policies, the older, signing generation seems to function in a more integrated way with Irish society as a whole. These deaf people grew up during a time that deafness was largely treated as normal, with sign language being a normal part of being deaf. They have excellent literacy skills, giving them a means to interact with non-signing hearing people, as well as a key to English language resources. Also, for this generation of d/Deaf people, hearing people generally felt the need to accommodate deaf people's communicative needs. Thus, these deaf people lived their lives in relative harmony with hearing people, albeit still segregated in some ways because of hearing differences. The younger deaf people, on the other hand, have largely experienced societal rejection because of their deafness. With every act of exclusive oralism they are reminded that they are required to accommodate to hearing people's communicative needs and to deny their deafness. In this context, deafness is not viewed as normal, but as a stigmatized disability which gains further stigma were they to choose to use sign language. It is not surprising that it is this group of people, who are ostracized (in a sense) because of their deafness, who embrace the literature on Deaf ethnicity and values which mark the differences between deaf and hearing people, and give validity to the d/Deaf experience.

Within less than fifty years, it seems that deafness went from a relatively unmarked, normal status to a more highly marked, disabled status. Gender identity went from focal to largely unimportant within a very short period of time. Not only was educational language policy change an important contributor to this identity shift, but also the discourses about deafness held in other parts of Europe, in the United States and in Ireland helped lead to the increased recognition of "deafness" as a distinctive identity attribute among this group of people.

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DUBLIN'S CABRA SCHOOLS FOR THE DEAF
 INFLUENCE OF
EDUCATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY:
 Use of Irish Sign Language in Classrooms for all
 face-to-face communication

Saint Mary's School
 for Deaf Girls
 (1846 - 1946)

Saint Joseph's School
 for Deaf Boys
 (1855-1957)

- Principle means of communication:

- Principle means of communication:

Signed Language derived from

Signed Language derived from

French pedagogical signs
 Indigenous signs

French pedagogical signs
 Indigenous signs

- Used by students, teachers, visitors

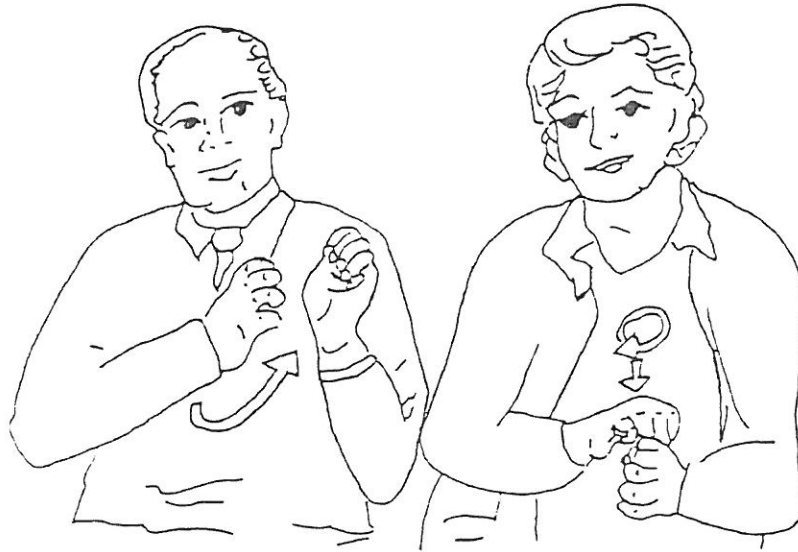
- Used by students, teachers, visitors

- Linguistic community relatively isolated from boy's school

- Linguistic community relatively isolated from girl's school

- *Deafness relatively accepted by society; deaf people enjoy 'legitimate' (if somewhat circumscribed) positions in Dublin society*
- *Burden on hearing people to bridge communication gaps*

Figure 1.



male sign EASTER

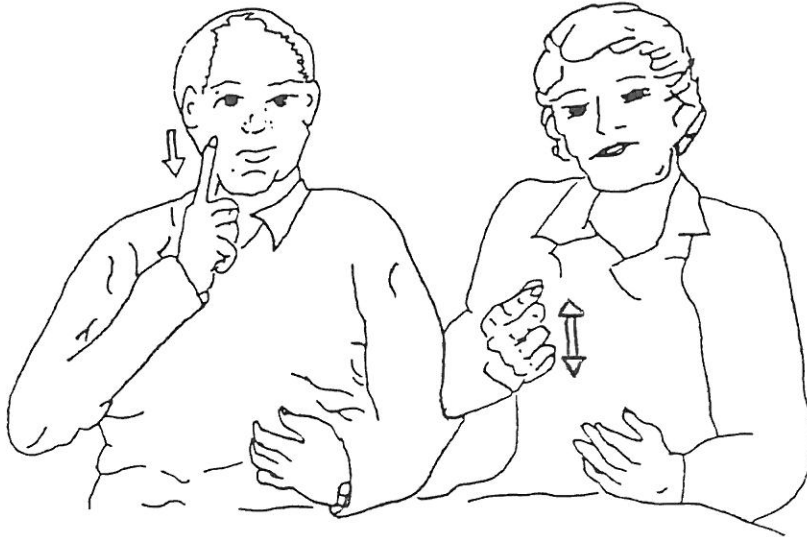
female sign EASTER

	PA	HC	MOV
MALE	∅	$E\partial \perp E < \perp$	$\vee \epsilon \bullet$

	PA	HC	MOV
FEMALE	*	$E > \perp E \partial <$	$e [x]$ \perp $<$

(Appendix 2 provides a description of the symbols used to represent the signs illustrated in this paper.)

Figure 2.



male sign GREEN

female sign GREEN

	PA	HC	MOV
MALE	.3	1 < ^	x v

	PA	HC	MOV
FEMALE	0	G' < ⊥	No•

Figure 3.

**DUBLIN'S CABRA SCHOOLS FOR THE DEAF
INFLUENCE OF
EDUCATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY:
Use of ORALISM in Classrooms for all face-to-face
communication**

**Saint Mary's School
for Deaf Girls
(1946 - PRESENT)**

**Saint Joseph's School
for Deaf Boys
(1957-PRESENT)**

- Principle means of communication:

ORALISM (method of speaking and lip-reading)

- Used by students, teachers, visitors (except in manual section of school)

- Children segregated by:

Hearing abilities
Oral abilities

- Girls' school now has social events with boys' school

- Principle means of communication:

ORALISM (method of speaking and lip-reading)

- Used by students, teachers, visitors (except in manual section of school)

- Children segregated by:

Hearing abilities
Oral abilities

- Boys' school now has social events with girls' school

- *Societal stigma against the use of sign language*
- *Burden on deaf people to bridge communication gaps*

Figure 4.