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Deafness among the Negev Bedouin: an interdisciplinary dialogue on deafness, marginality and context

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Appendix

Book Review¹

Margalit Fox, *Talking Hands: What Sign Language Reveals About the Mind*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007, Hardcover: € 20.00/\$ 27.00; Paperback: € 12.00/\$ 15.00 (354 pages). ISBN: 0-7432-4712-4 (hardcover); 0-7432-4713-2 (paperback).

Reviewed by Shifra Kisch (University of Amsterdam)

This book, covering an impressive range of linguistic topics, is written for the general audience. As the title and subtitle of this book suggest, the book will introduce readers to the field of sign linguistics and to its contributions to some of the key questions in modern linguistics. The set up of the book presents the readers with dual narratives that alternately unfold in the seventeen chapters.

The nine odd-numbered chapters provide the narrative frame and sensationalism as related in the text on the front cover: “In a remote village where everyone speaks sign language, scientists are discovering the essential ingredients of all human language- and uncovering the workings of the human mind”. In this narrative, the protagonists are four leading linguists — Carol Padden, Irit Meir, Wendy Sandler, and Mark Aronoff — and their study of the emerging sign language among the Bedouin inhabitants of a kin-based village in the southern Negev region of present day Israel, where deafness has a high prevalence. Following negotiations with the linguists’ team leader, Margalit Fox, a former student of Aronoff, was invited to join the team during their

¹ Originally published in *Sign Language & Linguistics*. 12(2):203–210. 2009.

second visit to Al-Sayyid. Fox was invited under strict conditions: she was at no time allowed to interview her host independently (p. 1) and all four team members had a chance to edit the entire manuscript for corrections (p. 2). *Talking Hands* was released less than two years after the linguists published their first findings in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*. In these rather brief odd-numbered chapters, Fox describes her three-day field trip with the linguists and chronicles their work on their project.

The eight even-numbered chapters review the birth and development of sign language linguistics and place the field in the broader context of modern linguistics. For the purpose of introducing and illustrating the relevance of sign language linguistics, Fox has integrated materials from numerous linguistic studies ranging from detailed findings from specific studies (mostly of American Sign Language) to accounts of the work and lives of Abbé de l'Épée, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet (p. 24–37), Noam Chomsky, William Stokoe, and others. The author also heavily cites various canonical sources by authors like Harlan Lane, Carol Padden, Tom Humphries, Susan Fisher, Jane Maher, and Oliver Sacks. The author incorporates many of the examples and accounts widely published in linguistics into a flowing storyline with many tangents. Given these side tracks and the amount of reprinted materials, it would not be practical to provide a summary of the entire book or its individual chapters.

The task of reviewing a popular science book for a highly specialized journal is not a simple one. Additionally, the protagonists in the book are prominent members of the academic community working within the sign linguistics field. I have witnessed their first steps in the field and introduced them to some of their informants, including their research assistant. I have been conducting community-based anthropological fieldwork among the Negev Bedouin since 1996 and have written on the unique social and linguistic conditions and practices of translation among the Al-Sayyid, as well as other Negev Bedouin groups. From the deaf and hearing members of my Al-Sayyid host family, I have learned the local Arabic dialect as well as the local sign language. Throughout my 25 months of fieldwork so far, I have resided with the same host family. In fact, during the first year of my fieldwork, their grandmother, one of the very first deaf descendants of the group, was still alive.

In what follows, I focus on the framing of the linguistic narrative in the brief odd numbered chapters dedicated to the story of the Al-Sayyid, and the story

of the research project. My main concern is with the romantic depiction of Al-Sayyid as remote and isolated and the ways this portrayal corresponds to the myth of a linguistic vacuum. I will also suggest that Fox's intriguing choice to place the linguists' team in the center of her narrative is a missed opportunity. It could have produced a valuable depiction of the research process if Fox would have included the debates and controversies involved in the research process, rather than reducing the academic endeavor to a linear process of questions answered by extraordinary discoveries alone.

Too often, popular science is dismissed for being oversimplified, and compromising the accuracy and complexity of scientific findings. I do not share such reluctance and believe that it is important to translate insights gained from academic labor into texts that are accessible to the lay public. This is especially true for fields of inquiry where, despite an abundance of academic work, widespread ignorance among the general public has concrete consequences for groups and individual members of our societies. For example, the devaluation of sign languages and consequently of their communities of users is still commonplace among the general public as well as among members of closely related disciplines and professionals. In this respect, the appearance of *Talking Hands* 18 years after Oliver Sacks' *Seeing Voices*, which the author mentions as one of her models, cannot be underestimated.

With respect to making sign language linguistics accessible to the lay reader, this book is a fine accomplishment. Fox's writing is clear, engaging, and noticeably grounded in comprehensive reading, which she composes into an intelligible text. To address the obstacles presented by the deep-rooted depreciation of sign language, Fox spells out the questions that an interested yet skeptical reader might ask. The book includes nearly 30 pages of endnotes. However, there is no indication of their existence in the text itself. Although one of the undeniable pleasures of well written accessible popular science is relief from endless footnotes and references, the choice of this user-unfriendly referencing method is unhelpful when the book extensively builds on examples and insights from numerous publications. Apart from that, Fox manages to rephrase complex theoretical questions and detailed studies into an agreeable read.

The main issue with the book lies in the framing of the linguistic story. In spite of providing a rich linguistic framework, the book is thin on providing insights

into the Al-Sayyid sign language and its social context. The author attempts to interlace several stories; a rather elaborate survey of the academic interest in sign languages; the story of an ambitious research project; her own travel log accompanying the linguistic expedition; and finally the story of the Al-Sayyid Bedouin. This ambitious yet uneven setup results in the decontextualisation of the subjects of the linguistic study. Reduced to clichés, the landscape and people of Al-Sayyid are mere figurants providing the *mise en scène*. Though no less than nine chapters are dedicated to the visit to Al-Sayyid, these chapters are meager: the reader learns little about this unique social and linguistic reality.

When finally reading about Al-Sayyid, the reader is soon diverted into detailed examples from other linguistic studies. In Chapter 13, for example, more than half of the pages provide a detailed report on Goldin-Meadow's study of homesigns — the reader learns more about David, one of Goldin-Meadow's subjects, than about any of the Al-Sayyid hosts mentioned in that chapter. The text that is dedicated to the actual report on the visit includes repetitive descriptions of people signing lists of lexical items and Sylvester & Tweety cartoons, accompanied by observations such as the Hebrew (translation) providing "Tweety with biblical grandeur" (p. 172), or the "quality of liturgy" (p. 77). Additionally, only in the very last chapter (Chapter 17) does the reader receive some information on the properties of the Al-Sayyid sign language.

Following her site visit to Al-Sayyid, Fox traveled across the United States to complete her linguistic inquiry, and throughout the book, she engages the reader by presenting intriguing linguistic questions as broad and complex as "What is language, really?" (p. 63). But not a single question is presented with regard to who her hosts were. Fox devoutly describes how her hosts are dressed and what is written on their T-shirts; this could have been a good start for revealing that contradictions and tensions are abound, but Fox does not go beyond that. Perhaps that should not come as a surprise; Fox accompanied the linguistic team on a brief yet busy work program, and had little means or permission to communicate directly with her hosts (p. 1). Still, rather than addressing the problem of working under such restricted conditions or consulting the existing literature on the Negev Bedouin, she presents the readers with unfounded generalizations and stereotypes.

Erroneous and simplistic statements range from those related to the general context, to those directly related to the linguistic study. While Fox

dedicates two pages (p. 115–117) to a study on folk linguistics contextualizing the ways that people refer to their own language, she does not apply the same logic to statements people make about their own culture. Sweeping generalizations are made on issues such as gender relations or local marriage regimes — matters highly relevant for the understanding of the social relations (of deaf and hearing people) that constitute this unique social fabric. Other inaccuracies replace essential concrete information on the rates of deafness, the status of deaf people, or the genealogy of the Al-Sayyid descent group (the latter information possibly distorting the classification of first and second generation signers).

Al-Sayyid is often referred to in the book as an insular, isolated, and remote village. Al-Sayyid is, however, one of the many Bedouin shanty settlements surrounding Beersheva that have for decades been refused connection to national electricity, water or sewage systems. Depicting it as a remote desert village surrounded by camels and olive trees is more than mere romanticizing. Many live in poverty, raising animals and crops for mere subsistence. No one makes a living from farming, and no more than a handful can make a living from herding in the absence of grazing permits. The government does not recognize their land claims nor allocates water for agriculture. More than once, their crops have been destroyed by poisonous aerial spraying and by uprooting trees. Rather than being farmers that have fancy furniture (p. 118) and that are “even middle-class” (p. 6), most Bedouin occupy the lowest strata of the Israeli labor market and suffer the highest poverty and unemployment rates in the country. Physically, the Bedouin settlements in the Negev are no more isolated than Jewish towns are from one another (most Al-Sayyid dwellings overlook the McDonalds at the nearest road intersection, which is no more than a fifteen-minute drive away). In social terms, however, most Bedouin belong to another sphere. Rather than being isolated, the Negev Bedouin are marginalized, subject to neglect and discrimination. These circumstances have direct consequences, for instance, for the differential structure of opportunities and social networks of deaf and hearing members of the community (Kisch 2007a, 2008a). It also means farming or herding are not good criteria for illustrating the integration of deaf people into society (p. 119).

Also, I wonder about the secrecy surrounding the location of this village. While the author states, “Consider Al-Sayyid a kind of signing Brigadoon (although it is very real, and I have seen it), a place utterly impossible for any

outsider to find” (p. 2), Sandler et al. (2005) have consciously used the actual name rather than a pseudonym in an interview with the science section of the *New York Times* as well as in their first publication.

Furthermore, suggesting that the Al-Sayyid are socially isolated even from other Bedouin is erroneous. In fact, in several neighboring communities, what might be considered as dialects of the Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language are used. Historical tribal hierarchies and alliances that gradually have less bearings on social relations are indeed partially responsible for strict marriage regimes and high rates of kin endogamy, yet statements such as “[C]ontact with other villages is limited [...] few other Bedouins condescend to associate with them” (p. 118) are exaggerated; friendships, mutual visits, and other political and economic collaborations are common. Most teenagers attend high school in a nearby town; increasingly, more young men and women attend university in Beersheba (as well as abroad), and most men commute to work all over the country. Unsurprisingly, the people of Al-Sayyid also host classmates, colleagues as well as occasionally strangers, including in recent years more than a few journalists, filmmakers and politicians. Thus, phrases like “one of only a few journalists in the world to have set foot in the village”, are odd. In fact, I have suggested (Kisch 2000, 2004) that the status of deaf people among the Al-Sayyid should be understood in light of the multiple lifeworlds that many inhabit.

It is interesting to consider to what extent the portrayal of the Al-Sayyid as a remote and isolated place serves the linguistic claim of an isolated language, its location in the desert further providing the metaphor for the unexplored terrain and the expedition-like project and storyline, apropos claims like “a communication system that no outsider had ever seen before” (p. 272), “witnessed by few outsiders and never before described” (p. 1).

Based on my own research experience and the data that I have collected over the past 14 years, there is little doubt that the sign language of Al-Sayyid is indeed a language-isolate in the strict sense of the word; a natural language with no demonstrable ancestral language. However, this is quite different from insisting on a “linguistic vacuum” (p. 280 and elsewhere) or “a language out of nothing” (p. 72). If indeed the “Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language has arisen entirely on its own, outside the influence of any other language” (p. 7–

8),² is this then not even more significant if we recognize that it did not develop in a linguistic vacuum?

For instance, one of the main linguistic consultants is bilingual if not multilingual. Being among the first generation to attend the deaf school in the nearby city, she is fluent in Israeli Sign Language. Though this school has failed to provide most of its students with a proper education including full literacy, this young woman is at least partially literate (I regularly receive letters from her written in Hebrew). Her older brother has spent some time at a school for the deaf in the West Bank as a young boy. Deaf students attending this school (which was and is still strictly an oral school) confirm that they do sign among themselves; their signs are apparently influenced by Jordanian Sign Language. These siblings are both classified by the linguists as second generation signers assumed to use “the pure isolated form” (p. 242) of the village sign language. This is the same generation which has been claimed to bring the “first systematic grammatical structure” (p. 278) to the emerging sign language. Additionally, among the first deaf descendants of the family, one man was partially literate in Arabic. Such examples underscore the problems related to the urge to speak of “The natural Forbidden Experiment that is Al-Sayyid” (p. 284).

Yet the most significant issue regarding the myth of the linguistic vacuum is the relative downplaying of the participation of hearing signers. The number of hearing signers and their fluency is marveled at, they are rightfully considered to have a significant contribution to the preservation of the language (p. 71), but their bilingualism is not seriously considered. Though it seems to be unpopular among students of sign language and deafness to consider the role of hearing signers in the creation of a sign language, it seems unavoidable in this case. Rather than referring to Al-Sayyid and comparable cases as “signing villages”, I have suggested the term “shared signing community” (Kisch 2000, 2008a) to capture what these cases have in common: the pervasive use of signing by both hearing and deaf members (for a similar emphasis, see also Nonaka 2009). This is not to say that these communities should be romanticized. On the contrary, I have suggested that,

² “free of influences of other languages, signed or spoken” (quoting an unpublished manuscript by Sandler et al. (2005: 72).

as is the case for most social structures and practices, each shared signing community should be examined for the ways they may facilitate and restrict their deaf members. Additionally, I believe that if hearing signers are taken into account, the linguists' classification of first, second and third generation signers should be reconsidered. The Al-Sayyid sign language did not "sprung from the hands of ten deaf children" (p. 242). As in the Nicaraguan case, initially, there were homesigns, but in the Al-Sayyid case, these evolved into a sign language that might in fact better be understood as the result of a collaboration between hearing and deaf signers.

I have presented some of the above comments at the workshop in Nijmegen (Kisch 2006), which was also attended by the author (for Fox's account of this workshop, see p. 286–288 in the book). However, pointing out these and other possible communicative inputs and language contacts is just one example of a broader academic debate that has been ignored by Fox. I have in mind perspectives such as those expressed by Russo and Volterra in their comments on the study of the emerging Nicaraguan Sign Language. Russo and Volterra (2005: 56b) have underscored the different communicative inputs young deaf signers may rely on and suggest that "studies on emerging sign languages must not be considered as experiments of a language "in vitro" — that is, of a completely self-developing original language. Social, pragmatic, and environmental aspects have to be carefully evaluated case by case and in each developmental stage of the acquisition of these languages".

On the Nicaraguan case, Fox also makes little use of the work by Polich (2005). Another example of one of the many themes pertaining to Fox's narrative that are left unchallenged is her mention of the linguists' expectation to find a modality driven language, and instead finding a syntax-driven one (p. 280). Here too an entire academic debate is of relevance that I trust Fox, if she would have chosen to do so, could have skillfully integrated into her narrative for the benefit of the lay reader, who would then have a better understanding of the fascinating process of doing science.

One might tolerate the relative absence of the Al-Sayyid from Fox's story under the pretext that the team of linguists is the object of her study (p. 43), and the story is that of the scientists and their research project. However, one would still expect that science not be reduced to a linear process of questions answered by extraordinary discoveries alone. Fox does a good job of placing the Al-Sayyid research in the context of the team members' histories and

academic interests and contributions, as well as in the broader context of modern linguistics. However, it is unfortunate that Fox's thorough reading of the literature did not lead her to portray a more complex depiction of the scientific endeavor, one that would reveal the critical dialogues and debate presenting complementary, and at times contrasting, data and perspectives that are so essential to any scientific project.