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[THE LEGACY OF ROBERT HOFFMEISTER](#)

[On the Importance of Supporting Deaf scholars](#)

Jonathan Henner, Patrick Rosenberg, and Rachel Benedict

Introduction

A year after Dr. Henner had come to Boston for his graduate education, he found himself in a small room in The Learning Center, surrounded by laptops, wires, and dividers. The laptops were placed in the nooks between the dividers, with the goal that participants could use the laptops without seeing participants next to them. The wires connected all the laptops to a central hub computer, which controlled what was on each laptop's screen, and each laptop sent information to the central hub about buttons clicked or other interactions with them. When all of the laptops were running, they showed the American Sign Language Assessment Instrument (ASLAI) in the earliest stages of execution.

Participants would stream into the small room, several at a time, and take several receptive, non-production assessments that targeted their American Sign Language vocabulary knowledge. They would then call an assistant over to set up a production assessment built into each laptop. There were three production assessments. The receptive assessment results were sent to the hub. The production assessment data was saved to each laptop, and then transferred to USB memory sticks at the end of the testing day.

We, the ASLAI team composed of mostly deaf researchers, educators, and linguists, were testing the deployment of the first online adaptation of the ASLAI, then an almost 30-year old assessment. The ASLAI was previously pen-and-paper based, but the Boston University researchers had recently been awarded a multi-year Institute of Educational Sciences grant to move the battery online and expand it beyond the vocabulary assessments initially offered. Over the next couple of years, our work on the ASLAI brought us from that cramped little room to schools for the deaf all over the country, including Riverside, Honolulu, Providence, and Jacksonville, and even to exotic-to-us places like London, Melbourne, and Zurich. Most importantly, we were able to learn about how to assess deaf children and use these skills to build our careers.

While some people would argue that the ASLAI is Dr. Hoffmeister's greatest legacy, what made it work during the years of building was the team behind it. Dr. Hoffmeister was unique among hearing scholars of Deaf Education in that his team was entirely deaf. He sought out and built pipelines for deaf scholars. The three of us who graduated with doctoral degrees, the two of us who graduated with master's and educational specialist degrees, the two administrative assistants, and the doctoral student who eventually found a satisfying career outside of academia were all invaluable to the project in different ways; and we were all deaf signers. Dr. Hoffmeister had a gift for recognizing the intrinsic talent that each of his deaf scholars brought to the table. As [Robinson and Henner \(2018\)](#) explain, deaf people in the academy are often only recognized as teachers of signed languages, and as ways for university systems to profit off signed language knowledge without giving back to deaf communities. Accordingly, Dr. Hoffmeister pushed for us to present at conferences, or publish, or work on the team according to our unique skills and talents.

The true legacy of Dr. Hoffmeister, therefore, is not the ASLAI battery, which is groundbreaking in its own right. Over the years the ASLAI has become one of the de-facto standards for computerized assessment batteries of signed language, and the data from it continues to revolutionize how we understand how US signing deaf children use languages. The publications created from the ASLAI dataset push researchers closer to Dr. Hoffmeister's stated dream of showing concrete connections between signed language abilities and academic achievement. Yet, the true legacy of Dr. Hoffmeister was and is his willingness to build pipelines for deaf

scholarship. This chapter will focus on why a lack of deaf scholarship is problematic, and how non-deaf scholars can follow in Dr. Hoffmeister's legacy to support deaf scholarship.

The Need for Deaf Scholars in Education of the Deaf and Linguistics Research

For a variety of reasons, it is difficult to quantify the number of deaf people who have advanced degrees such as master's or doctorates. Any count requires first that people identify themselves as having the degree and second that they identify themselves as members of the deaf communities. But, for a generation of deaf people, the source of the number of deaf doctorates was located in the back of Jack Gannon's *Deaf Heritage* (1981). Many of us grew up reading the names and wondering if we would be one of them one day. These days, the number of deaf doctorates plus those with advanced graduate degrees would likely be numerous enough that the book itself would extend into the thousands of pages were it to contain a comprehensive list of all of us!

Regardless of how much the number of deaf people with advanced degrees has increased since 1981, the actual number is still small (although we cannot quantify the exact number as mentioned previously). The National Deaf Center (2019) reports that 6.6% of deaf people in the United States have at least a master's degree (compared to 12.5% of non-deaf people) and 0.6% have a doctoral, medical, or a juris doctorate degree (compared to 1.3% of non-deaf people). Additionally, while exact numbers are not available about the ranking of the degrees awarded, at least 3.9% of the degrees awarded to deaf people are in literature and languages, and 10.7% are in education. In total, the number of deaf people who have advanced degrees in either linguistics or education of the deaf are a small percentage of a small population. This is unfortunate because these are two of the fields that most need input from deaf people, and deaf people who are in positions where they have the credentials (e.g., a doctoral degree) to push back against misinformation and tropes about deaf people (e.g., that deafness causes behavioral challenges).

Since the early 1990s, various disability communities have rallied around the expression *Nothing about us without us*. Disability historian scholar [Charlton \(1998\)](#) mentions that he first heard it spoken in disability contexts in South Africa in 1993, from people who picked it up in Eastern Europe. However recent the phrase, the idea that disability justice cannot be done without disabled people involved is not recent. Ed Roberts, one of the founders of the modern twentieth-century disability rights movement, was fond of saying that "... when others speak for you, you lose" ([Charlton, 1998](#), p. 3). Essentially, Roberts' point was that abled people have been dictating agency for disabled people to their detriment. Because abled people cannot conceptualize outside of their own understanding of the world, they make assumptions about what disabled people want based on their own ability ([Butler & Bowlby, 1997](#)). The results of narrow expectations of what disabled people want, based on abled assumptions, are often what [Jackson \(2019\)](#) calls *disability dongles*, or "... a well-intended, elegant, yet useless solution to a problem we never knew we had." Disability dongles can refer to mechanical wheelchairs that can climb stairs, when ramps would be the preferred accommodation ([Jackson, 2019](#)). When Dr. Henner went to the 17th international ACM SIGACCESS Conference on Computers and Accessibility back in 2015, one of the exhibits was technology that showed deaf people disembodied lips to promote lip-reading. The presenter admitted that there were no deaf people on his team, nor were there deaf consultants. He just assumed that deaf people wanted to read lips.

By and large, the signing American deaf communities have chosen to reject abled expectations of *hearing* and *speaking* where possible. The deaf community in the United States appears to have a longer history of activism and agitation, largely because of how tied deaf education was to language rights and justice. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, arguments between the manualism and oralist approach to deaf education had intensified, leaving deaf children damaged in its wake. By 1896, Edward Miner Gallaudet was regularly receiving letters from parents that described the damage from oralist philosophies. One father wrote, "His teacher regarded him as the smartest boy in his class, and if my statement is of any value, from a general knowledge of his classmates, I think the teacher was right. Notwithstanding this, he is unable to understand anyone, or make himself understood outside his own home circle," (p. 2). Another mother explained about her daughter,

She was put under the instruction, or rather guidance, or Prof. Bell to whom I am greatly indebted for the preservation of her voice, which now, at the age of seventeen, is remarkably good *for a deaf person* [emphasis our own]. And yet it is not perfectly intelligible to any but members of her own family or intimate friends. Neither can she read the lips of strangers with facility; and after ten years of the most expensive instruction in this country and in Europe, I am forced to the conclusion that your theory is correct: that the combined method is best. For these reasons chiefly: so much time is given to voice drill and lip-reading that the general education obtains but limited consideration. (p. 3)

The purpose of these quotes is to demonstrate that oralist approaches to education have always depended on convincing parents of deaf children that their methods will help the deaf children become more hearing, if not actually *passing for hearing*.

Indeed, by 1880, before hearing parents of deaf children were writing Edward Miner Gallaudet about the damage that oralism had done to their children, deaf people were realizing that they could not depend on hearing people to defend the manual language and deaf communities. The focus on “voice drill and lip-reading that the general education obtains but limited consideration” existed because hearing people prioritized speech over all kinds of knowledge. Like [Harmon \(2013\)](#) writes, “as much as possible *hearingness* [emphasis ours] is the goal” (p. 1). Rote learning of speech and listening was still the pedagogical approach for oral teaching of deaf children in the mid-twentieth century as explained by Jackie Roth to Andrew Solomon in a 1993 New York Times Magazine article, “We spent two weeks learning to say ‘guillotine’ and that was what we learned about the French Revolution.” Even in the early twenty-first century, oral listening and speaking skills are a prime facet of pedagogies for the deaf and hard of hearing. During the COVID-19 pandemic, [Warren \(2020\)](#) described deaf students in the Memphis Oral School as entirely dependent on hearing prostheses because required masks covered the face, especially the lips. In oralist education, there can be no multi-modal approaches to communicating. Even relying on reading the lips evidences a failure against performative hearingness. The only acceptable experience for living in the world is communicating through the ears.

Dr. Hoffmeister used to tell us a story about the time he attended a conference where the presenter was a hearing researcher of deaf education. The researcher was experimenting with a new oral-based pedagogy structure and was proudly recounting the hundreds of words that the child participating in the study knew. Dr. Hoffmeister, then in the audience, during questioning, strolled up to the microphone in his long-legged, languid manner, in a T-shirt, sweatpants, and a Boston University cap on, and into the microphone, instead of questioning, mentioned that signing deaf kids at that age knew thousands of words instead of hundreds. Dr. Hoffmeister’s goal in telling us this story was to remind us, his deaf graduate students, that every instance of audism in the field had to be pushed back against. No false statements about the abilities of deaf children and adults should be allowed to stand without question or comment, lest people accept them as verified and evidence based.

Pushing back against the hearings has a strong tradition in the deaf communities. [Ladd \(2003\)](#) called these 1,001 small victories. And in the late-nineteenth century, the signing deaf community in the United States was working on rejecting the oral movements. At the first National Deaf-Mute Convention (1880), which took place in Cincinnati Ohio, Theo Froehlich proclaimed:

So far as I understand, the object of this Convention is to bring the deaf-mutes of the different sections of the United States in close contact and to deliberate on the needs of deaf-mutes as a class by themselves. As deaf-mutes among the other inhabitants of this country, we have interests peculiar to ourselves, and which can be taken care of by ourselves. (p. 36)

As [Sampson \(2020\)](#) exclaimed on Twitter after reading the quote from Froehlich, “for the deaf, by the deaf!”. Sampson’s enthusiasm shows how profound it is for deaf people to see deaf leadership. *Same same* (see [Figure 16.1](#)) is absolutely critical, and also points to the importance of not only showing white, male leadership in deaf communities, because *same same* extends to far more than deafness alone.



FIGURE 16.1 Signing the concept of “same-same”

The Consequences of Not Having Deaf Scholarship in Linguistics and Education of the Deaf Research

The consequences of a lack of representation from the communities being taught or studied is a well-researched phenomenon with other marginalized communities (see citations in this section). Accordingly, the lack of deaf scholarship in linguistics and education has detrimental consequences for the validity of the research on deaf people and communities because non-deaf people interpret data using hearing and abled lenses. Although, we clarify that we cannot draw direct comparisons between all deaf communities and communities that have racial marginalization because white deaf people are still white, and deaf black, indigenous, and other people of color can be multiply marginalized based on race in addition to deafness. Our goal in sharing these examples is not to say that they are analogous but to spotlight adjacent examples which can help readers understand possible application to deafness.

For example, [Milner and Howard \(2004\)](#) point out that the depressed academic assessment results of black students cannot be attributed solely to socio-economic status, but rather from a consistent environment of racism and a paucity of black leadership and mentoring that does not exist to enforce structural racism. Black students mostly have white teachers who teach values and information rooted in structural racism. When black students do have black teachers, the black teachers are often in administration where they are forced to be disciplinarians. According to Milner and Howard, in these situations, black students experience black adults only punitively. When Dr. Henner was in elementary school, deaf members of the community were only included as recess parents. Their job was to police the actions of the deaf children in the playground. The recess parents did not play with the kids nor did they provide examples on how to mediate relationships with the hearing people who could not communicate with us. Instead, they only interacted with us when we were doing something contrary to the hearing expectations of play that were never adequately communicated to us.

Part of the issue raised by [Milner and Howard \(2004\)](#) is how teacher education programs can compound the issue of whiteness in pedagogy by training teachers of color to enact the policies of whiteness. [Escamilla \(2006\)](#) details that students of color in teacher preparation programs are told that students of color have deficits that must be addressed within the schooling system. The deficits, accordingly, are assigned to color rather than existing in a racist society. Racist beliefs, even internalized, tended to manifest in statements by the teachers such as “Spanish is easier to learn to write than English” (p. 2340) and by blaming Spanish for any perceived deficiencies in the students themselves. In later discussions, the researchers and the teachers realized that the errors they noticed in the bilingual students’ writing were similar to the errors that any students that age would have made and could not be faulted by speaking Spanish and learning English. For some, it may seem odd that racism could be applied to Spanish, a major spoken language and one with a colonial history; however, in the United States at least, Spanish is racially marked as a *brown* language ([Rosa, 2019](#)). English, especially white, spoken English, is the accepted norm by which *deviance* is measured.

[Annamma, Boelé, Moore, and Klingner \(2013\)](#) explain that schools construct and enforce policies of normalcy which are modeled by the dominant culture in which the schools reside. In the United States, that is whiteness, hearingness, and English competency. Students who are not white, or who are not hearing, and do not demonstrate monolingual English competency according to the metrics are marked as broken and in need of remedial help. As such, students of color find themselves largely placed in specialized education for learning, behavior, and emotional disabilities ([Annamma et al. 2013](#)). This is also true of deaf students, and doubly true for deaf students of color.

The insufficiency of what ASL users call *same same* can create issues where teachers misinterpret the actions of their students because they use lenses established by their own culture, communities, and experiences. [Schalge and Soga \(2008\)](#) were asked to study why students were not attending ESL classes that they registered for in a Minnesota community center. Teachers blamed student absenteeism on external factors unrelated to the classes such as family issues, money problems, transportation, or cultural challenges. But when the students were asked, they did not speak to that. Instead, they talked about how the class was too easy for them, or that the instruction was not specific enough to help them communicate with people in the communities or in the workforce.

Students mentioned that they felt that the teachers underestimated their intelligence and their abilities to learn English. Schalge and Soga indicated that teacher perspectives on student actions and abilities were influenced by racism and linguisticism ([Phillipson, 1992](#)). Linguicism, as defined by Phillipson, is the belief that languages are hierarchical. In the States, English is believed by many to be the best language, which is reinforced by the sheer amount of English monolinguals and attachment to white nationalistic behavior ([McIntosh & Mendoza-Denton, 2020](#)).

Similarly, nondeaf researchers of deaf people attribute behaviors that deaf people exhibit while living in a hearing world to deafness, rather than to other factors. They claim that deafness causes these behaviors that they see as negative. For example, [Antia, Jones, Luckner, Kreimeyer, and Reed \(2011\)](#), in a five-year longitudinal study of the social skills of deaf students in inclusive classrooms, found that deaf students tended to rate themselves as having better social skills than the rating they received from their teachers. Antia et al. did not provide an in-depth discussion of why there were differences between teacher ratings of deaf children, and student ratings of themselves. They instead seemed to stress that the ratings from both the teachers and the students were pretty normal and any possible deviance could be attributed to communication challenges. However, these communication challenges were afforded to deafness instead an entirely inclusive language environment. Their suggestions for intervention focused on changing the students rather than changing the environment which could cause communication breakdowns. [Marschark et al. \(2017\)](#), in a description of the Antia et al. findings, wrote that deaf children were simply overconfident about their own social skills. To further emphasize the difference between deaf perceptions of themselves and nondeaf perceptions of deaf people, Marschark et al. referenced the results of another study by Borgna et al. (2010) that concluded that deaf college students tended to think that they learned more than they actually did, whereas nondeaf college students were better about knowing how much they learned. In response, Marschark et al. described deaf college students as “unskilled and unaware” (p. 23), which is a damning way to label a historically marginalized population.

Research focused on deafness rarely has deaf scholarship which can account for some of the very negative ways that deaf people are described in the literature (e.g., unskilled and unaware). [Marschark et al. \(2017\)](#) claimed that their work had some validity because the assessment used in collecting data had been modified from the original assessment to be used with deaf people by three interpreters (nondeaf) and one (nondeaf) audiologist. However, authority on deafness granted by proximity to deafness amounts to nothing. Proximity to deafness is not a substitute for deafness. Indeed, interpreters and audiologists are often vectors of oppression for deaf people. As Dr. Hoffmeister recognized, the way to change the field is to put more deaf people in leadership and researcher positions within the field. He did this by mentoring and creating pipelines.

Mentoring and Supporting Deaf Scholarship

[Listman and Dingus-Eason \(2018\)](#) explain that the lack of deaf scientists, researchers, and teachers can be explained by the presence of what they call *phonocentric hegemony*. Phonocentric hegemony describes the general expectation that scholars be able to “hear and communicate verbally in spoken English” (p. 280). Phonocentric hegemony explains, in part, why nondeaf academics tend to be relatively successful compared to their deaf colleagues in fields that focus on deafness, such as signed language linguistics, and deaf education. [Robinson and Henner \(2017\)](#) point to the fact that just like deaf people prefer *same same*, nondeaf people also want to engage with people who have their understanding of the sonorous-based world and can communicate with them easily. For these reasons, nondeaf people seek out nondeaf scholars, researchers, and professionals to talk about deafness. They do this through phone calls, or by amplifying nondeaf voices at the expense of deaf perspectives. Hearingness, and proximity to deafness, has become the leading criteria for expertise. And nondeaf scholars, researchers, and professionals augment their careers via the lived knowledge of the deaf people they are supposed to support and serve.

[Scott \(2020\)](#) writes that many privileged teachers working in marginalized communities have Superman-like identities. They want their students to “catch up, fill in blanks” and “save students from a corrupt world” (p. 71). However, Superman was never an equal with the people he purported to serve. Superman always had the power and was always more powerful than an average person. Just the same, nondeaf people always have more power, and are always more powerful than deaf people.

The first step to supporting deaf scholars is to give deaf scholars the space and opportunities to reclaim deaf knowledge and show deaf expertise. This means directing journalists to talk to deaf scholars, ensuring that edited books have chapters by deaf authors, and working to make sure that conferences about deafness have invited deaf speakers either as a keynote, or in a prominent speaker position. Many of our recent academic experiences were a result of nondeaf linguists and researchers of deaf education, in a position of allyship, giving us the opportunity to write chapters, or to be co-authors on articles. If nondeaf scholars can do so, they should also seek out deaf collaborators and promote them to receive opportunities that would otherwise be granted to nondeaf people. Part of working against phonocentric hegemonies means giving deaf scholars a seat at the table.

While we encourage nondeaf scholars to work to elevate deaf scholars, we caution them against using deaf scholars as tokens, or shields against criticism. Using deaf scholars to say that there is a deaf scholar at the table, without actually allowing deaf *scholarship* is worse than ignoring deaf scholars, because deaf scholars in these situations are used to prop up nondeaf scholarship and to defend the phonocentric hegemony. To summarize, it is not an allyship to have deaf co-authors if the deaf scholars are never in a position to assert their ideas, or if they are only co-authors and not leading the research. This does extend to nondeaf/deaf partnerships as it gives the impression that deaf scholars can never be in leadership positions over nondeaf people.

The experiences of deaf scholars in academia can be paralleled, but not perfectly explained by [Martinez-Cola's \(2020\)](#) description of how early career scholars of color are treated by white faculty. In Martinez-Cola's ontology, white faculty who mentor scholars of colors can be placed into three categories: (1) collectors, (2) nightlights, and (3) allies. Collectors, as explained by Martinez-Cola, are white faculty who collect mentees of color because they think they have to, and do not reflect on the systems of whiteness that they place their mentees in. Collectors, for example, lavish praise on themselves for supporting scholars of color, however, continue to perform both macro and microaggressions on their students of color. Nevertheless, Martinez-Cola stresses that Collectors are not necessarily bad people. They are just embodiments of the system. Nightlights, on the other hand, use their privilege to help scholars of color navigate the systems. They confront other white people when they recognize that scholars of color are being marginalized. And they ask questions publicly that help scholars of color recognize covert rules and curriculum that are often passed among white people and not typically shared with people of color. Allies, according to Martinez-Cola, "have done the work it takes to develop an appreciation and admiration for the experiences of students of color, and this work informs their mentoring relationship." (p. 36).

We can use [Braun, Gormally, and Clark \(2017\)](#) to extend Martinez-Cola, as Braun et al. examined specifically what deaf mentees looked for in non-deaf mentors. They developed a survey, the Deaf Mentoring Survey, to find out what affects the mentoring experience that deaf individuals have with mentors. They found that respondent answers could be divided into four main factors: (1) being a scientist, (2) Deaf community capital, (3) asking for accommodations, and (4) communication access. Basically, effective mentors should work in the field that the mentees want to work in, should have access to Deaf community cultural capital, should know how to manage being disabled in the world, and should be able to provide direct access to communication for their mentees. We should recognize, though, that a person can meet all four factors as designated by Braun et al. and still be a Collector under the Martinez-Cola ontology! Being an effective mentor for deaf scholars means recognizing complex factors that can influence the relationship between mentor and mentee. Dr. Hoffmeister, for example, sought funding to support deaf pipelines through higher education. He also established collaborations with other universities to ensure that deaf scholars from different institutions were in touch with each other. Dr. Hoffmeister's commitment to deaf scholarship is evident through many of the authors in this book who came up through his praxis.

Wrapping Up

Creating pipelines for deaf scholarship is challenging, given that there are few researchers, professionals, and advocates for deaf people who can do anything about institutional gatekeeping. However, supporters of deaf scholarship can continue to work to find ways to break down these institutional barriers. Some of this includes ensuring that scholarship about deaf communities and languages is always represented by deaf scholars. Dr.

Hoffmeister's greatest gift to the linguistic and educational communities is a history of promoting deaf scholarship and ensuring that he trained members of the deaf communities in his values and advocacy.

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